

**PODSTAWY EDUKACJI**

**TOM 18**

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**FUNDAMENTALS OF EDUCATION**

**VOL. 18**

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# SPIS TREŚCI

## CONTENTS

Od redakcji .....	9
Editors' Preface .....	11
<b>STUDIES AND DISSERTATIONS</b>	
<b>Waldemar KULIGOWSKI</b>	
Creative Ethnography: On Its Necessity, Challenges, and the 'Agony of Writing' in the Audit Culture .....	15
Etnografia kreatywna: o jej konieczności, wyzwaniach i „agonii pisania” w kulturze audytu (Streszczenie) .....	30
<b>Mirosław PĘCZAK</b>	
Youth Culture in the Polish People's Republic of the 1960s: The Pedagogy of Big Beat .....	31
Kultura młodzieżowa w PRL lat 60. XX wieku. Pedagogika big-beatu (Streszczenie) ....	44
<b>Anna WARZOCHA</b>	
The Practice of Intermedia Literature in Early School Education. Revealing Symbols – Exemplification .....	45
Praktyka intermedialnej literatury w edukacji wczesnoszkolnej. Odślanianie symboli – egzemplifikacja (Streszczenie) .....	57
<b>Arleta SUWALSKA</b>	
Self-Care Learning of Educators in the Thriving Workplaces – Examples from Australia .....	59
Nauka dbania o siebie wśród nauczycieli w dobrze prosperujących miejscach pracy – przykłady z Australii (Streszczenie) .....	69
<b>Agnieszka KOZERSKA</b>	
In Search of Opportunities for Development in Old Age. The case of Gerotranscendence Theory .....	71
W poszukiwaniu możliwości rozwoju w okresie starości. Przypadek teorii gerotranscencji (Streszczenie) .....	90
<b>Marta KRUPSKA</b>	
The Pedagogical Relationship – in Search of Responsibility for the Process of Changing the Face of Suffering Experience .....	91
Relacja pedagogiczna – w poszukiwaniu odpowiedzialności za proces zmiany w doświadczeniu cierpienia (Streszczenie) .....	102

Beata ŁUKASIK

Possibilities for Supporting Students with Anxiety Disorders in the School Environment .....	103
Możliwości wsparcia ucznia z zaburzeniami lękowymi w środowisku szkolnym (Streszczenie) .....	120

## RESEARCH REPORTS

Hanna KĘDZIERSKA, Alicja LISIECKA

Culturality as a Field of Educational Research: Insights from Higher Education .....	123
Kulturalność jako obszar badań pedagogicznych: refleksje na przykładzie szkolnictwa wyższego (Streszczenie) .....	138

Kinga LISOWSKA

Polish Saturday School in Medway – a local centre of Polish intangible cultural heritage in the United Kingdom .....	139
Polska Sobotnia Szkoła w Medway – lokalne centrum polskiego niematerialnego dziedzictwa kulturowego w Wielkiej Brytanii (Streszczenie) .....	154

Qiuling XIONG

Evaluation Criteria and Levels of Formation of Aesthetic Values of College Students by Means of Musical Art .....	155
Kryteria oceny i poziomy kształtowania wartości estetycznych studentów szkół wyższych poprzez sztukę muzyczną (Streszczenie) .....	171

Michał DASZKIEWICZ

<i>Positioning</i> of Spoken Language by Erasmus Exchange Students – Positivist Perspective .....	173
<i>Pozycjonowanie</i> języka mówionego przez studentów programu wymiany Erasmus – perspektywa pozytywistyczna (Streszczenie) .....	189

Izabela ZIĘBACZ

Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence. Conclusions from Sweden's Decision for Pedagogy and the Design of Educational Environments .....	191
Edukacja w epoce sztucznej inteligencji. Wnioski z decyzji Szwecji dla pedagogiki i projektowania środowisk dydaktycznych (Streszczenie) .....	208

Krzysztof SKONIECZNY, Martyna POPŁAWSKA

The Perception of Teachers and Technology in Polish Policy Documents Devoted to Information and Communication Technologies in Education .....	209
Obraz nauczycieli i technologii w krajowych dokumentach poświęconych technologiom informacyjno-komunikacyjnym w edukacji (Streszczenie) .....	230

Klaudia NOWAK

- The Educational Potential of Participation in the *Odyssey of the Mind* Program in Supporting the Development of Selected 21st-Century Competencies ..... 231  
Potencjał edukacyjny uczestnictwa w programie *Odysseja Umysłu* we wsparciu rozwoju wybranych kompetencji XXI wieku (Streszczenie) ..... 246

Anna JÓZEFOWICZ

- What and How Does Today's Child Read? The Voices of Third-grade Pupils from Białystok on Their Encounters with Literature, Favourite Characters, and Creative Writing ..... 247  
Co i jak czyta współczesne dziecko? Głos uczniów klas trzecich z Białegostoku o formach kontaktu z literaturą, bohaterach i własnej twórczości (Streszczenie) ..... 264

Katarzyna SMOTER

- Note-taking as a Learning Strategy for First-Year Students Majoring in Pedagogy – Pilot Study ..... 267  
Notowanie jako strategia uczenia się studentów pierwszego roku pedagogiki – badania pilotażowe (Streszczenie) ..... 284

Karol MOTYL, Iwona MURAWSKA

- High School Final Exam Blackmail as Part of Everyday School Life. Preliminary Research Report ..... 285  
Szantaż maturalny jako element szkolnej codzienności. Raport z badań wstępnych (Streszczenie) ..... 307

Dorota CHIMICZ

- Accessibility of Higher Education Institutions for Students with Visual Impairments – Reality and Proposed Directions for Change ..... 309  
Dostępność instytucji szkolnictwa wyższego dla studentów z niepełnosprawnością wzroku – rzeczywistość i proponowane kierunki zmian (Streszczenie) ..... 328

Ewelina RZOŃCA

- Mind Maps and Convergent Thinking of Second-Grade Students – Reports from a Pilot Study ..... 329  
Mapy myśli i myślenie konwergencyjne uczniów drugiej klasy – raport z badania pilotażowego (Streszczenie) ..... 342

Małgorzata ZALEWSKA-BUJAK

- Motivating Students to Learn by Primary School Teachers – in the Light of Teachers' Narratives ..... 343  
Motywowanie uczniów do uczenia się przez nauczycieli szkół podstawowych – w świetle nauczycielskich narracji (Streszczenie) ..... 354

Agnieszka KACZOR

- Perception of Quality of Life Among Teachers in Poland in the Context of Preschool and Early School Pedagogy Students' Career Choices ..... 355  
Postrzeganie jakości życia nauczycieli w Polsce w kontekście wyboru drogi zawodowej przez studentów pedagogiki przedszkolnej i wczesnoszkolnej (Streszczenie) ..... 368

<b>Anna SUSKA-ZAKASZEWSKA, Tomasz KLOC</b>	
The Phenomenon of Stress in the Professional Work of Preschool Teachers .....	369
Zjawisko stresu w pracy zawodowej nauczycieli wychowania przedszkolnego (Streszczenie) .....	385
<b>Joanna Ludwika PĘKALA, Kamila WICHROWSKA</b>	
Career Success in the Perception of Early Childhood Education Studies Graduates .....	387
Sukces zawodowy w percepcji absolwentów studiów z zakresu edukacji wczesnoszkolnej (Streszczenie) .....	403
<b>Jakub KOSEK</b>	
Cultural and Social Dimensions of Contemporary Heavy Metal Narratives .....	423
Kulturowo-społeczne wymiary współczesnych narracji heavymetalowych (Streszczenie) .....	440
<b>REVIEWS</b>	
<b>Bogusław ŚLIWERSKI</b>	
Lecha Witkowskiego „archeologiczne” odkrycie w filozofii Alfreda Northa Whiteheada wizji edukacji przyszłości .....	443
Zasady przygotowywania publikacji .....	451
Rules for preparing publications .....	453

## Od redakcji

Z dużą satysfakcją oddajemy Państwu do rąk osiemnasty tom rocznika „Podstawy Edukacji”. Jest to tom w nieco zmienionej formule, gdyż w tej edycji nie orientowaliśmy nadsyłanych tekstów wokół konkretnej idei. Artykuły, które publikujemy w niniejszym tomie, doskonale wpisują się w profil naszego czasopisma obejmujący szeroki kontekst edukacji jako humanistyki zintegrowanej. Podstawy edukacji, budowane na pewnych fundamentach oraz tradycji, wymagają jednak dziś ciągłej readaptacji, rewaloryzacji, rekonstrukcji, dekonstrukcji, bycia w procesie zmiany. Kierując się tym przekonaniem, prezentujemy oryginalne studia i badania przekraczające dominujące paradygmaty, a także mające charakter interdyscyplinarny i innowacyjny.

Na osiemnasty tom rocznika „Podstawy Edukacji” składa się 26 artykułów, w tym 7 stanowiących studia i rozprawy, 18 będących artykułami przedstawiającymi autorskie badania empiryczne i jeden artykuł recenzyjny. Wszystkie teksty, za wyjątkiem jednego, publikujemy w języku angielskim. Zdecydowaliśmy o publikacji artykułu recenzyjnego w języku polskim ze względu na podjętą w nim dyskusję z oryginalnym wydaniem monografii Lecha Witkowskiego pt. *Whithead. Naddania i (w)zrosty dla humanistyki i edukacji*.

Artykuły, które wypełniają niniejszy tom, dotyczą problemów badawczych na wszystkich etapach całościowego uczenia się człowieka, także kształcenia – zarówno formalnego, jak i nieformalnego. Wiele artykułów poświęconych jest problematyce szeroko pojętej edukacji dzieci, a także młodzieży, studentów, osób dorosłych, w tym osób starszych. Gdyby wskazać słowa klucze, które mogą stanowić intelektualną klamrę łączącą tom, można wymienić: relację pedagogiczną; potencjał rozwojowy, edukacyjny; lęk, stres, cierpienie, a nawet szantaż w szkole; sukces i skuteczność; innowacyjne, twórcze metody, w tym edukacyjne i badawcze; kulturę i jej życiodajną relację z edukacją; wartości jako drogowskazy w etycznym i estetycznym rozumieniu świata edukacji. Tom jest bogatą, ciekawą różnorodnością ujęć i perspektyw teoretycznych oraz metodologicznych.

Mamy nadzieję, że osiemnasty tom czasopisma „Podstawy Edukacji” wzbudzi Państwa zainteresowanie i zainspiruje do refleksji. Kierujemy go zarówno do osób zajmujących się działalnością naukowo-badawczą, jak również do nauczycieli, pedagogów, edukatorów zakorzenionych w praktyce i poszukujących nowych, inspirujących ścieżek dla/w edukacji. Życzymy miłej i owocnej lektury.

Niniejszym informujemy, że artykuł zamieszczony na stronach 405–421 został wycofany z tomu z przyczyn formalnych.



## Editors' Preface

It is with great satisfaction that we present to you the eighteenth volume of the annual "Fundamentals of Education." This volume has a slightly modified format, as in this edition we did not focus the submitted texts on a specific idea. The articles published in this volume perfectly align with the profile of our journal, which encompasses the broad context of education as an integrated humanities discipline. The foundations of education, built on certain foundations and traditions, require constant re-adaptation, revaluation, reconstruction, and deconstruction, as well as a process of change. Guided by this belief, we present original studies and research that transcend dominant paradigms and are interdisciplinary and innovative in nature.

The eighteenth volume of the annual "Fundamentals of Education" consists of 26 articles, including seven studies and dissertations, 18 articles presenting original empirical research, and one review article. All texts, except one, are published in English. We decided to publish this review article in Polish because it discusses the original edition of Lech Witkowski's monograph, *"Whithead: Advantages and (In)creases for the Humanities and Education."*

The articles in this volume address research issues at all stages of lifelong learning, including both formal and informal education. Many articles address the broadly defined education of children, youth, students, and adults, including older people. If we were to identify keywords that could serve as an intellectual framework for this volume, we could mention: the pedagogical relationship; developmental and educational potential; anxiety, stress, suffering, and even blackmail in school; success and effectiveness; innovative, creative methods, including academic and research; culture and its life-giving relationship with education; and values as guideposts in an ethical and aesthetic understanding of the world of education. The volume presents a rich and engaging diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches and perspectives.

We hope that the 18th volume of the "Fundamentals of Education" journal will pique your interest and inspire reflection. We aim it at those engaged in research, as well as teachers, educators, and practitioners seeking new and inspiring paths in education. We wish you a pleasant and fruitful read.

We hereby inform you that the article spanning pages 405–421 has been withdrawn from the volume for formal reasons.

Editorial Team



# **STUDIES AND DISSERTATIONS**





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## Creative Ethnography: On Its Necessity, Challenges, and the 'Agony of Writing' in the Audit Culture

### Abstract

The aim of this article is to recapitulate the process through which creative ethnography has taken shape—an academic variant of non-fiction that employs techniques drawn from literary fiction. The debate surrounding “writing culture” gave rise to experiments in ethnographic writing, an openness to storytelling, an appreciation of anthropological poetics, the development of autoethnographic forms of expression, a rethinking of the category of fiction, and a renewed understanding of the relationship between fieldwork and textual work. The author highlights both the benefits and risks inherent in these processes, suggesting that the absence of university-level training in creative ethnography often leads to personal disappointments and raises questions about the comfort of text production, in both professional and psychological terms.

**Keywords:** creative ethnography, fiction, autoethnography, storytelling, academic writing.

Socio-cultural anthropology is usually defined as a discipline rooted in the unique fieldwork experiences of its researchers. In reality, however, anthropologists spend most of their time in front of computer screens or hunched over notebooks – a fact wryly captured by Clifford Geertz, a ‘transitional figure’ for the discipline (Rees, 2008, p. 14), in his well-known quip: ‘What does the ethnographer do? – he writes’ (Geertz, 1973, p. 28). Despite the originality and ac-

curacy of this observation, in the decades that followed many researchers continued to adhere to the model concisely summarised by Adam Kuper (1987, p. 97): the ethnographer was expected to spend at least a year – preferably two – in the field, gradually becoming, at least to some extent, a member of the community under study. Only upon returning from the field would they begin writing their ethnographic monograph. The tendency to downplay the importance of this latter task stemmed from the belief that what truly mattered, scientifically and epistemically, had already taken place, in the heat of fieldwork struggles where the anthropological ‘steel’ had been forged.

The aim of this article is to trace the development of creative ethnography – an academic form of non-fiction that draws on the techniques of literary fiction. The debate surrounding *Writing Culture* that emerged in the 1980s, which gave rise to experimental forms of writing and to a rethinking of both the category of fiction and the relationship between fieldwork and textual work, invites a reconsideration of its legacy as well as an assessment of its benefits and risks. The argument advanced here points to a striking deficiency – particularly evident in Poland – namely, the near total-absence of university-level courses devoted to creative ethnography. Finally, in light of the reflections on ethnographic writing, with all its sacrifices and disappointments (Starn 2022), the article addresses the question of writing comfort – both professional and psychological.

## **From *Writing Culture* to Storytelling**

The tendency to overlook – or even ostentatiously disregard – writing as part of the research process came under open challenge in the 1980s. As George Marcus and Dick Cushman observed,

Anthropologists have finally begun to give explicit attention to the writing of ethnographic texts, a subject long ignored either by conceiving of ethnography primarily as an activity that occurs in the field or by treating it as a method, rather than a product, of research (Marcus and Cushman, 1982, p. 25).

In a similar vein, Barbara Myerhoff and Jay Ruby suggested that ethnography was the only literary genre that had never been subjected to analysis, adding, ‘The art and craft of producing an acceptable ethnography is learned indirectly and accidentally. The question of the relationship between ethnography and other literary form is seldom discussed’ (Myerhoff and Ruby, 1982, p. 23).

A groundbreaking work for raising awareness of the ‘textual’ or ‘literary’ dimension of the discipline was the volume *Writing Culture* (Clifford, 1986a), whose title quickly came to designate a particular stage in the development of anthropology. The book, the outcome of discussions and seminars, brought together researchers – mostly still relatively young – who wanted to rethink an-

thropology: its goals, methods, and very meaning, and to reconfigure it. Among them, apart from the two editors, were Mary Louise Pratt, Renato Rosaldo, Talal Asad, Vincent Crapanzano, Steven A. Tyler, Paul Rabinow, and Michael M. J. Fischer. As Clifford wrote on behalf of them all, 'We begin, not with participant-observation or with cultural texts (suitable for interpretation), but with writing, the making of texts' (Clifford, 1986b, p. 2). He added, 'The essays in this volume do not claim ethnography is "only literature". They do insist it is always writing' (Clifford, 1986b, p. 26).

The cover of *Writing Culture* featured a photograph of Tyler taken in India. In the image, the researcher is clearly absorbed in writing something in his notebook. Beside him lies a hat, and tucked behind the frame of his glasses is a white cloth for cleaning the lenses. In the background, behind the anthropologist, a few figures can be seen watching him. This, Clifford noted, is not a typical 'field' photograph: we are more accustomed to images of Margaret Mead playing with children on Manus Island or talking with informants in Bali. Yet these standard depictions are only part of the reality of fieldwork. The well-known photographs, for example, never show the inside of Malinowski's tent on Kiriwina – the very place where the Trobriand monographs were actually conceived and written. Clifford emphasised that

writing has emerged as central to what anthropologists do both in the field and thereafter. [...] Writing reduced to method: keeping good field notes, making accurate maps, "writing up" results (Clifford, 1986b, p. 2).

This, he argued, is anachronistic and naïve thinking. The most basic questions that must therefore be asked are: 'Who speaks? Who writes? When and where? With or to whom? Under what institutional and historical constraints?' (Clifford, 1986b, p. 13). Further questions might follow: 'What desires and confusions was it smoothing over? How was its "objectivity" textually constructed?' (Clifford, 1986b, p. 14).

The reflexive approach proposed in the volume was meant, as Clifford envisioned, to encompass several perspectives: historical ethnography (Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Natalie Davis, Carlo Ginzburg), cultural poetics (Stephen Greenblatt), cultural critique (Hayden White, Edward Said, Fredric Jameson), analyses of the relationship between knowledge and everyday life (Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau), critique of hegemonic 'structures of feeling' (Raymond Williams), studies of science and scientific communities (Thomas Kuhn), and the semiotics of 'foreign worlds' (Tzvetan Todorov). This broad and ambitiously sketched spectrum, within which anthropological reflexivity operates, was intended to serve as a theoretical point of departure for research into the 'poetics and politics' of ethnography. Here, the term *poetics* was not limited to romantic or modernist subjectivity but, on the contrary, was associated with precision and objectivity, while *politics*

referred to the broader context of the conditions – both contemporary and historical – under which anthropologists must practise their discipline.

Clifford and Marcus's volume was unquestionably groundbreaking. It may be viewed as a kind of disciplinary watershed and a sign of a new opening in anthropology. This might sound like a cliché, but it is justified: after the publication of *Writing Culture*, almost nothing in anthropology remained the same. Among the subsequent studies that engaged with the issues it raised, the following are worth noting: *Literature and Anthropology* (Dennis and Aycok, 1989), *Modernist Anthropology* (Manganaro, 1990), *Anthropology and Literature* (Benson, 1993), *Women Writing Culture* (Behar and Gordon, 1995), *Representation in Ethnography* (Van Maanen, 1995), *Culture/Contexture* (Daniel and Peck, 1996), as well as reflexively oriented experimental writings by Kevin Dwyer (1982), Vincent Crapanzano (1990), and Ruth Behar (1996).

Particular attention should also be given to Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture*, which bears the telling subtitle *Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Clifford 1988). In this work, the author examines, among other things, the category of 'ethnographic authority', highlighting the transitory nature of the categories of art and science – exemplified in fascinating ways by the collaboration between ethnographers and surrealists in 1920s and 1930s France. By analysing various cultural practices – anthropology, travel journals, collecting, museum collections – Clifford demonstrates that the representations of others constructed through these practices are always a kind of fiction. He reserves a special place for authors deeply entangled in the multiculturalism of life and the multilingualism of creativity, such as Joseph Conrad, Bronisław Malinowski, Michel Leiris, Aimé Césaire, and Edward Said.

One may therefore venture the thesis that Clifford's statement – 'No longer a marginal, or occulted, dimension, writing has emerged as central to what anthropologists do' (Clifford, 1986b, p. 2) – has become part of the discipline's self-understanding. Yet this thesis can only be accepted conditionally. Researchers have indeed succeeded in confirming the presence of distinct authorial signatures in classic ethnographic monographs (Geertz, 1988). They have also identified a distinctive anthropological style of expression known as 'ethnographic realism' (Marcus and Cushman, 1982), highlighted manifestations of anthropology's authority in the form of 'colonial textualism' (Abu-Lughod 1991), and demonstrated the existence of a specific 'politics of writing' (Ruby, 1982). Despite these important achievements, the literary dimension is still too often treated dismissively. In both teaching and research practice, field experience continues to be favoured over textual experience.

The debates and analyses initiated during this period led to a situation in which the discipline's identity began to be perceived through the prism of the tension between the spaces and experiences of theory, fieldwork, and text, as

well as through the complex and heterogeneous condition of the researcher, who exists simultaneously 'there' (in the field) and 'here' (in libraries, offices, the academy). To grasp these interconnections, scholars turned to the concept of reflexivity, which came to dominate anthropology throughout the 1990s. In its best-known and most accessible form, reflexivity was distilled into two directives:

- 1) the practice of experimental writing that foregrounds the researcher's subjectivity and makes use of literary forms of expression;
- 2) the recognition that the anthropological project of representing human diversity emerged as part of the larger Western colonial project (Whitaker, 2008; Kuligowski 2016).

The most significant textual outcomes of reflexivity were, on the one hand, the development of autoethnography, and on the other, an opening to literary experiments and inspirations. Although the original meaning of autoethnography, proposed by Mary Louise Pratt (1992), referred to transcultural texts produced as a result of European colonisation, its later understanding centred primarily on self-reflective (Maréchal, 2010) and autobiographical practices (Ellis, 2004), both in writing and in research. These practices, positioned in opposition to positivist epistemology, draw on literary conventions and forms of expression that allow for the exploration of personal emotions and experiences. As a result, autoethnography – focused on narrative persuasiveness and the presentation of 'personal truths' – helped to popularise storytelling (Bochenr and Ellis, 2006), understood both as a specific technique and as a heuristic stance.

Literary inspirations, understood as a repository of techniques and tools for representing reality, do not, unlike autoethnography, constitute a separate current within anthropology. Examples include readings of Jane Austen, in which she appears as an ethnographer of marriage and kinship within her own class in England (Handler and D. Segal, 1990) as well as inspirations drawn from the works of E. M. Forster (Rapport, 1994), from William Shakespeare's plays (Hastrup, 2004), or from Anton Chekhov, especially his documentary prose in *Sakhalin* (Narayan, 2012).

Parallel to these tendencies, another field emerged: anthropological poetics. Within this field, two distinct forms of practice became visible: ethnopoetics and anthropological poetry (Brady, 2000, p. 95). Ethnopoetics manifested itself through the study of the 'art of the word' and the presentation of local expressive forms by means of creative transcriptions and translations, which highlighted their value as expressions of art (Tedlock, 1992). The leading voice of this approach was the journal *Alcheringa/Ethnopoetics* (published between 1970 and 1980), whose editorial board included Jerome Rothenberg, Dennis Tedlock, Stanley Diamond, Dell Hymes, and Gary Snyder. Anthropological poetry, by contrast, encompassed poetic expressions most often focused on the intersections of cultures as well as on the experiences accompanying fieldwork. Illustrative

examples include the works of Stanley Diamond, Paul Friedrich, Ian Prattis, Dennis Tedlock, and Dell Hymes.

## On Pundits and Healers

The processes outlined above – from the *Writing Culture* debate, ‘colonial textualism’, and ‘ethnographic authority’, through the rise of reflexivity, to the practices of autoethnography, storytelling, and anthropological poetics – gave rise to innovative and experimental modes of ethnographic writing. Researchers have successfully produced engaged works of political critique (*Why America’s Top Pundits Are Wrong: Anthropologists Talk Back*, edited by Catherine Besteman and Hugh Gusterson), acclaimed memoirs (Paul Stoller, *The Power of the Between: An Anthropological Odyssey*; Kirin Narayan, *My Family and Other Saints*<sup>1</sup>), social novels (Paul Stoller, *Jaguar: A Story of Africans in America*), anthropological variants of romantic comedy (Kirin Narayan, *Love, Stars and All That*), collections of poetry (Dennis Tedlock, *From Work with the Zuni in New Mexico*), crime novels (Jenny White, *The Sultan’s Seal*), and works that combine first-person academic ethnography with third-person literary fiction (Kristen Ghodsee, *Lost in Translation: Ethnographies of Everyday Life After Communism*).

The figure of the anthropologist as ‘author’, merely hinted at by Geertz in the late 1980s (Geertz, 1988), has in the last decade evolved into the anthropologist as ‘writer’ (Wulff, 2017a). It is no coincidence that *Anthropology and Humanism*, the journal published under the auspices of the American Anthropological Association, features sections devoted to ‘Poetry’, ‘Fiction’, and ‘Creative Nonfiction’.

The examples cited above vary greatly in nature. *Why America’s Top Pundits Are Wrong* is a work of polemic, advanced both in its argumentative force and emotional engagement, challenging dominant U.S. beliefs about the contemporary world, its problems, and its supposed future (Besteman and Gusterson, 2005a). The individuals responsible for propagating and legitimising these beliefs are the ‘pundits’ named in the book’s title. The term itself comes from an older form of Hindi, where it originally meant ‘teacher of religion and law’ or ‘authority’, and later came to denote an ‘authoritative source of opinion’. The contributors to the volume identify some contemporary American pundits explicitly – among them Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times*, Robert Kaplan of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Samuel Huntington of Harvard University, and Dinesh D’Souza of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.

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<sup>1</sup> This is how Narayan reinterprets the memoir form: ‘It’s a *we-moir*.’ [...] There really is a “me” here—both the skinny, searching little girl in Bombay who made it through the difficult times narrated in this book, and the grown-up who contains and narrates her’ (Narayan, 2008, p. 7).

*Why America's Top Pundits Are Wrong* opens with two chapters devoted to Samuel Huntington (Brown, 2005; Gusterson, 2005), the author of the highly influential *Clash of Civilizations* (Huntington, 1996) – a book in which Huntington devotes 300 pages to describing all the world's cultures and civilizations without citing a single foreign-language publication and virtually ignoring the work of anthropologists (Gusterson, 2005, p. 25). He urges his readers to accept caricatured visions of cultures built from stereotypes: Muslims are essentially born fundamentalists with a marked propensity for violence, while the Chinese are inherently authoritarian. In his account, ahistorical essentialism is blended with a deep-seated fear of multiculturalism, which, he argues, inevitably leads either to genocide (as in Bosnia) or to an unpredictable and potentially catastrophic conflict (such as the 'Latino fifth column' supposedly being formed in the United States by Mexican immigrants).

Kaplan is subjected to criticism in a similar tone (Bringa, 2005; Besteman, 2005). As the author of the popular *Balkan Ghosts* (Kaplan, 1993), he uncritically perpetuates an image of this part of Europe as a perpetual war zone, populated by tribal passions and resentments harking back to the Middle Ages. According to his narrative, everything that happens in the Balkans stems directly from their history and is determined by it to the highest degree, with the region's past presented in a monochromatic and sombre register.

The editors suggested:

In our national debate about such questions, some of the loudest voices belong to pundits [...] Although they do not all come from the same side of the political map, they draw on and embellish a loosely coherent set of myths about human nature and culture that have a strange staying power in American public discourse: that conflict between people of different cultures, races, or genders is inevitable; that biology is destiny; that culture is immutable; that terrible poverty, inequality, and suffering are natural; and that people in other societies who do not want to live just like Americans are afraid of "modernity" (Besteman and Gusterson, 2005b, p. 2).

The common feature of the pundits under critique is what might be termed 'reactionary determinism' – sometimes more neutrally referred to as 'realism'. This position rests on a 'syndrome of inevitability', which amounts to arguing that 'things must be this way'. Thus, if African Americans are disproportionately poor, it is allegedly because they are intellectually weaker, and no social programmes can change this; rape, in this view, is the result of genetic functioning rather than a product of culture; and people from different cultural traditions are destined for antagonistic rather than constructive relationships.

The contributors to the volume advocate a different kind of 'realism'. This approach, grounded in the achievements of the social sciences – and neither left-wing nor right-wing, neither liberal nor conservative – clearly demonstrates that cultures can change, that traditions are invented rather than eternal. As they write,

human beings constantly misrecognize the world they have made as the natural order of things. While the pundits whisper in our ears that nothing can be done to make the world a better place, we know that this is wrong (Besteman and Gusterson, 2005b, p. 23).

At the opposite end of the continuum of creative ethnography lies Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes's book *In Sorcery's Shadow: A Memoir of Apprenticeship among the Songhay of Niger* (Stoller and Olkes, 1987). Before the book was written, Stoller met the elderly Adamu Jenitongo, a healer from the Songhay people of Niger. Under Jenitongo's guidance, Stoller learned about medicinal plants, prayers, methods of divination, as well as techniques of defence and attack through sorcery, eventually becoming his apprentice. This apprenticeship lasted for sixteen years.

In the end, drawing on his field notes, Stoller wrote an academic book based on the knowledge he had acquired. In 1984, with a printed copy of the manuscript, he visited his teacher. After explaining the purpose of his visit, he spent three months reading to Jenitongo, five to ten pages at a time. Jenitongo listened in silence, without correcting a single error or offering any praise. At the end, however, he expressed his disappointment, which concerned above all the style of storytelling, which he found inadequate. He then said something that profoundly changed Stoller – both as an anthropologist and as a writer:

You must produce something that will be remembered, something that describes me and you, something that my grandchildren and your grandchildren will use to remember the past, something they will use to learn about the world (Stoller, 2017, p. 120).

Significantly, the sorcerer's critique mirrored Stoller's own growing sense of dissatisfaction, as he gradually realised how many field experiences had been filtered out through the sieve of 'ethnographic realism' and lost in a text written in the standard academic mode (Stoller, 2017, p. 118–120). As a result, Stoller and Olkes (who was also his wife and took part in the final phase of the research) created an entirely different book: a first-person memoir of their fieldwork between 1976 and 1984. This work included vivid, sensory descriptions of places, detailed portraits of key figures, and full dialogues rather than the fragmentary quotations that had previously been accepted as the norm in anthropological texts.

Of course, this was not the first attempt to integrate two different cultural frameworks within a single narrative. A similar ambition had once guided Frank H. Cushing, who wore Zuni clothing and signed his letters as '1st War Chief of Zuni' (Green, 1990). Another point of comparison is Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, who, while studying the magical practices of the Azande and recognising them as a coherent system of thought not fundamentally different from religion, ultimately adopted a stance of cautious scepticism (Evans-Pritchard, 1937). There is also the inevitable association with Carlos Castaneda and his cycle of fictional tales about Don Juan Matus – an author, Stoller remarked, 'with whom I did not want to be compared' (Stoller and Olkes, 1987, p. 25).

*In Sorcery's Shadow* reveals the consequences of an almost complete opening of the researcher to local categories – including the application of the knowledge passed on to Stoller when a member of the Songhay asked him for help in taking revenge on a European, and the magical means employed achieved the desired effect. 'I was frightened of this power as well as of the notion that sorcery was real', Stoller confided (Stoller and Olkes, 1987, p. 123). The book's narrative, novelistic in tone, full of events and adventures, and ostentatiously rejecting the constraints of 'ethnographic realism', is at the same time an account of the radical application of an emic strategy, in the strict sense of the term (Pike, 1967).

### **From workshops to the embrace of fiction**

Another significant outcome of anthropology's opening to the literary dimension has been the emergence of classes and workshops devoted to the craft of ethnographic writing. Anthropology curricula began to include courses aimed at developing the skills needed to produce engaging, stylistically varied texts that would appeal to readers. Several universities have introduced such courses – among them Harvard University, California State University, University of Vermont, Arizona State University, Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences, George Mason University, Northridge, McGill University, Queen's University, The New School, University of Leeds, University of Oslo, and the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (The Graduate Institute, Geneva). At times, these courses have been accompanied by the publication of 'guides' and 'manuals', such as *A Student's Guide to Reading and Writing in Social Anthropology*, published by Harvard in 2010. However, this is by no means the norm, as becomes clear when these offerings are compared to the widespread availability of 'Creative Nonfiction Writing' courses at universities. These aim to encourage a general openness to literary ways of representing reality – including in the online environment, where digital publication forms predominate.

A crucial ally of these newly emerging courses has been a shift in the understanding of fiction. Previously, recourse to fiction was associated either with the ethical frameworks of anthropological work (such as the pseudonymisation of places and people) or with the need to conceal the authorial self – or with both aims simultaneously, as in the case of *Return to Laughter* by Elenore Smith Bowen (1954). In fact, this was a pseudonym concealing the true identity of Laura Bohannan (Elenore was her mother's first name, and Smith her own maiden name). In the author's note opening the book, she writes: 'All the characters in this book, except myself, are fictitious in the fullest meaning of that word. I knew people of the type I have described here; the incidents of the book

are of the genre I myself experienced in Africa. Nevertheless, so much is fiction' (Bowen, 1954, p. 5). *Return to Laughter* was written as an autobiographical, first-person narrative, and it addressed, in an open way, problems that were at the time generally kept out of official accounts. Bowen/Bohannon did not hide her research dilemmas. She revealed her mistakes and missteps, showing how the fieldwork enterprise lost much of its aura as an objective effort to uncover an external, causally structured reality.

Clifford reminds us in this context that the concept of 'literature' is a transitional category. Beginning in the seventeenth century, Western science excluded certain forms of expression from its repertoire – rhetoric, subjectivity, fiction – assigning them instead to the domain of literature. Thus, when it is suggested that ethnography is a form of art or literature, this refers to its older understanding as the 'skilful fashioning of useful artifacts' (Clifford, 1986b, p. 6). In this sense, ethnographic writing is a fiction – something fashioned or shaped, in line with the Latin root of the term *fingere* – and good ethnographies are, ultimately, 'true fictions'. This oxymoronic expression was further developed by Vincent Crapanzano, who compared the writing ethnographer to a trickster, promising, like Hermes, never to lie, while at the same time never being able to tell the whole truth (Crapanzano, 1986). This limitation arises from the inevitable rhetorical nature of anthropological texts, which 'are thus inherently partial – committed and incomplete' (Clifford, 1986b, p. 7).

Destabilising the notion of fiction and detaching it from the strictly literary domain of expression had significant consequences. Fiction increasingly came to be seen as a useful tool, enabling anthropological knowledge to be applied in new and innovative ways that, as Ulf Hannerz suggests, may lead to 'developing new genres' (Hannerz, 2017, p. 256). Fiction also became a complementary mode for communicating research results with the explicit intention of reaching a broader audience. Examples include Oliver La Farge's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1930 novel *Laughing Boy*, and, more recently, Darcy Ribeiro's experimental novels, which combine the language of government documents and ethnographic reports with mythic narration and a polyphony of voices speaking in both the first and third person (*Maira*). Similarly, Amitav Ghosh's prose – such as *In an Antique Land* – draws on anthropological techniques. In an interview, Ghosh explained:

The field notes were the "anthropological" part of my work; the diaries were more literary. My dissertation was based almost entirely on my field notes; similarly the first-person narrative in *Antique Land* is based on my diaries (Stankiewicz, 2012, p. 536).

The epistemic benefits of employing fiction have also been recognised in relation to anthropological poetry. Victor Turner (1983) observed that the achievements of ethnopoetics 'bring to light' issues of multiculturalism. Ivan Brady added to this, pointing to problems of historical politics, racism and relativism,

arguing that anthropologists' use of diverse expressive forms – including poetry – stems from the need to say things that could not effectively be conveyed through other means (Brady, 2000).

At the same time, one aspect has not changed: publishing remains a necessity for those working in higher education and serves as the fuel for anthropological careers. Ongoing debates about whether monographs or journal articles are more important, the dominance of citation index regimes, and the well-known slogan 'publish or perish' are all consequences of this reality. Helena Wulff captures this tension succinctly:

Anthropologists have mostly celebrated the field experience in all its variety. Yet in fact, they are likely to spend as much time sitting in front of the computer screen. Once it has begun, writing is in one way a very solitary activity, but in another way, it is not: you may be in interaction with an imagined audience of colleagues, students, as well as people in your field, perhaps general readers, and increasingly, the representatives of academic audit culture (Wulff, 2017b, p. 1).

## Coda

Despite the processes described above, creativity in ethnographic writing – understood as producing texts rich in meaning and employing diverse figures, modes, and styles to engage a wide range of readers – continues to be marginalised. 'How, one asks constantly, could such interesting people doing such interesting things produce such dull books?' Mary Louise Pratt asked years ago (Pratt, 1986, p. 33). This century, Laurel Richardson expressed the same frustration even more forcefully: 'For years I had yawned my way through numerous supposedly exemplary qualitative studies. Countless numbers of texts had I abandoned half read, half scanned' (Richardson, 2005, p. 959). Pratt's question and Richardson's confession remain just as relevant today, particularly where creative ethnography – as a research, writing and teaching practice – is either absent or treated dismissively.

This is all the more surprising given that anthropology's past could easily be told through the bestselling books published over the decades: from James G. Frazer (*The Golden Bough*), Margaret Mead (*Coming of Age in Samoa*), Ruth Benedict (*Patterns of Culture*), and Bronisław Malinowski (*The Sexual Life of Savages, A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*), through Zora Neale Hurston (*Mules and Men, Their Eyes Were Watching God*), Claude Lévi-Strauss (*Tristes Tropiques*), Carlos Castaneda (*The Teachings of Don Juan*), and Nigel Barley (*The Innocent Anthropologist*), to Marc Augé (*Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*), Thomas Hylland Eriksen (*Small Places, Large Issues*), and Gillian Tett (*Saving the Sun: How Wall Street Mavericks Shook Up Japan's Financial World and Made Billions*). Another way of telling this story might be to

trace the changing conventions and textual modes of representation: from ethnographic realism, with its typical use of the *praesens ethnographicum*, to later experiments with modes of expression, the position and role of the narrator, multi-authored formats, and the inclusion of dialogue and character descriptions within the text.

Reconstructions of this kind – though perfectly legitimate – are not common. There remains a persistent reluctance to think of anthropology as a writing enterprise. The flip side of this reluctance is the belief that the discipline's identity is rooted primarily in the specialised tools and techniques of fieldwork. As a result, agrarian metaphors dominate (*field, fieldwork, fieldworker*), rather than textual ones (*author, authorship, writing*). And yet, despite the development and spread of new technologies, it is textual narratives that remain the central medium through which the results of anthropological research are communicated. In this light, the absence of courses in Polish university ethnology and anthropology programmes devoted to cultivating the skills needed to produce vivid, engaging and compelling texts must be regarded as not only surprising, but frankly embarrassing.

Nor is this merely a problem affecting students. Orin Starn has courageously shed light on the range of difficulties faced by university faculty who lack adequate preparation for the task of writing. He used the phrase 'agony of writing' to describe this experience and confessed:

My dissertation, soaked in sweat at my desk, blocked and panicked for months, my first fall into full-blown depression. A colleague finding me, some years later, curled sobbing on my crummy office carpet, certain I'd never finish the tenure book I needed to keep my job. A second book, weeping once more, this time in the cellar so the kids wouldn't hear me, and contemplating suicide (Starn, 2022, p. 187).

Starn gives another example: a researcher isolates themselves in a remote cabin to write a monograph after completing fieldwork, only to end up burning their field journal and smashing their laptop. Significantly, the 'agony of writing' can last an entire professional life. The syndrome of bitterness, insecurity and disappointment – described as 'professorial melancholia' – affects academics even in the 'late' stages of their careers. According to U.S. statistics, writing is an easy process for only 10% of researchers, a struggle for 80%, and a source of dysfunction for the remaining 10% (Starn, 2022, p. 194). Notably, the majority of those facing serious psychological difficulties with writing come from the humanities.

Given that in most master's and doctoral programmes in anthropology, the skills associated with creative ethnography are still treated as secondary – and that these same programmes often assume such skills can be acquired through some kind of natural osmosis, without dedicated courses or textbooks – it fol-

lows that the 'agony of writing', intensified by the pressures of academic audit culture, will only become more widespread.

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## Etnografia kreatywna: o jej konieczności, wyzwaniach i „agonii pisania” w kulturze audytu

### Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest podsumowanie procesu, w którym ukształtowała się twórcza etnografia – akademicka odmiana literatury faktu, wykorzystująca techniki zaczerpnięte z literatury pięknej. Debata wokół „kultury pisania” dała początek eksperymentom w pisarstwie etnograficznym, otwarciu na narrację, docenieniu poetyki antropologicznej, rozwojowi autoetnograficznych form ekspresji, ponownemu przemyśleniu kategorii fikcji oraz nowemu rozumieniu relacji między badaniami terenowymi a pracą nad tekstem. Autor podkreśla zarówno korzyści, jak i zagrożenia związane z tymi procesami, sugerując, że brak uniwersyteckiego wykształcenia w zakresie twórczej etnografii często prowadzi do osobistych rozczarowań i stawia pytania o komfort tworzenia tekstu, zarówno w ujęciu zawodowym, jak i psychologicznym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** twórcza etnografia, fikcja, autoetnografia, opowiadanie historii, pisanie akademickie.



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## Youth Culture in the Polish People's Republic of the 1960s: The Pedagogy of Big Beat

### Abstract

The main topic of this article is the functioning of youth music (so-called big-beat music) in the Polish People's Republic in the 1960s. The educational impact of the music offered was a significant context, as was the subjection to political pressure and the rules of party cultural policy. To this end, it was necessary to reconstruct the social situation and historical specificity in relation to the facts described. The methods employed included analysis of song lyrics, analysis of selected aspects of cultural policy, and examination of historical processes influencing youth culture.

**Keywords:** youth, youth culture, youth music, big beat, cultural policy, People's Poland.

The purpose of this article is to explore the pedagogical, educational, and political contexts in the social functioning of Polish youth music in the 1960s and early 1970s. Polish big beat, as a counterpart to Western rock, was under the special tutelage of government institutions and was often charged with various educational and propaganda tasks. In this article, I will attempt to demonstrate the manifestations and consequences of this tutelage. Lyrical analysis will be crucial here, as will tracing the ad hoc shifts in cultural policy aimed at shaping youth attitudes.

Undoubtedly, three turning points are significant: the first (1956–1962) marks the beginning of the history of youth culture in the Polish People's Republic, and thus the history of big beat; the second (1968) marks the beginning of

the waning period of Władysław Gomułka's government after the events of March 1968; and the third, after 1971, when Edward Gierek took power and changes began in the structure of the youth organizations overseen by the party. These three turning points mark three distinct periods of the state's cultural and educational policies, and also illustrate how the authorities' approach to the phenomenon we call youth culture has changed.

The term "youth culture" is imprecise. Within its semantic field, it includes "youth" as the subject of cultural creation, but it can just as easily be interpreted as "culture for youth," which ignores or at least marginalizes that subjectivity. In fact, we are dealing with a linguistic construct that conceals two distinct worlds: institutional culture and spontaneous culture, or in other words, the aforementioned culture for youth and culture of youth. Barbara Fatyga pointed this out, suggesting in her book *Dzicy z naszej ulicy. Antropologia kultury młodzieżowej* (*Savages from Our Street: Anthropology of Youth Culture*) suggests that the entire sphere of youth subculturality should simply be called "youth culture" (Fatyga, 1999; Wertenstein-Żuławski, Pęczak, 1991).

Nevertheless, the history of youth as a distinct social group—assuming we are referring to the broadly understood Western Civilization, occidentalized forms—reveals a clear division between "official" (institutional) youth culture and "unofficial" (spontaneous) youth culture. To explain this situation, the example of the United States is often cited. In the early 1950s, media executives, entertainment industry managers, producers, and fashion designers concluded that American teenagers (especially those from the white middle class) and so-called young adults were becoming a marketing-attractive target group, and thus deserved attention in various business plans. Efforts were made to "top-down" respond to the real, presumed, and culturally manufactured needs of young people. As a result, a new popular cinema emerged aimed at youth audiences (e.g., dramas starring James Dean, comedies with Elvis Presley), fashion trends were promoted e.g. jeans (Fiske, 1989), and most notably, there was an explosion of a new genre of popular music known as "rock'n'roll".

Essentially, this entire offer reflected the main features of commercial popular culture (mass culture), except that its recipient was considered specific (young, hedonistic, more emotional than reflective). Daniel Bell explained the cultural shift in post-WWII America:

The old American value system emphasized the quality of their achievements judged success, and a person's character. In the 1950s, success still mattered, but it was measured by status and taste. Culture no longer cares about how to work and achieve success, but how to spend and enjoy. Despite still using the language of Protestant ethics, American culture in the 1950s became hedonistic, focused on fun, entertainment, and extravagance, and—as is often the case in America—there was something compulsive about this attitude.

Furthermore,

the success motive found its fulfillment in sex. In the 1950s and 1960s, the cult of Orgasm replaced the cult of Mammon, which had previously been America's main passion (Bell, 1976, p. 120).

It quickly became clear that the most important domain of expression defining the specificity of "youthfulness" **was music**.

Rock'n'roll stars such as Jerry Lee Lewis, Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, and Brenda Lee became not only "style dictators" for youth but also informal opinion leaders. Meanwhile, among older and more conservative Americans, the music gained a reputation as a miasma that unleashed the worst instincts. Record labels and media, therefore, tried to influence rock'n'roll creators and performers to soften their musical message, with Elvis Presley's voluntary enlistment in the army serving as a symbolic expression of this tendency. The idea came from Presley's manager, Tom Parker, who hoped that such a gesture would win the singer favor with more conservative and older audiences, or at least soften the views of rock'n'roll's harshest critics, who saw Presley as just another scandalous figure of the genre. In general, the goal was to associate rock'n'roll with harmless entertainment for youth.

Youth music was associated with seasonal musical fashion rather than with an aesthetic, let alone a moral revolution. The dangerous rebelliousness was seen especially in the form of this music, in its energy, which also had a performative expression during live concerts and television appearances. The entertainment industry wanted to prevent a situation in which youth music would become an element of a cultural war, and for a few years, this seemed effective, at least until the beginning of the so-called British Invasion and the emergence of American psychedelic rock in the mid-1960s.

Institutional youth culture in the USA during the decade 1955–1965 had a clearly systemic character, fundamentally consistent with the political mainstream. Apart from a few films, such as *Rebel Without a Cause* starring James Dean, there was no revolution in popular culture texts. Rock'n'roll songs mostly dealt with teenage heartbreak—joyful versions encouraged enjoying life, while sad ones reflected on the sorrow of lost love. This resembled earlier mainstream American popular songs, about which Samuel I. Hayakawa wrote:

[...] the lyrics of popular songs, mostly (though not all) the creation of white lyricists intended primarily for white listeners, are full of delusions, vague and meaningless nostalgia, unrealistic fantasies, self-pity, and sentimental clichés pretending to be genuine emotions (Hayakawa, 1955, p. 84).

There was little to no reference to social issues, let alone political ones—no wonder, then, that student audiences largely ignored this first wave of American rock'n'roll and instead gravitated toward politically engaged folk music (Denselow, 1989, p. 16).

Spontaneous youth culture in America, however, had earlier roots, developing since the early 20th century. It encompassed phenomena such as youth gangs, similar hooligan groups, youth equivalents of artistic bohemia, and communities of young hobos, which became particularly visible during the Great Depression. Except for the artistic bohemians, this entire sphere was usually labeled as deviant, criminal, or at least semi-criminal—requiring deep resocialization and triggering moral panic in mainstream public opinion (Thrasher, 1927; Cohen, 1955, pp. 24-25).

This variant of youth culture was not considered a potential segment of the cultural industry, nor a target for any marketing efforts. However, after the explosion of rock'n'roll, the world of subcultures increasingly began to influence "official," institutional youth culture.

In Poland at that time—the 1950s—the authorities, following the post-October "thaw" of 1956, began to liberalize the Stalinist-inspired political model and allowed selective access to Western culture. However, the principles of this selection remained unclear for many years and changed depending on the current domestic and international political situation (Walicki, 1995, p. 107).

Regardless, the West—and especially America—was for young Poles a supremely positive point of reference. From America also came models of youth subculturality. That is why the first Polish youth subculture, the *bikiniarze* (bikini boys), and much later the hippies, were accused—especially in party press—of succumbing to politically hostile influences.

Youth subcultures in Poland were often accused—especially in the party political press—of succumbing to politically hostile influences. (Pećzak, 1992, pp. 12–13). The first rock'n'roll band in Polish history, Rhythm and Blues, was founded in 1959 in Gdańsk by Franciszek Walicki, a journalist from the Tricity area, cultural activist, lyricist, and a key figure in shaping the emerging youth music scene. The band lasted only a few months, as it was banned from performing in venues with more than 400 seats (the reason cited was hooligan incidents during concerts). Given the low ticket prices, this restriction made concerts financially unviable and effectively ended the band's activity (Walicki, 2000).

As Anna Idzikowska-Czubaj wrote:

Since Rhythm and Blues could no longer perform, the band's name was changed—initially with the same lineup—to Czerwono-Czarni. The term 'rock'n'roll' was replaced with 'Big Beat,' and a game of hide-and-seek with the so-called official authorities began, all in the name of fulfilling the need for fun and expressing one's distinctiveness<sup>1</sup>. (Idzikowska-Czubaj, 2011, pp. 134–135).

Walicki himself recalled:

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<sup>1</sup> All translations into English of the original texts are the author's own translations.

We also stopped using the term 'rock'n'roll,' which irritated the decision-makers. They went crazy over that name, and there was no point in provoking them. I looked for a Polish term to replace the outlawed 'rock'n'roll,' but nothing came to mind. One day, I was browsing a French magazine devoted to popular music. I looked at the title: 'Big Beat.' That was it—I thought—Czerwono-Czarni: a band of strong impact! (Walicki, 2012, p. 71).

It's worth noting that while Rhythm and Blues performed almost exclusively English-language songs (mainly American rock'n'roll standards), Czerwono-Czarni and their rivals, Niebiesko-Czarni, soon after their debuts began to consistently promote Walicki's slogan: "Polish youth sings Polish songs." This slogan first appeared as the banner for a concert series at the Non Stop club in Sopot in 1962 and 1963, hosted by Niebiesko-Czarni. It overlapped with an earlier initiative by Czerwono-Czarni called "We're Looking for Young Talents," which led to two editions of the Szczecin Festival of Young Talents (1962 and 1963). (Idzikowska-Czubaj, 2011, pp. 136-137). Walicki was the impresario for both bands.

These efforts, launched shortly after the term "Big Beat" (soon polonized as "bigbit") entered public discourse, gave this domestic version of rock'n'roll a distinct character, embedding it in a specific pedagogical and ideological context. Undoubtedly, the authorities kept a close eye on the youth music scene.

The most emblematic example is Władysław Gomułka's speech at the Central Committee Plenum of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) in July 1963. The party leader thundered:

[...] a foreign style has crept into our cultural and entertainment life, promoting a model of life that is easy, brutalized, and dismissive of the culture of emotions and interpersonal relations. This model, unfortunately promoted until recently by our radio, television, and stage activities, has caused considerable harm in our educational work with youth. It spread among them an unhealthy cult of stardom, unsupported by honest work and study. The greatest blame for the cultural and moral damage resulting from... (Stańczak-Wiślicz, 2012, p. 64).

The speech left no illusions—the third edition of the Festival of Young Talents had no chance of taking place. It also became clear that Gomułka himself remained a staunch opponent of youth culture imitating Western fashions. As a result, the entire future of the newly established Big Beat as an official musical offering was thrown into doubt. Promoters of this scene, such as Franciszek Walicki, could no longer count on the "porosity of the system" or the confusion among cultural policy administrators that had characterized the atmosphere of the 1956 political thaw. A special "survival strategy" had to be devised—or simply, "Big Beathad" to be absorbed into the mainstream of popular music in the Polish People's Republic at the cost of abandoning its rock'n'roll identity.

There are strong indications that the latter option was chosen. Above all—echoing the process of taming rock'n'roll by the cultural industry in 1950s America—Big Beat was first reduced to the role of pure entertainment aimed at

youth. Its creators and performers had to abandon any ambitions of supporting the development of an autonomous youth culture. As a result, Big Beat bands frequently served up silly, infantile songs, such as the Niebiesko-Czarni's new version of the children's tune *Stary niedźwiedź mocno śpi* (*The Old Bear Is Sound Asleep*) or Czerwone Gitary's *Pluszowy miś* (*The Plush Bear*), which included lyrics like: "the little bear was afraid to go into the forest / he trembled like a leaf / the plush bear".

This peculiar trend was not limited to the early days of bigbit, as evidenced by Czesław Niemen's 1968 song *Baw się w ciuciubabkę* (*Let's Play Hide-and-Seek*). Undoubtedly, this could alienate the more demanding segment of the youth audience. Music journalist Wiesław Królikowski wrote about the causes of this situation:

[...] in the 1960s, that is, at the beginning of domestic rock's career, song lyrics could be described at best as 'for youth' rather than 'youthful.' The difference between the two lies in the fact that well-known rock performers mostly used lyrics written by a small group of authors. Their age exceeded the average age of the rock audience. Over time, many lyricists became semi-professional, and it was common for one author to collaborate with several performers or bands. It's possible that this unhealthy situation was the result of the actual weakness and imperfection of authorial songwriting in Polish rock at the time. Many young people with ambitions and potential to express themselves through their own musical and lyrical creativity were drawn in the 1960s and 1970s to the strong current of poetic song (Królikowski, 1882).

Andrzej Paweł Wojciechowski emphasized that

the main theme of songs was love; direct, uncomplicated, and often silly or naïve, they spoke of the problems of girls and boys in love. Two recurring themes were difficulties at school and tensions between parents and teenagers (Wojciechowski, 1976).

Anna Idzikowska-Czubaj, referring to the hit *Niedziela będzie dla nas* (*Sunday Will Be Ours*) by Czerwono-Czarni, observed:

Previous analyses of native Big Beat lyrics have always led to the conclusion that they had little in common with the general idea of rock'n'roll as music expressing youth rebellion and generational conflict. Youth slang was not adopted in them. The lyrical subject in the songs is no rebel, but rather a hardworking role model who doesn't even have time to meet his girlfriend between one meeting and another (Idzikowska-Czubaj, 2011, p. 142).

The quoted comments, of course, do not exhaust the topic, as they fail to consider the most crucial context shaped by cultural policy. Although party documents more often relied on ideological generalities than specifics, it was easy to infer that the leadership of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), while allowing for a "safe" formula of youth culture, had no intention of permitting its autonomy or relinquishing its role as political gatekeeper and party educator. One reason was the enormous popularity of music bands and their presumed (but also real) influence on the attitudes of young people. Perhaps that is why

lyrics sung by big-bit bands began to show signs of distancing themselves from youth culture and youth fashion. A flagship example is the song *Nie bądź taki Bitels* (*Don't Be Such a Beatle*), written by Jacek Grań (artistic pseudonym of Franciszek Walicki) and performed by Czesław Niemen in 1964. Here is a fragment of the lyrics:

"Don't be such a Beatle," says my dad to me.  
 And mom, as always: Go to the hairdresser!  
 Because the barber's chasing you with scissors.  
 Cut that mop already, shame on you, son!  
 And I say to Dad: Dad, you're backward,  
 Dad doesn't even know—that's the fashion now.  
 And as for mom, well, that's the mom we've got,  
 She's never heard of Liverpool.  
 Cut that mop, brother, and don't spite your mom.  
 We know it's hard—we've got moms too.  
 So when mom nags, there's only one solution:  
 Go to the hairdresser, brother, go to the hairdresser! [...].

In my book on subcultures in the Polish People's Republic, I wrote in reference to the lyrics above:

Let's try to empathize with the situation and emotions of the person being addressed. As a fan of Anglo-Saxon rock, he has a clear vision of the world: the West is a space of freedom, the cradle of new music, and young people there look however they want. The People's Republic of Poland, on the other hand, wants to raise its youth according to the convictions of the communist authorities and the imaginings of a peasant-style conservative older generation. Polish youth music, as soon as it becomes an object of fascination, is immediately 'pedagogically corrected'. A comprehensive educational and repressive front is formed, comprising actions by schools, the militia, families, and the media. The message of this front is clear: this is the East, not the West—we will eradicate all foreign moral decay, noisy music, and 'mops' included. Yet those 'mops' seem very attractive to the young Pole, and all attacks on this appealing aesthetic are perceived as ideological, malicious interference and humiliation. (Pęczak, 2013, p. 78).

The intergenerational conflict over boys' long hair in the 1960s and 1970s thus grew into a symbol. Long hair was worn by the Beatles and other British rock bands that conquered America between 1963 and 1965; later, such hairstyles became associated with hippies and counterculture. In any case, these long locks—fought against by conservative parents, teachers, and of course the militia—were above all a sign of defiance and, naturally, a hallmark of Western youth culture.

Of course, there were exceptions. For instance, hits by Niebiesko-Czarni from the late 1960s referenced ecology (*Na betonie kwiaty nie rosną – Flowers Don't Grow on Concrete*) or, in a slightly veiled form, the ideology of flower power and the hippie symbolism of long hair (*Mamy dla was kwiaty – We Have Flowers for You*). A more direct manifestation of youth culture's independence

can be found in earlier songs by Karin Stanek—*Tato kup mi džinsy (Dad, Buy Me Jeans)*, *Autostop (Hitchhiking)*, and *Trzysta tysięcy gitar (Three Hundred Thousand Guitars)*. These songs celebrated youth fashion (jeans being its emblematic symbol in the 1960s), the practice of free movement via hitchhiking (Robotycki, 2005, p. 26) and, finally, the guitar—an instrument that became a symbol of youth music.

The guitar, as an emblematic instrument of youth music, became a symbol of generational identity. After the events of March 1968, the distrust of party officials toward Western pop culture intensified—ironically, in direct proportion to the growing interest of political authorities in youth music. A pivotal moment was the assessment of two Warsaw concerts by The Rolling Stones in April 1967. Following riots outside the Congress Hall, where the band performed twice, Minister of Culture Lucjan Motyka wrote to Władysław Gomułka the next day, informing him that he had issued a ban on “[...] inviting to Poland bands whose performances might cause similar public disturbances” (Bittner, 2017, p. 76).

In June 1969, the Culture Department of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party (KC PZPR) conducted a critical review of entertainment programming on Polish Television (TVP). In Karolina Bittner’s book analyzing the cultural policy of the PZPR in the realm of musical entertainment, we read:

Faced with the popularity of Big Beat, the Culture Department of the KC PZPR supported all initiatives promoting the so-called middle-of-the-road song. The Opole Festival, as well as television programs—*Kabaret Starszych Panów (The Old Gentlemen’s Cabaret)*, *Listy śpiewające (Singing Letters)*, and Lucjan Kydryński’s shows, such as *Giełda Piosenki (Song Exchange)*—shaped Polish musical tastes. Among the valuable and beautiful songs promoted by *Giełda Piosenki*, the Culture Department listed: *Niepewność (Uncertainty)*, *Gondolierzy znad Wisły (Gondoliers from the Vistula)*, *Zapomniałam (I Forgot)*, *Opolskie dziewczyny (Opole Girls)*, *Jest bałalaika (There’s a Balalaika)*, and *Cała sala śpiewa z nami (The Whole Hall Sings with Us)* (Bittner, 2017, p. 193).

A clarification is necessary here: Lucjan Kydryński hosted the television program *Muzyka lekka, łatwa i przyjemna (Light, Easy and Pleasant Music)*, while the creator and first host of the TV show *Giełda Piosenki (Song Exchange)* was Lech Terpiłowski. Kydryński occasionally appeared as a presenter on the radio show of the same name. Additionally, the authors (and main performers) of *Kabaret Starszych Panów (The Old Gentlemen’s Cabaret)* were Jeremi Przybora and Jerzy Wasowski, and *Listy śpiewające (Singing Letters)* was created by Agnieszka Osiecka. The Department justified its evaluation as follows:

We care about every new, good song that brings joy to people. We especially care about attractive and modern youth music that reflects the interests, joys, reflections, and sometimes even doubts of the younger generation. It must be said clearly that we particularly care about songs that speak not only of love and joy, but also embed in the subconscious of the listener such values as love of the homeland and pride in a job well done (Bittner, 2017, p. 76).

The essence of the Department's position boiled down to the authorities' expectation that songwriters fulfill propagandistic functions. "Pride in a job well done" suggests a nostalgic longing among party ideologues for the socialist realist version of popular culture—an approach unlikely to enhance the appeal of songs built on such premises. However, "love of the homeland" quite often became a theme in Big Beat compositions.

In the second half of the 1960s, especially after the events of March 1968, a "partisan-soldier" trend emerged in youth music, most prominently represented by bands such as Czerwone Gitary and No To Co. The rise of this phenomenon was tied to immediate ideological demands and the influence of nationalist currents within the party apparatus. The goal was to highlight the younger generation's tribute to war heroes, counteract so-called cosmopolitan tendencies, and resist youth fashion imported from the West.

Songs serving this purpose included *Po ten kwiat czerwony* (*For That Red Flower*) by No To Co, *Niebieskooka* (*Blue-Eyed Girl*) and *Biały krzyż* (*White Cross*) by Czerwone Gitary, and the hit *Już lat 25* (*It's Been 25 Years*) by ABC, written to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the end of World War II. "Boys and girls walk the streets / Thinking of the soldiers who fought for them," sang Wojciech Gąssowski with a group ABC.

All these songs were hits at the Soldiers' Song Festival in Kołobrzeg, whose repertoire consistently reflected the current propagandistic definition of patriotism. It is worth noting, however, that these songs almost always wrapped their "patriotic" messages in a seemingly modern pop format. "Girls walk the streets / Thinking of the soldiers who fought for them" — sang Wojciech Gąssowski with ABC. All the songs mentioned above were hits at the Soldiers' Song Festival in Kołobrzeg, whose repertoire consistently reflected the current propagandistic definition of patriotism. It is worth emphasizing, however, that these songs almost always wrapped their "patriotic" messages in a quasi-modern pop format (Pęczak, 2015).

Nevertheless, the content of these works was most often derived from a heavily trivialized poetic style. In addition to the formulaic partisan ballad, we find here sentimental depictions of native landscapes. Perhaps the most striking example is the song *Najpiękniejsza jest moja ojczyzna* (*My Homeland Is the Most Beautiful*), composed by the band No To Co to mark the 25th anniversary of the Polish People's Republic:

My homeland is the most beautiful  
 When it awakens from sleep in spring.  
 Its day begins with birdsong  
 And the scent of jasmine and lilac.  
 By the roads, tall poplars  
 In summer nearly reach the sky,  
 Sad willows braid their tresses,

The sun ripens in the clouds like a lily.  
 When the hot summer passes  
 And storks fly across the seas,  
 Golden autumn in a leafy dress  
 Paints colorful pictures, paints.  
 Winter puts on white dresses,  
 Brings snow stars to the roof,  
 Bows with its branches in the wind,  
 As if inviting us for a walk.  
 Where forests and mountains are more beautiful,  
 Where the lark sings so sweetly in the fields,  
 Where clouds rush across the sky,  
 Where wheat ripens golden, ripens.  
 Our homeland is the most beautiful  
 When it awakens from sleep in the morning.  
 Its day begins with birdsong  
 And the scent of jasmine and lilac."

It is difficult to determine whether this was a conscious inspiration, but the character of the lyrics strongly resembles the poetry of "domestic" romantics—Pol, Syrokomla, Lenartowicz—whose depictions of rustic landscapes were intended, among other things, to evoke the "love of the homeland" cited earlier in the party document. There are, however, songs in the Big Beat repertoire in which the tradition of nature descriptions merges with soldierly and veteran themes. One such example is the song performed by Jacek Lech, vocalist of Czerwono-Czarni, at the Opole Festival in 1969: *Gdzie szumiące topole* (*Where the Whispering Poplars Grow*), with music by Piotr Figiel and lyrics by Janusz Kondratowicz. At the Opole Festival in 1969, Jacek Lech of Czerwono-Czarni performed the song *Gdzie szumiące topole* (*Where the Whispering Poplars Grow*), with music by Piotr Figiel and lyrics by Janusz Kondratowicz. The lyrics read:

Dust from the road beneath my feet  
 First green fields before my eyes  
 Once my father returned here from Oka river  
 Once he came back, back to this place  
 Where the whispering poplars  
 Reach high into the sky  
 Where the willow bows  
 To wandering clouds  
 Where on the Vistula's sandy banks  
 Nets tangle across the paths  
 Where birds seek shelter  
 Before flying on  
 Where every house  
 Has open doors  
 Where the whitewashed orchards  
 Bloom with colorful flowers  
 Where cornflowers and poppies

Guard the quiet by the roadside  
Where a stranger passing by  
Is a welcome guest

A spectacular culmination of Bigbit's political engagement on the side of the authorities was undoubtedly the song *Union of Polish Socialist Youth* from Czerwone Gitary's repertoire, composed in 1975 (music by Seweryn Krajewski, lyrics by Krzysztof Dzikowski). Here is a fragment:

From all corners of the land  
A common song is heard;  
From the factories, from vast steelworks,  
From fields where bread grows:

The Union of Polish Socialist Youth  
Unites, unites youth from towns and villages.  
The Union of Polish Socialist Youth –  
Our shared path, the slogan of our days.

The Union of Polish Socialist Youth  
Leads us forward through work.  
The Union of Polish Socialist Youth  
Builds a better world through shared struggle [...]

In Marek Gaszyński's book *Czerwone Gitary. Nie spoczniemy...*, We read that this anthem was written exclusively for a contest announced to celebrate the creation of the *Union of Polish Socialist Youth*. The song was, in fact, commissioned by Zdzisław Kurowski, a member of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the PZPR and newly appointed chairman of the main council of the *Union of Polish Socialist Youth*. The offer was personally extended to Krzysztof Dzikowski, who later authored multiple lyrics and worked in UPSY as "the song expert." Marek Gaszyński adds that in 1975, another song by the Krajewski–Dzikowski duo was created on a similar theme: *Młodość naszą siłą* (*Youth Is Our Strength*). Both songs were performed at a ceremonial concert in Warsaw's Congress Hall, celebrating the unification congress of youth organizations, and both were included on a commemorative album. (Gaszyński, 2005, p. 151). 1960s Big Beat generally followed the mainstream of musical entertainment, coexisting on festival stages with more traditional genres. Moreover, as a highly popular genre, it felt ideological pressure and often succumbed to it. This was especially evident in moments when Big Beat performers were engaged in propaganda activities and tasked with fulfilling objectives set by the party apparatus. Such was the case after the events of March 1968.

One manifestation of this engagement was the practice of incorporating folk music into Big Beat repertoire. This practice dates back to the very beginnings of bigbit, when bands like Niebiesko-Czarni performed songs such as *Płynie Wisła, płynie* (*The Vistula Flows*), *Głęboka studzienka* (*The Deep Well*), and *Kawaliry* (*The Cavaliers*)—songs known from the repertoire of state folk song and dance

ensembles. Skaldowie boldly drew on highland folklore, while Trubadurzy modeled their songs on East Slavic, especially Russian, folk traditions. However, the greatest contribution in this field undoubtedly came from the band No To Co (full name: Grupa Skiffłowa No To Co).

Founded in Łódź and led by Piotr Janczerski, the band was present at all major popular music festivals and consistently generated enthusiastic responses from audiences—thanks both to their musical craftsmanship and the specific nature of their songs, nearly all of which appealed to mass tastes. Press coverage also played a role. In July 1968, Krystian Brodacki wrote in “Polityka” magazine:

I attended a concert featuring the group No To Co. What I saw and heard defied all expectations. No To Co took the stage dressed in... Polish folk costumes, and they even brought a *turoń* with them. Then they began singing Polish folk melodies in a Big Beat rhythm! And something even stranger happened—the youth gathered in the hall began singing along in chorus: *Zasiali górale* (*The Highlanders Have Sown*), *W murowanej piwnicy* (*In the Stone Cellar*), *Hej, górol, ci jo górol* (*Hey, Highlander, I Am a Highlander*). I do not hesitate to say that the boys from No To Co performed a miracle that no one in Poland had achieved before. Through Big Beat ‘profanation,’ they opened teenagers’ ears to the beauty of our folk music and taught them to sing! And if they wanted to transfer this experiment to the realm of mass songs with social and educational themes, I believe they could succeed again (Michalski, 2014, p. 326).

The Lublin-based magazine “Kamena” reported with peculiar enthusiasm in June 1969:

They dress colorfully, but when they took the stage! *Kierezyje, kapy, pasy słuckie*—a mix of styles, eras, and regions, yet somehow it all looked folk-like. Stefanek in a purple *sukmana*! Rybiński, who plays bass guitar and wears the hair and mustache of a typical peasant, in an embroidered peasant shirt. Piotrek in red trousers, boots with high tops, and spurs (Michalski, 2014, p. 364).

The idea of folklorism—or more precisely, *neo-folklorism*<sup>2</sup>—when applied to the social function of this musical genre, clearly had political and educational significance. Broadly speaking, it aimed to neutralize the “cosmopolitanism” expressed in fascination with Anglo-Saxon rock by opposing it with musical (and not only musical) “localness.” These efforts were designed to incorporate the expectations and tastes of more traditional audiences, aligning with their “folk” taste, as Pierre Bourdieu would define it (Bourdieu, 2005, pp. 43–48). The authorities found it especially useful to exploit generational divides in musical preferences, particularly since this “folk taste” could—contrary to Bourdieu’s concept and after appropriate ideological and aesthetic processing—serve as a “legitimate taste,” that is, a hegemonic one.

<sup>2</sup> For distinction from the well-known and frequently described “primary” version of folklorism, I introduce this term assuming that neo-folklorism does not have to be based on so-called folk authenticity, but often turns to forms resulting from prior stylization (folklorization), or treats said authenticity as a purely symbolic or even entirely conventional frame of reference.

The folklorization (*neo-folklorization*) of Big Beat undoubtedly contributed to stabilizing the genre's place within the mainstream of Polish popular music. At the same time, however, it clearly distanced Big Beat from the universal idiom of rock. As a result, Big Beat ceased to be attractive to younger audiences and, by the 1970s, had become a musical relic—an element of the repertoire for less significant events or wedding receptions. A new era had begun: **the era of the disco**.

In the process, the concept of youth culture also lost its edge. It could be said that the term "youth culture" had outdated itself, just like the youth it originally referred to, and just like the concept of big beat. Furthermore, educational institutions were unsure how to cope with a situation defined on the one hand by disco, and on the other by the growing appeal of youth subcultures. The true effects of this situation, however, would come later – in the last decade of the Polish People's Republic.

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## **Kultura młodzieżowa w PRL lat 60. XX wieku. Pedagogika big-beatu**

### **Streszczenie**

Głównym tematem niniejszego artykułu jest funkcjonowanie muzyki młodzieżowej (tzw. big-beat) w Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej w latach 60. XX wieku. Istotnym kontekstem był wpływ edukacyjny oferowanej muzyki, podobnie jak poddanie jej presji politycznej i zasadom partyjnej polityki kulturalnej. W tym celu konieczne było odtworzenie sytuacji społecznej i specyfiki historycznej w odniesieniu do opisywanych faktów. Zastosowane metody obejmowały analizę tekstów piosenek, analizę wybranych aspektów polityki kulturalnej oraz badanie procesów historycznych wpływających na kulturę młodzieżową.

**Słowa kluczowe:** młodzież, kultura młodzieżowa, muzyka młodzieżowa, big-beat, polityka kulturalna, Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa.



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## The Practice of Intermedia Literature in Early School Education. Revealing Symbols – Exemplification

### Abstract

The article discusses the issue of literary education in primary school in the context of cultural change brought about by new media. The concept of intermedial plays a key role here – understood as the *in-between space* of art and life, encompassing both the functioning of a media society, cultural phenomena, and the individual experience of a person in a mediated world. Literary texts, especially those addressed to young readers, are increasingly characterized by narrative heterogeneity, and fit into the media competencies of contemporary children, who use a "navigational" way of reading. At the same time, the sketch emphasizes the need to develop symbolic interpretation skills, which are important in the context of losing contact with the symbolic language in the era of visual overload. An example of the practical implementation of the concept of intermedia literature in early school education is the interpretation of the book *Zgubiona dusza* by Olga Tokarczuk and Joanna Concejo. The symbolic nature of the work enables such early school literature practice, which through conversation and analysis of metaphors, supports the process of understanding symbols, symbolic thinking, and the language capabilities of the student. Intermedia literature also provides a space for reflection on human existence and humanity, and a way to slow down life in a world dominated by acceleration.

**Keywords:** intermediality, symbolic literature, semiotic code, early school education, symbol, reflection, dialogue with literature, conversation in school reading.

## Introduction

Awareness of the change that has taken place in the cultural and civilizational space over the last fifty years due to new media has led to scientific reflections on specific phenomena occurring within the arts: literature and media<sup>1</sup>. The actions taken by literary scholars involved evaluating individual fields, designating their individual *status quo*, but simultaneously revealed mutual influences, defined relationships, multilaterally illuminated the connections that occur between heterogeneous communication structures of both types of speech, and led to certain normative determinations for the latest literature (Hejmej, 2022; Hopfinger, 2010; Bodzioch-Bryła, 2011; Regiewicz, 2021)<sup>2</sup>, also directed at a juvenile reader (Warzocha 2020, 2018 a, b).

At the same time, the instrumentarium of literary texts poetics has been expanded, which, according to Andrzej Hejmej, is now treated as a transdisciplinary discipline, capable of describing polysemantic and multi-media phenomena (Hejmej, 2016, p. 13-14), and for which the current audiovisual culture becomes the background (Hopfinger, 1997). It is the audiovisual nature that rearranges the communicative hierarchy, which has highlighted the need to verify literary works for adult and child readers through an analysis of the *action* of images and sound in various media environments, while considering current scientific findings regarding the perceptual capabilities of contemporary audiences.

Such a reality evokes definitions well-known from the repertoire of social and humanistic concepts, which are essential for further argumentation: media society and intermediality (Hejmej, 2014; Goban-Klas 2025)<sup>3</sup>. First, in the broad-

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<sup>1</sup> I accept the definition of media as an art by Ryszard W. Kluszczyński, who wrote: "The concept of media art, or media art, refers in the most direct and most reasonable way to the complex of artistic phenomena that use media, i.e. mechanical or electronic techniques of recording, producing and transmitting audio and visual information, as a means of expression. In this sense, media arts should include, for example, photography, film, video, diorama, radio art, television art, computer animation" (Kluszczyński, 2000, pp. 167, all translations into English of the original texts are the author's own translations). In short, media (technical: audiovisual, digital) can be treated as art, because they have their own language, influence the recipient and shape his aesthetic sensitivity.

<sup>2</sup> It would be remiss not to mention one of the most important Polish authors of works inquiring into the correspondence between the arts of literature and media, Maryla Hopfinger. Her numerous articles, but above all her monograph *Literatura i media*, have, as we know, become an inspiration for many researchers of the subject. (Hopfinger, 1985, 1992, 1997, 2010; Bodzioch-Bryła, 2011; Regiewicz, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> "In today's scientific reflection – wrote A. Hejmej in 2014 – the issue of the media society is most often addressed, which is completely understandable, from the perspective of media studies, the science of mass communication, sociology, there has been a kind of 'appropriation' of the issue of media (mediality) by social communication theorists" (Hejmej, 2024, pp. 244–245). And for example, according to Tomasz Goban-Klas, a media society is a society in which

est sense, it defines the current social state in which, with unprecedented force, there is a dependence of man on media mechanisms. To the extent that, because of mediatization, the social system is under media compulsion and begins to be guided by logic as such, but media logic (Michalczyk, 2008, pp. 8). Therefore, it describes an individual/child as *a media entity* (Hejmej, 2022, pp. 28), articulated by audiovisual cultural experiences (Hopfinger, 2003). These, in turn, cause anthropological changes, redefining human possibilities, needs, and expectations, which determine the transformations of culture and, further, the conversion of its texts, including literary ones (Hopfinger, 2010; Bodzioch-Bryła, Pietruszewska-Kobiela, Regiewicz, 2015; Regiewicz 2021 a, b).

Meanwhile, intermediality, introduced as a scientific horizon in 1965 by Dick Higgins as the so-called *inter-space* connecting various forms of expression in avant-garde art (Chmielecki, 2008; Chmielecki, 2007), has now decisively expanded ontological boundaries and is currently situated in virtually every dimension of technology-driven reality. It is a sign of current social communication and a feature of the realization of today's art and media hybrids (Hejmej, 2022). Intermediality is becoming a symbol of current culture, with strongly expansive media increasingly shaping the expectations of their participants, changing the meaning order that has been in place for years. They subject areas of reality and human attitudes to semiotics.

In fact, writes Andrzej Hejmej, it would be necessary to state that in the contemporary world, three dimensions of intermediality inevitably overlap: the first is related to the functioning of the modern society (the "postmodern", "informational", "network", "media" "society", etc.), which is characterized by networks of communication and their interactions in the sphere of ideology, politics, science, and other areas; the second, in this case, is rightly referred to as artistic intermediality – with contemporary art [...]; the third – with existence or, as some researchers propose, existence *inter-esse* (individual experience conditioned by the situation of mediatization, being in a media and mediated reality)" (Hejmej, 2022, pp. 42).

In other words, the phenomenon of intermediality takes on another form from this perspective. He builds an *inter-space* not only in art, but also in the life of every human being. In a world dominated by media, the existence at the intersection of the real and virtual environments, which expands experiences, becomes an important issue. As Umberto Eco said in *Dzieło otwarte*, this is one of the ways of shaping one's worldview (Eco, 2008). Therefore, the way a media society participant interprets reality differs from the way a person who does not know or use the Internet interprets it. Human-technological symbiosis expands

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"interpersonal contacts and relationships are predominantly of an intermediated, media nature; a society in which the media create (produce) a specific virtual reality, media culture; a society in which the media infrastructure, and in particular telecommunications, is the basis of information networks and circuits of various scales (from local to global), essential for effective individual and organizational actions and contacts in all spheres of life [...]" (Goban-Klas, 2015).

the possibilities of perception and reception of the representative of *homo-irritus*, while proposing a new way of receiving the art of the word.

The interpretive approach to the latest children's literature involves a dimension of intermediality that encompasses all topics and issues related to interartistic and intermedia relations. This is therefore intermediality, which, in the opinion of Adam Regiewicz (Regiewicz, Warzocha, 2023, p. 15):

It does not so much analyze the way in which "media substitution" or "intermedial transposition" occurs in a literary text, the circumstances under which a given text adapts another medium, or the way in which the text functions as a hybrid – a variant of intermedial literature, but rather focuses on all kinds of intermedial transformations: recycling strategies, collages, montages, borrowings, adaptations, remediations, transpositions, convergence phenomena, etc. However, the most important thing is the awareness that in the center of attention remains the human being in the contemporary media reality (Regiewicz, Warzocha, 2023, pp. 15).

We are dealing with a comparative phenomenon that, by addressing issues related to the latest readings in relation to new media, highlights the heterogeneity of the message in the literary text, which consists of compositional elements of different generic origin – literary and audiovisual (Regiewicz, Warzocha, 2023, pp. 133). As a result, the recipient receives a polymorphic, audiovisual work.

Looking at contemporary reading dedicated to the immature reader, it is impossible not to notice that intermediality and audiovisuality are becoming more and more visible in it. This is due to the various artistic means used to create the literary world, which include both traditional literary devices, such as evoking a musical narrative through onomatopoeia, phonetic instrumentation, and rhythmic speech, as well as new techniques and schemes symptomatic of the poetics of audiovisual/digital productions (film, advertising, music videos, the internet, etc.) (Szczęsna, 2018; Szczęsna, 2007). Heterogeneous narrative can be found more and more clearly in texts proposed to children, which weaves the literary world through intersemiotic mechanisms.

It is a response to the *media skills* of the young person caused by the development of digital technology (Carr, 2021), who reads cultural texts with audiovisuality, can decode meanings in the way of internet navigation, and for whom hyperlink literature, at least due to his immersion in new media that induce habits, seems more friendly than a traditional, linear work (Warzocha, 2020).

On the other hand, there is a need today in early education to carefully develop students' ability to understand symbols, because, as Manfred Lurker wrote, in times of visual overfeeding through television and film, the person living today has little contact with the symbolic language. Symbols, according to the German researcher, are phenomena that transcend tangible reality, and their exploration serves to seek a sense of meaning in human life lost due to *civilization sickness* (Lurker, 2011).

Symbols are found in dreams, myths, or fairy tales. They accompany a person throughout their life, and this is why there is a need for teaching activities that will gradually reveal them to the student in the school process.

For a younger student, who, as Wiesława Limont notes, “can find very distant, yet close and apt metaphorical expressions for the presented drawings [...]” (Limont, 1996, pp. 58), and also, as Ewa Guttmejer reports, is in a breakthrough phase when it comes to the symbolic interpretation of literary works (Guttmejer, 1982, pp. 151), and considering the situation of a child of a media society and their activity marked by visual and audiovisual characteristics, a joint, school reading of intermedia texts marked by symbolism will allow for the preservation and development of their natural abilities (Żuchowska, 2017; Kłakówna, 2016).

## Exemplification

The practice of interdisciplinary literature in primary education. Olga Tokarczuk and Joanna Concejo’s *Zgubiona dusza*.

To illustrate the discussed issues, which in translation to early school practice may mean respecting the above-mentioned assumptions and ideas of literature practice designated by literature teachers, let us consider an individual example that corresponds to the assumed concepts.

Reflection on the potential of symbolic intermedial texts in the process of literary education of children in the early school age leads once again to the analysis of a work in which form and content create an inseparable whole. In this context, Olga Tokarczuk’s book *Zgubiona dusza* with the iconic text by Joanna Concejo (Tokarczuk, Concejo, 2017) takes on special significance.

This is a different work from the rest of the Nobel laureate oeuvre, which has so far been associated primarily with adult literature. This time, the text is addressed to a reader sensitive to the coexistence of words, images, and sensory experiences in a cultural text. He should be willing to discuss fundamental topics related to questions about human beings, time, interpersonal relationships, happiness, or loneliness. The recipient can be either an adult or a child. It is important that he is ready to meet literature filled with symbols, which proposes their deciphering and combining into one via a hybrid code composed of verbal, iconic, and tactile signs. It also becomes significant to access another way of reading, because the work, looking at the cover itself, consistently leads the reader to decoding the typography of the text, characterized by changes in the size of the interline used, with places covered by print, but with emptiness on the pages of the book. On the one hand, such typography builds upon the con-

tent, and on the other hand, it gives the reader a chance to reflect on what they have read, to start an internal dialogue.

At the same time, an integral part of the narrative in *Zgubiona dusza*, whose material dimension recalls an old photo album, is the dual type of paper. The presence of parchment emphasizes the impression of holding a collection of photos with translucent inserts. Also introducing an additional layer of meaning into the text: it can also be interpreted as a symbol of the human soul, memory, transience, or the passage of time.

The narrative of the piece is created in parallel through the thoughtful and consistent use of colors. Joanna Concejo proposes illustrations that simulate photographs, which gain color as the action develops, but also proportionally to the emotional barometer of the main character. It is a young, contemporary man who, in the pursuit of duties, success, and the pace of life, *loses* his own soul. The monochromatic colors of the invocation, which presents the world before the era of accelerated culture in images, evoking a state of security, peace, silence, and human closeness, emphasize the intimacy and contemplative mood of the book. With the appearance of verbal text, which depicts a man entangled in his thoughts, they mean something completely different. They are a reference to Jan's emptiness, alienation, misfortune, and fear. The gradually appearing palette of colors symbolizes the process of the hero's slow transformation, the time of seeking peace, finding oneself, one's identity, and the harmony of life.

This intermedial story becomes a pretext for a conversation about a person for whom, as Chantal Delsol wrote: "The only wealth of a human being is the time that remains for them to live. With time, everything is possible. Without it, nothing is" (Delsol, 1998, pp. 146).

With this assumption, the events depicted in the referenced story converge. The book by the Tokarczuk/Concejo duo becomes an invitation to reflect on different ways of experiencing existence. On the one hand, it shows a rhythm subordinated to the maxim "time is money," in which everyday life appears as a constant rush, a pursuit of benefits and productivity. In the philosophical sense, this corresponds to the *having* attitude – based on accumulation, possession, and measuring value in material terms. The novel's images, dominated by chaos, emotional emptiness, and growing tensions between people, can be read as a critical reflection of the realities of a consumer culture in a media society that threatens relationships and a sense of meaning.

The second model of life that the Nobel laureate opposes to this vision is the perspective of *being*, associated with the experience of harmony, a calm rhythm, and simplicity. It is a peculiar story about a lost land of happiness – a world where security does not stem from the wealth of one's wallet, but from inner peace and closeness. Finally, there is another dimension in John's story: *recov-*

*ered Arcadia*. Its foundation is the hero's inner transformation, returning to oneself and the ability to find meaning beyond the logic of possession.

Therefore, reading the schoolbook *Zgubiona dusza* with ten-year-old students, whose interpretation we will follow on an individual example, can begin with questions directed to students about: How do they feel when they are in a hurry? How do they feel when they have time to rest peacefully? What happens to them when they are in a hurry? What happens to them when they have time? What do they miss when they hurry? What they pay attention to when they are calm. What can people do when they have time? What don't they do when they don't have it? Why does a person hurry, and what is the result? How important is family time to them?

The discussion that follows is a form of introducing the atmosphere of the work and is a way of opening students to a dialogue about the literary text. It approaches the subject of classes, which aim to interpret the symbolism of the soul and discuss issues that seem difficult to realize in the context of a child. The issue of man and time, or one's own temporality, is usually dealt with by great philosophers, physicists, and people of great imagination. However, the unlimited imagination characteristic of the youngest allows them to solve problems in a way that would surprise an adult. A child's cognitive activity is characterized by a significant intensity that surpasses the mental operability of adults in many ways. While adults often submit to routine, mechanical regularity and certain behavioral patterns, children manifest a disposition to explore reality from the perspective of a researcher who transcends the boundaries of the known world. Alison Gopnik frames such events in terms of a functional division of roles: children play the role of a kind of *evolutionary laboratory* in which new cognitive models and innovative adaptive strategies are generated, while adults focus on maintaining the stability of the social system through production and management processes. Childhood appears here as a period of intensified epistemic activity – children act as natural experimenters, using inferences, constructing empirical tests of hypotheses, and producing theoretical concepts whose originality and creativity exceed the possibilities of an average, schematic adult (Gopnik, 2010; Fresse, 2008).

At the same time, as Zofia Agnieszka Kłakówna reports, the book should be discussed in school:

These conversations, which are of course not a methodical revelation, are intended to discover deeper meanings in the text being read and to include the text being read in a broader cultural context. They require various accompanying activities, including analytical ones, reflection, and exchange of observations. [...] The entire sense of engaging in reading in school depends on the organization of these activities and these conversations, and on their quality. Today, in the face of a reading crisis, it would be wise to read to students aloud a lot and well (Kłakówna, 2016, pp. 283–284).

The source for a discussion about the referenced work can be a passage from the text read aloud by the teacher, which is not the beginning of the verbal text. Choosing to read it does not mean giving up on the entire text, which should be further interpreted over the next few days. It was cited as an introduction to further work with literature and at the same time as characteristic of the issue under discussion. Its value is the marriage of the real world with the fantastic and human problems resulting from living in a hurry and lack of time. Here the symbol of the soul also appears. Animation humanizes and realistically depicts it, and therefore requires analysis and the use of tools that separate fiction from reality, notice the symbol, and point out metaphors and epithets.

If someone could look at us from above, they would see that the world is full of people running in a hurry, sweating and very tired, and their late, lost souls that can't keep up with their owners. It creates a big commotion, people lose their minds, and they lose their hearts. I know that souls have lost their owners, but people often don't even realize that they have lost their own soul (Tokarczuk, Concejo, 2017).

It is now worth directing the teacher's spotlight on the students' level of understanding of the read passage, which may differ significantly among students in the same class. At the age of ten, children's symbolic thinking, according to Ewa Guttmejer's research, is most often at its first level (factual). However, the individual possibilities of each of them, as is known, can deregulate this state (Guttmejer, 1997). The pedagogical diagnosis posed here becomes the starting point for further activities, but above all questions that can be asked about the read passage: What images did you see while listening to this passage? What is happening to the people here? Why is this happening? Who is also the hero of this passage? Why do souls get lost here?

The interpretation of the phrase "souls lose their heads and people lose their hearts" is particularly interesting, as is the statement "Souls know they have lost their owner, but people often don't even realize they've lost their own soul" (Tokarczuk, Concejo, 2017). The methodological actions taken by the teacher to lead students to identify these messages from the text depend on the teacher himself, who analyzes the intellectual capabilities of the students (individual work of the child with the text, in pairs, drawing attention to the thesis presented by the teacher himself: emphasizing with the voice, or asking a question: what does the phrase mean, etc.).

A philosophical analytical tradition that focuses on the analysis of the concept (linguistic approach) with a pragmatic approach, trying to base consideration of problems that are significant in the life of the whole society, including children (Cam, 2020), may be a good solution for understanding the above, but also a specific symbol: the soul.

The illustration by Joanna Concejo, placed alongside the verbal content, addresses the recognition of the meaning of the sentences mentioned in the quote

and the child's need to explore the world. The scene of Jan sitting alone in the hotel restaurant, shot in shades of gray, symbolizes a sense of emptiness, disorientation, and loneliness, and shows the automatism of everyday life.

It is also worth stopping at this point at the adjectives that describe the state of souls and people. The suggested line of thought is related to the stages of didactic work on language development and children's fascination with words, as designated by A. Kłakówna (Kłakówna, 2016, pp. 132). In this case, activities that help maintain and develop it can be games such as: replace an adjective with another one so that the sentence still has the same meaning or: come up with your own word that means the same as the chosen adjective; it can be a competition to find the largest number of synonyms in the dictionary.

The material dimension of the book and the translucent pages it contains also help in understanding the symbolism of the soul, which students will most likely associate with the concept of the soul being analyzed (for example: by associating it with the animated fairy tale: *Casper the Friendly Ghost*). Such sensory immersion in literature and the defined definition, in the context of primary education, promotes the activation of students' imagination and in-depth interpretation of the work, as well as develops children's ability to decode multi-layered messages.

Finishing work on the discussed fragment, which consists of a narrative about heterogeneous code, it is worth asking: how do students imagine their soul and what adjectives could they attribute to it? They can briefly describe their soul while maintaining the style of the song. At the same time, it is worth referring to what was the beginning of the meeting with the reading of the *Zgubiona dusza* – to the time – thanks to which there is often a reflection on the opposing *to have* or *to be*.

## Conclusion

Reflection on the place and function of interdisciplinary literature in early school education leads to the conclusion that contemporary texts for children become not only a space for the encounter of word, image, and sound, but also a field for the confrontation of the student with the demands of the media society. Intermediality and audiovisuality, which are part of narratives dedicated to young audiences, reflect the realities of everyday life, in which a young person learns to navigate between the real and digital worlds. An analysis of the book *Zgubiona dusza* by Olga Tokarczuk and Joanna Concejo reveals that such works can serve as a mirror of anthropological changes in the educational process, as well as a teaching tool that allows for the development of symbolic thinking and interpretive skills in children.

Using intermedial literature in education helps students discover the multi-layered nature of cultural texts, enables them to engage in dialogue with verbal, iconic, and tactile signs, and creates the conditions for experiencing the depth of reading. In this sense, literature opens itself up to the needs of the media audience, but at the same time it poses challenges to them – it demands that they stop, reflect, and re-read. Therefore, if school practice is to remain relevant to the demands of the audio-visual culture, it should not only develop the *media skills* of young readers, but also nurture their symbolic sensitivity, which is at risk of disappearing in the era of visual overload.

From a pedagogical perspective, it seems particularly important that reading intermedial literature, as in the case of the *Zgubiona dusza*, be linked to the experience of conversation, reflection, and the search for meaning. This means that reading becomes a process that is not so much mechanical, but rather spiritual and existential, opening the young reader to questions about time, the meaning of life, human relationships, or the human condition in a world dominated by technology. At this point, literature can serve as a compensatory function for media logic: reminding us of the need to slow down, the value of being beyond possession, and the importance of closeness and mindfulness.

Cannot be overlooked is the fact that contemporary humanities are increasingly subject to the pressure of measurability and utilitarianism. Meanwhile, as Małgorzata Piasecka notes:

In today's world of reductionist tendencies, associated with the concretization, quantifiability, and applicability of post-culture, subtle phenomena with their non-opportunistic nature may seem unworthy of attention. All these brilliant, flashy, trendy discourses of contemporary humanities are not, in fact, a true representation of the struggle for the individual, his autonomy, the depth of his spiritual world. The *storyitself*, which I describe as the Dreamer's tender and universal narrative about a better world, is, in my opinion, a discourse from which new and unknown, universum-sized, objectified worlds, possible and desirable cultural worlds, can emerge and become present (Piasecka, 2019, pp. 59–70).

From this perspective, media literature, included in the school curriculum, appears as a tool that opposes the superficiality and acceleration of modern times. It reminds that literary education should not be limited to the development of technical skills but should also support the spiritual and axiological development of the child. Ultimately, introducing young audiences to the world of symbols, metaphors, and hybrid narratives is not only a didactic task, but also an act of caring for the preservation of sensitivity and contemplation in a culture that encourages haste.

Intermedia literature, especially that which, like *Lost Soul*, combines layers of words, images, and sensory experiences, should become a way of learning *a different pace of life* in education. Her presence in school creates the conditions for building a culture of mindfulness, reflection, and existential depth,

through which the young reader can shape their own worldview. In this sense, intermedial literature becomes not only a reflection of the changes in media culture, but also an antidote to its dominant reductionisms – a space in which a child learns to see that the most important thing is not *to have*, but *to be*.

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## Praktyka intermedialnej literatury w edukacji wczesnoszkolnej. Odślanianie symboli – egzemplifikacja

### Streszczenie

Artykuł podejmuje tematykę związaną z kształceniem literackim w edukacji wczesnoszkolnej w sytuacji zmiany kulturowej wyznaczonej przez nowe media. Kluczowe miejsce zajmuje tu pojęcie intermedialności – rozumianej jako „między-przestrzeń” sztuki i życia, obejmujące zarówno funkcjonowanie społeczeństwa medialnego, zjawiska kulturowe, jak i indywidualne doświadczenie człowieka w zmediatyzowanym świecie. Literackie teksty, zwłaszcza adresowane do młodego odbiorcy, nacechowane coraz częściej heterogenicznością narracyjną, wpisują się w medialne kompetencje współczesnego dziecka, które posługuje się „nawigacyjnym” sposobem lektury. Jednocześnie zostaje w szkicu podkreślona potrzeba rozwijania zdolności interpretacji symbolicznej, istotnej w kontekście utraty kontaktu z językiem symbolicznym w epoce wizualnego przesytu. Przykładem praktycznej realizacji koncepcji literatury intermedialnej w edukacji wczesnoszkolnej staje się interpretacja książki *Zgubiona dusza* Olgi Tokarczuk i Joanny Concejo. Symboliczna natura utworu umożliwia taką wczesnoszkolną praktykę literatury, która poprzez rozmowę, analizę metafor, wspiera proces rozumienia symboli, myślenia symbolicznego i możliwości językowych ucznia. Literatura intermedialna stanowi także przestrzeń do budowania refleksji nad egzystencją człowieka i człowieczeństwem, sposobem na zwolnienie tempa życia w zdominowanym przyspieszeniem świecie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** intermedialność, literatura symboliczna, kod semiotyczny, edukacja wczesnoszkolna, symbol, refleksja, dialog z literaturą, rozmowa w szkolnej lekturze.





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## Self-Care Learning of Educators in the Thriving Workplaces – Examples from Australia

### Abstract

In this article self-care learning of educators is analyzed through the lens of thriving workplaces —arenas shaped by Australian factors to enact educational change through overcoming arising problems. This article puts into consideration the features of Australian strategies for thriving workplaces. There are presented Australian ways of supporting others and self-care learning of educators.

The document-based method was selected because governmental publications and official statements offer invaluable insights into the social reality that shaped educational change. In line with Wodak and Krzyżanowski (2008, p. 156), the methodology draws on micro-level themes of discourse, identifies the broader framework of educational change within self-care learning of educators and practices of thriving workplaces.

The article results revealed that self-care learning of educators and their autonomy within thriving workplaces sustain new directions and opportunities in overcoming emerging problems, as „learning is the work”. There is put an emphasis on constant work on problem solving skills of educators and a zero tolerance for bullying and harassment.

**Keywords:** self-care learning, thriving workplaces, teachers.

### Introduction

Modern schools or organizations that thrive successfully operate on the principle that “learning is the work”. Reupert (2020, p.17) says “educators need

a welcoming, supportive, safe and intellectually stimulating environment to thrive". So, there is need for self-care learning of Australian educators, within well-led community of educators. Each successful workplace put an emphasis on a strong moral purpose within relationships. As Fullan (2020, p. 63) notes, "moral purpose, relationships, and organizational success are closely interrelated".

## Theoretical approach

Relations shows how we treat people—colleagues, and students—as we follow strategy and structure. Self-care learning and the concept of a healthy lifestyle, has been studied since ancient times (Albuck M, Gillis L., 2021). Lewin and Regine (2000, p. 27) claim that relationships emerge from authentic human connection and true care. Reupert (2020, p.18), defines wellbeing as "enjoyment in life, an ability to cope with stress and sadness, work productively, the fulfillment of goals and a sense of connectedness with others". Relations influence on solving problems by educators, their interactions with children, families and colleagues (Cumming, 2017; McMullen, et al., 2020).

The level of good relations of educators stimulates mental health, which is defined by The World Health Organisation (2022, p.1) as "a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn and work well and contribute to their community". Self-care is a pattern according to which teachers take care with themselves conscientiously, being aware of their needs and compassions. Teachers who possess a strong sense of efficacy are more likely to take initiative and overcome obstacles well in the face of challenges. So there is need for self-care of educators but also for systematic ways of solving the problems and creating of meaningful change.

The driver of systemic change in education, as Fullan (2005) claimed demands transformation across three interrelated levels: the individual educator, the school or particular organization and community in relation to the district and state (Fullan, 2005, p. 58). The central goal is to change within education both based on individuals and systems at the same time. Achievements within this change is related to the transformation and demand what Fullan calls "learning in context". From the above perspective, modern organizations need to involve essential elements of happiness, which are after Haidt named as love, which is based on meaningful relationships; meaningful work, that offers engagement and a sense of contribution. Haidt also mentioned about vital engagement with positive feelings and cross-level coherence – alignment each person values and the culture in which we live. If you get "these relationships right," Haidt concludes, "a sense of purpose will emerge" (pp. 238–239).

Australian Government, Department of Health and Aged Care<sup>1</sup>, by recognising deep, ongoing connection to Country, pays respect to Elders, „past and present, [...] put an emphasis on the continuation „of the cultural, spiritual and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples” (Beyond self-care, p.1). Educators’ wellbeing stays at the heart of caring for children and young people together with continuation of practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, especially in culture, and education. "Be You" supports educators in tools and knowledge which enable them to create positive learning communities contributing to mental health. According to The Monash University research there are entrenched issues in the Australian education contributing to stress of educators, so there is need for self-care learning of them being conducted in a meaningful way.

## Methodology

The document-based method was selected because governmental publications and official statements offer invaluable insights into the social reality that shaped educational change. In line with Wodak and Krzyżanowski (2008, p. 156), the methodology draws on micro-level themes of discourse, identifies the broader framework of educational change within selfcare learning of educators and practices within thriving workplaces.

In this article self-care learning of educators is analyzed through the lens of thriving workplaces —arenas shaped by Australian factors to enact educational change through overcoming arising problems. There are presented Australian ways of support others and self-care learning of educators.

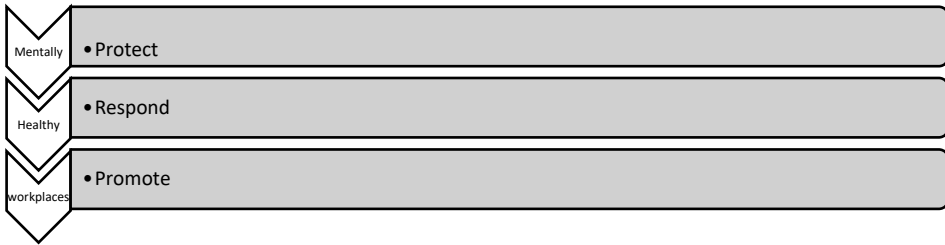
## Towards mentally healthy workplaces and self-care of educators

The National Mental Health Commission (2022) prepared suggestions (three pillars) which enable the creation of a mentally healthy workplace. Firstly, there is underlined the need for identification of work-related risks within mental health (named as **Protect**). Secondly, after identification there is **Respond** based on support of those who experience stress or issues related to mental health. Thirdly, the next step is based on recognising and enhancing the positive work aspects which could contribute to the promotion of mental health (**Promote**).

On the other side, there are steps (principles), which are needed for healthy workplace to thrive and to start changing into learning community where educators thrive. The most important step within thriving workplaces is a creation of a positive culture and environment which supports educators.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Government, Department of Health and Aged Care founded “Be You” organization.



*Figure 1*  
Building mentally healthy workplaces (author's source)

Secondly, thriving workplace put an emphasis on recognition and respect towards educators as professionals. Thirdly, there is indispensable acceptance of educators' autonomy together with their wellbeing. To build mentally healthy workplaces with self-care there is put an emphasis on the promotion of respectful relationships on the wave of collaboration.

Wellbeing stays in the centre of heart of working organization which also includes easy accessible resources. To make wellbeing and self-care stronger all educators have an access to initiatives which acknowledge their cultures, experiences and support their work with children. Fifthly, evidence-informed practice are used within educators learning communities to create high-quality, when design wellbeing initiatives. Sixthly, wellbeing initiatives, which are adaptable, need to be applied within the daily work of learning communities.



*Figure 2*  
Guiding principles for healthy workplace to thrive and to start changing into learning community (author's source)

## Six layers indispensable for educator wellbeing

The collected documents revealed factors which contribute to Australian educators' wellbeing. The significant factors for each person are as follows: „Collegial relationships, Workplace culture, Leadership, Community, Governance and policy” (Beyond self-care, p. 6).



*Figure 3*

Contributors of wellbeing (Beyond self-care, p.6)

All above factors contribute to healthy workplaces and means that workplace is going to thrive. Self-care leaning of educators is very important and in this approach it is also the way to support self-care of a whole community.

On the other side, factors which are presented below make difficult to achieve educators' wellbeing. These factors are as follows:

- “unsupportive leadership
- discrimination
- competition
- high or low workload
- lack of role clarity
- remote or isolated work
- emotional labour
- feeling undervalued
- job insecurity
- toxic culture” (Beyond self-care, p.6).

## Australian strategies for thriving workplaces, towards self-care learning of Educators

Meaningful change is possible if there is focus on self-care (Beyond self-care, p.6). There is also significant to follow the three components within learning communities. Educators underlined the importance of certain factors in building self-care of educators. Firstly, Collegial relationships, if they are poor quality within its interactions within workplace often contribute to „bullying, gossip, conflict and criticism can harm an educator’s wellbeing” (Beyond self-care, p. 12). Secondly, there is taken into granted Workplace culture within thriving workplaces. „Inclusion and belonging nurture wellbeing. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and LGBTQIA+ educators emphasised the value of having their identity acknowledged and feeling comfortable to be themselves” (Beyond self-care, p.12). The third factor is Leadership. It is significant to prioritize staff well-being. As a result, leaders design a culture of care, full of autonomy and trust.

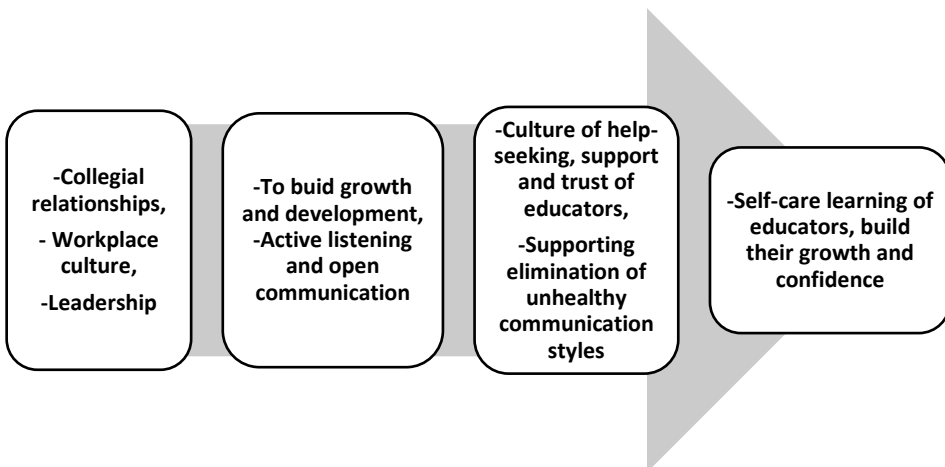


Figure 4

Strategies to reinforce self-care learning of Australian educators (authors’ source)

On the other hand, there are presented certain examples of strategies to reinforce self-care learning of educators (Beyond self-care. An Educator wellbeing guide, p.6-7). There is underlined planning optional social events for educators to attend. At the same time, educators have an allowance to choose learning developments which build their growth and confidence. It is related to promotion of access to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Moreover, there is underlined a step towards „a culture of help-seeking, mutual support and trust” (Employee Assistance Program, p.13) in which workers „maintain a welcoming physical environment”.

On the other side, in case of Australian **Collegial relationships**, teachers, who work together, present „positive practice” in a workplace. In case of *Collegial relationships* there are needed procedures based on time and response to avoid overt or casual discrimination with elimination of unhealthy communication styles. Additionally, there are welcomed opportunities for full team planning and working together. All expectations are based on open communication and active listening of educators who work together, care and rely on each other. There is put an emphasis on health promotion within inclusive relationships. Moreover, procedures are timely and eventual conflicts are solved skillfully.

On the other hand, in the clear Australian policies and procedures there are actions than only static documents. All strategies involve procedures to build respectful interactions between staff and educators to make people feel supported in the workplace.

## Collegial relationships and importance of speaking freely

Table 1

*Collegial relationships within Australian educators (author’s source)*

Working together	Inclusivity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— respectful communication including individual views and ideas,</li> <li>— opportunities for team planning and working together with respect to each other</li> <li>— open communication,</li> <li>— listening to each other,</li> <li>— educators work together with the aim to for each other and rely on each other,</li> <li>— staffrooms promote healthy, inclusive relationships,</li> <li>— educators feel a sense of belonging,</li> <li>— procedures are design to be timely and responsive,</li> <li>— procedures to react quickly in a case of or casual discrimination and unhealthy communication styles,</li> <li>— constant work od problem solving skills for educators.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— „respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ knowledge and a climate where non-Indigenous people assume responsibility for learning and embedding appropriate protocols within learning communities” (Beyond self-care, p. 10),</li> <li>— a workplace culture based on respect of educators,</li> <li>— there are prepared policies to identify and in an appropriate way to respond to exclusion of educator groups, „LGBTQIA+, culturally and linguistically diverse, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander”, (Beyond self-care, p. 10).</li> </ul>

The policy of staff communication has a specific rules in case of what’s acceptable in the real communication within workplaces. There is not acceptable to use bullying and harassment. “It’s not just words on a piece of paper. Seeing the piece of paper come to life, it’s not just sitting in a folder” (Beyond self-care, p.7). Moreover, it is really significant to be able answer on questions if

and how each learning community contributed to individual self-care? What ways can be used to create thriving workplaces if there is truly educators' well-being? To sum up, there is needed to provide a healthy and safe environment in which all staff and educators speak freely.

## Self-care learning and wellbeing – priorities

If leaders create the opportunities for educators to discuss the issues of wellbeing it makes the standards of wellbeing better. There is need for normalisation of conversations about wellbeing, if community is interested in achieving a higher level towards collegial relationships. People, who work together, should feel safe and supported at workplaces. All self-care of educators priorities make the workplace a better place (Beyond self-care, pp. 8–10).

We started looking at how we can improve staff mental health and wellbeing and we thought it would have a knock-on effect for the students. We had worked hard to create a positive culture in the school but we could see that was changing. It weighs on you all the time as a leader. It's about living it well, not just saying we do it well. We had to really dive into that – I posed some questions to the staff. What do we do well? What are three wishes for improvement on what we do well? We got an array of responses for both. It took about a term and a half to do this process – we opened up discussions with our staff and they fed back, it was collated and presented back. All the way along they had input and they could have ownership over the process. Some things we were able to fix really quickly. We spoke to them about that process. They could see it came from the right place. The ability to be able to feed back openly and honestly without feedback (Beyond self-care, p. 8).

## Supporting others and self-care learning of Educators – examples from Australia

There were prepared suggestions to thriving workplaces among Australian educators, according to collected documents.

- The first suggestion among Australian educators means to have a conversation and to show concerns and willingness to support, which invites other educators to look for help.
- The second suggestion is embodied in **Stop Reflect Act** framework in which if someone worries about someone when he/she experiences stress or a concern, there are supportive ways to overcome problems.
- The key is to understand feelings and experiences of an educator and offer practical support which do not cross educators' professional boundaries. In this perspective, it is suggested in Australian workplaces to encourage self-care which works as a protective shield for mental health. Moreover, it is advised to promote help-seeking and exploring all potential and options.

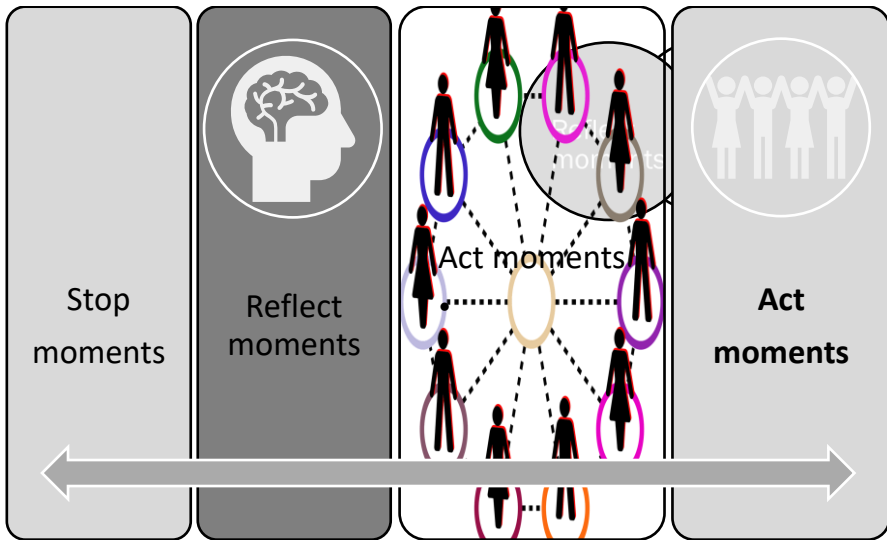


Figure 5

Stop Reflect Act moments within Australian community of educators, towards self-care learning (author's source)

- After the conversation with an educator, there is suggested to find time for own feelings and use self-care plan (named as STOP). The conversations among educators teach the community to create and maintain a self-care culture, where people are constantly learning.
- After all steps, it is suggested to stop (take a brief break, listening to your feelings) and try to find out time for Reflections (consider thoughts, feelings and physical and emotional safety).
- ACT- each step in ACT among Australian educators should be purposeful and intentional. It is not the aim to fully solve a problem, issues or find out answers to questions, these processes often go through a series of simple Stop Reflect Act moments.
- Through dialogue, educators explore different perspectives, and make the process of change more effective through meaningful engagement. If educators are involved in a truly collective vision within workplaces, they should foster clarity, transparency, enthusiasm, open communication, and deep commitment in their workplaces (Senge, 1990, p. 227).

## Results

Fullan (2005) underlined demands transformation across three interrelated factors, included the individual educator, the school or particular organization

and community in relation to the district and state (Fullan, 2005, p. 58). The article revealed that self-care learning with its improvement contribute to healthy workplaces. These workplaces are safe and stimulating towards growth of all educators, enabling them to cope with stress, learn and work well.

The article also presented that a sense of purpose of educators emerges if relationships are respectful, within positive culture, environment and a sense of belonging. There is need for self-care of Australian educators but also for systematic ways of solving the problems and creating of meaningful change.

There is needed an open communication of educators, full of active listening and rely on each other to follow the principle „learning is the work”. The article also revealed that self-care of educators and their autonomy within thriving workplaces sustain new directions and opportunities in overcoming emerging problems. There is put an emphasis on constant work on problem solving skills of educators and a zero tolerance for bullying and harassment.

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## **Nauka dbania o siebie wśród nauczycieli w dobrze prosperujących miejscach pracy – przykłady z Australii**

### **Streszczenie**

W niniejszym artykule analizie poddany jest proces samokształcenia nauczycieli przez pryzmat dobrze funkcjonujących miejsc pracy (obszarów ukształtowanych przez czynniki australijskie), co ma na celu wprowadzenie zmian w edukacji poprzez pokonywanie pojawiających się problemów. Dodatkowo przedstawiono australijskie sposoby samokształcenia nauczycieli.

W zakresie metodologii skorzystano z analizy dokumentów, ponieważ publikacje rządowe oferują nieoceniony wgląd w rzeczywistość społeczną, która ukształtowała zmiany w edukacji. Analiza dokumentów opiera się na mikropoziomowych tematach dyskursu, który identyfikuje szersze ramy zmian w edukacji w ramach samokształcenia nauczycieli i praktyk w dobrze prosperujących miejscach pracy.

W dobrze prosperujących miejscach pracy uwidatnia się konieczność ciągłej pracy nad umiejętnościami rozwiązywania problemów przez nauczycieli, w tym również zerowej tolerancji dla znęcania się i molestowania. W artykule podkreśla się również, że nauka dbania o siebie samych nauczycieli oraz ich autonomia zawodowa wspierają nowe kierunki i możliwości w pokonywaniu pojawiających się problemów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** nauka dbania o siebie, dobrze prosperujące miejsca pracy, nauczyciele.





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## In Search of Opportunities for Development in Old Age. The case of Gerotranscendence Theory

### Abstract

Gerotranscendence seems to be a promising construct in research on successful/positive ageing. The gerotranscendence theory approach to ageing does not focus on the losses associated with the ageing process, but points to opportunities for harmonious living when these losses are inevitable. The theory may be attractive from the perspective of research on the education of seniors, as it shows the possibilities for development even for people who are very advanced in age and in poor health and physical condition.

This article aims to present Lars Tornstam's gerotranscendence theory from the perspective of a researcher dealing with learning in late adulthood. The text presents the main assumptions of the theory, its origins, and a brief overview of research on gerotranscendence conducted to date, including research conducted in Poland. Areas that have been the subject of debate with the author of the gerotranscendence theory have also been identified in articles published in the subject literature. The last part has been devoted to the educational and practical implications of the theory in question.

**Keywords:** gerotranscendence, learning in late adulthood, late adulthood.

### Introduction

In 1985, and then in 2008, Swedish sociologist Lars Tornstam conducted a survey on the feeling of loneliness among young people and older adults (Tornstam, 2011). Analysis of the data collected, both from 1985 and from the

study conducted 23 years later, showed that, contrary to common sense assumptions, the degree of loneliness not only does not increase with age, but even decreases. This would mean that older people are more adept at managing the challenges of daily life than younger individuals and are less prone to feelings of loneliness. According to Tornstam, the key to explaining these results may lie in his gerotranscendence theory. According to the author himself, this is a theory of 'positive ageing' (Tornstam, 2011), the basic element of which is a change in the perspective of perceiving oneself and the surrounding world. The theory states that human development towards gerotranscendence is related to redefining oneself and one's relationships with other people. In the course of this development, there is also a change in the interpretation of the existential questions one asks oneself throughout life. Thanks to this modification of perspective, people are better able to cope with the changes taking place in their lives. According to Tornstam (2011), approximately 20% of the population achieves a high level of gerotranscendence.

In recent years, interest in Tornstam's theory has grown in scientific literature (cf. systematic literature review by Pamuk et al., 2025). Publications cover areas such as nursing, psychology, psychiatry, religion, education and educational research, public, environmental and occupational health, medicine, and linguistics.

In studies on learning in late adulthood, the gerotranscendence theory can be inspiring because it allows us to see the potential for development in old age, showing that even very old people can develop and that a person can mature towards wisdom until the end of their life.

In this article, I present the main assumptions of the theory and its origins. In the next section, I provide a brief overview of the research conducted to date on gerotranscendence, discussing the most commonly used research tools in quantitative analyses of this phenomenon. Next, I focus on polemics with the author and articles critical of the theory published in the literature on the subject. In the last part, I show the educational and practical implications of the theory.

## **The gerotranscendence concept and its origins**

The term 'gerotranscendence' was introduced into the language of psychology by Lars Tornstam in 1989.

The core of this term is the concept of "transcendence", understood as transcending the boundaries of the existing worldview, including the boundaries of one's own self (in this context, we are talking about self-transcendence), aimed at achieving full humanity, personal perfection and a deep sense of meaning in life (Straś-Romanowska, 2017, p. 567)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations into English of the original texts are the author's own translations.

For Tornstam (1989), gerotranscendence development is related to wisdom. In older people, the process of gerotranscendence plays an important role in adapting to old age. This process consists of a personal transformation leading to the attainment of life wisdom. Tornstam (1989, p. 60) formulated the following definition: 'a shift in meta-perspective from a materialistic and rational view to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally followed by an increase in life satisfaction.'

The changes that occur as part of the gerotranscendence process take place in three dimensions (Tornstam, 2011): the cosmic dimension, the self dimension, and the social and personal relationships dimension.

The cosmic dimension is characterised by signs of development towards gerotranscendence, such as: redefining the perception of time, space, and objects, redefining the perception of life and death, and a reduction in the fear of death, a sense of cosmic unity with the spirit of the universe. With these changes, the distance between the present and the past becomes blurred.

Changes in the *Self* dimension are manifested in less self-focus and a decrease in egocentricity. People begin to spend more time 'meditating' and become more reflective. As part of the changes in the *Self* dimension, people confront themselves and realise they are not the centre of the universe. The way they perceive their own bodies changes. They accept them as they are and abandon the obsessive struggle for beauty (in the sense of a youthful appearance). Their attention is focused on the needs of other people, especially their children and grandchildren.

Changes within the social relationships dimension involve a decline in interest in unnecessary, superficial social interactions. Instead, there is an increased need for positive, contemplative solitude or care for a specific person (e.g., a spouse). People learn to transcend unnecessary conventions and norms that once limited their freedom of self-expression. Material possessions cease to have their former significance, and people get rid of unnecessary things, i.e., those that do not serve to satisfy their essential needs.

At the root of the gerotranscendence theory is the disengagement theory by Elaine Cumming and William Henry (1961), or more precisely, the controversies and scientific debates that took place in the 1970s around the accuracy of this theory (Tornstam, 2005). According to the disengagement theory, ageing individuals tend to gradually withdraw from social life. It is both social and psychological withdrawal. Social withdrawal involves limiting social contacts and roles. Psychological withdrawal, on the other hand, involves a decrease in interest in one's surroundings and a minimisation of emotional involvement in other people's affairs. The disengagement theory states that not only are older people prone to disengaging from social life, but the process also works in the opposite direction – society is also prone to disengaging older people. According to the

authors of the theory, this is a completely natural process and, if individuals are able to withdraw skilfully, disengagement processes can be beneficial for both society and ageing individuals and can be associated with a sense of life satisfaction and inner harmony among older people. In the 1970s, this position of the proponents of the disengagement theory was at odds with the then widely accepted theory of activity and the assumption accepted by many researchers that the lifestyle in late adulthood should be a continuation of the lifestyle preferred in middle age. Moreover, as Tornstam (2005, pp. 33-36) points out, many gerontologists, including himself, already believed at that time that there was probably something underlying the disengagement theory that had not yet been discovered and articulated, and that this should be sought in order to avoid simplifications or inaccuracies. The intuition of scientists went hand in hand with the feelings of employees (practitioners) who work with seniors on a daily basis. Some of them expressed their doubts about the validity of the approach known as 'activating' the elderly. Reflection on the possible theoretical foundations of the disengagement theory is one of the factors that influenced the development of the gerotranscendence theory.

When discussing the origins of the gerotranscendence theory, Tornstam (2005, p. 40) mentions the work of Erik H. Erikson. According to E.H. Erikson's concept (1982), human development throughout life is an evolutionary process. Development occurs in successive stages, each of which requires a change in the way a person functions, each of which is marked by a crisis (the transition between stages takes the form of a crisis). Each time, coping with the crisis facilitates the further development of the individual's identity. The last, eighth stage is a conflict between ego integrity and despair. As a result of successfully passing through the eighth stage, a person achieves a state of integrity, accepts their life as it was, and is able to come to terms with the fact of the finiteness of their own existence. If they do not achieve a state of integrity, they experience despair and fear of death. By winning the battle between integrity and despair, a person gains wisdom. Tornstam (2005, p. 40) points to a fundamental difference between his concept and E.H. Erikson's proposal. In his opinion, individuals who have reached the stage of gerotranscendence do not refer to their past lives solely with satisfaction and acceptance of what has happened in that life, as is the case in E.H. Erikson's model, where an individual achieving integrity is described. On the contrary, in his opinion, such individuals perceive the previous stages of their lives as a period of immaturity and judge their earlier lives as unconscious. Referring to E only direction, but one of many possibilities that can.H. Erikson's concept of wisdom, Tornstam suggests that E.H. Erikson, in describing wisdom, 'intuitively have come close to what here [in the sense adopted by Tornstam – note by A.K.] is referred to as gerotranscendence' (Tornstam 2005, p. 40). However, gerotranscendence in E.H. Erikson's view is not the lead to wisdom. Bugajska describes it as follows:

the wisdom of the last stage of life, combined by E.H. Erikson with the philosophical nature of ritualisation and ethical social ethos, opens a person to a world of existentially significant values, which can lead to various ways of “being in the world” even in the face of death itself, without excluding gerotranscendence but also without recognising the need to transcend the meta-perspective as the only, most appropriate path of development in old age (Bugajska, 2015, p. 27).

Joan M. Erikson (1997) directly referred to the term ‘gerotranscendence’ in her proposal to expand E. Erikson’s theory with yet another, ninth crisis in the course of life. The crisis of the ninth stage is an intensified version of the crisis of the eighth stage. It is characterised by an even more intense struggle in the integrity-despair conflict. According to the author, at this last stage of life, the scale of challenges is greater than at the previous stage. People are forced to devote all their attention to their own deficits: their senses lose their sharpness, memory problems arise, cognitive disorders and physical limitations make themselves felt. According to J.M. Erikson, the force that has a chance to arise as a result of struggling with the crisis of the ninth stage is gerotranscendence. Although she has, in a sense, integrated Tornstam’s theory with her own, it is worth noting the fundamental differences between the positions of these two authors (Verbaak 2000). Tornstam conceptualizes gerotranscendence as a reorganisation of one’s relationship with the outside world, encompassing a transformed understanding of one’s place in society within the broader universe. This process is based on ‘natural, structural developmental changes taking place in the mind of an adult’ (Straś-Romanowska, 2017). In J.M. Erikson’s view, on the other hand, the condition for gerotranscendence is the resolution of a developmental crisis, which results in personal transformation. For Tornstam, overcoming such a crisis is not necessary to achieve gerotranscendence. Rather, he treats this process as natural changes accompanying the last stage of life, which occur when certain conditions are met (Verbaak 2000). According to Tornstam (1989), the process of gerotranscendence is continuous, gradual (rather than ‘sudden’) and lifelong. J.M. Erikson’s proposal to add a ninth stage to the life cycle is consistent with the currently accepted distinction between two stages of old age: the third and fourth ages. Arguing against J.M. Erikson’s position, Polish researcher Beata Bugajska (2015, p. 27) notes that accepting gerotranscendence as the driving force of the last stage is ‘a narrowing of E.H. Erikson’s theory, a kind of shift towards the ideology of success, which E.H. Erikson warned against, and a certain forced limitation of individual independence.’ Bugajska presented her own proposal to add a ninth stage, but in the eighth position (between E.H. Erikson’s seventh and eighth stages). The crisis of this new eighth stage can be related to people in the so-called third age. It plays out between *commitment* and *resignation*; within its framework, a person is confronted with their own old age in the dimensions of *soma, psyche, and ethos* (Bugajska, 2015).

*Commitment* is understood here as ‘choosing one’s own way of being in the world [...] with a sense of acceptance of the changes that are a consequence of the ageing process’ (Bugajska, 2015, p. 29). *Resignation*, on the other hand, is the belief that it is pointless to take any action for one’s own development. However, it is important to note the author’s observation that resignation is not the same as withdrawal. It is possible to be engaged despite withdrawal, deriving joy, for example, from contemplating nature. As a result of a person’s struggle with the crisis between engagement and resignation, courage is born. This is the courage to live in one’s own unique way, the courage to search for oneself and self-fulfilment, to change one’s life according to cherished values, to cope with life’s adversities (Bugajska, 2015, p. 32). In the last, ninth stage, courage is a basic life need. In the last, ninth stage, as a result of the conflict between integrity and despair, wisdom has a chance to develop, which may (but does not have to) lead a person towards gerotranscendence.

Returning to the presentation of the origins of the gerotranscendence theory, one more source of inspiration for its author can be mentioned. It is the scientific work of Erich Fromm. Tornstam (2005, pp. 38–39) refers primarily to Fromm’s reflections on the search for analogies between psychiatry in Western countries and Zen Buddhism. Against this background, he uses a metaphor to illustrate the contrast between the two ways of thinking. Namely, when a representative of Western culture observes a Zen Buddhist meditating, he may describe him as *withdrawn*. The Buddhist, on the other hand, would disagree with this description. He would rather describe himself as *transcendent*. His level of engagement is high, but the representative of Western culture does not see this because he uses a different definition of engagement. As we age, Tornstam writes, we become more and more like Zen Buddhists. We change our way of thinking, our perception of ourselves, the world around us, including other people. We change our understanding of engagement. Note that the above metaphor also illustrates well the fundamental differences between the withdrawal theory and the gerotranscendence theory.

## **Empirical research on the phenomenon of gerotranscendence**

Below is a brief overview of existing knowledge in the form of scientific texts on gerotranscendence. The overview is narrative in nature and is not a typical systematic review. However, in this study, I take into account, among other things, several scoping reviews recently published by other authors.

According to Tornstam (2005), the theory was formulated based on the results of qualitative research involving interviews with older people. However, there are also opinions in the literature (Hauge 1998) that there are many indi-

cations that the theory was developed by deduction, as a logical conclusion (combined with personal feelings) resulting from analyses and doubts about other theories. Nevertheless, empirical data were certainly crucial for the formulation of the theory.

The author intended to go beyond the framework of positivist gerontology and turn towards phenomenologically oriented gerontology. The analysis of the content of qualitative interviews was an attempt to show how older people understand the concept of ageing. The author sought to ensure that older people, above all, had an influence on the development of the theory, including the definition of basic concepts related to the theory (Tornstam, 2005). The theory of gerotranscendence has been repeatedly verified by the author in both qualitative (Tornstam, 1997b, 1996) and quantitative (1994, 2003, as cited in Tornstam, 2005) studies.

In longitudinal studies conducted over 7 years among people over 80 years of age, Agren (1998) showed that, indeed, more than half of them revealed a change in perspective characterised by deeper altruism, religiosity and life satisfaction. She also noticed a narrowed perception of time and a more active life in the present among the subjects. When it comes to religiosity, it is worth noting that Tornstam did not include it in his theory: 'concept of gerotranscendence does not specifically include a relationship with a higher power' (Jewell, 2014; Dalby, 2006, p. 11). Tornstam clearly stated that he does not use the concept of transcendence in a religious or metaphysical sense. However, there is a whole series of studies showing a positive relationship between gerotranscendence and religiosity (Abreu, Araújo, Ribeiro, 2023). Studies conducted among people of different cultural backgrounds have confirmed the relationship between religiosity (understood as a cultural context) and gerotranscendence. It has been shown that religiosity can influence the development towards gerotranscendence (Lewin, 2001). On the other hand, studies have shown that in non-religious individuals, the relationship between gerotranscendence (spiritual/cosmic) and a sense of meaning in life is stronger (Braam et al., 2006). In a scoping review conducted by Abreu et al. (2023b), six scientific databases were searched for empirical studies examining the correlation between religiosity and gerotranscendence. Seven of the nine studies included in the analysis showed a positive correlation between gerotranscendence and religiosity; one study showed an ambiguous correlation and one showed a negative correlation. The authors of the scoping review point to the weaknesses of previous studies related to the measurement of religiosity as a variable. In eight of the nine studies, religiosity was not assessed using a validated tool, and in some studies, participants were simply asked about their religious affiliation.

Pamuk et al. (2025), on the other hand, used systematic analysis to examine the main themes and new trends in gerotranscendence research. A total of 139

articles published between 1992 and 2024 were retrieved from the Web of Science database. The authors of the review identified the following thematic areas of interest in the literature: care for the elderly and counselling for the elderly, religiosity and reminiscence, intergenerational relationships, and family life. Recently, new areas have also emerged, such as marketing, environmental design, and gerontology. Although the theory of gerotranscendence originated in Sweden, Pamuk et al. (2025) note that its application is becoming increasingly global, with significant research in countries such as India, China, and Turkey.

Research on the theory of gerotranscendence has been conducted in various parts of the world. So far, the theory has attracted the most interest from scholars representing Scandinavian countries. An interesting discovery is the identification of a pattern whereby difficult life situations and crises can accelerate the development of gerotranscendence. Positive changes following trauma (post-traumatic growth) can be seen as an accelerator of gerotranscendence (Weiss, 2014). This connection is also recognised by older people based on their own experiences. Participants in qualitative interviews (Tornstam, 1997b) described life crises as an important source of transformation towards gerotranscendence. The relationship between negative life events and high levels of gerotranscendence in the spiritual (cosmic) dimension was also observed in the studies by Read et al. (2014). At the same time, these studies showed that the absence of such events is associated with low levels of gerotranscendence in the cosmic dimension.

Among the three dimensions identified, the cosmic (spiritual) dimension is treated by Tornstam (1989) as the central element of the theory. The scale for the cosmic dimension in quantitative studies also proved to be the most consistent in terms of psychometric properties (Braam et al., 1998). It has been tested and confirmed that cosmic (spiritual) transcendence is associated with a sense of meaning in life (Braam et al., 2006). People who had lost a loved one in the last year scored higher on the cosmic transcendence scale (Tornstam 1994).

The relationship between gerotranscendence and life satisfaction has been analysed many times. Such studies have been conducted in various countries, in relation to people living in culturally diverse societies. Tornstam (1989) assumed, based on qualitative research, that as gerotranscendence develops, the level of life satisfaction increases. Attempts to empirically verify this assumption have not always confirmed this hypothesis. For example, no such correlation was observed in studies conducted among Swedish residents (Tornstam, 1997). The expected correlation between life satisfaction and the level of gerotranscendence did not appear in studies conducted among Japanese people (Nakagawa, 2007). The relationship was also not confirmed by analyses conducted by Kavalari et al. (2015) in India. On the other hand, there are also numerous research results confirming that as the level of gerotranscendence increases, so does the level of life satisfaction. Examples include research conducted in Swe-

den among religious and non-religious Iranians living there, as well as among religious and non-religious residents of Turkey (Lewin, Thomas, 2001). Another example is the work by Wang (2011), in which a structural model of bio-psycho-social-spiritual factors influencing the development of gerotranscendence in elderly people in long-term care facilities was constructed on the basis of data collected in Taiwan. In the final model, life satisfaction, alongside meaning in life and social support, is a factor significantly related to gerotranscendence. Life satisfaction and religiosity proved to be significant correlates in subsequent studies in Taiwan (Ling Yu 2008, as cited in Tornstam, 2011). In Portugal, a comparative study was conducted of elderly clergy and consecrated persons (monks and nuns) and non-clergy (90% of whom were Roman Catholic). The analysis showed that the level of gerotranscendence and life satisfaction was higher in the first group. According to the authors, the results suggest that consecrated life may be more closely related to gerotranscendence than secular participation in a religious community (Abreu, Ribeiro, Araújo, 2023).

A longitudinal study was conducted in the Netherlands – four cycles of interviews with seniors every three years between 1995 and 2006 (Braam et al., 2016). The results did not confirm Tornstam's assumption that gerotranscendence develops with age, or at least that this is not the case in old age. The level of the analysed variable did not change significantly over time in the same individuals. However, the oldest respondents scored slightly higher. The authors of the study concluded that the historical period in which individuals lived and grew up may be significant. The Netherlands has been undergoing a process of secularisation since the 1950s, which may have had an impact on inhibiting the development of gerotranscendence in younger seniors. A higher level of gerotranscendence is predicted in this study by variables such as age, the importance of prayer, membership of the Roman Catholic Church, a low sense of control over the situation, higher cognitive abilities, and coping with humour.

A team of researchers from Japan (Gondo et al., 2013) obtained interesting results. Among other things, they showed that development towards gerotranscendence is a factor that protects against the negative impact of age-related changes in functioning on mental health. Research conducted among Polish and Czech seniors (Kozerska, 2025) showed a positive correlation between gerotranscendence in older people and the presence of meaning in life. Furthermore, gerotranscendence proved to be an intermediary variable between the presence of meaning and the search for meaning in life. It was shown that the presence of meaning in life not only promotes life satisfaction among older people but can also be the foundation for the development of spirituality (cosmic gerotranscendence), leading to greater openness to seeking new ways of understanding the world and new meaning. As far as research conducted on the Polish population is concerned, in addition to the said study, a number of articles pre-

senting the results of empirical research have appeared in recent years. These include, for example, an analysis of the determinants of marital satisfaction in late adulthood, which adopted the perspective of gerotranscendence theory (Brudek, Korulczyk, Ciuła, 2018). Another example is a study of the relationship between subjective health assessment and dimensions of psychosocial functioning in early and late adulthood, which refers to Torstam's theory in its interpretation (Brudek et al., 2019). In Poland, young and older women were also compared in terms of their level of gerotranscendence, and the determinants of this variable were analysed separately for each age group (Kozerska, 2021). The level of cosmic gerotranscendence was higher in older women. In both the younger and older women's groups, the level of the dependent variable increased in individuals who were actively seeking meaning in life and who were characterised by high levels of empathic wisdom and religiosity. In the group of younger women, experiencing difficult life situations in the last 6 months emerged as an additional predictor (this relationship did not emerge in older women). Research by Brudek et al. (2023) showed that forgiveness plays a mediating role in the relationship between gerotranscendence and wisdom in late adulthood. The results of Brudek, Krok, Steuden (2022) indicated that wisdom is an important element of the system of religious meanings and social support that people use as they mature towards gerotranscendence in order to cope with life's difficulties and challenges. An increase in gerotranscendence is associated with an increase in forgiveness and wisdom.

In Polish literature, the adaptation of the gerotranscendence scales (Brudek, 2018, 2021) is noteworthy. Several works of theoretical reflection have also appeared in Poland, including attempts to review selected scientific positions and attempts to evaluate the theory. These categories include, for example, the works of Jerzy Halicki (2006), Stanisława Steuden (2011), Marcin Muszyński (2016), Małgorzata Malec (2012), Maria Straś-Romanowska (2009, 2017), and Paweł Brudek (2016, 2017). Also noteworthy is the attempt to characterise wisdom as a variable resulting from changes arising from the process of gerotranscendence (Steuden, Brudek, Florczyk, 2016). However, I cannot find any description in Polish literature of attempts to use the potential of this theory in practice, in the process of institutional support for the development of older people.

## **Research tools used to study the course and signs of the gerotranscendence process**

Lars Tornstam has developed two scales to measure the course of the gerotranscendence process. The first is the Gerotranscendence Scale Type 1 (*GST-1*). The *GST-1* scale allows us to capture the 'dynamics' of changes related to the

process of gerotranscendence. The second is the Gerotranscendence Scale Type 2 (GST-2), which comes in two versions: a longer one consisting of 25 items and a shorter one consisting of 10 items. The GST-2 scale allows for the identification of signs of gerotranscendence. The author of the Polish adaptation of Types 1 and 2 scales is Paweł Brudek (2018, 2021). As Brudek (2018) notes, the GST-1 and GST-2 scales are complementary, and each refers to different aspects of gerotranscendence, so each serves to formulate and solve different, separate research problems.

The GST-1 scale consists of 10 items. Examples of items in the Polish adaptation are (Brudek 2018, pp. 91, 92): *Today, I feel that the boundary between life and death is less clear than when I was 50; Today, I am less interested in superficial acquaintances.* The original version of the scale was constructed on the basis of the results of a qualitative study (Tornstam, 1997). On the basis of statistical analyses, two subscales were identified: Cosmic Transcendence and Ego Transcendence -. The GST-1 scale has been adapted and used in research in other countries as well, with a view to conducting cross-cultural studies in the future that would verify one of Tornstam's assumptions – the cultural independence of the process of gerotranscendence. Such research was conducted, for example, in the Netherlands among 556 adults aged 56-74 (Braam et al., 1998). It confirmed the existence of two dimensions (Cosmic Transcendence and Self Transcendence). It also showed, among other things, that the results are higher in the group of the oldest respondents (the changes perceived by the respondents are greater compared to when they were 50 years old). In Poland, 481 people aged 60-85 participated in such a study (Brudek, 2018). The results obtained were consistent with those obtained by Tornstam, confirming the two-factor structure of the tool.

## **Debate with the creator of the gerotranscendence theory**

Tornstam's belief in the universality of his theory is one of the subjects of scientific controversy in journals related to gerontology and related fields. According to Kristen Thorsen (1998), the gerotranscendence theory, like other theories of ageing, is constructed within a specific culture, and therefore its proponents should abandon the assumption of universality. The ageing process takes place in specific historical and cultural conditions and cannot therefore be considered in isolation from this context. Changing cultural ideas leave their mark on both the worldview of individuals and the way they perceive themselves. In fact, as Thorsen sees it, the phenomena observed by Tornstam are probably situated in a specific context that is conducive to their emergence. Therefore, they are not, *de facto*, exclusively related to the individual experience

of ageing, but the historical period in which a tendency towards transcendence emerged (perhaps not only among seniors) may also be significant here. Nor are we certain that this is not a cohort phenomenon (a specific generation characterised by the changes described). Moreover, Thorsen sees several inconsistencies in the reasoning of the author of the gerotranscendence theory. On the one hand, it is supposed to be a gradual, continuous process, but on the other, it is described as a transcendental and radical, 'sudden' change. On the one hand, a person developing towards gerotranscendence becomes more and more open and tolerant, and on the other, they reduce their contacts with other people to those closest to them. Finally, another objection raised by Thorsen is that Tornstam's 'spiritualisation' of older people results in a denial of their physicality and a marginalisation of the significance of gender. Yet there is no doubt, both on the basis of research and everyday observations, that old age varies according to gender.

Tornstam emphasises the need to move away from the dominant paradigm in gerontological research, arguing that previous studies have been 'tainted' by assumptions unconsciously accepted as obvious and requiring no proof by the researchers themselves. According to Donald Ebel (2000), this fact contributed to the theory being ignored by the scientific community for a long time. In his opinion, the theory was simply too confrontational, radical, and abstract for those involved in gerontology at the time it was developed. Another barrier to the acceptance of the theory was that in the 1990s, researchers focused mainly on health issues and the related biomedical model of successful ageing. The descriptive language, parallels and metaphors did not favour approval by the scientific community. Moreover, according to some critics (e.g. Hauge, 1998), the fundamental flaw of the theory is the lack of a clear definition of its most important concept (gerotranscendence). The definition presented by Tornstam is considered to be insufficiently precise. The reader is therefore forced to rely on a kind of intuitive understanding of the phenomenon described, which in turn may raise doubts about the scientific nature of the entire theory. Tornstam uses terms such as mysticism, meditation, and blurred boundaries between time and space. These are concepts that are foreign to representatives of Western culture, who consider them unscientific and difficult to understand in a logical sense (Hauge, 1998). For Solveig Hauge, it is also unclear whether, if transcendence is natural in old age, it is also natural in middle adulthood. If not, does this mean that Tornstam considers a materialistic attitude to be biologically more natural in middle age? After all, he claims that old age is qualitatively completely different from middle age. If it is true that we are more materialistic and rational in middle age, Hauge wonders, should this not apply to everyone, including those who live in the East?

Jewell (2014) points to the similarity between Tornstam's theory and E.H. Erikson's theory and wonders whether the former really offers any additional explanatory value. This raises the question of which theory's constructs are more useful for conducting research.

Another subject of controversy (Hauge, 1998) is the inconsistency between Tornstam's harsh criticism of the positivist paradigm in his scientific texts and the way he verifies his own theory (quantitative research). The author's fascination with Eastern philosophy and his use of concepts originating in this philosophy are also subject to criticism. Why doesn't he look for concepts in the main Western religion, Christianity? asks Hauge. He goes on to comment: "Perhaps many of the people in the West would have felt more familiar with Tornstam's ideas if he had based his theory on Christian philosophy". In Poland, similar suggestions were made by Paweł Brudek (2018) in an article describing the Polish adaptation of the Gerotranscendence Scale Type 1 (GST-1). In his research, he writes, he focused on a faithful translation of the scale, but he considers the adaptation of GST-1 using the theoretical background of Christian philosophy, which is closer to Poland in terms of mentality and culture, to be worth considering. According to Brudek, Straś-Romanowska's (2005) concept of quality of life, which takes into account the transcendent/spiritual dimension in the image of man, may be helpful in this regard. The subject of the research tool used to measure the variable of gerotranscendence is an important element of the debate. Jewell (2014) provides examples of publications in which the authors indicate that some items on Tornstam's scale were not understood by some of the respondents. This applies to the concepts of time and space, and the boundaries between life and death, which can be difficult to understand, especially for people with a low level of education.

## **The educational potential of the theory**

From the perspective of research on learning in late adulthood, it is important that the theory of gerotranscendence draws attention to the possibility of development even in people of very advanced age and regardless of their health and physical condition. As the author of the theory himself emphasises, development in this direction is characteristic of only a few:

Already from the first qualitative study it was obvious that gerotranscendence cannot be regarded as any uniform development which is the same for all ageing individuals. It is rather a developmental possibility, which can take different forms from individual to individual. Metaphorically, it may be that "the seed of gerotranscendence" is within us all, but needs proper watering to grow (Tornstam, 2005, p. 193).

Furthermore, what is important from the perspective of education research is that the process of gerotranscendence can be accelerated, but it can also be

inhibited or hindered (Tornstam, 2005). Intensification of development often occurs as a result of difficult life experiences. Inhibition, on the other hand, may be a consequence of prevailing cultural beliefs about old age. Tornstam (2005, p. 43) identifies many such inhibiting factors in Western culture. In his opinion, these include, among others, the prevailing belief in the value of activity, productivity, efficiency, independence, and sociability. Taking this view as an axiom, older adults may feel guilty about developmental changes that lead to other outcomes. It is also worth emphasising that we can talk about the graduality of development towards gerotranscendence, about different stages of this development (Tornstam 2011). In this context, Paweł Brudek's (2018, p. 14) observation that the changes that make up the process in question are rather potential in nature – they may or may not manifest themselves in everyone in old age – is noteworthy.

From the perspective of research on the education of older people, attention should be paid to the potential associated with the use of the assumptions of gerotranscendence theory to develop methods of supporting older people in various types of institutions involved in the care of seniors, or to promote ways of nurturing mental and spiritual health among older people. An example of research showing the possibilities in this area is the experiment conducted by the team of Wang, Lin, and Hsieh (2011). The results of this study suggest that supporting seniors using methods based on gerotranscendence theory has an impact on their mental health indicators. As a result of the experiment, the participants' life satisfaction improved significantly, symptoms of depression decreased, and the level of gerotranscendence increased. Wadensten (2010), on the other hand, uses qualitative research to show that implementing certain guidelines derived from gerotranscendence theory in the work of nurses in nursing homes could help to treat residents in a more individualised manner and could influence the quality of their ageing.

Some authors emphasise the particular importance of gerotranscendence theory in the process of supporting the oldest seniors (Gondo et al., 2013). In their opinion, support programmes based on Tornstam's theory have the advantage of being successfully applied even to people experiencing a significant decline in cognitive abilities. In some cases, it may be difficult to apply the Selective Optimisation with Compensation model (Baltes, Baltes, 1990), which requires rational management of internal and external resources, to such individuals. Furthermore, Gondo et al. (2013) point out the unique challenges faced by the oldest people, e.g., the increasing dependence on others daily assistance, and, the prospect of approaching death. According to the authors, these issues are easier to overcome by adopting a spiritual perspective than by using methods based on logical or strategic reasoning (Gondo et al. 2013).

The topic of gerotranscendence also appears in texts on dying and ageing as a tangible experience of human finitude. A review of the literature on this topic can be found in the article by Kellehear and Garrido (2023). Among other things, it shows that gerotranscendence can be a way for individuals to adapt to a situation in which they realise the inevitability of their own death. An example of educational activities related to supporting older people in developing a new perspective on life and death is the Psychoeducational Approach to Transcendence and Health (PATH) Programme. It was described by McCarthy et al. (2018). According to the authors, the PATH programme has the potential to be used in various places where older people meet, such as retirement communities, religious groups, adult day centres, and nursing homes.

A current review of experimental interventions conducted in various locations around the world, examining the impact of gerotranscendence-related interventions on the well-being of older adults, can be found in Abreu et al. (2023c). The results of this meta-analysis confirm the positive impact of the interventions on the mental health and life satisfaction of the participants.

## **Summary**

The gerotranscendence theory can be treated as a theoretical framework for developing strategies for the effective adaptation of individuals to the conditions associated with the ageing of the body. It is, of course, one of many proposals that have emerged in the field of educational gerontology (cf. Mollaei et al., 2025). What distinguishes this theory from others is its perception of ageing as an opportunity for existential development. It does not emphasise the deficits associated with the ageing process or the need to cope with them. The approach to ageing from the perspective of gerotranscendence theory does not focus on losses, but points to the possibilities of harmonious living in a situation where these losses are inevitable. Unlike the theories of activity (Havighurst, Albrecht, 1953) and withdrawal (Cumming, Henry, 1961), which emphasise social roles and place the individual as part of a system, gerotranscendence theory focuses on individual goals and internal development, strengthening human subjectivity.

Gerotranscendence appears to be a promising construct in research on successful/positive ageing (Carver, Buchanan 2016). A model of successful ageing that incorporates the theory discussed here would go beyond biomedical criteria, which some researchers consider discriminatory and perpetuating the misconception that illness and disability lead to 'unsuccessful' ageing. Viewing the ageing process from a spiritual perspective would make the model of successful ageing more inclusive. Furthermore, this model would be more consistent with older people's subjective understanding of successful ageing (Abreu et al., 2025).

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## W poszukiwaniu możliwości rozwoju w okresie starości. Przypadek teorii gerotranscendencji

### Streszczenie

Gerotranscendencja wydaje się być obiecującym konstruktem w badaniach nad pomyślnym/pozytywnym starzeniem się. Podejście do starzenia się z perspektywy teorii gerotranscendencji nie koncentruje się na stratach związanych z procesem starzenia się, ale wskazuje możliwości harmonijnego życia w sytuacji, gdy te straty są nieuniknione. Teoria może być atrakcyjna z perspektywy badań nad edukacją seniorów, ponieważ pokazuje możliwości rozwoju osób będących nawet w bardzo zaawansowanym wieku, słabym stanie zdrowia i kondycji fizycznej.

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie teorii gerotranscendencji Larsa Tornstama z perspektywy badacza zajmującego się uczeniem się w okresie późnej dorosłości. W tekście przedstawione zostały główne założenia teorii, jej geneza oraz krótki przegląd dotychczas prowadzonych badań nad gerotranscendencją, z uwzględnieniem badań prowadzonych na terenie Polski. Zidentyfikowano też obszary będące przedmiotem polemiki z autorem teorii gerotranscendencji w artykułach publikowanych w literaturze przedmiotu. W ostatniej części pokazano edukacyjne i praktyczne implikacje dotyczące omawianej teorii.

**Słowa kluczowe:** gerotranscendencja, uczenie się w późnej dorosłości, późna dorosłość.



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## The Pedagogical Relationship – in Search of Responsibility for the Process of Changing the Face of Suffering Experience

### Abstract

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE:** The article focuses on the issue of pedagogical relations discussed among researchers inspired by Max van Manen's concept of 'phenomenology of practice'. To what extent does restoring the importance of pedagogical relations in pedagogy matter in relation to reflections on changes in education and care, as well as socio-cultural change? Reflect on this issue from the perspective of pedagogical seeing or pedagogical community. **PROBLEM AND RESEARCH METHODS:** The research method used in this work is content analysis (Babbie, 2008, pp.168-169). Publications in which concepts such as 'pedagogical seeing', 'pedagogical community' and the issue of moral disquiet, closely related to the pedagogical relationship, are brought to the fore, will play a special role in the presented issue. **PROCESS OF REASONING** The main part of the issue developed in the article concerns suffering, fragility, otherness and the place for the pedagogical relationship in the reflection developed by researchers such as Max van Manen, and in particular Tone Saevi and her colleagues, including Andrew Foran, Tone Eikland. The beginning of building a pedagogical relationship is the awareness of one's own 'incompleteness,' lack of perfection, and constant journey towards maturity. It is the ability to distinguish between what is pedagogical and what is non-pedagogical. The profound meaning of change, which can be sourced from the pedagogical relationship, will be revealed in the process of discovering the meaning of the experience of fragility or disability in the relationship between the caregiver and the care recipient. **RESULTS OF SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS:** Understanding otherness and suffering is a process of deepening the capacity for pedagogical seeing. Pedagogical seeing is an embodied perception of

people and situations that somehow reveal not only what we see, but how we see. This is important, especially when the gaze of a teacher or carer, intentionally or not, tells the student something meaningful about how their uniqueness, otherness, or weakness is seen. A guardian of change is someone who preserves the personal experience of a person's fragility and suffering. They reflect on the human experience of fragility and suffering, which is part of our existence, and make it a significant dimension of human maturity and the foundation for community building. CONCLUSION: this pedagogical relationship is the source of individual and social change, and above all, change in care and education. We need a pedagogical seeing, which is guarded by the ability to experience and understand moral disquiet and concern for the presence of trust in interpersonal and social relationships

**Keywords:** pedagogical relation, pedagogical seeing, change, vulnerability, moral disquiet, pedagogical community, trust.

## Introduction

The starting point for these reflections is the European tradition of human science research, which tends to blur the boundaries between school and home, professional and non-professional bonding with children, referring to the cultivation of the inner life or soul of a child or young person, and the introduction to culture, tradition and humanism (Friesen, Saevi, 2010, p. 126). The essence of this European tradition is not based on theoretical concepts or the development of methods of their doctrines, but on living relationships, felt, experienced, existentially described and interpreted. The lived and alive experience of the meeting and relationship between the child and the adult, the caregiver and the care recipient, precedes the methods and procedures associated with education in the guise of pedagogical intention and deeply tests pedagogical practice and reflection, challenging it (Saevi, 2011; Foran, Olson, 2008).

The article focuses on one of the important contemporary approaches to the concept of pedagogical relations, which developed on the basis of phenomenological pedagogy. The roots of this concept can be found in the thought of one of the most important contemporary researchers in this field, Max van Manen. This concept strongly and multifacetedly confronts us with the awareness that pedagogy 'draws' us into the ethical dimension of human experience, allowing us to distinguish between good and evil in reflection and practice, between what is just and supportive, what serves the development of personality and the improvement of life, what allows us to go through suffering and crisis, from what is destructive, unjust or harmful in our way of acting and forming a pedagogical alliance with the child. This constant attempt to restore the humanistic dimension in pedagogy is also confirmed by the persistent insistence that pedagogy is an experience of good and a way to discover its meaning (Van Manen, 2015, p. 20). Reflection on the relationship with the otherness and suffering of a child or care recipient cannot lead us in any other direction than towards such an alliance with them.

Can methods, techniques, procedures be a real source of change in education and care? Criticism of contemporary education is often based on the assumption that schools do not prepare students to respond to local and global realities and needs. On the one hand, relationships between teachers and students have become something obvious. On the other hand, in pedagogical reflection, the pedagogical relationship often escapes attention. Past experiences can often reveal and capture what is unexpressed in moments that are taken for granted. Therefore, phenomenological sensitivity is needed (Foran, Robinson, Eliffsen, Munro, Thurber, 2020, p. 39). The main part of the issue developed in the article deals with reflection on the pedagogical relationship as a source of change. In approaching this topic, we will focus on the meaning in the process of individual and, consequently, social change of concepts such as 'pedagogical seeing' and 'pedagogical community'.

## **Educational relationship and ethical responsibility**

The environment created by researchers inspired by Max van Manen's ideas persistently asks what is hidden at the very source of the pedagogical relationship as a 'promise' for the theory and practice of education? Contemporary discourse in this area is affected by the increasing barrenness of ethical content. We are aware of the destructive tendencies to move ever deeper towards totalizing rationality. As a result, we face a permanent threat to the unique meaning hidden in the concepts of pedagogy and pedagogical relationship (Van Manen, 2015, pp. 42–45). Creating such a space, Max van Manen points out, would require that the individual and social activities around which educational institutions are "organized" give them the opportunity to remain democratic and pedagogical. Professional wisdom would mean recognizing that the fundamental concept of education cannot be created within the current technical-rational framework (Van Manen, 1999, pp. 85–89). It is also difficult to build a mature concept of individual and social change within this framework.

It is worth highlighting the term of 'pedagogical seeing' as a source of change. Initiating individual and social change is a process of deepening the capacity for pedagogical vision. What does it mean to 'see pedagogically'? Tone Saevi points out that it is about understanding and experiencing the relationship with the student in accordance with specific pedagogical and ethical standards. To see a student pedagogically means to serve the good and to be oriented towards understanding the pedagogical good of one's own or others' actions with respect for the life of that particular child. The effort to see a child pedagogically in this sense is the main challenge for a teacher. In a way, pedagogical seeing understood in this way is an unachievable goal due to the complexity and un-

predictability of the pedagogical relationship. To see with pedagogical eyes means to practice pedagogy as a way of being and acting that will follow the student or care recipient, intentionally directing oneself towards helping, caring for and supporting his or her personal and educational growth (Saevi, Foran, 2012, pp. 2–3).

The term ‘seeing’ appears in various contexts of everyday human life. This small word ‘to see’, anatomically related to the organ of sight, conceals a range of meanings, intentions and possibilities of interpretation that help to express the enormous diversity of the human condition. Beyond seeing people, things, nature and art with our physiological organ of sight, often with the help of other senses, we seem to be able to ‘see’ thoughts, reflections, ideas, memories, images, dreams and fantasies. Experience shows that there are ways (‘modalities’) of seeing that are not solely physiological in nature, even if some of them assume this to be the case. For educators, this particular concept of seeing and the different ways of seeing the world contribute to the essential meaning of pedagogical seeing (Saevi, Foran, 2012, pp. 2–3).

There are many ways in which the phenomenon of seeing, understood in this way, is deeply experienced and reveals successive layers of meaning. The diversity of physiological, mental, literal, metaphorical, concrete and measurable ways of seeing are well known to our way of being, which is based on what is empirically experienceable and based on imagination and intuition. Tone Saevi and Andre Foran emphasize that seeing, in a more ontological sense, is a way of being in the world. It is the embodied perception of people and situations that somehow reveals not only what we see, but how we see. A teacher’s gaze, intentionally or not, tells the student something meaningful about how their uniqueness, otherness, weakness – or, for example, disability – is seen (Saevi, Foran, 2012, pp. 2–3).

Accepting what is difficult: suffering, weakness, disability or a different way of perceiving and experiencing the world is a significant part of the discourse in the area of the concept of pedagogical relations of researchers focused on the idea of ‘phenomenology of practice’ and drawing on the tradition of human science research, such as Tone Saevi. Reflection on these phenomena is closely linked to reflection on otherness. Let us recall some of her reflections on disability.

### **Relationship in the experience of suffering – does weakness still exist?**

When reflecting on the pedagogical relationship as a source of change, it is worth asking about our attitude towards fragility, weakness and suffering. Tone Saevi devotes a lot of space in her intellectual work to the experience of disabil-

ity. How is disability perceived pedagogically? People with special educational needs are assigned various labels. Despite socio-political and educational efforts aimed at inclusion and an attitude characterized by the pursuit of egalitarianism in our culture, there is no doubt that the situation of certain specific groups of students is still different (Saevi, 2004, pp. 43–44). The pedagogical atmosphere, understood, among other things, as the general attitude of the rest of society, is a challenge for this group and raises questions for everyone. It is a source of many new pedagogical issues. These changing circumstances, as well as the call for equal treatment of every human condition, raise fundamental human (anthropological) questions. Some of them are new, some are old, but often forgotten. One of them is the question of the distribution of power. This raises fundamental human (anthropological) issues. Some of them are new, some are old but often forgotten. One of them is the issue of power distribution (Saevi, 2004, pp. 43–44).

Tone Saevi points out that in the pedagogical discourse around suffering, weakness or disability, we cannot limit ourselves to an interest in empowerment, strengthening positions, political correctness or teaching theories and pedagogical methods of education in special education. What is important here is to focus on the embodied, at least in part inexpressible and indescribable experience of being together as a student with an experience of suffering or disability and a teacher in a pedagogical meeting. Can disability be seen pedagogically in some way? How can pedagogy truly meet ethical and pedagogical challenges and bring out the qualities and values associated with every pedagogical meeting by confronting it with the experience of disability? What does this confrontation offer in terms of understanding what the experience of disability is? (Saevi, 2004, pp. 43–44).

As she emphasizes, the entire European pedagogical tradition has produced an innumerable number of books, dissertations and articles on the pedagogical meeting. Yet, to a very small extent, they are focused on discovering the meaning of the experience of fragility or disability in the relationship between student and teacher. Part of this experience is learning about disability. Research mentioned by Tone Saevi confirms that people who are somehow on the sidelines because of different needs experience being outside and inside at the same time. They experience being citizens of two cultures. This lack of a place is more debilitating and destructive than, for example, the lack of an organ. The problem of being different, a situation in which someone does not fully meet certain universal standards, was solved by access to rehabilitation, which would bring the person back to a state consistent with standards considered 'normal'. (Saevi, 2004, p. 104).

Tone Saevi points out that people with disabilities are programmed to 'dissolve', to disappear. Rehabilitation marks the appearance of a culture that at-

tempts to bring about the end of identification, making everyone 'the same'. This act causes people with disabilities to disappear, and with them everything that is 'lacking', that is 'not enough', disappears in a stubborn social assimilation, dissolving into a larger, single social world that is the same for everyone and serves as a point of reference for everyone. Society is becoming increasingly rigid, manifesting itself through the denial of differences and otherness in the name of social equality (Saevi, 2004, p. 22).

She points out that it is important to highlight a certain contradiction here: the process of empowerment and independence, which supports the strengthening of personal freedom and the right to make choices, as well as the ideal of independent living, somehow removes the concepts of 'weak' and 'needy' from social and pedagogical language. In this sense, the belief that no one should be 'weak' or 'needy' is promoted. Does "weakness" still exist? Or is it just a creation of social welfare, behind which there may be good intentions, but also paternalism? What if some of us are still 'weak' even if, in an optimal perspective, we should not be? Are weakness and suffering not rather a personal experience than a specific concept that defines individuals or social groups? Does the experience of human fragility no longer exist simply because of the introduction of specific social and educational reforms (Saevi, 2004, pp. 43–44). Or perhaps fragility, 'weakness' and dependence are phenomena that are simply part of human experience, regardless of the social structures or procedures that serve to support us? – she asks.

Is focusing on the progressive features of social reforms sufficient for pedagogical awareness? Personal human experiences, despite their political and social immediacy, do not discontinue to exist but will manifest themselves as if 'socially expressed'. Diversity in the realm of human conditions cannot be separated from personal experience; it can only take on various social forms, hiding behind them, as it were. Standards and procedures seem to insist on extinguishing our personal experience. Yet experiences such as suffering, fragility or sensitivity cannot be standardized, even if some still seem convinced that standardized knowledge describes the only reality that exists (Saevi, 2004, pp. 33–34). The pedagogical relationship is experienced by those who preserve the personal experience of the individual. It approaches the human experience of fragility and suffering, which is part of our existence, and makes it a significant dimension of human maturity and the foundation for community building.

## 1. Pedagogical community

Following Max van Manen and Tone Saevi, we can see that the pedagogical relationship is not something that one 'has', a set of tools that one "possesses",

just as one can ‘possess’ a set of specific or performative competences. The relationship is something that the teacher must save, bring out again, restore, recapture by recalling it. So, what must they save? They must save the experience of the pedagogical community. The pedagogical community needs attentiveness and a specific fullness, completeness of the relationship of pedagogical good. In Tone Saevi’s pedagogical thought, the concept of pedagogical good has its own significant position (Saevi, Eilifsen, 2008, pp. 1–15).

Pedagogical practice is unity, a sense of connection, and community. It is hidden in the relationship and understood as a personal, normative, asymmetrical and responsible meeting between teacher and student. Pedagogy is seen as a form of community, of being together, of cooperation, enabling the emergence and realization of the student’s human and educational potential. The teacher cannot create it without the student’s consent. Responsibility for pedagogical practice must be redefined by teachers when they meet their students in new pedagogical situations (Saevi, 2004, p. 17). This is the basis for a conversation about authority.

In the conversation about otherness and suffering, we address the issue of living pedagogical and ethical relationality as fundamental to education and essentially going far beyond the procedure of delivering and receiving knowledge as a routine legitimized by specific procedures. Education is often understood primarily as a set of political and social ideas and structures and forms of student organization in educational institutions, as well as an appropriate form of articulation of a certain philosophy of culture and civilization, expressed in goals formulated with a view to preparing the younger generation to face the challenges of an unpredictable future. However, it should be emphasized that phenomenological and existential pedagogy primarily sees education as an intentional relational practice based on pedagogical ethics and directed towards the unique life experience of a particular young person in order to support their entire personal life and way of experiencing it (Saevi, 2004, p. 18). Let us return once again: the act of building relationships is a process that manifests itself in the act of care.

The act of care, like the pedagogical relationship as such, is intentionally directed towards the good of the child; otherwise, we would not be talking about care or pedagogy. Pedagogy, in the first instance, is not a concept that refers to the relationship between the child, the care recipient and the adult/caregiver as a relationship within the system in which the teaching process is organized, but rather a certain existentially characterized type of community that allows something personal to grow between them, something that is permanent, though often smouldering only with quality (Saevi, 2004, p. 19). From the child’s perspective, the relationship with the teacher/caregiver is experienced as an experience of community with them – in community with others.

## 2. Can moral disquiet still be a source of change?

Pedagogical seeing is guarded by the ability to experience and understand moral disquiet and concern for the presence of trust in interpersonal and social relationships. In the article, *What is Moral Disquiet and How Does the Experience of Moral Disquiet Appear in Professional Human Practices? Facing Responsibility in Nursing, Teaching, and Caring* by Tone Saevi and Helene Torsteinson. As the researchers point out, Bauman recognizes that contemporary societies are changeable, drifting, associated with what is unstable and temporary – not only roles and responsibilities, but also relationships. In this kind of ‘leaky’ society, where change is permanent, loyalty to the rules of the system and pre-planned regulations are often in conflict, and where both the existence of the natural world and human beings can be threatened and exposed to suffering (Saevi, Tornsteinson, 2022, p. 79).

In some way, the foundation of humanity, the irreplaceable individual responsibility and gentleness, is increasingly being replaced by interchangeable role players who immediately fill the gap I have left. This is a very visible process in which responsibility is dispersed and often ‘rests’ in the role rather than the person. Individual responsibility is blurred in an overgrown system of rules, regulations and recommendations subject to control. This seemingly allows uncertainty and ambiguity to be controlled. Human morality thus seems to be increasingly overshadowed by a kind of alienation of human existence, which mixes the real with the formal, separates substance from form, and reduces pluralism to a single uniform (Saevi, Tornsteinson, 2022, p. 79).

The authors point out that their concern in their reflection is the living meaning of moral anxiety in nursing, teaching, and in any professional practice centered on the category of care. Here, we immediately touch upon the question of professional relationships in institutions of culture, education and care. It is about the forms of human activity undertaken by professionals working with people who, for various reasons and to varying degrees, find themselves in situations that reveal human suffering and fragility. It is about an experience we are all familiar with: being a child, a patient, a person with a disability. Tone Saevi and Helen Eikland are interested in the lived experience of moral anxiety among young professionals in the fields of education, social work and nursing – people who enter into this type of relationship (Saevi, Tornsteinson, 2022, pp. 79–80).

Usually, in these institutions, relationships are based on (and can embody) control and power. They can therefore easily become authoritative, asymmetrical and even authoritarian and hierarchical. Within institutional responsibility and loyalty to a certain, universally binding discourse, rules and regulations, the true meaning of caring for human beings may be lost. Reflecting on the issue of moral anxiety as a phenomenon that is present in our professional practice, at

the heart of which is the relationship, can help us move towards a reflective and sensitive practice. As a moral phenomenon, anxiety is present as a reality that feeds our caring (protective) sensitivity and effort.

Relationality is at stake and at the heart of experiences where there is a sense of anxiety on behalf of others. The caregiver remains between uncertainty and self-blame. Perhaps the awareness of what is different, what is beyond us, and the ability to be disturbed by what puts our self-centered lives on hold is an experience that can cause anxiety. We may experience not knowing what to do when confronted with something we have not experienced before. In this situation, we feel encouraged to interrupt our presence and actions for someone or something other than ourselves. Not interrupting it becomes a powerful source of change (Saevi, Tornsteison, 2022, pp. 82–83). The reflections of Tone Saevi and Helene Torsteinson do not provide solutions or answers to the question of how we should understand moral anxiety as an important topic for educational practice. We do not have absolute certainty about how to deal with disturbing situations when working with others in professional practice, or how to determine whether moral anxiety is healthy in this situation and whether it will be a source of a healthy (good) lifestyle. Anxiety is a phenomenon that reveals itself to us, appearing before our eyes and senses based on our own assumptions. We may wish that we had not seen what we saw, that we did not have to witness what another person is subjected to (Saevi, Tornsteison, 2022, p. 86).

Our anxiety pulls us out of the state we are in and brings the other person into our sphere of responsibility. Most often, we are not prepared for the ‘disturbance’ caused by the other person’s situation, and when this happens, we feel deeply insecure. Sometimes we miss the opportunity to act. Or we are left with the feeling that we could have acted differently. Nevertheless, moral anxiety must be recognized as something that has meaning for understanding and deepening professional relationships. How so? To truly understand human relationships in professional practice, we must remember that this is not about a problem that needs to be solved, dealt with permanently, or taken care of once and for all in an effective way. It is not primarily about having recipes or routinely used strategies. Rather, it is about the fact that practice in this area consists of moments and events that open up possibilities and offer us moments of humanity. Every moment in the process of professional activity hides a new opportunity, a new time, a new stage (Saevi, Tornsteison, 2022, pp. 86–87).

Professional practice and moral concern are sensitive to everyday moments of care and moments of concern. Professional practice is oriented towards everyday life practice. Every moment of this experience has its own mood and meaning, even if one may not be aware of it. The students participating in this study trust that their anxiety is meaningful, even though they are unsure of their own actions. Their anxiety makes sense. What they do, however, is put their

own lives on hold for a shorter or longer period of time, momentarily disregarding their own needs and desires, opening themselves up to becoming entangled in someone else's life. They do not deliver results or solutions, but they feel encouraged and decide to create episodes that are meaningful to their lives. They pause, listen, observe and react to the events in which they find themselves. They remain in relationships where their existence and actions are at stake, without visibility or predictable chances of a good outcome. The life of another person turns to them. And they act in accordance with the responsibility they face, not knowing how to be or act. These are decisive characteristics for all areas of human practice, including those affecting the need for one person to take care of smaller or larger events in the life of another person (Saevi, Tornsteison, 2022, p. 87).

## Conclusion

This pedagogical relationship is the source of individual and social change, and above all, change in care and education. We need a pedagogical seeing, which is guarded by the ability to experience and understand moral disquiet and concern for the presence of trust in interpersonal and social relationships. The answer to the question of how to participate in the process of individual and social change lies in the phenomenon of trust. It is worth noting the reflections contained in the article by Tone Saevi and Tone Eikeland, *From Where does Trust come and Why is "From Where" Significant?* As they emphasize, we talk a lot about the lack of trust in contemporary societies and tend to think of trust in terms of absence or requirement. Trust, as a phenomenon, is likely to remain unrecognized when it is present, but when it is lacking, we become very aware of it, and it becomes a topic of discussion. Can trust be influenced or possessed in order to build personal or professional relationships? Can trust be built, maintained, rebuilt or expanded when necessary, or when relationships are established? Can trust be easily and effectively rebuilt when it is lacking or eroded? Although we know that uncertainty and ambiguity remain at the heart of trust, and that these qualities are part of the power of trust, we still consider them fragile, a flaw, a weakness (Saevi, Eikland, 2012, p. 91).

We always try to moderate the fragility of trust and act as if trust were something that is manageable, rational and predictable. We establish certain rationally organized procedures, frameworks for routine activities in public schools, health care institutions – and in the penitentiary system. These are elements of trust that we would like to reduce or eliminate. We constantly try to mitigate the fragility of trust by acting as if trust were controllable, rational and predictable (Saevi, Eikland, 2012, pp. 91-92). Therefore, we establish routines (Saevi,

Eikland, 2012, p. 92). We introduce certain routinely implemented procedures in public schools, care institutions, and also healthcare, as well as in the area of social rehabilitation and penitentiary systems. Arrangements for homework, rules to deal with behavior and communication, safety offered also to older dependents through automatic forms of assistance and care – this is what we try to rely on (Saevi, Eikland, 2012, p. 92).

Trust and distrust are ways in which we understand our own lives and our relationships with others. One of the fundamental characteristics of trust is understanding ourselves in the interdependence of human beings. Trust is one of the very foundations of life. Trust is experienced in relationships, felt and experienced as something positive when it arises spontaneously (ibid.). And nothing other than a genuine pedagogical and caring relationship based on trust and community will become a source of change. This relationship may or may not arise between us. We will rediscover its value if we open ourselves to this experience and the disquiet that is its inherent moral dimension.

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## Relacja pedagogiczna – w poszukiwaniu odpowiedzialności za proces zmiany w doświadczeniu cierpienia

### Streszczenie

Artykuł koncentruje się na problematyce relacji pedagogicznej rozwijanej w środowisku badaczy zainspirowanych koncepcją Maxa van Manena „phenomenology of practice” – w jakim stopniu przywrócenie znaczenia relacji pedagogicznej w pedagogice ma znaczenie dla refleksji nad zmianą edukacji i opieki oraz zmian społecznych. Analizuje pojęcia pedagogicznego widzenia czy pedagogicznej wspólnoty. Metodą badawczą wykorzystaną w pracy jest analiza treści. Dla prezentowanej problematyki szczególną rolę odgrywają publikacje, w których na pierwszy plan zostały wysunięte takie pojęcia jak: „pedagogiczne widzenie”, „pedagogiczna wspólnota” i wiążące się ściśle z relacją pedagogiczną zagadnienie moralnego niepokoju. Zasadniczą część rozwijanej w artykule problematyki dotyczy cierpienia, kruchości, inności i miejsca relacji pedagogicznej w refleksji rozwijanej przez takich badaczy jak Tone Saevi, Andrew Foran czy Tone Eikland. Początkiem budowania relacji pedagogicznej jest świadomość swego własnego „niewykończenia”, braku doskonałości i ciągłego bycia w drodze ku dojrzałości, rozróżniania tego, co pedagogiczne, od tego, co niepedagogiczne. Głębokie znaczenie zmiany, której źródłem może stać się relacja pedagogiczna, ujawnia się w procesie odkrywania znaczenia doświadczenia kruchości czy niepełnosprawności w relacji między opiekunem a podopiecznym. Rozumienie inności i cierpienia jest procesem pogłębiającej się zdolności pedagogicznego widzenia. Pedagogiczne widzenie to ucieleśniona percepcja osób i sytuacji, która w jakiś sposób odsłania nie tylko to, co widzimy, ale i to, jak widzimy. To ważne, zwłaszcza wtedy, gdy spojrzenie nauczyciela lub opiekuna – intencjonalnie lub nie – mówi uczniowi coś znaczącego o tym, w jaki sposób widziana jest jego unikalność, inność, słabość. Opiekunem zmiany staje się ten, kto ocala osobiste doświadczenie kruchości i cierpienia osoby. Poddaje refleksji ludzkie doświadczenie kruchości i cierpienia, będące częścią naszej egzystencji, i czyni je znaczącym wymiarem ludzkiej dojrzałości i fundamentem tworzenia wspólnoty. Pedagogiczna relacja jest sercem indywidualnej i społecznej zmiany, a przede wszystkim zmiany w opiece i edukacji. Potrzebujemy pedagogicznego widzenia, które jest gwarantem zdolności do doświadczenia i rozumienia moralnego niepokoju i troski o obecność zaufania w interpersonalnych i społecznych relacjach.

**Słowa kluczowe:** relacja pedagogiczna, pedagogiczne widzenie, zmiana, kruchość, moralny niepokój, pedagogiczna wspólnota, zaufanie.



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## Possibilities for Supporting Students with Anxiety Disorders in the School Environment

### Abstract

Anxiety disorders are the most common group of mental disorders among children and adolescents, and their prevalence is steadily increasing. They may manifest as severe, complex and chronic as early as in adolescence, leading to significant difficulties in family, school, and social functioning, increasing the risk of other mental and somatic health problems. That is why it is so important for the child to receive care and appropriate support as early as possible. School is one of the most important places where the first symptoms of anxiety disorders can be noticed. Teachers, school counsellors, and psychologists are among the first to recognise the symptoms early and initiate support measures.

Most commonly diagnosed anxiety disorders among children and adolescents have been presented in this article as well as some of school intervention strategies aimed at creating an optimal environment for students experiencing anxiety have been outlined. The following forms of support are mentioned: mindfulness training, peer tutoring, preventive programmes to develop stress management skills and strengthen mental resilience, activities to foster an atmosphere of safety, appropriate preparation of teachers for the initial diagnosis of students with anxiety disorders, individualisation of the education process, and involvement of the family in the intervention process. In addition to ways of supporting students with anxiety disorders, some of the difficulties that schools may face in carrying out tasks in this area have also been identified.

**Keywords:** support, student, school, anxiety disorder.

## Introduction

Anxiety disorders are the most common group of mental disorders among children and adolescents (James, James, Cowdrey, Soler, 2015; Odgers, Dargue, Creswell, Jones, Hudson, 2020). In recent decades, their prevalence has been steadily increasing and is currently estimated at 5–20% (Ćwiklińska-Zaborowicz, 2010; James et al., 2015; Odgers et al., 2020; Polanczyk, Salum, Sugaya, Caye, Rohde, 2015). It is also believed that anxiety disorders in children and adolescents remain largely undiagnosed (James et al., 2015), which is probably related to reluctance of parents to seek psychiatric help, limited access to child psychiatry, and a lack of early recognition of symptoms. Research findings indicate that chronic anxiety disorders in childhood and adolescence can lead to serious functional impairments in adulthood and constitute a risk factor for other mental disorders (Odgers et al., 2020).

Therefore, one of the tasks of the school that should be strongly emphasised is not only the fulfilment of its educational function, but also care for the mental health of children and adolescents. Teachers, school counsellors, and psychologists are one of the first ones who may recognise the symptoms of anxiety disorders at an early stage and initiate supportive measures.

This article is a review, and the subject of study are the possibilities of supporting (forms and strategies) students with anxiety disorders in the school environment.

The aim is to present the specifics of anxiety disorders in children and adolescents, to identify the strategies used in schools to support students experiencing these difficulties, and to indicate the barriers and challenges that school faces in this area. The research questions include the following: 1. What are the most commonly diagnosed anxiety disorders in school-age children? 2. What forms and strategies of supporting students with anxiety disorders are used in the school environment? 3. What are the barriers to effectively supporting students with anxiety disorders? A method of analysis and synthesis of the literature on the subject was used in the study, including studies in the fields of psychology, pedagogy, and child psychiatry. An analysis of documents and reports from institutions dealing with the mental health of children and adolescents (including the Supreme Audit Office) was also included.

## **Anxiety disorders in school-age – characteristics and consequences**

Anxiety is a natural and adaptive emotion which is to prepare the body to respond to threats. If its intensity is within the limits of adaptive capabilities, it

can be described as physiological anxiety, which has a signalling and mobilising function. However, if it is disproportionate to the circumstances, caused by neutral stimuli that do not pose a real threat, and lasts disproportionately long in relation to the stimulus that caused it, if it is accompanied by intense somatic symptoms such as rapid breathing and heartbeat, shortness of breath, trembling, etc., and disrupts daily functioning, it then develops into a maladaptive symptom that hinders the ability to cope with everyday life. In such a situation, we refer to anxiety disorders (Bourne, 2011; Butcher, Hooley, Mineka, 2020).

During school age, the most commonly diagnosed anxiety disorders include:

- separation anxiety disorder, characterised by excessive anxiety and distress, disproportionate to the development level, occurring in situations involving separation from home or from primary attachment figures. It differs from typical separation anxiety in its heightened intensity and the presence of significant impairments in social functioning (Popek, 2012b; Bourne, 2011);
- social anxiety disorder- characterised by an intense fear of public evaluation and humiliation, resulting in significant difficulties in social functioning. It usually emerges in mid-adolescence and may persist into adulthood. Affected child tends to be highly concerned with meeting social norms and behaving correctly, and imagines situations of ridicule. Common behaviours include withdrawal, standing on the sidelines, avoiding conversations, and eye contact. Social anxiety should be differentiated from shyness, which is not considered a pathological condition (Kendall, 2010; Popek, 2010);
- generalised anxiety disorder, which is excessive, uncontrollable, worrying about various aspects of life. In the course of this disorder, excessive fears related to school, social relationships, family, health and safety, world events, and natural disasters, etc., are chronic, creating negative scenarios of the end of certain events, feeling anxiety continuously, accompanied by restlessness, nervousness, and irritability. Common symptoms in children include fatigue, tension, difficulty concentrating, and sleep disturbances. Despite reassurance and support from adults, the child often remains unable to calm down (Popek, 2012b);
- anxiety disorders in the form of phobias, where anxiety is caused by specific situations or objects that are external to the person and are not objectively dangerous. As a result, the child avoids such situations or reacts with terror to them or even to the thought of them. The awareness that others do not consider the situation dangerous or threatening does not reduce the anxiety (Popek, 2010; 2012b);
- anxiety disorders with panic attacks – panic anxiety, which is characterised by recurrent episodes of intense anxiety, occurring unpredictably, unrelated to specific stimuli, and usually lasting several minutes. Anxiety also occurs while waiting for the next attack. A panic attack includes a feeling of loss of

control, 'going crazy' or impending death, and frightening somatic symptoms. Children experiencing panic attacks, fearing loss of control during a panic attack, may avoid public places, and in severe cases, they are reluctant to leave their home environment (Butcher et al., 2020; Popek, 2017);

- selective mutism, characterised by inability to speak in certain social situations where verbal communication is expected (e.g., nursery, school), despite speaking in other situations. This condition cannot be justified by communication disorders related to speech fluency or by the occurrence of autism spectrum disorders, schizophrenia or other psychotic disorders. The most common pattern of behaviour in children outside the family is timid withdrawal with inhibition and passivity, consisting of constant, alert observation of the environment without revealing emotions (Popek 2012a);
- obsessive-compulsive disorder, which is associated with the occurrence of recurrent and persistent obsessions (intrusive thoughts) and compulsions (intrusive behaviours) or both symptoms together, most often unwanted, which the person tries to resist, at least at the beginning of the disorder. Obsessions or compulsions are time-consuming and cause clinically significant distress or impairment in functioning appropriate to the developmental stage (Piacentini, Langley, Roblek, 2018; Lewin, 2009; Bourne, 2011).

The frequency of anxiety disorders increases significantly with age, which, first of all, indicates that these disorders do not resolve spontaneously and, at the same time, emphasises the need for early therapeutic intervention (Bodden, Dirksen, Bögels, 2008). Anxiety disorders can become severe, complex, and chronic already in adolescence. They often co-occur with other disorders, mainly of a depressive nature (Sauter, Heyne, Westenberg, 2009). The results of longitudinal studies emphasise the continuity of anxiety disorders from adolescence to adulthood (Kim-Cohen et al., 2003). With age, children require increasingly intensive corrective measures, and entrenched, generalised anxiety becomes more difficult to treat. The accompanying difficulties in psychosocial functioning intensify over time, including problems at school, deficits in social competence, lack of peer relationships, low self-esteem, and a distorted self-image (Sauter et al., 2009). In the long term, untreated anxiety disorders lead to significant problems in family, school, professional and social functioning, further increasing the risk of other mental and somatic health difficulties, including affective and psychosomatic disorders, addictions, problems in social functioning, family conflicts or a lower quality of life (Lebowitz, Marin, Martino, Shimshoni, Silverman, 2020; Wood, McLeod, Piacentini, Sigman, 2009).

The cognitive model is the most commonly described among the concepts explaining the development of anxiety disorders in children. It assumes that the central feature around which symptoms develop is a tendency to experience feelings of threat and uncertainty. This model includes three basic components

of experienced anxiety: avoidance behaviours, physiological signals, and the formation of distorted cognitive assessments. Excessive anxiety that exceeds adaptive capabilities leads to the development of distorted cognitive patterns and, as a result, to excessive focus on oneself and one's feelings, excessive focus on evaluation (both of oneself and others), and the perception of various situations as threatening (Bryńska, 2016). An older but still relevant concept is Bowlby's attachment theory (1987). It explains the development of anxiety in children based on a relationship with a parent who does not provide a sufficient sense of security. The model assumes that anxiety disorders may be the consequence of the development of an insecure attachment pattern, which perpetuates the child's anxiety at later stages of development. The child perceives that caregivers cannot be relied upon – they are unavailable, not trustworthy, do not respond adequately to needs, and in difficult situations, their support and protection cannot be counted on. As a result, the child does not learn adaptive ways of regulating emotions and engaging in social relationships. Instead, they develop the belief that their needs cannot be met through interaction with other people, and that relationships themselves become a source of distress and anxiety. The importance of biological and temperamental determinants of anxiety, in particular negative emotionality and behavioural inhibition, is also emphasised. The development of anxiety disorders in children is thought to be due to an individual tendency to experience intense negative emotions, frustration, and irritability, as well as high reactivity (Rothbart, Bates, 2006). In the systemic concept, however, the emergence of anxiety disorders in children and adolescents is closely related to the family context. Attention is drawn to the fact that a child may be delegated to certain roles and behaviours which, if too difficult or experienced by the child as conflict, may be a source of symptoms and emotional problems. In the classical understanding, anxiety experienced by a child is a symptom of dysfunction in the family system and cannot be considered without looking into their relationships (Józefik, 2018).

Unfortunately, published research results indicate that the mental health indicators of children, and adolescents are rapidly deteriorating, and the number of young people in need of psychological and psychiatric support is constantly increasing. Nationwide studies paint a picture of lonely, anxious students with extremely low self-esteem and a sense of agency (Dębski, Flis, 2023; Sajkowska, Szredzińska, 2022).

## **School strategies for counteracting anxiety disorders**

Regardless of the roots of anxiety disorders, children should be cared for and supported as early as possible. School is one of the most important places where

the first symptoms can be noticed. It is teachers and school counsellors who observe students' behaviour in various social and educational contexts, which puts them in a special diagnostic position. However, the effectiveness of school counsellors in recognising anxiety disorders depends on their knowledge, experience, and the support tools that are available to them.

An important task for schools in the prevention of anxiety disorders in students seems to be the creation of an appropriate environment that provides a sense of security, transparent rules, a sense of belonging, and which fosters the development of relationships between students and teaching staff. The results of a study conducted in 2022 by Raniti and colleagues (Raniti et al., 2022) indicate a link between a higher level of belonging to the school community (resulting from the atmosphere prevailing in it) and a lower incidence of depressive and anxiety symptoms in adolescents.

In addition to creating an appropriate school atmosphere and preparing teachers to make an initial diagnosis of students with anxiety disorders, one needs to remember the importance of systematic prevention in the form of psychoeducational programmes that improve students' skills in coping with stress, recognising emotions, and developing mental resilience.

*Mental resilience (resilience)* is a phenomenon consisting of an individual's ability to effectively cope with difficulties, stress, or trauma and to rebuild their well-being after crisis experiences. It does not mean complete insensitivity to problems, but rather mental flexibility, the ability to adapt and return to relative balance after difficult situations. Characteristic of the pedagogical understanding of resilience is

the broadening of the psychological understanding of positive adaptation despite adversity to include socio-environmental aspects and the dimension of "reflective self-regulation", which is more or less consciously pursued in coping with the uncertainties and challenges encountered in educational processes (Konaszewski, Skalski-Bednarz, Surzykiewicz, 2025, p. 2).<sup>1</sup>

This perspective allows for the development of appropriate educational programmes that support young people in their lives, enabling them to acquire individual and social skills to function despite the difficulties they encounter.

Research on the effectiveness of programmes that strengthen mental resilience points to the particular value of methods such as *Zippy's Friends*, *mindfulness*, and the *Penn Resilience Program*.

*Zippy's Friends* is an emotional skills learning programme implemented in the Polish educational environment and inspired by the global standards of *Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)* (Brackett, Rivers, 2014). It is one of the best-

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<sup>1</sup> All translations into English of the original texts are the author's own translations.

known educational initiatives aimed at developing children's emotional skills (Holen, Waaktaar, Lervåg, Ystgaard, 2012). The project was created in the United Kingdom and has been adapted in many countries around the world. In Poland, the programme is implemented by the Centre for Positive Education [*Centrum Pozytywnej Edukacji*] under licence from the English foundation *Partnership for Children*. After appropriate training, teachers and school counsellors conduct 24 meetings with children during the school year, using prepared methodological materials (Centrum Pozytywnej Edukacji, 2025). The programme is aimed at pre-school and early school-age children and focuses on developing emotional self-awareness (recognising and naming emotions), conflict resolution skills (practising problem solving), and coping with emotions such as fear, sadness, or anger by learning techniques to help regulate strong emotions. It also promotes adaptive expression of feelings, cooperation, and effective communication with peers.

Mindfulness training is also a response to the need for schools to implement appropriate interventions to strengthen students' mental resilience and alleviate the symptoms of their anxiety disorders. It includes elements of meditation, the essence of which is to distance oneself from one's own thoughts, beliefs, and expectations. The training also has a relaxing effect, allowing one to find soothing in difficult moments. The first formalised mindfulness-based programme to support stress management was *Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction* (MBSR) by Kabat-Zinn (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). *Mindfulness* means full acceptance of awareness of the current experience, so-called 'acceptance without judgement' (Germer, 2015, p. 34). This practice allows for deepening self-awareness and better understanding of own emotions (including anxiety), thoughts, and reactions to difficult experiences. In addition to their impact on the emotional sphere, formal mindfulness training practices focus on developing various aspects of attention and improving cognitive and metacognitive functions, which can further support a child's school functioning (including improved academic performance and increased knowledge and competence). Clinical studies indicate that mindfulness training also promotes improved interpersonal relationships (Creswell, 2017). This leads to the accumulation of positive experiences in the area of social relationships and their perception as more pleasant and desirable (Brown, Creswell, Ryan, 2015). In addition, research on the effectiveness of mindfulness training has observed an increase in positive affect with a simultaneous decrease in negative affect (Chen, Sang, Zhang, Jiang, 2021). A decrease in anxiety and even anxiety disorders has also been reported. It is worth adding that anxiety levels were often used as an operationalised indicator of the effectiveness of mindfulness training (Chen et al., 2021; Parker, Kupersmidt, Mathis, Scull, Sims, 2014).

Among the programmes that strengthen the mental resilience of children and adolescents, whose effectiveness has been confirmed, is the *Penn Resilience*

*Program (PRP)*, developed by Gillham. It is a group intervention dedicated to adolescents in early and middle adolescence (aged 10–14). The programme is based on a cognitive-behavioural paradigm and aims at strengthening the internal resources of children and adolescents through structured activities carried out in group sessions (Dray et al., 2017). PRP builds resilience, well-being, and optimism by drawing on the strengths of the individual. It equips them with a set of practical skills that can be used in everyday life to cope with adversity and thrive in difficult circumstances. Research has also confirmed the effectiveness of this intervention in treating anxiety symptoms (Dray et al., 2017). Unfortunately, this programme is not widely known or directly implemented in Polish schools, but its principles and objectives are in line with the development of methods to support the mental resilience of children and adolescents.

ISKRA Resilience [*ISKRA Odporności*] is one of the Polish educational initiatives that helps children and adolescents better cope with the symptoms of anxiety disorders. It is a new programme based on many years of cooperation between the Centre for Positive Education and the English foundation *Partnership for Children*. The implementation of the ISKRA Resilience programme in Poland is a response to emerging mental health problems (including anxiety disorders) caused by the effects of the SARS-COV-2 pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine. The programme is aimed at adolescents aged 11–15 and is to support mental resilience, meaning the ability to control reactions to difficult events and cope with challenges and adversity. During 11 meetings, students learn to enhance their inner strength by recognising and developing their strengths. The essence of the programme consists of tasks and exercises that increase mental resilience and reduce symptoms of anxiety by teaching mindful breathing, creating a Resilience Portfolio (recognising one's own resources and strengths), and analysing and transforming habitual ways of thinking and reacting in difficult situations (Sarnat-Ciastko, Nowak, 2022).

*Emotional FIRST AID KIT [APTECZKA Pierwszej Pomocy Emocjonalnej]* programme, like *ISKRA Resilience*, supports the mental health of children and adolescents. It aims at developing basic social and emotional skills in children aged 8–12 and prepare them to cope independently in difficult situations in order to strengthen their resilience to stress. The programme can be implemented by teachers, psychologists, and school counsellors. Over the course of one or two school years, the teacher conducts classes comprising two or three meetings for each of the ten parts of the programme, for a total of 30 meetings. The *FIRST AID KIT* programme uses the concept of *mindfulness*, which allows participants to take a conscious approach to their surroundings, themselves, and others. The practice of mindful experience of reality, drawn from the theory of mindfulness, is intended to ensure calmness, teach how to focus the attention on what is currently important in our lives, develop stress management skills, and perse-

verance in pursuing goals (Centrum Pozytywnej Edukacji, 2025). One of the key objectives of the programme, particularly important in the context of treating anxiety disorders (especially social anxiety), is to develop the ability to establish and maintain close relationships, as well as to strengthen self-esteem and proper self-assessment, built on the basis of positive interpersonal experiences. The programme also promotes the development of a sense of community in children, the ability to cooperate in a group, and a willingness to help others.

*The Guardians of Smiles* [Strażnicy Uśmiechu] programme is a prevention programme designed for primary school pupils. It includes a series of psychoeducational classes based on 32 scenarios, designed for children aged 5 to 10 (*The Guardians of Smiles* part 1 – for pre-schools and grades 1–3 of primary school) and for children and adolescents aged 10 to 15 (*The Guardians of Smiles* part 2 – for grades 4–8 of primary school).

*The Guardians of Smiles* programme was developed by Ignjatović-Savić, professor of psychology at the University of Belgrade in Serbia, in response to the difficult experiences of war in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. It was then adapted for implementation in Polish schools by the Methodological Centre for Psychological and Pedagogical Assistance [Centrum Metodyczne Pomocy Psychologiczno-Pedagogicznej] – a nationwide teacher training institution established and run by the Minister of National Education in 1977–2009. At present, the programme is supervised by the Centre for Positive Education. The aim of the *Guardians of Smiles* programme is to develop children's self-awareness, shape their life and socio-emotional skills, including coping with difficult and unpleasant feelings, and strengthen their confidence in themselves and others, which can be very helpful in working on anxiety disorders experienced by children and adolescents. The programme takes the form of psychoeducational workshops conducted by teachers with children and adolescents in primary schools. Classes can be held during form periods, as extracurricular activities, in after-school clubs, during so-called 'green school' trips, as part of additional meetings. The workshop scenarios have been developed by the author in such a way that teachers can implement them without the need for additional preparation. However, as many years of experience of trainers promoting the programme have shown, it is very useful to train teachers so that they can deepen their awareness of their own feelings, needs, and educational attitudes, build trust in themselves and others, reflect on their own priorities, values, and their relationships with students, their parents, and other teachers. The training takes the form of personal development workshops.

In addition to systematic activities in the form of preventive programmes, teachers, bearing in mind the well-being of children struggling with anxiety disorders, should remember to individualise the education process on a daily basis. This means adapting teaching methods and means of assessment to the abilities

and needs of children with anxiety disorders. The scope of adaptation may include, among others: rules for presenting content (e.g. avoiding questioning in front of the class, replacing oral answers with written ones in the case of social anxiety), dividing tasks into stages, setting 'partial' deadlines, allowing the student to gradually expose themselves to difficult situations while providing emotional support, or introducing elements of project work that reduce the pressure of individual assessment.

Peer group support can be a type of intervention that helps build students' mental resilience while alleviating the symptoms of anxiety disorders. Peer tutoring has become increasingly popular in recent years. In addition to its academic dimension, which develops specific areas of knowledge and skills, it can also take the form of developmental tutoring (Brzezińska, 2012). This mainly refers to the development of social, organisational and communication skills and the broadening of humanistic knowledge (Brzezińska, Rycielska, 2009; Brzezińska, Appelt, 2013). Researchers and advocates of tutoring (including Slavin, 2013; Topping, 2005) quote numerous research results confirming that the use of peer tutoring benefits both the cognitive and socio-emotional development of participants, including the development of empathy, strengthening bonds between students, and increasing self-esteem, which is crucial in the treatment of anxiety disorders.

Having the best interest of children and adolescents experiencing anxiety disorders in mind, schools should provide appropriate psychological and pedagogical support. This includes access to specialists (psychologists, school counsellors) who can conduct individual consultations with students to identify their difficulties and jointly develop strategies for coping with them. Although full-scale clinical therapy should take place in mental health clinics, schools can be a place for implementing short therapeutic interventions based on elements of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which has been proven effective in improving the well-being of people with anxiety disorders. (Hofmann, Hayes, 2020; Barlow et al., 2020; Beck, 2005; Kendall, 2006). Students struggling with these disorders may experience sudden panic attacks, strong anxiety reactions, or refusal to participate in school activities. A school psychologist or counsellor should be prepared to conduct a crisis intervention to ensure the student's safety, reduce the intensity of their emotions, or provide support in returning the student to the classroom (Nadeem, Jaycox, Kataoka, Langley, Stein, 2011). Specialists can also organise group classes on relaxation techniques or the mentioned mindfulness. Undoubtedly, the school's tasks should include cooperation with a psychological and pedagogical counselling centre and external specialists (psychiatrist, psychotherapist) in the case of severe anxiety symptoms in a student.

It is also important for the school to involve the family in the process of supporting students with anxiety disorders, as the family is the key context for the child's emotional development. Research shows that parenting style, level of

emotional support, and parents' response to symptoms of anxiety have a significant impact on the course of the disorder (Rapee, Schniering, Hudson, 2009). A high level of control and overprotectiveness can exacerbate anxiety symptoms, while a supportive and open approach promotes the development of coping skills (Wood, McLeod, Sigman, Hwang, Chu, 2003).

In order to strengthen parenting skills and facilitate parent-child relationships, schools should, among other things, organise workshops and meetings for parents on understanding anxiety disorders and support the development of consistent parenting strategies at home and at school. School-family partnership programmes can contribute to improving a child's functioning both in and outside of school. Working with families and providing support at home can significantly increase the effectiveness of school interventions. Furthermore, involving the family in developing the child's emotional skills and in the process of coping with anxiety symptoms, through education about its nature and participation in therapeutic programmes, allows for the creation of a synergistic relationship that provides real support for the child in struggling with the internal, often incomprehensible and difficult world of emotions.

## Barriers and challenges

Despite the available opportunities to support students with anxiety disorders, it is important to be aware of the difficulties that schools in Poland face in carrying out their tasks. One of the main problems is the insufficient number of specialists – psychologists and school counsellors. In Poland, there is an average of over 700 students per psychologist (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2024), which makes it impossible to conduct regular therapeutic work. According to the audit report *Psychological and Psychotherapeutic Assistance for Children and Adolescents*, between the years 2020 and 2023, children and adolescents in Poland did not receive comprehensive psychological and psychotherapeutic assistance tailored to their needs. The availability of specialists was limited, among other things, due to staff shortages and underfunding, which is a serious obstacle to the implementation of preventive programmes and individual interventions.

The lack of substantive training for teachers in the early recognition of students' emotional problems and referring them for specialist diagnosis and work with children experiencing mental disorders is also an issue. Teachers often feel helpless in the face of their students' mental health problems, and the professional development system rarely offers sufficient training in mental health (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2017).

Another difficulty is the individualisation of the teaching process. With large numbers of students and limited time resources, teachers encounter organisa-

tional barriers that make it difficult to fully adapt educational requirements to the needs of the child.

When analysing the problems schools face in supporting students with anxiety disorders, it is impossible not to mention the availability of prevention programmes. Although there are effective anxiety reduction programmes based on cognitive behavioural therapy implemented in schools (which have been mentioned earlier), they are not implemented in many institutions. The barriers are a lack of systemic support, limited financial resources, and an insufficient number of qualified staff.

Barriers resulting from the lack of parental involvement in the process of supporting the student cannot be forgotten. Effective help requires cooperation between the school and the family, but not all parents recognise the problem, and some fear stigmatisation. The lack of a consistent strategy between school and home can weaken the effectiveness of support measures.

## Summary

Based on the analyses conducted on the possibilities of supporting students with anxiety disorders in the school environment, conclusions relevant to both educational theory and practice can be formulated. An approach is needed that includes both reflection on the place of the school in the mental health support system for children and adolescents, as well as specific measures implemented in everyday educational work.

In the context of educational theory, it is important to emphasise the need to redefine the role of the school as an institution that not only teaches but also supports the emotional and social development of students. Mental and emotional support should be recognised as an integral part of the upbringing and education process, and not solely the domain of specialist assistance. Education should take into account the relational dimension of the teaching process, in which trust, acceptance, and safety are prerequisites for learning and development. From the perspective of pedagogical theory, it is necessary to develop the concept of a supportive school – an institution in which mental health prevention and emotional education are part of the basic principles of education for mental resilience (Dray et al., 2017). School, understood in this way, becomes an environment in which educational theory integrates with psychological and social knowledge, creating a coherent basis for pedagogical practice.

From the perspective of educational practice, the possibilities for supporting students with anxiety disorders are wide-ranging, but their effectiveness depends on the coordination of activities at the individual, class, and institutional levels. Early recognition of symptoms, individualisation of the teaching process

,and implementation of programmes to strengthen mental resilience (Konaszewski et al., 2025; Centrum Pozytywnej Edukacji, 2025), which can be effective tools for early intervention. It is equally important to ensure access to specialist psychological and pedagogical support, as well as close cooperation between the school and the family (Rapee et al., 2009) in understanding and responding to the child's emotional difficulties. Schools should actively foster a climate of acceptance, safety, and mutual trust that promotes openness and reduces anxiety (Raniti et al., 2022).

For these measures to be effective, systemic solutions need to be introduced at the level of education policy – increasing the number of specialists in schools, funding prevention programmes, and preparing teachers to recognise and support students with emotional disorders. Then the school will become not only a place for imparting knowledge, but also a space that supports the mental well-being of children and adolescents, where children's experience of the world and themselves in it is mediated by adults who help them face challenges, guiding them to a higher level of development while protecting them from experiences that they are not yet able to cope with without adequate support.

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## Możliwości wsparcia ucznia z zaburzeniami lękowymi w środowisku szkolnym

### Streszczenie

Zaburzenia lękowe stanowią najczęściej występującą grupę zaburzeń psychicznych wśród dzieci i młodzieży, a ich rozpowszechnienie systematycznie wzrasta. Już w okresie adolescencji mogą one przybierać ciężki, złożony i przewlekły charakter, prowadząc do znaczących trudności w funkcjonowaniu rodzinnym, szkolnym i społecznym, zwiększając ponadto ryzyko pojawienia się innych problemów w zakresie zdrowia psychicznego i somatycznego. Dlatego tak istotne jest, aby dziecko jak najwcześniej zostało otoczone opieką i otrzymało odpowiednie wsparcie. Szkoła jest jednym z najważniejszych miejsc, w których mogą zostać zauważone pierwsze objawy zaburzeń lękowych. Nauczyciele, pedagodzy i psychologowie szkolni, jako jedni z pierwszych, mają szansę na ich wczesne rozpoznanie oraz inicjowanie działań wspierających.

W niniejszej publikacji przedstawiono najczęściej diagnozowane wśród dzieci i młodzieży zaburzenia lękowe oraz nakreślono niektóre z możliwych strategii interwencyjnych szkoły zmierzających do stworzenia optymalnego środowiska dla ucznia doświadczającego lęku. Wśród form wsparcia przywołane zostały m.in.: treningi uważności (*mindfulness*), tutoring rówieśniczy, profilaktyczne programy rozwijające umiejętności radzenia sobie ze stresem i wzmacniające odporność psychiczną, działania sprzyjające budowaniu atmosfery bezpieczeństwa, odpowiednie przygotowanie nauczycieli do wstępnej diagnozy ucznia z zaburzeniami lękowymi, indywidualizacja procesu kształcenia, czy też angażowanie rodziny w proces interwencyjny. Poza możliwościami wspierania ucznia z zaburzeniami lękowymi wskazane zostały także niektóre z trudności, z jakimi szkoła może się mierzyć w realizacji zadań w tym zakresie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wsparcie, uczeń, szkoła, zaburzenia lękowe.

# **RESEARCH REPORTS**





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## Culturality as a Field of Educational Research: Insights from Higher Education

### Abstract

This article examines the concept of culturality within the academic context, providing a semantic reconstruction of the notion informed by Anna Jawor's (2023) cultural studies perspective. Empirically, it draws on focus group interviews with university faculty, aimed at understanding how participants interpret their experiences of academic culturality and how these interpretations shape educational interactions. Using a constructivist grounded theory, seven dimensions of academic culturality were identified. The study highlights the heuristic value of culturality for educational research and underscores the need for further systematic inquiry.

**Keywords:** culturality, university, education, grounded theory.

### Introduction

Contemporary academic education takes place amid profound cultural, social, and institutional transformations. These changes reshape traditional educational relationships, redefine participants' roles, and alter prevailing normative frameworks (Segiet, 2024). In this context, there is a growing need for ana-

lytical categories that can capture the subtle, often hidden mechanisms shaping academic life. One such category—largely absent from pedagogical discourse—is culturality. Far from being a mere set of etiquette rules, it represents a complex, dynamic network of meanings that links individual and social dimensions and underpins the didactic climate of any educational setting.

This article aims to establish culturality as a legitimate field of pedagogical inquiry, with a focus on higher education. It begins with a semantic reconstruction of the concept of culturality, drawing particularly on Anna Jawor's (2023) cultural studies framework. The empirical basis of the analysis comes from focus group research with university faculty, designed to capture the meanings they assign to their own experiences of academic culturality and to provide an initial insight into how these meanings influence the dynamics of the didactic situation.

The article situates itself within the broader field of research on academic education by advocating for the inclusion of culturality among key theoretical categories. These categories help deepen our understanding of the contemporary challenges facing higher education. In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing debates about the university's future as a space not only for knowledge transmission but also for cultivating attitudes and values. Given its normative potential and its ability to illuminate relational and identity-forming processes, culturality also has a universal quality, allowing its application in educational research beyond the confines of academia.

## **On the Concepts of Culture, Culturality, and Ethos**

The term culture derives from the Latin verb *colo, colere*, meaning “to cultivate” (Jabłońska, 2019). Initially, it referred to the cultivation of the land, but over time its meaning expanded to encompass all forms of “cultivation”—both in the sense of human self-improvement and the transformation of nature. In this view, culture encompasses everything that can be developed, actualized, and shaped by human activity (Daszkiewicz, 2010). The metonymic use of the term appeared in Cicero's notion of *cultura animi*—the “cultivation of the spirit”—achieved through philosophy. In antiquity, culture was not understood as an autonomous concept but was always tied to a specific sphere of life, such as the spirit or the mind. Its Greek equivalent was *paideia*, signifying the process of shaping the human being through virtues such as justice, compassion toward people and animals, and courtesy (cf. Schaefer, 2015). Greek *paideia* represented the ideal of the accomplished citizen and exerted a profound influence on Roman culture as well as on Christianity (Daszkiewicz, 2010). In a sociological perspective, culture is understood as the totality of the material and immaterial products of human activity, encompassing values and recognized norms of con-

duct that have been objectified and accepted within a given community and subsequently transmitted both to other groups and to future generations (Gruchoła, 2010). Turning to anthropological thought, culture may also be conceived as a system of beliefs upheld within a particular community (Buliński, 2002). According to Ward H. Goodenough (1964, p. 36):

culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves. Culture, being what people have to learn as distinct from their biological heritage, must consist of the end product of learning; knowledge, in a most general, if relative, sense of the term. By this definition, we should note that culture is not a material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people, behavior, or emotions. It is rather an organization of these things. It is the forms of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating, and otherwise interpreting them. As such, the things people say and do, their social arrangements and events, are products or by-products of their culture as they apply it to the task of perceiving and dealing with their circumstances. To one who knows their culture, these things and events are also signs signifying the cultural forms or models of which they are material representations.

Culture is a collective phenomenon, cumulative in nature, and evolving over time (Gruchoła, 2010). The term “culture” carries multiple meanings. It may refer to a set of norms and rules regulating behavior, traditions, religions, customs, and social practices, as well as to personal refinement and etiquette. It also encompasses artistic heritage, including masterpieces of painting, architecture, and literature, as well as cultural events (Mihułka, 2018). When used in everyday language, the term culture acquires a “strong evaluative connotation” (Jabłońska, 2019, p. 132).<sup>1</sup> While the adjective “cultural” may simply denote ways of life and retain a degree of objectivity, describing something or someone as “cultured” expresses approval, representing a form of judgment always made within a specific context (Jawor, 2023).

In pedagogical thought, being well-bred, which characterizes a cultured individual, has been described in terms such as good manners, etiquette, courtesy, politeness, and refinement (Wrońska, 2019). Social refinement also encompassed aesthetic education—that is, familiarity with art and engagement in creative activity (Wojnar, 1964). In the 1970s, Andrzej Tyszka (1971) argued that a cultured person should demonstrate authentic participation in culture, openness in views and attitudes, creative and expressive engagement, reflectiveness, a serious and profound approach to knowledge, art, and morality, as well as the possession of a personal worldview (cf. Zalewska-Pawlak, 2017; Olbrycht, 2019). According to more recent social opinion research conducted in Poland, a cultured person is characterized by the ability to behave appropriately in any situation, tact, carefulness in speech, avoidance of vulgarity, courtesy, respect, tolerance and openness, cleanliness and neat attire, reading, formal education, at-

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<sup>1</sup> All translations into English of the original texts are the authors’ own translations.

tendance at the theatre, cinema, and philharmonic, knowledge of art, reflectiveness, and engagement in social matters, among other attributes (Burszta et al., 2010; cf. Wilk, 2016). Thus, the standard of a cultured person encompasses a broad and heterogeneous set of traits.

Anna Jawor (2023) highlights, in her study of the model of a cultured person in Poland, that no comprehensive term has so far been established for culturally appropriate behaviors and the traits of cultured individuals. Jawor proposes to fill this theoretical gap by introducing the concept of culturality, derived from the adjective “cultured”. Jawor (2023, p. 8) understands culturality broadly:

as the totality of dispositions in individuals that allow them to be regarded as ‘cultured.’ These are traits and behaviors positively valued by society, socialized in children and expected, to a greater or lesser extent, from adults. They pertain to various aspects of life, from the control of physiological activities to forms of interpersonal communication. They encompass a wide range of attitudes, from elementary ones that cannot be disregarded to ‘higher-order’ ones worth aspiring to. Culturality spans from a gesture (someone behaves in a cultured manner, e.g., saying ‘Good morning’) to a personality trait (someone is cultured, i.e., it is difficult to imagine them not saying ‘Good morning’). These are values always positively connoted.

In this framework, culturality manifests across several domains: **attitudes** (appropriate behavior, respect for others, punctuality, hospitality, care for language, nature, and country), **rituals** (greetings, introductions, table manners), **communications** (greetings, expressions of thanks, congratulations), **personal appearance** (hygiene, attire, smiling), **virtues** (kindness, conscientiousness, honor, accountability for one’s word, honesty), **mental attributes** (broad interests, eloquence, sense of humor, critical thinking), and **engagement in cultural activities** (reading, attending theatre or cinema, visiting museums, engaging in artistic creation) (Jawor, 2023). Culturality may be considered in multiple ways—as a regulator of social life, a manifestation of personality, a life stance, an attitude toward the world, and as practices that aesthetically shape the social environment. As a normative phenomenon, culturality must always be examined with regard to its specific context.

The broad understanding of culturality presented by A. Jawor aligns it closely with the concept of ethos proposed by Czesław Robotycki (1980). The category of ethos is complex, encompassing a set of social facts that Robotycki identifies as morality and custom, corresponding to two fundamental dimensions of social reality: attitudes and behaviors. The moral dimension comprises worldview, values, judgments, and norms. Custom, on the other hand, is constituted by: the normative personal model (a set of conceptions regarding proper behavior), patterns of personal behavior (the actual behaviors of community members), ritual rules (gestures, expressions, etiquette), and the realm of material references (meanings and evaluations attributed to material objects). Specific relations exist between these categories, and their observation allows the researcher to un-

derstand the complex transpositions of prevailing norms into the sphere of human action. The spheres of morality and custom mutually influence each other through the attitude–behavior relationship. Robotycki’s proposed model of ethos pertains to groups distinguished by a certain cultural and normative cohesion. However, this system “does not operate in isolation, and its elements undergo changes under the influence of external information” (Robotycki, 1980, p. 31). The system evolves, and the process of change can be subject to empirical exploration. Robotycki (1980, p. 32) writes:

The ethos of any group (community), is conditioned by its structural characteristics and historical fate; hence, the elements of ethos are historically variable (some more durable, others less so). The model thus demonstrates that situations are possible in which historical changes result, for example, in a discrepancy between values and personal patterns, which does not necessarily lead to the disintegration of the ethos.

Tracking the process of change, as manifested in the everyday life of a given group (cf. Sulima, 2000), allows one to understand the role of external factors in the transformations occurring within a specific ethos.

## Academic Culture and Academic Culturality

Academic culture, understood as the ideological and normative framework delineating the scope of activity within the university community (Sztompka, 2014), has been largely shaped by the so-called “traditional” model of the university, formulated by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the first half of the nineteenth century (Zakowicz, 2012). Academic culture embodies the realization of the values underpinning the idea of the university and its ethos, which in turn shape the identity and mission of higher education institutions. In the traditional university, the ethos encompassed the pursuit of truth, academic freedom, scholarly integrity, a sense of community, civic education, and the social responsibility of the academic community (Zakowicz, 2012).

As Jacek Hołówka (2015) observes, contemporary universities increasingly depart from the classical model of academic ethos, adopting structures and operational mechanisms characteristic of production-oriented enterprises. Alongside critical perspectives on these transformations, there is also a conviction regarding the necessity of market-oriented higher education as a factor conducive to social, technological, and economic development, while simultaneously emphasizing its potential to enhance the quality of educational processes (cf. Marzałek, 2008; Andrzejczak, 2015; Makieła, 2017). Under these conditions, the concept of the “university person” undergoes transformation, often remaining in a state of mutual tension. This tension manifests, on the one hand, in the defense of traditional values and the dignity of *homo academicus*, and on the

other, in the—frequently not fully recognized by the academic community—impact of market mechanisms, which impose pressures for efficiency and the rationalization of costs and benefits (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2014, p. 16).

Like culture more broadly, academic culture is subject to both processes of reproduction and evolution (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2015), shaped by profound cultural, social, and economic transformations (Sułkowski, 2016). Within increasingly egalitarian and entrepreneurial academic structures, individuals representing diverse cultural codes, lifestyles, and differing conceptions of the role and functioning of higher education institutions converge, resulting in the coexistence of heterogeneous organizational models and the creation of spaces with a hybrid, often ambivalent, character. This new normativity transforms the traditional roles performed by university members, their behaviors, attitudes, and competencies, which in turn entails changes in interpersonal relationships, particularly between teacher and student (Kaczmarek, 2017). Consequently, academic culturality undergoes transformation as well (cf. Hrehorowicz & Gietka, 2023). Changes in the values and practices of academic culture affect both the conditions—subjective and objective—and the course of student education (Kaczmarek, 2017). In the context of evolving academic culture, it becomes increasingly apparent that

the didactic situation is not static, but dynamic, unstable, and variable; it develops not according to predetermined, predictable patterns, but rather chaotically. Consequently, there exist neither fixed schemes for structuring curricular content nor orderly patterns for creating educational experiences (Gofron, 2012, p. 55).

Analyzing the complex conditions of the educational environment therefore requires the use of appropriately nuanced theoretical categories. One such category—sensitive to diverse changes and bearing considerable axionormative significance—appears to be precisely (academic) culturality.

## Methodological framework

This article draws on a research project initiated in April 2025, designed to examine the dynamics of change in academic culturality. Despite the centrality of culture and civility to the functioning of higher education, empirical investigations into the transformation of academic culture remain scarce (Hrehorowicz & Gietka, 2023; Biały, 2011). The study addresses this gap by exploring how culturality is reshaped within the university setting, attending to the interplay of institutional norms, generational shifts, and broader socio-cultural forces. At the outset of the project, during the conceptualization phase of the research constructs, a preliminary framework of research problems was formulated in the form of the following questions: (1) How do academic teachers construct and

experience academic culturality (2) How do these constructions inform and shape the dynamics of the educational setting? These questions enabled, on one hand, a clear delineation of the research field's scope, and on the other, the undertaking of key methodological decisions essential for conducting the qualitative research central to the project.

The research project was divided into two stages. In the first stage, the results of which are presented in this article, focus group interviews were conducted with two groups of academic staff from two public universities in Poland. The choice of method (FGI) was driven by the need to access knowledge resources – both individual and collective – that often remain unconscious to participants and only emerge during discussion. This allows the researcher to more accurately identify key areas relevant to the research objectives that may have previously gone unnoticed. Furthermore, as emphasized by Barbour (2011), focus group research supports the refinement of research instruments. In the second stage of the project, the data obtained from the focus group interviews will be used to develop a scenario for in-depth individual interviews (IDI) (Miński, 2017), which will be conducted with faculty members from public universities.

Academic teachers representing the social sciences were invited to participate in the focus group interviews. Utilizing a convenience sampling strategy (Patton, 2002), participants were recruited based on the following criteria: employment in a teaching or teaching-and-research role and a minimum of five years' experience in higher education. In total, 14 academic staff members took part in the study, with professional experience ranging from 5 to 38 years, holding roles such as assistant, adjunct, and professor. Additionally, two doctoral students who had completed mandatory pedagogical internships – thus possessing teaching experience with students – were also invited to participate.

The interviews were conducted between May and June 2025. Participants provided informed consent for both their participation and the recording of the focus group discussions. The spontaneous group discussions lasted approximately three hours in the first group and two hours in the second group.

The empirical data were analyzed following the procedures of postmodern grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2013).

## **Academic culturality as experienced by teachers**

In the participants' accounts, culturality is documented both at the individual and social levels, manifesting in everyday, easily observable practices as well as in subtle, less easily discernible attitudes and orientations. Analysis of the interviewed faculty members' statements reveals the multidimensional nature of academic culturality—encompassing behavioral, cognitive, axiological, rela-

tional, and identity-related components—and indicates that the dynamic changes occurring within it have a significant, often adverse, impact on everyday teaching practice.

Through analysis of the empirical material, seven principal dimensions of academic culturality were reconstructed from the participants' accounts: (1) culturality as a set of ritual and customary behaviors; (2) culturality as an expression of respect, maturity, and readiness for "adult-to-adult" relationships; (3) culturality as a matter of identity and affiliation with the university; (4) culturality understood as participation in cultural life; (5) culturality as an intellectual stance; (6) culturality as an area of generational conflict; and (7) culturality as an unstable and negotiable category.

**Culturality as a set of ritual and customary behaviors** is rooted in the habitual understanding of culture, in which gestures and forms function as normative regulators of social relations (Bourdieu, 2009). In this context, faculty members associate culturality with personal culture, understood as knowledge of and adherence to etiquette, the demonstration of politeness and courtesy, and the use of forms of communication appropriate to the university setting. In this sense, culturality becomes a set of normative customary codes governing interactions within the academic space. Teachers primarily relate culturality to observable behaviors, such as greeting others, punctuality, appropriate attire, avoidance of vulgar language, and refraining from eating during classes:

always open restroom doors, [...] not saying good morning, not opening windows, not holding doors. Well, I could, so to speak, list a whole series of various behaviors [...]. And my favorite: eating, drinking during classes, doing a thousand things that, in my view, do not align with the dignity of the academy. It didn't happen before, now I see that it does.  
(Maria)

Adherence to the norms of academic etiquette is perceived by some of the teacher participants in the focus group interviews as a prerequisite for maintaining basic didactic order. Failure to follow traditionally accepted norms often evokes surprise, more frequently dissatisfaction and frustration, and occasionally even a sense of threat:

And when they (the students) are called out on it, what affects me the most, really affects me personally, are either the comments or the facial expressions [...] and this is met, for example, with some kind of, or some uhh, or some muttering under the breath, or eye-rolling. [...] I think, I am dissatisfied with such behaviors, I think it is precisely uncultural, inappropriate, does not conform to certain norms, precisely etiquette [...] or simply personal culture. But then the situation occurs again, I ask again, and nothing changes. And that is what irritates me the most—that no change occurs, even though I ask the students for something, I feel like I'm hitting a wall. Each time I have to ask again, to point it out again, I am more irritated. [...] So, when I hear such language at the university, I feel concerned, even threatened. Because it seems to me that this is the least appropriate place to use such language. (Dorota)

For the majority of the interviewed faculty, adherence to norms and customs constitutes a significant aspect of educational practice. However, it is often met by students with disregard, and sometimes with overt disapproval or misunderstanding.

The second dimension of culturality emerging from the faculty members' accounts is the perception of **culturality as an expression of respect, maturity, and readiness for "adult-to-adult" relationships**. This dimension extends beyond the sphere of observable behaviors—although it is intrinsically linked to them—encompassing intentions, attitudes, and the manner of presence toward another person. The interviewed faculty emphasized the importance of care for others, attentiveness, openness to dialogue, and communicative competence. In this conception, culturality assumes the character of a relational axiology, the absence of which is experienced as symbolic exclusion from the space of respect, rather than merely a deviation from convention. Mature relationships with students, as expected by the faculty, carry an educative component (Kapias, 2015) aimed at restoring the desired order. However, this educative function is not fully realized due to the perceived weakening of academics' authority and position:

We have reached a point where the student can do anything, and sometimes we can do nothing. And it's unclear how to behave. I often worry whether pointing something out or saying something might later be used against me, or whether a complaint might be filed about me, and I've already experienced situations like that. (Natalia)

Participants stressed that in the "adult-to-adult" relationship, which they consider appropriate for the university, both parties should demonstrate openness and understanding. Yet academics feel that only they are required to accommodate students, while students make no effort to understand the needs and expectations of their instructors or the conditions under which they operate, even though they should:

It is up to them (the students) to make the effort and to show some attempt to understand, to accept that we are also different. (Beata)

The third dimension emerging from the data is **culturality as an issue of identity and belonging to the university**. In the accounts, particularly from more senior faculty members, culturality appears as an element of the academic ethos, serving as a symbolic indicator of identification with the community and the internalization of its core values. It takes the form of a distinct sense of "being part of" a space imbued with specific values and meanings that distinguish the university from other social environments:

Here, I identify with a certain institution that inherently tells me how I should behave. I can relax the dress code, yes, I can dress more casually, I can do some other things. But there are cultural canons in academia that must not be broken, because if we destroy

them, we can essentially announce the end of the university. Perhaps it would be worth it, I don't know. Some things have ended, so maybe it would be worth letting this end too. But when that happens, I certainly won't be here anymore, because I cannot live without these things. (Maria)

At the same time, faculty members perceive the infiltration of external value systems and alternative logics of operation into the university, characteristic of other social fields, such as the market (Sułkowski, 2016). This process leads to the blurring of the boundaries of academic culture, weakening its culture-shaping and identity-forming functions, and transforming relationships within the academic community, where maintaining a coherent system of references and shared meanings becomes increasingly difficult:

We observe a shift toward a very utilitarian perception of knowledge, culture, everything in order, and students are just like that. They want concrete results—what will I gain from this—and this will probably deepen further, and at some point we probably won't even talk about such autotelic values anymore. (Natalia)

The understanding of **culturality as participation in cultural life**, as expressed by the faculty, confirms that this category extends beyond mere adherence to the rules of etiquette, encompassing active engagement with culture and openness to new experiences (cf. Burszta et al., 2010). In this dimension, culturality is associated with possessing a basic knowledge of the culture in which one operates, as well as an attitude of readiness to learn and independently seek new forms of participation. Some faculty members expressed the view that students do not engage with high culture in ways they would consider desirable. Moreover, students are often absent from the university's cultural life, which, according to faculty, is in a state of regression. This situation reveals a lack of a shared communicative space:

I talk with students about when they last visited an exhibition, when they went to the theater, what they have done, and suddenly there is silence, and you no longer know whether it was only me or if they don't want to speak. Yes. It's as if I lose the language in which I could discuss anything beyond the classical, transmission-focused content. (Maria)

Some teachers note that contemporary students pursue their cultural needs primarily outside the university, often within the realm of popular culture, and emphasize that these activities can also be valuable and developmental. At the same time, concerns are raised that, within the academic context, students' alternative cultural activities do not contribute to fostering mutual understanding:

(Students) are engaged in pop culture or elsewhere. Meanwhile, I am not there. As a result, a completely different outside-academic stream of activity is probably created, which I cannot access. I don't know whether it's because I am not active or because it develops so far from where I am that I cannot reach it. Perhaps then it would be easier for me to understand students and their various behaviors. [...] But, on the other hand, I cannot accept the university becoming a site of pop culture. Not everything that comes

from pop can pour into the university, because then [...] my level of discomfort would prevent me from working here. (Maria)

Analysis of the interviewed faculty members' statements reveals that they associate academic **culturality with the willingness to engage in intellectual effort, independent thinking, and cognitive curiosity**. Intellectual maturity here entails not only possessing a certain body of knowledge but also a readiness to deepen it, the ability to critically engage with scientific and cultural content, and reflective participation in academic life. Deficiencies in this dimension manifest as indifference, lack of engagement and autonomy, and an instrumental approach to education, which are sources of disappointment and frustration for some faculty members:

Sometimes I just hit a wall with their unwillingness, lack of engagement, and I feel that they do not internalize certain values that I would like to share with them. They choose only what they want. (Patrycja)

The sixth dimension identified in the study—**culturality as an area of generational conflict**—reveals differences in the understanding of norms and values between faculty and students, as well as the tensions that accompany them. Faculty members acknowledge that behaviors considered appropriate or neutral by students may be interpreted by them as signs of not being well brought up or insufficient sensitivity to academic cultural norms. Conversely, students may perceive academic forms as artificial, outdated, or inadequate in relation to contemporary student life. In this context, culturality becomes a matter of negotiation and a potential source of axiological tension. Some faculty members highlight the difficulty of finding a common communicative language that would engage students while simultaneously respecting academic standards:

I wonder what they actually understand, that is, in what language should I speak to them, to the students, so they don't fall asleep, don't scroll, so that it is attractive. (Beata)

At the same time, observations point to different areas of sensitivity in younger generations. Differences in the perception of academic culturality have both axiological and communicative dimensions, requiring faculty to reflectively negotiate their own expectations and flexibly adapt their teaching strategies to the evolving generational context:

I think it would be hard for them to understand that this is upsetting to us. I think it's a matter of mindset and approach, unfortunately. They are sensitive, but in a different way—not in terms of sensitivity to culture or etiquette. They are sensitive simply because they are emotionally sensitive and cannot cope with it, but these are two different issues. (Jolanta)

The final dimension of academic culturality, as reflected in the teachers' statements, is the perception of **culturality as an unstable and negotiable category**. This dimension highlights an awareness of the fluidity of broadly under-

stood cultural norms and the need to revise one's own expectations. Teachers recognize that the boundaries of what is considered "cultural" shift over time, and that the category itself is susceptible to reinterpretation. The "axiological suspension" experienced by faculty—stemming from difficulties in assessing what should be regarded as appropriate and what should not, combined with the conditions of constant change—intensifies a sense of uncertainty:

Every group is different, every seminar is different. And we are on some... I don't know... shifting sands. (Patrycja)

Consequently, some teachers express a need for clear, top-down guidelines that could help re-establish order in educational interactions at the university and reduce tensions arising from axiological ambiguity:

Some concrete norms that would state clearly, simply, in their language: this is appropriate, this is not. (Beata)

This perspective underscores that academic culturality is not a fixed construct but a dynamic, contested field, where the search for stability continually intersects with the realities of change.

## Implications for the Educational Context at the University

The tensions and uncertainties experienced by faculty, arising from the dynamic nature of academic culturality, carry far-reaching consequences for educational interactions. The instability of norms, divergences in the understanding of values, and the absence of a "shared language" contribute to the fragmentation of the didactic space, in which instructors and students operate within quasi-parallel axiological realities, and at times, in a climate of social identity conflict (cf. Klimek, 2024). Under such conditions, the teaching process becomes more complex and emotionally demanding. Discrepancies in understanding and adhering to customary and ethical norms generate feelings of disappointment, powerlessness, and frustration among the interviewed faculty, diminishing their assessment of their own pedagogical competence and standing, while also negatively influencing their perception of the students' broader axiological condition (cf. Robotycki, 1980). Functioning across divergent cultural spaces limits the possibility for students and faculty to co-construct a shared system of reference that would support both dialogue and critical reflexivity (cf. Olbrycht, 2019). Differences in the perception of values and norms foster tensions and hinder mutual understanding, thereby weakening the formative and identity-shaping potential of the university (cf. Segiet, 2024). Consequently, teachers are compelled to continuously negotiate their expectations and boundaries within educational interactions, heightening emotional strain and necessitating the development

of adaptive and mediatory competencies in everyday academic practice. This, in turn, shapes contemporary understandings of the role of the university teacher (cf. Kaptur, 2011; Barańska & Nowak-Kluczyński, 2019).

The results of the present study indicate the need for further reflection on the role of the university in shaping norms and values, as well as on strategies to support faculty in fostering a coherent educational environment—a space for shared intellectual work—amid the evolving conditions of academia (cf. Kapias, 2015). Seemingly minor, everyday situations within the academic space, often overlooked, carry considerable significance for faculty and can profoundly affect their professional functioning. Student behaviors perceived as uncivil, the disregard of norms, or failure to follow established rules are experienced by academics in a highly personal manner, impacting their work comfort, teaching engagement, and, in some cases, decisions regarding the continuation of an academic career:

I feel very uncomfortable with this. It complicates my daily functioning. I take it very personally. Based on certain student reactions—not only toward me but also toward others or in various situations—I construct a negative image of my workplace, of my work, which discourages me from coming to work. I am mainly speaking about teaching, not research. Many times I have considered resigning and have even taken steps to change jobs for this very reason. It may seem trivial, but for me it is not. It hinders my work here to such an extent that I have considered changing my job or profession. So, this is an important aspect of my functioning within the academic environment. (Dorota)

Consequently, everyday interactions and minor breaches of cultural norms are far from inconsequential—they exert a tangible influence on the professional quality of life of faculty and, by extension, on the university's didactic climate. Academic life is not normatively neutral, and the work of university teachers must be "axiologically meaningful" (Murawska, 2017) in order to provide them with sources of significance and personal satisfaction.

## **Conclusions: Towards Conceptualising the Category of Culturality in the Educational Setting**

The conducted study confirmed the complex and dynamic nature of culturality (Jawor, 2023). When considered in the context of higher education, culturality emerges as a broad constellation of dispositions, behaviors, and attitudes characterizing individuals who are well-mannered and actively engaged in cultural life. It encompasses not only personal manners and adherence to social etiquette but also involvement in academic, artistic, and cultural activities, including the appreciation of art and literature and participation in social events. Culturality is context-dependent, representing a multifaceted, dynamic category that reflects both societal and individual expectations toward an individual

and/or a group. The findings observed within the academic environment may be interpreted more broadly and applied to education in general. One may assume that each educational setting gives rise to specific forms of culturality, which can be studied empirically and which shape the character of educational relationships—affecting both their tangible outcomes and the subjectively perceived quality. Through their actions and attitudes, individuals simultaneously shape the culturality of a given educational environment and are shaped by it.

Within contemporary academia, new forms of culturality are emerging, which can no longer be analyzed solely in terms of the dualism between the “old” and the new university. This new culturality possesses a hybrid nature and thus follows a distinct logic that can be mapped to enhance understanding (Stochmal & Maciejewski, 2018). The dynamics of these interrelated processes call for systematic, in-depth educational research, as they may reveal conditions influencing the educational process that would otherwise remain imperceptible.

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## Kulturalność jako obszar badań pedagogicznych: refleksje na przykładzie szkolnictwa wyższego

### Streszczenie

Artykuł podejmuje problematykę kulturalności w kontekście akademickim, proponując semantyczną rekonstrukcję kategorii w oparciu o perspektywę kulturoznawczą Anny Jawor (2023). Część empiryczna opiera się na wywiadach fokusowych z nauczycielami akademickimi, których celem było zrozumienie, w jaki sposób uczestnicy interpretują własne doświadczenia kulturalności akademickiej oraz jak te interpretacje kształtują interakcje dydaktyczne. W ramach konstruktywistycznej teorii ugruntowanej wyodrębniono siedem wymiarów kulturalności akademickiej. Wyniki podkreślają heurystyczny potencjał pojęcia kulturalności dla badań edukacyjnych i wskazują na potrzebę dalszych, pogłębionych badań w tym obszarze.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kulturalność, uniwersytet, edukacja, teoria ugruntowana.



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## Polish Saturday School in Medway – a local centre of Polish intangible cultural heritage in the United Kingdom

### Abstract

This paper discusses the Polish Saturday School in Medway – a local centre of Polish intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in the United Kingdom. The research focuses on the characteristics of the institution's functioning, its activities in the field of promoting, sustaining and safeguarding Polish ICH, as well as examines the school's potential and the difficulties it faces. The research material was collected through interviews with teachers and parents, as well as observation and analysis of secondary sources. The institution is a family-like community, shaped by interactions among students, teachers, and parents. The goal of the teaching process is to foster the bonds between children and young people and their homeland, while Polish ICH is perpetuated and protected through the organisation of holiday festivities, national celebrations, and cultural events. The school must address limitations in terms of infrastructure, staff, and funding, as well as varying levels of cultural identification among its pupils.

**Keywords:** cultural heritage, cultural education, emigration, Polish Saturday Schools, cultural identity.

### Introduction

According to the Office for National Statistics' 2021 data, approximately 614,000 people who identified as Polish lived in England and Wales. At the same

time, 612,000 people stated that Polish was their main language of communication, making it the most widely used foreign language in the United Kingdom (United Kingdom Census, 2021). Statistics Poland reports that in 2023, the United Kingdom had the largest community of Polish emigrants in Europe, with a population of 440,000 (GUS, 2023).

Based on data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there are approximately 180 Polish Saturday Schools operating in the United Kingdom. Run by local Polish community organisations, they bring together both temporary migrants and permanent residents. The primary goal pursued by such institutions is to pass on Polish traditions, history, and culture, teach the native language to the children of emigrants, and prepare students for the GCSE exam in Polish as a foreign language (ORPEG, 2025). The schools operate thanks to the involvement of local communities and volunteers, promoting Polish intangible heritage among the younger generation. One such institution is the Polish Saturday School in Medway, which combines education with the nurturing of tradition and cultural identity within the emigrant community.

## Research assumptions

The aim of this article is to present the Polish Saturday School in Medway as a local centre of Polish intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in the United Kingdom. The author focuses on answering the following main question: What characterises the Polish Saturday School in Medway as a local centre of Polish ICH in the United Kingdom? It also examines certain specific issues: What is particular about the institution's functioning? What efforts does the school undertake to promote, sustain and safeguard Polish ICH? What is the school's potential in terms of protecting and promoting ICH, and what difficulties does the institution face?

The research material was collected on the basis of:

- participant observation;
- semi-structured, problem-focused interviews conducted individually with 12 teachers (9 women, 3 men) aged 30-60 and 30 parents (20 women, 10 men) aged 28-50;
- analysis of secondary sources: the institution's curriculum and teaching materials (Rubacha, 2016)

Observation and interviews were carried out with a view to obtaining data on the essential premises of the school's operation in Medway and its activities aimed at promoting, sustaining and protecting Polish ICH in the United Kingdom. The following system was used to analyse and compile the material collected during the interviews: number of the respondent/gender/role, e.g., teacher – I/F/T; parent – I/M/P.

The information from secondary sources formed a body of text in which both explicit and hidden variables were sought. Explicit variables included all elements of the curricula as well as teaching materials used to promote and protect Polish ICH. Cultural codes contained in the curricula and materials that enable such objectives to be achieved indirectly constituted the hidden variables (Rubacha, 2016).

The acquired material was then subjected to reduction, representation and verification of data in a circular arrangement. The reduction was carried out by aligning content with analytical categories that corresponded to the research problems (taking into account the layered selection of units). In effect, it was possible to identify the elements that constituted the context of the data. The verification procedure involved analytical induction, whereby hypotheses were qualitatively confronted with all cases observed in the studied domain (Rubacha, 2016).

A coding and categorisation system was employed, and the following theoretical codes were formulated:

- functioning—the institution relies on staff from the local Polish community; cooperation between teachers, parents and pupils resembles family interactions and fosters the propagation and safeguarding of Polish ICH;
- activities—the school plays the role of an institution that passes on traditions, language, customs and national values through educational activities, celebrations, workshops and competitions;
- potential—the institution takes advantage of the competencies of teachers and the involvement of parents and pupils to create a space conducive to the preservation of ICH;
- difficulties—the institution struggles with a shortage of qualified staff and adequate infrastructure, financial limitations and uneven levels of language skills in the school community, diverse cultural identities of students and the difficulty of upholding intergenerational traditions.

## **ICH: theoretical premises**

Growing international awareness of the threats posed by globalisation, migration and cultural homogenisation has prompted the realisation that the intangible aspects of culture—language, customs, rituals, traditional knowledge and social practices—require intensive legal and social protection (Blake, 2017). The essential document regulating ICH at the international level is the 2003 UNESCO Convention. The act defines intangible cultural heritage as “practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural herit-

age” (Convention, 2003, Art. 2). The Convention emphasises that safeguarding ICH is inherently dynamic and consists in supporting living traditions and passing them on to future generations in the context of contemporary changes. ICH is transmitted between generations and undergoes continual reconstruction within cultural communities whose relationship with the environment and history is constantly transforming. For any given community, that heritage is a fundamental source of identity and cultural continuity (Schreiber, 2005).

Mechanisms have been introduced to support countries in identifying, documenting and promoting elements of their ICH internationally. Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity includes 892 entries; List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding—81 entries; Register of Good Safeguarding Practices—40 entries (UNESCO, 2025). The Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of ICH, selected by representatives of the governments of the states that have ratified the Convention, decides on the entries to the lists. Only those elements of heritage that are already included in the national register can be entered on the international lists. Poland ratified the Convention in 2011 (UNESCO Convention, 2011), and the national ICH list is maintained by the Minister of Culture and National Heritage in cooperation with the National Institute of Cultural Heritage (Schreiber, 2023).

In line with the guiding principle of the Convention and the Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage adopted in 2015, intangible heritage is not subject to valuation. Its fundamental importance stems from its capacity to engender a sense of belonging to a community, nurture bonds within a community or group, foster joy in shared practice, as well as pride and a willingness to act for the benefit of one’s milieu among its bearers. Intergenerational transmission of traditions is a vital component, as it strengthens intra-group bonds. Although partly repeatable, ICH is inherently dynamic and adaptable. The role of institutions and individuals involved in safeguarding ICH is to foster conditions that promote the development of protected cultural practices (Schreiber, 2023).

In the United Kingdom, the 2010 Equality Act is the primary normative act pertaining to national and ethnic minorities. The Act uses the term race, defined as a protected attribute. Within the meaning of the Act, race includes colour, nationality, as well as ethnic or national origins. The Act prohibits discrimination, harassment and victimisation on the grounds of skin colour, nationality, and ethnic and national provenance. Such a legal framework ensures equal treatment in the public sphere and guarantees the freedom of national and ethnic minorities to cultivate and disseminate their cultural heritage. It enables equal access to all areas of social life, including education and the right of association (Barszcz, 2022).

The United Kingdom ratified the 2003 UNESCO Convention in 2024. Until then, national minority heritage had been protected and promoted chiefly as

part of equality and cultural diversity policies. Efforts to support ICH were mainly undertaken at the local level by social organisations and educational institutions (UNESCO, 2024). Groups that are particularly active in this respect include Polish emigrants and communities of South Asian, Caribbean, African, and Eastern European origin. The traditions and practices cultivated by minorities are not only a form of cultural expression but also a means for negotiating identity in the host society (Barszcz, 2022).

## **Polish Saturday Schools in the United Kingdom**

Polish Saturday Schools (also known as Szkoły Przedmiotów Ojczyźnych, meaning School of Homeland Subjects) enable children and young people to learn their native language and explore Polish culture and history. The contemporary form of these institutions began to take shape after World War II, in response to the needs of the large Polish émigré community. Established on the initiative of parents, teachers and Polish community organisations, the schools were not only venues of education, but also played a cultural and formative role. Since Poland's accession to the European Union, the number of students and the demand for new institutions have substantially increased, resulting in intensive development of the network of Saturday schools (Zamecka-Zalas, 2021).

Saturday schools focus primarily on nurturing children's cultural identity, anchored in Polish values and traditions. Through formative and educational activities, as well as social initiatives, they preserve and pass on the Polish cultural heritage, encompassing customs, language, traditions, and history. The education process takes place on Saturdays, while the meetings of special interest clubs and scout teams are organised in the afternoons. The centres are attended by pupils aged 3 to 16 years old. Each child takes a test to assess their knowledge of Polish, based on which they are assigned to the appropriate group or grade. In smaller schools, children work in same-age groups, but their proficiency in Polish varies (Zamecka-Zalas, 2021). An important milestone for students is the preparation for the GCSE exam in Polish as a foreign language, which they take at the end of their education at Saturday school (ORPEG, 2025).

The teachers, who are engaged as volunteers, must hold a certificate stating that they have no criminal record. It is also stressed that every educator should possess the appropriate qualifications to teach. In practice, the primary experience of most teachers is confined to caring for children and upbringing, though all have completed higher education, often in the humanities and social sciences. They are responsible for developing the curriculum, including lesson plans, providing care to children during their stay at the facility, preparing them for celebrations and national holidays, and for comprehensive cooperation with parents (Howe, 2016).

Saturday schools serve as a community-like space where children can grow in all areas: linguistically, emotionally, socially, and culturally. Thanks to the dedication of teachers, parents, and volunteers, these institutions create a unique environment in which each child can feel valued, understood, and connected to both Polish traditions and British culture. (Zamecka-Zalas, 2018).

## **Polish Saturday School in Medway – analysis of research**

### **a. Characteristics of functioning**

The data provided here represents the outcome of document analysis, individual interviews with teachers and parents, as well as participant observation.

The Polish Saturday School in Medway was launched in the 2014/2015 school year. It is run by the Polish Club of Medway in Kent, in cooperation with the Polish Educational Society in the UK. It uses premises rented from local schools, currently from St Mary's College. Its community consists of pupils aged 3-16 who have Polish roots. The majority of children were born in the United Kingdom, and at least one parent is of Polish origin. The number of pupils fluctuates between 110 and 130, with the majority aged between 3 and 10. The school is funded primarily by parental contributions and support from various sources, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The teachers work on a voluntary basis, receiving cash rewards or exemption from school fees for their children. The youngest group (aged 3–6, comprising 25 pupils) is supervised by a volunteer with no teaching qualifications, supported by a 16-year-old Polish girl who was raised in the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, a group of 55 pupils aged 6-10 is being educated in line with the curriculum for grades I–III. The school has two first-grade classes (12 pupils each) and two second-grade classes (10 pupils each), which is due to different command of Polish, as well as one third-grade class (11 pupils). The children participate in sports classes led by a volunteer who previously worked as a physical education teacher before emigrating. Class IA is taught by a qualified teacher, while IB is taught by the mother of one of the pupils, who has a background in the humanities. Class IIA is taught by a graduate of family mediation, class IIB by a volunteer with 10 years of experience at the institution, and class III by a teacher with 20 years of experience in Saturday schools. The teachers are supported by graduates of the institution who are over 16 years of age and have passed the GCSE exam in Polish.

Given the smaller number of students in grades IV–VIII, the institution has combined groups based on Polish language proficiency, as interest among young people in learning at a Polish school has declined. Specific subjects are taught by

five teachers (two men aged 40-55 and three women aged 45-59) with backgrounds in the humanities and social sciences, but without formal teaching qualifications; their competency is attributed to multiple years of experience in Saturday schools.

The school in Medway creates a unique space that functions not unlike a family community. During classes, parents remain on the premises, engage in discussions and exchange their observations on life in the UK and events in their home country. The Parents' Committee is responsible for maintaining the school's furnishings, engaging in fundraising efforts, preparing prizes, arranging rooms, and organising celebrations, picnics, and competitions.

Due to the limited number of meetings, the priority in teaching is not to convey as much information as possible, but to stimulate interest in Polish history and tradition and to foster a sense of emotional bond and belonging to Polish culture. The school fosters an environment in which pupils can establish relationships with their Polish peers, which helps them develop a sense of belonging to a linguistic community characterised by distinct traditions and culture. The school is the cornerstone around which the students develop their national identity. There, children are given the opportunity of regular exposure to the Polish milieu and culture, which strengthens the bond with their homeland. The school shapes social attitudes by teaching collaboration, collective action and respect for peers and adults.

## **b. Activities in the field of promoting, sustaining and safeguarding Polish ICH**

### CHILDREN AGED 3–6

In the preschool group, children are introduced to elements of Polish tradition and history, particularly as they relate to national holidays and state symbols. The basic method is learning through play, supplemented by music and art classes. Knowledge of the Polish language is nurtured, among other things, by singing the national anthem and patriotic songs, such as: *Mali patrioci* (Śpiewające Brzdące), *Jestem Polakiem* (Niezwykłe Lekcje Rytmiki), *Ja jestem Polką, a ty Polakiem* (Małe Aniołki). Activities of this kind help children naturally familiarise themselves with new vocabulary without feeling lost in the learning process. Parents emphasise that such activities help build bonds with grandparents and other family members. "It is important for us that our daughter understands the Polish language and knows that it has its historical roots" (II/M/R). Additionally, using Polish helps children of Polish emigrants develop a sense of belonging, whether it is within their family, the local Polish community, or the broader circle of Polish culture. This is a crucial element in fostering the cultural identity of the youngest immigrant generation.

It follows from an analysis of secondary sources and the conducted interviews that children are regularly read fairy tales, fables, and poems in Polish. These include both the classics of children's literature, such as *Cinderella*, *The Ugly Duckling*, and *Hansel and Gretel*, as well as works that evoke Polish history and patriotic values, including *Mądre bajki* [Wise Fairy Tales], poems by Władysław Bełza, and *Poznaję Polskę. Wiersze o Polsce, Legendy o Polsce* [Discovering Poland. Poems about Poland, Legends about Poland]. In the experience of teachers, literature serves not only a linguistic function, but also an axiological one, i.e., it shapes attitudes based on friendship, respect and tolerance, while at the same time making children aware of the realities of life in bi- and multicultural environments. Through references to questions of identity, i.e., "Who am I?" or "What are my roots?", the youngest children have the opportunity to become rooted in the intangible heritage of their culture of origin, while at the same time benefiting from the experiences and cultural patterns of their host country.

Art education is an important area of patriotic formation, as it focuses on national symbols, Polish holidays and traditions. Classes involve making collages, cut-outs, tear-outs and other forms of artistic expression, allowing children to actively participate in celebrations. In preparation for Independence Day, children create national flags, coloured items, and works depicting national heroes, prominent figures in science and culture, as well as historical events that are part of Polish tradition. In addition, they collaborate with older students to make wreaths to be placed at monuments commemorating the fallen of World War II. Such activities nurture respect for national traditions and enable children to participate in the collective experience of historical memory.

#### GRADES I–III

In grades I–III, Polish language learning is combined with the content related to national traditions. Learning through play is also employed here, including crossword puzzles, rebuses, riddles, and team games. The themes of the activities focus on the Polish language, Polish national symbols, important historical figures and events that are significant for building national awareness. Pupils eagerly participate in charades, prepare language tasks for their peers and take part in an educational paper chase.

According to the teachers, these types of activities are an opportunity for children to gradually discover their own national identity and understand fundamental questions: Who am I as a Pole? Where do I come from? At the same time, they develop language skills, enabling the clear expression of thoughts, expand their vocabulary, and develop the skill to use correct Polish. "Learning through play makes them more willing to absorb cultural content, which they associate with pleasure and positive emotions. They do not feel forced to learn" (V/K/N).

Parents emphasise that puzzles and themed games relating to Polish customs, legends and holidays teach children respect for ICH and build a sense of pride in being part of the national community. They also note that team games support social development by teaching cooperation and presenting culture as a structure that is jointly created and shared among individuals. "They play, have fun and laugh. Polish school is not a boring chore, but a time spent with friends" (XX/M/R).

Interviews with teachers reveal that children's and young adult literature play a vital role in the teaching process. The works used include *Akademia Pana Kleksa* [The Academy of Mr. Inkblot], *Bolek i Lolek, Legendy o Polsce* [Legends of Poland], *ABC małego patrioty* [Young Patriot's ABC], as well as the works by Jan Brzechwa and Julian Tuwim. Here, children not only learn to read and comprehend texts in Polish, but also reflect on the values rooted in national tradition. Analyses of the attitudes of literary characters and their decisions support the emotional and moral development of children, shaping their empathy, courage, ability to cooperate, and ability to distinguish between good and evil. Literature becomes a tool for integrating children with Polish ICH and showing how it can be drawn upon in the present day.

#### GRADES IV–VIII

Based on interviews with the teachers and parents, it may be observed that older students learn about Polish tradition and culture in greater depth. This is achieved through exposure to legends, historical narratives and information about the lives of prominent Poles. Teachers stress that their goal is not just to impart knowledge, but also to build an emotional bond between students and their homeland. "It's not just about children remembering dates or names, but about them feeling proud and respectful of the history of their nation" (III/M/N). As part of the classes, pupils learn about the historical regions of Poland, their ICH, natural assets and the particulars of social and economic life. Teachers note that this approach enables children to appreciate the diversity of traditions and their shared cultural foundation. "When we talk about Mazowsze, Podhale or Kaszuby, children come to realise that Poland is a mosaic of traditions that together make up a single national identity" (V/K/N).

Literature, both classical and patriotic, remains an important element of teaching. Students are introduced to the works of Henryk Sienkiewicz, Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, Bolesław Prus, Aleksander Kamiński, Stefan Żeromski, as well as the fables of Ignacy Krasicki and the songs of Jan Kochanowski. These texts serve as a source of knowledge about the experiences of national heroes, the values cherished by successive generations, as well as the social norms and events that have shaped Polish culture. Pupils are not expected to

receive that content passively, but prepare their own interpretations of the works, which they subsequently present at school ceremonies and celebrations of national holidays. "When children recite excerpts from *Ordon's Redoubt* or perform scenes from *Stones for the Rampart*, they begin to understand that these are not just required reading, but also stories about their own roots" (III/M/N). Parents confirm that this approach elicits deeper emotions and a bond with tradition in children. "For the first time, my son told his grandfather about the heroes from his reading material, and I saw pride in his eyes. It wasn't just schoolwork, it was a conversation between generations" (V/M/R).

In grades IV-VIII, pupils continue to learn patriotic songs and even attempt to compose their own related to Polish history, while also drawing on traditional songs, such as "Nie martw się Polsko!" [Don't Worry, Poland!], *Polskie kwiaty* [Polish Flowers] and *Jest takie miejsce taki kraj* [There is Such a Place, Such a Country]. These songs are performed during school ceremonies and historical anniversary celebrations. "When they sing *Polskie kwiaty* together, they understand that it's not just a melody, but a memory of the sacrifice that made Poland free" (VII/K/N). Parents note that this teaches young people to appreciate the sacrifice of the previous generations. "My daughter told me that she now understands better why her grandfather is so emotional about the anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising. It's wonderful that the school gives them the tools for such conversations at home" (VIII/K/R).

### **Extracurricular activities**

The school's range of basic activities in terms of cultural development includes a variety of extracurricular undertakings, which represent one of the important sources of shaping the cultural identity of Polish emigrant children. Parents are actively involved, assisting their children with their preparations and taking an active part in the school's life. The events include ceremonies, celebrations, and picnics on the occasion of national holidays, as well as integration activities to consolidate the local Polish community.

Interviews with teachers and parents demonstrate that students readily participate in school celebrations, including national festivities and initiatives aimed at preserving Polish traditions. Such events serve as an important vehicle for knowledge about national culture and customs that may be encountered in both local communities in Poland and in Polish homes abroad. The beginning and end of the school year are particularly important moments. "British schools do not practice the tradition of a ceremony to mark the start or end of the school year, children do not come in festive attire or give flowers to their teachers before the holidays" (I/K/N). "It's here, in Polish schools, that children have the opportunity to see the flag bearers, hear the national anthem and learn the meaning of the

commands given during the assembly" (II/M/R). Ceremonies of this kind introduce the school community to the world of values and traditions, and also inspire respect for national symbols. They are accompanied by the student initiation ceremony (a ritual not found in British schools), which is a unique experience for children. "Children impatiently look forward to being inducted as pupils. It is a special moment that makes them feel more connected to the school community" (III/M/N). The end of the school year is a time for recapitulations and honouring pupils' achievements. During the assembly, diplomas, awards and acknowledgements are presented, while certificates and small gifts are handed out in individual classes.

An analysis of secondary sources and observations suggests that pupils actively participate in regular events dedicated to Polish history and tradition. These include: National Education Day, National Independence Day, National Day of Remembrance of Cursed Soldiers, Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Katyn Massacre, Feast of the Baptism of Poland, Labour Day, Flag Day of the Republic of Poland and the May Third Constitution Day. Children and young people prepare decorations, recitations, theatrical performances and patriotic songs. Additionally, they participate in patriotic marches and lay wreaths at monuments commemorating those who lost their lives in World War II. Parents emphasise that the performances are a major experience for children. "It's a big effort for them. They have to learn the text in Polish and present it in front of an audience. However, they feel proud and understand how important tradition is" (IV/K/R).

Another significant event in the school calendar is the International Mother Language Day, celebrated on 21 February. On this day, family days are held, during which pupils set up educational language stands with competitions and tasks. "International Mother Language Day reminds us how important language is in shaping culture and identity. If we care about our mother tongue, we care about who we are as a nation" (IV/K/N).

The institution promotes customs and holidays that are part of Polish tradition, including Nativity plays and Christmas gatherings, Women's Day, Mother's Day, and Children's Day. Children and young people prepare greeting cards, Christmas decorations and artistic performances, during which they sing songs (*Kiedy Babcia była mała* [When Grandma Was Little], *Piosenka dla Dziadka* [Song for Grandfather]) and carols (*Cicha noc* [Silent Night], *Bóg się rodzi* [God Is Born], *Dzisiaj w Betlejem* [Today in Bethlehem]). The entire school community contributes to the celebrations. "Then we are one big family. A family from Poland" (V/K/N). "We all do something. Someone sews costumes, someone helps with learning the text. But the most beautiful thing is that the kids do it with great joy" (IV/K/R).

Pupils regularly participate in competitions for Polish emigrant children in the United Kingdom, such as the recurring Wierszowisko poetry recitation con-

test and the Polish Schools in England and Wales Spelling Competition for the Golden Pen, awarded by the Consul General of the Republic of Poland in London. Teachers stress that “reciting poems develops a sense of rhythm, sound and beauty of the Polish language, while spelling competitions teach sensitivity to linguistic correctness. Ultimately, this translates into a deeper understanding and respect for national culture” (I/K/N). Parents, on the other hand, note that participation in such projects strengthens children’s self-confidence and self-esteem. “When my daughter competed and did very well, I saw enormous pride in her. It builds their identity” (IX/M/R).

Analysis of sources and interview data suggests that extracurricular activities at the school in Medway contribute to maintaining national identity, fostering cultural awareness, and promoting cooperation, thereby strengthening inter-generational bonds and a sense of community among Polish emigrants.

### **c. Potential**

The close cooperation between teachers and parents, which creates a cohesive and enriching educational environment, should be considered an essential asset of the institution. In educational and formative activities, particular importance is attached to cultivating the Polish language, upholding national traditions and shaping cultural identity in children and young people. “We are building one big community. All children are ours” (II/M/N). “Without the work of the parents, our efforts would be meaningless. Thanks to collaboration, we can teach children the Polish language, pass on and make them aware of Polish culture and tradition” (IV/K/N).

Teachers observe that parents actively support the education process, i.e., they participate in school celebrations and events, help create decorations, prepare costumes, and share their knowledge and experience. Their presence and involvement reinforce the cultural message, showing children that Polish identity is an integral part of everyday life. “Through their commitment, parents underscore the fact that they find cultivating Polish culture important. All such activities build an invisible bridge between school and home” (II/M/N).

Observation reveals that many teachers are also parents of the pupils at the Medway school, which further contributes to the institution’s atmosphere. They bring their family experiences into the educational space and get their family members living in the UK involved in their undertakings. As a result, school life takes on a personal and emotional dimension, and children naturally integrate with the culture of their ancestors. Parents emphasise that, in effect, the teachers to adopt an empathetic approach to the organisation of the teaching process. They do pay attention to the individual characteristics and predispositions of students, observing them outside the school walls as well. “The school gives our chil-

dren what English schools do not offer—contact with Polish culture, history and language. It's important that the teachers put so much heart into it" (XV/K/R).

The results of the research indicate that cooperation between parents and teachers yields an environment where students effectively develop linguistic and social competencies, laying the foundation for further, conscious participation in Polish culture.

#### **d. Difficulties**

According to interviews with parents and teachers, the school in Medway faces several organisational and financial challenges. One of the primary concerns is the shortage of stable, qualified teaching staff. This is due to both limited funding for teachers and the small number of teachers living outside the country who are willing to work in such institutions.

Another barrier is insufficient funding from the Polish government, as well as complicated formal procedures involved in obtaining funds. As the teachers emphasise, the number of documents required and the poor administrative competencies of the school staff make it very difficult to apply for financial support effectively.

Inadequate infrastructure is also a major problem, especially for the youngest students, who must have their classrooms rearranged each time before lessons begin. After class, all teaching materials must be stored in a designated cupboard, which forces teachers to keep most of their worksheets and art supplies at home and bring them back for the next class.

In the daily functioning of the school, tensions arise due to language barriers and the varying degrees of cultural identification among pupils. Teachers draw attention to the difficulties in maintaining intergenerational transmission of traditions, especially in older grades. Teenage pupils often lose interest in attending school on Saturday, especially when they are involved in other extracurricular activities at the same time.

## **Conclusions**

The Polish Saturday School in Medway serves as a local centre for Polish intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in the United Kingdom. It creates a unique environment that functions like a family community, shaped by interactions among students, teachers, and parents. The primary goal of the teaching process is to build an emotional connection between children, young people, and their homeland, helping to embed them in their cultural roots and increase their awareness of their native traditions and language. Polish ICH is promoted, maintained, and protected through the following methods:

- structured teaching aimed at passing on traditions, language, customs, cultural symbols and national values;
- celebration of national holidays and traditional events established in Polish schools and Polish culture, special events, theatre performances and family picnics;
- social campaigns in the form of patriotic marches;
- student participation in competitions promoting the Polish language.

Regarding the safeguarding and promotion of Polish national culture, the institution's main strength lies in close collaboration between teachers and parents, who together establish a unified educational environment. Significant emphasis is placed on nurturing the Polish language, national traditions, and the cultural identity of children and young people. Parents actively support the educational process by sharing their knowledge and experiences, which enhances the cultural message. At the institution, many teachers also serve as parents, adding a personal touch to school life and strengthening the integration of students into their ancestral culture.

However, the school in Medway faces challenges due to a lack of properly adapted teaching infrastructure, as well as the need for qualified staff and stable funding for education. The school's community also struggles with tensions and limitations caused by language barriers, differing levels of cultural identification among students, difficulties in maintaining intergenerational tradition transfer, and declining interest in Polish culture among older students, which impacts the organisation of the educational process.

Because there are few qualitative studies on contemporary Saturday schools in the UK, it is hard to compare this analysis with other researchers' findings. Since Polish Saturday Schools in the United Kingdom create unique spaces for intergenerational interaction, maintain Polish culture among the younger generation of the Polish diaspora, and shape their emotional connection to national traditions and customs, they undoubtedly require in-depth, qualitative research. Specifically, it would be helpful to compare data based on the experiences of teachers, students, and parents with observations and analyses of secondary sources. Additionally, it would also be relevant to compare individual institutions based on their location in the United Kingdom, the number of students, and the qualifications of the teaching staff.

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## **Polska Sobotnia Szkoła w Medway – lokalne centrum polskiego niematerialnego dziedzictwa kulturowego w Wielkiej Brytanii**

### **Streszczenie**

Artykuł prezentuje Polską Sobotnią Szkołę w Medway – lokalne centrum polskiego niematerialnego dziedzictwa kulturowego (NDK) w Wielkiej Brytanii. Zagadnienia badawcze koncentrują się na specyfice funkcjonowania placówki, jej działaniach podejmowanych w zakresie upowszechniania, podtrzymywania i ochrony polskiego NDK oraz na potencjale szkoły i trudnościach, z którymi się mierzy. Materiał badawczy zebrano za pośrednictwem wywiadów przeprowadzonych z nauczycielami i rodzicami oraz obserwacji i analizy źródeł wtórnych. Placówka tworzy wspólną rodziną, na którą oddziałują interakcje pomiędzy uczniami, nauczycielami a rodzicami. Celem procesu dydaktycznego jest kształtowanie więzi dzieci i młodzieży z ojczyzną, a podtrzymywanie i ochrona polskiego NDK realizowana jest poprzez organizację świąt, uroczystości narodowych i wydarzeń kulturowych. Szkoła zmaga się z ograniczeniami infrastrukturalnymi, kadrowymi, finansowymi i zróżnicowanym poziomem identyfikacji kulturowej uczniów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dziedzictwo kulturowe, edukacja kulturowa, emigracja, Polskie Sobotnie Szkoły, tożsamość kulturowa.



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## Evaluation Criteria and Levels of Formation of Aesthetic Values of College Students by Means of Musical Art

### Abstract

The article raises the problem of forming aesthetic values among college students and emphasises their importance in people's lives. The urgency of the problem is due to the rapid pace of development of network technologies, in particular short, low-quality videos (Little Red Book and Tik Tok), which seriously mislead the aesthetic values of some college students. However, the quality of aesthetic values often faces a difficult evaluation environment. This article attempts to explore the evaluation standards and levels of aesthetic values formed by music among college students in the context of globalisation. The genesis of the problem of forming aesthetic values in the mixed situation of multiple cultures in China is traced. It is emphasised that the development of media leads to the erosion of their aesthetic values. Based on the analysis of the works of scholars, 4 levels of development of aesthetic values are identified: initial, fashionable, advanced and the highest level – the suspended layer. The essence of the concept of 'evaluation' and its relationship with such categories as standards, criteria, norms are defined. The philosophical content of the main criteria for assessing aesthetic values: truth, goodness, beauty is analysed. A system of indicators for assessing the musical and aesthetic values of college students is developed. An experimental study was conducted to identify the advantages in the development of aesthetic values of college students and the results of the analysis of such an experiment are presented. It is concluded that any evaluation standard formulated by people and used by people will be influenced by various factors.

**Keywords:** aesthetic values, musical art, college students, assessment, indicators.

## Introduction

In people's daily lives, beauty is indispensable, let alone aesthetics. People will judge and choose between right and wrong, good and evil for certain things, cultures, and even concepts based on their own aesthetic values, and practice their aesthetic choices in future behavior. Therefore, for individuals, the correct aesthetic values can guide a person to develop healthy and upward emotions. Healthy aesthetic values can guide a person to discover the true beauty in life and reflect this beauty in future behavior. As to society, the correctness of each member's aesthetic values is also related to people's value choices towards diverse ideas, which will ultimately have a significant impact on the development of society. College students are the main body of aesthetic education in Chinese universities. Through a review of literature, the author found that currently, the development of aesthetic education for college students in Chinese universities is limited to education and practice, and there is no attention paid to the results of cultivation and the standards used to evaluate the aesthetic values of college students, lacking thinking and questioning.

This article is based on practice, with human needs as the core, and deeply analyzes the connotation of "truth, goodness, and beauty" as the evaluation standard for the formation of music aesthetic values among college students, as well as its eternal and elastic characteristics. It then elaborates on the two evaluation dimensions of music aesthetic values among college students from the relationship between humans and society, and attempts to construct an evaluation index system for their music aesthetic values by combining the particularity of music itself. The aim is to promote the attention of Chinese universities to the practice of music aesthetic education among college students, scientifically and correctly guide them to form music aesthetic values, understand the diverse needs behind the selection of music aesthetic values among college students, and evaluate their music aesthetic values with an open and inclusive attitude, achieving the comprehensive development of college students and achieving social harmony.

College students are in a stage where their outlook on life, worldview, and values are not yet mature, so they are highly susceptible to the influence of external environment, various social public opinions, and other related factors. With the continuous development of network technology, all new and emerging things continue to grow and expand over time, and with the help of science and technology, they are constantly influencing people in all aspects from different perspectives. The relevance of studying this problem is due to the fact, that the diverse aesthetic perspectives also profoundly influence the establishment of aesthetic cognition among college students, and have resulted in many aesthetic alienation phenomena. For example, in recent years, short video software such

as Little Red Book and Tik Tok has gradually emerged. Many we-media creators intentionally upload some works that are not deep, pompous, and contrary to the mainstream aesthetic concepts in order to obtain fan benefits and economic benefits. These works just meet the requirements of some college students who like to be innovative, and seriously mislead some college students' aesthetic values. Specifically, the aesthetic preferences of college students tend to be utilitarian and hedonic. As the main force of schools and the future builders of the country, college students are in an important period of aesthetic development. Faced with this complex and ever-changing society and complex online world, it is particularly important to pay attention to the aesthetic education of this group in order to establish correct aesthetic values. Only by establishing correct aesthetic values can we better develop social spiritual civilization. However, the quality of a certain aesthetic value often faces a complex evaluation environment. Establishing an effective evaluation standard is the primary issue in the current education of aesthetic values for college students. Aesthetic values are an important component of the life values of college students, and music has become an irreplaceable way to cultivate aesthetic values among college students due to its unique perception. Based on this, this article attempts to take the college student group as the research object, explore the evaluation standards and levels of aesthetic values formed by music among college students in the context of globalization, in order to help guide the college student group to establish correct aesthetic values, promote the refinement of talent training programs for music and aesthetic education in universities, and effectively promote the comprehensive development of college students, which has positive significance.

## **1. Aesthetic values of Chinese students: challenges, influences and educational strategies**

The research on the aesthetic values of college students in China started relatively late, and in recent years, many scholars have only begun to pay attention to this aspect of research. In the process of educational development, the emphasis on aesthetic education in the education sector is gradually deepening. As early as the Republic of China period, Chinese educator Cai Yuanpei proposed the importance of aesthetic education and pointed out that aesthetic education is the key to achieving education to save the country. He strongly advocated the development of aesthetic education in various stages of school education, and even regarded it as an important means to enlighten human thought, cultivate individual emotions, and improve individual personality. In 2015, "the Opinion of the General Office of the State Council on Comprehensively Strengthening

and Improving School Aesthetic Education” was released in China, which pointed out: “Aesthetic education is not only aesthetic education, but also a multiple education related to individual spirit, emotion, quality, and other aspects” (General Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2015, p. 21). It can not only enhance individual aesthetic literacy, but also have a positive impact on their interests, temperament, and other aspects. It can be seen that among the many components of aesthetic education, aesthetic value education is the most core part, and aesthetic education is crucial for the development of individuals and even society.

Liang Ming conducted an empirical investigation on the current situation of aesthetic values and pointed out that as contemporary Chinese aesthetic culture gradually presents a mixed situation of multiple cultures, especially under the influence of fast-food consumption culture, there are problems of ambiguity and disorder in the aesthetic values of college students. Specifically, on the one hand, college students are exposed to various elements through media such as the internet, causing them to immerse themselves in vulgar and entertaining content. Over time, college students view noble things as not keeping up with the trend, and entertainment and vulgar things as a trend, leading to the problem of reversing and blurring their aesthetic values. On the other hand, there is a problem of disorder in the aesthetic values of college students (Liang, 2015).

Zhu Yan believes that the comprehensiveness of information and the interactive construction of network culture make the aesthetic values of college students increasingly diverse, and the virtual experiential nature of network culture makes the aesthetic experience of college students tend to be sensory (Zhu, 2011). Zhu Sanyi believes that current multiculturalism is a cultural form that tends to please the public’s senses. The aesthetic values of Chinese college students are more susceptible to cultural shocks from consumerism and entertainment. In addition, the educational methods and content of aesthetic education in school education, as well as the lack of an environment for shaping aesthetic values in family education, all have a greater or lesser impact on the aesthetic values of college students (Zhu, 2021). Guan Li Xue explores the importance, composition, and basic orientation of college students’ aesthetic values from a theoretical perspective. Starting from the three dimensions of aesthetic standards, aesthetic tastes, and aesthetic ideals of college students in the context of new media, this study aims to understand the basic situation of aesthetic values among Chinese college students in the context of new media. The author proposes to develop aesthetic values by: strengthening family education and creating a multidisciplinary educational environment for families, schools and communities; using online and offline educational resources for continuous self-education (Guan, 2023).

Li Xin divides the aesthetic needs of college students into four levels based on their musical literacy and aesthetic taste: The first level is flat level, one is in a state of extreme lack of basic music knowledge and ability, has a strong desire to learn music knowledge and cultivate music ability; The second level is fashion level, one is in a blind state with a passion for music, and has a practical and specific need for music learning, and they hope to receive guidance and improvement; The third level is advanced level, one is in a state of possessing certain music skills and having a certain understanding of basic music knowledge, and urgently needs to learn standardized music theory and humanistic knowledge to promote a deeper understanding of music; The fourth level is suspended layer, one is in a state of high musical literacy and mastery of certain music theories, with a greater pursuit of exploring the essence of music four levels of requirements (Li, 2015). Liu Yanfei focused on the music acceptance of university students and explored their acceptance and influence on the current music, especially popular music, from the perspective of aesthetic acceptance. He concluded that compared to other types of music, contemporary university students are more fond of popular music, and current popular music can basically meet their music needs (Liu, 2008). Zhao Xiyuan used questionnaire survey and interview methods to study the music aesthetic perception ability of non-music major college students from two dimensions: music aesthetic perception ability and music aesthetic perception ability. He summarized the path suitable for higher normal universities to cultivate the music aesthetic perception ability of non-music major students (Zhao, 2023).

In summary, scholars have not only explored the composition and concepts of aesthetic values from a theoretical perspective, but also conducted investigations and analyses on the current situation, existing problems, causes, and strategies of aesthetic values among college students from a practical perspective; From the perspectives of aesthetic subject and aesthetic object, this study not only explores the guidance path of music aesthetic interest and the cultivation path of music aesthetic perception ability at the macro level, but also explores specific teaching methods at the micro level. However, there is still no research on the evaluation criteria for the aesthetic values and music evaluation values of college students.

The formation of aesthetic values in music among college students is particularly important for the development of individuals, the country, and society. Previous research has been limited to exploring the current situation, existing problems, causes, and strategies of aesthetic values among college students, or studying a certain element of aesthetic values in music. However, there are not enough philosophical and social criteria for evaluating aesthetic values through music, which musical aesthetic values they want to form and to what extent. This research will make it possible to form appropriate standards of assessment

and updating index systems for measuring the aesthetic values of music among students.

The purpose of this article: analyze and discuss the evaluation criteria and dimensions for the formation of aesthetic values in music among college students, and attempt to construct an evaluation index system for the aesthetic values in music among college students.

## **2. The unity of truth, goodness and beauty as a philosophical basis for the criteria for evaluating aesthetic values**

The concept of “evaluation” has a wide range of applications and exists in various aspects of social life. “The Dictionary of Psychology” points out that “evaluation generally refers to the process of evaluating the value or meaning of something” (Lin, Yang, Huang, 2003, p. 906). Thus, evaluation serves as a fundamental tool for assessing and interpreting various phenomena in human life.

Things themselves have no value and meaning, and their value and meaning exist due to human existence. In other words, from the perspective of human historical activities, evaluation is the subjective activity of human beings, and it is always linked to human needs and the values formed on this basis. Consequently, evaluation not only reflects reality but also influences future actions and decision-making. Evaluation, as a spiritual activity of the subject, is a comprehensive reflection of various forms of human consciousness on the activities and results of the objective world. It is the endpoint of practical activities and the starting point of new practical activities. Standard is the fundamental category of epistemology, “often referring to standards, criteria, paradigms, norms, etc.” (Jiang, 2007, p. 21). Standards provide a foundation for objective judgment and facilitate structured evaluation. However, the formulation of any standard is not achieved in an action. For example, the ethical value evaluation standard may face the following problems when it is formulated: first, the dilemma and contradiction of ethical decision-making, such as doctors’ choice between treating a single patient and public health, lawyers’ balance between protecting the interests of customers and maintaining legal justice. Second, difficulties in the process of balancing. In ethical decision-making, individuals need to balance between different moral values, interests and consequences. For example, when making product pricing, enterprise managers need to make a trade-off between profits and consumer rights and interests, and need to comprehensively consider factors such as market competition, cost expenditure and consumer purchasing power. These problems have brought great challenges to the formulation of ethical value evaluation standards.

Evaluation criteria, also known as judging criteria, refer to the value scale and boundaries that people apply to objects in evaluation activities. The objectivity of evaluation is an important basis for the scientific validity of evaluation criteria. It refers to the requirements for the degree of excellence determined relative to the aspects specified by the evaluation criteria. It is the quantitative regulation of the process of qualitative change of things. It is not only the scale followed by the practical process itself, but also the scale for people to evaluate its results after the practice is completed. All human practical activities, including various relatively independent concepts or theories, can ultimately be summarized as transforming the world according to one's own needs. As a conscious social existence, humans have gradually developed their own needs in practical activities and have also gradually formed evaluation criteria for practical activities that meet their needs: truth, goodness, and beauty.

The unity reflected in people's pursuit of "truth" is "not just the inherent unity of the object that tends towards objectivity, but should be a higher unity of subjectivity and objectivity, subject and object, and human and world established in a human way" (Li, Wang, Li, 2004, p. 318). Based on this, "truth" not only refers to the subject's understanding of the essence and attributes of the object, but also includes the subject's reflection of their own needs and characteristics. "Truth is manifested as existence and nothingness in ontology, as right and wrong in epistemology, and as a problem of good and bad in axiology" (Sui, 2008, p. 2).

"Goodness in a broad sense includes the practical value that satisfies people's needs in various aspects of natural and social relationships (such as economy, politics, morality, culture, etc.). Any utilitarian and moral positive value can be called good. Goodness is the realm that realizes the inevitability of the subject" (Li, Wang, Li, 2004, p. 319). This means that goodness is not just an ethical construct but a key factor in sustainable human progress.

People generally understand the concept of "Goodness" in a narrow sense, believing that "Goodness" refers to the basic category of reflecting on human moral and ethical life, and evaluating human behavior in morality. It is directly related to morality and is based on the premise of truth. A utilitarian and purposeful moral state that characterizes whether a person's internal qualities and external behavior meet moral standards in relation to social reality and necessity. "Goodness" has functions such as critical, normative, and idealistic. Ethical Good behavior is conducive to the improvement of human nature, social progress, and the happiness of others. In fact, the broad concept of "goodness", which refers to the harmonious relationship between the subject and the object, is also what humans aspire to pursue.

"Beauty is a higher sphere achieved on the basis of truth and goodness. Beauty is a creative activity of human transformation of the world and its achievements that affirm human freedom. It is a highly unified subject object

based on the subjective scale “ (Li, Wang, Li, 2004, pp. 319–320). It indicates that beauty unifies subjectivity and objectivity, including objectively existing beautiful things and human subjective aesthetic feelings. Beauty is expressed through aesthetics, reflecting the pleasure and harmony that humans create by unifying the object world with the subject’s own scale according to the “scale of objects” and “scale of humans”. Beauty is the unity of “purposefulness” and “regularity”, highlighting human creativity, richness, and the possibility of unlimited human power, as well as the purpose of human freedom and comprehensive development. This suggests that beauty is not merely a passive perception but an active engagement with the world through creative expression.

Therefore, from our point of view, “truth, goodness, and beauty” reflects human needs and the ideal of pursuing harmonious relationships between humans and nature, between humans and society, and between humans. Their evaluation criteria as practical activities are eternal, and the perfect integration of the three is the highest standard for evaluating aesthetic values. From the perspective of overall pursuit, as long as human life exists, there is a need for continuous improvement, and the production of human spiritual realm will continue indefinitely. Even if a certain degree of relative unity is achieved within a certain period of time, with the continuous development and transformation of various social conditions, the standards of truth, goodness, and beauty will undergo new changes, and the era will propose new topics and challenges for the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty. Therefore, human practice is constantly continuing and developing, and the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty is also an endless and never-ending process of movement and development. From the perspective of individual realization, every individual or group relative to the whole must pursue truth, goodness, and beauty in specific social forms and historical stages, and be constrained by various objective conditions and subjective factors, and cannot be detached from the reality in which the individual is located. Therefore, the unified trend of truth, goodness, and beauty is not just the perfection of that distant world, but a collection of truth, goodness, and beauty formed by countless specific and relatively unified chains in the vast river of history. In human social practice, the unity of truth, goodness, and beauty is reflected in all aspects. The same applies in the field of music aesthetics, where “truth, goodness, and beauty” are also the evaluation criteria for the music aesthetic values of college students.

### **3. Evaluation of Musical Aesthetic Values in the Student Environment**

Does whether the aesthetic values formed by college students through music meet the evaluation criteria of society and individuals regarding “truth, good-

ness, and beauty”? It requires the establishment of a measurable evaluation index system. Firstly, it is necessary to define the concept of aesthetic values. Due to the fact that the generation of aesthetics is a process of psychological processing, different scholars have arranged and combined these psychological elements in different forms, viewing aesthetic values as a psychological structure. Based on the three-level model (i.e. basic level, dimensional level, and indicator level) and two prototypes (sufficient and necessary conditions and family similarity) proposed by Gary Goertz in “Conceptual Definition: A Discussion on Measurement, Cases, and Theory” (Goertz, Yin, 2014), Ye Zezhou believes that “aesthetic values are a set of psychological structural systems that guide the aesthetic subject to satisfy aesthetic needs through the aesthetic relationship between subject and object, and achieve the peak experience of aesthetic pleasure” (Ye, 2023, p. 109 ). This shows that, according to the process of aesthetic psychology, aesthetic values exhibit a dynamic and infinite cycle of generation, from aesthetic needs to aesthetic relationships (aesthetic interest → aesthetic cognition → aesthetic judgment) → aesthetic reactions → aesthetic needs. In our opinion, similarly, the formation of aesthetic values in music among college students also goes through a similar process of generation, but is achieved through auditory perception. As an art form, music is different from other types of art such as painting, calligraphy, and sculpture. People perceive various elements of music and the characteristics of the organic whole constructed by these elements through auditory perception, and combine them with their own life experiences to trigger rich imagination. It is through the aesthetic activities of music that people have formed their aesthetic values. Firstly, college students have gradually developed a need for music aesthetics in their own life practices, yearning to seek auditory satisfaction and a joyful emotional state through music; Secondly, as the existence of aesthetic relationships in music, college students are the main body of music aesthetics. On the basis of their own music aesthetic needs, they interact with music as the object of music aesthetics. Due to various factors such as personal living environment and learning experience, college students have different musical aesthetic tastes, musical aesthetic cognitive abilities, and musical aesthetic judgment abilities. As a result, they ultimately exhibit different musical aesthetic reactions due to their ability to obtain joyful physical and mental experiences and meet musical aesthetic needs. From a local perspective, aesthetic response is the endpoint in a unidirectional aesthetic process, but from a holistic perspective, it is also the starting point of a new aesthetic process and will trigger new aesthetic needs. In other words, aesthetic values are the never-ending dynamic process of human aesthetic psychology rising in a spiral shape. The same goes for the aesthetic values of music among college students, which will not end with the end of their college life. The dynamic formation process and related elements of college students’ music aesthetic values are shown in Figure 1.

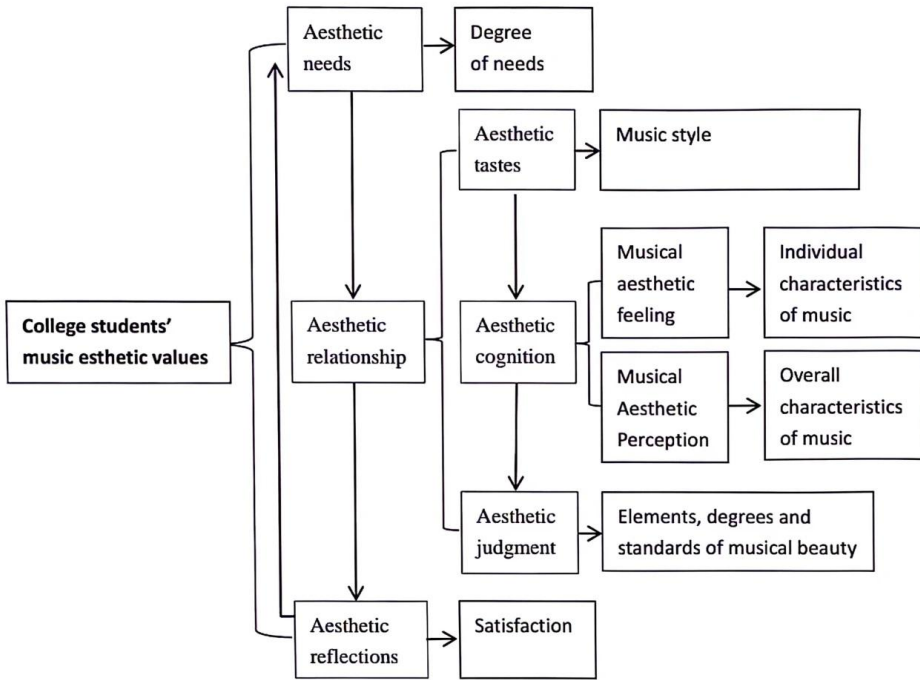


Figure 1 Evaluation index system for music aesthetic values of college students

In the process of the formation of College Students' aesthetic values of music, "truth" mainly refers to the experience, cognition and evaluation of the authenticity of music. For example, it can accurately capture and understand the emotions conveyed in music works and the deep meaning behind these emotions; Understand the social and cultural background of different music styles and genres, have rich knowledge of music theory, and be able to deeply understand the internal structure and artistic value of music; Evaluate and appreciate music works, music creation, performance skills and values, etc.. "Goodness" mainly refers to the positive guidance of music aesthetic judgment, such as encouraging yourself with the power of music, using a positive and optimistic attitude towards life, and facing the challenges of life. "Beauty" mainly refers to the aesthetic feeling of music, for example the sensitivity to musical elements such as musical structure, harmony, rhythm and melody, and how these elements together constitute the aesthetic experience of musical works; Be able to deeply feel the emotional resonance caused by music and resonate with others; The aesthetic taste has been improved, which can distinguish the elegance and vulgarity in music works, and cultivate healthy aesthetic taste.

To sum up, the evaluation standard of the development level of college students' music aesthetic values should comprehensively examine its performance in three dimensions: true perception and evaluation, goodness judgment and aesthetic experience. Such an evaluation system not only focuses on college students' aesthetic appreciation of music works, but also emphasizes the positive social effects and personal growth value of their music aesthetic activities, aiming to guide college students to form healthy, profound and creative music aesthetic concepts. Accordingly, this study designed the evaluation index system of college students' musical aesthetic values (Table 1).

Table 1

*The evaluation criteria for the aesthetic values of music among college students*

Standard classification	First level indicators	Second level indicators
Truth	Cognition and evaluation of music	Ability to distinguish different musical styles
		Ability to distinguish and evaluate different music types
		Understanding of vocal music skills
		Evaluation ability of folk cultural heritage
Goodness	Positive guidance brought by music	Positive emotions brought by listening to music
		Ability to express emotions through communication
Beauty	Musical aesthetic feeling	The development of musical aesthetic taste
		Realize the social beauty of music

Table 2

*Diagnostic table for assessing the level of development of ethical values of college students through music*

	Indicators	Score and number of evaluators					
		0	1	2	3	4	5
1	Development of aesthetic taste (5 points)	3 (1.7%)	1 (0.57%)	8 (4.55%)	36 (20.45%)	48 (27.27%)	80 (45.45%)
2	Positive emotions from listening to music (5 points)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	15 (8.52%)	38 (21.59%)	123 (69.89%)
3	Awareness of the social beauty of music (5 points)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (2.84%)	27 (15.34%)	41 (23.3%)	103 (58.52%)
4	Ability to express emotions through communication (5 points)	0 (0%)	2 (1.14%)	6 (3.41%)	36 (20.45%)	44 (25%)	88 (50%)
5	Ability to distinguish between different styles of music (5 points)	1 (0.57%)	3 (1.7%)	10 (5.68%)	40 (22.73%)	44 (25%)	78 (44.32%)

Table 2 (cont.)

	Indicators	Score and number of evaluators					
		0	1	2	3	4	5
6	Ability to distinguish between music genres and evaluate them (5 points)	1 (0.57%)	1 (0.57%)	16 (9.09%)	42 (23.86%)	41 (23.3%)	75 (42.61%)
7	Understanding of vocal music technique (5 points)	3 (1.7%)	8 (4.55%)	19 (10.8%)	43 (24.43%)	32 (18.18%)	71 (40.34%)
8	Assessment of cultural folk heritage (5 points)	2 (1.14%)	4 (2.27%)	21 (11.93%)	38 (21.59%)	36 (20.45%)	75 (42.61%)

Taking Henan University of science and technology as an example, this paper tests the development level of college students’ aesthetic values through music from multiple dimensions, such as music aesthetic taste, the impact of music on personal emotions, the social beauty of music, the ability to communicate and express emotions, the ability to distinguish music styles, the ability to distinguish and evaluate music types, the understanding of vocal music skills, and the ability to evaluate folk cultural heritage. 176 questionnaires were distributed and 176 valid questionnaires were collected (Table 2).

From Table 2, the test results are as follows:

**3.1. The majority of college students have a positive attitude towards the development of musical and aesthetic taste**

The following diagram shows that the majority of college students have a positive attitude towards the development of musical and aesthetic taste (Figure 2).

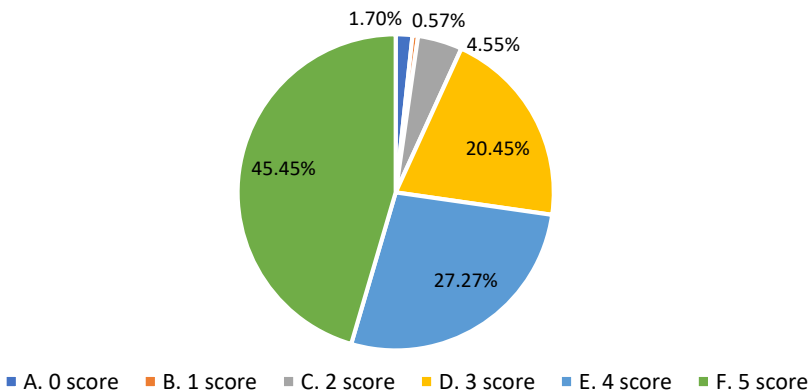


Figure 2 Diagram of the distribution of components for assessing the formation of aesthetic values of college students

Among the options, 45.45% of college students chose 5 points, indicating that they thought their musical aesthetic taste was well developed. In addition, 27.27% of college students chose 4 points, showing a high degree of recognition of the aesthetic taste of music on the whole. Only a few college students chose a lower score, indicating that the development of music aesthetic taste has been better evaluated on the whole.

### **3.2. The vast majority of college students believe that listening to music brings positive emotions**

According to the survey results, 69.89% of college students chose 5 points, indicating that they thought the positive emotions brought by listening to music were very significant. In addition, 91.41% of college students chose 4 points or more, which further supports this conclusion.

### **3.3. Most college students believe that the social beauty of music is higher**

Among all the college students interviewed, 58.52% gave the highest score (5 points), while only 2.84% gave the lowest score (2 points). This shows that most college students hold a positive attitude towards the beauty of music in society.

### **3.4. College students generally believe that they have strong ability to communicate and express emotions**

It can be seen from the data that 50% of college students chose 5 points, indicating that they are very strong in the ability to express emotions through communication. The students who scored 4 and 3 also accounted for a considerable proportion, which were 25% and 20.45% respectively. This shows that most college students are confident in their emotional expression ability.

### **3.5. Most college students have a strong ability to distinguish music styles**

From the survey results, 44.32% of college students gave the highest score of 5 points, indicating that they have strong ability to distinguish different musical styles. In addition, 69.32% chose 4 points or above, which showed that college students' confidence in the ability as a whole.

### **3.6. Most college students can better distinguish and evaluate music types**

42.61% of college students gave the highest score of 5 points, indicating that they have strong ability to distinguish and evaluate different types of music. In addition, 23.86% and 23.3% of college students gave 3 and 4 points respectively, and only 0.57% of respondents chose 0 point, indicating that the vast majority of people have a certain ability to distinguish and evaluate music types.

### **3.7. College students generally have a good understanding of vocal music skills**

It can be seen from the data that the proportion of college students who choose 5 points is the highest, reaching 40.34%. This shows that most college students think they have a good understanding of vocal music skills. The second is the college students who choose 3 and 4 points, accounting for 24.43% and 18.18% respectively. Therefore, on the whole, college students' understanding of vocal music skills tends to be higher.

### **3.8. Most college students hold a positive attitude towards the evaluation of folk cultural heritage**

In the evaluation of folk cultural heritage, 42.61% of college students chose 5 points, indicating their high recognition of folk cultural heritage. On the whole, more than 80% of college students choose 3 points or above, indicating the importance of folk cultural heritage in college students' hearts.

From a horizontal perspective, the number of people who score basic indicators increases from 0-5 points in a ladder like manner, and the scores are mostly concentrated in the range of 3-5 points, the number of people who score 1-2 points is much less, and the number of people who score 0 points is the least. For these eight indicators, 10 students rated themselves as 0, 19 as 1, 85 as 2, 277 as 3, 324 as 4, and 693 as 5. Most college students fully recognize their music perception ability, think that music can bring positive emotions for themselves, and be aware of the social attributes of music. Music reflects the consensus of most people in society on the beauty of music. About 50% of college students believe that they have the corresponding ability and cognition in the development of aesthetic taste, the ability to communicate and express emotions, the ability to distinguish and evaluate different music styles, different music genres, the understanding of vocal music skills and the evaluation of folk cultural heritage. About 18-27% of college students basically or better have these abilities or levels. About 0-12% of college students do not have or only slightly have the ability and level in these aspects.

From the vertical view, the number of college students who rated themselves 5 points was close to 50% of the total number. College students generally hold a positive attitude towards the aesthetic taste and emotional expression ability of music, which reflects their strong confidence in music appreciation and understanding. The survey also shows that most college students perform well in the ability to distinguish different music styles and types, indicating their potential in music education and cultural exchange. At the same time, the understanding and attention to vocal music skills and folk cultural heritage reflect the concern and inheritance consciousness of contemporary college students for traditional culture. Especially in the positive emotions brought by listening to music and the recognition of the social beauty

of music, it has been significantly supported. College students scored 5 points for the two indicators of listening to music can bring positive emotions and being aware of the social beauty of music, accounting for 69.89% and 58.52% respectively. The vast majority of college students have strong positive emotional reactions to music, which shows that music plays an important role in college students' emotional life. Future education and cultural activities should pay more attention to the promotion of music education, and help students make better use of music as a tool for emotional expression and social communication.

Generally speaking, the development level of college students' aesthetic values of music shows a positive trend, but a considerable number of college students' aesthetic values of music show insufficient status, which may be related to college students' living environment, music education program, personality, gender, major and other factors, or they may not understand the options.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, people can only pursue the evaluation standard of the perfect integration of "truth, goodness and beauty" as an ideal. Society is a complex collection of people. People are constantly engaged in various practical activities when they are alive, which also makes the whole world in change all the time. Therefore, any evaluation standard formulated by people and used by people will be affected by various factors not only in the formulation process but also in the implementation process, and it is difficult to achieve comprehensive and perfect evaluation results. So is the evaluation standard of college students' music aesthetic values. In colleges and universities of different regions and levels, economic conditions, the attention of school leaders, the strength of teachers and other factors will affect the implementation of music aesthetic education in schools, and naturally affect the development level of college students' music aesthetic values and the formulation and implementation of evaluation standards of music aesthetic values. These issues will also be the focus of this study in the future. As university leaders, they should not only focus on the usefulness of music with a utilitarian attitude, but should actively create a good music education environment for college students under the guidance of the national education policy and in accordance with the existing conditions; As music educators in colleges and universities, we should not only stick to one teaching method or teaching mode, but also pay attention to the needs of students from different backgrounds and adjust teaching strategies in classroom teaching, and also carry out multi-dimensional evaluation of students' learning effect under the guidance of the standards of truth, goodness and beauty, and pay attention to the healthy development of students' personality.



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## Kryteria oceny i poziomy kształtowania wartości estetycznych studentów szkół wyższych poprzez sztukę muzyczną

### Streszczenie

Artykuł porusza problem kształtowania wartości estetycznych wśród studentów i podkreśla ich znaczenie w życiu ludzi. Pilność problemu wynika z szybkiego tempa rozwoju technologii sieciowych, w szczególności krótkich, niskiej jakości filmów (Little Red Book i TikTok), które poważnie wprowadzają w błąd niektórych studentów w kwestii wartości estetycznych. Jednak jakość wartości estetycznych często napotyka trudne warunki oceny. Niniejszy artykuł podejmuje próbę zbadania standardów oceny i poziomów wartości estetycznych kształtowanych przez muzykę wśród studentów w kontekście globalizacji. Prześledzono genezę problemu kształtowania wartości estetycznych w mieszanej sytuacji wielu kultur w Chinach. Podkreślono, że rozwój mediów prowadzi do erozji ich wartości estetycznych. Na podstawie analizy prac naukowców zidentyfikowano 4 poziomy rozwoju wartości estetycznych: początkowy, modny, zaawansowany oraz najwyższy poziom – poziom zawieszony. Zdefiniowano istotę pojęcia „oceny” i jego związek z takimi kategoriami, jak standardy, kryteria, normy. Analizuje się treść filozoficzną głównych kryteriów oceny wartości estetycznych: prawdy, dobra i piękna. Opracowano system wskaźników oceny wartości muzycznych i estetycznych studentów. Przeprowadzono badanie eksperymentalne w celu zidentyfikowania korzyści w rozwoju wartości estetycznych studentów, a następnie przedstawiono wyniki analizy takiego eksperymentu. Stwierdzono, że każdy standard oceny, sformułowany i stosowany przez ludzi, będzie podlegał wpływom różnych czynników.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wartości estetyczne, sztuka muzyczna, studenci szkół wyższych, ocena, wskaźniki.





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## **Positioning of Spoken Language by Erasmus Exchange Students – Positivist Perspective**

### **Abstract**

The paper presents a study based on the notion of *positioning* applied to examine Erasmus Exchange students' approach to spoken language. First, two forms of positioning are discussed as constantly co-occurring, requiring different methodologies, and being needed in the realm of education. Then, one of them, namely positivist, is selected for the study and the rationale and construction of the respective tool are outlined. It is analysed how highly the respondents' place speech in the area of beliefs, affect, actions (observable behaviours), and thinking, and how these four facets contribute to the overall approach. The results point to their limited appreciation of spoken language, to beliefs not being reflected in actions, and to different purposes of language use being placed on a similar level of recognition. The study is to be considered to present only one "side of the coin", as findings obtained with positivist means need to be complemented and interpreted through the prism of constructivist data, with the former grasping the students' approach as a scalable and gradable concept, and the latter implying such a treatment whereby spoken language is a multidimensional construct not falling subject to any pre-set classifications or closed hierarchisations.

**Keywords:** positivist perspective, spoken language, Erasmus Exchange, students, constructivist perspective, interaction, approach to speech.

### **Introduction**

The study does not relate to the specific subject matter of the Erasmus Exchange programme<sup>1</sup>, but to something that might be regarded as "soft skills" for

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<sup>1</sup> The name 'Erasmus' and 'Erasmus Exchange' are treated in this paper as a generic term covering both the previous Erasmus programmes as well as the current 'Erasmus+' edition, reaching beyond the European Union.

students' participation to be undoubtedly beneficial. The underlying rationale here is that if the entire programme is to be genuine and successful, there needs to be proper spoken interaction between students (as well as academics) coming from different countries and educational institutions. The notion of *positioning* helps capture their approach to spoken language, which underlies all instances of spoken interaction and which, as a consequence, could serve as an important facet indicating students' eligibility for participation and as an indicator showing a real educational change during the exchange. Conversely, how students *position* spoken language helps account for the trajectory, the success, and the personal experiencing of their Erasmus experience. The notion's scope and potential speak in favour of its inclusion in the Erasmus exchange official framework, which is additionally justified by education becoming more strongly affected by online resources, artificial intelligence, electronic gadgets (preventing students from regular "corridor exchange"), and spoken communication being more increasingly on the scrap heap.

## 1. Theoretical foundations

The notion of *positioning* has a twofold character in this paper (whereby it differs from its treatment by other sciences and disciplines noted below). It combines objectivity-oriented facets of a person's approach with its subjectivity-poised characteristics. In other words, *positioning* as construed in this study reflects the very human nature causing individuals to both think in terms of scales and comparisons, as well as view reality through strictly personal lenses. The former facets are more explicit (and verbalised on a daily basis) than the latter. It is no different with how people approach their own speech.

Accordingly, the eponymous notions helps capture the spoken dimension of education, which, for a number of commonsensical reasons, is the crucial one for such an international educational programme (such as currently Erasmus+) which rests heavily on spoken interaction and on the exchange of knowledge and ideas by word of mouth. How students position spoken language strongly determines their academic participation (and how actively they take part in university classes and lectures) as well as their engagement in extra-curricular activities, both on and off university premises. Recognising their positioning of spoken language can thus support classroom diagnostics, instruction, communication, and overall performance, especially if students themselves become aware of the notion in question.

Technically speaking, everyday positioning of things takes a twofold character: — first, we all place various issues, facets, people, phenomena on multiple (mental) scales, which is manifested by comments about something or

someone being, for instance, more important, pleasant, etc. than other things or people (and hence quietly assuming that their importance, amicability, etc. is scalable);

and

- second, we locate the very same facets or persons within multidimensional spaces, without any need or possibility of specifying any extremes, recognising degrees, making linear comparisons, drawing up any kind of hierarchisations.

These two forms of positioning co-occur by definition and neither of them is more significant than the other. Their naturalness speaks in favour of their complementary treatment as people are inclined both to putting things on scales as well as to developing their own conceptual categories adding something more to gradable characteristics. In other words, positioning falls both under positivist rationale (the former option named), whereby we can speak of ‘concepts’ which are ‘placed’ on scales, and under constructivist rationale (the latter option), whereby it is more relevant to speak of ‘constructs’ being ‘located’ in spaces. (In this paper we will stick to scales- and placement-based terminology as the research discussed here followed the positivist study regime.)

It is the hybrid character of positioning that renders the notion highly suitable for educational purposes. Yet, contrary to numerous fields and disciplines, where it has been heavily exploited, in the realm of education it remains essentially absent. This gap can be viewed detrimental as the understanding of positioning outside the scope of education as well as applications of this term transpire as highly relevant for teaching and learning, too, and offer a potentially fruitful perspective. Popularised by two specialists of advertising, Al Ries and Jack Trout in their book entitled *Positioning: Battle for Your Mind* (2001), in the world of marketing positioning refers to placing a product or organisation in the minds of prospects or customers, which, as discussed by Michael E. Porter (2011) or Jekaterina Barakova (2010), generates a sustainable competitive advantage, beats competition by maximizing the potential benefit (Kotler & Keller 2006), and frequently becomes fundamental to how companies approach and succeed in a market (Fluhrer & Brahm, 2023). By the same token, positioning spoken language can give one a strong educational advantage.

The advantage implied by the high positioning of spoken language is particularly worth considering in the context of Erasmus Exchange programme, the specific objectives of which should be noted to rest heavily on students’ oral linguistic skills, even though they are as such not explicitly stated. Promoting “cooperation, excellence, creativity and innovation” as well as “learning mobility and active participation” (Erasmus+ Programme Guide, 2024) can hardly be successfully carried out without strong reliance on spoken language. It is beyond any doubt that the fact that, as Serkan Dincer notes, Erasmus Exchange pro-

gramme has particularly contributed to cross-cultural education (Dincer, 2014) is largely owing to communication conducted by word of mouth, being positioned highly throughout the period of this international exchange programme's existence.

The hybrid character of the notion of positioning chimes with today's integration of mixed methods, aggregation of multiple sources of data, and application of various instruments – which jointly enable a more holistic look at phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2003). Of the three holistic approaches recognised by Adrienn Fekete as relevant to linguistic education – complex dynamic system theory (CDST), language ecology, and post-structuralism (Fekete, 2023), the second one is most concordant with positioning as construed in this paper. According to the ecological approach, the language user and their environment cannot be separated from each other forming a dynamic interacting relationship (Steffensen & Kramsch, 2017), which additionally implies that the process is strongly linked to the process of socialisation during which one conforms to all sorts of cultural and social conventions or behaviours established and required by a specific community (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2017).

Our eponymous notion is indeed highly ecological, as construed above, in that not only is positioning an integral part of our daily functioning, but its both versions mentioned above consistently accompany each other and jointly underlie our natural way of interacting with our environment. Neither can we cease to put phenomena or people on our mental scales (as those which we value or like to a lower or higher extent), nor can we somehow resign from building up our own networks of constructs falling outside any measures and evading any systematic hierarchisations. Thanks to its ecological and holistic nature, positioning is both a notion with solid theoretical grounds, but also a most practical tool for examining people's approach and finding out how low/high they place particular issues and in what context/where they locate them in their individual networks of constructs. For the very same reason, any study focused on either the former (like this very paper) or the latter perspective will remain fragmentary if not complemented by a verification of the other.

The above means that *positioning* can provide grounds for a completely new educational paradigm. Lying at the heart of our human nature, this twofold epistemological process remains deeply hidden, quietly presumed or taken for granted. Positioning is frequently conducted without people's awareness – which often characterises emerging paradigms engaging various ways of seeing and researching the world, which, as Kostera notes, may prevent specialists of one discipline from cooperating with one another (Kostera, 2005). The two "branches" of positioning make up a cohesive model (which is one of the constitutive features of paradigms, as defined by Kuhn, 2001) and exist as immanent contradiction, which, as is the case with usable paradigms, justifies and legiti-

mises researchers two-lined activities (Sławecki, 2012). One branch of positioning rests on the reality being “tameable” by objective/dual descriptors (as exemplified in the study discussed here), whilst its other branch presupposing relative reality subject to “subjective criticality” (Guba & Lincoln, 2014, p. 285). Discordant as the two versions of positioning appear, they rely on their natural integration by individual people and, as such, call for a harmonious application of mixed (reflective) methods.

## 2. Methodology

**AIMS.** The study was aimed to establish by positivist means how Erasmus Exchange students (EEs) position spoken language (along four selected scales described below as comprising their overall approach to speaking). It was not intended to examine how well/much they speak or how they participate in classroom interactions, but, instead, to rely essentially on their self-assessment on the level of spoken language (whether it complies with their real use of speech or not). In short, it is the students’ (not outsiders’) perspective of their own speech that mattered. Although the study was not meant to result in any sweeping generalisations (as personal attitudes remain too individual too be directly compared), it was based on the assumption that certain overarching tendencies among students from different EU member states could be found for further more systematic studies.

**PROBLEMS.** The formulation of the problems rested on the distinction of four dimensions: beliefs, emotions, actions, and thoughts, which under the theory of multilateral education (Okon, 1995) are the essence of four educational domains. Each dimension can be viewed as a scale on which speaking is placed (Figure 1).

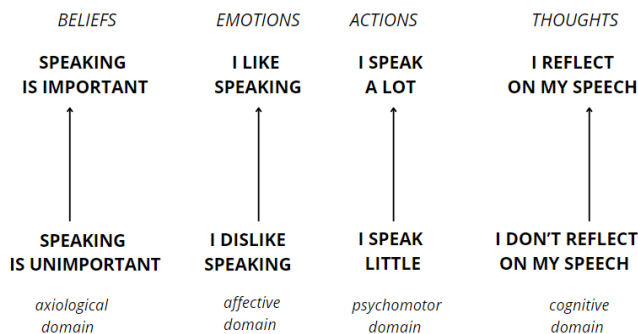


Figure 1

Four dimensions of spoken language positioning

Any of the four components may be the cause of high positioning of spoken language (and make students more likely to become engaged and focused on the content being articulated by themselves and others. More significantly, though, “adding up” (in mind) the four arrows representing four placements of spoken language by an individual yields one joint scale built up by the four sub-scales, as the examples – of higher and lower positioning, with differing configurations – show (Figure 2).

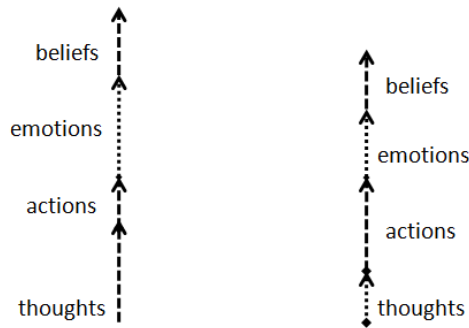


Figure 2  
Examples of overall spoken language positioning

With this joint scales in mind, the general problem of how Erasmus Exchange students position spoken language was broken down into four specific research problems:

1. What is the overall **tendency** of Erasmus Exchange students as to positioning spoken language?  
(Do they place it high or low? How long are the joint (symbolic) arrows?)
2. Which **components** matter the most in Erasmus Exchange students' positioning of spoken language?  
(How consistently do they position it? How similar is the length of the four (symbolic) sub-scales?)
3. How does the overall positioning of spoken language by Erasmus Exchange students relate to the **purpose** of language use?  
(How do extrinsic and intrinsic purposes contribute to their positioning?)
4. To what extent does the positioning of spoken language by Erasmus Exchange students relate to their **self-assessment** as speakers (as to how much and how well they speak)?

HYPOTHESES. There being no research addressing positioning construed as herein (by other researchers), I can hypothesise here basing predominantly on common sense, instructional experience and observations from classrooms in which Erasmus Exchanges students have participated – as follows:

Hypothesis 1. On the whole, EEs were hypothesised to position spoken language fairly high, but not very high (or, in other words, not high enough for all the ambitious objectives of the Erasmus programme to be secured on the level of university students). On the one hand, these students are willing to take part in the international exchange, which, rather obviously, implies spoken communication (and this favours higher positioning), but, on the other hand, their educational systems do not prioritise language as such (which, in turn, moves the positioning lower).

Hypothesis 2. The dimension of actions (psychomotor domain) was presumed to contribute the most to the location assigned by EEs to spoken language. This was assumed to have been caused by their practical approach to language skills and by them regarding speaking skills as predominantly a communicative means serving different everyday needs and purposes. The dimension of thoughts (cognitive domain) was expected to contribute the least, with EEs not reflecting on language per se very much and the dominant view on language as a practical tool.

Hypothesis 3. It was hypothesised that EEs were more likely to place spoken language higher when it comes to purposes extrinsic to language (be it fulfilling a classroom task or learning subjects or disciplines), and lower when thinking of purposes of an intrinsic character (such as mastering a language as a goal in itself or developing it as a prospective attribute of a person).

Hypothesis 4. The following logic was assumed to operate here: the higher the self-assessment in terms of quantity, the higher the positioning of spoken language (as garrulous students could be assumed to demonstrate a highly positive approach to speaking). On the level of quality, though, the logic was assumed not to apply as some students assessing themselves as good speakers might be taking every opportunity to practice speaking, to cherish and reflect on their own talks, and to value all speech-focused settings, whilst others, assessing themselves equally well, might tend to treat spoken language with care, not to overuse it, or even consider insignificant in life.

**METHOD.** In line with the positivist rationale (constituting “one side of the coin”, so to speak, in addressing the notion of an invariably hybrid character as noted earlier in the text), the study had a quantitative character and employed an attitude scale with a 5-point scale used, with the replies being marked as ‘Definitely NOT’, ‘Rather NOT’, ‘Hard to say’, ‘Rather YES’, and ‘Definitely YES’. Crucially, the method retained a balance between the four subscales as well as the purposes of language use and the two sides of students’ self-assessment (quantity and quality) necessary for an objective examination of the third and fourth hypotheses.

**TOOL.** The study tool had a simple format and consisted of 20 items, ordered in the way considered most justified from the respondents’ point of view, that

is: 2 opening items on the quantity of their use of spoken language, 16 “core” items pertaining to the four dimensions (sub-scales, domains) named, and 2 closing items on the quality self-assessed after all the facets have been considered. Hence, the self-assessment comprised of items shown by Table 1.

Table 1  
*Questionnaire items relating to self-assessment*

1	Self-assessment	Quantity	I'm a talkative kind of person.
2			I speak in the company of all the people I meet.
19	Self-assessment	Quality	My general speaking abilities are good.
20			I find myself a person nice to listen to.

The “core” of the tool followed the sequence beliefs-emotions-actions-thoughts and each of the four components (the tool’s blocks) was constructed in such a way that balanced references were made to four potential purposes of language use (as construed above), two extrinsic – speaking for the sake of fulfilling tasks or learning various subjects, and two intrinsic – speaking as a goal per se or a personal attribute, as presented by Table 2.

Table 2  
*Questionnaire items relating to beliefs*

3	TASKS	I view speech as a way of dealing with all kinds of problems.
4	SUBJECTS	I must be able to speak about an issue if I want to say that I've learnt it.
5	VALUE	I see the ability to speak as an important educational goal.
6	ATTRIBUTE	I believe that the way I speak is an important part of my personality.

This component appeared as first owing to the fact that beliefs are often explicitly expressed, discussed and openly compared by different language users. All the items are strongly oriented on the first person singular so as to emphasise that it is the respondent’s approach that matters here rather than any general view and, accordingly, that there are no good or bad answers.

Table 3  
*Questionnaire items relating to affect*

7	TASKS	When solving a task, I feel more comfortable when I can speak about it.
8	SUBJECTS	Speaking out loud about what I know gives me pleasure.
9	VALUE	I like speaking about the things which I'm learning about.
10	ATTRIBUTE	I'm keen to develop my speaking abilities, in all the languages I know.

The affective component – covered by Table 3 – was next for two main reasons: first, it strengthened the initial message concerning the respondent's approach being at stake the most, and, second, it was important for this block to precede the items relating to acting and thinking so that the respondent could focus on their general emotional stance rather than on any particular linguistic behaviours or doubts.

Table 4  
*Questionnaire items relating to actions*

11	TASKS	When facing a problem, I speak with people about it.
12	SUBJECTS	After I've learnt something new, I speak and discuss it with people.
13	VALUE	I tend to talk to people just for the sake of my speaking abilities.
14	ATTRIBUTE	I use conversations with people as a means of self-improvement.

The psychomotor component – reflected by Table 4 – related to behaviours that are observable and measurable (or, perhaps better – graspable with human senses), which in the case of spoken language refers strictly to actually uttering/verbalising content. (The fact that actions are directly accessible through senses makes them different from affect, which belongs to the so-called latent sphere of education comprising all those facets that need to be derived by what is available and largely inferred). This part comprised items (the first two) which sounded rather ordinary compared to those (the later couple) which might appear atypical and somewhat odd, especially to those who view language as predominantly a tool for communication. Thanks to the second half being more obscure, the block served as a shift and introduction to the next – most demanding – component.

Table 5  
*Questionnaire items relating to thinking*

15	TASKS	Whatever task I'm doing, I think about how to put things into words.
16	SUBJECTS	I tend to reflect on how much I can say about different issues.
17	VALUE	I ask myself how much I can say about different things.
18	ATTRIBUTE	I tend to wonder what kind of speaker I am.

The realm of thoughts, to which Table 5 pertains, appeared last as reflecting on the very use of language seemed to be most implicit of all the four components and most advanced, too. It takes time and expertise to develop the habit of considering the points raised in the questionnaire's four items here and in the study itself the respondents had been prepared to address them after the three previous components.

Notwithstanding the tool's build-up, which perhaps might be modified and justified differently, what mattered the most is that all the four components (domains) were addressed in a balanced way and the respondents did not "jump" between them, but focused on one at a time.

**SAMPLE.** The study employed stratified sampling and was made with a group of 40 respondents, volunteering from a pool of larger groups taking part in courses designated for Erasmus Exchange students of different social sciences (early education, journalism, political science, psychology). Their line of studies was marked at the beginning of the questionnaire, along with their nationality, with the respondents coming from (mostly European) countries, i.e. the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Malta, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, and Ukraine. The respondent's majors and nationalities were of secondary importance in the study, they supported the analysis of the results obtained, and also provided initial information for a later constructivist-wise study.

### 3. Analysis of results

[Quantity → Quality] In order to make the reading smoother and to mark the supportive character of quantitative data, percentage indicators will be consistently converted into descriptive terms, with 20-percent ranges applied for the interpretation of the results, i.e. 1-20% very low (positioning), 21-40% low, 41-60% medium, 61-80% high, 81-100% very high. The quantifier 'extreme' will be employed here to the 5-percentage ranges on the two end of the scale (not observed in the study itself, but referred to in the discussion within comparative and hypothetical comments made.)

**OVERALL TENDENCY.** On the most general level, the positioning of spoken language was found as fairly high (the mean equalling 72.5%) – in accordance with Hypothesis 1, with as many as 37 students positioning it above the medium range, only 3 respondents positioning it at the medium level, and none of them as low or very low. The average percentage observed for the 16 core items was 72.5, with the average for all 20 items (i.e. also including the 4 self-assessment items) being just one percentage point lower. Nearly 60% of all the replies given with regard to the 16 items are positive, with the answer 'Rather YES' being chosen significantly more frequently (36%) than 'Definitely YES' (23,5%). What is crucial here, too, is that within this core of 16 items the answer 'Hard to say' was marked in 22% of all replies, which means that nearly 80% of respondents were clear about being either negatively or positively approached to particular statements. Additionally, it is also worth noting that considering all the students taking part in the study together, four highest positioning was shown above Spanish respondents (constituting the largest sub-group of all and scoring on average

62), that is just above the medium-high borderline. On the other hand, the lowest positioning was found with Czech and Maltese respondents, although there were too few of them for this observation to be of any major significance in this very study. This aspect, though, is worthy of further investigation.

**COMPONENTS.** The highest positioning was observed with the items relating to beliefs and actually classified as very high here (more than 85%), whilst the lowest with the items to do with actions – which is strongly opposite to what had been anticipated under Hypothesis 2, whereby actions had been expected to appear on the other end of the scale as positioned the highest. Within the two other domains, i.e. affective and cognitive, fairly high positioning was observed – 74.5% and 68% respectively. In order to interpret these scores with more understanding, it is worth noting that the average correlation between all the four components (domains) equalled only 0.26, with the highest correlation noted between affect and actions (0.44) and the lowest (practically non-existent) between the components concerning beliefs and thoughts (0.09).

Considering the outcome observed for single items (in the core group of 16), they all fell within a rather wide range, i.e. from 54% to 91% (with the average – as observed earlier – equalling 72.5%; the average score was exactly the same for odd- and even-numbered items, which adds to its reliability – often verified with a test juxtaposing scores for two halves, which here would not have been adequate owing to the halves including items pertaining to different educational domains).

**PURPOSES OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE.** There was hardly any difference in scoring between the foursomes of items relating to the purposes distinguished (i.e. fulfilling tasks, learning subjects, improving language per se, developing a personal attribute), also across the first two (extrinsic) and the next two (intrinsic) purposes – which disproves Hypothesis 3. Yet, there were significant differences between separate items, especially in the case of those relating to the third and fourth purpose: it is within these two sub-groups that both the lowest positioning and the highest positioning was observed as if the respondents were most uncertain as to the decisions – we will return to this issue later in the text. Yet, these sub-groups of items correlated higher than those relating to the four main components, with the average correlation being more or less twice as high as earlier (0.51), the highest between the two latter (extrinsic) purposes – 0.74, and the lowest between the first and the fourth purpose named – 0.31.

**SELF-ASSESSMENT.** The correlation between the 4 (opening and closing) self-assessment items and the core 16 (domains-oriented) items is nearly identical with regard to quantity and quality – which disproves Hypothesis 4. Yet, it can be said that this negative verification of the hypothesis provides positive information as the respondents' self-assessment seems to be more consistent and partially reflective of their approach to spoken language – even if this reflection is not too exact, with the correlation obtained equalling only 0.35 (for the open-

ing two – quantity-oriented – items) and 0.33 (for the closing two – quality – oriented items). At the same time, the scoring obtained in the items concerning the quantity of speech (65%) was lower than that relating to quality (71%).

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

Considering the primary role of spoken language in education, the respondents' positioning of it remains far from ideal, as the overall score obtained implies that on average they remain **sceptical about more or less every fourth item included in the questionnaire**. The statements included in it are by no means radical and the entire set of 16 items can be viewed as the desired approach to spoken language across four components and four purposes of language use. (The tool might be radicalised by the inclusion of statements such as *Putting my thoughts into speech can help solve all my problems* or *The way a person speaks is one of the most important traits of a human being*.) This scepticism was revealed in different components by different respondents, which clearly shows that boosting their positioning of speech would require a highly individualised didactic treatment.

In the sphere of spoken language positioning, the say that 'actions speak louder than words' appears to apply: the respondents' claims falling into the realm of beliefs do not prove to be confirmed – even at the level of their declarations – by what they actually do. The gap between the two sub-scores which exceeds 20% (85% for beliefs and 62% for actions) can be interpreted as indicative of a clear discrepancy (so as not to use the word 'hypocrisy') between what the respondents think of (the beneficial and developmental side of) spoken language and how they act with it. The fact that the score pertaining to actions is even (6 percentage points) lower than that relating to thoughts (contrary to Hypothesis 2) only justifies the conclusion that the high positioning of spoken language and somewhat lofty claims as to its benefits and reflections on it need putting into practice.

The study of correlations between the four components imply that if any one of them is supposed to **boost** some other one(s), it is **most likely to happen between affect and actions**. In other words (although this will not sound very innovative), a positive attitude to spoken language tends to be accompanied by actual spoken performance, and, at a slightly lower level, by reflections on speech. Yet, the generally very low level of all correlations between the four components can be viewed to imply that the positioning of spoken language, or the role or function of speech, is not given sufficient explicit coverage across different European educational systems, which leaves students to themselves as to what to think of it, how to feel about it, or, more generally, how it all works in life.

Much as the affect-and-actions link appears unsurprising, it was definitely unexpected in the study to see the **four different purposes of spoken language contributing to its positioning at a nearly the same level**. In the light of the dominance of practical approaches to language use observed today, it seems that the respondents proved to address the set of four purposes intuitively and commonsensically, treating spoken language as equally vital for classroom tasks, learning things, developing it as a means in itself or as a personal attribute. The highest correlation between the intrinsic purposes and the lowest correlation between speaking for the sake of classroom tasks and for the benefit of speech as an integral part of one's personality (with both these findings being accordant with the premises of the study and the construction of the questionnaire) spoke in favour of the harmonious treatment of all the four purposes and their explicit discussion with students. The fact that the correlations observed here exceeded those observed across the four domains imply that the **positioning of spoken language is somehow more effectively boosted on the level of what functions, roles, or purposes languages serve than on the level of how spoken language relates to beliefs, emotions, feelings, actions, or cognition, which seems to remain out of classroom talks**.

Two couples of items pertaining to what we have referred here as intrinsic purposes of spoken language merit a more detailed discussion here as the results obtained prove the most extreme. Specifically, whilst on the level of BELIEFS the two statements – (Item 5) *I see the ability to speak as an important educational goal* and (Item 6) *I believe that the way I speak is an important part of my personality* – yielded the highest scores, on the level of ACTIONS with the two (also I-oriented) statements – (Item 13) *I tend to talk to people just for the sake of my speaking abilities* and (Item 14) *I use conversations with people as a means of self-improvement* – the lowest scores were obtained. This can be interpreted as the respondents being most **at a loss when requested to address items reaching beyond extrinsic purposes of spoken language**. The outcome obtained with the latter component is tantamount to admitting that one finds it 'Hard to say' (as worded in the questionnaire) whether one talks to people so as to improve speaking (in Item 13) or whether one views conversations as a way to develop one's personality altogether. This shortage of awareness here constitutes a major obstacle to higher positioning of spoken language and it calls for a prompt didactic intervention.

Yet, this is not the only area in which the study shows self-awareness to be required: the results noted with the four items "surrounding" the core section of the questionnaire, the respondents' self-assessment with regard to spoken language proves markedly higher for quality than for quantity. This is to say that **their view of how much they speak is excelled by their perspective on how well they do so**. In other words, a respondent's self-assessment reads along lines

“Although I do not speak too much, I speak pretty well”. At the same time, the two respective sub-scores (65% vs 71%) are not too high, which makes these replies not too convincing, especially the former one, which is not far from the borderline with uncertainty. The lack of being convinced on the level of both quantity and quality is additionally confirmed by the fact that within the four self-assessment items the most frequently chosen one was ‘Hard to say’ (36%) (whilst the two positive options were marked nearly three times as often as the negative replies – 48% vs (less than) 17%, respectively). “Connecting dots” here, we can infer that the respondents speak pretty high of their spoken language *despite* its amount not being too large, which may imply that their true speaking skills and habits are not being sincerely disclosed.

Finally, just a few more remarks on the issue of decisiveness and positivity: (1) Whilst there was no single item where negative agreement was observed among more than half the respondents, there were six items in which positive agreement was found. The top one on the negative end was item 13, in which every second student denied talking to people just for the sake of speaking abilities. On the other hand, nearly all the respondents admitted (in items 5 and 6) seeing the ability to speak as an important educational goal and viewing it as an important part of their personality (38 and 36 respondents, respectively). (2) On the whole, there was more indecisiveness on the positive end than the negative one (if we look at the two options with the quantifier ‘rather’ included), which can be interpreted as an indicator of replies being given somewhat intuitively along the lines ‘I agree that there is some value in spoken language, but I am not certain what exactly it is’. (3) In as many as eight items (out of 16, hence in exactly half of the core) there was not a single respondent definitely denying the item’s claim and in the entire sample the highest negativity reached only a group of three students. (4) The facets which attracted negativity the most occurred in items relating to actions, where the respondents denied (strongly or mildly) actually talking to people for the sake of speaking abilities (item 13 – exactly half the sample) and using conversations with people as a means of self-improvement (items 14 – 40% of the respondents).

Although the sample was too small to allow for any far-reaching generalisations, the study does point to several noteworthy aspects concerning Erasmus Exchange students, on the one hand, and the positioning-oriented research, on the other. As for the respondents, there appears to be a fairly consistent approach characterised by appreciation of spoken language, which is not quite intense or ubiquitous, but rather moderate and limited, without too much strictly speech-oriented focus. This form of limited appreciation proved equally scattered across different purpose of language use, which is to say that spoken language was not assigned by the respondents a primary role when it comes to either classroom tasks, learning issues, superior educational goals, or personal

development. What is more (and worse – for the success of education and Erasmus Exchange itself), a strongly positive attitude to speaking on the level of beliefs is not matched in the sphere of the respondents' approach to actions, affect, and reflections. **A more balanced approach would no doubt be highly conducive to language performance on and outside university premises.**

The consistency of the results speaks in favour of the tool having been applied as well as to the existence of some degree of the respondents' common denominator when it comes to how they approach spoken language. It has led to two hypotheses being unequivocally disproved and one more being partially confounded. Although the quantitative measures used under the positivist methodological regime serve only a secondary function and the exactness of numerical data does not really matter in the case of spoken language, grasping the level of positioning speech does indicate how much room there is for boosting it and in which of the four dimensions applied there is most work to be done in this respect. As a notion which – largely thanks to its popularity in the world of computers and Internet websites – is readily graspable (despite having solid theoretical grounds at the same time), positioning has the potential of moving education further, especially when it is applied to as crucial a concept as spoken language, with regard to which university students' stance should be well known, particularly when it comes to a spoken-interaction-based international exchange.

There are two chief recommendations that follow from the study's results: first, boost the students' positioning of speech by referring it to its four dimensions mentioned; relating speech only to such issues as roles, functions, and purposes (which appear highly practical) does not secure the most desirable level of positioning – which *can* be developed by orienting students – when they speak – towards their beliefs, affect, actions, and thinking. The second conclusion applies to the Erasmus programme itself, under which the positioning of spoken language might be adapted as one of the criteria of students' eligibility for participation (as noted earlier); the students' (developmental) profit from partaking in the international exchange is bound to be enhanced when the appropriate positioning of spoken language is addressed, improved, and consistently fostered.

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## **Pozycjonowanie języka mówionego przez studentów programu wymiany Erasmus – perspektywa pozytywistyczna**

### **Streszczenie**

W artykule przedstawiono badanie oparte na koncepcji *pozycjonowania* zastosowanej do zbadania podejścia studentów programu wymiany Erasmus do języka mówionego. Najpierw omówione zostały dwie formy pozycjonowania, które stale ze sobą współwystępują, wymagają różnych metodologii i są niezbędne w obszarze edukacji. Następnie wybrano jedną z nich – mianowicie pozytywistyczną, przedstawiono jej uzasadnienie oraz konstrukcję narzędzia. Analiza dotyczy tego, w jakim stopniu respondenci przypisują wypowiedziom aspekty z obszaru przekonań, uczuć, działań i myślenia, oraz w jaki sposób te cztery aspekty przyczyniają się do ogólnego podejścia. Wyniki wskazują na ograniczone docenianie języka mówionego, brak odzwierciedlenia przekonań w działaniach oraz podobny poziom rozpoznawalności różnych celów używania języka. Należy uznać, że badanie prezentuje tylko jedną „stronę medalu”, ponieważ ustalenia uzyskane za pomocą metod pozytywistycznych należy uzupełnić i zinterpretować przez pryzmat danych konstruktywistycznych. Pierwsze z nich ujmują podejście studentów jako pojęcie skalowalne i stopniowalne, drugie zaś zakładają takie podejście, w którym język mówiony jest wielowymiarową konstrukcją, niepodlegającą żadnym ustalonym klasyfikacjom ani zamkniętym hierarchiom.

**Słowa kluczowe:** perspektywa pozytywistyczna, język mówiony, wymiana Erasmus, studenci, perspektywa konstruktywistyczna, interakcja.





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## Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence. Conclusions from Sweden's Decision for Pedagogy and the Design of Educational Environments

### Abstract

The decision of the Swedish government to limit digital technologies in early school education has been taken as a starting point for reflection on the design of didactics in the age of artificial intelligence. The analysis was embedded in the framework of digital pedagogy, Marian Mazur's theory of autonomous systems, and pedagogical cybernetics. OECD data (PIAAC, PISA) and national statistics (GUS, BN) concerning basic skills and reading practices were used. A comparison of trends from 2011/12 to 2022/23 shows that in Sweden the percentage of people with very low skills remains stable (12–14%), while in Poland it reaches almost 40% in reading and mathematical reasoning and 48% in problem solving (see also Díaz et al., 2024). The results indicate that mere access to technology does not guarantee the development of competences and, with a weaker foundation, may deepen inequalities. The conclusions emphasize the need for sequential didactic models "offline-first, AI-assisted," in which traditional practices form the foundation and artificial intelligence supports only critical and autonomous thinking.

**Keywords:** digital pedagogy; artificial intelligence in education; internal control; design of educational environments; functional illiteracy.

### Introduction

Digitization has become, over the past two decades, one of the main directions of educational reforms. Information and communication technologies

(ICT) have been presented as tools of the democratization of knowledge, the personalization of teaching, and the development of future competences. The decision of the Swedish government in 2023 to limit the use of ICT in early school education – including a return to printed textbooks and handwriting – has sparked a broad debate. It is interpreted not as a resignation from digitization, but as an attempt to restore balance between online and offline practices at key stages of education. As Selwyn, Nemorin, Bulfin and Johnson (2017) emphasize, digital technologies in schools should not be treated as neutral tools but as political and cultural instruments, embedded in broader social contexts, which makes critical reflection on their implementation essential.

As Prof. M. Piasecka (2022) notes, “every epoch has its important questions, which are posed in the face of successes, failures, crises, and challenges. Educational reality, immersed in broad social and cultural contexts, concentrates within itself like a lens the problems of the macro-world.” One such question is the relationship between technology and basic competences.

The research problem concerns the discrepancy between access to technology and the level of basic skills. In the PISA methodology, basic competences are understood as the ability to read and to reason mathematically above the Level 2 threshold, that is, the minimum level of proficiency enabling further learning and social participation (OECD, 2023). PIAAC and PISA data indicate that the mere presence of ICT in schools does not automatically translate into higher results in reading, writing, or mathematical reasoning. Research results on the popular flipped classroom concept confirm that the effectiveness of methods depends on the quality of didactic preparation and teacher support (Diaz Gomez et al., 2024). Moreover, with differentiated initial competences, technologies may deepen educational inequalities instead of reducing them. In the Polish debate, however, the digitization of schools is still reduced mainly to the issue of equipment, although the data show the greater importance of the quality of tasks and teacher preparation.

The aim of this analysis is to juxtapose Sweden’s decision with OECD data and the situation in Poland, as well as to interpret the results in the light of Marian Mazur’s theory of character. The cybernetic perspective makes it possible to treat the student as an autonomous system, whose rigid control parameters constitute the basis for development (Mazur, 1999). From this perspective, the role of the school is not to attempt to change the student’s character, but to design educational environments conducive to internal control and cognitive autonomy.

The analysis focuses on three research questions:

1. How have the indicators of basic competences (PIAAC/PISA) changed in Sweden and Poland in the years 2011/12–2022/23, and what significance do these changes have for policies limiting screens in lower grades?

2. In what way do Mazur's theoretical categories (autonomous system, internal control, "control parameters") help to interpret the effects of different online/offline mixes for students of different characters?
3. What design solutions – the selection of tools, the sequence of activities, the task-based use of AI – support the strengthening of internal control, and in what situations is there a risk of its weakening?

The structure of the article includes a discussion of the theoretical framework, a presentation of the methodology and comparative results, an analysis of the case of Sweden, and a discussion leading to conclusions and recommendations concerning the design of educational environments in the era of artificial intelligence.

## 1. Theoretical framework

### 1.1. Digital pedagogy and the online/offline mix – definitions and risks of competence inequalities

Digital pedagogy is understood as the practice of combining information and communication technologies (ICT) with traditional forms of education. The key challenge remains the balance between digital and analog elements – not for the mere presence of screens, but for the purpose of strengthening basic competences (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014).

Research shows that technology in itself does not improve the quality of learning, and the lack of teacher preparation deepens inequalities (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). Polish studies have indicated that teachers often have equipment at their disposal, but they lack tools for designing tasks that develop critical thinking and cognitive competences.

Diaz et al. (2024) show that well-designed digital books can surpass paper materials, but their effectiveness depends on the methodology of work. Without appropriate instructional design, e-books foster the shallowing of practices and the reinforcement of competence differences, especially with unequal school and family support (Holmes et al., 2022).

In this context, there is talk of "second-generation inequalities" – resulting from the quality of didactic tasks and the way online/offline is integrated, not from mere access to equipment. As Bussesund, McGarr, and Engen (2024, p. 268) noted, teachers are at the same time "key actors and main obstacles" of the digitization process, because it is their design decisions that determine whether technologies support students' development or merely deepen differences. This aligns with Hattie's (2011, p. 22) findings that visible learning depends primarily on the teacher's ability to set explicit goals, provide and seek feedback, and actively engage students in the learning process. Recent research

further confirms this perspective: Ning and Danquah (2025) show that teachers' pedagogical readiness for digital innovation is shaped not only by their individual competences, but also by institutional support, targeted professional development, and their own beliefs about the educational value of technology.

## **1.2. Mazur's theory – Key concepts**

Marian Mazur defined the human being as an autonomous system, capable of self-regulation through feedback mechanisms and a homeostat that maintains functional equilibrium in the face of disturbances (Mazur, 1976; 1999). The central concept of this theory is character, understood as "a set of rigid control properties" (Mazur, 1976)<sup>1</sup>. These are relatively stable regulatory traits that determine how an individual responds to stimuli and makes decisions.

Internal control means the ability to maintain balance despite disturbances and in didactics corresponds to processes of self-regulation. As Mazur emphasized, "the behavior of other people can be influenced only by affecting the registration potential  $V_r$ " (Mazur, 1976). This means that the school does not change the student's character but can design educational environments consistent with his or her parameters.

Although the theory was developed in the 1970s, its categories remain relevant. The concepts of character and internal control allow us to redefine the boundaries of the school's influence on the development of cognitive autonomy and critical thinking. These interpretations have been further elaborated in Polish pedagogical literature, where Wilsz (2005, 2012, 2015) developed systemic and cybernetic analyses of human functioning as a basis for educational research.

## **1.3. Pedagogical cybernetics – adaptive control**

Pedagogical cybernetics approaches the educational process as a cycle of adaptive control: identification (recognition of the student's state), intervention (selection of didactic actions), and re-identification (evaluation of effects and adjustment of the process) (Barot, 2017). Empirical studies have shown that students were "repeatedly identified by a teacher" in order to adjust tasks and tools to changing needs (Barot, 2017).

In this approach, the teacher does not change the student's control parameters but adjusts stimuli and the environment so as to support the cognitive homeostat. Adaptive control requires not only cyclical diagnosis and re-diagnosis but also the conscious design of feedbacks between teacher and student (Barot, 2017). Practice understood in this way constitutes a development of Mazur's concept, transferring it to the ground of school didactics.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations into English of the original texts are the author's own translations.

#### 1.4. Knowledge Management and Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Generative artificial intelligence carries the risk of flattening knowledge structures and lowering cognitive curiosity (Fazlagić, 2018, 2022). The effectiveness of knowledge management in schools, however, depends on the ability to create “organizational memory” – repositories of experiences, examples, and practices (Fazlagić, 2020). Knowledge management understood in this way makes it possible to counteract the effect of superficiality generated by AI, because students can use authentic sources and institutional reflection, and not only content provided by algorithms.

Shifting the burden of regulation from the student to technology weakens the processes of internal control. Therefore, didactics should include “AI-resilient” tasks, such as the reconstruction of reasoning, working with sources, counter-argumentation, and diversifying ways of acquiring knowledge (print, discussion, digital resources). An important element is also knowledge management practices in schools – the creation of communities of practice (groups of teachers and students exchanging experiences) and joint reflection on mistakes (Fazlagić, 2020). In this perspective, the role of AI is to support the planning, monitoring, and correction of the student’s actions so as to strengthen, rather than replace, his cognitive autonomy.

## 2. Methodology

The study employed a comparative case study (Sweden–Poland), secondary analysis of international data (PIAAC, PISA) and national data (GUS, BN), as well as an analysis of education policy documents announced in Sweden since 2023 (Regeringskansliet). Quantitative data made it possible to capture trends in basic competences and reading practices, while the analysis of documents enabled the reconstruction of the logic of policy (e.g., limiting screen time, investments in textbooks) (OECD, 2016; OECD, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, NCES, n.d.; OECD, 2023a, 2023b; Biblioteka Narodowa, 2016–2024; GUS, 2023; Regeringskansliet, 2023; UNESCO, 2023).

The trend analysis covered the years 2011/12–2022/23: in PIAAC – cycle 1 (2011–2016) and cycle 2 (2022/23), in PISA – the 2012–2022 editions, and in national data – annual BN indicators and GUS aggregates. The analysis of documents concerned the period 2023–2024, including communications of the Swedish government on skärmfri förskola policy and directions of digitization (Regeringskansliet, 2023; UNESCO, 2023).

Five indicators were adopted (Table 1):

1. **Adult competences (PIAAC)** – the percentage of people with a score  $\leq$  Level 1 ( $\leq 225$  points) as a measure of very low skills, identified with functional illiteracy (OECD, 2016).

2. **Student competences (PISA)** – a score below Level 2 means the absence of a minimum proficiency threshold and the risk of cognitive deficits (OECD, 2023a; OECD, 2023b).
3. **Reading practices (BN)** – no reading of books (0 per year) as an indicator of the marginalization of literacy practices (Biblioteka Narodowa, 2016–2024).
4. **Demographic-educational context (GUS)** – structure of education and participation in lifelong learning as the background for interpreting differences in PIAAC and PISA (GUS, 2023).
5. **Theoretical categories (Mazur)**- character as “a set of rigid control properties” and internal control as the ability to self-regulate the learning process (Mazur, 1976; 1999).

The analysis focuses on the percentage of people  $\leq$  Level 1. Other measures, e.g., average scores, were omitted due to clarity and usefulness for education policy.

Table 1  
Operationalizations of the Studied Variables

Variable	Operational Definition	Threshold/Category	Interpretation	Source
Adult Competences (PIAAC)	Score in the literacy and numeracy scale in the PIAAC survey (ages 16–65)	$\leq$ Level 1 ( $\leq$ 225 points)	Proxy of functional illiteracy – performing only simple text and numerical tasks.	OECD (2016), <i>Skills Matter: Further Results from the Survey of Adult Skills</i> , OECD Publishing, Paris; OECD (2019), <i>Technical Report of the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC)</i> , OECD Publishing; OECD (2023), <i>Do Adults Have the Skills Required to Succeed in the 21st Century?</i> , OECD Publishing; NCES (n.d.), <i>What PIAAC Measures</i> , National Center for Education Statistics
Student Competences (PISA)	Score of fifteen-year-olds in reading and mathematics.	$<$ Level 2	Risk of cognitive deficits – difficulty in identifying the main idea and applying basic strategies.	OECD (2023), <i>PISA 2022 Results: Country Note – Poland</i> , OECD Publishing; OECD (2023), <i>PISA 2022 Results: Country Note – Sweden</i> , OECD Publishing
Reading Practices (BN)	Declarations of Poles regarding the number of books read in a year.	0 books / year	Indicator of the marginalization of reading; proxy of the decline of cultural practices supporting literacy.	Biblioteka Narodowa (2016), <i>Stan czytelnictwa w Polsce w 2016 roku</i> ; Biblioteka Narodowa (2020), <i>Stan czytelnictwa w Polsce w 2020 roku</i> ; Biblioteka Narodowa (2022), <i>Stan czytelnictwa w Polsce w 2022 roku. Komunikat o badaniach</i> ; Biblioteka Narodowa (2024), <i>Stan czytelnictwa w Polsce w 2024 roku</i>

Table 1 (cont.)

Variable	Operational Definition	Threshold/ Category	Interpretation	Source
Educational Context (GUS)	Participation in education and lifelong learning; structure of the population's educational attainment.	GUS indicators (2011–2023)	Demographic-educational background for the interpretation of PIAAC and PISA.	Główny Urząd Statystyczny (2024), <i>Program badań statystycznych statystyki publicznej na rok 2024. Część I. Informacje o badaniach</i> , Warszawa
Theoretical Categories (M. Mazur)	Character and internal control	Definitions from Mazur (1976)	Interpretative categories: whether the educational environment strengthens or weakens self-control.	Mazur, M. (1976), <i>Cybernetyka i charakter</i> , PIW, Warszawa

Note. Author's own elaboration based on OECD (2016), U.S. Department of Education, NCES (n.d.), OECD (2024), Biblioteka Narodowa (2024), GUS (2023), and Mazur (1976, 1999).

**PIAAC Poland (2022/23).** OECD emphasizes problems with the quality of data in a significant part of the sample; the results require greater interpretative caution than in other countries (OECD, 2023, *Do Adults Have the Skills...*). **BN.** The “0 books” indicator in 2023 amounted to 57% of adults (readers about 43%), that is, slightly less than the over 60% observed earlier (Biblioteka Narodowa, 2024).

The analysis was deliberately limited to the percentage of people  $\leq$  Level 1. Other measures, e.g., average scores, were omitted due to clarity and usefulness for education policy.

## 2.1. Limitations of the Study

Comparative studies carry the risk of simplifications. In the case of Poland and Sweden, significant demographic and linguistic differences mean that “measures of competence” also reflect the cultural and social context.

In PIAAC, the methodology has changed: cycle 2 (2022/23) differs from cycle 1 not only by the transition to tablets but also by the introduction of a new domain, adaptive problem solving, instead of the earlier problem solving in technology-rich environments (OECD, 2019). This means that comparisons of results may be misleading, especially in public debate. Also in PISA 2022 it is difficult to separate the results from the effects of the pandemic and remote learning. In

Poland, this crisis was exceptionally severe, which may have influenced declines in reading and mathematics. GUS and BN data have a different character – they show cultural practices rather than skills themselves.

The declaration “I do not read books” does not mean a lack of reading ability, but indicates lifestyle and generational differences. These limitations do not invalidate the comparisons but require interpreting them with caution, taking into account the context and with the awareness that differences of a dozen or so percent between countries are of a lasting character.

The analysis is based on published PIAAC and PISA data. Reported percentages should be treated as point estimates subject to sampling error. Standard errors (SE) and confidence intervals (CI) are available in the OECD technical documentation. In this paper a descriptive approach is applied, focusing on the mapping of patterns and their educational interpretation. No causal tests were conducted, and the comparisons are cross-sectional and interpretative in nature.

## **2.2. Selection of the Comparative Country**

The choice of Sweden as the comparative country results from two premises. First, in 2023 the government in Stockholm decided on a clear correction of policy: limiting digital technologies in preschool and early school education and returning to printed textbooks and handwriting (Regeringskansliet, 2023). In Poland, where digitization has been developed for years – among others through laptop programs for students – this decision constitutes an important counterpoint.

Second, the percentage of adults with extremely low results in PIAAC ( $\leq$  Level 1) is low and stable in Sweden, while in Poland it remains high. The fact that a country with a large share of migrants maintains a low level of very low competences indicates that the Polish problem has other sources – systemic or cultural. This question constitutes a key point of the comparative analysis.

## **2.3. Analytical Procedure**

The analysis comprised three stages. First, the PIAAC results of Poland and Sweden were compared in cycles 1 and 2, limited to the literacy and numeracy domains, which are comparable between waves. Next, a table “country  $\times$  year  $\times$  domain” was developed, also including APS from 2022/23, with the reservation of its incomparability with the earlier PSTRE (OECD, 2019). In the third step, a content analysis of Swedish policy communications was carried out.

Coding according to the scheme policy element  $\rightarrow$  principle  $\rightarrow$  expected mechanism revealed a logic in which limiting screens is justified by concern for the student’s self-control and ability to concentrate. Such an approach corresponds both with Mazur’s (1976) cybernetic categories and with the concept of

adaptive control (Barot, 2017), see also the approach of predictive control in technical cybernetics, which justifies the cycle diagnosis–intervention–re-diagnosis (Barot, Kubalcik, & Bobal, 2017). From the Polish perspective, it contrasts with the parallel modernization discourse: “more technology = a better school.” This asymmetry is one of the most important findings of the analysis.

### 3. Results

The analysis of data from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) reveals a clear contrast between Poland and Sweden in terms of basic competences (Table 2).

Table 2

*Percentage of adults (ages 16–65) reaching level  $\leq$  Level 1 in PIAAC (literacy, numeracy, adaptive problem solving), Poland and Sweden, 2011/12 and 2022/23 [%]*

Country	Literacy 2011/12	Literacy 2022/23	Numeracy 2011/12	Numeracy 2022/23	Adaptive Problem Solving 2022/23*
Sweden	13.3	12	14.7	12	14
Poland	38.3**	39	38.1**	38	48

Note. Author’s own elaboration based on OECD (2016), OECD (2019), OECD (2023a), and OECD (2023b). \*Adaptive Problem Solving (APS) is reported only in cycle 2 (2022/23). In cycle 1 a different construct, PSTRE, was used and is not directly comparable. \*\*Exact values for Poland (2011/12) are taken from tables A.3.2 and A.2.2 in OECD (2016).

#### 3.1. Trends in PIAAC

In Sweden, the percentage of adults with very low competences remains at the level of 12–15% and is stable between cycles, which indicates a lasting skill base. In Poland, this indicator is more than twice as high – 38–40% – and has practically not improved over the decade. Particularly alarming are the results of the APS domain from 2022/23: 48% of adult Poles do not reach the minimum threshold, while in Sweden only 14%.

Such data mean that nearly half of adults in Poland may have difficulties adapting to new professional and social situations. This contrasts with the narrative of education policy, which for years has emphasized digitization and “skills of the future.” OECD results suggest that the real effect of these actions is limited. However, it should be remembered about the limitations: in Poland in 2022/23 problems with data quality were noted in a significant part of the sample, which requires more cautious interpretation (OECD, 2023a).

### 3.2. Trends in PISA

The results of fifteen-year-olds in the PISA study confirm the differences observed among adults. In Poland in 2022, about 25% of students scored below level 2 in reading and mathematics, which means the absence of a minimum proficiency threshold. In Sweden, the problem concerned about 17% of students, and the results were more stable. Poland ranks close to the OECD average, while Sweden maintains a level clearly above this average (OECD, 2023b; OECD, 2023c). The difference of eight percentage points translates into thousands of students: in Poland many of them remain below the threshold of minimum competences, while in Sweden they reach this threshold.

### 3.3. Interpretation of Differences

The Polish–Swedish contrast goes beyond dry numbers and has several dimensions.

1. **Competence base** – in Sweden, a stable level of skills is maintained both among adults and students. In Poland, the high percentage of adults with very low competences limits the effectiveness of the school – the system operates in the shadow of a weak family and social base.
2. **Cultural practices** – according to National Library surveys, in 2020 the indicator of at least one book read during the year was 42% (BN, 2020, p. 1), in 2022 it dropped to 34% (BN, 2022, p. 5), in 2023 it rose again to 43% (BN, 2023, p. 4), and in 2024 it slightly decreased to 41% (BN, 2024, p. 6). In Sweden, reading culture, supported by a dense network of libraries and state policy, remains a widespread practice. This is a difference not only of a statistical but also of a civilizational character.
3. **Demography and language**– factors such as the share of migrants or the structure of the language may influence the results but do not explain the scale of the contrast. Rather, they increase the demands on Sweden, which nevertheless achieves higher results.

### 3.4. Case Study: Sweden – Policy of Limiting ICT

In 2023, the Swedish government announced a package of measures limiting children’s exposure to digital tools in preschool and early school education. It included the withdrawal of the obligation to use tablets in preschools, increased expenditure on printed textbooks, and the return to learning handwriting in grades I–III. In official communications, emphasis was placed on the protection of “cognitive health” and the need to strengthen educational foundations before intensive digitization (Regeringskansliet, 2023).

Studies by Holmes et al. (2022) and Pettersson, Hult, Eriksson, and Adewumi (2024) indicate that these decisions were interpreted in schools as a signal of

care for students' attention and for balance between the analog and digital environment. In practice, they can be treated as a conscious giving of a "breath from digitization" to students.

In March 2023 the National Agency for Education announced the phasing out of mandatory digital tools in Grades 1–3. In August 2023 the Ministry of Education confirmed the return to printed textbooks as the default in basic education, and in September the government allocated SEK 685 million for the purchase of printed materials and teacher training in reading instruction. In 2024 pilot projects were launched in selected municipalities in order to evaluate learning outcomes under a reduced digital load. These actions represent a reversal of the earlier "digital-first" policy. At the time of writing no outcome data are yet available; the analysis refers to the logic of policy design rather than to its measured results.

### **3.5. Political Justifications**

The decision of the Swedish government had three sources: deteriorating competence results, concerns about the impact of screens on attention and memory, and the lack of evidence that early digitization improves the quality of learning (Regeringskansliet, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). This direction was assessed differently – as a necessary limitation or as a risk of weakening digital competences. In Poland, a similar debate practically does not exist: digitization is usually presented as a non-alternative solution.

In Poland, where nearly 40% of adults have serious deficits in basic skills, the priority should be the foundations of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Only on this basis is it worthwhile to selectively introduce new technologies and artificial intelligence into didactics. Otherwise, there is a risk of a paradox: modern tools end up in the hands of students who are unable to fully understand a simple text.

### **3.6. Mapping onto Didactic Design**

In Mazur's (1976) cybernetic perspective, these actions strengthen the attention homeostat and the student's internal control. The limitation of screens and the emphasis on handwriting do not change character but tune the environment to natural regulatory mechanisms. Sweden's policy resembles an adaptive loop: diagnosis (decline in competences), intervention (print, handwriting, reduction of screens), and re-identification of effects in PISA and national tests. This is an example of practical feedback – rarely encountered in Poland. This logic can be further illustrated in Table 3, which maps Swedish policy elements onto design principles and expected mechanisms.

Table 3

*Elements of Swedish policy – design principles – expected mechanism (Mazur / adaptive control)*

<b>Policy element (Sweden)</b>	<b>Design principle (for school/classroom)</b>	<b>Expected mechanism (Mazur / adaptive control)</b>
Investments in printed textbooks (“more reading, less screens”) Return to handwriting	Offline-first in grades I–III: most work with printed text, screen as support	Reduction of distractions → stabilization of the attention homeostat; strengthening of internal control
Investments in printed textbooks (“more reading, less screens”) Return to handwriting	Daily handwriting practice (10–15 minutes)	Integration of motor skills and memory – deeper encoding – development of agency
Limitation of screens in preschool and lower grades	Gradual introduction of ICT only after reaching proficiency thresholds in reading and arithmetic	Dosing of stimuli- reduction of cognitive overload, prevention of external control
Introduction of “silent reading windows”	Fixed periods of focus without digital devices	Micro-loops of re-identification of progress; strengthening of self-regulation capacity
Caution toward “hyper-digitization” (AI and cognitive health)	AI as an assistant, not a substitute – tasks requiring reconstruction of reasoning	Minimization of “flattening” of knowledge; preservation of the student’s cognitive autonomy

Note. Author’s own elaboration based on Regeringskansliet (2023), UNESCO (2023); OECD (2023), Holmes et al. (2022), Pettersson et al. (2024).

The Swedish case shows that ICT limitations can be consistently embedded within a systemic logic. Strengthening analog elements – such as the textbook, handwriting, or silent reading – stabilizes attention and supports self-regulation. For Poland, with a high proportion of adults with low competences, this means the necessity of building foundations before digitization. Technologies, including AI, can support learning, but only when they are based on a solid foundation of reading and arithmetic.

## 4. Discussion

The analysis of PIAAC and PISA shows that without strong foundations in reading, writing, and arithmetic, the inclusion of digital technologies and artificial intelligence into didactics is risky. The “offline-first, AI-assisted” model assumes the dominance of analog activities in early school education, and the introduction of digital tools only after reaching the proficiency threshold (e.g., Level 2 in PISA; OECD, 2023). Technology makes sense when the student is able to work with text independently.

According to Mazur's (1976; 1999) theory, the goal is the protection of the attention homeostat and the strengthening of internal control. The implementation of such a model, however, encounters barriers: some teachers have become accustomed to tablets, and parents treat them as a symbol of a modern school. In Poland, the debate focuses more on equipment than on the quality of didactic practices. Such an interpretation resonates with Wilsz's (2012, 2015) argument that cybernetics provides a key to the interdisciplinarity of pedagogy and its application to practical educational design.

The design of learning environments should be based on the logic of adaptive control (Barot, 2017): identification of the student's level, intervention (greater share of offline when deficits are present; task-based use of AI after crossing the threshold), and re-identification of effects. The online/offline "mix" is not a slogan but a sequence of actions: textbooks, discussion, and handwriting must balance the screens. AI, in turn, should support the reconstruction of reasoning and additional tasks, not provide ready-made answers (Fazlagić, 2018).

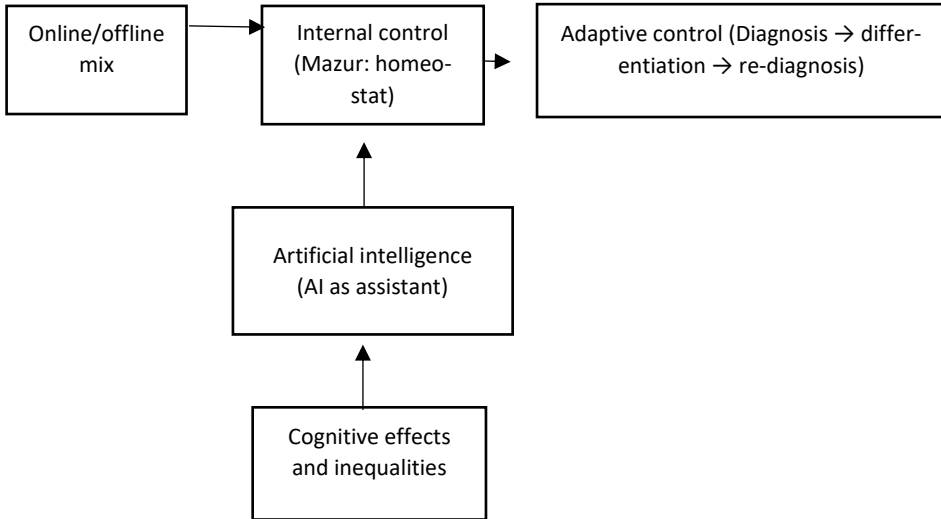
Effectiveness also depends on the culture of the school. Fazlagić (2018, 2022) emphasizes the role of communities of practice and learning from mistakes, while Bussesund, McGarr, and Engen (2024) highlight the responsibility of teachers as both the main actors and the main barriers to digitization. UNESCO (2023) and Holmes et al. (2022) warn that AI, when used unreflectively, flattens knowledge and lowers cognitive curiosity. The answer lies in "AI-resilient" tasks that require recording the thought process and engaging in critical discussion.

Critics of the offline-first model point to greater motivation and personalization thanks to technology. However, OECD (2023) data suggest that this effect occurs only after reaching the proficiency threshold. Similarly, the argument about a "regression of digital competences" is misguided—offline foundations are a prerequisite for effective digital work.

The comparative difficulties of PIAAC and PISA stem from demographics and reading culture but do not invalidate the conclusions. Therefore, triangulation was applied: numerical data were combined with policy documents and theoretical frameworks. The paradox is clear: tools promised as "democratizing" access to knowledge may flatten its structure. This is confirmed by reports from the Supreme Audit Office, which indicate that the lack of teacher preparation effectively limits the impact of school digitization.

The scheme (Fig. 1) shows the flow of dependencies in the design of learning environments. The starting point is the online/offline proportions, which stabilize attention and support self-regulation. Internal control is monitored in an adaptive cycle (diagnosis – intervention – re-diagnosis) (Barot, 2017, p. 7). AI appears only after reaching the proficiency threshold and serves as an assistant – supporting analysis and the reconstruction of reasoning instead of providing

ready-made answers. In this way, a well-designed mix can both reduce inequalities and protect against cognitive overload.



*Fig. 1*

Conceptual scheme

Note. Author's own elaboration based on Mazur (1976, 1999), Barot (2017), Fazlagić (2018, 2022), OECD (2023a), Regeringskansliet (2023).

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The comparison between Poland and Sweden shows that effective digitization of education begins with the basics. PIAAC and PISA data demonstrate that students who do not reach the minimum proficiency threshold in reading, writing, and arithmetic cannot fully benefit from digital tools—technologies may even weaken their independence. Therefore, in grades I–III, analog practices should be the priority: working with books, handwriting, and silent reading.

AI should serve as an assistant, not a substitute. Its task is to support the reasoning process—generating additional exercises or solution variants—rather than providing ready-made answers. The key is “AI-resilient” tasks that require recording the reasoning process and engaging in critical discussion, ensuring that AI strengthens internal control instead of replacing it (Fazlagić, 2018, 2022).

The practical implementation of this approach requires the logic of adaptive control (Barot, 2017): diagnosis of the level, adjustment of the online/offline proportions, and re-diagnosis. This cycle makes it possible to respond to the diverse needs of students and to protect against cognitive overload.

The organizational culture of the school is also crucial: communities of practice, repositories of student work, and learning from mistakes create resources that counteract the “flattening of knowledge” by generative tools (Fazlagić, 2018, 2022).

The Swedish experience shows that education policy should balance investments in traditional practices with the development of teachers’ competencies for critical, task-based use of AI. In Poland, with a weaker baseline of adult competences, the necessary sequence is: first the fundamentals, then the careful integration of technology (BN, 2020, p. 1; BN, 2022, p. 5; BN, 2023, p. 4; BN, 2024, p. 6).

Thus understood, the “offline-first, AI-assisted” strategy minimizes the risk of deepening inequalities and prepares students for the conscious use of AI. This is not only a matter of education policy but also a civilizational challenge: how to design a school that strengthens cognitive autonomy instead of reducing the student to the role of a content consumer. This challenge is echoed in recent research on inclusive education, where the dynamism of character is proposed as a tool for supporting teachers in diverse classroom environments (Ziębacz, 2024).

Meta-analyses indicate a consistent advantage of paper-based reading over digital reading, especially in tasks requiring deeper reflection (Delgado et al., 2018; Clinton, 2019). At the same time, research on the flipped classroom model confirms its moderate effectiveness when appropriate instructional support is provided (Lo & Hew, 2017).

This paper does not test causal relationships between ICT use and learning outcomes. The analysis is descriptive and is based on international assessment data and one national case study. The focus is on policy logics and their possible implications. The results should not be overgeneralized beyond the cultural and institutional contexts of Poland and Sweden.

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## Edukacja w epoce sztucznej inteligencji. Wnioski z decyzji Szwecji dla pedagogiki i projektowania środowisk dydaktycznych

### Streszczenie

Decyzja rządu Szwecji o ograniczeniu technologii cyfrowych w edukacji wczesnoszkolnej została potraktowana jako punkt wyjścia do refleksji nad projektowaniem dydaktyki w epoce sztucznej inteligencji. Analiza została osadzona w ramach pedagogiki cyfrowej, teorii systemów autonomicznych Mariana Mazura oraz cybernetyki pedagogicznej. Wykorzystano dane OECD (PIAAC, PISA) oraz statystyki krajowe (GUS, BN) dotyczące kompetencji podstawowych i praktyk czytelniczych. Porównanie trendów z lat 2011/12–2022/23 pokazuje, że w Szwecji odsetek osób o bardzo niskich umiejętnościach pozostaje stabilny (12–14%), podczas gdy w Polsce sięga niemal 40% w zakresie czytania i rozumowania matematycznego oraz 48% w rozwiązywaniu problemów. Wyniki wskazują, iż sam dostęp do technologii nie gwarantuje rozwoju kompetencji, a przy słabszej bazie może pogłębiać nierówność. Wnioski akcentują potrzebę sekwencyjnych modeli dydaktycznych „offline-first, AI-assisted”, w których tradycyjne praktyki stanowią fundament, a sztuczna inteligencja wspiera jedynie krytyczne i autonomiczne myślenie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** pedagogika cyfrowa; sztuczna inteligencja w edukacji; sterowanie wewnętrzne, projektowanie środowisk dydaktycznych; analfabetyzm funkcjonalny.



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# The Perception of Teachers and Technology in Polish Policy Documents Devoted to Information and Communication Technologies in Education

## Abstract

The article analyses how teachers and technology are presented in Polish policy documents concerning education. Using critical discourse analysis and corpus analysis, the authors identified three main themes: infrastructure deficiencies, insufficient digital competences of teachers, and online security threats. Teachers are portrayed as unprepared for technological challenges, requiring constant training, but at the same time remaining an essential part of the education system. The documents call for a redefinition of their role – from experts to mentors or guides in the learning process. Technology is presented as an independent force driving social and educational development, capable of solving key problems in education. However, the authors point out that this dominant discourse does not take into account the social and institutional context of the changes taking place, which leads to a simplified picture of the relationship between education and technology. The text draws attention to the lack of critical reflection on technology as a socially conditioned phenomenon – instead, it is accepted as an independent, self-sufficient force, detached from the interests and activities of specific entities.

**Keywords:** digital education, teacher, technology, digital competences, discourse analysis.

## Introduction

In recent years we are observing the growth of the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in education. This change – which had already been reinforced all over Europe through the postulate of the promotion of digital education (see e.g., European Commission 2019) – has accelerated in recent years because of two factors. The first was the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced teachers and students to almost instantaneously switch to digitally-mediated learning methods (see e.g., Winiarczyk, Warzocha, 2021). The second and more recent one was the release, in November 2022, of ChatGPT, the freely available generative AI chatbot by the company OpenAI. Importantly in the context of education, this tool allowed to easily create original pieces of text on a level that was sufficient to meet the grading standards of many teachers, and to solve problems requiring using mathematical equations or coding.

The aforementioned technological changes are reflected also in Polish educational policy documents. These types of documents set the direction of the development of the Polish education system, contain diagnoses of the current educational system, and recommend actions from policymakers, administrators and teachers. Importantly for the current study, they are also based on – not always explicitly stated – assumptions concerning key questions relating to the role of technology and teachers in education and society as a whole. The aim of this text is to recognize and understand these assumptions.

## Theoretical underpinnings

The study uses an approach based on the interlinked methodologies of pragmatic linguistics, critical discourse analysis and critique of ideology. Taking the perspective of critical discourse analysis means that the object of the study is not to determine the factuality or truthfulness of the analyzed documents, nor is it to reconstruct the actual beliefs of the authors or policymakers. The analysis concentrates on the ways in which reality is constructed with linguistic means, i.e., what patterns of meaning and interpretational frameworks are created and reinforced in the documents. This means that this approach does not concentrate on the factual value of the diagnoses and postulates presented in the documents, but rather on the way in which the language of the documents naturalizes certain beliefs about the role of technology and teachers. The *critical* part of the study concerns the unveiling of ideological underpinnings of discourse in the documents rather than discussing with the arguments presented therein.

We define ideology following Jef Verschueren, who claims that “We can define as ideological any basic pattern of meaning or frame of interpretation bear-

ing on or involved in (an) aspect(s) of social ‘reality’ (in particular in the realm of social relations in the public sphere), felt to be commonsensical, and often functioning in a normative way” (Verschuieren, 2012, p. 10).

Ideology in this sense is not an axiologically loaded notion – like it is in the opposition between (real, true) science and (bad, false) ideology we often observe in the public sphere – but rather a term describing a set of basic and unreflectively accepted (or at least not put into question) beliefs concerning a given aspect of social reality. Verschuieren puts the word “reality” in parentheses, because any critique of ideology stipulates that social “reality”, even though it seems objective and unquestionable to the persons who function within it, is in fact an effect of complex processes of “normalization” and “objectivization”.

The second part of Verschuieren’s definition – referring to the “normative” character of ideological patterns of meaning or frames of interpretation – means that in this text we are interested primarily in the norms that are created for social actors who are denoted by the analyzed terms. In particular, we are trying to understand, what actions are required from “teachers” towards “technology” and how the two terms are valued – e.g., when is a teacher “good” or when is technology “bad”.

According to Verschuieren, “(One of) the most visible manifestation(s) of ideology is LANGUAGE USE or DISCOURSE, which may reject, construct, and/or maintain ideological patterns.” (Verschuieren, 2012, p. 17). Verschuieren’s pragmatic-linguistic approach suggests that the two terms (language use and discourse) are equivalent – this of course is a controversial decision from the point of view of some classic conceptions of discourse (see e.g., Foucault 1971), but, regardless of any care for theoretical orthodoxy, does unequivocally point to language as a privileged space for the analysis of ideology. Crucially, the pragmatic approach recognizes the *productive* role of discourse, which means that it claims that language does not (only) describe reality, but also creates or constructs it. This is especially true with regards to institutions of power (e.g., Foucault 1977) – this is why policy documents, among others, are a promising object of this type of analysis.

One of the key functions of the language of power is the legitimization of certain practices of management; these practices are shown as necessary with regards to the aspects of reality that have been naturalized. In the case of a change as significant as the introduction of digital technologies in education, observing such practices seems especially important.

## State of the art

Earlier analyses concerning the representation of the problem of technology in educational policy documents suggest that technology is almost always valor-

ized positively as a means of offering solutions to many problems plaguing education, and that teachers need to adjust to the speed and character of technological development. E.g., a study which – like this one – was conducted as a part of the EDUCAT(H)UM project and concerned EU educational policy documents revealed them as

portraying EdTech as a panacea without adequately addressing the multifaceted challenges and implications. Thus, the problem of an *a priori* ‘inadequate’ teacher, constantly lacking digital competencies, is discursively constructed as commonsensical. Simultaneously, the solution to the problem is imposed as an implicit demand to use EdTech, neglecting and suppressing the complexity of EdTech, as addressed by critical research (Žmavc & Bezlaj, 2024a, p. 12).

A study concerning Slovenian policy documents yielded similar conclusions (Žmavc & Bezlaj, 2024b).

“Critical research”, to which Žmavc and Bezlaj point – as well as other texts reflecting critically on technology in education – show a wider context of social and political challenges connected to using technology in schools and in education more widely. For example, in an analysis of documents referring to the use of technologies in higher education after the Covid-19 pandemic and published by British foundations and universities, Daniel Clark points out that the use of technologies in education “has been legitimised through the symbolic and authoritative nature of discourse, [which] is inexorably entrenched in the conditionalities of its production.” (Clark, 2023, p. 424). In other words, the techno-optimistic discourse of educational institutions is, in this view, a reflection of material conditions which (especially in systems such as the British one) are subordinated to the neoliberal economic model. This model will not only favor the tendency for educational institutions to resemble private companies whose main goal is market success, but also the likening of teachers to persons who are responsible for training in such institutions. As Malin Ideland remarks based on her research on the discourse of Swedish educational institutions:

The most obvious characteristic in the teacher figuration is the coach, the teacher who customizes his/her work to the individual student and his/her needs of knowledge, location and timeframes, emphasizing that education is not a collective activity but a personal business (Ideland, 2020, p. 43).

On the other hand, the field of data collection that grows larger thanks to technological advancements, leading to the growing “optimalization” of teaching, and making José van Dijck and his co-authors say that the role of the teachers changes “from classroom directors to dashboard controllers” (van Dijck et al. 2018, p. 123). At the same time, as Ideland adds,

Perhaps paradoxically, it is (still) impossible to articulate that teachers will disappear from school. On the contrary, they need to remain, despite the technological revolution (Ideland, 2020, p. 43).

Research concerning technologies in education in Western and Northern Europe thus point to two main threads – a not-sufficiently-critical technooptimism and the need to change the role of the teachers in order to better adjust to economic conditions and more expertly use technology. It could thus be expected that similar threads would be found in Polish educational policy documents – however, these similarities could be limited because of two main reasons. Firstly, it seems that Polish education is much less exposed to market forces than in the case of Britain or Sweden<sup>1</sup>; it could thus be expected that the change of the teacher’s role would be presented in a less “neoliberal” manner. Secondly, the analyses of earlier documents concerning technologies in education point to the fact that the technooptimistic tendency also seems less proclaimed; instead, the aspect of safe use of technologies is underscored (e.g., Cicha et al, 2021). As Adam Mazurkiewicz points out, according to Polish government documents and projects,

the digitalization of the school should not be a goal ‘in itself’ but rather [it should be] subordinated to general teaching goals. The presence of information and communication technologies as such remains insufficient if it does not carry with itself the awareness of its limitations (Mazurkiewicz, 2020, p. 117).

## **Methodological underpinnings**

The object of this study are Polish strategic, program and normative documents concerning educational policy in Poland insofar as it concerns information and communication technologies. The analysis concentrates on the ways in which the representation of technology and the role of the teachers in the process of digital transformation of education is constructed. These documents, which are an expression of official institutional discourse, determine the directions of the development of the educational system and shape social beliefs concerning the place of technology in the teaching process. The goal of the study is to recognize and understand the ideological assumptions that can be found in the analyzed documents, as well as establishing how information and communication technology is described within them, what are the meanings ascribed to it and how the role of the teacher with regards to the challenges of digital education is defined. The analysis aims to ascertain in what way the Polish institutional discourse describes the relationship between education and technology and what narrative it constructs in this regard.

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<sup>1</sup> This sentence may seem problematic with regards to Sweden, as this country is perceived as traditionally socialdemocratic – and indeed, the level of private expense in Sweden is lowest in the EU (if you compare the percentage of household expense devoted to education, see Karwowska, Piekut 2024), however research suggests that the way public money is spent is leading to a specific “marketization” of education (e.g., Lundahl et al 2013).

The main research question is: how are informational and communicational technologies described in Polish educational policy documents?

This question was then developed into three more specific questions:

1. What are the main problems constructed by the Polish policy documents concerning technologies in education?
2. How are teachers described in these documents?
3. How is technology described in these documents?

In the study, we adopted preliminary hypotheses, which were not treated as rigid expectations or final theses, but rather served as primary stipulations, in line with the exploratory character of qualitative analysis (Silverman, 2008). Their goal was to direct the process of interpretation rather than to determine the final results of the study. These hypotheses are as follows:

H1: In Polish educational documents, technology is not presented as a value in itself, but rather a tool subordinated to teaching goals.

H2: As opposed to Western narratives, the Polish technological discourse is less technooptimistic and puts more weight on the dangers and limitations of technology.

H3: In the Polish context the expectations from the teacher with respect to using technology are less connected to making work more flexible and subordinating to the market, and more to ensuring the quality of teaching.

These hypotheses are treated as preliminary stipulations – general and flexible interpretative suggestions, which may be modified in the course of the analysis. Their function is to point to possible avenues of research and the preliminary situation of the study in the wider context of educational discourses, and not the strict determination of causal relationships. In this way, the procedure adopted in the study follows the logic of qualitative research, in which preliminary hypotheses have a heuristic role and serve an exploratory function (Rapley 2013).

In the study, we analyzed thirteen documents concerning technologies in educational policy, issued by various public institutions. These were, first of all, the Ministries of National Education and of Digital Affairs. Some documents were also issued by the Educational Research Institute (Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych, IBE) and Centre for Education Development (Ośrodek Rozwoju Edukacji, ORE) – two state institutions that are subordinate to the Ministry of National Education. IBE is an institute responsible for studies on education, and ORE is a national public institution devoted to training teachers and promoting teacher excellence. For the analysis, we chose documents that concerned using technologies in education.

To show a wide spectrum of approaches to the topic, we selected various types of documents – manuals, reports, a monograph, as well as bills and resolutions of the Council of Ministers. This multi-genre approach is consistent with good practices in data gathering – Vershueren (2012, p. 26) calls this “horizontal

variation". The publication time of the documents spans five years, from 2019 to 2024. This allowed us to focus on relatively new documents, in which we could find observations concerning the time before and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

As it turned out, there were relatively few documents which met the criteria and it was initially difficult to see that they are connected by a common idea or vision of approaching the problem of technology. The situation changed in on 12 September 2024, when at the motion of the Ministry of National Education the Council of Ministers accepted a resolution concerning the *Policy for the Digital Transformation of Education (Polityka Cyfrowej Transformacji Edukacji, PCTE)*, a document which sets the direction in which technology should be used in education. This document describes the strategy for changes in Polish education with regards to the different aspects of technology use in the next few years.

The table below presents a detailed list of all the sources along with the type/genre of the source and the publishing institution.

Table 1

List of policy documents concerning the use of technology in education

No.	Document name (original with English translation)	Year	Type	Publisher
1	<i>Bezpieczna szkoła. Zagrożenia i zalecane działania profilaktyczne w zakresie bezpieczeństwa fizycznego i cyfrowego uczniów (Safe School. Dangers and Prophylactic Recommendations for Physical and Digital Safety of Students)</i>	2020	Manual	Ministry of National Education
2	<i>Sztuczna inteligencja (AI) jako megatrend kształtujący edukację. Jak przygotować się na szanse i wyzwania społeczno-gospodarcze związane ze sztuczną inteligencją? (Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a megatrend shaping education. How to prepare for the socio-economical opportunities and challenges linked to artificial intelligence)</i>	2022	Report	Institute of Educational Research (IBE)
3	<i>Umiejętności nauczycieli w kontekście potrzeb nowoczesnej edukacji (The abilities of teachers in the context of the needs of modern education)</i>	2022	Monograph	Institute of Educational Research (IBE)
4	<i>Nauka w cyfrowym świecie transformacji technologicznej i globalnych wyzwań (Learning in the digital world of technological transformations and global challenges)</i>	2023	Manual	Centre for Education Development (ORE)
5	<i>Polityka cyfrowej transformacji edukacji – diagnoza (Policy for the Digital Transformation of Education – Diagnosis)</i>	2024	Report	Ministry of National Education

Table 1 (cont.)

No.	Document name (original with English translation)	Year	Type	Publisher
6	<i>Polityka cyfrowej transformacji edukacji (Policy for the Digital Transformation of Education)</i>	2024	Bill	Ministry of National Education
7	<i>Polityka cyfrowej transformacji edukacji – uzasadnienie (Policy for the Digital Transformation of Education – Justification)</i>	2024	Bill	Ministry of National Education
8	<i>Strategia cyberbezpieczeństwa Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 2019-2024 (Strategy of Cyber Safety for the Republic of Poland, 2019-2024)</i>	2019	Resolution of the Council of Ministers	Ministry of Digital Affairs
9	<i>Polityka dla rozwoju sztucznej inteligencji w Polsce (Policy for the development of Artificial Intelligence in Poland)</i>	2020	Resolution of the Council of Ministers	The Council of Ministers' Committee for Digital Affairs
10	<i>Ustawa z dnia 7.07.2023r. o wsparciu rozwoju kompetencji cyfrowych uczniów i nauczycieli (Bill of 7 July 2023 on supporting the development of digital competences of students and teachers)</i>	2023	Bill	Ministry of National Education
11	<i>Program Rozwoju Kompetencji Cyfrowych (The program for the development of digital competences)</i>	2023	Resolution of the Council of Ministers	Ministry of Digital Affairs
12	<i>Zintegrowana Strategia Umiejętności (część ogólna) (The integrated strategy of abilities – general part)</i>	2019	Resolution of the Council of Ministers	Ministry of National Education
13	<i>Zintegrowana Strategia Umiejętności (część szczegółowa) Polityka na rzecz rozwijania umiejętności zgodnie z ideą uczenia się przez całe życie (Integrated strategy of abilities – detailed part. The policy for developing abilities according to the idea of lifelong learning)</i>	2020	Resolution of the Council of Ministers	Ministry of National Education

Source: Author's data

The study was conducted with the use of critical discourse analysis aided by corpus analysis with the use of the LanCSBox tool (Brezina et al., 2021). As Paul Baker points out (2010, p. 123), corpus analysis in itself is not a sufficient method of analysis of the ideological assumptions of studied texts; in this study, it allowed to ascertain the choice of the texts and reach preliminary conclusions.

After the documents were uploaded into LanCSBox and the corpus<sup>2</sup> was created, first we analyzed which single words are mentioned most often in the text,

<sup>2</sup> For the needs of this article, we use the term "corpus" for our set of documents, because of the use of corpus analysis as a tool; it should be noted that strictly speaking, the term corpus should not be used for such a small and selective dataset (see Rühlemann 2019, 1).

in order to judge if the analyzed documents are indeed focussed on the key themes. In this analysis we came upon the following words (indicated below with the number of appearances in the documents and with the most common English equivalent of the term):

1. Umiejętności (*abilities*) 1738
2. Edukacji (*education*) 1421
3. Nauczycieli (*teachers*) 1153
4. Uczniów (*students*) 1110
5. Pracy (*work*) 1053
6. Rozwoju (*development*) 1052
7. Cyfrowych (*digital*) 994
8. Kompetencji (*competences*) 923
9. Działania (*actions*) 884
10. Szkoły (*schools*) 741
11. Technologii (*technology*) 660

As some of the terms that are crucial to the analysis, are composed of more than one word, we also searched for the most common double ngrams (i.e., combinations of two words). The most important were those which had the most appearances:

1. uczenia się (*learning*) (514)
2. kompetencji cyfrowych (*digital competences*) (505)
3. sztucznej inteligencji (*artificial intelligence*) (442)

After this initial confirmation of the validity of the documents for the chosen themes, we carefully analyzed concordance lines for the most important subjects, which allowed us to see them in a wider context (seven words before and after the given key word). The analysis of concordance lines was performed for the terms which were found the most important for the theme of the research based on the earlier parts of the analysis and the discussion within the EDUCAT(H)UM project, including analyses by Žmavc and Bezljaj (2024a, 2024b). Ultimately, the most interesting results from the point of view of the research goals were obtained through the analysis of the following terms (the asterisk was used to include the declinations or conjugations of the terms, the different genres and adjective forms of nouns, e.g., technologiczny – technological. The English translation is given for the most typical version of the term):

- nauczyciel\* (*teacher*) (2188)
- technologi\* (*technology*) (1213)
- ucz\* się (*learning*) (834)
- technologi\* w edukacj\* (*technology in education*) (11)
- korzystan\* z technologi\* (*using technology*) (42)
- rozw\* kompetencj\* cyfrow\* (*development of digital competences*) (209)
- kompetencj\* cyfrow\* nauczyciel\* (*digital competences of teachers*) (27)

— edukacj\* cyfrow\* (*digital education*) (129)

The analysis of concordance lines enabled the initial identification of main subjects addressed in Polish educational policy documents concerning technology. Having identified these subjects, we performed a detailed analysis of thusly identified fragments of the texts, which required us to go beyond the 15-word concordance lines we looked at previously.

## Analysis of results

### 1. Main problems constructed by the Polish policy documents concerning technologies in education

The analysis of the documents revealed three main themes concerning technology. The first one refers to furnishing schools with the appropriate, modern equipment and elements of technological infrastructure. The documents point out that insufficient equipment makes using digital solutions in the classroom difficult. Infrastructural problems – mainly concerning the lack of sufficiently fast internet connections – make it impossible to conduct classes with the wide use of digital technologies, e.g., because not all students can use the internet connection at once. These themes are present in the documents even though the Ministry of National Education conducted a number of projects aiming to finance equipping schools in the newest devices. Example:

Polish schools, despite carrying out several projects (e.g., Digital School, Laptop for the Student, Laboratories of the Future, Active Whiteboard or the project of the National Educational Network) still face shortages of modern computer equipment for students and teachers, and of sufficiently robust internet connections. In many schools the equipment is obsolete and middle- and high schools were recently neglected in the shipments of computers and other equipment. (Rada Ministrów, 2024, p. 42)<sup>3</sup>

The second theme concerns the competences of the teachers. Every document mentions that the teachers have inadequate skills to conduct lessons with the use of digital technologies, which is why they need to train constantly. It is suggested that the teachers constantly deepen their knowledge of using technologies in education and – in the *Policy for the Digital Transformation of Education* – that each school appoints a coordinator of digital education, whose role it would be to support teachers in using digital technology in various activities. For example:

Teachers do not question the attractiveness of digital technologies, even though many of them have reserves in using them in everyday work. Although 90% of teachers declare the use of digital technologies in teaching, expository methods dominate [...] Teachers

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<sup>3</sup> All translations into English of the original texts are the authors' own translations.

still use ICTs sparingly to communicate with the students' parents, as well as other teachers or schools. (Rada Ministrów, 2019 a, p. 41).

The last theme is online safety. The policy documents point out the many dangers of the web and present tips and recommendations, how to warn young people against them. For example:

Cyber safety education should be available from the earliest stage, as soon as the children and young people have access to digital services – it would be best if it were conducted before the children enter the digital world; it is often practically required during the three first years of primary school. Taking into consideration the subject of the safe use of cyberspace, it is assumed that the teachers will receive support in the carrying out of the basic teaching goals, especially in the updating of curricula for different subjects according to the state-of-the-art knowledge of safe use of digital technologies. Moreover, actions will be taken to support the constant improvement of the teachers in the realm of modern technologies and cyber safety, taking into account the diagnosed needs of a given school or institution. (Rada Ministrów, 2019 b, p. 27)

## 2. The image of the teacher in the policy documents

The analyzed documents show two elements of the image of the teacher, which remain in some tension with one another: (1) teachers are shown as not possessing adequate digital competences; (2) with the ongoing digitalization of education, the role of the teacher is shifting from the expert and the only possessor of knowledge to a partner in the search for knowledge and in the process of education in general.

### A. TEACHER AS UNEDUCATED AND IN NEED OF TRAINING

Teachers are shown as persons who do not possess full digital competences in the potential sense (i.e., are not sufficiently *prepared* to use ICTs), and do not actually use them in a practical sense. Examples:

Research shows that teachers in all types of schools have a relatively low knowledge about various aspects of digital safety. It has also been shown that only some teachers update their digital competences, and that persons with average and high ability of using ICTs in teaching are a small minority in schools. (MEN, 2020, p. 68).

Even if [the possibilities to use AI tools] will become available, teachers are not ready to introduce them and to use them (Fazlagić, 2022, p. 82).

most teachers do not have neither the time nor the technical abilities to create their own virtual reality applications (Fazlagić, 2022, p. 136).

Teachers still show a very limited use of the great potential given by information and communication technologies for teaching their subjects and more general abilities (Płusa, 2023, p. 58)

It can be assumed that to diagnose a competence gap in the use of ICTs by teachers, one would have high abilities in this regard (or tools from experts). Meanwhile, only a minority of the teachers used active methods of teaching with ICTs, the use of which is facili-

tated by high digital competences. One can thus estimate that less than half of the teachers (including directors) have the knowledge and abilities allowing for a profound analysis of competence gaps with regards to ICTs (Rada Ministrów, 2024, p. 122).

As we can thus see, the diagnosis of low abilities of teachers pertains both to general questions concerning the use of ICTs and specific areas in which such technologies are or could be used – cybersecurity or online safety, teaching with the use of AI-powered apps, or creating their own VR apps. The last cited fragment points out another difficulty – teachers and school directors, not having sufficiently high digital competences, are not able to understand exactly in what areas they should develop their skills.

Teachers are also shown as unwilling to use digital solutions. These types of narratives are a form of constructing of a normative vision of the approach to technology. Consistent with Verschueren's approach, the language not only describes the "anxieties" of the teachers, but also reinforces them and gives them meaning, thus legitimizing further systemic actions:

We should also remember the constant anxieties of teachers that any technology introduced in schools may result in the diminishing of their role and their eventual elimination (Fazlagić, 2022, p. 75).

Teachers do not question the attractiveness of digital technologies, but many of them have reserves about using them in everyday work (Rada Ministrów, 2019 a, p. 41).

Teachers are mostly shown as critically assessing their abilities concerning ICTs and willing to educate themselves. Interestingly, this diagnosis is often justified by invoking research concerning the teachers themselves – and students as well.

The results of the study<sup>4</sup> conducted in the spring of 2020 on a non-representative sample of over 3 thousand Polish teachers showed that only 5% of them felt very well prepared to conduct online courses; students expressed a similar sentiment, with only 8% judging the abilities of the teachers as high and one in five saying that they are low (Rada Ministrów, 2023, p. 37).

With regards to the way of conducting online classes, as many as 45% of teachers felt a low or average level of preparedness to teach in this way (Osowska, 2022, p. 125).

Also in the case of regular forms of teaching, a great majority of teachers feel the need to coordinate the use of ICTs, expressed by the support for the idea of introducing the function of a school ICT coordinator (Rada Ministrów, 2024, p. 123).

In other words, the documents show that the need of teacher training, stemming from the low abilities of the teachers, is observed by teachers themselves and by students who interact with them, and not, e.g., as a result of a policy

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<sup>4</sup> The fragment concerns the study: Plebańska, M. et al. Edukacja zdalna w czasach COVID-19. Raport z badania. Wydział Pedagogiczny Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego. 2020. Online. Access 17 October 2020. [https://files.librus.pl/articles/00pic/20/07/09/librus/a\\_nauczanie\\_zdalne\\_oczami\\_nauczycieli\\_i\\_uczniow\\_RAPORT.pdf](https://files.librus.pl/articles/00pic/20/07/09/librus/a_nauczanie_zdalne_oczami_nauczycieli_i_uczniow_RAPORT.pdf)

decision concerning the shape or character of education in Poland. The references to quantitative data serve a legitimizing function and, in the light of the adopted theoretical frame, do not negate the ideological character of the narrative. On the contrary, they strengthen the naturalized image of the teacher as “inadequate” to the needs of new technologies. Nothing suggests that these documents are based, in this aspect, on, e.g., institutionally created list of abilities or actions that the teacher should be able to perform (although such a list could be created with regards to students, see e.g., Cicha et al. 2021); the vocabulary used suggests rather the necessity to adjust to a technological reality, which is external not only to the teachers, but also the institutions that are performing the diagnosis. In the perspective of critical discourse analysis, these types of representations are not only a neutral reflection of the results of empirical studies, but are an element of an ideological interpretative framework in which the language of the analyzed documents functions. This means that the teacher with his or her actual diverse experiences and abilities is not described as a real participant of the education system, but is rather constructed as a discursive figure – someone who is perpetually placed in the position of “not adjusted” to contemporary demands. In this logic, the teacher is always “at a deficit”, because his or her competences are systematically described in terms of a lack that needs to be constantly filled through training and other reparatory activities. In effect, the discourse of educational policy naturalizes the vision of a teacher whose main role becomes the constant catching up with technological progress, and not the active shaping of its directions.

The cure for these inadequacies – aside from furnishing schools and teachers with the right equipment, as mentioned above – is first and foremost training:

In particular, the teacher should have the possibility to know in advance the educational uses of the equipment that will be available at school or for students. New equipment in schools should be introduced along with teacher training (Rada Ministrów, 2024, p. 11).

The fulfillment of the postulate to train teachers or all subjects, as well as counselors and psychologists, is of great importance (MEN, 2020, p. 68).

Training concerning chosen aspects of digital safety needs to be organized obligatorily, using the means that are available for school authorities to raise teachers’ skills, or means from external sources (such as EU projects, the school board or ministry) – with regards to the purchase of new digital devices or installation/changes of/in the school computer/internet network (MEN, 2020, p. 69).

Teachers are thus described first and foremost as being in the process of change – not ready for digital transformation, but aware of their shortcomings and mostly (despite some reservations) amenable to undergoing the right training to ameliorate the situation. We write “undergoing” training, and not “participating in” training, because it seems that even though teachers are described as agreeing to training and even signaling the need to be trained, they are shown

as being fundamentally passive in this process; the documents depict them as objects of action, and not acting subjects. This can be interpreted as the naturalization of technological discourse (Verschueren), in which technology is treated as an external force to which everyone needs to adjust. In consequence, the naturalization of this discourse leaves no room for reflection if teacher training in this aspect is indeed justified – the answer is always already given as “yes”. The discussion does not concern the purposefulness of training, but is only conducted at the level of implementation, since policy documents claim that the training is indispensable. This way, another thread of the narrative appears as a natural consequence of the discourse: training is supposed to be the answer to the purportedly inadequate teacher skills.

#### B. CHANGING ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Describing the teachers as inadequately proficient in using ICTs and passive in their adoption in schools remains in tension with another thread present in the documents, namely the claim that the teacher is an absolutely crucial part of education, but his or her role needs to change. This tension is essentially in line with Ideland’s observation that within the discourse it is impossible to think of a school without teachers (even though they are not fundamentally adjusted to the contemporary world).

On a more superficial level, the described change concerns the use of technology – the documents suggest that the use of ICTs, especially AI-based applications, will help to improve the working conditions of the teachers, especially through making classes more engaging and replacing teachers in the most tedious and time-consuming activities. For example in the document *Nauka w cyfrowym świecie (Education in the digital world)* (Płusa, 2023, pp. 84-93), contains a number of examples of using applications for communication and especially making the teachers’ work easier (much of the space is devoted to teaching students who experienced migration). Applications using artificial intelligence are deemed most promising – they are supposed to help not only in planning lessons, grading and clerical work, but also, e.g., in communicating with parents:

Teachers are obligated to keep constant relationships with parents. AI could relieve teachers in some tasks involved in this, especially if AI will allow for giving direct feedback concerning the student to the parents, without the need to engage the teacher (Fazlagić, 2022, p. 35).

Teachers could devote time that is saved in this way for example to “teaching or rest” (Fazlagić, 2022, p. 35), which, along with partly automated psychological help, could reduce burnout:

The burden of administrative tasks also has considerable impact on the level of motivation to work and often results in burnout. Artificial Intelligence can also suggest with whom and concerning which topic the teacher should meet (Fazlagić, 2022, p. 35).

But using ICTs in education is also supposed to bring about one more change, this time with regards to the teacher's position at the school, especially with regard to the students. The teacher is not supposed to be the expert in the field whose main goal is the top-down presenting of information – the documents often criticize the expository method, which is deemed not adjusted to the needs of the digital world. Instead, there is often talk of cooperation (e.g., MEN, 2020, p. 68) and the shift from teacher to partner, coordinator of the process of education, or tutor:

The profession of the teacher in times of digitalization comes with varied requirements. The way students perceive the teacher also changes. At school, students expect the teacher to be a mentor, coordinator, coach or guide in the surrounding world. It is especially important in the situations in which the student, having exhausted all possible ways of solving a problem, turns to the teacher" (Płusa, 2023, p. 36).

The popularization of the culture of learning starts on the earliest stages of education and demands the redefinition of the role of the teacher and of the student. The teacher becomes the "guide", the "companion in cognitive, emotional and social experiences", and the student is defined as the subject of the process of learning. With roles defined in this way, the responsibility for the educational effects lies equally on the teacher and the student, who becomes an active participant in the process of learning and teaching, and not just a passive receiver of content (Rada Ministrów, 2019 a, p. 64).

The change of the teacher's role is the effect of the discursive construction of the new professional norm. As mentioned earlier, in the light of the pragmatic approach, the language does not describe reality, but actively creates it, pointing to the desired model of the relationship between the teacher and the students. In this sense, the descriptions found in the documents are not neutral diagnoses, but practices of legitimizing specific demands from the profession of the teacher – moving away from the role of the expert towards that of the guide, tutor or coach. Consistent with Verschueren's approach, we see here an ideological pattern of meaning, in which the belief that this model of relation is the only adequate answer to technological changes is being naturalized. This means that the redefinition of the role of the teacher is not a simple consequence of the changes in the digital world, but the effect of institutional discursive action, which create a new professional certainty, at the same time marginalizing alternative ways of thinking about education. Importantly, this change is also caused by – among others – the vision of the teacher and his or her digital competences described above – especially the fact that the documents describe teachers as those who are not "at home" with the new technologies. In this context, the notion of "Prensky's digital immigrants" (Rada Ministrów, 2024, p. 85) is used, which suggests that students seem more alike to "digital natives" (Prensky 2001), and that their knowledge and experiences need to be taken into account in the planning of the educational process. Moreover, technology – as we analyze below – is supposed to widen the autonomy of the

students in the learning process, which means that they require different methods of teaching than before.

### 3. The image of technology in the policy documents

The analyzed documents diagnose contemporary life as unprecedentedly permeated with technology, which is presented as a social challenge and an element shaping social change:

Most of the Polish society functions in a world of digital content and services, which permeate everyday life on a level unmatched by any technology from the past (MEN, 2020, p. 2).

The technological tsunami – dynamic development of digital tools and the internet, which leads to the constant introduction of technological and virtual novelties into everyday life (Płusa, 2023, p. 65).

In the face of dynamically developing technologies related to, among others, the Internet of Things (Rada Ministrów, 2019b, p. 23).

Artificial intelligence is to be one of the most important technologies of the future (Fazlagić, 2022, p. 26).

Importantly, the advent of new technologies and the potential or actual changes connected to it are usually described as a natural element of reality, and not something made by humans – such as scientists, engineers or big corporations – i.e., a result of some planned action, which one could potentially influence. Ascribing agency to technology is an example of ideological shift, which obscures the real social and political actors who are responsible for its development. From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, we see a process of naturalization, in which technology is presented as an autonomous and inevitable force of change. This approach legitimizes the necessity for all subjects in education to adjust to “objective” progress, and at the same time limits the possibility to question the sources and directions of those changes. In concordance with Verschueren’s ideas, ideology works here through the creation of an interpretative framework, which give the guise of naturalness and necessity to what is in fact a result of institutional and economic decisions. In consequence, the language of the documents not so much describes technological reality, but constructs it as unquestionable and determining action in the sphere of education. This tendency is easiest to observe when we look at sentences and passages in which technology is the subject:

Technology, especially AI, makes us redefine the division of competences (Fazlagić, 2022, p. 27)

Technology has been an element of change towards more independent, curiosity-driven styles of learning. Digital technologies had an enormous impact on teaching and learning, not only as different kinds of technological tools available for use, but also in the way in which we understand how the process of learning occurs (Rada Ministrów, 2024, p. 84).

This way “technology” – usually the word is used in a general sense, although specific technologies are sometimes named – is shown as the ultimate explanation of the changes mentioned above. There does not seem to be any other subject behind thusly understood “technology” – for example international organizations, governments or other state institutions that create policy regarding technology (in education or other areas of life), companies developing technologies (including AI) whose interest is that those technologies permeate as many areas of life as possible, or social actors such as teachers, parents or students. This “autonomous” technology can however be “used” in various ways – that is why teacher skills that were analyzed in the previous part of the text are so important. Technology may be a very good tool in teachers’ work – “personalization of the teaching process, adjusting materials to individual needs of the students and the automatization of grading” (Rada Ministrów, 2024, p. 81) are mentioned in this context. Right use of new technologies raises the quality of teaching, as it enables the individual fitting of the tools to the students (Piśa, 2023, p. 81). Digital competences are considered key competences, and therefore it is indispensable that they are taught to the students:

It is not surprising, then, that the competences of this sort, usually referred to in literature as digital competences, are considered among key competences, and are the fundament enabling the ability of lifelong learning and functioning in many environments and areas of life (Osowska, 2022, p. 121).

Moreover, advanced digital competences of teachers will be reflected by the practical use of these technologies by students. In the documents it is assumed that high digital competences of students are a direct effect of high digital competences of teachers (Rada Ministrów, 2023, p. 73). The following fragment presents this process in the most concise manner:

Correctly planned and used digital teaching using open digital resources, based on using various digital tools, activating students to creatively use available equipment and matching applications or functions is conducive to the development of digital and other abilities and increases the effectivity of educational processes; it creates conditions to undertake innovative and creative action; teaches group cooperation; develops the autonomy of thinking, teaches responsibility and the creative approach to own development; enables the comprehensive development of the individual, but also influences the equalization of educational opportunities, the leveling of social disproportions, because it does not depend on the place of residence, the level of education of parents, economic status of the given family of the student (Rada Ministrów, 2024, p. 87-88).

Education with the use of technology seems thus to be considered as – to use the term cited in the beginning of this text – panacea for the ailments of the contemporary school system, such as the purported lack of specific, useful abilities (the term “digital abilities” seems to enable us to bypass the question concerning the usefulness of abilities gained at school in later life), the lack of independent thinking and feeling of responsibility or the deepening, or at least not

changing, social inequalities. The diagnosis is especially problematic if we take into account the autonomous character of technology, which was mentioned earlier – it seems that such a formulation neglects the importance of other social actors in the shaping of technological, educational and social policies, which could actively influence the reduction of the aforementioned ailments. Coming back to our theoretical frame, this is an example of an ideological pattern of meaning, in which social, cultural and institutional context is ignored, and technology is shown as a neutral and universal tool for change. Critical discourse analysis suggests that these types of discourse homogenize diverse educational experiences and marginalize alternative means of reducing inequality – e.g., through social policy or structural changes in the educational system. In this sense, the language of documents not only describes the potential of technology, but also casts it in the role of the only, obvious solution, which leads to the legitimization of certain directions of action at the cost of other possibilities. This kind of narrative strengthens the belief in the necessity of digitalization regardless of the critical reflections on its limitations. It is worth noting in passing that the cited fragment is one of the few places in which (though, as it seems, marginally) the question of the origin of a given technology is addressed, as the fragment speaks of “open” digital resources.

## Discussion

The analyzed documents show the following representation of the relationship between teachers and technology in the contemporary world. The world is shown as dominated by technology and shaped by it in an unprecedented way, and since the importance of technology will only grow, it will also be a growing social challenge, also for teachers. This challenge is all the more important, because with regard to the aforementioned change, the use of technology in education is absolutely necessary. Teachers approach this challenge in the position of unpreparedness – their technological ability is relatively low – and presenting an ambivalent approach to technology: on the one hand, they see its usefulness, especially in making classes more attractive, on the other hand, they sometimes express aversion or anxiety towards technology. However, conscious of their own inadequacy – and seeing their inadequate knowledge reflected in the eyes of their students – they see the need and the sense to enhance their abilities, which would be made possible mainly through additional training.

This picture partly confirms the hypotheses stemming from the literature review. With regards to the first hypothesis, technology is indeed shown as a tool that needs to be subservient to teaching and teachers – but this tool also has its autonomous being. It is also underscored that its use during classes is

worthwhile, and that teachers should learn to actively use those tools. The second hypothesis is also partly confirmed. The most important problems addressed in the Polish policy documents concentrate on the dangers related to using the Internet and on security questions. Even though technooptimism is not as uncritical as it is in the Western European discourses, it is also present – although it is usually qualified. This is linked to the third hypothesis, concerning the role of the teacher. The image of the teacher is an important element of the analysis – in the documents, the teacher is often presented as “inadequate” to the challenge brought about by contemporary technology. At the same time, the teacher remains a key character in the school, although on the condition that some changes are made. These changes include departing from the traditional manner of transferring knowledge towards building a relation of partnership with the students. The teacher’s role is to be a companion or a coach, who adapts his or her actions to the individual needs of every student.

Using critical discourse analysis allowed us to move to the side the question of the veracity or adequacy of the content of the documents, and instead concentrate on how certain visions of the social world are constructed with the use of language (Rapley, 2013). In this view, the Polish educational policy discourse is not a neutral description of reality, but rather ideological practice which legitimizes certain ways of thinking about the role of technology and teachers. This approach helped to pinpoint the mechanisms of naturalization – presenting technology as an inevitable causative force and the teacher as a deficit figure, in need of constant improvement. In this logic, the teacher is presented as “inadequate”, because his or her competences are systematically described as deficient and in need of ameliorating through training and corrective action. In other words, the language of the documents not only claims that certain insufficiencies exist, but also constructs them and stabilizes them as an obvious element of the educational reality. This type of analysis not only widens the understanding of digital education discourse, but also opens the space for reflections on alternative narratives that could co-create a more balanced and critical view of technologies in education.

Although – again in concordance with our expectations – this view does not seem to unequivocally follow “neoliberal discourse” that we observed in British or Swedish research, but rather stems from the aforementioned belief that technological changes “happen” more or less autonomously – in a sphere independent not only from teachers and students, but also from the ministries who created the analyzed documents – this understanding of technology means that the only role the teachers (but also educational institutions) have to play is only keeping up with technological progress, with regards to which they will never serve the role of subjects.

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## Obraz nauczycieli i technologii w krajowych dokumentach poświęconych technologiom informacyjno-komunikacyjnym w edukacji

### Streszczenie

Artykuł podejmuje analizę sposobu, w jaki nauczyciele i technologia są przedstawiani w polskich dokumentach strategicznych dotyczących edukacji. Autorzy, stosując krytyczną analizę dyskursu oraz analizę korpusową, zidentyfikowali trzy główne wątki: braki infrastrukturalne, niedostateczne kompetencje cyfrowe nauczycieli oraz zagrożenia związane z bezpieczeństwem w sieci. Nauczyciele ukazywani są jako osoby nieprzygotowane do wyzwań technologicznych, wymagające stałego dokształcania, ale zarazem pozostające niezbędnym elementem systemu edukacji. W dokumentach pojawia się postulat redefinicji ich roli – z eksperta na mentora czy przewodnika w procesie uczenia się. Technologia przedstawiana jest jako niezależna siła napędzająca rozwój społeczny i edukacyjny, zdolna do rozwiązywania kluczowych problemów szkolnictwa. Autorzy wskazują jednak, że ten dominujący dyskurs nie uwzględnia społecznego ani instytucjonalnego kontekstu zachodzących zmian, co prowadzi do uproszczonego obrazu relacji między edukacją a technologią. Tekst zwraca uwagę na brak krytycznej refleksji nad technologią jako zjawiskiem społecznie uwarunkowanym – zamiast tego przyjmowana jest ona jako niezależna, samoistna siła, oderwana od interesów i działań konkretnych podmiotów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja cyfrowa, nauczyciel, technologia, kompetencje cyfrowe, analiza dyskursu.



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## The Educational Potential of Participation in the *Odyssey of the Mind* Program in Supporting the Development of Selected 21st-Century Competencies

### Abstract

This article combines theoretical reflections with fragment of preliminary research focused on exploring the educational potential of participation in the *Odyssey of the Mind* program in fostering selected key competencies among early school-aged students. The research question addressed the specific ways in which selected competencies can be supported by this process. The study examined and integrated two theoretical frameworks: the 4C and the *Social Emotional Learning* (CASEL) models. The research sample included children from three countries (Poland, China, and the United States). Data were collected through participant observation. Findings indicate that the program offers opportunities for children's competencies development through program-based activities and initiated by children and teachers. The study recommends integrating similar programs in formal education and conducting further longitudinal research based on triangulation.

**Keywords:** Early School Education, Odyssey of the Mind, Social Emotional Learning, 4C Competencies.

### An Alternative Approach to Creative Early School Education

*Odyssey of the Mind* is an international educational program with a competitive framework. Its overarching aim is not only to foster creativity, but also to support autonomy and the development of skills associated with selected key competencies of the 21st century. Participation in the program enables multi-

lateral problem-solving and enhances adaptive capacity in response to the increasing demands of a rapidly changing socio-cultural environment.

The early school education is a time of heightened developmental sensitivity to environmental stimuli and a period of increased receptivity to learning through concrete actions, experiences, and emotional engagement (Schaffer, 2018). The principles underlying the *Odyssey of the Mind* program align with psychosocial needs by providing students with opportunities for experimentation, self-expression, collaborative play and games (Christ, 2019).

Considering the multifaceted nature of this educational program, the primary objective of this article is to present a part of qualitative analysis of the ways in which selected competencies are developed among children in early school age participating in the *Odyssey of the Mind* educational program. The second objective is to establish a theoretical convergence of concepts and frameworks based on two selected models of core competencies: 4C competencies concept and *Social Emotional Learning* approach as defined by the CASEL framework. The analysis also identifies theoretical links between this models, including an integral alignment among specific components. The concluding part presents a several implications significant for future research and early school education practice.

## From Local Inspiration to an International Educational Program

The origins of the *Odyssey of the Mind* program date back to the 1970s in the USA. Samuel Micklus, Professor Emeritus at Rowan University of New Jersey, sought an innovative pedagogical approach to enhance and diversify instruction in his courses on industrial and fine art design classes. For years he experimented with many active learning strategies (*Odyssey of the Mind*, 2025a). Ultimately, he established a specialized university course and developed a project-based methodology (*Odyssey of the Mind*, 2025b).

Samuel Micklus' concept is consistent with the assumptions underpinning the humanistic educational paradigm. Emphasizing student subjectivity, individualization, experimental learning, dialogic interaction, and grounding the educational process in learner autonomy represent several key characteristics of this orientation (Paprotna, 2019). Implementation of the humanistic assumptions allows for the involvement of a broad spectrum of stakeholders (Gołębnik, 2014). Furthermore, the knowledge is approached as a dynamic, ongoing process, with reality understood as subject to constant transformation. Failures and mistakes are not regarded as setbacks but as essential components of the child's developmental trajectory (Poziemska, 2015).

Currently, *Odyssey of the Mind* operates as an international educational competition with a multicultural potential. Its global character is evident during the

annual *World Finals*, which bring together thousands of teams, coaches, and volunteers from various regions of the world including America, Asia and Europe (Odyssey of the Mind, 2025a). The total number of participants reaches approximately ten thousand annually (Odyssey of the Mind, 2025a). In the Polish edition of the finals in 2025, around two thousand individuals took part in the competition, forming two hundred and eighty-one teams (Odyssey of the Mind, 2025b).

The cyclical finals feature students from four distinct age groups, from primary school to university. Participation in the event is preceded by a multi-stage qualification process. Each team qualified for the competition is required to solve two types of challenges.

## Long-Term and Spontaneous Problems

Work on long-term problems is conducted in the form of a project and spans several months from the official announcement (Odyssey of the Mind, 2025a). These tasks are interdisciplinary, encompassing technical, natural science and engineering, social, humanities and artistic topics. The final outcome of the team's work is an original solution that must be presented in a thematic performance. The demonstration of the problem should adhere to specified formal and substantive criteria. Evaluation encompasses the accuracy and quality of the problem solution, originality, the level of independence, the technical quality of execution, artistic styl, and element related to group collaboration (Odyssey of the Mind, 2025b).

Table 1

*Comparison of Selected Criteria of Long-Term and Spontaneous Problems in the Odyssey of the Mind Program*

Criteria	Long-Term Problems	Spontaneous Problems
preparation time	several months	a few minutes
availability of the task content	from the date of the commencement of the next edition of the competition	available prior to the commencement of problem-solving
nature of the task	multi-stage, project-based	„surprise” type, improvisation
type of tasks	vehicle, technical, classics, structure, performance	verbal, manual, verbal-manual
coach's presence	present at every stage	involved during the preparation phase as methodological support; absent during the final task
character of student collaboration	continuous, long-term engagement, extended over time	immediate, dynamic, based on mutual trust and connection

Source: Author's own elaboration

The second fundamental component of the program comprises spontaneous problems. These tasks are solved by teams without prior preparation of scripts or instructions, within a strictly defined time and location during the competition finals. The task content is disclosed to participants immediately before commencement, allowing for real-time assessment of problem-solving skills. The task is completed in the absence of coaches and spectators. Spontaneous problems can be categorized into three types: verbal, manual, and verbal-manual tasks (Odyssey of the Mind, 2025b). In summary, both types of problems were compared in Table 1.

## Exploring the Key Competencies of the 21st Century

Key competencies in the 21st century are defined as a knowledge, skills, attitudes (Foster, Piacentini, 2023), habits, traits (Bucle, 2025) and also as values (CCR, 2024). They mainly concern such features, concepts and phenomena that will allow students to achieve success in the future, including coping with unpredictable challenges, self-regulation and keeping up with new technologies, adapting to previously unknown professions (Bucle, 2025). Regarding the theoretical framework we can distinguish many of them, i.e.: the *P21 Framework* (2009), *OECD/INFE Core Competencies* (OECD, 2018), *21st Century Skills Model* by Tony Wagner et al. (Edmond, 2017), *Four-Dimensional Framework* (CCR, 2024), model of *4C's Competencies* (Do, Maniate, Sultan, Sonnenberg, 2023; Lamri, 2021), *Future Work Skills 2020* (iCEV, 2024), *World Economic Forum Future Skills Framework* (2025) and *Collaborating States Initiative* (Dusenbury, Yoder, Dermody, Weissberg, 2019).

The most frequently emphasized key competencies of the future currently include: creativity, cooperation, critical thinking, and communication skills (Lamri, 2021); learning ability, problem-solving, empathy, cognitive flexibility, emotional intelligence, moral maturity (Kwiatkowski, 2018); self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2025); capacity for rapid adaptation, cultural and ecological awareness, visualization, metacognitive skills (Lamri, 2021); entrepreneurship, self-image shaping, or relationship-building skills (Białek, Swat-Pawlicka, 2025).

The diversity of approaches of 21st-century competencies results from the influence of numerous socio-cultural factors that shape both their interpretation and prioritization in educational policy and pedagogical practice. The sources of variability in defining and understanding this phenomenon can be attributed to the rapidly changing labor market (Wasik, Barrow, 2018). The development of artificial intelligence, the expansion of social media, and increasing automation and replacement of humans by machines render the key competen-

cies of the 1990s inadequate in relation to the contemporary demands of everyday life (Fazlagić, 2022).

From presented approaches, two primary frameworks were selected for an in-depth analysis. The 4C competencies model (Lamri, 2021) was compared alongside socio-emotional competencies within the theoretical framework of CASEL (2025). Both approaches complement each other in educational theory and practice, as demonstrated in Table 2. Some competences exhibit closer links, while others are connected at deeper dimensions of theoretical correlation.

Table 2

*Juxtaposition of the 4C Competency Model with the Social Emotional Learning framework (SEL) – common competency domains*

SEL	4C	creativity	communication	critical thinking	cooperation
<b>self-awareness</b>		self-efficacy	interpersonal communication skills	reflexivity, analysis of strenghts and weaknesses	recognizing/ understanding emotions, growth mindset
<b>social awareness</b>		awareness of diverse social needs, social construction of reality	empathy, active listening, context-sensitive communication	recognizing socio-cultural context, understanding diversity	understanding roles, emotions, motivations, and social dynamic
<b>self-management</b>		fostering intrinsic motivation, constructive attitude toward mistakes	resilience, emotional regulation, management of communicative situations	impulse control, attention regulation, delayed gratification	organizational skills, planning, goal-setting
<b>relationship skills</b>		social engagement, openness to others, ability to integrate perspectives	interpersonal communication, ability to establish and maintain social relationships	socially appropriate refusal skills, interpretive readiness	negotiation skills, conflict resolution, effective teamwork
<b>responsible decision making</b>		cognitive flexibility, ideas creating, problem-solving	articulation of needs and principles, argumentation skills	in-depth analysis of challenges, reflective thinking	perspective-taking, monitoring, coordination of group actions

Source: Author's own elaboration upon: Lamri (2021); CASEL (2025); Glăveanu (2023); Nikitenko (2022); Karwowski (2010); Fazlagić (2019); P21 (2009); Białek, Swat-Pawlicka (2025); Panorama Education (Bucle, 2025); Czaja-Chudyba (2020); Dusenbury, et al. (2019); Nęcka (2003); Do, et al. (2023); OECD (2018); Deptuła, Misiuk (2016); Brzezińska, Półtoraczyk, Reksnis, Starczewska-Kaczmarek, Wilczyńska (2020).

## Methodology and Research Approach

This preliminary research constitutes fragment of an ethnographic, qualitative two-year study. The article is limited to presenting preliminary findings based on observations. Given the complexity and contextual nature of the phenomena, a subjective-participatory paradigm was adopted (Ciechowska, 2018; Denzin, Lincoln, 2009; Babbie, 2024; Malewski 2023). Consideration was given to the pragmatic approach to this study, with the aim of preserving cognitive efficiency as defined by the formulated research question (Ciechowska, 2018; Malewski, 2023).

## Research Objectives and Problems

The aim of the study was to explore the ways and situations in which selected competencies, from the integrated competency model (*4C and Social Emotional Learning*), could be supported through participation in the *Odyssey of the Mind* educational program among children in early school age. The research objectives were exploratory and descriptive (Pilch, Bauman, 2001; Babbie, 2024). Based on this, the research question was formulated from the framework of the education methodology approach: „What are the ways, if any, in which the participation in the *Odyssey of the Mind* program supports the development of selected competencies in early school age children?”.

In alignment with the position of Łobocki (2000), the study refrained from establishing any hypotheses. The choice of research focus is consistent with current trends in contemporary pedagogical reflection and with the recommendations of the OECD (2018), as well as the „Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning” (Council of the European Union, 2018).

## Data Collection and Analysis Methods

A research qualitative approach was employed, using participant observation based on an ethnographic perspective (Babbie, 2024; Pilch, Bauman, 2001; Denzin, Lincoln, 2009; Flick, 2012). The researcher assumed three distinct roles in an active and passive way: as a coach, full member of the students team, and observator. The researcher attended various team-related events, including the opening and closing ceremonies, and daily activities held on the Michigan and Iowa State University campuses (e.g., teams rehearsals, lunches, shopping).

The subject-object perspective was an integral component of research based on shared experience (Pilch, Bauman, 2001). The direct observations

were also examined performances presented by early-school age children (aged approximately seven to ten or eleven) across all five categories of long-term problems: technical, vehicle, structure, classics, and performance (Odyssey of the Mind, 2025a). During the presentations and ceremonies, the researcher was seated among the audience.

The research tool consisted of self-designed journal used for recording general and subjective information related to all events taking place within the program (Flick, 2012; Deptuła, Misiuk, 2016). In progress, the researcher collected selected data included concrete situations and observed activities through the *Odyssey of the Mind* program participation.

Over the course of the study, manifestations of selected student competencies gradually became observable. They have been conceptualized in accordance with the views of scholars and scientific organizations such as: Lamri (2021); CASEL (2025); Glăveanu (2023); Nikitenko (2022); Karwowski (2010); Fazlagić (2019); P21 (2009); Białek, Swat-Pawlicka (2025); Panorama Education (Bucle, 2025); Czaja-Chudyba (2020); et al. Students were observed individually and in group contexts. The following manifestations of competencies and elements of observed situations were recorded in a descriptive way: acts of helping (e.g., repairing toys), creative activities (e.g., singing), initiating plays and groups situations (pin trading), conversations topics (pins, costumes), content of expressed emotions and opinions situations (statements about feelings), description of the reaction to the judges' opinion and failures (crying), content of asked questions (exact quotes), etc. The journal included the date, location, role allocation, and details regarding the study group (Table 3).

The main analysis focused on the six-steps thematic analysis procedure (Braun, Clarke, 2024). Following the familiarization phase and the formulation of the research question, relevant excerpts from the journal were identified. These included sections describing the methods, actions and educational activities employed by both coaches and students, with particular attention to the distinctive activities from the *Odyssey of the Mind* program.

Inductive coding was used in the thematic analysis of handwritten notes recorded in the observation journal (Gibbs, 2015; Braun, Clarke, 2024, Flick, 2012). This approach does not exclude the reliance on theories presented earlier in the article and enables the structuring of gathered thoughts, emotions, and other information (Gibbs, 2015; Flick, 2012). Following the approach proposed by Gibbs (2015), the coding process included specific actions and behaviors (e.g., asking questions, speaking in front of a group), activities (e.g., participating in an integration event), and events (e.g., losing a toy/pin).

## Sample Selection

Empirical data were collected during events related to the *Odyssey of the Mind* competition (the Polish and world finals in 2025 and in 2024 – four events). The selection of the sample was purposeful based on availability principle. As part of the observation of selected representations of long-term problems, a specific research sample was selected, consisting of ten teams of children at the early school age (students from first age category in this program). In total fifty-one children from three different countries (Poland, China, United States) participated in this fragment of observations, as presented in Table 3. The study did not interfere with the performances or the children’s everyday lives.

All presentations of the long-term problems, except number 5, were conducted in English. The abbreviations „G” and „B” in the gender column stand for girls or boys. „Team size” is a number of children in one group. The „year” given refers to the date of the performance, and the „I age category” refers to students in early school age (from seven to eleven years old). In order to protect the anonymity of participants, information about competition placement and sensitive data were not disclosed.

Table 3  
*Characteristics of the Sample (n=51)*

Team Number	Represented Country	Age Category / Year	Type of Long-Term Problem	Team Size	Gender
1.	Poland	I / 2024	Performance	7	G, B
2.	Poland	I / 2024	Performance	5	G
3.	USA	I / 2024	Classics	4	G, B
4.	USA	I / 2024	Performance	5	G
5.	Poland	I / 2025	Vehicle	6	G, B
6.	Poland	I / 2025	Classics	4	G, B
7.	China	I / 2025	Structure	5	G, B
8.	USA	I / 2025	Technical	5	G, B
9.	Poland	I / 2025	Performance	6	G, B
10.	China	I / 2025	Performance	4	G, B

Source: the author’s own elaboration

The selection of groups for research was determined by the availability of performances, nationality, age category, and the event schedule. A variation in team size was observed (ranging from four to seven children), along with a predominance of coeducational groups. Performance type of presentations, titled „AstronOMical Odyssey!” (2025) and „Rocking World Detour” (2024), ranked

among the most preferred task formats analyzed in the study, consistent with information from the *Odyssey of the Mind* organization (2025b). A certain challenge was posed by the active role of the researcher, who at the same time participated in the implementation of the own team's program. The arrangement of buildings on the campuses and the distances between them, constituted another obstacle.

## Outline of Research Results

Based on the applied analysis, the main area corresponding to the study objectives was refined, defined, and named (Braun, Clarke, 2024). This category relates to ways of supporting the development of selected competencies among children in early school age (Table 4). They are understood as activities that facilitate the development of competencies in the context of implementing the assumptions of the *Odyssey of the Mind* program. These phenomena encompass specific situations and practices presented in Table 4, which constitute a coherent system of multidimensional support aimed at fostering students' competencies. This aligns with CASEL's (2025) perspective on socio-emotional competencies development.

Table 4  
*Activities Codebook – ways of support to the development of selected competencies*

Main Code Name	Code Name	Code description	Examples
Activities	Program Initiative	activities based on <i>Odyssey of the Mind</i> educational program	long-term and spontaneous problems-solving; integration events; opening and closing ceremony; self-made preparing costumes from recycled materials; living on the university campus
	Coach Initiative	non-program activities initiated by the coach to support team	discussions about the consequences of various behaviours; facilitating active group games; encouraging speeches; using mindfulness methods (body scan, conscious breathing, etc.) before the performance
	Student Initiative	self-initiated activities and interactions presented by children	pins trading; spontaneous helping behaviors; team-based preparation of costumes and decorations; encouraging speeches; spontaneous prototype testing before the performance

Source: Author's own elaboration

Each activity, conceptualized as main theme of analysis, undertaken during participation in the program and as part of non-formal education can be considered in the context of its potential to support the development of selected 21st-century competencies.

In addition, the main activities, that constitute a thematic category, may include more specific actions and behaviors, which can exert a more direct support within the broader framework of the educational process. For example, during pin trading, children develop a range of competencies through sub-activities: engaging in conversation and negotiation (communication); planning exchange strategies and trading collaboratively (cooperation); designing their own pins (creativity); evaluating the value and „profitability” of trades (critical thinking); recognizing their own emotions and preferences (self-awareness); interacting with peers from different countries (social awareness); managing uncertainty (self-management); forming social connections through trading (relationship skills); and learning to anticipate the consequences of exchanges from moral perspective (responsible decision-making). The detailed process of developing these competencies will be included in the separate publication.

Throughout the course of the research, a distinction was observed between activities based on the degree of their planning. Activities initiated by students were characterized by spontaneous interactions among peers (e.g., pin trading, helping behaviors). In the case of teacher-student interactions, activities were both planned (organizational tasks, implementation of the program) and spontaneous (encouraging speeches, mindfulness techniques before the performance).



*Fig. 1*

Examples of the Odyssey of the Mind Activities: pins trading, long-term problem presentation, closing ceremony

Source: Author's own archive

The example presented is intended to illustrate a perspective on the educational potential of participation in the program, whose activities often resemble

Łukaszewicz's (2020) concept of *designed educational opportunities*. The open-ended tasks in the form of long-term and spontaneous problems, which constitute the foundation of the *Odyssey of the Mind* program, trigger divergent thinking, encourage unconventional forms of activity, and stimulate an endless range of possible solutions and choices, what is similar compare to the ideas proposed by Łukaszewicz (Remiszewska, 2018). In the context of the analysis presented, the method of *designed educational opportunities* most closely corresponds to activities initiated by the teacher-coach, who prompts students to engage in creative actions that serve as a foundation for the development of multiple key competencies.

The observed activities confirm the importance of a supportive environment for child development and the role of mutual interactions among multiple stakeholders (Schaffer, 2018). The parents also participated in both programmatic and extracurricular activities of *Odyssey of the Mind*. During the research, parents were present in the audience, the campus cafeteria, and at other competitive events held in the USA.

Moreover, creativity was found as the most prominent competency within the program's requirements by the *Odyssey of the Mind* organization (2025a; 2025b), which is consistent with the observed activities. For example, the originality is evaluated in ideas, solutions, costumes, or handmade decorations. Creativity, conceptualized as a set of cognitive, emotional-motivational, and behavioral dispositions (Nikitenko, 2022), creative attitude grounded in independence and openness (Karwowski, 2010), is developed through both vertical and horizontal relationships (Schaffer, 2018). During informal meetings between teams, when children are creating pins or task solutions, this attitude was observed. The highlighted activities demonstrate a broad spectrum of influences on the development of future competencies and multitude of educational opportunities, with the recognition of the postulate of a school open to the environment, cooperation and experimentation (Białek, Swat-Pawlicka, 2025).

## Conclusions and Practical Implications

This fragment of preliminary research indicates that participation in the *Odyssey of the Mind* program can support the process of selected 21st-century competencies development through specific activities initiated by selected educational entities and subjects. The identified components of this process can provide children with opportunities for engaging and hands-on acquisition of specific skills in a situational, spontaneous, and integrated manner. The program may be conceptualized as a model example of personalized, participatory, and transcultural education. The program offers participants a range of opportuni-

ties, from establishing relationships with peers from different nationalities, to selecting the activities. Participants are also involved in a variety of both spontaneously initiated and formally organized events.

In terms of public schools and educational policy, the integration of the programs with a similar structure and humanistic orientation is recommended. Such initiatives may serve as valuable supplements to conventional school curriculum, particularly at the early primary education level, where foundational skills and attitudes are being shaped. It is advised that these programs be incorporated either as structured extracurricular activities or as part of pedagogical innovations. The implementation of selected elements of the program could be considered through the alignment of lessons plans and the development of supplementary activities focused on long-term and spontaneous problem-solving, focused on project-based method.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the potential risks and challenges with integrating programs such as Odyssey of the Mind into formal educational frameworks. A fundamental issue lies in the possible misalignment between the program's overarching goals and the requirements of the national core curriculum. Furthermore, the implementation of such pedagogical models necessitates substantial institutional capacity, including appropriately trained personnel, methodological expertise, sufficient time, and financial resources. Many public schools, particularly those operating under constrained budgets, may lack the infrastructure and support mechanisms required to facilitate sustained participation. The disparity could unintentionally reinforce existing educational inequities between affluent and under-resourced communities.

The financial burden associated with adopting such programs also raises questions about long-term sustainability and the allocation of responsibility between educational authorities and individual institutions. In addition, the increased cognitive and logistical demands placed on students may contribute to academic overload. Extended school hours and the accumulation of extracurricular tasks risk diminishing learners' intrinsic motivation and overall well-being. Moreover, the limited size of the research sample constrains the potential for broad generalizations. Therefore, it would be advisable to first conduct pilot studies focusing on the implementation of selected components of the program. For instance, the integration of spontaneous task-based activities into the routine structure of formal curriculum.

From the research perspective, a structured pedagogical experiment is advised, as current practices observed among Odyssey of the Mind educators indicate their informal implementation. For example, in the form of titled as *Odyssey Lessons*, during which selected competencies can be developed intentionally and in a structured manner, within the framework of *designed educational opportunities*.

It is essential to continued longitudinal research, accompanied by the application of methodological triangulation (methods, research technics, and theories), in order to expand and deepen scope of the research. To ensure a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the phenomenon, it is recommended that subsequent studies involve learners at early school age who present with special educational needs and enhance the analysis of how particular activities affect selected competencies, among elder students too.

Further research could benefit from a psychological examination of traits such as cognitive flexibility or emotional intelligence, particularly in connection with achievements in this competition. Future studies are encouraged to complement this preliminary findings with the use of diagnostic tools aimed at measuring socio-emotional competencies at early school-aged students (e.g. *Obserwacyjny Kwestionariusz Kompetencji Emocjonalnych i Społecznych*) (Brzezińska, et al., 2020).

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## Potencjał edukacyjny uczestnictwa w programie Odyseja Umysłu we wsparciu rozwoju wybranych kompetencji XXI wieku

### Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł łączy refleksje teoretyczne z fragmentem badań wstępnych, które były skoncentrowane na poznaniu edukacyjnego potencjału wynikającego z uczestnictwa w programie Odyseja Umysłu w kontekście wspierania wybranych kluczowych kompetencji uczniów na etapie edukacji wczesnoszkolnej. Sformułowane pytanie badawcze dotyczyło konkretnych sposobów, w jakie wybrane kompetencje mogą być kształtowane w oparciu o wskazany proces. W artykule przeanalizowano i zintegrowano dwie ramy teoretyczne: model kompetencji 4K oraz Social Emotional Learning (CASEL). Do grupy badanej wybrano dzieci z trzech krajów (Polski, Chin i Stanów Zjednoczonych). Dane zebrano w oparciu o obserwację uczestniczącą. Wyniki wskazują, że program oferuje możliwości rozwoju kompetencji poprzez działania programowe oraz aktywności inicjowane przez dzieci i nauczycieli. W badaniu rekomenduje się integrację podobnych programów w edukacji formalnej i potrzebę dalszych badań longitudinalnych opartych na triangulacji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja wczesnoszkolna, Odyseja Umysłu, Social Emotional Learning, kompetencje 4K.



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## What and How Does Today's Child Read? The Voices of Third-grade Pupils from Białystok on Their Encounters with Literature, Favourite Characters, and Creative Writing

### Abstract

This article examines the reading preferences of third-grade pupils from Białystok, focusing on how they engage with literature, their favorite characters, and their own creative writing. The qualitative study, based on focus group interviews and rooted in childhood studies, involved 96 pupils and aimed to capture authentic reading experiences and expressions of literary creativity. The theoretical section outlines key concepts related to children's reading development and the cultural and environmental factors shaping it, referencing prior research (e.g., Baluch, Krasoń, Leszczyński, Ungehauer-Gołąb). The empirical findings highlight the role of adults as mediators, the influence of media and technology, and the need to adapt educational practices to the realities of contemporary childhood. These insights may support teachers, librarians, and parents in fostering reading habits in children.

**Keywords:** early primary school pupil; children's literature; literary education; *childhood studies*.

### Instead of an introduction – theoretical assumptions of own research

In an age of ubiquitous media, technology, and an overabundance of “consumer stimuli,” it's easy to overlook the crucial role exposure to quality litera-

ture plays in a child's development. Paradoxically, the abundance of available content can be frustrating for both children and their parents, leading to difficulties in choosing appropriate books. On the one hand, contemporary audiovisual culture is gradually replacing contact with the spoken word. Imaginative, rapid communication doesn't foster in-depth reflection or understanding complex, metaphorical content that must be read, not just viewed. On the other hand, modern technologies can support reading by "bringing books to life" by combining words with images, sound, and playful elements, which can also develop a child's aesthetic sensitivity and facilitate the reception of content (Pawelec, 2013). Despite these opportunities, young readers, so-called digital natives, a generation raised in the internet world, accustomed to short, dynamic forms of information transmission often struggle to concentrate and quickly become discouraged by longer reading sessions. Although books are available today in various formats – printed, electronic or as audio books- reading itself is becoming an increasingly greater challenge (see Eurostat data from August 2024 on reading in Europe and research on the state of reading in Poland in 2024 conducted by the National Library).

In this changing world, a new approach to promoting literature is needed – one that takes into account changes in young people's lifestyles, reading habits, and new technological possibilities. The children's book market is developing rapidly in the 21st century – the number of publications is growing, new literary and graphic forms are emerging, and there are a growing number of initiatives promoting reading, such as the "Rabka Festival," the "Children's Book Fair" in many cities in Poland and Europe (e.g., Bologna), storyteller festivals, and the June "National Week of Reading to Children." Schools and libraries also play a significant role as part of the "National Reading Development Program." Simultaneously, the number of blogs, magazines, and discussions devoted to books for young readers is growing, confirming that books continue to serve an important function – as a source of entertainment, cultural identity formation, and emotional support. Since 2001, the "All of Poland Reads to Children" campaign has been running, aimed at helping them choose quality literature and raising awareness among adults about the importance of regular, enthusiastic, and engaging reading with children (Swędrowska, 2014). Such a shared ritual fosters closer family bonds and builds bridges between generations.

Many researchers (educators, psychologists, literary scholars, bibliotherapists) have for years emphasised the importance of consciously introducing children to the world of literature. A key role in this process is played by an adult – a parent, teacher, or caregiver – whose attitude toward reading influences the child more than the book itself. Alicja Baluch emphasises that how a caregiver perceives and interprets a text can be crucial to a child's later interest in literature (Baluch, 1994, p. 10). The importance of a literary guide's emotions, their

ability to “read with emotions,” is also emphasised (Żółtowski, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Monika Kupiec (2024, p. 162) encourages working on an attitude that can be described as “reading with children” rather than “reading to children.” This is why the process of literary initiation is so important, because reading needs do not arise spontaneously but are the result of conscious, long-term activity in which an adult plays the role of a guide and intermediary in the world of literature (Papuzińska, 1981, p. 203). As Alicja Ungeheuer-Gołąb argues, reading at home, above all, shapes literary taste, values, and moral sensitivity, and the important question we should ask during reading is: what kind of person do we want to raise? (insensitive or sensitive to the fate of people and the world) (A. Ungeheuer-Gołąb, 2001, p. 28). Anna Janus-Sitarz also emphasises the importance of shared “reading at home” and the need to familiarise children with the diversity of cultural texts, as well as discuss difficulties in their reception, developing young people’s reflectiveness, and encouraging them to reflect on “the value of their own encounters with literature” (Janus-Sitarz, 2009, p. 115). Literary scholars also emphasise the importance of ensuring the quality of children’s literature, because the so-called “first books,” as Grzegorz Leszczyński (2012) calls them, remain in a child’s consciousness for life as “big-little books.” Zofia A. Kłakówna (2013), in turn, draws attention to the quality of reading, writing about “reading weather,” which largely depends on the teacher – their attentiveness, reflectiveness, flexibility in selecting reading materials, and the ability to adapt methods to the emotional and intellectual needs of children. Bernadeta Niesporek-Szamburska and Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek (2017) emphasise that the foundation of contact with a book should be freedom and pleasure.

All of this research confirms that literary education plays a key role in a child’s overall development and in shaping their identity. In early childhood education, therefore, collaboratively discovering the value of literature and supporting students in the process of becoming conscious, attentive, and critical readers of texts is particularly important. This raises important research questions: what do contemporary children actually read? How do they perceive books and the reading process itself in the context of their daily lives? These are key questions in the analysis of children’s reading preferences – a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, determined by both internal and external factors. Individual interests, emotional needs, developmental stage, and previous reading experiences influence these preferences. The form of exposure to books is also significant – whether a child reads independently, listens to texts read by adults, or uses other forms of media such as e-books or audio books. The availability and appeal of books are also significant: their graphic design, difficulty level, subject matter, and their presence in the child’s environment. The influ-

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<sup>1</sup> All translations into English of the original texts are the author’s own translations.

ence of the social environment – family, school, and peers – also plays a significant role. Reading preferences are also influenced by favourite literary characters, with whom children identify, and their own creativity – ideas for books they would like to write. The latter are not only a manifestation of creativity but also a valuable source of knowledge about a child's inner world. All these elements contribute to the image of a child's reading taste, level of engagement, and development direction of reading skills.

It's worth noting that the topic of reading preferences among early childhood education students was addressed in Polish research as early as the late 1990s. Katarzyna Krasoń (1999) highlighted the numerous methodological challenges associated with studying this age group. She emphasized that children's literary preferences are largely shaped by adult intermediaries – parents, teachers, and librarians – meaning that children's book choices do not always reflect their true interests, but rather stem from available resources or targeted adult suggestions. The researcher also pointed out that starting school is associated with obligatory reading, which can discourage reading, especially when the suggested books do not align with the child's actual needs and preferences. Krzysztof Kruszko's (2015) study demonstrated that early school children most often listen to books read to them by their mothers, especially in urban settings. Girls show a greater interest in literature than boys, preferring fairy tales, poetry, and newspapers, while boys are more likely to reach for adventure books and gaming magazines. Children's reading is primarily supported by schools through competitions and library activities, and the school library is the most common source of books. In their free time, only some children read books on their own initiative, and only a few receive them as gifts. Olimpia Gogolin and Eugeniusz Szymik (2017) presented the results of a survey conducted among students in grades 1–3 of primary schools in Czerwionka-Leszczyn (Silesian Voivodeship), the aim of which was to examine children's relationships with books as readers. The survey allowed them to determine what motivates students to read, what attracts their attention in books, and where they look for interesting titles. The study results revealed a clear influence of popular culture, particularly Disney cartoons and fads (e.g., Pokémon) (Vasquez 2005, pp. 201-215), and the dominant role of required reading, including literary classics (especially works by Brzechwa and Andersen). A.M. Klas-Markiewicz and M. Szczęsna (2023) also joined the discussion on reading among students in grades 1-3, analyzing reading levels, motivations for reading choices, thematic and genre preferences, and children's attitudes toward the Ministry of Education and Science's reading canon. Their research, also based on a diagnostic survey, focused on children from rural areas. The study showed that students in younger grades were eager readers, reaching not only for required reading but also for books outside the canon, especially about animals.

Due to its limited space, this article presents only a selected portion of my own research on the reading preferences of early school-age children. I consciously focused on specific issues, omitting other categories, such as favourite and less-favourite books (including required school reading), motivations for reading, and factors influencing reading choices, which would require a separate study. Therefore, I present a portion of the research that reveals children's forms of contact with books, their favourite literary characters, and ideas for their own stories.

### **Methodological Assumptions of the Own Research**

The impetus for undertaking my own research into children's reading preferences came from the desire to engage in direct dialogue with young readers. I wanted to hear their authentic voices regarding their first experiences with literature, so I decided to conduct the research within a qualitative paradigm, grounding it in the perspective of childhood studies.

My research focused on the responses of children regarding their forms of contact with books, who are about to complete the first stage of education, their favourite literary characters, and their ideas for their own literary creations. The study aimed to understand the ways in which children interact with literature, their emotional and cognitive responses to literary characters, and their attempts to construct their own stories. I wanted to capture how children perceive books and reading as part of their daily lives and how they express themselves and their needs through literature. Therefore, I formulated the following main problem: What are the reading preferences of contemporary third-grade students? I also developed specific research questions to explore this issue: What forms of contact with books do children completing the first stage of education prefer? Which literary characters would they like to befriend, and why? What ideas do they have for their own literary stories, and what do these stories reveal about their inner worlds?

From the perspective of contemporary childhood studies, a key assumption is that understanding children's reality is only possible with the active participation of children themselves, who are the most comprehensive and reliable sources of knowledge about their own childhood experiences. Analysing children's statements and creations, researchers look for manifestations of their self-awareness and signals regarding their needs. Therefore, recognising children's agency, listening carefully to their voices, and refraining from judgment are crucial in this approach (Clark, 2004; Szyborska, 2016; Zwiernik, 2012; Qvortrup and Corsaro, 2009). I attempted to reconstruct children's perspectives on books and reading, based on the authentic statements of the study partici-

pants. In line with the principles of childhood studies, which treat children as full co-creators of meaning rather than merely recipients of adult narratives, the analysis of children's statements also aimed to present them as active, competent participants in culture. This approach allows not only for a better understanding of contemporary children's reading practices, but also for the formulation of conclusions important for teachers, parents, librarians and cultural and educational policy makers.

The data collection method was focus group interviews. Participants were children aged 9-10, third-grade students from eight public primary schools in Białystok. The research sample was purposive and was selected through school principals, who demonstrated openness and interest in the research topic. Participation in the study was preceded by consent from the principals, parents, and the children themselves. A total of 96 students participated in the study – 48 girls and 48 boys. I conducted interviews with 16 groups of children – two groups of six (composed of three girls and three boys) from each of the eight schools. In accordance with the principle of contextuality (Ciechowska, 2017, p. 120), the interviews took place in a familiar environment for the children – on the school grounds, in their classrooms, in the school library, or in the after-school club. Each meeting lasted approximately 40 minutes. The anonymity of the children participating in the study was maintained – their names and statements were marked with the following symbols: from Dz1 to Dz3 (where "Dz" denotes a girl), from Ch1 to Ch3 (where Ch denotes a boy), and from F1 to F16 (where "F" denotes the focus group number). The children were given cards – identifiers, e.g., F1Dz10la. In this article, I will quote selected statements of the children, marking them, for example, F1Ch1 (the first focus group, boy no. 1). I recorded the interviews with a voice recorder and transcribed them immediately afterward, which allowed me to record initial observations and apparent digressions that might prove important in further analysis (Lisek-Michalska, (2013, pp. 28–29).

I conducted focus group interviews from January to June 2025, using an interview plan beforehand prepared, based on open-ended questions. Flexibility was also a key element of the interviews – subsequent questions were prompted by the children's responses, allowing for the development of topics important from their perspectives. This format, inspired by free dialogue (Kvale, 2013), fostered the children's active participation and allowed them to freely express their opinions and experiences. The group nature of the interviews enabled observation of the children's mutual influence on each other's statements – complementing and confirming them, but also confronting differing opinions.

## **Analysis and Interpretation of My Own Research Results**

The collected material was subjected to thematic analysis. Following the approach of V. Braun and V. Clarke (2022), this analysis involves the active involvement of the researcher – not only identifying themes but also developing an understanding of how participants construct their reality. Through inductive coding and repeated analysis, I categorized the responses, identifying the main themes that corresponded to the research objectives and questions. The following sections present a summary of these themes and their interpretation.

### **1. Children's Contacts with Books**

It's worth beginning the study of children's reading preferences by exploring the forms of their contact with books, because the way a child engages with text – whether reading independently, listening to text read by an adult, or using audio books – has a key impact on their engagement, understanding of the content, and shaping their individual reading preferences. Analysis of children's responses revealed a significant diversity of reading practices and highlighted, above all, the role of the interpersonal dimensions of this activity.

Many children reported that they enjoyed reading independently because it helped them focus and remember the content. Reading independently also helped them empathize with the characters and gave them a greater sense of independence and control in learning about the story. Examples include: "I prefer to read alone because it helps me focus and remember" (F16Ch2), "I read alone because I don't like being interrupted" (F5Ch3), and "I don't like being read to because it makes it difficult to feel the emotions" (F5Ch1). Several children (boys) combined independent reading with other activities, for example, sharing chapters with their parents or listening to audio books (F3Ch1,2; F10Ch3; F9Ch1; F11Ch1).

Adult reading was also highly appreciated by children, especially before bed, as it had a calming and relaxing effect. It also proved effective for more challenging school reading assignments, as it facilitated better comprehension. It was important for the children that reading aloud was done "nicely", with appropriate intonation and voice modulation, adapted to the individual characters ("Mum imitates the characters nicely" (F8Dz3), "I love it when mum reads to me – it's time just for me and mum" (F8Dz1), "The teacher at school reads so interestingly that you want to listen" (F15Dz1). The children most often mentioned their mother as the person who reads, but also their father, grandmother, older siblings, teacher or after-school care worker. Kruszko's research (2015) also indicated their mother as the person who reads most often to the children. One of the girls emphasised that she loves reading together with her sister, because

it often turns into fun and making up stories together. Reading, therefore, has a ludic function – it turns into creative play and a form of creative expression. This confirms the assumptions of childhood studies, which indicate that children not only receive culture but also co-create it. A book does not exist without a reader, so it's worth bringing it to life through play. It's worth letting children play with literature – staging it, telling it, and adding their own versions, because, as Papuzińska claims, reading should always be a starting point for other activities (Papuzińska, 1981, pp. 80–82).

The importance of a loved one is particularly evident in home reading rituals, which build an atmosphere of closeness and a sense of security. In the school context, a teacher who can read inspires admiration, becoming an authority, and books reading – becomes more interesting and accessible (“I like it when the teacher reads, because then I understand better” (F16Ch3). Although few children used the term “audio book,” many statements referred to listening to stories, which served a relaxing function – children listened to them to rest (“without having to strain” F2Ch2), to help them fall asleep (“I listen before bed with my eyes closed” F6Ch3), and also aesthetically – they appreciated acting skills, and the role-playing brought them clear joy.

As children's statements suggest, reading serves not only a cognitive but also an emotional function. Daily rituals, such as evening reading, are an important form of building relationships; reading with loved ones is a time of being together, not just acquiring information. Children learn through relationships and rituals, which often prove to be the most lasting and enjoyable reading experiences, shaping habits and attitudes toward books. This emotional embedding of reading in relationships directly influences the development of reading motivations, which can be divided into external (instrumental), resulting from obligation or adult pressure, and internal (autotelic), based on the child's inner need (Ungeheuer-Gołąb, 2001, pp. 20–21). It is these autotelic motivations that most often lead to a lasting and positive attitude toward reading. In this context, the process of so-called reading initiation – the first experiences with books that have the potential to shape a child's long-term reading habits – becomes particularly important. This initiation takes place primarily in a family environment, and it is the family that most often provides the first impulse to reach for a book.

The school library also plays an important role in shaping reading habits. Most children surveyed declare that they enjoy going there and perceive the library as a peaceful, warm, and friendly place. Some visit regularly, others primarily for required reading. Students often emphasise the importance of the atmosphere and the role of the librarian, who actively supports their reading choices. Children appreciate the opportunity to choose their own books and the openness of the librarians: “There's always something interesting” (F8, Dz1), “I like the librarian because she recommends good books” (F3, Ch2), and “I go

there several times a month; it's my favourite place at school" (F9, Dz1). The range of books available for borrowing is diverse – from school reading, through adventure stories, fantasy, animal books, and even comics. It is worth quoting one statement from a student referring to the book *About a Girl Who Wanted to Save Books* by Klaus Hagerup: "[...]She (the main character of the book) read every day and found out that books that no one reads disappear. So she took half the library to save them" (F11, Act 3) – which shows the emotional connection the reader has with the story.

Critical voices also emerge – some children note that books are damaged or the library doesn't offer interesting titles: "I like some, but there are more interesting books in a bookshop" (F2, Ch3), "They usually don't have the books I'm interested in" (F9Ch1). At the same time, they point to other sources of books, such as municipal libraries or online bookstores, for example, "I buy books from Trzy Kropki bookstore – now it's only available online" (F2, Ch1). For some children, the school library is their only place of contact with literature, especially when there are no books at home. Therefore, the library serves not only an educational function but also a compensatory and social one, enabling the development of reading skills in children who might otherwise be deprived of it.

## 2. Favourite Book Characters and Motivations for Befriending Them

It's worth exploring children's reading preferences by considering their favourite book characters and the motivations behind choosing and identifying with them. Choosing characters with whom children want to identify or admire helps us better understand their emotional needs, developing value systems, interests, and perceptions of the world. Therefore, it is a significant factor influencing their reading tastes and engagement.

Among the most frequently mentioned favourite literary characters were Beadie, the heroine of Maria Kruger's book, a girl with a magic bead that grants wishes, and Harry Potter, valued by children for his courage and "friendliness" (F13Ch2,3; F15Ch1,2). Both characters were appreciated for their extraordinary powers, access to the world of magic, and ability to influence reality, which may indicate a child's desire for agency and the need to escape into the world of imagination. Lampo, the dog from Roman Pisarski's book *"About a Dog Who Ridden a Railway,"* a character symbolising loyalty, attachment, and fidelity, also ranked high on the list of favourite characters. Candy, the cat from Waldemar Cichoń's series *"Candy, You Rascal!"*, also enjoyed considerable popularity, gaining recognition for his mischievousness and sense of humour – children emphasised his playful and "human" nature. Respondents also readily identified with the characters in Astrid Lindgren's book *The Children of Bullerbyn*, whose everyday lives and ordinary adventures seemed to build a sense of community, secu-

rity, and belonging (F2Dz1,2; F10Dz2,3; F10Ch1). Statements referring to the group of friends from the *Scooby-Doo* comic strip were similar – children appreciated their cooperation, mutual support, and shared adventures, which may indicate the importance of the relational dimension of reading (F9Ch1,2; F16Ch1; F6Ch1,2). Among the characters mentioned was the protagonist of Hugh Lofting's series, Doctor Dolittle, distinguished by wisdom and empathy, who understood animal language, which clearly corresponds to a child's interest in the natural world and concern for animals. Pippi Longstocking, as a rebellious character, full of energy and courage, proved to be a symbol of independence, creativity, and childlike autonomy (F1 Dz3; F4 Dz2,3). In turn, Hermione Granger, as an intelligent, helpful, and consistent heroine, was seen as a role model, embodying the values of knowledge, agency, and solidarity valued by children (F3 Dz3,1; F6 Dz2; F10 Dz2).

Children also mentioned other characters they found likeable, highlighting the traits they found particularly attractive. Funny and likeable characters, such as Tomek Lebski, were very popular, appreciated for their sense of humour, mischief, and friendly nature (F2Ch1; F3Ch2,1; F7Ch2; F7Dz3). Other magical characters, such as *Elsa from Frozen*, also attracted attention because of her extraordinary abilities (F8Dz1; F14Dz1,3; F17Dz1,2). Brave and loyal characters such as Batman, Spiderman (F9Ch1,2; F16Ch1) or Kazik from the book *Kazik's Africa* by Lukasz Wierzbicki (F5Act1,2; F13Ch2,3) also aroused admiration, whose traits – courage, readiness to act and helping others – were seen as worthy of imitation. Among the indications, there were also “touching” characters, such as Asiunia from the book by Joanna Papuzińska (F6Act1,2; F15Act1,2,3; F16Act2) – a child living during the war, or the siblings from *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, whose fate moved children and aroused compassion and empathy (F15Act1,2,3; F1Ch2,3).

The declared desire to befriend literary characters is often linked to several recurring themes. Children long to experience extraordinary adventures together, and they find qualities in the characters that they value and identify with—such as courage, intelligence, and a sense of humour. They often admire specific abilities of the characters, such as the ability to cast spells or communicate with animals. Some children mentioned characters from computer games, such as those from *Minecraft* (F9Ch1,2; F11Ch1,2,3; F1Ch1,2,3), while others expressed a desire to befriend real-life characters, such as Robert Lewandowski (F3Ch3; F5Ch1,2). Friendship with book characters can serve an important function for children – providing motivation for reading and simultaneously serving as a source of inspiration and positive emotions. Children's choices, both typical and unique, reveal the richness of their imagination, the diversity of their needs, and the individual paths they take to build their identity. This choice of characters reflects the diverse needs of children – from the longing for magic and the

extraordinary, through the desire for close relationships and a sense of community, to the aspirations of being wise and unique.

It's worth noting that many children's choices often reflected their recent reading – their favourite characters were often from books they had just read. This demonstrates the dynamic nature of children's preferences – what's current and fresh can quickly acquire a special emotional significance. An example is the hare who conquered fear from Elżbieta Zubrzycka's therapeutic fable "*About the hare, Filip, who out of fear accomplished great deeds,*" which was suggested to the boy by his mother (F7Ch3). For the child, this story was important and necessary—it helped him confront his own fears, confirming the therapeutic potential of literature.

It's also significant that the characters mentioned included Elsa, Batman, Spiderman, and *Minecraft* characters. Their presence suggests the considerable impact of contemporary pop culture, extending beyond the traditional boundaries of children's literature. Although some of these characters have their counterparts in books or comics, for most children, the primary source of contact with them was audiovisual media—films, TV series, computer games, and the internet. From the perspective of childhood studies, such choices once again reveal children as active participants in a culture that is now clearly transmedia and multichannel. For them, literature is just one possible source of inspiration—games, YouTube, streaming platforms, and mobile apps are equally (and often more) important. Children move fluidly between various forms of media, creating their own individual cultural configurations. They often reach for a book after watching a film, while a computer game can prompt them to seek out information or literary history, and vice versa (Buckingham, 2013; Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016). Literature remains relevant here, but becomes one of many equally important channels for participating in culture. This choice of protagonists reflects not necessarily a lack of interest in literature, but rather the complexity of the contemporary cultural landscape in which children operate. Children's cultural identity is shaped today in the digital space, but it's worth remembering that it is still deeply rooted in narrative forms of self-expression.

It should be noted that the majority of the children surveyed indicated their favourite literary characters as characters from school reading lists, such as Carol, Doctor Dolittle, and characters from *Harry Potter* and *The Bullerby Children*. This may be a sign that the requirement to read school reading lists, despite its institutional "compulsion," allows children to engage with classic children's literature. The children's choices often reflected traditional gender preferences. Girls more often identified with heroines such as Britta, Anna (*The Bullerby Children*), and Hermione (*Harry Potter*), while boys more often identified with male characters. During the focus group discussions, a significant degree of agreement was observed among the participants. The children demon-

strated enthusiasm and mutual understanding, often reacting spontaneously, emphasizing shared experiences with exclamations such as “I like that too!” “Oh! I know that too!”, etc.

### 3. Children’s Ideas for Their Own Books

It’s worth exploring children’s reading preferences by considering their ideas for their own books, as these creative concepts reveal the topics that interest them the most. The children eagerly shared their ideas for books they would like to write. Analysis of the collected materials revealed the children as “authors” capable of self-reflection and allowed us to discern the richness of themes present in children’s imaginations. Their hypothetical stories were not only a testament to creativity but also a glimpse into the children’s world of emotions, values, and needs. Many students chose magical and fantasy themes as the basis for their literary ideas. In their stories, magic served as a tool for exploring emotions and dreams, as well as for symbolically coping with difficulties and problems. Characters such as “sorceresses fighting evil” (F2Dz1,2), “children with supernatural powers” (F10Dz1) or “magical animals” (F10Dz2,3) were a metaphor for the need for agency and control over the surrounding world, and for coping with uncertainty (Bettelheim, 1996, pp. 31-33). Many of the responses were inspired by literature and media – there were references to the Harry Potter series and fairy tales with fantasy elements (e.g., Sonic, Pokémon) (F5Ch1,2; F10Ch1,2,3; F11Ch1). The children expressed a desire to write a continuation of the adventures of Harry Potter and his descendants, as well as a continuation of their popular book, *The Incredible Adventures of Ten Socks* by Justyna Bednarek (e.g., further adventures of the “pirate sock” (F10Ch2), the “magician” (F10Ch1), and the “circus performer” (F14,Ch2,3)). This indicates a strong attachment to the world presented in both series and a need for further exploration. The students’ responses also included interesting attempts at inter-textual connections between characters from different literary universes. For example, there were ideas for a meeting between Judy Moody (the heroine of Megg McDonald’s series) and Wimpy Kid (the hero of Jeff Kinney’s series) (F16Dz1,Ch2) as well as a juxtaposition of the Wimpy Kid character with Tom Gates (the hero of Liz Pichon’s series) (F4Ch1,2). Such solutions demonstrated the children’s creative approach to familiar narratives, which at the same time fits in with the need for storytelling, deeply rooted in human nature. Contemporary culture confirms Walter Benjamin’s observations regarding the enduring importance of narrative as a means of conveying experience, knowledge, and solace, as well as a tool for critically analysing reality (Benjamin, 1975, pp. 91-94). A particularly interesting motif was the modern school, where the presence of magic combined with everyday life, creating a unique universe in which children could act as heroes and

solve problems on their own. Magic in this approach became a symbol of strength, agency, and security. Animals appeared equally frequently in children's literature. Alongside the universally known and beloved pets – cats, dogs, fish, and parrots – children also eagerly reached for less obvious species, such as horses, cows, and donkeys, considering creating stories with them as well (F3Dz1; F5Dz3; F10Ch1,2,3). Animals were often personified – there were “talking cats” (F12Dz1,2), inhabitants of the “cat city” (F9Ch3), “guinea pigs as detectives” (F1Ch3) or “Batman the dog in a cape” (F9Ch1,2). The most common themes in these stories concerned friendship, care and rescuing animals (e.g. *“Dog's happiness” – a story about a girl and a dog from the countryside*) (F8Dz2). Animal characters served as close companions, often replacing human characters. Importantly, they were also assigned a value system – empathy, loyalty, and courage. Adventure and action themes were also strongly present. The vast majority of children wanted to write dynamic books, full of puzzles, journeys, and unexpected twists. Their stories abounded with themes such as “robot wars” (F5Ch1) or “spaceships” (F7Ch3), “time travel” (F7Ch1,2), “detectives searching for treasure” (F6Dz1, Ch3), “space expeditions” (F1Ch3), and the conquest of “other planets” (F11Ch1,2, Dz1). Adventure and action became a form of action for them and a way to gain experience. Furthermore, the presence of humour in narratives serves a deconstructive function, allowing children to question existing structures and norms.

Late childhood is a stage of intense cognitive development, characterised by a heightened curiosity about the world and a need for exploration and experimentation. Children at this age can consider the perspectives of others, argue their own positions, and analyse the motives behind their actions, which is clearly manifested in the stories they create. It is in these narratives that children test the limits of their cognitive and social competences, while simultaneously revealing developing moral concepts, such as justice, which help children organise the presented world and understand the actions of the characters (Wadsworth, 1998, pp. 129–130).

Some children were inspired by their own daily lives, families, relationships, and personal experiences. Ideas included books about themselves, family members, a beloved dog, a favourite teddy bear, holidays, or school. These narratives allow children to explore their own identity and imagine themselves in various roles (Erikson, 2004). Examples of such projects included girl characters such as “Zosia – Helpful, Brave, and Pretty” (F7, Dz1) or the story “My Life as a Ballerina” (F12, Dz3), expressing the aspiration to create an ideal self-image.

Children often chose a narrative told by a fictional character, which allowed them to reflect on themselves from a distance. In late childhood, the ability to self-assess develops, based on generalising experiences of successes and failures, leading to an increasingly stable self-image. Realistic and positive self-as-

assessment promotes healthy development and facilitates coping with future crises (Appelt, 2003, p. 5). In this approach, creativity becomes a tool helpful in constructing identity – books served as a form of self-expression. Similarly, many children’s statements indicated the joy derived from the act of creation itself, humour, play, and experimentation with form. The children created stories about “broken vacuum cleaners” (F4Ch2), “funny adventures of people with LEGO” (F10, Ch1,2), and “Ptyś the parrot as a comic book hero” (F8Dz2). They perceived writing books as a creative interplay with reality. Their ideas demonstrated a great deal of freedom of thought and a willingness to think outside the box; several boys suggested that they might “someday” also write a game guide (F3 Ch2,3; F10 and 12 Ch1,2).

Social and existential themes also emerged among the children’s ideas. The children were able to contextualise their stories in current events, such as the war in Ukraine. They also explored themes related to acceptance, otherness, and loneliness, as in the story inspired by the “ugly duckling.” Some stories touched on difficult emotions, such as the death of a beloved dog, which ultimately turned out to be a dream. This was a way of coming to terms with difficult topics and experiences. The children demonstrated an understanding of social reality and a need to describe it – literature became a space for them to process fears, conflicts, and experiences of misunderstanding. In her research, Dorota Klus-Stańska also emphasised that children’s stories about their own experiences were a form of searching for meaning and a way to understand themselves and the world around them (Klus-Stańska, 2002, pp. 189–220). Supporting narrative activity in young children should be considered an important element of humanities education and psychosocial development.

## Conclusions

The research aimed to give voice to the children themselves – their statements, reflections, and creative ideas served as the starting point for the analysis. Instead of focusing solely on their reading level or knowledge of specific titles, I attempted to understand the meaning children attributed to books and how literature was integrated into their everyday experiences. This allowed me to capture the deeper, relational, and emotional dimension of their contact with literary texts.

My research revealed the diverse nature of children’s contact with books, which extended beyond the framework of compulsory school reading. Literature was present in children’s lives in many forms – spontaneous reading, listening to audio books, shared reading with adults, and even as a school activity. The importance of the relational aspect of reading proved particularly significant, in

which books became a space for the exchange of emotions and ideas, not merely a teaching tool. Books were presented as a medium not only for learning but, above all, for socialising—a pretext for closeness, conversation, and shared experience, in which the adult played the role not only of the reader but also of a cultural mediator and reading companion. This approach resonated with the concept of, among others, Kupiec (2024), who emphasised the importance of “reading with a child” as a form of building relationships and a shared sense of community.

The children’s responses revealed an awareness of their literary preferences. Emotional literature held a special place – stories about friendship, family, loss, and animals – which enabled young readers to understand themselves and the world. Their ideas for their own books, however, demonstrated considerable creativity and a deep immersion in the world of pop culture and children’s literature. Recurring themes include magic, school, animals, continuations of existing stories, and the presence of pop culture characters. A particularly interesting phenomenon was intertextuality—children’s narratives often connected different worlds and characters, transcending the boundaries of individual texts, creating their own versions and syntheses of familiar stories. This creative way of absorbing and processing content demonstrates the fluidity of the boundaries between high and popular culture, as well as the presence of transmedia thinking, which Henry Jenkins described as a feature of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). Today’s children are not so much “abandoning” books as changing the way they use them – they want to transform them and imbue them with new meanings, rather than merely receiving pre-made content.

The collected data allows us to formulate several important practical recommendations. Analysis of children’s narratives reveals the need to create a space where children can talk, both about themselves and about the fictional world. The ability to create narratives in various situations and for various reasons, from autobiographical to fantasy, fosters the exploration of experiences and imagination. It’s worth supporting children in their creativity by providing them with space, time, tools, and confidence in their abilities. Creating books – individual, class, or collaborative – can be an extremely valuable educational tool. Spontaneously created stories are valuable and worth recording not only as evidence of linguistic development but also as a source of knowledge about children’s needs and values. Equally important is appreciating children’s choices and recognising their preferences when planning library purchases or selecting supplementary reading. It’s good to remember that literature requires openness to various forms of communication – from traditional text to audio books, comics, and interactive books. The teacher’s task also becomes preparing students to act as responsible consumers of information and critical recipients of opinions, especially in the context of the strong influence of the media, which often promotes behavioural patterns that are detrimental to children’s development.

Group dynamics played a significant role in my research – participants interacted with each other, significantly strengthening their engagement and openness. The phenomenon of social facilitation, or the positive influence of others' presence on individual activity, was particularly evident (Ciechowska, 2017, p. 105). Children were more willing to share their experiences and emotions within the group, confirming the validity of discussing certain topics in a group setting rather than in individual interviews, which could cause embarrassment. Although a so-called “dominator” occasionally emerged in the group, influencing other participants with their activity and the force of their speech, the overall effect of the interaction was overwhelmingly positive – the children stimulated each other, and the sense of community facilitated breaking down barriers and opening up to conversation.

The study's limitations include the relatively small number of participants, differences in the dynamics of individual focus groups, and the frequent emergence of dominant leaders, who sometimes restricted the freedom of expression of other children. An additional complication was the limited time available for discussion, resulting from the timeframe of the lesson.

It is worth continuing this type of research, as it reveals only a fragment of a broader phenomenon, and the dynamic nature of contemporary culture – especially influenced by media – can influence reading preferences year after year, even beyond the children's group. Therefore, contemporary analyses should encompass both traditional literature and digital content, reflecting the changing forms of engagement with text.

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## **Co i jak czyta współczesne dziecko? Głos uczniów klas trzecich z Białegostoku o formach kontaktu z literaturą, bohaterach i własnej twórczości**

### **Streszczenie**

Artykuł podejmuje temat preferencji czytelniczych uczniów wybranych klas trzecich z Białegostoku, koncentrując się na ich relacjach z literaturą – formach kontaktu z książką, ulubionych bohaterach oraz pomysłach na twórczość literacką własnego autorstwa. Badania zostały przeprowadzone w metodologii jakościowej, z wykorzystaniem zogniskowanych wywiadów grupowych, w oparciu o założenia childhoodstudies. Analiza tematyczna wypowiedzi 96 uczniów pozwoliła na uchwycenie ich autentycznych doświadczeń czytelniczych, sposobów odbioru literatury oraz form ekspresji twórczej. Tekst składa się z części teoretycznej, w której przedstawiam wybrane koncepcje dotyczące rozwoju czytelnictwa dziecięcego, uwarunkowania środowiskowe i kulturowe tego

procesu, a także omawiam dotychczasowe wyniki badań w tym zakresie (m.in. prace Baluch, Krasoń, Leszczyńskiego, Ungehauer-Gołąb); z części metodologicznej i empirycznej. Wyniki badań podkreślają znaczącą rolę dorosłych jako mediatorów literatury, wpływ mediów i technologii na kształtowanie nawyków czytelniczych oraz konieczność dostosowania metod edukacyjnych do współczesnych realiów życia dziecka. Wnioski sformułowane na podstawie analizy materiału empirycznego mogą okazać się przydatne nauczycielom, bibliotekarzom i rodzicom wspierającym rozwój czytelnictwa wśród dzieci.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dziecko w młodszym wieku szkolnym, literatura dla dzieci, edukacja literacka, childhoodstudy.





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## Note-taking as a Learning Strategy for First-Year Students Majoring in Pedagogy – Pilot Study

### Abstract

Note-taking is an integral part of the learning strategy – taking notes involves practising concentration, developing memory skills, selecting and organising teaching material, and critically assessing information. This issue has been the subject of numerous empirical analyses; however, there remains a lack of research involving individuals who are starting their academic education and actively developing individual learning strategies at this stage. A special group is made up of people undertaking education in teaching professions, who (in theory) should become experts in the process of educating children, young people or adults. Therefore, the pilot study described in this article presents how first-year education students perceive note-taking as a personal learning strategy. The results of this study indicated that the most commonly used type of note-taking is linear notes and their variation – outline notes. Handwritten notes were preferred, although a large group also reported taking digital notes. The students overwhelmingly rated characteristics such as legibility, aesthetics, neatness, content layout, and ease of learning from their own notes positively. On the other hand, their innovative nature was rated low. Among the challenges related to note-taking, the following were mentioned: difficulties with concentration and motivation, the need to select material, the pace of classes, the manner of presenting lecture content, and the speed of note-taking required in academic classes.

**Keywords:** note-taking, education students, strategy, learning, pilot study.

### Introduction

Note-taking seems to be a common skill, and its practice begins at an early stage of education. Notes can support a broader understanding of academic

texts, provide an opportunity to repeat and consolidate content, allow knowledge to be structured, and enable its growth and development to be monitored (Domagała-Zyśk, 2017). It is therefore a fully-fledged learning strategy, useful at every stage of education. Despite the seemingly prosaic nature of this activity, note-taking is not always a skill that students possess to a sufficient degree when they begin their academic education. According to van der Meer, they acquire this competence through trial and error at earlier stages of education, which does not necessarily translate into the active development of their competence resources (2011). It is interesting to reflect on how this issue relates to the experiences of Polish students of pedagogy who are just beginning their academic education. Therefore, the pilot study described in this article presents how first-year pedagogy students perceive note-taking as a personal learning strategy. Due to the fact that they are individuals who are required to have expert preparation related to learning and teaching others, we will also reflect on how note-taking fits into the broader context of their university education.

### **Note-taking as a learning strategy – definitional explanations**

The most concise definition of note-taking is recording the most important information during a lecture or while reading a text so that it can be easily accessed later (Jerzyk-Wojtecka, 2013). A note itself is defined as a short text written down in order to remember certain facts or observations (<https://wsjp.pl/haslo/podglad/35510/notatka/3939948/zapisek>). The verb “to note” means both “to write something down in order to remember it” and “to record the existing state of affairs” (<https://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/notowanie.html>). Note-taking significantly supports cognitive processes, as it requires selecting, prioritising, organising, comparing, evaluating and integrating information (Gryboś, 2021, p. 160). A good note is a kind of ‘[...] map of the text, facilitating orientation in it, but not losing the reader in details’ (Czerniawska, Ledzińska, 2007).<sup>1</sup> All the properties described here mean that it can be treated as an aspect that significantly supports the learning process.

The development and improvement of note-taking skills is included in the current core curriculum for Polish language teaching at all stages of education in Poland (Gryboś, 2021)<sup>2</sup>. Taking notes from literature is one of the elements

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<sup>1</sup> All translations into English of the original texts are the author’s own translations.

<sup>2</sup> Regulation of the Minister of National Education of February 14, 2017 on the core curriculum for preschool education and the core curriculum for general education for primary schools, including for students with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities, general education for first-level vocational schools, general education for special schools preparing for work, and general education for post-secondary schools. Appendix No. 2. Core curriculum for general ed-

of scientific cognition related to the deliberate observation and analysis of selected fragments of reality (Duraj-Nowakowa, 2002). In this case, note-taking is a form of theoretical research: learning aimed at gathering knowledge that allows for the construction of generalisations, laws of development and changes in literature (Duraj-Nowakowa, 2002). Despite the categorical presence of this issue, it seems that Polish primary and secondary schools lack a structured model for teaching how to create different types of notes. The main emphasis is placed on their aesthetics and comprehensive content (in accordance with the information provided by the teacher or found in the textbook). Even at the next, academic stage of education, not much time is usually devoted to note-taking. As a result, some of the study skills textbooks available in Poland, aimed at first-year students, actually omit the topic of notes (see, for example, Kuźnar, Towalski, 2020, Hyla, 2014). Among them, there are also publications in which the authors refer, at least briefly, to the issue of note-taking (including creative note-taking) or the topic of mind maps (Andrzejczak, 2014, Cottrell, 2007). Despite significant social changes, note-taking remains a key part of the process of creating academic knowledge structures. Notes are taken, among other things, during classes, when preparing for tasks assigned by the teacher (e.g., presentations), and when using scientific texts. For many students, they are an indispensable tool, and they also support various stages of the teacher's work, facilitating the preparation and delivery of classes (Janowicz, 2011).

As previously indicated, note-taking falls within the scope of learning strategies. In light of the literature on the subject, we can distinguish between metacognitive and cognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies concern the goal of planning and coordinating activities at a symbolic (mental) level (Ledzińska, 2000, p. 126). These include: planning strategies – e.g., reviewing material, generating questions, monitoring strategies – affecting concentration, as well as regulatory strategies – e.g., those related to revisiting specific content, reviewing material (see Dembo, 1997). Cognitive learning strategies are defined as memory strategies – these are 'procedures for organising situations and memory material, used by the subject to memorise and/or recall information' (Czerniawska and Ledzińska, 2007, p. 241). These include: repetition strategies, e.g., rewriting material; elaboration strategies, e.g., mnemonics, creating analogies; and organisation strategies, e.g., grouping data categories and concept maps (Rzońca, 2023, after Dembo, 1997). Most of the activities listed here affect the process of note-taking. According to R. Arends, there are four types of learn-

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education for primary schools (Journal of Laws 2017, item 356, as amended). and Regulation of the Ministry of National Education of January 30, 2018 on the core curriculum for general education, technical secondary schools, and second-level vocational schools. Appendix No. 1. Core curriculum for general education for four-year high schools and five-year technical secondary schools (Journal of Laws 2018, item 467, as amended).

ing strategies: repetition strategies, metacognitive strategies, elaboration strategies and organisation strategies (each of which can be further detailed) (Arends, 1994, pp. 488-499, Szymczak, 2012). Note-taking becomes a particularly important element of elaboration and organisation strategies. The essence of the former is to operationalise information, which facilitates its encoding and allows for a more effective transfer of data from short-term to long-term memory, as well as the generation of associations and connections between what is known and what is remembered (Arends, 1994). The essence of the second strategy, organisation, is for the individual to arrange the material into a specific structure, which is given individual meaning. Examples of this include creating lists of important issues or tables of contents and mind maps (Arends, 1994).

## Types of notes

Among the types of notes, we can initially distinguish between linear and non-linear notes. The former, which are the most commonly used, are similar to printed text written 'line by line' (Kasperowicz, 2014). Some people believe that only notes containing as many words as possible in complete sentences will help them remember information in a given field (especially if it is new information). In this approach, we try to write down as much as possible so that we can later use the comprehensive material. However, creating such notes can resemble rewriting a text rather than actively processing it. Linear notes are also often considered uninteresting in their 'basic' form, tedious and monotonous. It is possible to break this pattern and give these notes an 'author's commentary' by enriching them with elements that increase their attractiveness. You can write down the text using coloured pens and highlighters, change the structure of the text, divide it into paragraphs or paragraphs and margins (Gębuś, 2014). Following this lead, people who develop non-linear notes use a variety of methods – they use drawings, symbols, charts, diagrams, tables, different font sizes, stickers and coloured sticky notes.

Another classification, describing characteristics similar to the previous ones, distinguishes between summary and outline types of notes and mind maps (Cieciora, 2024). The former can be associated with linear notes, as they refer to the literal, source-compliant recording of read or heard content, which is used, among other things, for quotations, definitions of specific concepts, important statements or examples of phenomena. The disadvantage of this method of note-taking is that it is time-consuming, makes the mind lazy during the note-taking process, and often makes it difficult to learn from the resulting material. The second type is outline notes containing the most important content forming an organised, well-thought-out system – the content is hierarchi-

cally systematised: the main idea, theses and points indicating specific issues. In this type of notes, you can use highlights, underlining, colours, symbols, etc. This type of note-taking activates the author to a greater extent, can allow for better memorisation and understanding of the material, but requires the ability to select content (Cieciura, 2024). The last of the types highlighted here is a mind map: a diagram representing interconnected words, ideas or tasks, arranged around the main idea/keyword, placed in the centre of the map (see Eppler, 2006, Manoharan, 2008). It creates a diagram of connections between keywords selected by the author, which act as 'verbal hooks' containing a broader content load, triggering associations with the main category, which can allow the structure of the issue to be reconstructed. The map allows for comprehensive and concise content development: encoding and subsequent decoding of symbols, hierarchising and assigning meanings to concepts (Buzan, 2007). The creation of mind maps is subject to specific rules: they are created on a smooth, horizontally oriented sheet of paper, using numbering and hierarchisation, with words of different sizes... The concept of visual note-taking associated with mind maps has a broader meaning and can be associated with notes that include various graphic elements (there is no need for the specific structuring required in mind maps). The creative note-taking methods described above correspond to the dual coding theory present in the literature on the subject, which indicates that the use of both verbal and visual channels increases the effectiveness of information coding (Amirian, Heshmatifar, 2013, Rodriguez, Sadoski, 2000).

In an era of diverse technological inventions, students are looking for new solutions to facilitate the collection of academic content. The move away from traditional note-taking is accompanied by 'preserving' information in other ways – the long-established practice of photocopying academic texts or notes taken by colleagues, and taking photographs of text and visual materials (e.g., lecture slides) using mobile phones (not always taking into account copyright issues and the prohibition on reproducing copyrighted content) (Jerzyk-Wojtecka, 2013). Other important issues that often arise in discussions are methods of note-taking that use technological conveniences. Today, note-taking is often mediated by electronic devices and programmes. This method of note-taking is also facilitated by applications such as Xmind (which allows you to create mind maps), Obsidian (which allows you to create notes and connect them into a complex network), Scrble, Roam Research, OneNote, Think Notes, Note-taking AI, Notion, Evernote, Google Keep, FirmBee (<https://www.ifirma.pl/blog/aktualnosci/aplikacja-do-robienia-notatek>). The specific context determines AI-related systems – summarising, note-taking, or changing text into any form. It is precisely the issue of multi-stage note-taking using artificial intelligence that is currently an important research topic (see, for example, Karunarathna, Dilshan, Wanniarachchi, Bimsara, Piyatilake, 2024). Other significant areas addressed in empiri-

cal analyses in recent years have included the negative effects of using laptops in academic classes (Fried, 2008), working memory, verbal abilities, and prior knowledge as predictors of the quality of students' notes taken during online lectures (Hadwin, Kirby, Woodhouse, 1999), and scientific papers have also compared note analysis strategies using different methods (Siegel, 2018). However, there is still a lack of research involving people who are just beginning their academic education and actively developing individual note-taking strategies, which has become the subject of this study.

## **Methodology of own research**

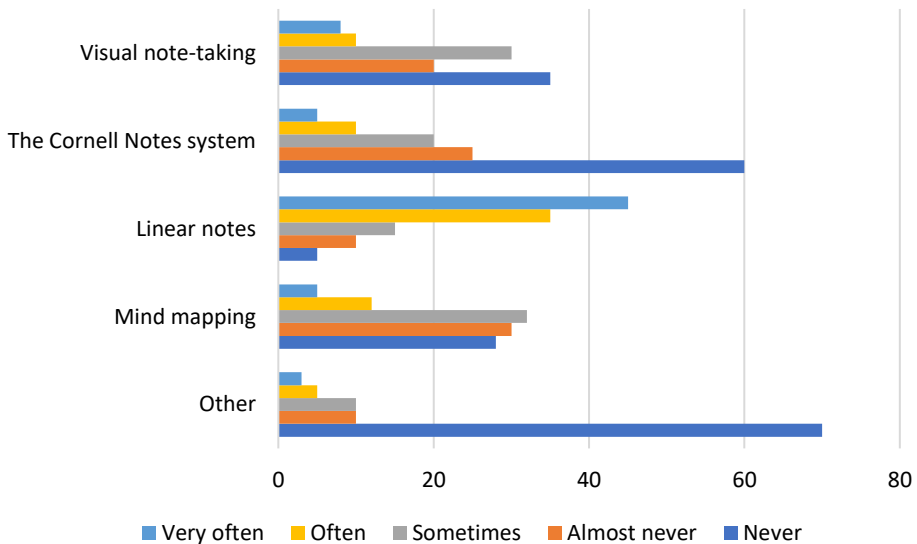
The research carried out for the purposes of this work was of a pilot and exploratory nature. The main problem was formulated in the form of a question: How do first-year education students perceive note-taking as an individual learning strategy? The subject of the analysis was the perception of note-taking as an individual learning strategy by first-year students of pedagogy. The theoretical-practical and practical-implementation objectives were indicated here (Skorny, 1984). The first was to present the ways in which note-taking is perceived in the context of preferences for the type of notes, strategies for creating them, evaluation of one's own notes, factors influencing the style of note-taking, and challenges related to their creation. The practical and implementation objective, on the other hand, concerned the indication of preliminary recommendations for academic teaching related to the development of note-taking skills.

The study involved 109 students of pedagogy and arts education from Polish universities (Jagiellonian University, University of Szczecin, Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa, Maria Grzegorzewska University and University of the National Education Commission in Krakow). The students (mostly women with similar demographic profiles, living in large cities) chose the following fields of study: general pedagogy (general academic profile), preschool and early school pedagogy, special pedagogy, social rehabilitation pedagogy, pedagogy: cultural animation, arts education in the field of visual arts, care and educational pedagogy, and school pedagogy. The study was conducted at the end of the first academic semester of the 2024/2025 academic year and during the winter examination session. An original questionnaire was used, which included descriptive and multiple-choice questions as well as elements of the Likert scale, which made it possible to detect differences in the assessment of individual characteristics of note-taking. The survey was conducted using the CAWI technique on the google forms platform.

## Presentation, analysis and interpretation of own research results

The first question concerned the frequency of use of different types of notes, including mind maps, traditional linear notes, Cornell notes, and sketchnoting (graphic note-taking). In addition, it was possible to select and describe methods other than those listed or to indicate that no notes were taken.

The data showing the students' choices is presented in Chart 1.



*Chart 1*  
Frequency of use of different note-taking styles  
Source: own research

Almost every respondent took personal notes with varying frequency. As shown in Chart 1, the most popular style of note-taking was linear notes (85% of responses 'often' and 'very often'), while mind maps (16% of responses 'often' and 'very often') and notes created using the Cornell method (only 8% of responses "often" and 'very often') proved to be the least popular. Respondents had the opportunity to clarify their choice or describe another strategy they used. Numerous responses indicated the importance of adding elements to enrich the text – some of the students surveyed create their own modifications of the above-mentioned styles, which is described as follows:

*I sometimes [...] combine mind maps with the traditional method. In each of the links (rectangles), I put a few lines of text (definitions, points), connect these links with arrows and sometimes add colours. (Female, Pedagogy, Jagiellonian University)*

*I often use simple or curved arrows in traditional notes, e.g., I write a fairly long sentence and there are arrows here and there [...]* (Female, Preschool and Early School Education, Jagiellonian University)

A small group creates types of notes not mentioned in the question, as evidenced by the following statements:

*My notes are fragments of thoughts on scraps of paper* (Female, Rehabilitation education, Maria Grzegorzewska University)

*I create notes from sub-points combined with a chain method of associations; these are notes such as 'questions and answers'.* (Female, Pedagogy, Jagiellonian University)

*I write notes on different sides: left, centre, right. Or I create branches on two sides with a blank centre.* (Female, Preschool and Early School Education, The University of Szczecin)

Another aspect was the self-assessment of the students' notes. The respondents could evaluate characteristics such as: the legibility of the notes, their neatness, the ease of learning from their own notes, their aesthetic value, the innovative nature of the notes, and the way the content was organised.

These data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Characteristics of notes as assessed by the respondents*

Characteristics of notes	Total number of responses "I rate it highly and very highly"
Legibility	62,3%
Ease of learning from notes	70,6%
Aesthetics of notes	62,4%
Innovativeness of notes	21,1%
Content layout	60,6%
Carefulness of notes	65,2%

The percentages do not add up to 100% because the respondents evaluated different characteristics of the notes. Source: own research.

As can be seen from the data presented in the table, the respondents rated their own notes positively in relation to almost all criteria, except for innovation – only 1/5 of the respondents rated this feature highly. Interestingly, characteristics such as legibility and aesthetics were rated positively, even though in one of the subsequent open-ended questions, a significant proportion of students had reservations about these characteristics, describing them as a challenge.

Another important issue was the methods of note-taking and strategies for using notes. The majority of students declared that they most often write them by hand (78% of responses 'often' and 'very often'). A smaller, but still very significant group indicated the frequency of using a laptop or other electronic devices when taking notes (about 58% of responses "often" and 'very often'). Only

1/5 of students declared that they copied notes from others and treated them as ready-made study material (approximately 21% answered 'often' and 'very often'). Slightly less than one-third of students indicated that they create notes based on notes borrowed from their fellow students (approximately 30%). These data are presented in Chart 2.

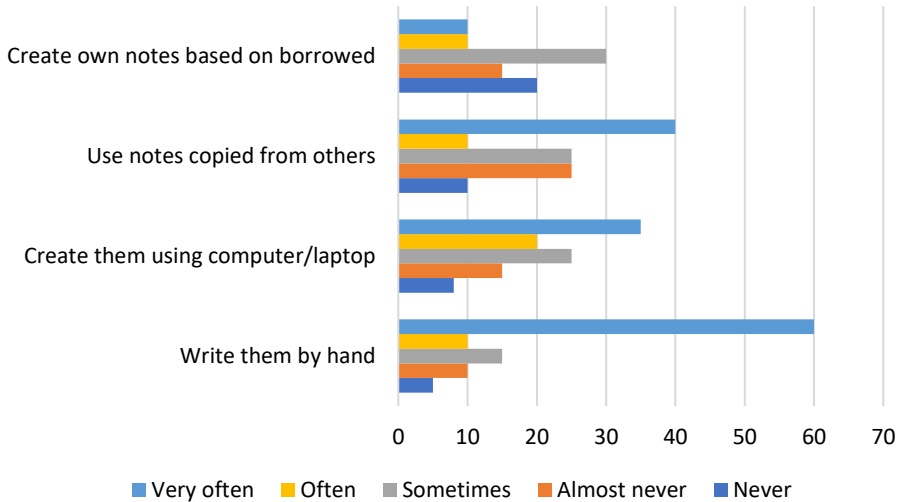


Chart 2

Note-taking methods and note-use strategies among respondents

Source: own research

A relatively large group of respondents declared that they take notes using a laptop or tablet. They justified this with aesthetic considerations, increased legibility, and the possibility of structuring the text. However, the positives presented here should be compared with the results of research: Fried (2008) pointed out that the use of laptops distracted both their users and other students. The level of laptop use was also negatively correlated with student learning indicators, including self-assessment of understanding of the material and final exam results (Piolat, Olive, Kellogg, 2005). Handwriting, on the other hand, is valued in many different ways, with emphasis placed on, among other things, its multidimensional sensory-motor processes, which significantly influence the process of learning about reality and improving memory (Longcamp M., Velay J.-I., Wise Berninger V., Richards T., 2017, Mangen, Velay, 2010). These issues are certainly worth paying more attention to during academic classes.

The respondents were also asked in an open question what (or who) had the greatest influence on their current note-taking style. The students' answers revealed a wide range of categories, among which individual searches and prefer-

ences dominated (thinking about learning material, searching for the most effective ways of note-taking, often by trial and error, creating notes in different styles and choosing those that are most appropriate). Relatively few responses revealed inspirations related to specific individuals (school teachers, colleagues) and trends present in social media (i.e. video tutorials posted on Instagram, TikTok and Pinterest). Interestingly, no literature was mentioned here, e.g., methodological textbooks aimed at first-year students. The few statements indicate that some students had not previously considered this issue, treating note-taking as a largely intuitive process.

The surveyed students also responded to statements relating to the style and strategy of note-taking, indicating how often they engage in various note-taking practices. For this purpose, ten statements were selected, which were the result of the author's analysis of the literature on the subject. These statements are shown in the table below (Table 2).

Table 2

*Frequency of activities accompanying note-taking in the statements of the surveyed students*

Practices accompanying note-taking	Total number of "often" and "very often" responses
During lectures, I try to transcribe the content "word for word."	58%
When taking notes in class, I try to summarize and shorten the content on an ongoing basis.	53%
I create notes – outlines (I use, for example, numbering of content, writing in points and subpoints).	91%
I use graphic elements: drawings, diagrams, symbols...	42%
I write down content in different colors or underline/highlight parts of my notes using colored highlighters.	70%
When writing notes, I refer to additional content beyond what is provided by the lecturer.	21%
I write down content in a rather chaotic manner.	39%
I make a "first draft" – later I create another note from it.	40%
I also create personal notes from texts assigned by the teacher that I have read for class.	37%
After taking notes in class, I rewrite them more than once to learn them effectively.	27%

The percentages do not add up to 100% because respondents could give more than one answer. Source: own research

According to this data, a large number of students take notes in the form of summaries (91%), and writing down content using different colours or highlighting with highlighters is also very popular (70% of responses). More than

half of the respondents also declare that they meticulously transcribe the content of presentations given during lectures, and more than half of the students surveyed summarise and modify their notes while taking them. Relatively few respondents chose the strategy of rewriting as a way of memorising academic content.

The respondents also answered an open-ended question, describing the challenges associated with note-taking. The answers focused on five areas categorised as follows:

— **difficulties related to concentration (and divided attention), focus, and motivation to make the effort to take notes**

This issue is illustrated by the following statements from students:

*Taking notes is a monotonous activity for me. I find it difficult to concentrate on taking notes.* (Female, Pedagogy, Jagiellonian University)

*I suffer from a lack of motivation to take notes, problems with concentration, and with longer texts, it is more difficult to take this kind of notes in bullet points, which is how I learn best.* (Female, Preschool and Early School Education, Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa)

*I often cannot focus on taking notes and listening at the same time.* (Female, Pedagogy – cultural animation, The University of Szczecin)

— **the nature of the educational content: its quantity, presentation, and comprehensibility for students**

This aspect was addressed as follows:

*The scientific language, which I am not yet used to, is definitely a challenge.* (Female, pedagogy – cultural animation, University of Szczecin)

*There is a lot of material to take notes on, and it often turns out later that about half of it is unnecessary.* (Female, Pedagogy, Jagiellonian University)

*We have too much information from different sources, and I am never sure which information is most accurate.* (Female, art education in the field of visual arts, Maria Grzegorzewska University)

— **the pace of the classes and the resulting speed of note-taking**

This challenge was described as follows:

*One of the biggest challenges is that the lecturer speaks too fast. Sometimes I can't keep up with the presentation.* (Female, Pedagogy, Jagiellonian University)

*The difficulties (if any) stem solely from the way the classes are conducted. There is a lot of text on the presentation slides, and not enough time to read it.* (Female, Rehabilitation education, Maria Grzegorzewska University)

*The speed of information transfer is definitely a challenge, it is often impossible to write everything down, too much important information is given in quick succession.* (Female, care, educational and school pedagogy, Maria Grzegorzewska University)

### — the need to select teaching material

When describing this difficulty, the students surveyed pointed to the following aspects:

*It's not like in secondary school, sometimes you have to pick up on the content yourself, which I'm not used to yet.* (Female, Preschool and Early School Education, University of the National Education Commission in Krakow)

*It is difficult to assess which information is most important and should be included in the notes; you need a sense of what is most important.* (Female, Care and Education Pedagogy and School Pedagogy, Academy of Special Education)

*I feel uncertain in my subjective assessment of which knowledge is more important for the exam (it is an internal conflict: should I focus more on the knowledge that will be expected of me, or on the knowledge that interests me, potentially lowering my exam result for the entire material).* (Female, Rehabilitation education, Academy of Special Education)

### — legibility, aesthetics and organisation of the content included in the notes

In this context, students pointed out the following challenges:

*Sometimes I have to rewrite my class notes several times because they don't look the way I want them to, which is time-consuming.* (Female, Preschool and Early School Education, Jagiellonian University)

*I always make rough notes in class and then rewrite and correct them, etc., and it is precisely this process of making clean notes that is often a challenge.* (Female, Preschool and Early School Education, Jan Długosz University in Czestochowa)

*The biggest challenge for me is my handwriting, which is difficult to read.* (Female, Care, Education, and School Pedagogy, Maria Grzegorzewska University)

The requirement to write neatly, instilled at early stages of education, may encourage students to seek new ways of taking notes (or to choose programmes and web applications that support this process). All this because of handwriting that is considered ugly, in their own opinion. Numerous statements by the respondents show that they focus on making their notes not only legible, but also 'neat'. Cognitive and motivational factors, the selection and organisation of information, and the characteristics of academic teachers, who are not always sufficiently prepared to work with first-year students, representatives of Generation Z, also pose a challenge for students.

The issues presented in this text provide preliminary information on how pedagogy students new to the academic world perceive the process of note-taking. The data presented shows that most of them reflect on the process of note-taking, although they most often take linear notes, a large proportion of them give them an original character by modifying them in various ways. They highly value the accuracy and legibility of their notes, while critically assessing their innovativeness. Despite the popularity of digital notes, a significant number of respondents still prefer handwritten notes. Faced with individual chal-

lenges and external factors (such as complex scientific language, the pace of classes, and the way lecturers present material), they seem to develop their own solutions, often through trial and error. They draw inspiration from, among other things, their previous experiences, people who are important to them, and materials posted on social media, but they do not use textbooks describing skills useful in studying.

Referring to the research results obtained, it is worth mentioning the results of analyses carried out by other authors on some of the issues covered in the pilot study in question. Not many similar studies have been conducted, but we can cite, for example, a study carried out on a large group by Peverly and Wolf (2019), which shows that 96.5% of British students of various fields, like their Polish counterparts, take handwritten notes at least occasionally, and more than half of them sometimes or often create digital notes. When it comes to assessing note-taking skills, reference can be made to the analyses by Morehead, Dunlosky, Rawson, Blasiman, & Hollis (2019), in which almost 90% of young respondents, much more than in the comparable Polish study, declared that they positively value their own notes (on the other hand, according to the cited study, as many as 58% of them would like to improve their skills in this area). In turn, the challenges related to note-taking described by Polish students were similarly outlined by New Zealand first-year students of various fields of study (they concerned, among other things, difficulties in organising and selecting information), which in many cases was also associated with their expectation of receiving ready-made materials from teachers (van der Meer, 2011).

To summarise these threads, it should be noted that the results presented in this text provided preliminary information about the phenomenon under consideration and allowed us to identify issues that will be addressed in the main study. The questionnaire will be supplemented with elements related to the presence of communication technologies (applications and programmes supporting note-taking) and AI. Despite the fact that virtually 100% of students indicated that they take notes during their studies, the question of whether, in the context of the growing availability of various types of data, personal notes will continue to be an effective way of collecting, recording, deepening and managing knowledge is becoming increasingly relevant (Gryboś, 2021). This issue is illustrated by one of the respondents' statements: 'In most situations, I do not take notes. I consider it a suboptimal solution in times of easy access to the internet, AI, recordings (e.g., of lectures), and presentations.' The 'suboptimality' pointed out here is an important issue and should certainly be taken into account in research. There are also plans to expand the analyses to include broader strategies for the context of note-taking and note-use. The experiences of students in subsequent years of study are also worth exploring, as this may

reveal further prospects for competence development at other stages of academic education.

## Conclusion

Raising awareness of the role and purpose of taking individual notes is important in developing text-creating competence, which is extremely important for students of pedagogy, as it is the ability to produce and receive various communicative events (Duszak, 1998, p. 199). Note-taking does not have to be associated with the mechanical and unreflective process of writing down the lecturer's words. The development of the discussed competences should be treated on a par with other academic skills and must be combined with them. It is a constitutive educational practice that is a path to lifelong learning: it can allow for the development of reflectiveness, critical thinking, and deeper processing of the content being studied (Vlieghe, Zamojski 2021). Seminar classes and workshops devoted to developing basic study competences will be an adequate context for this task. The programme of such classes cannot ignore the challenges associated with note-taking, as indicated by the respondents. These areas should be present not only in classes devoted to study methodology, although they should play a key role in these academic meetings. Nor can they be separated from other areas of student competence. It is necessary to initiate a discussion on what promotes and what hinders the development of academic competences, including note-taking skills. It is also necessary to systematically familiarise students with different types of academic texts, practising paraphrasing, developing attention to precision in note-taking, using visualisation methods and other techniques for working with text (based on educational games, the Pomodoro technique), and exercises for relaxation, motivation, concentration, and the development of critical thinking in the reception of text. Last but not least, it will also be important to be aware of powerful individual distractors and to appreciate the role of breaks, regular physical activity, proper diet and hydration. When analysing the challenges associated with note-taking identified by students, it seems reasonable to 'go back to basics' and try to understand what the process of note-taking is in a cognitive and developmental context. It is a creative, active process that is worth exploring. It is worth the effort to seek answers to how this process can be implemented individually – modifying it and adapting it to one's needs, which can generate a break from non-developmental patterns and habits and the development of necessary academic resources.

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## **Notowanie jako strategia uczenia się studentów pierwszego roku pedagogiki – badania pilotażowe**

### **Streszczenie**

Notowanie jest nieodłącznym elementem strategii uczenia się – tworzenie notatek wiąże się z ćwiczeniem koncentracji uwagi, rozwijaniem umiejętności zapamiętywania, selekcji i organizowania materiału dydaktycznego oraz krytycznego odbioru informacji. Zagadnienie to było przedmiotem licznych analiz empirycznych, jednak wciąż odnotowuje się deficyt badań prowadzonych z udziałem osób rozpoczynających kształcenie akademickie, aktywnie rozwijających na tym etapie indywidualne strategie uczenia się. Szczególną grupę stanowią osoby podejmujące edukację w zawodach pedagogicznych, które (w założeniach) powinny stawać się ekspertami w procesie kształcenia dzieci, młodzieży lub dorosłych. W związku z tym, w opisanym w tym artykule badaniu pilotażowym, przedstawiono, w jaki sposób studenci pierwszego roku studiów pedagogicznych postrzegają notowanie jako osobistą strategię uczenia się. Wyniki tych badań wskazały, że najczęściej stosowanym rodzajem notowania są notatki linearne i ich odmiana – notatki konspektowe. Preferowano odrębny sposób notowania, choć liczna grupa deklarowała również, iż często tworzy notatki cyfrowe. Osoby studiujące w przeważającej mierze pozytywnie oceniały charakterystyki takie, jak: czytelność, estetyka, staranność, sposób rozplanowania treści i łatwość uczenia się z własnych notatek. Nisko waloryzowano z kolei ich nowatorski charakter. Wśród wyzwań związanych z notowaniem wymieniano trudności ze skupieniem uwagi i motywowaniem się, konieczność selekcji materiału, tempo prowadzenia zajęć, sposób prezentacji wykładowych treści oraz wymaganą na zajęciach akademickich szybkość zapisu informacji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** notowanie, studenci pedagogiki, strategia, uczenie się, pilotaż.



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## High School Final Exam Blackmail as Part of Everyday School Life. Preliminary Research Report

### Abstract

The aim of our text was to identify the forms of pressure experienced by high school graduates in connection with the final exams in the context of everyday school life. We conducted the research using a proprietary questionnaire, which was completed by 239 first-year students of pedagogy at selected Polish universities. The collected data indicate that the phenomenon of a high school final exam pressure affected 20% of respondents. Its two main manifestations are: focusing school life in the final year around the a high school final exam and exerting pressure on students to choose a high school final exam subjects in order to maintain the school's good image. The overall picture of the reported experiences of the final exams allowed for the identification of the highest form of pressure, i.e. the phenomenon of high school final exam blackmail, related to interference in students' choices. The research was preliminary in nature and may, therefore, serve as a basis for a further exploration of the phenomenon of a high school final exam blackmail.

**Keywords:** high school, final exams, everyday life, blackmail, pressure.

### Introduction

The everyday educational reality of students in the final years of high schools and technical colleges means that all their thought is bent on a high school final exam, which not only marks a formal end of education at this stage, but also is

a significant determinant of the future educational and career opportunities. More and more frequently, however, it is possible to notice in the everyday work of school practices the aim of which is to exert pressure on students. This pressure in schools connected with rankings and achievements is sufficiently strong to make the remaining elements of educational reality seem marginal within the whole scope of undertaken activities. A high school final exam attains the status of the Holy Grail of teachers' expectations. A high school final exam, as the final, but also the central, moment in the life of the high school students, involves, at times, coercion and oppressive activities (Murawska, Motyl, 2025). A frequent element of everyday educational reality is, at times, exerting pressure on students in the aspect of declaring a choice of certain subjects to be taken in the course of high school exams. And, even though the preliminary declaration in relevance to a high school final exam is no longer required since the school year 2024/2025, the final one ought to be submitted by 7<sup>th</sup> February (Głos Nauczycielski, 2025). Taking under consideration that students are graded only until April, it does ultimately not solve the problem faced by them. It is our intention to look at the issue of the assessment of the level of pressure exerted by a high school final exam after the changes as the subject-matter of further research. It still is the case that students' choices concerning a high school final exam may be made under the pressure for the part of teachers, and the forms of pressure may differ a lot than what once was observable. Unfortunately, the pressure in question does not support students, nor strengthens their motivation (it does not result from their actual predispositions or interests), but rather serves the interests of school because it helps to ensure a high level of pass rate of a high school final exam, and, by that means, maintain the prestige of school and its position in rankings. Therefore, it allows an institution to maintain *status quo*, or potentially improve its standing. Such a 'pro-ranking' strategy of an institution restricts the autonomy of students, and may also exert a negative influence on their motivation and choice of the further road of development. In our view, it is necessary to become acquainted with, and to understand, the mechanisms of these practices so as not only to present the superficial character of students' freedom of choice, but also to be able to design in the future activities which will prevent such oppressive practices. Therefore, this article is an attempt to conduct the preliminary analysis of the phenomenon of a high school final exam blackmail as a modest contribution to further research into that element of the everyday reality of high school.

## **Theoretical foundations**

Everyday reality is a part-and-parcel of our life and constitutes the background of the existence of each and every human being. However, what deter-

mines it, has a social and cultural profile. Such aspects of everyday reality like temporal dimension, repeatability and ensuring an orderly spatial arrangement provide the sense of settling in and security. Everyday reality is composed of the manners of communication, thinking, experiencing feelings and activities observed in the form of social practices, and it becomes a crucial realm of reflection, struggle between meanings and finding solutions in social-educational discourse; for that very reason, everyday life sees the occurrence of invisible, whereas exceptionally impactful, processes, which shape the future habits and individual profile of a single human being, and also their relations with the world (Kaufmann, 2004; Ćwikła, 2016).

The notion of everyday reality has more than one meaning, and it is difficult to define it in an unambiguous manner. It is possible to understand it in three different manners:

- everyday reality as determining that, what is ordinary and perceived in the categories of established organisational order;
- everyday reality as the reflection of that, what is typical, possible to perceive with one's eyes and tested empirically;
- everyday reality as parts of life connected with ordinariness, specificity and temporal-spatial vicinity, which result in restricting the activity of a single human being to their own milieu and aims at hand, which are ordinary, specific and usually repeatable (Waldenfels, 1993, pp. 105–107; Wysocka, Tomiczek, 2014).

Everyday reality in general is also relevant to that of school. In this context, it encompasses all situations which students experience each and every day (Ćwikła, 2016). Everyday life is marked by routine, habit and 'being self-evident', and also the mundaneness of its aspects, what is accepted by us without reflecting on, and without criticising it. The accompanying connection with a specific time, repeatability and ensuring an orderly spatial arrangement provides us with the sense of settling in and security. A typical manner of experiencing everyday life is habit (Sztompka, 2008).

Functioning of a human being in society boils down, first and foremost, to living in everyday reality, which is governed by standards, values, aims and tasks. Experiencing this everyday reality constitutes a foundation of constructing one's own view of the world. It ought to be indicated that, in reference to the subjects experiencing it, everyday reality concerns the principal educational milieus, among which one of the most important is school (Ferenz, 2003; Wysocka, Tomiczek, 2014).

Everyday educational reality is a complex and multi-dimensional one, analysed in the context of different problems and phenomena (Jakimiuk, 2021, p. 9). The 'shrouds of school life may fall' one after one, commencing from a broad systemic context, and proceeding ever deeper towards that what consti-

tutes the core of the functioning of a specific school and its everyday practices (Nalaskowski, 2017; Korzeniecka-Bondar, 2018). Therefore, it is possible to describe and research school in different aspects. In the opinion of Mirosław J. Szymański, it is possible to analyse this subject from the following perspectives:

- time and place: the perspective of the present, past and future, location, which decides about the content and profile of experiences;
- awareness and/or lack of reflection, which everyday reality ought to be subjected to;
- personal and/or institutional dimension: individual perspective seen in the light of one's own experiences, or institutional – meaning and the profile of an institution;
- routineness and/or innovativeness: patterns, repeated activities and events (Szymański, 2014, pp. 10–11).

Everyday educational reality is determined by the course of activities in time, rhythm of rituals, time of breaks and classes. According to the words of Maria Dudzikowa, 'owing to the rules and patterns of common-sense thinking, the world of everyday issues becomes orderly for a single human being, who are then able to cope with it in an orderly manner' (Dudzikowa, 2007, p. 234).<sup>1</sup> Everyday reality is also natural (real) and virtual territory of hesitation between settling in, making oneself acquainted with places and activities and uncertainty, strangeness and unexpected phenomena, between trust and a lack of trust, between becoming accustomed and routine and innovative approach (Dudzikowa, Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2010, p.11). Everyday reality, including educational as well, is discussed by Sławomir Krzychała as 'a mosaic of correlations, diversified degree of involvement, changing roles, expectations, determinants and activities, which together constitute the experience of (everyday) life' (Krzychała, 2007, p.35). It consists of simple, ordinary activities, not requiring too much of attention and effort, but, as well as of those, of those which demand struggling to cope in a changing reality, and also the space of diversified correlations and influences (Krzychała, 2007).

In the context of such correlations and influences, it is possible to analyse one of the elements of everyday educational reality, namely, a high school final exam pressure, which may also assume a form of a high school final exam blackmail. This notion was described by us as an element of the oppressive culture of school. While an attempt is made to identify the levels of the educational pressure of a high school final exam, it ought to be stated that blackmail is its ultimate form, which, as it was ascertained, is the one most frequently applied towards students who have experienced different forms of pressure. It may come in the form of threatening that one will not be allowed to take a high school final

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<sup>1</sup> All translations into English of the original texts are the authors' own translations.

exam, or will receive a lower grade. It ought to be added that not only is oppressive culture a permanent ingredient of everyday educational reality, but also the axis of the functioning of educational institutions. What we are looking at here, is a clear and imposed message, which indicates that the autonomous choice of a student will be connected with a severe punishment, most frequently being denied promotion to the next year. Such activities contradict the idea of the autonomy and subjectivity of a student, and also emancipation, indicate, in turn, the pattern of activity in which what matters is solely the prestige and renown of a school, achieved and maintained, in that case, at the expense of students (Motyl, Murawska, 2025).

A high school final exam blackmail stems from the policy of a school concerning the measurement of learning outcomes achieved by students. Permanent testing of their knowledge, and measuring their abilities with the application of grades, frequently becomes a nightmare for students, and such practices, creating a feeling of danger in everyday educational reality, are a source of stress and shame (Groenwald, 2015). Everything is regarded in terms of score, everything is assessed, and the results thus measured are later used to calculate mean grades and draw up the lists of the best students within every class...and that of the laziest as well. Accounting students on virtually each and every activity frequently reaches the level of absurd exaggeration (Jaskulska, 2009). Knowledge is not an autotelic value, but a unit of measurement and a currency. From the point of view of reflection dedicated to the consequences of 'hypertrophy' of measurement procedures in social life, the reactions of young people are a *sui generis* fruit of critical theory understood in ordinary terms; they discover this element of everyday educational reality, deconstruct it and develop its counterpoint (Kalinowska, 2022).

## Method

The subject-matter of the conducted research was that of experiences connected with choosing subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam, and also with, related to that, activities of teachers in the context of the oppressive culture of school with pressure on different forms in which it occurs (including a high school final exam blackmail). The aim was to discover, describe and attempt to explain the forms of such oppressive activities of a school (in particular, in the context of choosing subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam). By means of the analysis and interpretation of the received results, we are looking for answers to the three research questions:

- How do female and male graduates assess everyday educational reality in the final year of high school?

- What experiences connected with choosing subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam are those of female and male graduates?
- To what degree did the individuals participating in the research experience a high school final exam pressure?

The research the results of which are presented herein was a pilot one, and it served reaching the purpose of investigating the experiences of a high school final exam amongst the students of the first years of pedagogical majors. The research project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee. The data were collected by means of a survey, composed of between ten and twenty questions, close-ended and open-ended. It was dispatched to the lecturers of pedagogical majors at universities in Toruń, Częstochowa, Olsztyn, Warsaw, Łódź, Katowice, Opole, Kielce, and also Szczecin (according to accessibility criterion), with a request to forward it online to the female and male students of the first years of B.A. studies, or uniform M.A. studies, namely, to people who have started their first year of tertiary education, on the assumption that they did it directly after passing a high school final exam). It shows the preliminary vision of the experiences of students taking a high school final exam from tertiary education institutions in half of Polish provinces. Such a group made it possible to research experiences amongst the latest high school final exam-takers one year after it. The choice of a research sample does not allow, however, to formulate generalised conclusions applicable to the population as a whole whereas it indicates the need of further research and opens the gate towards broader-scale exploration. The survey was returned by 239 individuals, 196 of whom took a high school final exam in 2024. We decided to take under consideration also first-year students who declared having passed a high school final exam in 2023 and 2022 (43 individuals). First and foremost, we were interested in experiences connected with choosing subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam, and also in the relevant activities of teachers.

## **Analysis and interpretation of the results of the research**

A high school final exam pressure is a phenomenon which does not affect each and every student; however, is it a noticeable element of everyday educational reality. In the case of the question about personal experiences ('Did you experience pressure for the part of teachers or school authorities while choosing subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam?'), 77.4% of the respondents answered that they had not, which may suggest that the majority of graduates had no experience with educational pressure connected with a high school final exam, or did not notice it, treating the pressure in question as a normal aspect of educational reality. In spite of that, many a graduate (every

fifth) declare that problem of the pressure related to a high school final exam may occur in school, even though it is not a phenomenon affecting each and every high school final exam taker. The question concerning the occurrence of the said phenomenon in the milieu ('Did anyone in your school experience the negative consequences of their choices related to a high school final exam?') also shows that approximately 20% respondents know someone who experienced such a situation, what also may prove the presence of such form of pressure or oppression in the everyday life of a school. Detailed results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
*High school final exam pressure in figures*

	Yes		No	
	N	%	N	%
Do you think that the high school attended by you resorted to practices intended to force students to choose specific subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam?	44	18.4%	195	81.6%
Did you experience pressure for the part of teachers or school authorities while choosing subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam?	54	22.6%	185	77.4%
Were there unwritten rules concerning the choice of subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam in your school?	30	12.6%	209	87.4%
Did anyone in your school experience the negative consequences of the choice of subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam?	46	19.2%	193	80.8%

Own elaboration.

Answering YES / NO could be complemented by replying to an open-ended question in the survey. Answers YES to the question 'Do you think that the high school attended by you resorted to practices intended to force students to choose specific subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam?' were accompanied by many comments, indicating various forms of activities for the part of teachers or educational authorities which may be identified as the form of pressure exerted on a high school final exam takers in connection with their choices. The analysis of these answers makes it possible to categorise practices influencing the choice relevant to high school final exams as follows:

### 1. Pressure on choice

It is exerted by persuading, or forcing, to choose specific subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam. A high school final exam taker is specifically recommended on the choice of a specific subject:

'An individual who was 'forced' to take a high school final exam failed Polish'; 'Teachers chose what subject you were to choose for a written exam'; 'I wanted to take an extended syllabus in English for a written exam, but our English teacher choose who could, and who couldn't, do that'; '[...] the whole class were told not to take an extended syllabus for a high school final exam in Chemistry'; 'As I studied 3 subjects with extended syllabi, the teacher of these subjects required us to take an extended syllabus for a high school final exam in them'; 'My teacher of Polish kept repeating that it was why we had chosen Humanities-oriented class, and she couldn't imagine we might not take an extended syllabus for a high school final exam in this subject'

## 2. Pressure of not allowing to take a high school final exam

It is based on threatening not to allow to take a high school final exam by means of refusing to give a positive grade or lowering a grade:

'I was poor at an extended English syllabus, and my teacher said that if I chose an extended syllabus for my high school final exam, I would fail'; 'Threatening not to allow to take a high school final exam, setting so many extra tasks to those who chose extended English syllabus that they decided to resign because of the tiredness caused by learning it'; 'My schoolmate wasn't not as good as others at English, and the teacher said that if he chose it for a high school final exam, he would fail. He had to choose German instead'; They threatened to make it difficult for you to pass of you chose a specific subject with an extended syllabus for a high school final exam'; 'In a Mathematics- and Geography-oriented class, it was required to take these subjects' extended syllabi for high school final exam, or face a risk of not receiving a positive grade on that subject'.

## 3. Pressure of undermining self-confidence

Mocking, discouraging and lowering self-assessment, resorting to emotional techniques, in order to discourage a student from choosing a specific subject:

'I was oppressed by my Maths teacher so I gave up taking this subject's extended syllabus for a high school final exam'; 'The point was to take no extended syllabi 'because you won't manage''; 'Teacher's words that there was nothing wrong with work on a building site so you can give up on taking a high school final exam'; 'I wanted to take 2 subjects, and my class teacher was trying to persuade me it was too much work and I'd better focus on one'.

## 4. Pressure of results

Controlling choices and intervening in the decisions of students in order to minimise the risk of lowering mean of grades for specific subjects in a high school final exam:

'If the mock high school final exam brought disappointing results, the head conducted 1-1 talks with each and every student whose result was below 40%, and the students left her room crying'; 'Some of the teachers, and also the head, cared very much about good results of a high school final exam; for that very reason, some of the teachers threatened that students might receive a negative end-of-the-year grade, were very strict and questioned one's choice of subjects at every opportunity (a student ought to take only the subjects which had been taught as extended)'; 'In some cases, the head cares too much about ranking, and that results in students feeling pressure and creates so-called 'rat race' in school'; 'The head is very much concerned with the results and percent of passed

high school final exams, and, this results in pressure on students to do their best in a high school final exam; if someone performed badly at a mock exam, they were suggested not to take a high school final exam in May so as not to lower percentage pass rate of a high school final exam in this institution’.

On the basis of the descriptions of the experiences of students who admitted to have experienced pressure and blackmail in various forms for the part of teachers or school authorities while choosing subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam, it is possible to categorise them into the following groups:

- 1. Experiences of negative treatment and exclusion:** students feel they are worse treated, marginalised or rejected because of the choice of specific subjects; they begin to feel they are treated unjustly and that they are deprived of their right to make an independent choice.

Example responses: ‘As of a school with extended syllabi in Biology and English, its priority was a high level, therefore, less than brilliant students wanting to take a high school final exam in these subjects were treated worse’; ‘My acquaintance was treated in an outrageous manner when school prevented her from choosing Philosophy to be taken in the course of a high school final exam. The teachers looked down on her, and also commented on each and every decision of her’; ‘I felt bad about that, as one treated worse than others. Why couldn’t I try?’; ‘I understood that treating us the way they did was an abuse of teachers’ authority’; ‘Treating students as if they couldn’t cope’; ‘[...] if someone didn’t decide to take her subject, they were treated much worse’; ‘I was oppressed by my Maths teacher so I gave up taking this subject’s extended syllabus for a high school final exam’; ‘I wanted to take an extended Geography’s syllabus for my high school final exam subject whereas my teacher threatened to give me a negative grade if I did that’.

- 2. Experiences of lower self-assessment, emotional disorders, chronic stress and overload:** the pressure and criticism of teachers results in reducing self-esteem, which manifests in, among others, anxiety disorders, the feeling of helplessness and lack of trust in one’s own abilities; students describe the state of chronic stress and emotional strain, resulting from repeated pressure, being set extra tasks and threatening with consequences; many feel overloaded, which makes it difficult for them to learn effectively and make independent decisions.

Example responses: ‘My teacher of Polish always gave me a negative grade for my essays, and kept saying to me I wouldn’t pass; I was preparing to a high school final exam in Polish with not too much of effort and attention as I knew this subject was easy for me, however, because of the grades and comments of my teacher of Polish I felt that my self-assessment suffered a lot; it resulted in downright anxiety disorders, but I passed a high school final exam in Polish with the result above 70%, and, as far my teacher of Polish goes, I hope never to see her again’; ‘Resorting to all and every kind of manipulation and psychological abuse so as NOT take a given subject in a high school final exam’; ‘a lot of stress and pressure ending in the cases of losing consciousness and receiving lower grades’; ‘I took a one-year break because I felt exhausted’; ‘If the mock high school

final exam brought disappointing results, the head conducted 1-1 talks with each and every student whose result was below 40%, and the students left her room crying’.

- 3. Experiences of the loss of self-confidence and restricting aspirations:** pressure influences the doubts of students concerning their competences and chances of educational success; that may result in resigning from dreamt-out studies or changing life plans under the influence of pressure.

Example responses: ‘Teachers [...] reminded students about the fact that a high school final exam was coming, and commented skeptically on their competences. One could hear subtle remarks on the need to work harder and on finding a specific choice strange’; ‘A high school final exam pressure resulted in me doubting my chances entering the tertiary education institution I had chosen’; ‘I remember very skeptical comments addressed at my classmate, when, while attending a Humanities-oriented class, she chose Maths’; ‘These were rather negative experiences. I wanted to take extended Polish’s syllabus in a high school final exam, and my teacher of that subject was of the opinion that no one would receive more than 20% for that’; ‘No one exerted pressure on us, apart from the teacher of English, who didn’t want to do material for an extended syllabus for a high school final exam with us, as she thought we’d barely be able to pass a basic one’.

- 4. Experiences of resigning from independent activities:** students make decisions they are forced to make under pressure for the part of school, resigning from making independent ones concerning subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam; they accept choices imposed by school and take a high school final exam on subjects chosen by teachers; they relent to pressure and engage in activities frequently connected with various negative consequences.

Example responses: ‘I wasn’t able to study the major I wanted because, feeling a high school final exam pressure, I took the written one in fewer subjects than I wanted’; ‘One boy wanted to take Geography, and the teacher didn’t let him’; ‘I was attending a school of visual arts, and was obliged to take a high school final exam in the extended History of Art’s syllabus; each and every student had to choose it’; ‘I could [...] choose another subject to be taken in the course of a high school final exam, and study a different major, but I know they wouldn’t let me take these exams’.

- 5. Experiences of opposing blackmail and ‘revenge’ of school:** a student, in spite of resistance and pressure for the part of teachers or educational authorities, decides to oppose imposed restrictions concerning the choice of subjects for a high school final exam; they take independent and conscious decisions in spite of the lack of support, and, frequently, downright active hostility for the part of teachers or head; such a student is left to their own devices, frequently learning and preparing without an adequate help of school, which increases difficulties in meeting educational requirements and results in frustration; such activities manifest the attitude of resistance against oppressive and unethical educational practices, and are also an attempt to maintain personal autonomy in the conditions of systemic pressure and control.

Example responses: 'I didn't study extended Polish's syllabus, but I wanted to take it in a high school final exam; many teachers refused to help me'; 'Head forced me to resign from a high school final exam in Philosophy because I didn't want to have consultations (extra classes) with him because his behaviour was sexist, and I had a tutor, anyway'; 'When I decide to take extended Maths' syllabus, the teacher deliberately assessed me unfairly lowly, and said that only when I withdrew my declaration concerning a high school final exam, my grades would improve'; 'I wasn't a bad student, however, I chose to take Biology in the course of a high school final exam (even though it wasn't compulsory), and the teacher didn't help or support us, therefore, I had to prepare on my own (which discouraged many from taking this subject)'.

- 6. Experience of feeling being intimidated and the lack of autonomy:** students feel controlled and restricted, having no possibility to take free choices; the ambience of intimidation prevents from expressing individual preferences and is conducive to feeling helpless.

Example responses: 'Unpleasant, it was; they made it difficult for us to make independent decisions, manipulating us'; 'The lack of support, intimidating so as to make sure the statistics look good'; 'I think it's good to see to ambience. Assume that it is good preparation and not intimidation that is an aim'; 'Discouraging from seeing a high school final exam as one for 'mediocre students', 'if one of the less brilliant students declares to take a high school final exam, I will make sure they won't get a positive grade for my subject', 'if you want to pass, you must give up on a high school final exam', 'if you want to take a high school final exam, you must master the material on your own'. Lowering self-assessment in order to make one resign from a high school final exam, treating more leniently students declaring that they won't take a high school final exam'; 'threatening that if one does not resign from a given subject, they won't be allowed to take a high school final exam; unpleasant comments in general'.

- 7. Experiences of contrasting positive character – feeling of improvement in new conditions:** after leaving school and entering a tertiary education institution, students notice a positive change of the ambience; lecturers are less imposing, giving more autonomy and creating a more pleasant milieu for learning.

Example responses: 'Tertiary education appeals to me much more, and I don't feel a negative attitude and pressure for the part of lecturers; the ambience is also better – we are treated like free and adult human beings; in spite of all, I have more time to myself now when I've entered a tertiary education institution because there are no homework assignments and pressure to dedicate my entire free time to studying to a high school final exam'; 'I noticed difference and the level of material, but also in attitude to assignment papers and student'; 'I noticed that the approach of a teacher/lecturer makes a big difference for acquiring information. At a tertiary education institution, I experienced a more friendly ambience and an interesting material presentation; 'The ambience at a tertiary education institution is much more pleasant; the teachers aren't as imposing as those from high school'.

- 8. Experiences of reflection and critical assessment of past experiences seen in the light of the knowledge acquired in the course of studying a pedagogical major:** from the perspective of time, students notice numerous errors

and irregularities in teachers' behaviour and the educational system; there arises the awareness of the necessity of changes and a more ethical approach to students.

Example responses: 'I started to notice errors, and also unwelcome behaviours, of teachers, which, unfortunately, were common'; 'Now, I simply can see more errors made by teachers and school authorities'; 'I can see even more errors of my educators'; 'I know what errors were made by my teachers and what ought not to have taken place in such institutions, and yet they were made'; 'I started to notice how many errors were made by my teachers, and how many situations should not have occurred'.

The above-mentioned experiences indicate the influence of such activities like pressure, blackmail, intimidating, mocking, or even mental bullying in various forms, on students' choices of education and career, their mental well-being, sense of autonomy, and also agency. The analysed answers unambiguously show that these oppressive phenomena, involving teachers and school authorities, are not individual incidents, but a major problem in part of the institutions in question. Such activities may come in the form of, commonly existing, adopting informal rules in force in the final year of a high school, concerning, in particular, the choice of subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam. These unwritten rules may significantly restrict students' autonomy in terms of making decisions relevant to a high school final exam. On the one hand, they may result from the organisational and formal requirements, but, on the other one, they frequently lead to negative emotions, reducing development opportunities, and also stress, lowered self-assessment and the feeling of being treated unfairly. They may also serve the aim of protecting school image and its position in rankings, which is frequently more important than students' individual needs. On the basis of the descriptions from the respondents concerning informal rules of the choice of subjects for a high school final exam, it is possible to draw up a certain catalogue of them. The most common of the unwritten rules of that kind include:

- 1. Selecting students on the basis of skills and learning outcomes** – students seen as less successful or receiving lower grades are frequently discouraged or prevented from choosing certain subjects seen by school as more difficult in terms of a high school final exam. It also happens that a student is required to 'meet special requirements' (e.g., related to assessment), so as to be allowed to choose a given subject with the exam in question in mind.
- 2. Pressure on 'less brilliant' students exerted to make them resign from an extended subject syllabus** – the students seen as 'less brilliant', regardless of their aspirations, are encouraged or even forced to resign from an extended syllabus for a high school final exam. A tool used to enforce this rule is frequent informal talks and messages, threats, orders, and also humiliating.

3. **Connection between the choice of subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam and the learning outcomes of the schools** – informal rules may order students to choose such subjects which guarantee good results of a high school final exam, what is of importance from the perspective of school's position in rankings. In the case of less successful students (in order to ensure that the school enjoys a good ranking position in the aspect of pass rate), the two above-described rules are applied.
4. **Obligation to choose subjects in accordance with a class orientation** – students are obliged, or persistently persuaded, to choose subjects (including extended syllabi) closely connected with a class orientation (e.g. a student of Humanities-oriented class ought to take an extended syllabi for a high school final exam in the Polish language and history, and not in Biology, Chemistry or Maths). Breaking this informal rule by students results in unfavourable treatment or other sanctions.
5. **Applying sanctions involving impact on thinking and emotions** – resorting to such forms of pressure as blackmail (e.g. threatening that a grade will be lowered), threatening (e.g. not to allow to take a high school final exam, giving a negative grade (mid-year or end-year one) for the subject chosen to be taken in the course of a high school final exam subject), malicious comments, offending students and undermining their self-esteem.
6. **The unwritten contract 'certificate without a high school final exam'** – a secret agreement by the virtue of which school (represented by teachers or head) imposes on a student a condition of resigning from taking a high school final exam in exchange for positive grades in all subjects and a certificate of completing education in high school; such a student can take a high school final exam, but no sooner than a year from that time. Such practices, even though very infrequent, restrict student's autonomy, reduce their self-esteem, the feeling of agency and restrict their right to decide about own education and further development road on their own.

Table 2  
Educational determinants relevant to a high school final exam

	Definitely do not agree		Do not agree		Hard to say		Agree		Definitely agree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
My high school was a place where I felt good	23	9.6%	26	10.9%	40	16.7%	96	40.2%	54	22.6%
I could count on my teachers when I needed them	27	11.3%	24	10.0%	59	24.7%	82	34.3%	47	19.7%
In the final year, teachers reminded me each and every day that a high school final exam was coming	5	2.1%	16	6.7%	17	7.1%	53	22.2%	148	61.9%

Table 2 (cont.)

	Definitely do not agree		Do not agree		Hard to say		Agree		Definitely agree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
In the final year, I was provided with suitable emotional support	55	23.0%	61	25.5%	64	26.8%	43	18.0%	16	6.7%
In high school, I became acquainted with the techniques of effective and rapid learning	89	37.2%	72	30.1%	51	21.3%	20	8.4%	7	2.9%
Subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam were treated as priority by the faculty	15	6.3%	21	8.8%	27	11.3%	85	35.6%	91	38.1%
Subjects not to be taken in the course of a high school final exam were neglected by the faculty	54	22.6%	82	34.3%	63	26.4%	25	10.5%	15	6.3%
I felt pressure for the part of teachers or school authorities while choosing subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam	86	36.0%	62	25.9%	25	10.5%	34	14.2%	32	13.4%

Own elaboration.

In the context of graduates' educational experiences, we can see school in a positive and negative light at the same time. On the one hand, more than 60% respondents declared that they felt good in their school whereas more than 84% of them said that teachers each and every day reminded them about a coming high school final exam. It is possible to see this result as a manifestation of a daily pressure exerted on a high school final exam takers and the fact that a high school final exam, or rather its results, are a priority for educational institutions. In spite of the high expectations of schools relevant to results, students were seldom provided with emotional support; nor were they made acquainted with the techniques of effective learning. It may show a school as a place which still does not adopt a comprehensive approach to acquiring knowledge, and also abilities; nor does it notice the connection between students' well-being or ability to learn and successes. Nearly 74% of the respondents claimed that subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam were treated as a priority by the faculty, whilst, at the same time, they did not feel that the other ones were neglected. Most of the individuals taking part in the research did not feel or identify a pressure concerning the choice of subjects for a high school final exam, what may indicate a relative freedom of making this choice by most of the respondents. However, more than ¼ of graduates completing the survey declared to be feeling pressure or blackmail for the part of teachers

or school authorities, which is a significant signal indicating that this problem exists and matters.

In order to obtain more detailed information concerning the analysis of connections between the statements in the survey, the analyses of Spearman's rho correlation ( $p < 0.05$ ) was conducted in the scope of the collected data, which allows us to formulate the following observations:

- experiencing pressure for the part of teachers or school authorities while choosing subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam shows a low negative correlation with the feeling that students could, in time of need, count on teachers (-0.36), with the feeling that, in the final year, they were provided with a suitable emotional support (-0.35), with seeing by students school as a place where they felt good (-0.30), and also with becoming acquainted with the techniques of effective and rapid learning (-0.25);
- experiencing pressure for the part of teachers or school authorities while choosing subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam shows a low negative correlation with seeing school as a place where students feel good (-0.27), with the feeling of being provided with a suitable emotional support in the final year (-0.30), and also experiencing help and support for the part of teachers (-0.28). Interestingly, the experienced pressure shows a moderate positive correlation with experiencing oppressive activities while choosing subjects to be taken for the course of a high school final exam (0.55), and also a low positive one with being reminded each and every day by teachers in the final year about a coming high school final exam (0.31).
- high positive correlation was recorded in the case of providing students with emotional support, and also the feeling of being supported and assisted by teachers (0.71), which may confirm the importance of teachers for building well-being, and also undisturbed emotional functioning, in the final year;
- high correlation is also that between seeing school as a place in which students feel good and it being possible for students to count on their teachers in time of need (0.60).
- low negative correlation in the case of being reminded each and every day in the final year about a coming high school final exam and ensuring suitable support before a high school final exam (-0.33), and also students' becoming acquainted with the techniques of effective / rapid learning (-0.20).

Simultaneously, the results indicate the imperfections of emotional support, training students in the scope of the techniques of effective / rapid learning, and also concerning coping with stress in the crucial period, constituted by the final year of a high school.

## Conclusions

The aim of our article was to attempt to identify forms of pressure experienced by a high school final exam takers in connection with this exam, connected, in particular, with choosing subjects in the course of a high school final exam in the context of everyday educational reality. In this context, it is possible to ascertain that, owing to the conducted preliminary research, we were able to identify the phenomenon of a high school final exam blackmail as an element of everyday educational reality.

Analysing the collected empirical data, we were trying to address the three following research questions: How do graduates assess everyday educational reality in the final year of a high school? What are their experiences connected with choosing subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam?, and also: To what degree did participants in the research experience a high school final exam pressure? Graduates assess everyday educational reality in the final year of a high school differently, however, a large part of this group indicates a high priority assigned to a high school final exam in the final year of high school, regardless, whether they claimed to have experienced any forms of a high school final exam pressure or not. Interestingly, being reminded (about the exam in question) every day is not perceived by most of them as a form of pressure. Time spent in educational reality, even though focused on the exam, seems to be rather favourably recalled by graduates (more than 60% of the respondents declared that they felt good in school, and 54% that they could count on their teachers in time of need). Simultaneously, they were unlikely to receive psychological or methodological help. Experiences in the scope of choosing subjects to be taken in the course of a high school final exam are more diversified within the study group. Participants in the research experienced a noticeable high school final exam pressure. Every fifth of students experienced such practices, which influenced both decisions, the feeling of self-esteem or possibilities of further education. Some of the practices of an identified high school final exam blackmail give rise to a lot of concern, and are manifestations of breaking student rights, which ought not to take place.

Experiencing a high school final exam blackmail may negatively influence autonomy, agency, and also well-being, in the crucial moment of education. Such practices result in the feeling of unfair treatment, and also the restricted possibilities of choice in accordance with the individual predispositions and interests of a student. Our research was complemented by analysing answers to the open questions, which made it possible to categorise different tactics of influence choices relevant to a high school final exam (pressure on choice, pressure of not allowing to take a high school final exam, pressure of undermining self-confidence and pressure of results), types of experiences connected with a high

school final exam pressure, and also a catalogue of informal rules concerning the choice of subjects to be taken in the exam in question. The catalogue of those pressures includes a broad scope of behaviours that can be identified as blackmail.

Moreover, the analysis of ascertained correlations shows that experiencing pressure for the part of teachers or school authorities while choosing subjects to be taken in a high school final exam occurs together with the feeling of the lack of emotional support and help for the part of teachers, and also deteriorated mood, of students in school, and with the feeling of being less acquainted with the techniques of effective learning. Moreover, this pressure is connected with experiencing oppressive activities while choosing subjects and being frequently reminded that a high school final exam is coming. A significant correlation also occurs between providing students with emotional support and the feeling that, in time of need, they can count on teachers' help, which emphasises a major role of teachers in ensuring students' well-being. In addition, feeling that school is a place where students feel good, is connected with the feeling that teachers' support is available. Finally, being frequently reminded about a high school final exam is connected with the feeling of smaller support and being less acquainted with the techniques of effective learning. While interpreting these results, it is possible to ascertain that pressure and being excessively reminded about the exam may lower the subjective feeling of support and comfort experienced by students, whereas emotional support for the part of teachers and possibility to obtain their help are crucial for students' good mood and emotional functioning in the context of the exams.

In the light of the result of the research, a high school final exam blackmail is a complex social and educational phenomenon (cf. Murawska, Motyl, 2025). It is possible to understand it as a set of informal oppressive practices and mechanisms of pressure applied by teachers or educational authorities to force high school students to choose given subjects in the course of a high school final exam. A high school final exam blackmail combines official rules in school and informal practices of pressure, which negatively impact students' freedom of choice and their mental well-being. It concerns specific forms of activities (suggesting the choice, threats, lowering grades, mocking and discouraging, forcing to resign), subjective experiences connected with pressure (feeling of intimidation, lowered self-assessment, anxiety disorders, stress, psychological overload, discouraging from following personal aspirations, restricting further educational and career opportunities, resigning from dream-out majors or choosing another direction of education under pressure, and also feeling of unfair treatment and discrimination), and also the profile of blackmail mechanism (informal rule and hidden mechanism of control, not referred to in official regulations; connection with the interest of school in terms of maintaining a high position in rankings;

using the hierarchy of authorities and the status of teachers/head; lack of transparency and legal protection).

## Discussion

In the course of the library search conducted in Polish and foreign sources (Google Scholar, EBSCO, SCOPUS, ReseartGate, Academia.edu, and the repositories of Polish universities), no research into the phenomenon of a high school final exam blackmail on a similar scale was found. The subject was only raised superficially in the media (*Gazeta Wyborcza* 2024, *Polskie Radio* 2024, *Dead Statutes' Society* 2022), even though inspiration for these investigations was numerous discussion with tertiary education institutions' attendees concerning their experiences. Due to that fact, discussion about the results of research is difficult, and only possible in the form of our reflections based on conducted explorations. We are aware of the fact that the aim of our research was to diagnose a phenomenon that we find interesting in everyday educational reality of high schools; for that very reason, in the future, thorough exploration of this problem ought to be conducted.

It ought to be indicated that the research was participated in by 266 individuals, among whom data qualified for the analysis were obtained from 239 female and male respondents. The criterion of inclusion was taking a high school final exam no later than in 2022. What also matters is the fact that the research was conducted in half of Polish provinces. Taking under consideration the number of researched individuals in a sample, and also the size of the territory on which the studied schools were located, we think that they are sufficient for the needs of preliminary analyses. However, a thorough exploration of the phenomenon of a high school final exam blackmail requires research conducted on a broader scale and providing the possibility of formulating generalised conclusions on a population in the future. The analyses were conducted on the basis of data obtained from female and male first-year students of pedagogical majors (pedagogy, special pedagogy, pre-school pedagogy and early-school pedagogy), and may not be generalised or treated as reflecting the state of the matters in an entire population. In this aspect, we find it necessary to broaden the study group by including students of other majors in order to describe and explain the phenomenon of a high school final exam blackmail in more detail. Nor is it possible to differentiate the obtained results in reference to an independent variable constituted by sex because the research was participated in by a group of males in the number making the analyses of this type impossible. That constitutes a challenge not only to our research because of women's being a majority of pedagogical majors students. It is required to conduct research on a sample

which will balance the number of both sexes so as to look at the phenomenon of educational blackmail in females' and males' opinions.

Obsession with controlling students' knowledge and measuring not only their workload, but also capacities or personality traits, builds a negative ambience of school based on fear, competing and rivalry (Kalinowska, 2022; Adrjan, 2011; Ostaszewski, 2012; Przewłocka, 2015). Categorising students in accordance with the scale assessments results in treating them as less important than grades, and in school's activity being dictated by tests results and rankings (Kalinowska, 2022; Sauder, Espeland 2009). Results of the final exams both after primary school and the secondary alike are extremely important in the world of education, which results in many a benefit, but also in significant losses and damage (Kalinowska, 2022; Sitek 2014). In order to prepare students to perform the best they can during an exam, primary school is frequently converted into a preparatory course for the eighth-grader exam, and a high school serves reaching the same aim in relation to a high school final exam. Apart from that, on the basis of the best schools rankings, institutions compete with each other for a position in the educational market, which does not necessarily raise the level of education and learning outcomes (Kalinowska, 2022; Bukowski, Kobus 2018), whereas students, in the course of their school time, compete only for grades and the best results of a high school final exam (Kalinowska, 2022).

## **Recommendations for educational practice**

Even though most students do not feel, notice or experience a high school final exam blackmail, every fifth one of graduates declares to have encountered such oppressive activities. The results of the research indicate the need to conduct further explorations and monitoring that phenomenon. It is recommendable to conduct broad-scope quantitative research, and also more in-depth qualitative research, so as to understand the contexts and mechanisms of the functioning of that type of pressure forms in school. It is also advised to implement preventive and educational activities in school, which may make students, teachers, school authorities, and also parents, aware of the problem of blackmail and pressure, its causes, forms and results. What is recommendable as well is the top-bottom implementation of activities which would eliminate such practices.

Developing detailed recommendations is not easy due to the complexity of the researched phenomenon. Still, on the basis of the results of our research, we will attempt to develop a set of such recommendations. In the scope of school activity and teachers' work, an important element might be introducing clear and transparent rules of choosing subjects for a high school final exam respecting the autonomy of students and eliminating pressure or blackmail. An-

other possibility would be to conduct a series of trainings and workshops for teachers on the topic of communication, techniques of effective and rapid learning, professional ethics, psychological support and diagnosing discrimination in behaviour. That could be complemented by developing a psychological support system in schools, with access to professional education and career advisors, and also psychologists. Finally, and perhaps as the most difficult measure, at least in our own opinion, focus of school might be shifted from excessive concentration on prestige and position in rankings on the development of the competences and well-being of students.

Amongst recommendations for students and parents, there are, first and foremost, organising activities on the techniques of effective and rapid learning, and also coping with a high school final exam stress. Apart from that, we suggest conducting classes on human rights and student rights, and also correct practices of choosing subjects to be taken in a high school final exam, which will aim at promoting conscious educational choices in accordance with students' interests and predispositions, and not solely resulting from the pressure of the milieu. It is also important to strengthen support systems helping student and not located in school, principally, in the milieu of family. If parents are expected to provide support and help, they ought to be aware what problems, dilemmas and frustrations students in the final year of a high school encounter, and also what irregularities and oppressive activities are possible in that period in everyday educational reality.

At the meta level, from the point of view of the entire educational system, it seems for us to be important to significantly restrict the role of rankings as the principal indicator of effectiveness and quality of school-based education. Complementary activities may include drawing up regulations counteracting oppressive practices in schools, and also developing the system of monitoring such phenomena. Apart from that, it seems important to support building a friendly ambience of school as well as promoting the culture of respect, autonomy, individual approach to a student and the well-being of all involved in the process of education (including teachers and heads).

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## **Szantaż maturalny jako element szkolnej codzienności. Raport z badań wstępnych**

### **Streszczenie**

Celem naszego tekstu była identyfikacja form presji doświadczanych przez maturzystów w związku z egzaminem dojrzałości w kontekście szkolnej codzienności. Badania przeprowadziliśmy z wykorzystaniem autorskiego kwestionariusza ankiety, który wypełniło 239 osób – studentek i studentów pierwszego roku kierunków pedagogicznych na wybranych polskich uczelniach. Zebrane dane wskazują, że badane zjawisko presji maturalnej dotknęło 20% respondentów. Dwoma głównymi jego przejawami są: skoncentrowanie życia szkolnego w ostatniej klasie wokół egzaminu dojrzałości oraz wywieranie presji na uczniach w kwestii wyboru przedmiotów maturalnych w celu uzyskania dobrego wizerunku szkoły. Całokształt deklarowanych doświadczeń maturalnych pozwolił na identyfikację najwyższej formy presji, czyli szantażu maturalnego, związanego z ingerencją w wybory uczniów. Badania miały charakter wstępny, w związku z tym mogą stanowić podstawę do dalszych eksploracji zjawiska szantażu maturalnego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** szkoła średnia, matura, codzienność, szantaż, presja.





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## Accessibility of Higher Education Institutions for Students with Visual Impairments – Reality and Proposed Directions for Change

### Abstract

The aim of the study was to explore the experiences of students with visual impairments regarding the accessibility of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Poland. The research addressed the problem of structural and digital barriers that affect students' ability to participate fully in academic life. A qualitative method was applied, using a survey with open-ended questions to gather detailed narratives from students with low vision and blindness. The thematic analysis of the responses revealed five key areas: architectural accessibility, digital and ICT inclusion, adaptation of teaching materials, systemic barriers, and student recommendations for improvement. The findings show that despite some progress, significant challenges persist, especially in terms of teaching material accessibility, university website usability, and staff preparedness. The study highlights the urgent need for inclusive policies, targeted academic support, and training for university staff to meet the complex needs of this low-incidence but high-support group.

**Keywords:** accessibility, higher education, visual impairment, educational inclusion.

### Introduction

In countries where the culture of including students with disabilities has a long tradition, increasing rates of students with disabilities enrolling in higher

education have been observed for years. This is because universities have found strategies to make learning environments that are accessible, beneficial, and supportive for all students. For instance, between 2008 and 2017, universities in Australia recorded a 123% increase in the number of domestic undergraduate students with disabilities. (Universities Australia, 2019, p. 15). Similar trends are observed in the USA, where the number of undergraduate students with disabilities increased from 11.1% in the 2011–2012 enrolment period to 19.4% during the 2015–2016 academic year (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2019, p. 453).

In England, in the 2019–2020 academic year, 17.3% of all home students had a disability of some kind. The number has increased by 47% since 2014–15 (Hubble & Bolton, 2021, p. 5). More current statistics indicate that 11% of university students in Germany have disabilities (Kauffman, 2023, p. 4). Unfortunately, in Poland, we observe the opposite trend. The demographic changes over the last few years also affected the number of young people entering higher education institutions (HEIs). According to Statistics Poland (GUS), in recent years, the number of students with disabilities has been systematically decreasing—from 27,730 in 2014/2015 to 22,451 in 2023/2024—while the overall student population remained relatively stable. Data indicate that students with a disability statement represent between 1.7% and 1.9% of the total student population across this period (Tab. 1). However, the figures presented in the annual GUS reports do not reflect the real number of students with disabilities in Polish HEIs as they include only persons who have declared to the university that they have a disability statement. Presumably, there are many more students with biological disabilities (e.g., chronically ill, and with short-term disabilities due to accidents) who are not formally classified as students with a disability at Polish universities. Accurate records are also hampered by the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the fact that a significant number of students conceal their disabilities (Gorczycka & Kanasz, 2014).

Table 1  
*Students of higher education institutions in Poland (2014–2024)*

Academic Year	Total (in absolute values)	Students with disability (in absolute values)	Percentage of stu- dents with disability to non-disabled
<b>2014/2015</b>	1,469,86	27,730	1.9
<b>2015/2016</b>	1,405,133	26,341	1.9
<b>2016/2017</b>	1,348,822	25,121	1.9
<b>2017/2018</b>	1,291,870	23,828	1.8
<b>2018/2019</b>	1,230,254	22,046	1.8
<b>2019/2020</b>	1,215,307	21,240	1.7
<b>2020/2021</b>	1,218,000	20,248	1.7

Table 1 (cont.)

Academic Year	Total (in absolute values)	Students with disability (in absolute values)	Percentage of stu- dents with disability to non-disabled
<b>2021/2022</b>	1,218,200	20,513	1.7
<b>2022/2023</b>	1,223,600	20,800	1.7
<b>2023/2024</b>	1,245,153	22,451	1.8

Source: Author's research based on the Statistics Poland (GUS) – "Higher education and its finances" for years 2014-2024

Referring to the general population in Poland, it is estimated that approximately 12.2% of individuals live with legal and/or biological disabilities (<https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/osoby-niepelnosprawne>, accessed 05.08.2025). While this figure—much like the participation rates of students with disabilities in higher education—remains imprecise, it highlights the persistent underrepresentation of this group within the university-age population. Notably, students with disabilities constitute only 1.8% of all students enrolled in Polish higher education institutions, pointing to a significant participation gap. The representation of students with visual impairments is even more limited: according to recent national data, students with low vision and blind students account for merely 0.13% of the total student population. This suggests a critical need for targeted accessibility strategies and inclusive policies to address systemic barriers affecting this group.

Paradoxically, however, students with visual impairments in Poland demonstrate higher graduation rates than their non-disabled peers. Over the past five academic years, the graduation rate among blind and low vision students has remained relatively stable at approximately 28–31%, exceeding the average graduation rate for the general student population by 2 to 3 percentage points. This suggests not only a high level of academic commitment among these students but also the possible effectiveness of support mechanisms currently in place. These findings offer a promising signal and highlight the importance of maintaining—and further developing—inclusive educational practices that facilitate academic success. Moreover, the strategies supporting this group could inform broader institutional efforts to improve student outcomes across the board. (Tab. 2).

Both the provisions of international law and national legislation in Poland guarantee there should be no barriers in access to education for persons with disabilities. The rights of students with disabilities to education are protected by international agreements and numerous European Union (EU) documents. The most relevant documents for persons with disabilities are: *the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD), signed by the Polish Government on March 20, 2007, and ratified on September 6, 2012, *the Charter of Fun-*

*damental Rights of the European Union* (Official Journal of the EU, 2012a), *the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union* (TFEU) (Official Journal of the EU, 2012b) and *the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030* to raise the standard of living for people with disabilities in Europe and around the world (*Union of Equality...*, 2021).

Table 2

*Students and graduates of higher education institutions in Poland including students with low vision and blind students (2017–2024)*

Academic Year	Students with low vision and blind students		Non-disabled students		Percentage of students with low vision and blind students to non-disabled students
	Students	Graduates	Students	Graduates	%
	Total	Total	Total	Total	
<b>2017/2018</b>	2010	635	1,291,870	387,531	0.15
<b>2018/2019</b>	1886	530	1,230,254	327,714	0.15
<b>2019/2020</b>	1779	515	1,215,307	313,847	0.15
<b>2020/2021</b>	1667	452	1,218,000	293,436	0.14
<b>2021/2022</b>	1597	434	1,218,200	297,368	0.13
<b>2022/2023</b>	1580	410	1,223,600	292,605	0.13
<b>2023/2024</b>	1614	393	1,245,153	292,120	0.13

Source: Author's research based on the Statistics Poland (GUS) – "Higher education and its finances" published between 2017-2024

Polish law also upholds the right to education as a crucial component of the list of fundamental human rights. Its guarantees are contained, inter alia, in *the Constitution of the Republic of Poland* of 1997, in Articles 70 (1) and (4). In accordance with the provisions of this basic law, we can speak of the right to education being implemented on the basis of the principle of equality of access and "equality of opportunities", meaning discrimination "for any reason" is prohibited (Chimicz, 2021, p. 55). Also the provisions introduced in the Act of July 27, 2005, entitled *Law on Higher Education* amended in 2011, gave universities new opportunities to help persons with disability (Official Journal of Laws, 2005).

The framework of the European Higher Education Area requires universities to have a more inclusive character. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2018) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN, 2019) recognized inclusive education as an opportunity to empower people with disabilities and to remove obstacles to learning and participation for all students (Ramberg & Watkins, 2020). However, some educational systems still practice educational exclusion and prejudice which operate as real

impediments or roadblocks to advancement (Iacono, Keefe, Kenny, & McKinstry, 2019, p. 267).

Although important progress has been made over the past decade, research suggests that the inclusion of students with disabilities in Polish higher education still falls short of full academic integration. Earlier studies by Gajdzica (2015) and Sztobryn-Giercuskiewicz (2018) highlighted that inclusion often took the form of symbolic participation rather than substantive transformation of the academic environment. While many physical barriers have since been addressed, more recent developments point to persistent psychosocial, communicative, and organisational challenges—such as implicit bias, inconsistent academic accommodations, and the insufficient adoption of universal instructional design—as key obstacles to meaningful participation and equitable learning experiences.

Nonetheless, promising practices are emerging. Recent research conducted at the Maria Grzegorzewska University demonstrates that systematic training of academic and administrative staff significantly enhances their competencies in inclusive teaching and student support (Lejzerowicz, 2024). These efforts reflect a growing institutional awareness of the need for inclusive policies and tailored pedagogical strategies. Furthermore, participatory and action-based studies, such as those by Lejzerowicz and Podstawka (2021), emphasise the importance of fostering self-authorship, autonomy, and social agency among students with disabilities—shifting the discourse from compensatory support to empowerment and co-creation of inclusive academic communities.

Symbolic forms of participation, combined with persistent psychosocial and institutional barriers, continue to limit the realisation of equal educational opportunities for students with disabilities. These concerns are particularly relevant in the case of students with visual impairments—a group that remains markedly underrepresented in both educational statistics and academic discourse. In this context, there is a pressing need to explore not only general inclusion policies but also the concrete lived experiences of students who encounter daily challenges related to architectural, digital, and communicative accessibility.

This study aims to address this gap by focusing on students with visual impairments and their perceptions of accessibility in higher education.

## **Research Aim and Questions**

This paper presents a preliminary qualitative pilot study aimed at exploring the lived experiences of students with visual impairments in the context of accessibility within higher education institutions (HEIs). Rather than measuring accessibility through predefined indicators, the study seeks to understand how students themselves perceive, interpret, and navigate the accessibility of their academic environments.

In the context of this research, the term *structural barriers* refers to obstacles embedded in the physical and organizational infrastructure of universities, which hinder students' ability to participate fully and independently in academic life. These include architectural inaccessibility (e.g., lack of tactile signage, unmarked hazards, absence of accessible lifts), spatial disorientation, inflexible institutional procedures, and insufficient systemic adjustments. Such barriers are distinguished from digital or communicative barriers but often overlap with them in practice, forming a complex system of exclusion. This conceptualization aligns with the World Health Organization's (2011) definition of environmental barriers as external factors that, by their presence or absence, restrict functioning and participation. In the context of higher education, structural barriers are often accompanied by digital and communicative barriers, forming a multi-layered system of exclusion (Carrillo-Sierra et al., 2025; Hewett et al., 2017).

The aim is to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how institutional structures, support systems, and physical and digital infrastructures are experienced by students with low vision or blindness. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- (a) How do students with visual impairments perceive and evaluate the accessibility of their HEIs in terms of architectural, digital, and ICT-related aspects?
- (b) What kinds of difficulties and barriers do these students identify in relation to institutional accessibility?
- (c) What are their expressed needs and expectations concerning support services offered by HEIs?

Although students with disabilities have increasingly been the subject of scholarly attention, the specific perspectives of students with visual impairments remain notably underrepresented. This study seeks to centre their voices by foregrounding their subjective accounts of accessibility in higher education. In doing so, it interrogates how the right to equal education—as stipulated by legal and policy frameworks—is realised or constrained in the everyday experiences of these students.

## Research Method and Sample Characteristics

This study employed a qualitative research design rooted in the interpretive paradigm, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of students with visual impairments in Polish higher education institutions (HEIs). The recruitment strategy followed a purposive sampling approach, consistent with Denscombe's (2010, p. 35) suggestion that qualitative research seeks "the best information through focusing on a relatively small number of instances selected on the basis of their known attributes." The primary criterion for inclusion

in the study was the participant's identification as a student with visual impairments (i.e., either low vision or blindness) enrolled in an HEI in Poland.

To reflect the inclusive and participant-centred orientation of the study, the category "visual impairment" is used here as an umbrella term encompassing both students with low vision and those who are blind. Participants were initially identified through professional and academic networks known to the researcher and further recruited via snowball sampling, a strategy particularly suitable for accessing individuals from underrepresented or hard-to-reach populations (Vogt, 1999).

All recruitment and data collection procedures adhered to established ethical research standards. Participants were provided with clear and accessible information about the purpose and scope of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the right to withdraw at any point. Written informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Anonymity was assured through the use of pseudonyms, and data were processed and stored in accordance with data protection regulations. The research followed the guiding principle of "nothing about us without us", reflecting a strong ethical commitment to centring the voices and safeguarding the rights of participants with disabilities.

The final sample consisted of ten female students, aged between 21 and 35, all of whom held official disability certifications confirming their visual impairment. The participants were geographically dispersed across various HEIs in Poland and represented a range of study levels and academic fields. The detailed demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 3.

Table 3  
*Demographics of the respondents*

Pseudo Name	Level of studies	Vision status	Degree of disability	Major
R1	Master's degree	Light perception	severe	Clinical Psychology
R2	Master's degree	Light perception	severe	Psychology
R3	Bachelor's degree	Blind	severe	Occupational Therapy
R4	Master's degree	"Very" Low Vision	severe	Physiotherapy
R5	Master's degree	Low Vision	moderate	Pedagogy
R6	Master's degree	Blind	severe	Special Education
R7	Master's degree	Light perception	severe	Clinical Psychology
R8	Master's degree	Low Vision	moderate	Clinical Psychology with Psychotherapy
R9	Bachelor's degree	Blind	severe	English Philology
R10	Bachelor's degree	Light perception	severe	Spanish Philology

Source: Authors' research.

## Data Collection

Data were gathered through a semi-structured questionnaire, designed in two accessible formats: a Microsoft Word document and an online Google Forms survey, enabling participants to select the format most compatible with their assistive technologies and personal preferences. The data collection took place between May and December 2024.

Although the study employed a survey tool, the emphasis was on qualitative, open-ended responses that allowed participants to articulate their perceptions, challenges, and expectations in their own words. The data were subsequently analysed thematically, with a focus on identifying patterns, meanings, and individual nuances that emerged across the narratives.

## Results

The respondents shared their experiences of accessibility at the higher education institution they attended. Data analysis revealed the following themes: (1) accessibility of university buildings for persons with visual impairments, (2) digital and ICT accessibility, (3) adaptation of teaching materials to the needs of students with low vision and blind students, (4) barriers to taking full advantage of higher education, and (5) students' proposals for change to improve the study conditions for persons with visual impairments.

### Accessibility of university buildings for persons with visual impairments

Inclusive higher education institutions (HEIs) are expected to ensure that students with disabilities can participate fully in academic and campus life. Many institutions have begun to address architectural accessibility through renovations and the installation of assistive infrastructure. However, the narratives of participants in this study indicate that these efforts are often insufficient or inconsistently implemented.

Students described various challenges in navigating university buildings. A recurring concern was the absence of proper tactile or audible signage, which made locating classrooms, administrative offices, or restrooms difficult without assistance. Several respondents emphasised the anxiety and dependence this creates, particularly when trying to orient themselves in unfamiliar buildings. One participant explained:

*There are no markings or labels I can read; I usually have to ask someone every time I change buildings (Respondent 2).*

Concerns were also raised about the lack of visual contrast on stairs or obstacles such as pillars and low-hanging signage, which posed physical risks. As one respondent remarked:

*I tripped more than once on unmarked steps or barriers. There's nothing that warns you—no colour, no texture, nothing (Respondent 6).*

While a few students acknowledged the presence of accessible lifts with Braille and voice systems, these were more often described as exceptions rather than the rule. Audible signage and QR-code based room labelling, which could facilitate greater independence, were reportedly absent. A student with blindness summarised the situation bluntly:

*Absolutely nothing helps me navigate independently. Everything I need, I have to fight for (Respondent 9).*

Most respondents assessed their experience with the built environment negatively, with some reporting that architectural barriers were a frequent, even daily, obstacle to their autonomy.

### **Digital and ICT accessibility at HEIs**

European higher education policies are strongly committed to improving chances for diverse learners. Accessibility is understood among other things, as providing access to information, communication technologies and systems (ICT), as well as other facilities and services, on an equal basis with others (*European Commission...*, 2010). As a result, applicants, students, and other stakeholders form their first impressions of the HEI accessibility policy when they access its website. To prevent architectural barriers and putting students with disabilities at a disadvantage compared to their peers without disabilities, equal participation and digital inclusion should be provided (Fichten et.al., 2020). In the presented research students with visual impairments were asked to assess digital and ICT accessibility at their university. The results show that according to students with low vision, basic accessibility options such as the option to enlarge the font on the website and to increase contrast on the page were provided by their university web pages. Accessibility for blind students using screen readers was more problematic. None of the universities provided their blind students with audio descriptions or alternative forms for media or voice-enabled search on the website.

In relation to their experiences with searching their university websites students reported:

*The website is very complicated and hard for my screen reader to follow it. Without the help of a sighted assistant, I don't even try to search for anything there (Respondent 1).*

*Unfortunately, the website is very hard to use with a screen reader (Respondent 2).*

*My university's website is full of not appropriately marked links and buttons that are not compatible with the screen reading software, i.e., you can click on them endlessly and nothing happens. When uploading my undergraduate thesis into the system I had to be assisted by a sighted person (Respondent 10).*

*You can often get lost, too many tables, buttons not marked as buttons. There is no sound (Respondent 3).*

*The website contains information not aligned with the headings and it is very difficult to find it. Alternative descriptions are missing, documents saved as scans are completely inaccessible to me (Respondent 7).*

*At my university, the website is absolutely not adapted in any way for people with visual impairments. It is completely cluttered. It should be simplified (Respondent 8).*

Several participants described feeling isolated or disadvantaged during online learning activities. Problems included inaccessible virtual platforms, unreadable scanned documents, and audio content without transcripts or captions. These barriers extended beyond formal learning to administrative procedures, such as accessing forms or submitting assignments.

In line with prior research, such as Fichten et al. (2020), these findings underscore that digital accessibility is not merely a technical concern but a matter of equal participation in academic life.

### **Adaptation of teaching materials to the needs of students with visual impairments**

Universities are bound to find appropriate and efficient ways to produce accessible resources that benefit and support all students due to equal access regulations and the enrolment of students with visual impairments in higher education. However, the respondents' experience shows that the area related to the adequate preparation of teaching materials to meet the needs of students with low vision and blind students in particular, is the most neglected one.

The teaching materials used at HEIs are predominantly sight-based. The most problematic are printed materials (especially those containing photographs, drawings, diagrams, or charts not described by alternative text), PowerPoint presentations, and video materials used during the classes. In most cases, they are not accessible to students with visual impairments. Respondent 9, a recent graduate who describes herself as blind, stated:

*Lectures and practical classes were typically conducted for sighted people. All videos used by the teachers lacked audio descriptions. All PowerPoint presentations were based on visual images only and their content was not explained. Not being able to use the available materials makes it impossible for me to be an independent student. I was constantly assigned to someone to help me – either an assistant or another student. This was a very difficult and stressful experience.*

According to the respondents, by using only printed materials, i.e., articles, books, or reports as a main source of reference to a given subject, academics exclude students with visual impairments from most of the course activities:

*It is very difficult with the accessibility of learning materials at my university. Sometimes I was required to know a given topic without any materials, to solve tasks, and to do exercises only by listening to what is going on during the classes. Once I was asked during my oral exam evaluating my fluency in spoken English to describe a scene in the presented picture. Unfortunately, I failed this exam (Respondent 2).*

One of the respondents (R7) indicated that the rare opportunity to record lectures using a voice recorder and the adaptation of some materials by the staff in the Office for Students with Disabilities were the only forms of support in accessing didactic materials at their university.

### **Areas of difficulty and barriers in accessibility of HEIs for students with visual impairments**

In many HEIs where the respondents study, barriers that prevent them from functioning on equal terms with non-disabled peers are still present. It turns out that the problems are not only the unadapted university buildings (i.e., lack of proper signage in the building and marking of dangerous places), lack of necessary assistive technologies or unfriendly technical solutions for persons with visual impairments but also the persisting difficulties in accessing the full range of educational resources. Many respondents encountered difficulties in all areas of accessing learning materials, including delayed availability of reference materials, learning materials not being provided in an accessible format, inaccessible virtual learning environments (Moodle, MsTeams, Usos), unhelpful lecturers, and difficulties accessing the facility's and library's resources.

The needs of students with disabilities including blindness and visual impairments are not always met in a way that is expected from HEIs:

*The most important thing is that we can count on our sighted assistants. Thanks to them, we can study. You should have a lot of willpower and persistence to complete your studies. (Respondent 1)*

*Even though there were already a few blind people at my university, I feel like I have to blaze new trails. The university makes absolutely no effort to be accessible to blind students. Everything has to be fought for. (Respondent 7)*

*People from the university tried to solve my problems, but it didn't always work out. I had to adapt materials and print them out for myself instead of learning. (Respondent 9)*

Several respondents of the present research who describes themselves as blind commented that they were not aware that moving from high school to university would be such a "dramatic transition".

## **Students' proposals for change to improve the study conditions for students with visual impairments**

Access to learning materials is an important factor to achieve educational objectives. Many times, in this study, students stressed the fact that these materials need to be adapted and properly prepared to be useful for students with visual impairments. In their view, training academics in this area is one of the key aspects of improving students' study conditions together with promoting the concept of accessibility among the broadly understood university community.

By adhering to established inclusive teaching practises (such as making teaching materials available in digital form and in advance as well as ensuring the institution's virtual learning environment is accessible for screen reader users) and making the necessary adjustments, (e.g., ensuring accessible versions of key texts are available in advance), many difficulties faced by students with visual impairments can be overcome.

Some modifications are necessary in response to particular circumstances, and they may call for human assistance (e.g., readers and note-takers). Respondents express how beneficial it is for them to have access to digital lecture materials, particularly in advance of the lectures. This enables them to engage more independently. In students' opinion, there is evidence that academics do not constantly format electronic files so that they can be accessed using screen reading technology:

*I have never encountered a situation where the lecturer would have prepared the material so that it can be used with a screen reader. (Respondent 6).*

*It is very important to make lecturers aware of the importance of good (i.e., accessible to us) materials. (Respondent 7)*

*Accessibility of materials is key to our "to be or not to be" at university. (Respondent 9)*

*It is very important to change the lecturers' attitude: they must be more flexible in meeting our needs and then we will be able to study with pleasure. (Respondent 1)*

Access to information has been acknowledged as a fundamental human right, irrespective of race, religion, or physical limitations (Awais & Ameen, 2015, p. 103). It makes it possible for users to easily access the information they need (Kleynhans & Fourie, 2014). Respondents of the present research facing limitations in equal access to documents and information shared with the university community online also call for greater accessibility of their university websites. Web pages accessibility evaluation is a pending process. Due to its dynamic nature, it should be continuously monitored and tested.

It is not just the digital infrastructure that is a challenge for students with visual impairments, but also inappropriate communication styles and an indifferent attitude of teachers and administrative staff that hamper the educational

development of visually challenged students. According to the respondents, the university community should reflect on how to communicate with persons with disabilities and what language is used, as the way we refer to disability and people with disabilities can be limiting. In particular, academic and administrative staff should adopt communication practices that are respectful, inclusive, and accessibility-oriented when interacting with students with visual impairments. A growing body of research underscores the importance of person-first language, which places the individual before the disability and contributes to reducing stigma and stereotyping (Crocker, 2019; Grech, 2024). For example, it is recommended to refer to a “student with a visual impairment” rather than “a blind student,” unless the individual explicitly expresses a preference for identity-first language.

Effective communication also involves clearly identifying oneself during verbal exchanges, particularly in group settings, to assist students who cannot rely on visual cues to track the speaker (ADCET, 2024). Furthermore, it is essential to ask before offering assistance, respecting the autonomy of students. If support is welcomed, the student should be allowed to take the staff member’s elbow rather than being physically guided without consent (UTSA Disability Services, 2025). Vague references such as “over there” or “this one” should be avoided; instead, staff should provide specific and descriptive verbal cues (e.g., “the second door on your left, next to the elevator”) to facilitate spatial orientation (Harvard University Disability Access Office, 2024). Finally, all interactions should be grounded in professional respect and equality, avoiding overcompensation or expressions of pity, which can undermine the goal of fostering an inclusive and empowering academic environment (World Health Organization, 2011).

## **Discussion**

There have been numerous attempts to develop an educational environment where students, regardless of their traits, interests, skills, or abilities, feel competent, appreciated, and not excluded. In this sense, the right of people with disabilities to access higher education is a well-established legal right (Yssel, Pak & Beilke, 2016). Nevertheless, there are still gaps in its application, which makes the road to inclusion for many institutions longer and results in a number of genuine barriers to accessing education for people with disabilities (Croft, 2020; Fernández-Batanero, Montenegro-Rueda, & Fernández-Cerero, 2022).

Students’ with visual impairments experiences in HEIs are underrepresented in literature. Research frequently focuses on disabled students more broadly or on specific occurrences and experiences within the student learning experience. However, available research results show many barriers to accessing higher ed-

ucation for this group of students (Hewett et. al., 2017; Okoye & Adirika, 2019; Szczupał, 2022). To advance further on the inclusion path we need to understand the obstacles that make it impossible for these students to access higher education. The experiences of students with visual impairments presented in this research can be classified into three groups of barriers related to (1) infrastructure/building accessibility, (2) information, digital, and ICT accessibility, and (3) the teaching–learning process.

Responsibilities under *the Act of July 19, 2019, on Providing Accessibility to People with Special Needs* (Journal of Laws of 2019, item 1696) to persons with visual impairments include:

- a) with regard to architectural accessibility:
  - ensuring mobility on and between floors,
  - making it possible to reach all rooms (except technical) in the building,
  - making it possible to navigate inside the building,
  - making it possible to enter the building with an assistance dog,
  - ensuring safe evacuation from the building;
- b) in terms of digital accessibility: the requirements set out in the law of April 4, 2019, on the digital accessibility of websites and mobile applications of public entities;
- c) in terms of information and communication accessibility: the provision on the website of the entity information on the scope of its activities, in the form of an electronic file containing machine-readable text.

The results of the presented study show that in each of the areas indicated in the cited Act, students with visual impairments experienced barriers or limitations. While the possibility of access with a guide dog is fully provided, marking for easy and safe access to all university buildings and rooms or evacuation routes is problematic. Similar problems were found in a study by Omede (2015). Students also reported frequent difficulties in terms of digital accessibility: mainly in accessing the content of the university websites in audio format, the lack of alternative descriptions for posted images and graphics, and the incompatibility of webpages with the screen readers they use.

The most onerous area according to the results of the present research was that related to the teaching–learning process. Particularly, access to learning resources was an issue, since in most cases they are not adapted to students' needs or are limited and teachers neglect these needs. These results are in alignment with other studies (Hougann, 1999; Omede, 2015, Hewett et al., 2017, Szczupał, 2022). Hewett, Douglas & Keil (2017) present the evidence that:

for students with more severe visual impairments who are reliant on screen reader software or braille, the lecture material which is provided to them is not accessible, unless further adjustments and modifications are made. Several participants of their research

relied on other staff in the university, for example, library support assistants or transcription teams, to make these adjustments (Hewett et al., 2017, p. 24).

Ibrahim (as cited in Otyola, Kibanja, & Mugagga, 2017) studied the problems of students with visual impairments at the University of Jordan. The obtained results shown that there were similar research problems as the ones identified here, such as limited access to library resources and difficulties related to teachers not understanding these students' needs.

## **Conclusion**

Disability is a university-wide concern. Incorporating students with disabilities in mainstream university education requires HEI initiatives to enhance accessibility, making the call for accessible learning environments a reality. Offering a truly inclusive learning environment is a complex process and developing an inclusive culture that serves all students requires thinking and acting differently on both the personal and institutional levels. Working at all levels—from senior leadership to academics, administrative staff to students—is necessary to create an inclusive culture. Thereby, one of the most crucial elements in reaching the objective of disability diversity and inclusion is shaping the culture of higher education institutions. Such culture should emphasize making co-workers and students with disabilities feel welcome, assuring them of their fair treatment and equal access, and meeting their needs.

## **Study Limitations**

While the findings of this study contribute valuable insights to the limited body of research on the accessibility of higher education institutions (HEIs) for students with visual impairments, several limitations must be acknowledged. Reaching blind individuals who are both willing and able to participate in qualitative research remains challenging. Consequently, the study was based on a small, non-representative sample, and its results should therefore be interpreted with caution and not generalised beyond the immediate context.

Future research could benefit from exploring the specific support services provided to students with visual impairments by institutional units such as the Disability Support Office (Polish: *Biuro ds. Osób z Niepełnosprawnościami – BON*). Furthermore, while this study included both students with low vision and those who are blind, future research might consider employing a more homogeneous purposive sample to enhance the reliability and depth of the analysis.

It is also important to note that, in the 2023/2024 academic year, only 0.13% of all university students in Poland identified themselves as blind or having a severe visual impairment. This low prevalence highlights the relative rarity of visual impairment in the HEI population. As the findings indicate, this presents challenges for academic staff and disability support officers, many of whom lack prior experience in working with students with significant visual impairments.

Despite the low incidence, visual impairments are classified as "high need" disabilities due to the extensive accommodations and support often required. Institutions must therefore ensure adequate preparedness, training, and systemic responses to meet these needs, regardless of how infrequently such cases occur.

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## Dostępność instytucji szkolnictwa wyższego dla studentów z niepełnosprawnością wzroku — rzeczywistość i proponowane kierunki zmian

### Streszczenie

Celem badania było poznanie doświadczeń studentów z dysfunkcją wzroku w zakresie dostępności szkół wyższych w Polsce. Artykuł podejmuje problem barier strukturalnych i cyfrowych, które utrudniają pełne uczestnictwo tych studentów w życiu akademickim. Zastosowano metodę jakościową, opartą na ankiecie z pytaniami otwartymi, umożliwiającą zebranie szczegółowych narracji studentów słabowidzących i niewidomych. Analiza tematyczna odpowiedzi pozwoliła wyodrębnić pięć kluczowych obszarów: dostępność architektoniczną, integrację cyfrową i ICT, dostosowanie materiałów dydaktycznych, bariery systemowe oraz rekomendacje studentów dotyczące usprawnień. Wyniki badania pokazują, że mimo pewnych postępów nadal występują istotne trudności – szczególnie w zakresie dostępności materiałów dydaktycznych, funkcjonalności stron internetowych uczelni oraz przygotowania kadry akademickiej. Uzyskane wyniki badań podkreślają pilną potrzebę wdrażania polityk inkluzyjnych, ukierunkowanego wsparcia edukacyjnego oraz szkoleń dla pracowników uczelni, aby skutecznie odpowiadać na złożone potrzeby tej nielicznej, ale wymagającej intensywnego wsparcia grupy studentów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dostępność, szkolnictwo wyższe, dysfunkcja wzroku, edukacja włączająca.



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## Mind Maps and Convergent Thinking of Second-Grade Students – Reports from a Pilot Study

### Abstract

The article discusses the use of mind maps as a tool supporting the development of convergent thinking in second-grade primary school students. The theoretical foundations of mind maps according to Tony Buzan and the results of research confirming the effectiveness of this note-taking technique are presented. Issues related to convergent thinking in the view of J.P. Guilford are also described. The effectiveness of mind maps was tested using a quasi-experiment. The study was a pilot study aimed at validating the test – a research tool. The constructed test of the level of convergent thinking took into account the indicators given by J.P. Guilford: class production, systems production, transformation production and implication production. The results showed that at the initial stage, the levels in both the experimental and control groups were low in most of the students. After a series of classes on the implementation of mind maps in the experimental group, the number of students with a medium and high level of convergent thinking increased. There were also positive developments in the production of semantic implications. These changes, although partially statistically significant, indicate the potential of this method in developing convergent thinking in students. Therefore, it is worth implementing mind maps in early school education and expanding research in this area.

**Keywords:** mind maps, convergent thinking, students, early school education.

### Introduction

The ability to learn as a key competence should be developed in contemporary students starting from early school education. To do this, students need to learn strategies for remembering information and consolidating it.

As children grow up, they become more and more proficient in using various strategies that help them at every stage of memorization – coding, storing and recalling information (Schaffer, 2006, p. 277).<sup>1</sup>

Notes created by students are important in the learning process. In Polish schools, linear notes dominate, which make it difficult to add information and are not very attractive, especially for younger students. It is also worth adding that each student has their own individual learning style and therefore, after learning how to remember and create notes, they have the opportunity to choose solutions that are effective for them.

One of the ways of taking notes is mind maps, the originator of which was Tony Buzan. When creating mind maps, students use lines, colors, symbols, images, keywords, etc. The radial arrangement of mind maps resembles structures in the brain – the formation of new connections between neurons. Thus, mind maps help to integrate and visualize the concepts you have learned. This is crucial because, as Anna Jurczak notes,

comparing a child's brain to a cabinet with many drawers, it can be said that each of them contains a part of the knowledge possessed by them, but the ability to combine it is negligible, because each drawer has a space that it does not share with another (Jurczak, 2016, p. 41).

It should also be noted that mind mapping is attractive to students, including younger ones. They can use colorful images, symbols, made as best they can. Moreover, the visuals are not limited by nationality or language and are the best tool for younger students to discover new things and learn. Depiction through images is one of the most primal human qualities, and the ability to draw in young children is better than the ability to write. Elżbieta Płóciennik emphasizes,

images are an important element of human cognition, experience, they help to create a representation of the world, because they are a carrier of various content (data on the characteristics of physical objects and people, on relations between objects, relations and interactions between people, and events related to objects and social) (Płóciennik, 2011, p. 176–177).

Therefore, it is worth implementing mind maps in grades 1–3 as a method of creating notes, because their creator emphasized a number of advantages, m.in. help in understanding and remembering information, organizing thoughts into a clear, hierarchical structure, saving time and making the most of it (see Buzan, Buzan, 2002; Buzan, 2003). Students should learn a new way of taking notes and choose the right one that will help them in the learning process.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations into English of the original texts are the author's own translations.

## Tony Buzan's Mind Maps

Mindmapping has been known since the 60s/70s of the twentieth century, and its assumptions were developed by Tony Buzan. According to T. Buzan and B. Buzan, mind maps

are an expression of multidirectional thinking, and therefore a natural function of our mind. It is also a wonderful graphic technique that unleashes the potential of the intellect. Maps can be successfully used in all areas of life where the speed of learning and clarity of thinking improve the results achieved (Buzan, Buzan, 2002, p. 57).

In mind map definitions, attention is focused on the structure and effects of using this technique. For example, the Oxford Dictionary states that it is an information diagram presenting correlated ideas organized around a central idea (Oxford Dictionary), and according to Brinkmann, mind mapping is a powerful technique that allows thoughts to be expressed in the mind and reveals the brain's potential (Brinkmann, 2003).

A mind map has a radial structure that can resemble a tree. In the center is the main theme, from which interconnected branches of different thicknesses diverge to indicate connections. According to Buzan, this structure makes it easier to detect connections between different branches and create new associations to fill any empty spaces, thus encouraging us to keep thinking creatively (Buzan, 2019). For comparison, notes popular in schools are linear, students write down information line by line, use one color of pen (black or blue), sometimes they only underline certain issues, mainly the topic of the lesson, with a different color. This way of writing does not allow you to supplement the note with new information, let alone associations or drawings.

In order to prepare a mind map, you should have a blank sheet of paper (without lines), preferably A4, colored pens, and remember to go from the general information to the detail. When creating, it is worth taking into account the principles formulated by the creator of mind maps:

- the sheet is placed horizontally;
- in the middle of the page is a drawing that summarizes the main topic;
- the central branches that depart from this figure represent the main subtopics;
- from them depart interconnected lines that concern details;
- there are keywords or drawings on the branches;
- each added keyword or and-key creates new possibilities for connections, which in turn evoke further associations (Buzan, Buzan, 2002; Buzan, 2003).

Mind maps allow students to analyze the discussed issue or the text they read from the textbook by creating branches, thus developing the ability to categorize and hierarchize. What's more, this way of taking notes allows you to

present dependencies and connections between individual issues. According to Agnieszka Kaczor, such a statement

is not only a reflection of the student's knowledge, but more importantly, it is empirical evidence of the commitment he or she showed while working on the topic (Kaczor, 2020, p. 79).

Therefore, thanks to a mind map, the student not only reproduces the content, but also processes it, analyzes and organizes it. In addition, mind maps have numerous advantages indicated by their creator and it is also worth mentioning the time saving (writing down important words, repeating important things instead of reading several pages of notes).

Mind maps can be used to achieve various educational goals. The results of the study confirm the effectiveness and efficiency of the mind mapping technique in teaching and teaching a variety of subjects, e.g. mathematics (Brinkmann, 2003), economics (Budd, 2004), foreign languages (Haiyao et al., 2025). In the context of language learning, a systematic review of research from recent years indicates that mind maps are an effective tool in learning vocabulary or grammar.

In addition, numerous foreign studies confirm the effectiveness of mind maps in the following areas:

- improving learning performance and understanding of the material;
- problem-solving and critical thinking;
- increasing student motivation and engagement.

Mind maps help you organize and understand complex information. Research indicates that mind maps support the development of critical thinking and improve student performance (Rezapour-Nasrabad, 2019; Keter et al., 2021; Naihaho, 2022). What's more, Buran and Filyukov (2015) found that this note-taking technique supports students in solving problems and coming up with creative ideas. It is also worth noting the effectiveness of mind maps in terms of motivation to learn. Mind maps are seen as a tool to engage and stimulate students to actively process information (Sabarun et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2020).

The examples of research results cited indicate the usefulness of mind maps in the learning process of students at different stages of education.

## **Convergent thinking**

In the learning process, researchers point to the essence of two types of thinking – convergent and divergent. In the context of the topic of this article, it is necessary to present assumptions concerning the first of the above-mentioned types of thinking. According to J.P. Guilford,

convergent production belongs to the field of logical education, or at least to the field of the ability to draw conclusions. It is this, not divergent generation, that prevails when the input of information is sufficient to establish a unique response (Guilford, 1978, p. 335–336).

It is most often used in situations familiar to the individual, it does not require the use of new thinking patterns. At the stage of early school education, it may be a task consisting in indicating the appropriate caption to animal drawings, indicating the next number in a given sequence. As Maria Ledzińska and Ewa Czerniawska emphasize,

it consists in the fact that a person uses narrowing down the possibilities of choice (thoughts) in order to arrive at one optimal solution (Ledzińska, Czerniawska, 2011, p. 55).

Important in convergent manufacturing are the ways in which the mind organizes and classifies information during the problem-solving process. The following are listed in the literature on the subject:

- individuals refer to the ability to perceive individuals in the area of content,
- classes refer to the ability to organize individuals into meaningful groups and sort individuals into appropriate groups,
- relationships refer to the ability to sense relationships between pairs of individuals,
- systems consist of relationships between more than two entities,
- transformations are the ability to understand changes in information,
- implications relate to expectation (Barlow, 2000).

The division proposed by Guilford (1978) with respect to the convergent production of units, classes, relations, transformations and systems should be presented.

- Converging unit generation
  - semantic units.
- Converging Class Generation
  - figural classes,
  - semantic classes.
- Converging relationship generation
  - symbolic relations,
  - semantic relations.
- Converging system manufacturing
  - symbolic systems,
  - semantic systems.
- Converging transformation generation
  - figural transformations,
  - symbolic transformations,
  - semantic transformations

- Converging Implication Manufacturing
  - symbolic implications,
  - semantic implications.

Convergent thinking is crucial in situations that require finding a single, optimal answer and is developed through logical and analytical exercises. Convergent thinking develops mainly in the stage of concrete operations, according to Piaget's classification of cognitive development, and is fully developed in the stage of formal operations. Well, in the period of 7–11 years (the stage of concrete operations), "the child develops the ability to use logical thinking to solve specific problems that arise at a given moment" (Wadsworth, 1998, p. 39). Students most often practice convergent thinking when solving tests or mathematical tasks. For example, the students' task is to count objects after adding two sets or match the names of professions to attributes. As Ewa Filipiak points out, "the abilities assessed by the subtests of convergent production are related to the development of school skills: literacy, arithmetic skills" (Filipiak, 2015, p. 165). However, it should be emphasized that for the full development of students, it is important to develop divergent thinking in parallel, which will allow them to better cope with the challenges of the modern world and develop creativity.

## Research methodology

The conceptualization of the key concepts of the thematic area is based on the scientific theory discussed in the publications of T. Buzan and J.P. Guilford.

The cognitive goal of the research is to gain knowledge about the importance of using mind maps for the development of convergent thinking in second-grade students.

The following research problems were formulated:

- exploratory and diagnostic: What is the effectiveness of using mind maps in developing convergent thinking in second-graders, taking into account the level of convergent thinking in the control and experimental groups?
- Verification:
  - Does the creation of mind maps by second-grade students affect the convergent production of classes?
  - Does the creation of mind maps by second-grade students affect the convergent production of systems?
  - Does the creation of mind maps by second-grade students affect the convergent production of transformations?
  - Does mind mapping by second-grade students affect the convergent production of implications?

The designed research is a pilot study and is an introduction to longitudinal research, the subject of which will be the effectiveness of the use of mind maps in the development of convergent and divergent thinking in the second and third grades of primary school. The pilot was used to validate the research tool. The author constructed a test to learn the level of convergent thinking on the basis of J.P. Guilford's proposed tasks.

The research method was adopted in the designed research – a quasi-pedagogical experiment. The selection of the research group was deliberate, because in order to carry out the research in the primary school, two second grades were indicated. Thus, as stated by John W. Creswell (2013), the randomization requirement is necessary, and failure to meet it makes the experimental model (not meeting the definition requirements) a quasi-experimental model.

The control group was made up of second-grade students who do not know the mind map and only create linear notes. The group consisted of 11 people. The experimental group (16 people) are second-grade students who were familiarized with the principles of mind mapping and applied them in the winter semester of the 2024/2025 school year. The author conducted ten lessons in the field of mind maps by T. Buzan with students of the experimental group. In addition, students created maps with the teacher on the discussed issue (they had previously been given to the teacher by the author of the research) and independently during lessons. The participants of both groups were of the same age and were students of the same primary school. The designed research was carried out at several stages, which are presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Stages of the research*

	Pretest	Mind Mapping Classes by T. Buzan	Posttest
Experimental group	X	X	X
Control group	X		X

Source: Author's research.

Research tools – the convergent thinking level test included 9 tasks that corresponded to individual indicators and related to issues known to children. The indicators were selected on the basis of Guilford's classification. During the selection, information about the ineffectiveness of some tests was taken into account, which, showing secondary loads, is not an unambiguous measure. Therefore, the test included tasks related to:

- convergent class manufacturing
  - semantic classes – word grouping test. The task was to classify 12 commonly used words into a certain number of classes.

- Converging system manufacturing
  - symbolic systems – word changes test. The task was to indicate the order of the given words in order to move from the word coffee to the word basket, changing only one letter.
  - semantic systems
    - a) picture arrangement test. The task was to indicate the correct order of the drawings – the correct crossing of the street.
    - b) sentence order test adapted from Adkins and Lyerly. The task is to put the three sentences in the right order. Each corresponds to an episode in a certain series of events.
    - c) Word Matrices test. The task is to complete the table (3 rows and 3 columns) with the given words, in such a way that they share a common feature, e.g. vehicles.
- Converging transformation generation
  - symbolic transformations – a test of camouflaged words. In the sentences, it was necessary to find and underline hidden names appearing in the food pyramid.
- Converging Implication Manufacturing
  - symbolic implications
    - a) Form reasoning test. Given simple equations – a given figure is implied by a combination of two others. The task is to indicate the correct result.
    - b) sign changes test. The task was to solve a simple mathematical operation according to the given instruction – to replace one character of the operation with another sign.
  - semantic implications – a test of sequential associations. The task was to arrange the words in such a way that there would be a natural connection between the first and the second, the second and the third, and so on – grain, grain, flour, bread.

The collected data were subjected to statistical analysis in SPSS Statistics 28.0. Pearson's chi-square analysis was used to examine intragroup and intergroup differences in the level of convergence thinking converted into norms. The descriptive statistics and statistics of the Shapiro–Wolf test of the study variables in the experimental and control groups and in two measures: pretest and posttest were evaluated. The values of skewness in the range from  $-2.51$  to  $+3.32$ , and kurtoses in the range from  $-2.04$  to  $+11.00$  showed that the assumption of normality of the data distribution was not met. These findings confirmed the relevant statistics of the Shapiro–Wolf test for most variables. On this basis, the analyses were carried out using the nonparametric Wilcoxon rank test for two dependent samples and the Mann-Whitney U test for two independent samples. The significance of the results was assumed at the level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ .

## Mind Maps and Convergent Thinking of Grade 2 Students – Results of a Pilot Study

On the basis of the data collected, it should be concluded that Both groups started with the same low level of convergent thinking. After applying mind maps, at the trend level, the results in the experimental group moved from low to medium and high. There was no change in the control group.

In the case of intergroup differences, in the post-test it was found at the level of statistical trend that the percentage of students with high scores in the experimental group increased (from 6.25% to 31.35%) compared to the control group (0.00% in both measurements;  $\chi^2 = 5.03$ ;  $p = 0.081$ ). No intergroup differences were found in the pretest ( $\chi^2 = 1.52$ ;  $p = 0.468$ ). The discussed results are presented in Table 2 and Figure 1.

Table 2

*The level of convergent thinking depending on the type of group and measurement*

Group	Level of thinking	Pretest		Posttest	
		N	%	N	%
Control	Low	8	72,73%	6	54,55%
	Medium	3	27,27%	5	45,45%
	High	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Experimental	Low	13	81,25%	8	50,00%
	Medium	2	12,50%	3	18,75%
	High	1	6,25%	5	31,25%

Source: Author's research.

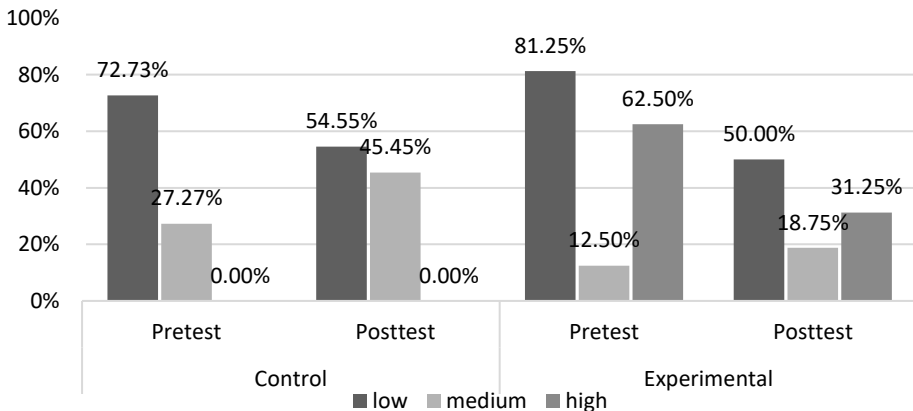


Figure 1

The level of convergent thinking depending on the type of group and measurement

Source: Author's research

As for individual indicators of convergent thinking, the data are included in Table 3 and in Figures 2-3.

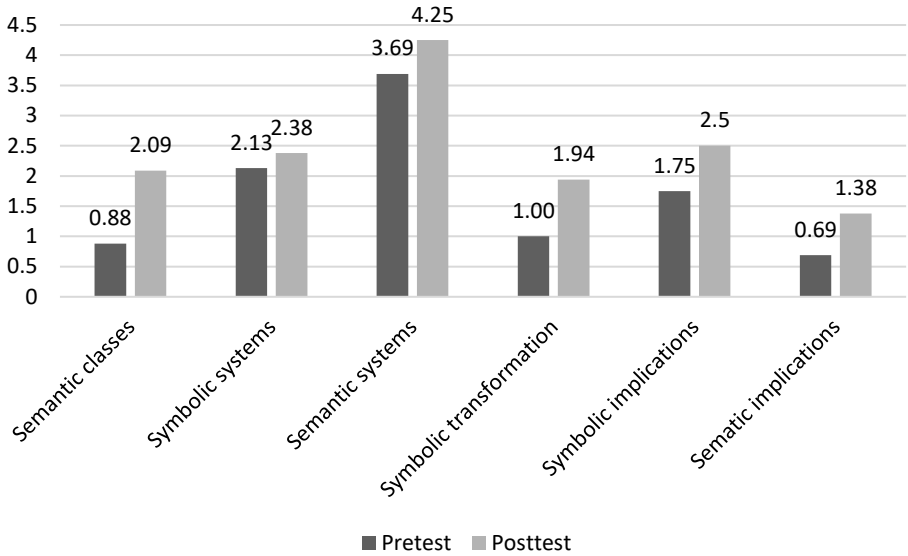
A statistically significant increase in the level of semantic implications was noted in the experimental group when comparing the pretest and posttest ( $p = 0.029$ ). In addition, in this group, an increase in the level of semantic classes ( $p = 0.082$ ) and symbolic implications (the sign change test) ( $p = 0.074$ ) was also found at the level of statistical tendency. Therefore, an increase in the result of the total convergent implication production ( $p = 0.073$ ) was recorded at the level of the statistical trend. In all cases, the strength of the effect was high ( $r > 0.50$ ). No statistically significant changes were found in other indicators of convergent thinking.

Table 3

*Comparison of pretest and posttest in convergent thinking in an experimental group*

Experimental group			Pretest		Posttest		With	$p$	$r$
			$M$	$SD$	$M$	$SD$			
Converging Class Generation	Semantic classes	P1	0,88	1,09	2,09	2,37	-1,74	0,082	0,66
		P2	2,13	1,20	2,38	1,20	-0,82	0,414	0,82
Converging system manufacturing	Semantic systems	P3	0,88	0,34	0,88	0,34	0,00	1,000	0,81
		P4	1,44	0,81	1,50	0,82	-0,29	0,773	0,67
		P5	1,38	1,28	1,88	1,41	-1,03	0,301	0,65
		Including	3,69	1,99	4,25	2,14	-0,76	0,449	0,36
	Including	5,81	2,98	6,63	3,18	-0,86	0,392	0,30	
Converging transformation generation	Symbolic transformation	P6	1,00	1,21	1,94	1,88	-1,61	0,107	0,68
		P7	1,00	1,03	1,00	1,03	0,00	1,000	0,65
Converging Implication Manufacturing	Symbolic implications	P8	0,75	0,88	1,50	0,89	-1,79	0,074#	0,66
		Including	1,75	1,40	2,50	1,55	-1,52	0,128	0,62
		P9	0,69	0,79	1,38	0,72	-2,18	0,029*	0,72
	Including	2,44	1,64	3,88	2,09	-1,79	0,073#	0,57	
Total			10,13	5,48	14,53	7,61	-1,35	0,179	0,34

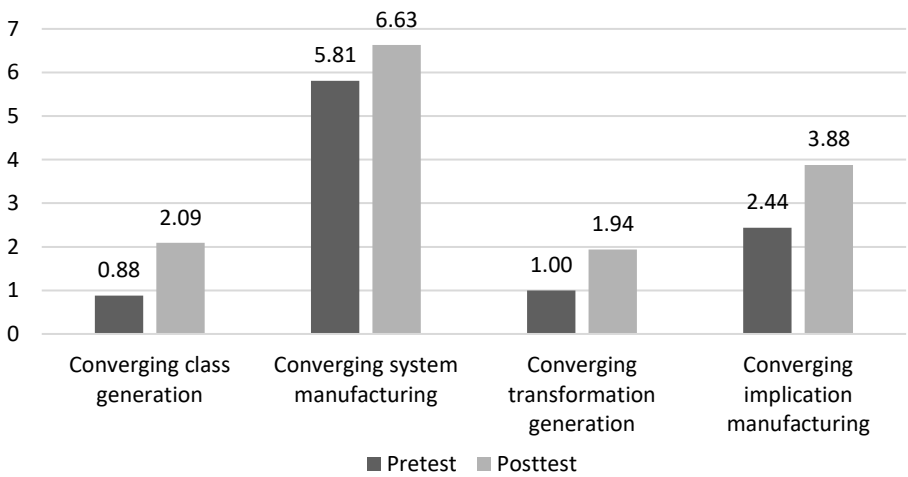
Source: Author's research.



*Figure 2*

Comparison of pretest and posttest in the field of subareas of convergent thinking in the experimental group

Source: Author's research.



*Figure 3*

Comparison of pretest and posttest in the field of convergent thinking areas in the experimental group

Source: Author's research.

## Summary and Conclusion

In the context of the research question about the effectiveness of mind maps in the development of convergent thinking, it should be stated that the intervention applied in the experimental group contributed to an increase in the percentage of students reaching a medium and high level, which was not the case in the control group. These results indicate promising effects, although they need to be confirmed in subsequent studies.

Referring to verification problems, the implemented activities – mind maps – in the experimental group contributed to a significant increase in the level of semantic implications and a tendency to improve indicators related to symbolic implication and convergent class production. The influence of other factors (disturbing variables) should be noted, e.g. the teacher's influence, the child's learning style.

The validation of the test constructed by the author to measure the level of convergent thinking of second-graders confirmed its reliability and usefulness. It is suitable for the intended use.

It is worth noting the low initial level of convergent thinking in students in both groups. The students had a problem with the tasks they were supposed to do. This indicates the need to develop this type of thinking at the stage of early school education. According to Guilford's (1978) assumptions, much depends on memory resources, because convectional operations require the generation of new information from already known information.

One of the ways that teachers can use, as the results of research show – creating notes in the form of mind maps. Therefore, there is a need to implement mind maps in primary schools starting from grades 1-3. It is worth it for teachers to learn the principles of creating mind maps according to T. Buzan and encourage students to use them. The discussed issues require further research to learn about the impact of mind maps on the level of convergent and divergent thinking. According to Guilford (1978), "in everyday life, these two types of production are not distinguished; People very often use divergent manufacturing to a large extent in order to find a convergent response" (p. 413).

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## Mapy myśli i myślenie konwergencyjne uczniów drugiej klasy – raport z badania pilotażowego

### Streszczenie

Artykuł podejmuje temat wykorzystania map myśli jako narzędzia wspierającego rozwój myślenia konwergencyjnego u uczniów klasy drugiej szkoły podstawowej. Przedstawiono teoretyczne podstawy map myśli według Tony'ego Buzana oraz wyniki badań potwierdzające efektywność tej techniki notowania. Opisano również kwestie związane z myśleniem konwergencyjnym w ujęciu J.P. Guilforda. Efektywność map myśli sprawdzono z zastosowaniem *quasi*-eksperymentu. Badanie miało charakter pilotażowy, mający na celu walidację testu – narzędzia badawczego. Skonstruowany test poziomu myślenia konwergencyjnego uwzględnił wskaźniki podane przez J.P. Guilforda: wytwarzanie klas, wytwarzanie systemów, wytwarzanie przekształceń i wytwarzanie implikacji. Wyniki wykazały, że na początkowym etapie w obydwu grupach – eksperymentalnej i kontrolnej – poziom u większości uczniów był niski. Po cyklu zajęć z wdrożenia map myśli w grupie eksperymentalnej zwiększyła się liczba uczniów ze średnim i wysokim poziomem myślenia konwergencyjnego. Odnotowano również pozytywne zmiany w zakresie wytwarzania implikacji semantycznych. Zmiany te, choć częściowo istotne statystycznie, wskazują na potencjał tej metody w rozwijaniu myślenia konwergencyjnego u uczniów. Warto zatem wdrażać mapy myśli w edukacji wczesnoszkolnej oraz rozszerzyć badania w tym zakresie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** mapy myśli, myślenie konwergencyjne, uczniowie, edukacja wczesnoszkolna.



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## Motivating Students to Learn by Primary School Teachers – in the Light of Teachers’ Narratives

### Abstract

Pedagogical reflection on stimulating students’ engagement in learning has evolved away from traditionally oriented, behaviorist stimulation toward a more progressive, developmental approach. The aim of this article is to examine teachers’ motivational practices and to address the following research question: *How do primary school teachers motivate their students to learn?* The empirical material was collected through unstructured qualitative interviews. The article presents the methodological foundations of the study, the adopted understanding of the concept of motivation and existing recommendation for motivating students, followed by an analysis of the teachers’ statements in relation to this category. The findings reveal a tendency among teachers to rely primarily on extrinsic motivation, as the strategies they employ (mainly rewards, coercion, and control) function as external stimuli. The motivational practices described in their narratives cannot be considered developmental for students, nor progressive in light of contemporary pedagogical scholarship. Hence, there arises a need to expand teachers’ awareness of the consequences of such practices and to enhance their competence in adopting alternative, more constructive approaches to motivating students.

**Keywords:** motivation, extrinsic motivation, teachers’ strategies of motivating students, rewarding students, coercion and control in learning

### Introduction

The issue of motivating children to learn is of concern not only to educators but also to increasingly broader social circles reflecting on the appropriate de-

sign of educational situations in schools that elicit cognitive activity in young learners. This reflection is increasingly directed toward the need to perceive learning as a lifelong process (Ćwikła, 2021), understood as an expression of individual autonomy and cognitive activity, rather than merely a reaction to teaching (Bauman, 2005). Such a perspective provides schools and teachers with grounds to move away from a traditional, behaviorist orientation in motivating students—an orientation largely manifested through short-term external stimulation—and to adopt approaches with a more progressive and developmental character.

It is therefore important to examine whether teachers, in their everyday practice, pursue motivational strategies consistent with such a perspective. Based on the analysis of research material collected through qualitative interviews, this article seeks to answer the following question: *How do the participating primary school teachers motivate their students to learn?*

## Stimulating and Shaping Students' Motivation to Learn

There are numerous definitions of the concept of motivation, each corresponding to specific theoretical frameworks. One such definition, proposed by Janusz Reykowski, identifies motivation with the emergence of a “directional tendency,” that is, “a readiness to pursue specific goals” (Reykowski, 1977, p. 18).<sup>1</sup> When combined with this readiness, motivation constitutes a form of “activating orientation of the current life act toward a positively valued state” (Rheinberg, 2006, p. 18), which one seeks to attain.

Building on Reykowski's theoretical findings, Małgorzata Cywińska defines motivation as a theoretical construct used to explain particular human behaviors, their direction, and persistence. “In relation to school learning, it concerns the student's subjective experiences, their willingness to engage in lessons and learning activities” (Cywińska, 2012, p. 155).

Different theoretical perspectives on motivation are accompanied by specific recommendations regarding how it may be stimulated and shaped in students. Barbara L. McComb and James E. Pope, in their book *“Hard-to-Handle Student: How to Motivate Them to Learn”*, highlight the following approaches:

- The Freudian perspective on motivation – specific basic biological drives and instincts motivate an individual's behavior. The teacher's task is to assist students in controlling and directing these impulses.
- Behaviorist theories of stimuli – the human being is seen as a “blank slate,” on which external events and experiences are inscribed. These form the basis for conditioned behavioral tendencies. Motivation and learning should

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<sup>1</sup> All translations into English of the original texts are the author's/authors' own translations.

be managed by influencing the individual's behavior through external stimuli (primarily rewards and punishments).

- The humanistic psychology approach – the individual possesses a natural tendency toward growth and self-actualization, which may be stimulated by learning, significant persons, or life events. Motivation is linked to the emergence and pursuit of needs (initially lower-order, later higher-order), which may be either supported or hindered by the environment (McComb & Pope, 1997).

As perspectives that modify and extend these positions, McComb and Pope also point to cognitive, socio-cognitive, and socio-behaviorist theories of motivation. The first emphasizes the role of cognitive processes in motivating learning. It assigns a significant role to the student's activity in the process of knowledge acquisition, which is always a personal construct shaped by their own system of beliefs and frames of reference. These may include, for instance, the student's self-concept, goals, or expectations, which in turn influence motivation and quality of performance. Theories associated with socio-cognitive and socio-behaviorist perspectives, by contrast, stress external factors that motivate learning. Among them, the authors identify social and emotional support from significant others (e.g., care or encouragement) as well as environmental stimuli (e.g., rewards) (McComb & Pope, 1997).

In discussing motivation, it is necessary to address the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Although some researchers, such as Aleksandra Tokarz (2005), question this division, it remains well-grounded in the scholarly literature.

Characterizing intrinsic motivation, Małgorzata Głoskowska-Sołdatow associates it with behaviors stemming from individual needs, among which she identifies interests, curiosity, and the desire to acquire knowledge as the strongest developmental stimuli. These factors drive the individual to continuously expand their knowledge, accumulate new experiences, and set increasingly ambitious goals. Extrinsic motivation, by contrast, is defined as “all activities undertaken by an individual as a result of external factors or social pressure” (Głoskowska-Sołdatow, 2016, p. 41). When learning is extrinsically motivated, a student undertakes tasks to gain rewards (e.g., good grades, praise, recognition) or to avoid punishments (e.g., poor grades, disapproval) administered by external authorities such as teachers or parents. Among extrinsic motivators she lists pressure, coercion, commands, reprimands, supervision, prohibitions, and various forms of gratification. She emphasizes that the use of such strategies—especially when applied ineffectively—may lead to negative consequences such as inhibiting spontaneity, diminishing the sense of control, increasing anxiety, lowering self-esteem, or suppressing self-initiated activities (Głoskowska-Sołdatow, 2016).

When considering motivation to learn, Martin V. Covington and Karen Manheim Teel distinguish positive motivation for learning and five accompanying

principles. These, in their view, foster students' achievement and help eliminate competition framed as a "race for ability." The principles are as follows: ensuring that each student has opportunities to demonstrate competence; rewarding curiosity, persistence, effort, and achievements alongside the natural satisfaction that sustains a willingness to learn; valuing diverse abilities and skills, rather than exclusively those related to abstract thinking and verbal proficiency, "which are favored in the traditional school operating under the rules of the ability race" (Covington & Teel, 2004, p. 45); employing diverse motivational strategies tailored to the needs of individual students, recognizing that children often value different motivations—some seek social acceptance, while others value privileges; and designing tasks that engage all participants by incorporating elements such as novelty, surprise, connections to personal interests, and an "inner force of attraction whereby everyone can find something that relates to their world" (Covington & Teel, 2004, p. 46).

In contrast to positive motivation, they point to teacher practices that direct students toward a race for ability, characterized by defining success in terms of grades and outperforming peers, prioritizing a narrow set of abilities while neglecting the effort of learning, deriving pride from outperforming others, perceiving classmates as obstacles to success, and positioning the teacher as a judge who interprets mistakes as signs of weakness or incompetence (Covington & Teel, 2004).

Covington and Teel's propositions reflect elements of cognitive, socio-cognitive, and socio-behaviorist models of motivation. These frameworks integrate both external factors (e.g., punishment) and internal ones (e.g., reliance on personal interests) in fostering students' motivation to learn. Jere Brophy, in his book *"Motivating Students to Learn"*, adopts a similar position, arguing that contemporary perspectives no longer view extrinsic and intrinsic motivation as opposing categories, since the former can complement the latter. However, he stresses that most researchers agree "that intrinsic methods are superior because they yield qualitatively better engagement with tasks and foster durable internal interest in the subject matter or activity" (Brophy, 2002, p. 158).

In providing teachers with guidelines for fostering intrinsic motivation, Brophy recommends didactic practices that elicit and sustain students' sense of self-direction and cognitive autonomy (e.g., opportunities for choice), competence (e.g., activities enabling active responses and immediate feedback), and relatedness (e.g., group collaboration). Effective strategies for cultivating students' motivation also include arousing curiosity, inducing tension, creating cognitive dissonance, transforming abstract material into personally relevant content, and stimulating interest in tasks (Brophy, 2002)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> This position is also shared by other theorists, namely Manfred Prenzel and Barbara Drechsel (1996), as well as Monique Boekaerts (2013).

## Methodological Foundations of the Study

The analyses presented in this article are based on research material in the form of transcripts of qualitative interviews conducted with primary school teachers. These interviews constitute part of a larger project aimed at accessing teachers' everyday professional experiences in order to describe, analyze, and interpret their meanings<sup>3</sup>. The specific goal of the present text is to examine how the participating teachers motivate<sup>4</sup> their students to learn. The guiding research question was therefore as follows: *How do primary school teachers motivate their students to learn?* Related to this was an inquiry into the kinds of tools they employ and the type of motivation on which they rely.

The method of data collection used was the unstructured qualitative interview (Stemplewska-Żakowicz, 2005)<sup>5</sup>. A total of fourteen interviews<sup>6</sup> were conducted with female teachers working in primary schools: five taught grades I–III, five taught Polish in grades IV–VIII, and one taught mathematics, one history, one English, and one French. The selection of participants was based on their extensive professional experience and their expressed consent to participate in the research.

The interviews were conducted in person. Analysis began during transcription, which included recording analytical observations and making notes (Gibbs, 2011). The next step involved delineating the thematic scope of the teachers' statements and identifying partial meanings within the context of entire narratives. Subsequently, the material was coded by assigning labels to fragments based on similarities in topics, issues, ideas, activities, or illustrations of comparable cases (Charmaz, 2009). This process resulted in the creation of a set of main thematic codes. The next phase involved more analytical and theoretical coding, which allowed for refining, developing, and hierarchically organizing the emerging codes into overarching, subordinate, and parallel categories.

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<sup>3</sup> In line with Florian Znaniecki's (2008) assumptions, it was accepted that access to elements of the teachers' lived reality could be achieved through the interpretation of their narratives about professional experiences.

<sup>4</sup> As one among several dozen categories, motivation was identified through multidirectional analyses of the participants' statements (Gibbs, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> The choice of data collection method was dictated by the adoption of a humanistic approach to the empirical study of social phenomena and by the assumption, following Florian Znaniecki, that scientific exploration of social reality can be undertaken through access to everyday human experiences (Znaniecki, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> The study was conducted within the interpretative paradigm, which, among other factors, determined the number of participating teachers. This was related to the exhaustion of the outcome field during the course of the interviews (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2000) and the saturation of emerging categories. The research was concluded at the point when no new themes or categories appeared in subsequent interviews.

A comparative analysis of the obtained information was then undertaken, examining similarities and differences between the teachers' accounts of their professional lives, events, situations, actions, and interactions with others. Finally, focused coding was applied to transform descriptive codes into constructs with greater analytical and theoretical significance.

## Teachers' Motivation of Students to Learn – Analysis of Research Findings

Most of the teachers participating in the study described deficits in students' motivation to acquire knowledge and skills defined by the curriculum, emphasizing their own inability to stimulate such motivation effectively. In classroom practice, students often displayed insufficient engagement (as perceived by the teachers), a lack of interest in the subject matter, boredom, or discouragement:

*These children are increasingly struggling with learning and absorbing knowledge. I don't know, they lack the motivation to know more, to be able to do more – what for? (Melania – grades I–III teacher)*

*It's like a wall. Once the principal came to observe my lesson, and I just had to conduct the class by myself, even though we had the multibook turned on, even though the equipment was there... There was no chance that anyone would speak up. (Edyta – Polish language teacher, grades IV–VIII)*

Teachers reflected on the causes of students' lack of motivation, typically attributing them to students' own deficiencies. This is exemplified by the statement of the teacher quoted above, who equates learning with absorbing knowledge rather than actively constructing it, an understanding that contradicts contemporary research and didactic recommendations—especially constructivist approaches (Klus-Stańska, 2018), which stress the need for learners to generate and deepen knowledge spontaneously (e.g., through problem-solving or project work), prioritizing the quality of the learning process over outcomes. In contrast, the participating teachers revealed a strong attachment to transmissive methods (lecturing, explaining, clarifying), in which the student remains largely passive, limited to receiving and assimilating knowledge, and following the teacher's line of reasoning. From the perspective of the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier, such practices are unlikely to foster motivation for learning.

Teachers in upper primary grades also attributed students' motivational deficits to fear of exposing their ignorance or to habitual disbelief in their own abilities:

*Often it ends like this: the student says, 'I don't know,' without even reading the task, already convinced they cannot do it. (Kinga – mathematics teacher, grades IV–VIII)*

Similarly, teachers expressed a desire to rely on students' self-motivation linked to the intrinsic need for knowledge, but considered this unrealistic:

*I like it when students are motivated, when they study, when they achieve good results—it's a great thing.* (Magdalena – English teacher, grades IV–VIII)

In practice, teachers aspired to rely on motivation arising within students themselves, yet framed this in terms of the desire to acquire externally defined knowledge, accumulated through assimilation. They were not oriented toward nurturing students' intrinsic needs for exploring the world but rather toward ensuring that students accept the necessity of absorbing knowledge presented by the teacher in traditional, transmissive ways. To instill this understanding, teachers resorted to strategies such as persuasion or coercion:

*I tell [students – Author] directly that in life there are things you don't like, but you still have to do them.* (Melania – grades I–III teacher)

*You study for yourself, so you won't be an idiot.* (Sylwia – Polish language teacher, grades IV–VIII)

Given their perception of students' lack of motivation and the difficulty of stimulating it effectively, teachers attempted to persuade students by presenting abstract, often distant visions of future life situations in which knowledge or skills might prove useful (e.g., employment opportunities):

*I tell them: 'Right now you're not interested, but in ten years, as an adult man, you'll sit at a barbecue... and someone will mention Piłsudski...'* (Ewelina – history teacher, grades IV–VIII)

Such strategies projected teachers' own visions of the future, which may not correspond to students' plans or imaginings. Moreover, they neglected the fact that young learners (especially in early education) are naturally inclined to live in the "here and now," rather than project themselves into a distant future<sup>7</sup>. Consequently, this approach appears ineffective in stimulating motivation.

Teachers also associated the usefulness of school knowledge with the educational realities of students, which necessitate mastering prescribed content and skills. In this case, the value of knowledge remains confined to schooling purposes, such as class promotion, preparation for the next educational stage, or meeting exam requirements.

In addition to persuasion, teachers frequently employed coercion as a motivational stimulus, often accompanied by control measures. The tools of control included frequent quizzes, tests, and examinations, intended to stimulate students to study:

*Also through testing... otherwise, the student simply wouldn't study on their own.* (Magdalena – English teacher, grades IV–VIII)

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<sup>7</sup> The nature of this phenomenon and the need for educators to respect it had already been addressed by Janusz Korczak (1984).

*Certainly there are quizzes, scheduled dictations... They need such frameworks.* (Bianka – grades I–III teacher)

*I think they simply don't study by principle, so lessons need to be verified, and maybe more quizzes given.* (Aneta – Polish language teacher, grades IV–VIII)

Among teachers of grades I–III, parental supervision was also identified as an additional, widely relied-upon mechanism for motivating students to acquire prescribed knowledge and skills.

Furthermore, teachers revealed a tendency to monitor students' thinking and behavior during lessons:

*I keep the weakest students in the front rows—those who need constant supervision, otherwise they won't write or will get lost within minutes.* (Kinga – mathematics teacher, grades IV–VIII)

External stimulation was also accompanied by the use of rewards. In grades I–III, teachers typically used material rewards (e.g., colorful stickers) to recognize students who fulfilled assigned duties or met expectations. In upper grades, good grades served as the primary reward. Notably, teachers themselves acknowledged the limited effectiveness of such practices:

*I used different motivators—stamps, stickers. It was fun for a while, but only up to a certain point.* (Małgorzata – grades I–III teacher)

*Honestly, grades are not motivating for students.* (Kinga – mathematics teacher, grades IV–VIII)

Although most motivational practices relied on extrinsic strategies such as control, coercion, and rewards, teachers also mentioned occasional attempts to use other means of stimulation, such as digital technologies, commercial educational offers (e.g., theater visits), or additional teaching aids. A few teachers emphasized the need to “activate” students in class, ensuring their active participation. However, such activation often took the form of temporary substitutes for student engagement, such as traditional mid-lesson exercises:

*Activity is important. It doesn't always work—sometimes better, sometimes worse... Sometimes you just have to improvise, get them moving between lessons, even just standing up and clapping.* (Jadwiga – grades I–III teacher)

Descriptions of these practices indicate that they lacked a genuinely motivational dimension, as they failed to provide opportunities for developing critical thinking, independent knowledge construction, linking knowledge to experience, problem-solving, collaborative creation or application of knowledge, improved communication (e.g., through discussion), or self-assessment (Głoskowska-Sołdatow, 2016). Teachers tended to equate “activation” with external stimulation through coercion:

*So they don't just sit apathetically in class, I constantly mobilize them for intensive work... I keep asking questions and demand [answers – Author]. If someone lies down on the*

*desk, I immediately call on them, to mobilize them again... I activate them.* (Aneta – Polish language teacher, grades IV–VIII)

Five teachers emphasized the importance of connecting with students' interests during lessons or creating opportunities for "success." However, "success" was typically understood as fulfilling assigned tasks or participating in activities valued by the teacher (e.g., contests), rather than as self-directed achievement. Teachers sometimes even simulated students' "success" to provide external recognition:

*Even if someone is weak, I give distinctions. They always get a certificate, participation counts—it's important they have the diploma. I give something, I somehow motivate them... Later, during contest summaries, we present what success was achieved, what place they got.* (Zuzanna – grades I–III teacher)

Finally, many teachers attributed students' lack of motivation to their parents, whom they described as failing to set challenges, being overly lenient, excusing ignorance or reluctance to learn, neglecting supervision, lacking authority, or being powerless to motivate their children.

## Conclusions and Discussion

The analysis of the collected research material revealed that teachers, in their efforts to stimulate students to learn, primarily rely on extrinsic motivation<sup>8</sup>, as the strategies they employ can be identified as external stimulants.

By employing extrinsic motivation<sup>9</sup>—coercion, rewards, or control—the teachers interviewed seemed unaware of the potential long-term consequences of such practices, for example, students' withdrawal from task engagement without an external incentive (e.g., a reward), or the experience of anxiety provoked by frequent teacher monitoring (through quizzes, tests, etc.), which may become a source of neurotic tendencies in students (Zajdel, 2019).

The participants' efforts, centered on externally stimulating students, lacked the recommended practices emphasized by Jere Brophy (2002), namely eliciting and sustaining students' sense of self-direction. Furthermore, in the context of externally prescribed content and skills and the teachers' tendency toward frequent monitoring, their practices limited opportunities for students to experience cognitive autonomy<sup>10</sup>, self-direction, and the satisfaction of achieving self-

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<sup>8</sup> These results align with the findings of Grażyna Szyling (2019), who demonstrated that early childhood education teachers predominantly employ extrinsic strategies to motivate their students.

<sup>9</sup> Extrinsic motivation is regarded, among others by Daniel Pink (2009), as less effective than intrinsic motivation in the context of the long-term education of younger generations.

<sup>10</sup> Research by Jennifer Henderlong and Mark Lepper (2002), as well as by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci (2000), demonstrates that students' sense of autonomy—together with the fulfill-

selected goals. Consequently, such practices did not foster key developmental components in young learners.

Teachers' attempts to spark students' interest in the curriculum also lacked elements highlighted by Ewa Filipiak, drawing on Jerome Bruner, namely: nurturing a sense of discovery, stimulating natural curiosity, and provoking doubt or uncertainty when faced with problem situations (Filipiak, 2012). The motivational practices described by the participants therefore cannot be identified as progressive or consistent with contemporary pedagogical trends.

The interview analyses highlight the need to enhance teachers' awareness of the negative consequences of relying predominantly on external stimulation, as well as the need for widespread professional development—through courses or workshops—focused on alternative motivational strategies. Such strategies should diverge from traditional, behaviorist school practices and instead align with constructivist approaches. Professional development of this kind could enrich educational practice with strategies consistent with current pedagogical trends (outlined in earlier sections of this article), such as stimulating students' curiosity and research-oriented engagement (e.g., through conducting experiments or independent inquiry in the process of knowledge acquisition), creating opportunities for agency and autonomy (e.g., involving students in co-designing educational goals and pathways to achieve them), fostering competence (e.g., building confidence in completing tasks through moderate effort; Cywińska, 2012), and cultivating satisfaction derived from both individual and collective achievements (e.g., shared classroom discoveries).

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ment of psychological needs such as relatedness and competence—constitutes a fundamental condition for effective motivation to learn and is associated with higher engagement and improved academic outcomes.

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## Motywowanie uczniów do uczenia się przez nauczycieli szkół podstawowych – w świetle nauczycielskich narracji

### Streszczenie

Pedagogiczny namysł nad wzbudzeniem aktywności uczniów do uczenia się ewoluował w kierunku oderwania się od tradycyjnie zorientowanego, behawioralnego ich bodźcowania do nadania motywowaniu uczących się bardziej postępowego, prorozwojowego wymiaru. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest ogląd nauczycielskich oddziaływań motywacyjnych i próba odpowiedzi na następujące pytanie: W jaki sposób nauczycielki szkół podstawowych motywują swoich uczniów do nauki? Drogą pozyskania materiału badawczego były wywiady swobodne o charakterze jakościowym. W tekście zostały przedstawione: podstawy metodologiczne podjętych badań, przyjęte rozumienie pojęcia: motywacja i istniejące zalecenia dotyczące motywowania uczniów do uczenia się oraz analizy wypowiedzi rozmówczyń związanych z tą kategorią. Ujawniły one tendencje nauczycielek do bazowania głównie na motywacji zewnętrznej, gdyż stosowane przez nie sposoby (głównie nagradzanie, przymus, kontrola itd.) identyfikować można jako zewnętrzne stymulatory. Opisywanych przez nie w narracjach oddziaływań motywacyjnych nie można uznać za prorozwojowe dla uczniów i postępowe w odniesieniu do współczesnych ustaleń pedagogicznych. Zachodzi więc potrzeba poszerzenia zarówno nauczycielskiej świadomości dotyczącej np. skutków tak zorientowanych działań, jak i umiejętności odmiennego motywowania uczniów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** motywacja, motywacja zewnętrzna, nauczycielskie sposoby motywowania uczniów, nagradzanie uczniów, przymus i kontrola uczenia się.



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## Perception of Quality of Life Among Teachers in Poland in the Context of Preschool and Early School Pedagogy Students' Career Choices

### Abstract

This study aims to investigate how perceptions of teachers' quality of life shape the career decisions of preschool and early school pedagogy students. A biographical research methods, was employed to gain insights into this topic. The analysis and interpretation of students' written responses provided a foundation for uncovering both objective and subjective mechanisms that future teachers use to define their well-being. The findings shed light on the specific challenges and protective factors associated with the teaching profession. Students identified family relationships as a major protective factor, while also recognizing burnout as a major risk factor. The study concludes with several recommendations, including the need to better understand the determinants of teachers' quality of life and to address the conditions that deter young people from entering the profession. Moreover, the study points to the necessity of improving teachers' quality of life by providing individual and institutional support.

**Keywords:** teacher quality of life, teacher, well-being, career choices, preschool and early school pedagogy students.

### Introduction

Choosing a career is often intertwined with the search for personal fulfillment and the pursuit of life goals. In the case of teaching—where professional-

ism is grounded in the teacher's ethical maturity, reflected in their authenticity (Sałaciński, 2010), and effectiveness is tied to a sense of self-efficacy (Goleman, 1999), which empowers teachers to set higher goals, plan effectively, and follow through with persistence (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008)—it is particularly relevant to explore how teachers perceive their own quality of life. This perception is largely shaped by personal experiences, both within and beyond the classroom.

Given the importance of maintaining quality of life (Bańka & Derbis, 1994), this study seeks to investigate, describe and explain how pedagogy students in Poland perceive the quality of life of teachers and how these perceptions influence their decisions to pursue or abandon teaching as a career. This research was motivated by observable trends: a steady decline in the number of students choosing to enroll in pedagogy programs, a growing dropout rate, and the significant proportion of students expressing reluctance to work as teachers after graduation. Addressing these issues is essential for gaining a deeper understanding of what it means to become a teacher in contemporary Poland.

## Teachers' Quality of Life in Poland

As a scholarly concept, quality of life has been interpreted in various ways. One definition describes it as:

a sense of life satisfaction, understood as the capacity for multidimensional development, self-creation, and the realization of one's aspirations and life goals, in accordance with accepted values and expectations, while also considering the material aspects of social status (Daszkowska-Tobiasz, 2010, p. 11).<sup>1</sup>

Quality of life is also often seen as a subjective assessment of one's overall circumstances, which encompasses physical and mental health, social opportunities, and religious and economic factors (Šušoliaková et al., 2013). Additionally, it may refer to an individual's current, global evaluation of their emotional well-being as it is experienced in the present (Radich & Bolton, 2007).

One of the earliest and most widely cited definitions comes from the World Health Organization, which describes quality of life as a state of physical, mental, and social well-being—not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (Callahan, 1973). Carol D. Ryff's model offers a more psychological perspective, identifying several indicators of well-being, such as autonomy, personal growth, positive relationships with others, a sense of purpose, and self-acceptance (Ryff & Singer, 2008). In a similar vein, Raeburn and Rootman suggest that quality of life is associated with personal development and the fulfillment of one's potential, while it tends to diminish when individuals are unable to achieve their goals (Raeburn & Rootman, 1998).

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<sup>1</sup> All translations into English of the original texts are the author's own translations.

When examining the quality of life among teachers in Poland, it is essential to recognize that they form a large professional group. In the 2023/24 academic year, the Polish education system employed 525,200 teachers (in full-time equivalent positions). Primary school teachers constituted the largest proportion, accounting for 49.3% of the total, with women representing 82.6% of all teachers (Auksztol, 2024). Research exploring factors that influence the quality of life for teachers suggests that many find their work to be a source of satisfaction. Teaching provides a sense of purpose and achievement, and allows educators to make meaningful contributions to their students' development (Prokop & Łukasik, 2015). However, teachers also report facing a range of challenges, crises, and difficulties in their daily professional lives (Prokop & Łukasik, 2015). Notably, teachers with at least two years of experience expressed greater confidence in their ability to manage these challenges. Many also highlighted the importance of feeling they can positively influence their work environment, particularly the atmosphere at school and innovate within their roles. This underscores the critical importance of social competencies in a teacher's day-to-day work and supports the need for continuous training and development in these areas (Radich & Bolton, 2007).

Carol A. Radich and David Bolton, in their comparative studies of teachers in the United States and Poland, found no significant differences in overall well-being between the two groups (Radich & Bolton, 2007). However, Olga Šušoliaková and her colleagues, who assessed the quality of life (QOL) of 142 primary school teachers using the WHOQOL-BREF questionnaire, discovered that although the teachers' quality of life did not significantly differ from the Czech population norms, their satisfaction with their health was considerably lower. This outcome was attributed to the stress inherent in the teaching profession, which negatively impacts factors like maintaining a healthy lifestyle (Šušoliaková et al., 2013). These findings are consistent with other research that links life satisfaction to emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and effective stress management (Ignat, 2010).

H. Koivuma-Honkanen et al. (2001) argue that satisfaction is an indicator of well-being. Research on teacher job satisfaction in Canada revealed dissatisfaction among teachers with regard to career advancement opportunities and compensation (Mahmood, 2011). Similarly, studies conducted in Slovakia found varying levels of satisfaction across different educational stages, with preschool teachers reporting the highest levels of job satisfaction (Kariková & Valent, 2020). In contrast, research by Hadzi-Nikolova et al. revealed that 52% of primary school teachers experienced work-related anxiety and tension, which significantly diminished their overall life satisfaction (Hadzi-Nikolova et al., 2013). This aligns with Geert Kelchtermans' argument (2017) that high job demands and unfavorable working conditions can lower an individual's well-being and quality of life.

Given that teachers' life satisfaction is a crucial predictor of their creativity and organizational skills—qualities essential for their work in school settings (Durdađi, 2015)—it is important to refer to findings showing that satisfied teachers are more productive, exude optimism, and form stronger, more positive relationships with their students (Nowak et al., 2017). Furthermore, research into teacher life satisfaction highlights the importance of activities outside of work, including family responsibilities, personal interests, and hobbies (Bartkowiak et al., 2023). A majority of teachers (63.7%) who report high overall life satisfaction mention the quality of their family relationships as a key contributor to their well-being (Nowak et al., 2017).

The findings discussed here are particularly relevant in light of the psychosocial risks inherent in the teaching profession. Key risks faced by educators include constant changes in education law, insufficient social support, and exposure to aggression from school administrators, colleagues, students, and their parents (Polek-Duraj, 2024). In response to these challenges, interpersonal relationships stand out as a protective factor, which provides a sense of security. The support from close family members, which reinforces the belief that help is always available, is crucial for teachers' day-to-day well-being (Jagielska, 2019).

Strong family bonds not only shield individuals from feelings of isolation but also strengthen their mental resilience (Kawula, 2003), which is essential for overcoming the many difficulties teachers encounter in their professional lives. As such, family serves as a vital source of stability and is frequently cited as a major contributor to life satisfaction (Jagielska, 2019). Studies indicate that teachers highly value these close family relationships, and associate them with the fulfillment of fundamental needs for safety, purpose, and acceptance. Importantly, teachers also view themselves as having a mission to build and nurture these family bonds (Jagielska, 2019).

In this regard, resilience emerges as a factor protecting teachers from the desire to leave the profession (Arnup & Bowles, 2016). The notion of resilience is closely tied to a broader sense of life meaning, which echoes how individuals perceive and understand the significance of their existence and the degree to which they feel that their lives have purpose (Schnell, 2021). Satisfaction in life, which helps individuals discover meaning in life—particularly through creative work, meaningful experiences, and relationships with others (Frankl, 1984)—is equally important for teachers' well-being. The concept of life meaning warrants special attention in the pedagogical context, as it can have a profound impact on teachers' motivation and engagement (Muchacka-Cymerman, 2023). It acts as a protective buffer against the effects of prolonged exhaustion, diminished job satisfaction, decreased professional commitment, and chronic physical fatigue (Chrzanowska, 2004). This sense of meaning also helps counteract burnout, which is characterized by emotional exhaustion, work-related stress, a de-

clining sense of professional accomplishment, feelings of incompetence, and de-personalization of students and their families (Maslach & Leiter, 2011).

The impact of burnout extends beyond the individual and deeply affects teachers' ability to perform their daily tasks. According to Polek-Duraj (2024), burnout is a key factor that disrupts teacher-parent collaboration, often leading to conflicts and misunderstandings, which in turn erode trust and parental support for teachers' educational efforts. Seventy-one percent of teachers surveyed identified this situation as highly stressful (Polek-Duraj, 2024).

In the context of enhancing all facets of teachers' quality of life, research demonstrates a notable correlation between physical activity and subjective well-being (Brodáni & Žišková, 2015). Additionally, studies show that while teachers' dietary habits vary widely, those who regularly engage in physical activity tend to exhibit the healthiest patterns (Szczepańska, 2016). It is also noteworthy that teachers' daily professional performance and their sense of efficacy are closely linked to their mental well-being, both in terms of hedonistic pleasure and eudaimonic fulfillment (Alipour & Taghvaei, 2016; Bentea, 2017). This view is supported by the findings of Agnieszka Lipińska-Grobelny et al., where teachers rated themselves highly on their ability to work in a goal-oriented way, expressed overall life satisfaction, felt they were living in accordance with their personal values, and saw their work—especially when it fostered personal growth—as a source of positive emotions that contributed to their overall well-being (Lipińska-Grobelny & Narska, 2021).

## Research Methodology

In a qualitative study involving education students from the university, the biographical method was employed to assess how students perceive the quality of life of Polish teachers and its relevance to their own career decisions. During the 2023/2024 academic year, written responses were gathered from 20 education students. The research involved women in their second year of pedagogical studies with a specialization in preschool and early school education. In selecting the sample, Michael Patton's saturation criterion was applied, which states that one should study as many people as necessary to obtain exhaustive answers to the research problem posed (Patton, 2002).

The data was anonymized and coded using QDA Miner, a software tool for processing qualitative data. This tool facilitated not only the identification and analysis of text segments but also the integration of notes associated with specific codes (Gibbs, 2015).

The biographical method, which is a fundamental approach in qualitative educational research (Smolińska & Theiss, 2010), allowed for an in-depth under-

standing of individual experiences as interpreted by the students themselves (Denzin, 1994). As Berger and Luckmann explain:

The tension of consciousness is highest in everyday life, that is, the latter imposes itself upon consciousness in the most massive, urgent and intense manner. It is impossible to ignore, difficult even to weaken in its imperative presence. Consequently, it forces me to be attentive to it in the fullest way (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 37).

Consequently, the biographical method functions as a tool for exploring the trajectory of human life as an element of social reality (Kowolik, 2001). Through this lens, biographical research reveals personal narratives, making the biographical approach often characterized as a scientific account of human life or the process by which such an account is constructed (Bednarz-Łuczewska & Łuczewski, 2012). The biographical method in educational, psychological, and sociological sciences helps to investigate the circumstances, phenomena, and life cases of specific individuals, enabling a detailed research approach into a person's life (Milerski & Śliwerski, 2000), as the researcher can analyze diaries, chronicles, memoirs, or transcriptions of narrative interviews (Sołoma, 2002).

Considering the alignment of the research paradigm, which is defined as a set of core beliefs that guide the research process (Gruba, 1990), with the study's focal area, I adopted the interpretive paradigm. This paradigm, as described by Magdalena Ciechowska, assumes that:

the social world emerges and is constructed through the interactions of its participants. The investigation of assumptions, meaning-making, and understanding seeks to explain how social actors construct their world (Ciechowska, 2018).

This perspective fits within an interpretive, humanistic framework (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

A key focus of the study was understanding how pedagogy students evaluate different spheres of a teacher's life in assessing its overall quality. Of interest were both the objective factors that future teachers believe contribute to life satisfaction for teachers and the subjective processes by which these criteria for well-being are established. Equally important was exploring students' motivations for pursuing a teaching career and their expectations regarding job satisfaction, given that no previous research has explored these issues within a comparable methodological or theoretical framework.

## Research Findings

To answer the main research question—what significance do pedagogy students assign to the perceived quality of life of teachers in Poland when considering a teaching career?—it was essential to investigate how these students

view teachers' quality of life and what elements they believe contribute to it. A related focus was to understand which aspects of teachers' lives students consider most significant when evaluating their overall well-being. The analysis and interpretation of the collected data led to the identification of criteria for well-being. Future teachers mentioned both objective conditions, which they believe promote life satisfaction for those in the teaching profession, and subjective mechanisms that influence how these criteria are established.

The respondents identified several objective factors that contribute to teachers' overall quality of life, including job security, flexible working hours, fair compensation, and the social status of the teaching profession. They pointed out that the job often involves an imbalance between the demands of teaching and the compensation provided:

Low salaries often lead to frustration and force teachers to take on additional work, which negatively affects both their quality of life and their free time (Katarzyna).

This view corresponds with the findings of Polek-Duraj, who noted that teaching carries a distinct form of responsibility tied to high societal expectations for educators (Polek-Duraj, 2024). However, according to the students, these expectations are not reflected in teachers' pay, which further diminishes the social prestige of the profession.

Among the subjective factors influencing well-being, the students cited expectations for their professional role, a reasonable workload, a sense of being valued, a passion for working with children and adolescents, stress resilience, positive relationships with students, and the satisfaction gained from their students' achievements. As one participant observed, "In Poland, teaching is often viewed through the distorted lens of long vacations and many days off" (Nadia).

Workplace conditions were a critical concern for the participants, who pointed to excessive administrative duties, bureaucratic burdens, and insufficient teaching resources. They emphasized the importance of a positive work atmosphere, along with support from school administration and colleagues. Additionally, they noted that having access to sufficient resources, assistance in problem-solving, and opportunities for professional growth were essential for effective functioning in the teaching role. The participants also stressed that feeling valued and respected as teachers is vital, as it impacts their self-esteem and overall life satisfaction.

Regarding their motivation for choosing a teaching career, respondents underscored the significance of intrinsic motivation, rooted in a passion for education and a conviction that teaching lays the foundation for students' future success. They expressed enthusiasm for working with children, acting as guides and mentors, and playing a formative role in shaping future generations. They also viewed teaching as a highly creative yet demanding profession, one that offers continuous opportunities for both professional and personal growth.

A key theme in the students' narratives was their expectations for life satisfaction as future teachers. When reflecting on these expectations, they primarily focused on core responsibilities of educators, and identified the following tasks:

- Organizing the learning process: This includes imparting knowledge, values, and skills; teaching students how to practically apply what they have learned; boosting their motivation and independent learning; ensuring student safety; and fulfilling professional duties with diligence.
- Handling administrative documentation
- Committing to personal and professional development in line with the school's needs: "Personal growth and witnessing the tangible impact of one's effort in the progress of students is the greatest reward for a teacher; it provides meaning, joy, and a sense of accomplishment in the profession" (Ewa).
- Enhancing the quality of educational practices: Building strong relationships with students based on trust and respect, effectively managing the classroom, maintaining discipline, and creating a positive, engaging learning environment.
- Understanding and addressing students' needs: "Teachers must be empathetic and capable of understanding students' circumstances in order to respond appropriately to their needs and challenges. Professionalism is also key—teaching should be conducted with the highest standards, whether in interactions with students, parents, or colleagues" (Alina).
- Collaborating with parents: "Maintaining communication with parents and encouraging them to collaborate for the well-being of the students and the school community" (Nadia). "Parental involvement is critical to student success, which is why open and constructive communication between home and school is essential" (Katarzyna).

The students viewed effective and friendly collaboration with parents as both an acknowledgment of the teacher's work, while difficulties in this area were seen as a significant emotional strain. It is also notable that the students linked reflective practice with teacher performance, particularly in improving educational methods. This supports Margaret Johnson and Kathryn Button's argument that reflection on teaching practices is an integral component of professional development and enables teachers to make meaningful improvements in their teaching (Johnson & Button, 2000). The students' understanding of teacher professionalism aligns with humanistic pedagogy, which stresses the importance of teachers' ability to understand their students' needs and respond with supportive actions (Kaczor, 2024).

According to the students, teaching "demands dedication, creativity, constant enthusiasm, along with wisdom, attentiveness, and sensitivity" (Ewa). However, they recognized that the profession carries risks, such as burnout and

a loss of motivation, which can negatively impact both the teacher's performance and well-being. In light of this, it is essential to provide constructive mentoring and develop support systems for teachers, such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), where educators can receive ongoing professional and emotional support (Muchacka-Cymerman, 2023). The students also noted that one of the most effective ways to support teachers' well-being is by "increasing societal recognition of teachers' contributions, as well as promoting their achievements and the vital role they play in shaping future generations. This could boost their job satisfaction and sense of self-worth" (Katarzyna).

According to the surveyed students, the satisfaction of students, parents, colleagues, and supervisors plays a significant role in fostering job satisfaction among teachers. These insights are particularly relevant in light of research showing that teachers often leave the profession due to overwhelming workloads, which diminish their engagement (Perryman & Calvert, 2020), and high levels of stress (Ryan, 2017). Ultimately, such challenges may lead to decisions to leave the field altogether (Smith & Ulvik, 2017). Therefore, it is important to consider the concept of resilience, which involves the process of self-reintegration—making a conscious effort to draw constructive lessons from adverse experiences in order to move forward constructively (Southwick et al., 2014).

## Conclusion

Through a critical analysis and synthesis of relevant literature, alongside empirical research findings, this study shows how pedagogy students perceive the quality of life of teachers in Poland as a decisive factor in their own career choices.

Aware that the perspective of students adopted in the research is one of the limitations of the described research results, as aspiring teachers do not have a full understanding of the benefits and problems faced by actively employed teachers, it has been noted that the knowledge gained from the research is niche. The knowledge obtained through the analysis and interpretation of research material from 20 respondents is built from details, from individual visions of themselves and the world (Bauman, 2010), which aligns with the assumptions of the interpretive paradigm adopted in the research.

Investigating teachers' quality of life is challenging but vital for understanding the complexity of the issue. One key recommendation is not only to identify the criteria for well-being but also to recognize how the current quality of life experienced by active teachers influences the career decisions of aspiring educators.

This paper contributes to the ongoing discussion on the determinants of teachers' quality of life. Awareness of these factors is essential in eliminating those that deter potential candidates from entering the teaching profession.

Given the broader goal of enhancing the overall quality of human life (Daszkowska-Tobiasz, 2010), the challenge for educational systems is to provide both individual and institutional support for teachers in order to help them manage the pressures of their professional roles. In the long term, improving teachers' quality of life would lead to better working conditions, increased salaries, and a higher social status of the profession.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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## **Postrzeżenie jakości życia nauczycieli w Polsce w kontekście wyboru drogi zawodowej przez studentów pedagogiki przedszkolnej i wczesnoszkolnej**

### **Streszczenie**

Celem niniejszego opracowania jest ustalenie, jak postrzeżenie jakości życia nauczycieli modyfikuje wybór drogi zawodowej przez studentów pedagogiki przedszkolnej i wczesnoszkolnej.

Do rozpoznania odcieni badanej rzeczywistości zastosowano metodę badań biograficznych. Analiza i interpretacja pisemnych wypowiedzi studentów, biorących udział w badaniach, stała się punktem wyjścia do ukazania obiektywnych i subiektywnych mechanizmów związanych z ustanawianiem przez przyszłych nauczycieli kryteriów dobrostanu.

W efekcie przeprowadzonych badań ukazano specyfikę funkcjonowania w zawodzie nauczyciela, wskazując przy tym na czynniki chroniące, wśród których znaczącą rolę osoby badane przypisały relacjom rodzinnym, i obszary ryzyka związane z wypaleniem zawodowym. Sformułowano rekomendacje, takie jak konieczność identyfikacji determinantów jakości życia nauczycieli i eliminacji czynników, które zniechęcają do rozpoczęcia pracy w zawodzie. Wskazano na konieczność poprawy jakości życia nauczycieli przez zapewnienie im form pomocy jednostkowej i instytucjonalnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** jakość życia nauczycieli, nauczyciel, dobrostan, wybór drogi zawodowej, studenci pedagogiki przedszkolnej i wczesnoszkolnej.



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# The Phenomenon of Stress in the Professional Work of Preschool Teachers

## Abstract

The article presents the results of the author's study, the aim of which was to understand the phenomenon of stress and its determinants in the profession of preschool teachers. Quantitative research involved the diagnostic survey method and the questionnaire technique. The studied group consisted of female preschool teachers from public and non-public institutions. The findings have revealed that the respondents consider their profession stressful due to the high level of responsibility for children, demands and pressure from parents, and an excessive workload. The vast majority of women, regardless of the type of preschool, experience this phenomenon. The study has made it possible to identify the determinants of stress, namely: systemic, intra-institutional, and individual factors. The respondents reported using various coping strategies to reduce stress factors.

**Keywords:** stress, preschool education teacher, stress factors, coping with stress

## Introduction

The profession of a preschool teacher is classified by researchers as a helping profession, or so-called social service, which is based on activities directed to-

wards other people. Its foundation lies in assistance, support, and service to others, relying on close, constant, direct, and active contact with them. These activities may result in numerous burdens and long-term stress, which in turn can negatively affect the performance of professional duties, relationships with pupils, and the overall well-being of educators (Lisowska, 2018).

The family constitutes the first and fundamental environment in which a child grows and develops. The second, equally significant, yet emerging slightly later, is the preschool environment, where qualified teaching staff stimulates the child's comprehensive development, taking into account their individual predispositions, hereditary and innate traits, and the pace of development (Surma, 2011). In preschool education, the key role is played by the preschool teacher, who acts as a guide for children. The teacher performs care, educational, and didactic tasks, educating young people in every area of life. What they convey, as well as the experiences, attitudes, and values that children acquire in preschool, will influence subsequent educational stages, their adult lives, and their functioning in society (Klim-Klimaszewska, 2010; Kundzicz, 2016; Nosek-Kozłowska, 2024; Musiał, 2022).

The increasing social, cultural, and economic changes, transformations of the education system, development of modern technologies, and extensive mediatisation cause preschool teachers' professional responsibilities to expand with new tasks and recommendations, which may become potential stress factors. Furthermore, their strong sense of duty and responsibility for young people and their future, combined with awareness of the importance of preschool education and the need to meet growing requirements and expectations, can constitute an additional source of stress (Synal & Szempruch, 2017, pp. 7–9). The challenges faced by preschool teachers highlighting that 'teaching today requires exceptional energy and psychological resilience' (Schaefer, 2005, p. 11).<sup>1</sup>

Currently, the issue of teacher stress is attracting increasing attention among researchers from various scientific disciplines, which often renders such studies more interdisciplinary. Although this subject has been explored for many years, there are still areas that have not been fully examined. The available literature provides numerous studies on teacher stress; however, they mainly concern teachers employed in primary, secondary, and special schools rather than those working in preschool education.

The aim of this article is to explore the phenomenon of stress and its determinants in the profession of preschool teachers. The discussion is divided into four parts. The first part describes stress, its specific causes and methods of reducing it; the second part presents the methodological assumptions of the author's own research; the third part presents selected results of the research, and the last part presents conclusions and recommendations.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations into English of the original texts are the author's own translations.

## **Stress: the specificity of the phenomenon, its sources, and methods of prevention**

The phenomenon of stress is described not only by scholars in the medical and health sciences but is increasingly becoming a subject of interest within the social sciences. The available literature offers numerous concepts and theories of stress; however, it is most frequently understood as a stimulus (an event or factor, such as a random event, failure, excessive demands, that disrupts homeostasis, causing tension and strong emotions independent of the individual); a reaction (how a person responds to an unpleasant situation, it may occur in the physiological, psychological, or behavioural domain); and a transaction (denoting the interdependence between stimulus and reaction) (Grzegorzewska, 2019; Korczyński, 2014, pp. 27–29; Grzegorzewska, 2006, p. 18).

In the first half of the twentieth century, the term ‘stress’ was introduced by physiologist Walter B. Cannon (Kocór, 2019, p. 54), while the issue was popularised by Hans Selye, who defined stress as ‘a nonspecific response of the body to any demand placed upon it from the outside’ (Selye, 1977, p. 25; Oniszczenko, 1993, p. 8). Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman, in turn, argued that stress is ‘a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding their resources and endangering their well-being’ (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19; Bernat & Krzyszkowska, 2017, p. 259; Wilczek-Rużyczka & Kwak, 2022, p. 82). Both definitions emphasise that stress disrupts human functioning, disturbing both physical and psychological homeostasis.

In the 1960s, empirical research on stress in the teaching profession began in the United States and England. Significant contributions to this field were made by Robert Louis Kahn and his collaborators, as well as English psychologists Chris Kyriacou and John Sutcliffe. In Poland, during the 1990s, the issue attracted the interest of scholars such as Bogusława Jodłowska, Stanisława Tucholska, Helena Sęk, Hanna Rylke, Joanna Kossewska, and Joanna Klisz (Suska-Zakaszewska, 2025).

Kyriacou and Sutcliffe developed and presented their own model of teacher stress. They defined teacher stress as ‘the generation of negative emotions (such as anger or discouragement) in teachers, which are typically accompanied by pathological biochemical and physiological changes in the body (elevated heart rate, increased secretion of adrenocorticotrophic and other hormones into the bloodstream, raised blood pressure), resulting from their professional duties and influenced by the perception of demands as threatening to their self-esteem and well-being, as well as by coping mechanisms aimed at reducing perceived threats’ (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1978a, p. 159; Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1978b, p. 2; Garbacik, 2018, p. 113; Tucholska, 1999, p. 52; Grzegorzewska, 2006, p. 54).

There are multiple stress factors in the teaching profession. Mark Borg and Richard J. Riding, through factor analysis, identified four fundamental sources that may generate this phenomenon. The first factor consists of inappropriate pupil behaviour, including noisiness, misconduct, impoliteness, inability to maintain discipline, large group sizes, and frequent instances of teachers covering for absent colleagues. The second category is time pressure, which generates difficulties such as insufficient time for an individual approach to pupils, poorly designed teaching materials, a lack of teaching aids and tools facilitating work, and the obligation to complete various administrative tasks. The third factor—poor working conditions—is closely related to inadequate remuneration, low professional prestige, the need to cover for absent colleagues, and a lack of recognition for well-performed work. The fourth and final factor concerns poor relationships among colleagues, encompassing attitudes, relationships, and atmosphere among teaching staff, pressure from preschool authorities and other educational bodies, as well as from parents or guardians (Borg & Riding, 1991; Tucholska, 2009, p. 100; Nowak, 2021; Dankiewicz, Cempel & Wasiewicz, 2024). Research conducted by Stanisław Korczyński indicates that the most common stress factors among preschool teachers include time pressure, physical discomfort, and a sense of psychological overload from professional duties. Other identified sources include the perceived lack of rewards, difficulties in fulfilling didactic and educational functions, a sense of insufficient support, and pupils' behaviour. Moderate stress among preschool teachers is also triggered by feelings of threat and responsibility at work, as well as conflict situations (Korczyński, 2018; Korczyński, 2017).

Continuous exposure to stress among teachers may lead to numerous negative consequences, both immediate and long-term. Immediate consequences occur directly after exposure to a stressor and most often manifest as somatic changes and emotional fluctuations lasting for a short period of time. Long-term effects, on the other hand, result from prolonged exposure to a stress factor and the lack of systematic mitigation (Zubrzycka-Maciąg, 2013, pp. 71–72; Suska-Zakaszewska, 2025, p. 81). Moreover, regardless of duration, stress may cause a range of physiological, psychological, and behavioural changes in educators (Korczyński, 2014; Kwiatkowski, 2022).

The stress experienced by teachers often disrupts both their private and professional lives; therefore, it is essential that they undertake preventive actions and possess coping skills. Norman S. Endler and James D. A. Parker developed three styles of coping with stress:

- 1) task-oriented coping – involves actions aimed at solving the encountered difficulty through focusing on the task or planning various ways to resolve the problem;

- 2) emotion-oriented coping – consists of actions intended to reduce or minimise emotional tension caused by the experienced stressor;
- 3) avoidance-oriented coping – is based on redirecting attention to other activities, such as reading or listening to music, instead of focusing on the stress factor (Endler & Parker, 1990; Szczygieł, 2020, p. 325).

## **Methodological assumptions of the author's study**

The subject of the research was the phenomenon of stress among preschool teachers, and the aim was to identify stressors in the profession of preschool teachers. The main research problem was formulated as follows: 'What is the phenomenon of stress in the professional work of preschool teachers?' The following specific research questions were posed:

1. How do preschool teachers define stress?
2. Do preschool teachers experience stress in their work, and how frequently?
3. What factors are the sources of stress among preschool teachers?
4. What coping methods do preschool teachers use to deal with stress?

The study was conducted using the diagnostic survey method and the questionnaire technique. Data were collected through an original questionnaire consisting of closed, semi-open, and open-ended questions. The sample selection was purposeful, and the inclusion criterion was the profession of a preschool teacher. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. It was carried out in August and September 2025, online. The study sample comprised 52 preschool teachers from Zamość, of whom 73.1% worked in public institutions and 26.9% in non-public ones. The respondents were women aged between 24 and 60 years, with an average age of 41. The majority were married (76.9%), while the remaining participants were single (11.5%), divorced (5.8%), in an informal relationship (3.8%), or widowed (1.9%). The shortest period of professional experience among the respondents was two weeks, and the longest was 37 years, with an average of 13 years. Among all respondents, 36.5% held the status of appointed teacher, 32.7% were novice teachers, 25% were chartered teachers, and 5.8% were contract teachers.

## **Results of the author's study**

Studies available in the literature indicate that preschool education teachers are exposed to stress. Therefore, the respondents were asked whether they considered their profession stressful and were then requested to justify their answers. The results are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1  
*Preschool teachers' opinions on the stressfulness of their profession*

Occurrence of stress factors	Type of preschool				Total	
	Public		Non-public		N=52	%
	n=38	%	n=14	%		
Yes	35	92.1	13	92.9	48	92.3
No	3	7.9	1	7.1	4	7.7

Source: Own study

The data presented in Table 1 indicate that the surveyed preschool teachers—regardless of the type of institution—perceive their profession as stressful. As many as 92.3% of all respondents reported the presence of stress factors in their everyday professional practice. The obtained results suggest that, irrespective of the organisational or legal form of the preschool, the sense of work-related stress is a common phenomenon within this professional group.

Table 2  
*Justifications for opinions on the stressfulness of the preschool teaching profession*

Category	N=48*	%
High responsibility for children	21	43.8
Excessive workload and time pressure	14	29.2
Demands and pressure from parents	15	31.3
Demands and supervision from management/institution	9	18.8
Unfavourable working conditions and intensity of social interactions	11	22.9

\* Twenty-two responses were assigned to more than one category owing to their multifaceted nature.

Source: Own study

The analysis of the respondents' answers made it possible to distinguish five main categories explaining the stress-inducing nature of the preschool teacher's profession (Table 2). According to 43.8% of the surveyed teachers, the profession is stressful because it involves a high level of responsibility for children. As one respondent emphasised: 'The teaching profession carries enormous responsibility for a large group of children. The teacher is responsible for every moment a child spends in preschool; every action has its consequences.' The second identified category concerns demands and pressure from parents—31.3% of the surveyed women indicated this factor. Preschool educators described it as the necessity to cope with high expectations, complaints, and communication difficulties, for example: 'Parents are demanding and entitled, and often unwilling to cooperate.' Slightly fewer respondents—29.2%—explained

that the profession is stressful due to an excessive workload and time pressure resulting from multitasking and numerous duties, both didactic and administrative. The fourth category includes unfavourable working conditions and the intensity of social interactions, such as noise, large groups of children, conflicts among teaching staff, and an unfriendly workplace atmosphere—this argument was mentioned by 22.9% of preschool teachers. Meanwhile, 18.8% of respondents stated that stress results from demands and supervision imposed by principals or educational authorities, as well as the frequently changing educational legislation.

Among all respondents, only 7.7% did not perceive their profession as stressful, explaining that ‘if someone enjoys their job, why should they feel stressed?’ and ‘it is important to plan your working time properly.’

The preschool teachers were also asked how they defined stress. The analysis of their responses shows that 59.6% of the participants defined stress as ‘a natural reaction of the body to difficult or demanding situations, causing psychological and physical tension.’ In turn, 40.4% described it as ‘fear of failing to fulfil assigned tasks, performing duties according to standards set by principals, and a stomach ache from the anxiety of not being able to cope.’

The study also sought to determine the respondents’ subjective assessment of the presence of stress in the professional work of preschool teachers (Table 3) and its frequency (Table 4). The analysis allows for the identification of differences between employees of public and non-public institutions.

Table 3  
*Subjective assessment of the presence of stress at work*

Occurrence of stress factors	Type of preschool				Total	
	Public		Non-public		N=52	%
	n=38	%	n=14	%		
Yes	30	78.9	11	78.6	41	78.8
No	8	21.1	3	21.4	11	21.2

Source: Own study

The data presented in Table 3 show that 78.8% of all surveyed preschool teachers experience stress in their professional work, while nearly one in five respondents (21.2%) declared that they do not experience this phenomenon. From these findings, it can be inferred that the issue of stress concerns the vast majority of respondents, regardless of the type of preschool in which they are employed.

As shown in Table 4, there are differences in the frequency of stress occurrence depending on the type of institution. Among teachers employed in public preschools, 63.3% experienced stress several times a month, 16.7% once a week, 13.3% rarely, and 6.7% daily. In contrast, 45.4% of teachers working in

non-public preschools reported experiencing stress daily, 36.4% once a week, and 18.2% several times a month. It is worth noting that none of the women employed in non-public institutions indicated the 'rarely' option, which may suggest that the type of institution influences the frequency of stress experienced.

Table 4

*Frequency of stress experienced at work by teachers who report it*

Frequency	Type of preschool				Total	
	Public		Non-public		N=41	%
	n=30	%	n=11	%		
Everyday	2	6.7	5	45.4	7	17.1
Once a week	5	16.7	4	36.4	9	22.0
Several times a month	19	63.3	2	18.2	21	51.2
Rarely	4	13.3	0	0.0	4	9.8

Source: Own study

To assess the intensity of selected stress symptoms, a six-point scale was used, on which the respondents indicated the extent to which each symptom occurred in them. The absence or very low severity of symptoms was indicated by scores of 0 and 1, moderate severity by scores of 2 and 3, and high or very high severity by scores of 4 and 5. A summary of the findings is presented in Table 5.

Table 5

*Severity of selected symptoms among preschool teachers (N=52)*

Symptoms	Severity					
	None or very low		Moderate		High or very high	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Headache	28	53.8	21	40.4	3	5.8
Fatigue	20	38.5	16	30.8	16	30.8
Insomnia	37	71.2	14	26.9	1	1.9
Loss of energy	23	44.2	21	40.4	8	15.4
Nervousness	27	51.9	16	30.8	9	17.3
Stomach disorders	40	76.9	10	19.2	2	3.8
Muscle pain	41	78.8	8	15.4	3	5.8
Discouragement	33	63.5	12	23.1	7	13.5
Irritability	31	59.6	15	28.8	6	11.5
Frustration	33	63.5	13	25.0	6	11.5
Other	45	86.5	4	7.7	3	5.8

Source: Own study

Fatigue emerged as the most prevalent symptom, with 30.8% of respondents experiencing it at a high or very high level, and a total of 61.6% of teachers reporting this symptom to varying degrees. The second most intense symptom was irritability (17.3%), followed by loss of energy (15.4%). Furthermore, psychological symptoms clearly predominated over somatic ones. The six main psychological symptoms affected, on average, 46.2% of respondents to varying extents, whereas somatic symptoms were reported by an average of 29.8% of teachers. The following symptoms occurred at moderate, severe, or very severe levels: 1.) psychological: fatigue (61.6%), loss of energy (55.8%), nervousness (48.1%), irritability (40.3%), discouragement (36.6%), and frustration (36.5%); 2.) somatic: headache (46.2%), insomnia (28.8%), stomach disorders (23.0%), and muscle pain (21.2%).

The causes of stress that preschool teachers believe occur in their profession are listed in Table 6.

Table 6  
*Stress factors in the work of preschool teachers*

Stress factors	Type of preschool				Total	
	Public		Non-public		N=52	%
	n=38	%	n=14	%		
Poor work atmosphere	13	34.2	7	50.0	20	38.5
Excessive workload	22	57.9	10	71.4	32	61.5
Low salary	10	26.3	2	14.3	12	23.1
Parent-teacher meetings	6	15.8	4	28.6	10	19.2
Inadequate supervision by the principal	1	2.6	3	21.4	4	7.7
Responsibility for children's safety	22	57.9	7	50.0	29	55.8
Frequent changes in the curriculum	6	15.8	1	7.1	7	13.5
Children's behaviour	12	31.6	2	14.3	14	26.9
Evaluation by children, parents, and other teachers	13	34.2	5	35.7	18	34.6
Classroom observation by the school principal	1	2.6	0	0.0	1	1.9
Classroom observation by a mentor/supervisor	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
None	1	2.6	0	0.0	1	1.9

Source: Own study

As shown in Table 6, an excessive workload was the most frequently reported source of stress, indicated by 61.5% of all respondents employed in pub-

lic institutions (57.9%) and non-public institutions (71.4%). Responsibility for the safety of the children was the second most significant cause, reported by 55.8% of all respondents. The third most commonly cited factor was an unfavourable work atmosphere (38.5%), which was more frequently emphasised by teachers in non-public preschools (50.0%) than those in public ones (34.2%). Other relatively prominent stress factors included evaluation by children, parents, and other teachers (34.6%) and children's behaviour (26.9%). Factors that the respondents perceived as less significant included low salary (23.1%), parent-teacher meetings (19.2%), and frequent changes in the curriculum (13.5%). Inadequate supervision by the principal (7.7%) or classroom observations conducted by the preschool principal (1.9%) were rarely mentioned. Interestingly, none of the respondents indicated stress caused by classroom observations conducted by a mentor or internship supervisor.

The impact of noise levels and working conditions in preschools on perceived stress levels was also analyzed (Table 7), while respondents were asked to justify their position (Table 8).

Table 7

*Impact of noise levels and working conditions in preschools on perceived stress levels*

Occurrence of impact	Type of preschool				Total	
	Public		Non-public		N=52	%
	n=38	%	n=14	%		
Yes	31	81.6	13	92.9	44	84.6
No	7	18.4	1	7.1	8	15.4

Source: Own study

The data presented in Table 7 clearly indicate that noise levels and working conditions in the preschool influence the occurrence of stress. As many as 84.6% of all respondents confirmed that these factors contribute to stress. This tendency was slightly more pronounced among employees of non-public preschools (92.9%) than those in public institutions (81.6%). Only 15.4% of the participants did not perceive a direct impact of these factors on their experienced level of stress.

First, the answers of those women who indicated that noise levels and working conditions in preschool contribute to stress were analysed. The justifications were categorised and are presented in Table 8. The dominant category (38.6%) comprised explanations referring to psychological and somatic consequences. Teachers described chronic fatigue, headaches, irritability, and nervous system overload as direct effects of working in conditions of constant noise. One respondent explained: 'The nervous system is strained by noise. Our hearing de-

teriorates. Sometimes it causes irritability and agitation.’ Nearly one-third of the responses (31.8%) concerned problems with concentration and related difficulties in organising work. In this group, respondents emphasised distracted attention, disruption of duties, and loss of control over the course of activities. An illustrative statement reads: ‘Noise often causes distraction, and when working with young children, attention levels should be at their highest—one loses control over what is happening.’ A further 20.5% of women highlighted sensory overload. One participant noted: ‘After or during work with children, a person is often overstimulated; this affects concentration, makes it difficult to focus on duties, and leads to irritability.’ The final category—institutional conditions and care-related requirements—mainly refers to the sources of noise in the pre-school and accounted for 15.9% of responses.

Table 8  
*Justifications for positions on the impact of noise and working conditions on stress occurrence*

Category	N=44*	%
Sensory overload	9	20.5
Difficulties in concentration and work organisation	14	31.8
Psychological and somatic consequences	17	38.6
Institutional conditions and care-related requirements	7	15.9

\* Three responses were assigned to more than one category owing to their multifaceted nature. Source: Own study

Teachers who did not associate noise and working conditions with stress (15.4%) explained their responses in terms of successful adaptation to noise (habituation), the ability to control noise (through influencing children), or neutrality in evaluating noise (perceiving it as a natural phenomenon). Four responses did not contain a justification or clearly referred to the stress-inducing aspect of noise and were therefore not assigned to the main categories.

The rest of the study focused on stress coping methods (Table 9) and the organization of programs for coping with this phenomenon in the workplace (Table 10).

Respondents were asked an open-ended question regarding methods of coping with stress at work. The answers obtained made it possible to identify the most commonly used coping strategies, as illustrated in Table 9. One quarter of the respondents manage stress through organising their work and maintaining a positive attitude. An equal proportion indicated rest outside of work, restorative activities, and attending to personal needs by engaging in hobbies and interests, such as reading, listening to music, dancing, or painting. Other frequently mentioned stress-relief methods included physical activity and sports (19.2%), as well as breathing and relaxation techniques (19.2%). Meanwhile,

17.3% of teachers considered social support—from the principal, other teachers, family, and friends—as a coping strategy. Slightly fewer—15.4%—used quick self-regulation techniques (short-term strategies), such as counting, taking a quick break, using an anti-stress gadget, leaving the classroom, or drinking lemon balm tea. Only 7.7% of preschool teachers coped with stress by actively engaging in work-related activities, for example: ‘I play with children and do with them what they enjoy the most.’ In contrast, 5.8% did not use any coping strategies or felt powerless in managing stress.

Table 9  
*Stress coping methods (as perceived by respondents)*

Category	N=52*	%
Physical activity and sports	10	19.2
Breathing and relaxation techniques	10	19.2
Social support	9	17.3
Work organization and a positive attitude	13	25.0
Relaxation outside of work, restorative activities, and self-care	13	25.0
Quick self-regulation techniques	8	15.4
Involvement in activities with children	4	7.7
Lack of strategies or a sense of helplessness	3	5.8

\* Eighteen responses were assigned to more than one category owing to their multifaceted nature.

Source: Own study

Table 10  
*Organisation of stress management programmes in the workplace*

Organisation of programmes	Type of preschool				Total	
	Public		Non-public		N=52	%
	n=38	%	n=14	%		
Yes	5	13.2	0	0.0	5	9.6
No	33	86.8	14	100.0	47	90.4

Source: Own study

As illustrated in Table 10, as many as 90.4% of preschool teachers—employed in both public and non-public institutions—emphasised that stress management programmes are not organised in their workplaces. Only a small proportion of teachers in public preschools (9.6%) reported the implementation of such programmes, which stands in stark contrast to the scale of occupational stress in this professional group. No such initiatives were recorded in non-public institutions. Respondents from public preschools (13.2%) noted the availability

of training sessions and relaxation activities. Based on these findings, it can be inferred that stress prevention in the work of preschool teachers remains a marginalised area.

Those respondents who reported participation in stress management programmes were asked to evaluate them. Three teachers highlighted the limited number of such initiatives in their institutions, while two noted that they participated willingly in those offered. At the same time, all respondents agreed that additional forms of support for teachers in coping with stress are necessary.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

The aim of the study was to learn about the phenomenon of stress and its determinants in the profession of a preschool teacher. Analysis of the results obtained allows us to conclude that preschool teachers belong to a professional group exposed to stress. The study has shown that the vast majority of respondents (78.8%)—regardless of the type of institution—experience stress in their work, and 92.3% perceive their profession as stressful. Among teachers in public preschools, 63.3% most frequently experience stress several times a month, whereas 45.4% of respondents employed in non-public preschools experience stress daily, and 36.4% once a week. This indicates that teachers in non-public institutions experience stress more frequently, which may result from the structure of the preschool, as well as differing working conditions and organisation.

The participants demonstrated theoretical knowledge of stress, incorporating elements of stimulus, physiological response, and person–environment transactions, in line with the scientific theories of H. Selye and R. Lazarus and S. Folkman. The study enabled the identification of systemic, intra-institutional, and individual factors potentially generating stress. Respondents indicated that the most frequent sources of stress are an excessive workload and significant responsibility for the safety of children. Other identified stress factors included an unfavourable work atmosphere, evaluation by children, parents, and other teachers, and children’s behaviour. Additionally, 84.6% of preschool teachers reported that noise and working conditions affect their perceived stress levels. These factors produce negative psychological and somatic consequences, disrupt concentration and work organisation, and contribute to sensory overload.

The study has found that respondents employ a variety of stress-coping strategies. The most frequently used methods include organising work and maintaining a positive attitude, rest outside of work, dedicating time to personal interests, and attending to personal needs. Other strategies include physical activity, breathing and relaxation techniques, social support, and quick self-regulation techniques. Alarmingly, 90.4% of respondents indicated that stress man-

agement programmes are not offered in their institutions, suggesting a lack of institutional support. The results obtained are consistent with earlier Polish studies: Stanisław Korczyński (2017; 2018), Ewa Smak (2018), Anna Klim-Klimaszewska and Agata Fijałkowska-Mroczek (2015).

It is worth noting that this article has its limitations. One of them is the small size and deliberate selection of the sample, which means that the results cannot be generalized to the entire population of preschool teachers. Therefore, the study group should be expanded to include other towns or provinces. Another difficulty was recruiting respondents, which may have been due to the fact that the research was conducted at the end of the summer vacation and the beginning of the preschool year. Therefore, when conducting research, it is worth taking into account the intensity of teachers' professional duties. Another limitation was the lack of a control group. The presented results can be considered preliminary, while the conclusions can be seen as a starting point for further research.

The analysis of the collected data allows for the proposal of pedagogical implications, the implementation of which could reduce both the severity and frequency of stress and prevent negative consequences. It is therefore recommended to implement a series of training sessions and workshops, during which preschool teachers could: (1) understand the mechanisms of stress; (2) build networks of support and collaboration; and (3) acquire skills in distinguishing between adaptive and pathological stress, recognising early symptoms in themselves and colleagues, organising time and tasks, and developing strategies to cope with noise (for example, flexible management of children's activities, introduction of quiet sessions, creation of relaxation zones in classrooms, visual signalling). It is also advisable to promote a healthy lifestyle, emphasising the importance of maintaining emotional balance through active rest, relaxation techniques, breathing exercises, and self-regulation. Other equally important measures could include training in interpersonal communication and strengthening an organisational culture that fosters collaboration and minimises conflicts among staff. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to develop clear procedures for emergency situations and introduce an insurance system protecting preschool teachers from legal liability, as well as to implement architectural and organisational solutions that minimise noise.

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## Zjawisko stresu w pracy zawodowej nauczycieli wychowania przedszkolnego

### Streszczenie

W tekście zaprezentowano wyniki badań własnych, których celem było poznanie zjawiska stresu i jego uwarunkowań w profesji nauczycieli edukacji przedszkolnej. W badaniach ilościowych wykorzystano metodę sondażu diagnostycznego i technikę ankiety. Grupę badaną stanowiły nauczycielki wychowania przedszkolnego z placówek publicznych i niepublicznych. Wyniki badań wykazały, że respondentki uważają swój zawód za stresujący ze względu na dużą odpowiedzialność za wychowanków, wymagania i presję ze strony rodziców oraz nadmiar obowiązków zawodowych. Zdecydowana większość kobiet, niezależnie od rodzaju przedszkola, doświadcza powyższego zjawiska. Badanie pozwoliło na identyfikację uwarunkowań stresu, tj. systemowych, wewnątrzinstytucjonalnych oraz indywidualnych. Ankietowane, by zredukować czynniki stresogenne, stosują różne metody zaradcze.

**Słowa kluczowe:** stres, nauczyciel edukacji przedszkolnej, czynniki stresogenne, radzenie sobie ze stresem.





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## Career Success in the Perception of Early Childhood Education Studies Graduates

### Abstract

In this article, we present the original study focused on the perception of professional success among graduates of the Preschool and Early Childhood Education at the Faculty of Pedagogy, University of Warsaw. The authors focused on a group of the graduates who, in the initial interview, declared that they felt professionally fulfilled – which was a key criterion for the selection of participants. Most of the respondents were active primary school teachers, but there were also some university teachers. The aim of the study was to analyse the perception of professional success among the Faculty graduates and to analyse the factors that support the process of achieving such success. The results clearly indicate that success is perceived by teachers not only through the perspective of professional achievement, but is also considered in the context of work-life balance – a full sense of fulfilment must encompass both spheres. In addition, those interviewed emphasise the significant role of support from family and loved ones as an important foundation for their professional journey. The article contributes a valuable voice to the discussion on subjective dimensions of career success among graduates of Preschool and Early Childhood Education studies.

**Keywords:** career success, graduates, career, teacher, job.

Interest in career success, its definitions and the factors that influence success is constantly increasing. The reasons for this could be found in the changing

role of employment in the competitive labour market. On the one hand, the problem of work-life balance is widely discussed in contemporary social science (Susanto, Hoque, Jannat, Emely, Zona, Islam 2022; Gounder, Govender 2018; Rahim, Ibrahim, Sabapathy, Loganathan, Jusoh, Ahmad, Elshaikh, Osman 2018; Haar, Russo, Suñe, Ollier-Malaterre 2014). On the other hand, a high standard of living, which is propagated in the media, is closely linked to the level of income and time-consuming professional commitment. Beliefs about career success play a key role in shaping both job and life satisfaction. When individuals have clear personal criteria for their career achievements, they are more likely to experience professional fulfillment and a stronger sense of overall well-being. This approach not only adds to their subjective assessment of career satisfaction, but also contributes to a broader appreciation of life satisfaction.

Professional success is defined as: “producing effective and tangible results through the skills and competencies in the area of one’s professional identity” (Aburumman, Barhem 2020). This definition emphasises the measurable impact and skills required for the task. A successful career is when the person is able to build a social network to collaborate, find and capitalize on opportunities, knows how to build self-confidence and strives to develop their skills (Judge, Van Vianen, De Pater, 2004).

There are studies on objective and subjective career success (Aburumman, Barhem 2020; Paleczek, Bergner, Rybnicek, 2018; Abele, Spurk 2009; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, Feldman 2005) and what distinguishes them are their determinants. The first type of factors is quite easy to extract (e.g. education and skills development, proactive personality, long-term employment, etc.). Objective career success is defined by verifiable achievements such as salary, promotions and professional status, which have long been considered markers of career success in many societies (Gu, Su, 2016; Heslin, 2005).

Research suggests that the idea of success combines objective measures of performance i.e. productivity and subjective measures like job satisfaction, self-evaluation of achievement and self-efficacy as a personal element of success (Nazar 2013, as cited in Skoryk, Grystyk, 2020). It is impossible to be successful without believing that one’s own abilities are sufficient to achieve personal goals (Bandura 1991; Pękala 2022). The basis of subjective belief in career success is “the experience of achieving goals that are personally meaningful to the individual, rather than those imposed by parents, peers, an organisation, or society” (Mirvis, Hall, 1994, p. 366). This conviction can lead to an experience of satisfaction and fulfilment at work and further increase work motivation. Career fulfilment can occur when the person identifies strongly with a goal, and such a sense of meaning is an element that cannot be built from the outside (Oliveira Silva, Barreiros Porto, Arnold, 2019). These categories refer to personal values and the element that unites both subjective and objective professional success is the

goal, even if its origin and perception are different in both cases. Greater attention should be paid to different views and personal perceptions when discussing criteria for career success, rather than using simply standardised one-size-fits-all measures (Mayrhofer, Briscoe, Hall, Dickmann, Dries, Dysvik, 2016).

The decision to focus on this particular research group (graduates of Primary Education studies at the Faculty of Education of the University of Warsaw) stems from both the needs of the labour market and the social significance of this profession. In Poland, the teaching profession is steadily losing its appeal: increasingly fewer young people are choosing to study education, and the number of unfilled teaching positions is growing every year. At the start of the 2025/26 school year the Ministry of Education reported 12.7 thousand vacancies for teachers listed in regional superintendent databases, with the largest share of these offers concerning preschool teachers<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, the teachers' union (ZNP) estimated the true number of missing teachers at around 20 thousand, as schools cover gaps with overtime and retirees<sup>2</sup>. The capital city of Warsaw consistently registers advertisements for teaching positions, particularly in preschools and grades 1–3 of primary school.

From a societal perspective, the stakes are very high. Research consistently demonstrates that the quality of teacher–child interactions in the early years is the single most important determinant of children's developmental and educational outcomes, with long-term benefits for both individuals and the economy (Bostic, Schock, Jeon, Buettner, 2003; Lang, Tebben, Luckey, Hurns, Fox, Ford, Ansari, Pasque, 2024; Melasalmi, Hurme, Ruokonen, 2022). Therefore, acknowledging and strengthening the professional success of early childhood teachers is not only a matter of individual well-being but also a question of public interest.

Graduates of the Early Childhood Education programme at the University of Warsaw are a particularly relevant group to study. The Faculty of Education is one of the largest academic centres preparing teachers for work with the youngest children in Poland, and its graduates are a significant source of new entrants into the Warsaw labour market, where demand is greatest. Investigating how these graduates define and pursue career success provides insights into how the profession can be made more attractive and sustainable at a time when recruitment and retention are critical challenges. It is therefore crucial for researchers and workplaces to understand what success criteria employees themselves consider important, as these personal reference points drive their productivity, eagerness to work and job satisfaction (Weston, Cardador, Hill, Schwaba, Lodi-Smith, Whitbourne, 2021; Erdogan, Bauer, Truxillo, Mansfield, 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Brakuje-ponad-20-tys-nauczycieli-Bez-nadgodzin-sie-nie-obejdzie-8991191.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://samorzad.pap.pl/kategoria/edukacja/w-polsce-brakuje-okolo-20-tys-nauczycieli-jak-szkoly-radza-sobie-z-wakatami>

## The study

For the purposes of this text, the authors designed and conducted an original empirical, qualitative research. The study was conducted in the first half of 2024. The authors set the goal of exploring the perception of professional success in the study group. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to study a homogeneous group and to assure the consistency of the studied perspectives (Ahmad, Wilkins, 2025). Graduates of Preschool and Early Childhood Education (pl: *Edukacja Przedszkolna i Wczesnoszkolna*<sup>3</sup>) at the Faculty of Education, University of Warsaw, were invited to participate in the study.

The following main research questions were asked in this study:

1. How do the participants perceive professional success?
2. What are the elements that promote and hinder professional success?
3. Which experiences and elements of the knowledge and skills gained in the Early Childhood Education programme can contribute to the professional success of graduates?

## Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews which were conducted through the Zoom platform (Elnahla, Neilson, 2022). Each interview was recorded with prior consent from the participant. Once a transcription of the interview was prepared, its recording was deleted.

## Sample

The survey consists of 13 interviews with graduates of the major Preschool and Early School Education. Participants in the study were between 29 and 65 years of age. Each study participant was asked the question: "Do you feel that you have achieved professional success?" Only those graduates who answered this question affirmatively were invited to participate in the study. Due to the need to reach people who declared that they had achieved professional success, the selection of the sample was purposeful.

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<sup>3</sup> The name *Edukacja Przedszkolna i Wczesnoszkolna* used in this article refers to the type of specialisation relating to the education received by all graduates. Since 1972/1973, when the first students began their education in this specialisation, the name of this specialisation has changed many times.

## Data analysis

In the data analysis, the Thematic Analysis (TA) method was used to analyse the content of the interviews. The study used the above method to describe the theme of career success in education as perceived by the people interviewed in a detailed and divergent way. This allowed the researchers to identify what career success is in the perception of the respondents and to select the main themes emerging from the interviews.

Data from the interviews was analysed based on the following stages:

1. Detailed familiarisation with the data: close and repeated reading of the transcriptions of the interviews.
2. Coding: identification of labels indicating relevant elements that can be linked to the research findings.
3. Creation of initial threads: based on analysis of previous labels to identify potential themes.
4. Reviewing the threads: to further understand whether they support a convincing interpretation of the data, answering the research question.
5. Defining and naming the threads: developing and naming each thread.
6. Writing: to describe the results obtained and referring to the existing literature (Braun, Clarke, 2012; 2019).

## Research

To understand what contributes to professional success among Preschool and Early Childhood Education graduates is fundamentally important for both current students and teachers in the field. While the existing literature often focuses on students' perspective and quality of the programmes, or teachers' insights on their everyday work, the personal perspectives of graduates who self-identify as having achieved professional success are not often explored (Lumsed, Musgrave, 2023; Egert, Dederer, Fukkink, 2020; Kouser, Akhter, 2020; Silberfeld, Mitchell, 2018; Moloney, 2010).

Through interviews, the respondents share their experiences, reflections and key factors that they believe contributed to their success. Highlighting their statements, in the following section of the article the authors present the results of their research in an attempt to capture the essence of achieving occupational success. The results aim to provide an insight into the milestones that provide a closer look at success from the perspective of those who have achieved it.

## When can we talk about success – research perspective

When it comes to defining professional success, most respondents associated this concept with achieving goals. One of the interviewees described themselves as a person who sets and reviews these goals:

For me, it is not important that someone tells me that I have achieved professional success, but that I feel it.

It seems that people who achieve professional success have strong positive feelings towards it. Many of the interviewees reported satisfaction, joy and even a sense of pleasure in connection with their work. What triggers these feelings? The belief that they fulfil their obligations at the highest level, which in turn motivates them to work even harder:

I know that I am doing my job well. I am happy about it, I would like to get even better, [do] even more.

Another subjective element mentioned by the graduates is the sense of achievement, which is often associated with the concept of professional success, as both are related to self-esteem and independence. The latter component was also mentioned by our participants as an indispensable prerequisite for professional success. While the interviewees appreciated the support of people from their family environment or professionals, many of them pointed out that their own efforts, their courage to take risks and the introduction of new solutions are the most important success factors.

One of the interviewed teachers defined the conceptual category analysed as follows:

(Success is) the feeling that I am contributing something, giving myself to others, making a positive impact.

The desire to share one's time and skills with others seems to be a deep, inner motivation in educational work. What links this response to the second, quoted below, is an awareness of the intended and unintended effects of interacting with other people:

My first professional success was that of a friend who performed physical work in a kindergarten, started her education under the influence of talking to me and became an inspector after a few years.

Although the interviewee worked with children, she considers the promotion of her colleague, to which she contributed, as her greatest professional success.

External, objective indicators of success included appreciation from the students' parents and, regardless of the current job, subsequent career advancement. Another common element mentioned by respondents were changes their

pedagogical activities had led to. The nature of these changes might be various, as the following statements show:

Changes that I have been able to introduce in the educational field based on research findings.

When children don't cry [after successful adaptation], they want to come to kindergarten.

Participants' approach to the changes differs by profession, just as the way they define their own success. Researchers mention the defence of their dissertation, publications and participation in scientific projects. Early childhood education teachers associate their professional success to the progress of the children (e.g. passing exams) as well as to the sympathy and trust of the students:

The children come to me, even if they are no longer in my class. They hug me and tell me what's going on in their lives.

## Keys to professional growth

When asked about the actions that interviewees have taken to succeed professionally, the development of their skills, especially through studies (in the field of broadly understood education) and courses were indicated the most frequently. Among the training courses, they mentioned the Veronica Sherborn Method course, Nonviolent Communication (NVC). Actions related to looking for and choosing a job were also pointed out. However, "the right" job is defined differently by the respondents. One of them said that he felt comfortable in the place where he could contribute his ideas, while the other teacher claimed:

I was looking for a kindergarten where the values that were important to me were present every day, not only in theory but also in practice.

Other activities mentioned by the respondents were related to gaining experience at work and even drawing conclusions from their own mistakes or failures. One of the participants said that she did not manage to get her dream job, two others spoke of difficulties working with children (problems with discipline, accidents with pupils). Failed lectures or lessons were also mentioned, which paradoxically contributed to improving the quality of work and were therefore steps on the road to professional success.

An interesting category in the context of professional success is the ability to combine different areas of life and work. The authors of the following article have categorised them into three groups, as respondents talked about:

- the ability to combine teaching and academic work at the university,
- the compatibility of organisational and pedagogical tasks at school,
- their life-work balance skills.

The graduates thus recognise how important it is for professional success to take care of yourself, manage your time, but also being aware of your own limitations. This has been emphasised a few times, i.e.:

I know that I am not the superwoman who can help everyone. I can exhaust myself in this way; I also have to look after my mental wellbeing [...] And that's also very important in my job, not to burn like this candle.

Awareness of the professional burnout and the fact that the interviewee is trying to protect themselves from is clearly apparent in the above statement.

### **Factors promoting career success**

The most frequently mentioned internal factors that have influenced the professional success of the research participants were motivation, persistence and determination in pursuing a career and overcoming obstacles. These elements seem to be indispensable in achieving goals and getting to a place that would satisfy ambitious graduates of the Faculty.

Although participants claimed that they are the main people responsible for their own success, they also recognise the role and help of others. They listed the principals of schools and kindergartens where they work, the professors who have taught them or with whom they currently work.

The external would definitely be the principal, and I had a principal here when I came to school who was also such an authority for me.

Some refer to colleagues whose successes have motivated them to seek career advancement. Those mentioned above could have a direct impact on taking up and pursuing a specific path in a professional career. Others named family members – a spouse or/and children. Survey participants indicated that family members gave them the support and strength to work and achieve their goals.

Certainly also the support of the family, well I wouldn't be able to carry out all these activities if it wasn't for my husband, for example, staying with the children during my trips, so it's certainly a very important external factor that this is an opening.

It appears that success is firmly rooted in third-party support. Whether it is the beginning of a professional journey, or in the course of obtaining successive degrees of professional promotion, it is the support of other people that matters.

### **Factors hindering career success**

It is quite interesting to notice that the element that facilitated professional success for some of the research participants, was the same thing that hindered

it for others. And that specific factor is family. Starting a family and having children entails shifting at least some of one's energy from professional duties to domestic responsibilities.

Definitely having children in terms of... absolutely I wouldn't change that, but it's if you're talking about career success, well it's definitely a hindrance of some kind.

Some of the interviewees mentioned that it was a challenge not to have many practical skills at the beginning of their work. Such skill deficits can certainly delay success, although on the other hand they are understandable and certainly accompany almost every person starting a career.

Some of those interviewed named covid-19 pandemic as a factor that disrupted their professional success. During lockdowns teachers were facing a whole new reality. They had to face the challenge of remote teaching, often left without support from the school or the governing body. They themselves, at an extremely fast pace, had to work out how to teach remotely. This was particularly difficult for teachers working with the youngest children, who often could not write or read (Marchlik, Wichrowska, Zubala, 2021).

One interviewee mentioned that the ongoing changes in legislation are a huge struggle. The regulations and educational programmes change with almost every new government. The teachers must make adjustments relating to the curriculum, change textbooks and find/ make new teaching aids. But the changes concern not only the teaching process. They also affect teachers' professional development (Dz.U. 2023, poz. 1672). In the latest amendment of 2023, some teachers lost previously gained professional degrees.

## **Study experiences crucial to success**

Research participants considered key study experiences contributing to their success to be: student internships, particular classes, supportive academic staff and a broad education. It is noteworthy that all respondents mentioned a number of factors related to their university experience that helped / positively influenced them to achieve career success. This may indicate that people who are motivated to succeed are able to find applications and use a variety of experiences to achieve their goals. To illustrate these factors, here are some quotes from the interviews.

There were all these activities in the form of workshops like this, where we could present our ideas among ourselves, as well as activities where there were, where you were working with the project method or you were going out of the university and doing something outside the building.

For me, the key experiences were when I had classes with people who were practitioners, who brought up examples from their professional lives a lot.

A very good experience for me at the time was the small groups, because I was learning at a time when the group was 12 people.

I loved these studies and the people who ran them and the idea of running and implementing it.

I remember a class on emotional communication, it gave me the basis of some knowledge, which later translated into something that can also be used directly in my work with the other person.

## **Pathways to career success for pre-service teachers**

Take advantage of what the university offers, [...] you get it on a plate.

The last question in the interview gave quite a range of answers. The study participants were asked to give advice to current students of the Faculty of Education that might contribute to success in their professional life. The answers that came through most often were: to take advantage of the classes, to inquire, to get involved in the classes, to keep training, to open up to the opportunities that the studies offer: trips, meetings with people invited to the Faculty. In the eyes of those interviewed, the Faculty provides students with ample opportunities for development and a wide range of experiences that prepare future employees to fulfill a variety of tasks. The classes themselves are only part of what the Faculty offers. The study participants believe that it is worthwhile to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the university.

Such that they open themselves up to the opportunities offered by their studies to the classes they take, because I know that these classes are not appreciated on a regular basis. They are appreciated later [...] so that they really take advantage of both the university and other opportunities [...] such as Erasmus trips. For example, people who come from abroad.

To focus on your development, to simply grow, to look for different training courses, courses that you can follow so in line with your needs, and some professional plans.

Summarising the suggestions of the study participants, they encouraged future students of the Faculty of Education to:

- utilise all the opportunities offered by the university,
- endeavour to find additional development opportunities (training, courses),
- be interested in people, ask questions,
- be prepared for different/unexpected situations,
- allow yourself to make mistakes,
- do not be discouraged by the documents (in the educational institutions),
- seek support and allies everywhere,
- develop self-esteem and self-control.

## Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we have decided to analyse the perception of professional success in the respective research group. Graduates of the Preschool and Early Childhood Education programme identify professional success with independently setting and realising their own goals. They associate the term with satisfaction, a sense of achievement and the results of their own endeavours. The results are consistent with other studies, which indicates that active career-related behaviours are strongly associated with success (De Vos, De Clippeleer, 2009). However, they also value the contribution of other people, such as their professors, head teachers, family members and colleagues. Bhave et al. claim that with social information processing theory, people understand and shape their perceptions, needs and values through interactions with other people, and this social influence provides a perspective through which individuals evaluate their work and career (Bhave, Kramer, Glomb, 2010).

Although success may be associated with high income or significant wealth (Smale, Bagdadli, Cotton, Russo, Dickmann, Dysvik, Gianecchini, Kaše, Lazarova, Reichel, Rozo, Verbruggen, 2019), these are not factors considered by our participants. Sharing their time and skills with others and contributing to their children's progress are synonyms for success in this particular perception. The gratitude of the parents of pupils and students is an important proof of their commitment to the work. When teachers generously invest their energy – not only in teaching, but also advising and tailoring to individual needs – they make a significant contribution to their students' development, which gives them a sense of fulfilment and contributes to their sense of success.

Graduates mentioned motivation, perseverance and determination as personal characteristics that are critical to success, which is consistent with the available research. External factors that had a favourable effect on professional development were a well-planned education and later career paths (Jo, Park, Song, 2023; Van den Borre Spruyt, Van Droogenbroeck, 2021).

The data shows that there are some elements that hinder professional success. On the one hand, family members were mentioned as important sources of professional support, while on the other hand, domestic responsibilities are seen as an obstacle to professional fulfilment. These results have been confirmed by previous research. Family involvement can be a potential source of career problems related to choice or decision-making processes (Gati, Krausz, Osipow, 1996), on the other hand, family resources (emotional, financial, organisational support) can positively influence career success (Becker, Moen, 1999; Beckma, Stanko, 2020; Cooper, 2014; Petriglieri, Obodaru, 2019). However, domestic duties are a career barrier, especially for women (Mayrhofer, Meyer,

Schiffinger, Schmidt 2008), who were mainly our research group, which is why this topic was addressed so intensively in the present study.

Lack of practical skills, especially at the beginning of professional life, and frequent changes in legislation are the biggest difficulties, especially for beginning teachers. These challenges may slightly delay the development of effective teaching strategies that directly contribute to building confidence in the classroom, which has a direct impact on shaping the teacher's self-esteem and achieving professional success. Without adequate support in the workplace, beginning teachers may find it difficult to demonstrate their full potential, which can affect both their professional development and their long-term future in the profession (Admiraal, Kittelsen Røberg, Wiers-Jenssen, Saab, 2023; Garcia-Hernandez, Buysse, Thorp, 2022). Therefore, our interviewees encourage current students to take advantage of their courses and utilise the opportunities that arise from their studies, such as Erasmus trips, additional training, meaningful internships and meetings with foreign academics (Arviv Elyashiv, Rozenberg, 2024; Bolli, Caves, Oswald-Egg, 2021).

Like most research that focuses on a specific subject area and analyses a homogeneous research group, it needs to be expanded and specified. It would be useful to also study the students of early childhood education studies at other universities in order to compare the opinions of the recipients of the different programmes. More independent variables should be considered – in the future, we could analyse and compare graduates in various age groups and at different stages of their careers.

In conclusion, success is a goal pursued by individuals, which highlights its universal importance. However, achieving success is not simple as it is shaped by various factors such as personal effort, social support but also opportunity, time and even luck. These findings underline the complex nature and importance of the success that has been the subject of our study.

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## Sukces zawodowy w percepcji absolwentów studiów z zakresu edukacji wczesnoszkolnej

### Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia autorskie badanie poświęcone percepcji sukcesu zawodowego wśród absolwentów kierunku edukacja przedszkolna i wczesnoszkolna Wydziału Pedagogicznego Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego. Autorzy skoncentrowali się na grupie tych absolwentów, którzy we wstępnym wywiadzie zadeklarowali swoje przekonanie o osiągnięciu sukcesu zawodowego, co stanowiło kluczowe kryterium doboru uczestników. Większość badanych to aktywni nauczyciele szkoły podstawowej, ale także nauczyciele akademicy. Celem badania była analiza percepcji sukcesu zawodowego wśród absolwentów Wydziału i analiza czynników wspierających proces osiągnięcia owego sukcesu. Wyniki jednoznacznie wskazują, że sukces postrzegany jest przez uczestników badania nie tylko przez pryzmat osiągnięć zawodowych, ale rozpatrywany jest również w kontekście balansu między życiem zawodowym a prywatnym – pełne poczucie spełnienia musi obejmować obie te sfery. Dodatkowo osoby badane podkreślają znamienne rolę wsparcia ze strony rodziny i najbliższych, którzy stanowią istotne wsparcie ich drogi zawodowej. Artykuł wnosi cenny głos do dyskusji nad subiektywnymi wymiarami sukcesu zawodowego wśród absolwentów studiów z zakresu edukacji początkowej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** sukces zawodowy, absolwenci, kariera, nauczyciel, praca.





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## Cultural and Social Dimensions of Contemporary Heavy Metal Narratives

### Abstract

The article addresses the cultural and social dimensions of contemporary heavy metal narratives. It delineates the principal theoretical premises regarding the pedagogy of popular culture and the educational significance of scholarly inquiry into heavy metal within the broader framework of popular music studies undertaken both in Poland and internationally. The study employs a qualitative content analysis of song lyrics drawn from albums released between 2020 and 2025 by selected Anglo-Saxon heavy metal pioneers (Osbourne, Saxon, Girlschool, Metallica). Particular attention is devoted to the identification of thematic categories, with an emphasis on the articulation of social discourses in the artists' oeuvre. Furthermore, selected aspects of the biographies of two deceased figures of the heavy metal canon, Ian "Lemmy" Kilmister and John "Ozzy" Osbourne, are examined in the context of mythologizing processes and the construction of cultural narratives.

**Keywords:** metal music narratives, song lyrics, musician biographies, popular culture.

### Introduction

This article explores the educational and socio-cultural dimensions of (hard) rock and heavy metal music. The inquiry is situated within the interdisciplinary field of *popular music studies* as well as within the pedagogical discourse on popular culture (see, e.g., Melosik, 2010; Jakubowski, 2016). The rationale for con-

ducting critical analyses of the rapidly evolving domain of popular culture arises from its constitutive role in contemporary social life. As Wojciech Burszta incisively noted, popular culture functions as

an inalienable element of everyday existence, the subject of casual conversations and scholarly debates; it provokes tears as well as bursts of laughter, provides pleasure yet irritates through schematism, offends with intellectual shallowness while simultaneously surprising with the unpredictable richness of symbolic references (Burszta, 2002, p. 9).<sup>1</sup>

In this sense, popular culture may be conceptualized, following Burszta, as “one of the fundamental *praxis* of contemporary society” (Burszta, 2002, p. 9).

In scholarship within anthropology and pedagogy of culture, media studies, and cultural studies, the educational dimensions of popular culture have long been emphasized. As Wojciech Burszta observed, “the education of the twenty-first century should also become a ‘preparation for life in popular culture’” (Burszta, 2002, p. 10). The potential of popular music within this context has been underscored by various researchers. Witold Jakubowski notes that

popular culture serves as a vehicle of identity patterns, with popular music playing a crucial role in this regard. Song lyrics and music videos, phenomena that uniquely combine the visual dimension of culture with popular music, embody diverse representations of identity (Jakubowski, 2021, p. 89).

Rock culture, in turn, is described as “a source of affective communities formed around a set of values shared by its participants” (Burszta, 2004, p. 19). The educational potential of rock narratives has been addressed on multiple occasions in both international studies (see, e.g., Flory, 2014; *Journal of Popular Music Education*) and Polish scholarship (Adamska-Staroń, 2018; Regiewicz, 2020). The present article examines cultural texts emerging from heavy metal music after 2020, as well as biographical narratives surrounding two deceased pioneers of hard rock and heavy metal: Ian “Lemmy” Kilmister, who passed away a decade ago, and John “Ozzy” Osbourne, who died recently on 22 July 2025.

## Theoretical and methodological assumptions

In Polish humanities, rock culture has for decades been the focus of multi-perspectival analyses, conducted from cultural, literary, political, linguistic, anthropological, media, and musicological perspectives. Today, diverse academic centers, including the University of Opole, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Jagiellonian University, the University of the National Education Commission in Kraków, the University of Warsaw, the Krzysztof Penderecki Academy of Music in Kraków, SWPS University, Jan

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<sup>1</sup> All translations into English of the original texts are the author’s own translations.

Długosz University in Czestochowa, and Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, are engaged in multifaceted research on popular music. Recent publications by Polish scholars have addressed such issues as the cultural contexts of rap, metal, and pop; the geography of music; musical taste as an analytical category; the poetics of music videos; and the anthropology of festivals.

Noteworthy recent works include the volume *Artyści. Samoświadomość twórców polskiej muzyki popularnej w warunkach zmiany społecznej*, edited by Mirosław Pęczak and Michał Rauszer (2024); a collective monograph focused on *identity* as a key research category in popular music cultures (Kaszuba, Kosek, Nożyński, eds., 2024); a book devoted to philological analyses of song and the relationship between (literary) text and popular music (Regiewicz & Rott, 2024); and two thematic issues of *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia de Cultura*: one dedicated to selected aspects of blues music culture (16.1/2024), and the other to contemporary discourses and genres of popular music (17.1/2025).

It is worth mentioning, of course, the international multi-threaded research in the field of metal music studies, which has been developing steadily for many years, including pioneering works in musicology (Walser, 1993) and cultural sociology (Weinstein, 2000; 2011), but also important monographs published in recent years addressing gender aspects (Hill, 2016; Berkers, Schaap, 2018), issues related to the identity of heavy metal youth (Rowe, 2018), and interdisciplinary studies addressing various issues related to metal music culture and indicating further directions for research (Brown, Spracklen, Kahn-Harris, Scott ed., 2016; Herbst, 2023).

This article focuses primarily on the lyrics of songs featured on selected albums released between 2020 and 2025 by internationally recognized hard rock and heavy metal artists whose output has been valued both commercially and artistically: Ozzy Osbourne's *Ordinary Man* (2020) and *Patient Number 9* (2022), Girlschool's *WTFortyfive?* (2023), Metallica's *72 Seasons* (2023), and Saxon's *Hell, Fire and Damnation* (2024). These albums ranked highly on hard rock sales charts, including the UK Rock & Metal Albums Chart, and have been favorably reviewed by critics, with some also awarded major prizes. For instance, Metallica received the Grammy Award for *Best Metal Performance* in 2024 for the title track *72 Seasons*, while *Patient Number 9* won the Grammy Award for *Best Rock Album* in 2023, and the song *Degradation Rules* (Ozzy Osbourne featuring Tony Iommi) received the Grammy for *Best Metal Performance*.

Saxon and Girlschool were chosen because they are key representatives of the New Wave of British Heavy Metal, a genre that was important for the development of rock and metal music. These bands were formed in the 1970s and are still active today. Their work is therefore part of the *longue durée* structure of rock music (compare Burszta, 2019). Saxon's work influenced many later artists,

including the thrash metal scene (Metallica, Anthrax, Megadeth, and others) and glam rock (Skid Row, Mötley Crüe, and others). Girlschool is one of the longest-running female bands in the history of popular music. It is a band that, despite numerous difficulties, has tried to break through the patriarchal system of metal culture. The artists have released numerous albums and continue to tour with notable passion and dedication, exemplifying a distinctive form of feminine energy and an uncompromising artistic stance. It is worth noting that Girlschool and Saxon performed in Kraków, Poland, in 2024, delivering a dynamic and well-received concert.

Ozzy Osbourne ranks among the pioneering figures of hard rock and heavy metal, having commenced his artistic career in the 1960s. As a distinguished musician and performer, he has sold tens of millions of records both as a solo artist and as a member of Black Sabbath, profoundly influencing successive generations of rock musicians. His death was commemorated by rock legends such as Robert Plant and Elton John, as well as younger popular artists such as Lady Gaga and Yungblud. Metallica, on the other hand, is the most commercially successful metal band in history, ranked number one by “Forbes” magazine as the greatest band of all time, selling millions of records, achieving very high streaming results, and regularly selling out world tours. All the bands discussed in this article are Anglo-Saxon groups that share a common genre – metal in the broadest sense. The early work of these groups has been described many times, so it is worth looking at their latest releases to see what message comes across in the albums of mature artists who continue to influence numerous fans and subsequent generations of bands inspired by their work. In the case of Ozzy Osbourne, the discussion centers on the most recent albums released during the artist’s lifetime. These recordings may be interpreted as a retrospective reflection on his artistic trajectory – a synthesis of the turbulent phases in the career of a musician who has made a profound and enduring contribution to rock culture.

Rock and metal word-music narratives can be fruitfully analyzed through broader contextual frameworks that encompass voice, genre, performance space, communication and language, and corporeality. Each narrative constitutes a discursive act, understood here as “a set of communicative practices expressing relations of power, states of knowledge, and the agency of communicating subjects” (Lisowska-Magdziejczak, 2019, p. 279). Music itself, as Simon McKerrrell and Lyndon C. S. Way argue, represents a form of multimodal discourse (McKerrrell & Way, 2017, pp. 1–20).

It is also essential to acknowledge the transmedial dimensions of rock narratives. Song lyrics are often expanded and recontextualized across media platforms, including album artwork, music videos, and textual-visual communication in social media. Within the convergent media environment, songs circulate across diverse music scenes, media carriers, and formats. They are further re-

shaped through (e-)covering practices, while fragments of lyrics function as quotations, slogans, or memes in both online and offline contexts, frequently serving as resources in fans' identity projects (Kosek, 2022, p. 85). Given these dimensions, this article also considers selected music videos and biographical as well as necrographic narratives. Biographical storytelling in heavy metal culture is a particularly rich research site, where identity formation intersects with processes of myth-making. Necroographies of rock and metal icons appear less frequently, yet, in light of the widely discussed passing of Ozzy Osbourne, they call for renewed critical attention.

Given the heterogeneity of the research material, this article employs methods of qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis, as well as discourse analysis and the analysis of biographical narratives. In conducting the qualitative content analysis, the author applied inductive open coding, also referred to as exploratory coding. The analytical categories were derived directly from the examined texts. In accordance with this approach, the set of categories is developed only after a thorough reading of the data and the identification of its key features, without imposing theoretical frameworks or preconceived interpretations (Gibbs, 2010, pp. 90–92).

The article discusses song lyrics and artists' biographical narratives—elements that contribute to the formation of a musician's artistic and media persona. In the context of image creation and artistic expression, it is important to recall the significant findings of Philip Auslander, who distinguishes three inter-related dimensions of popular music performers: the real person, the musical persona, and the character/ song personality (Auslander, 2006, pp. 100–119). Song lyrics, music videos, biographies, autobiographies, and other related components together constitute a complex "scene" composed of numerous cultural elements, understood here in accordance with the framework proposed by Keith Kahn-Harris (Kahn-Harris, 2006, pp. 9–49).

## **Socio-cultural discourses in the song lyrics of heavy metal pioneers (after 2020)**

From its very inception, heavy metal has been more than a musical style: it has functioned as a socio-cultural formation, generating subcultures, scenes (see Kahn-Harris, 2007), fashions, lifestyles, value systems, and modes of communication. Today, the genre encompasses dozens of subgenres, each marked by its own complex specificity. The present analysis focuses on the pioneers of heavy metal; however, the primary object of inquiry is not their formative output of the 1970s and 1980s but rather their more recent albums released within the past five years. This raises a number of questions: What themes are articu-

lated in the lyrics of these canonical figures, both male (e.g., Ozzy Osbourne) and female (Girlschool)? What cultural and social issues, particularly those related to human identity, are important in their work? A starting point may be found in the late John “Ozzy” Osbourne, one of the most significant figures in the history of metal music, who passed away on 22 July 2025. His two most recent solo albums repeatedly engage with themes of transience, mortality, and self-reflection, offering lyrical meditations on life, death, and the retrospective evaluation of an artistic career.

Tab. 1

*Thematic categories in the lyrics of Ozzy Osbourne’s solo albums (2020–2022)*

Artist	Album	Key Thematic Categories
Ozzy Osbourne	<i>Ordinary Man</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The human condition as a social being: life, death, and symbolic representations of mortality (black roses, garments, ashes); suicide; addictions (alcohol); memory; loneliness; cries for help; deception; farewell; escape; raid; emotions; the body (skin, bones, flesh); cannibalism; finitude (of life); the figure of the child.</li> <li>– The life of a musical star (fame, stage)</li> <li>– The sphere of natural elements and atmospheric phenomena (night, sky, sun, moon)</li> <li>– The religious sphere (hell), purgatory; Mother Maria, Jesus Christ, salvation, prayer</li> </ul>
	<i>Patient Number 9</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Characters: the patient, the vampire, father and mother figures, the parasite, divine figures, the madman, children</li> <li>– The human condition as a social being: sexuality; intoxicants (alcohol); hedonism; the pornosphere; death; burial; immortality; blood; loss of faith and the search for meaning in life</li> <li>– Places and institutions (hospital)</li> <li>– The sphere of natural elements and atmospheric phenomena: storm, sun, earth, night</li> </ul>

Source: Own study.

The musician, who is over seventy years old, is obviously aware of the inevitability of death and the transience of his career, fame, health, and life when creating his albums. An important theme in the lyrics on the albums is the problem of alcohol and drug addiction. When considering the lyrics from the transmedial perspective mentioned above, it is worth paying attention to the music videos released for the album *Ordinary Man* (2020). The music video for the title track from the album is retrospective in nature. Osbourne is shown in a dark cinema room watching a documentary miniature about his life and turbulent career. Archival footage shows, among other things, important

places such as Birmingham, the musician's hometown and the birthplace of heavy metal, as well as people important to the artist (his children, wife Sharon Osbourne, friends), but also to the history of rock music (Randy Rhoads, Zakk Wylde, and others).

The fictional music video for *Under The Graveyard* features actors Jack Kilmer and Jessica Barden as the singer and his wife. The narrative takes up autobiographical themes from Osbourne's life, particularly illustrating the dark side of rock stardom and the musician's severe addictions. The music video for *It's A Raid*, on the other hand, shows an animated story of Osbourne and his American rapper companion Post Malone's confrontation with the police. The humorous narrative is a self-deprecating tale about the fate of rebellious, anti-establishment musicians.

The British artist's latest solo album, *Patient Number 9*, contains serious themes concerning the transience of human life, illness, the search for purpose, faith and its absence, security and conflict, and images of children "playing with weapons." The lyrics on the album also touch on controversial topics, such as sexual themes (masturbation) and pornography addiction (the song *Degradation Rules* mentions the pornographic website RedTube). There are also lexical games, for example, in the title of the song *Mr. Darkness*, there is a reference to the poetics of titles recognizable in the artist's work (*Mr. Tinkertrain*, *Mr. Crowley*) or the humorous theme in the closing track *Darkside Blues*, at the end of which Osbourne can be heard laughing and saying "Hahaha, that's jazz."

Social themes can also be found in the work of the still-active British band Girlschool. However, the lyrics on the album express a critical assessment of the condition of humanity. In *It's A Mess*, the words "The human race is a mess, psychologically weak and falling apart" are sung. There are also themes referring to the COVID-19 pandemic, where there is mention of an "invisible killer" ("There's a deadly virus spreading fast, It has no conscience, built to last, There's no future, it's so strong, Taking lives, like we don't belong").

Tab. 2.

*Thematic categories in the lyrics of Girlschool's album WTFortyfive? (2023)*

Artist	Album	Key Thematic Categories
Girlschool	<i>WTFortyfive?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Animal characters (wolf)</li> <li>– The figure of the devil</li> <li>– Man and society: humanity in disarray; the virus, an invisible killer/enemy; the figure of a woman</li> <li>– Characteristics of matter (darkness, gloom)</li> <li>– Music (guitar sounds) and rock and roll (as a lifestyle, rebellion, toasts, breaking the rules)</li> </ul>

Source: Own study.

Girlschool's lyrics also include motivational themes (*Believing In You*), praise for rock and roll, and encouragement to rebel, but also to party (*Up To No Good; Party*). The clearly intertextual song *Party* contains references to famous songs by rock bands that created the canon of the genre, including Led Zeppelin ("We'll do the misty mountain hop" and "We got a whole lot of love"), Ramones ("We'll do the blitzkrieg bop"), David Bowie ("We'll do the genie gene gene"), Queen ("Just like a killer queen"), T.Rex ("We can ride a white swan"; "C'mon and get it on"), AC/DC (We do it all night long); Saxon ("We'll Be the Strangers in the Night"); Motörhead ("With the bomber in flight"); Rainbow ("Since you've been gone"; "Rainbow rising up above"). The album *WTFortyfive?* also features a cover of Motörhead's *Born to Raise Hell*, with guest appearances by musicians such as Peter "Biff" Byford, Phil Campbell, and Duff McKagan.

Saxon, who collaborated with Girlschool, devoted more attention to historical themes in the lyrics on their latest album, *Hell, Fire And Damnation*, released in 2024. The use of historical themes by a heavy metal band can have educational value, encourage listeners to deepen their knowledge of past events and figures, and even serve as teaching material through which teachers can introduce certain topics in school lessons. In Saxon's song *Madame Guillotine*, we find an ironic reference to the historical figure of Marie Antoinette, the Austrian archduchess, queen of France and Navarre from 1774 to 1791, who was accused of treason and sentenced by the Revolutionary Tribunal to be beheaded by guillotine on October 16, 1793. In the song *1066*, we find references to the Battle of Hastings, the famous clash on October 14, 1066, between the Norman army led by William the Conqueror and the Anglo-Saxon militia and guard commanded by King Harold II:

Harold had beaten the vikings at Stamford  
 Routing Hardrada the end of an age  
 Dayglow was finished, the shield war defeated  
 An army triumphant, they marched to their grave  
 But news traveled fast of a second invasion  
 The army of Saxons would face a new foe  
 Tired and weary they marched to the battle  
 Where William was waiting with quiver and bow

(Saxon, *1066*, in: *Hell, Fire And Damnation*, 2024)

In the song *Kubla Khan And The Merchant Of Venice*, we find a direct reference to the title character of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *Kubla Khan* about the eponymous Mongol ruler, who was described by the famous Venetian merchant and traveler Marco Polo. Saxon's narratives also contain references to the burning of the Salem witches and the so-called Roswell incident, an event that took place on July 2, 1947, in New Mexico, where a ship belonging to extraterrestrial beings allegedly crashed. In addition, the narratives deal with the strug-

gle between good and evil, the category of freedom (*Hell, Fire And Damnation*), war (*The Prophecy*), and urban and industrial themes (*Fire And Steel*). In *Pirates Of The Airwaves*, we learn the story of a teenage boy who listens to a transistor radio under his blanket and tries to find a station where he can hear the Rolling Stones. The lyrics mention the names of historical radio stations that broadcast without a license from ships (Radio Luxembourg, Radio Caroline, Radio London Town, Radio Avalon, Radio KSHE).

Tab. 3

*Thematic categories in the lyrics of Saxon' album Hell, Fire And Damnation (2024)*

Artist	Album	Key Thematic Categories
Saxon	<i>Hell, Fire And Damnation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Historical events (Battle of Hastings); Roswell incident</li> <li>– Historical figures (Kubla Khan; Marco Polo; Marie Antoinette)</li> <li>– Theme of war, army</li> <li>– Elemental sphere (fire)</li> <li>– Industry: steel, machines</li> <li>– Man, condemnation</li> <li>– Characters: child of Satan, Salem witches</li> <li>– City and city sounds</li> <li>– Hell</li> </ul>

Source: Own study.

The work of the aforementioned bands influenced the most famous metal band in history, Metallica. On April 14, 2023, the Californian band released their eleventh album, *72 Seasons*. The band's vocalist already pointed to the New Wave Of British Heavy Metal scene as an inspiration in the song *Lux Aeterna*. James Hetfield said that it was "an optimistic, fast, happy song, with a nod to New Wave Of British Heavy Metal, a kind of 'back to the 80s' riff." There has been a lot of darkness in my life and our career, but there has also been hope; we have always seen the light in the darkness. Without darkness, there is no light, so it's good to focus on the brighter side of life instead of the bad things" (Koziczyński, 2023, pp. 18–19). The title *72 Seasons* refers to the time of maturation and the formation of human identity, which is 18 years of life. The themes contained in the lyrics on the album can provoke self-reflection, introspection, observation, and analysis of one's own mental states and thoughts. The lyrics on Metallica's album also feature themes related to religion, death, interpersonal relationships, and human flaws and weaknesses (including lying and lust).

Tab. 4

*Thematic categories in the lyrics of the songs on Metallica's 72 Seasons album (2023)*

Artist	Album	Key Thematic Categories
Metallica	<i>72 Seasons</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The human condition as a social being: emotions (anger, shame, fear), mental states, inheritance, the figure of a boy and older people; escape, fame, stage fright, 72 seasons of life, violence, illness, death, suicide</li> <li>– Social behaviors and expressions: lying, temptations, longing for freedom, misery, despair, pain, separation, sleepwalking, the human body, bones</li> <li>– Figures of demons, witches</li> <li>– Objects and places: mirror room, cyanide, barbed wire</li> <li>– The realm of the elements, atmospheric phenomena, and matter: night, moon, light, shadows, sky, darkness, fog, fire, flames</li> </ul>

Source: Own study.

As has been briefly demonstrated above, the narratives of the precursors of heavy metal music address a variety of themes, including human functioning in society, interpersonal relationships, human weaknesses, emotions, addictions, depression, death (sometimes suicidal), adolescence, and the formation of one's own identity. The narratives also feature motifs related to the elements and atmospheric phenomena, supernatural characters (e.g., the devil), and references to historical events and figures. The lyrics also touch upon, albeit infrequently, themes related to the rock 'n' roll lifestyle, partying, sex, and hedonism. Rock and heavy metal narratives are not limited to song lyrics. Here, we adopt Mieke Bal's understanding of narrative text. According to the researcher, it is

a text in which an agent or subject conveys a story to the recipient ('tells' the reader) through a specific medium, which may be language, image, sound, structure, or a combination of these (Bal, 2012, p. 3).

In the context of the stories of two figures key to the emergence of heavy metal, Ian Lemmy Kilmister and John Ozzy Osbourne, it is worth briefly reflecting on selected aspects related to the study of biographical narratives and the creation of necrobiographical stories.

## **Biographical narratives in the perspective of *metal music studies***

The history of these English musicians can be viewed through the prism of mythical narrative in the process of creating artistic mythology. Marek Jeziński, researching the mythologization of musicians' artistic message and analyzing the profiles of artists such as Roy Harper, Billy Bragg, and Neil Young, compared

the narrative elements present in their biographies with components found in mythical stories. He distinguished the following elements of narrative:

Separation; Searching for one's place; Embarking on a journey; The road; Breaking taboos; Overcoming adversity; Performing tasks; Fighting monsters; Bearing ideological witness – achieving artistic maturity (Jeziński, 2014, pp. 149–150).

Based on an analysis of (auto)biographical materials concerning Ian Kilmister, who died in 2015 (Kilmister, & Garza, 2002), it can be noted that the first of the above components – “Separation” – would refer to his disagreements with his father and leaving his family home; “Searching for one's place” would be associated with odd jobs, including at a riding school and then at a factory specializing in assembling Hotpoint washing machines. In his autobiography entitled *White Line Fever*, Kilmister recalled:

About that time, my stepfather got me into a factory that made Hotpoint washing machines. Everyone worked on just one piece of them. I was one of the first in line: I had to take four small brass nuts and bolt them on this thing and then a machine came down and knocked a ridge across the sides of them. Then you took the pieces off and threw them in a huge box. There were 15,000 of them to do, and when you were done with that batch, and really garnered a sense of achievement, they'd come and steal them and give you an empty basket. (Kilmister, & Garza, 2002, pp. 20–21).

The narrative element – “Embarking on a journey” – in the case of the Englishman, this was his decision to become a musician; in the section entitled “The Road,” one would point to his wanderings around Great Britain, living in squats, and his first small performances with amateur bands. This stage of his career is well illustrated by the musician's memories from the 1970s:

All through the rest of '76 and early '77, we played gigs here and there, a lot of one-offs. I remember at one gig, in a disco place in Shrewsbury – Tiffany's, for God's sake! – Eddie and I both fell flat on our backs onstage. It was one of those slippery plastic floors with lights under it. But the crew only lifted me up – Eddie used to treat them like servants so they left him down there. There he was, lying on his back, waiting confidently to be picked up and it never happened. On the way to another gig, Phil was angry about something and kicked the side of the van, breaking his toe. By this point, the morale of the band was getting pretty low; all our efforts were getting us nowhere. We were starving, living in squats and nothing was happening. I was well prepared to keep going but Phil and Eddie wanted to give it up. It wasn't their band and they didn't have the commitment I did. So finally in April, after much debate, we decided to do a goodbye show at the Marquee in London and call it a day. (Kilmister, & Garza, 2002, pp. 75–76).

“Breaking the rules” is a component that played a significant role in Kilmister's life: examples include prison arrests, a countercultural attitude, provocative slogans, and skirmishes with the police. In his autobiography, the musician recalls the moment of his high-profile arrest for drug possession while crossing the border from the United States to Canada.

So there I was, stuck with the Canadian police. They didn't even bother charging me for the pills, but I was arraigned and sent down to jail on remand. This was, as you can well imagine, not a pleasant experience. I'd been locked up in cells overnight, but never in a serious jail like this one. I remember I was in the delousing room, ready for the spray when this wonderful voice behind me said, 'You're bailed.' Well, as I found out later, the only reason the band got me out was because my replacement wasn't going to get to Canada in time. Otherwise, they would have just let me rot. I wouldn't have rotted anyway – since what I had was amphetamine sulphate and not cocaine, the case was thrown out as a 'wrongful charge', and they couldn't charge you again for the same substance. So I was free and clear. (Kilmister, & Garza, 2002, p. 65).

In the "Overcoming adversity" section, we can list, for example, problems and frequent disputes with record labels, financial difficulties, criticism of corporate systems and politics, contained, for example, in the lyrics of some Motörhead songs. An example of this can be found in the lyrics of the song *Just 'Cos You Got the Power*, which explicitly criticises the political and corporate system.

You might be a financial wizard  
With a sack of loot  
But all I see is a slimy lizard  
With an expensive suit

Go on and run your corporation  
Go on and kiss some ass  
You can buy up half of the nation  
But you can't buy class  
You bastards think it's funny  
Lynin' and thieving all your life  
Think all there is, is money  
Got your future wrapped-up tight

But just 'cos you got the power  
That don't mean you got the right

(Motörhead, *Just 'Cos You Got the Power*, in: *Rock 'n' Roll*, 1987)

The element of "Performing tasks" in the musician's life would be associated with criticism of the vices of Western societies, while the "Fighting Monsters" component of the narrative would concern the premature death of Sue Bennett and other friends and family members of Kilmister, as well as the singer's deteriorating health and illness in the last period of his life, which ultimately led to his death. Looking at the last of these elements of the story – "Bearing ideological witness – achieving artistic maturity" – it should be noted that the musician was primarily a champion of rock 'n' roll, its ideas, aesthetics, and spirit. His political views, which were reflected in some of his ideologically engaged lyrics, would only come second. Sometimes, especially during press interviews, the rocker also acted as a socio-political commentator.

Marek Jeziński notes that an artist who is conscious of creating his own artistic mythology takes responsibility for the content that reaches his audience –

it then takes on a flagship significance, it is “a factor to which the musician devotes a lot of space, shaping this mythology in accordance with his own worldview, presenting to the audience those events that are important for the formation of his career and its most important stages” (Jeziński, 2014, p. 151). The career of Ozzy Osbourne, the precursor of heavy metal who died in July 2025, is an exhibitionist story of an eccentric artist. If we look at the singer’s history in the context of the narrative categories mentioned above, the element of “Separation” could refer to leaving his family home; “Searching for one’s place” would be associated with odd jobs (including working as a plumber and in a factory producing car horns). Osbourne’s autobiography contains many humorous passages describing his experiences in various workplaces. For example:

On my first day at the Lucas plant the supervisor showed me into this sound-proofed room, where I’d do my shift. My job was to pick up the car horns as they came along a conveyor belt and put them into this helmet-shaped machine. Then you’d hook them up to an electrical current and adjust them with a screwdriver, so they went, ‘BAGH, BOOO, WEEE, URRH, BEEOOOP.’ Nine hundred a day – that’s how many car horns they wanted tuned. They kept count, because every time you did one you clicked a button. There were five of us in the room, so that’s five car horns burping and beeping and booping all at the same time, from eight in the morning until five in the afternoon. (Osbourne, & Ayres, 2014, 22).

The element of the narrative – “Embarking on a journey” – is the decision to become a musician; the part entitled “The Road” refers to life on the road and the first amateur performances. “Breaking the rules” is a component that also played an important role in Osbourne’s life: examples include prison arrests, a rebellious attitude, and skirmishes with the police. The section “Overcoming adversity” could include, for example, disputes with other musicians, record labels, and criticism of corporate systems. The element of “Accomplishing tasks” would be associated in the musician’s life with criticism of the vices of Western societies, while the narrative component of “Fighting monsters” would concern the premature death of Osbourne’s friends and the singer’s long-term illness, which ultimately led to his death. In the musician’s autobiography, one can find, for example, memories related to the death and funeral of Randy Rhoads:

Randy’s funeral was held at the First Lutheran Church in Burbank. I was one of the pall-bearers. They had big pictures of Randy all around the altar. I remember thinking: It’s only been a few days since I was sitting on the bus with him, calling him mad for wanting to go to university. I felt so bad. Randy was one of the greatest guys who’d ever been in my life. And I suppose I felt guilty, too, because if he hadn’t been in my band, he wouldn’t have died. I don’t know how Randy’s mother survived the funeral – she must be some kind of woman. Her little baby had died. She was divorced, Delores was, so her kids meant everything to her. And Randy really loved her – he absolutely adored her. For years after, every time me and Sharon used to see Dee, we felt terrible. (Osbourne, & Ayres, 2014, p. 132).

“Giving ideological testimony – achieving artistic maturity” is an element that would be associated with some of Black Sabbath’s ideologically (e.g., ecologically) engaged lyrics and Osbourne’s solo achievements. One of the first environmentally conscious songs in metal music was *Into the Void*, with lyrics written by Geezer Butler:

Rocket engines burning fuel so fast  
 Up into the night sky they blast  
 Through the universe the engines whine  
 Could it be the end of man and time?  
 Back on earth the flame of life burns low  
 Everywhere is misery and woe  
 Pollution kills the air, the land and sea  
 Man prepares to meet his destiny

Rocket engines burning fuel so fast  
 Up into the night sky so vast  
 Burning metal through the atmosphere  
 Earth remains in worry, hate and fear  
 With the hateful battles raging on  
 Rockets flying to the glowing sun  
 Through the empires of eternal void  
 Freedom from the final suicide

(Black Sabbath, *Into The Void*, in: *Master of Reality*, 1971).

From a cultural studies perspective, but also from the point of view of popular culture pedagogy, posthumous stories related to rock and metal musicians, fan reactions and practices, memories, notes, and commemorative entries may prove interesting. In the broader field of obituaries related to the band Motörhead and the “(necro)persona” of Lemmy Kilmister and Ozzy Osbourne, the following practices, cultural “products” and events can be identified: posthumous publications and commemorative narratives (biographies, magazines, etc.); posthumously released songs; new original songs by the artist released after his death (in Kilmister’s case, these were *Bullet In Your Brain* and *Greedy Bastards*); reissues of important albums in the musicians’ discography; songs dedicated to musicians recorded by other performers; albums containing covers of songs by deceased singers; concert activities of bands operating in the “tribute to” formula; fan art – in this area, it is worth highlighting murals, drawings, paintings, memes, sculptures, statues, and many other forms.

In the context of Kilmister and Osbourne, among others, we can observe tanatourism trips, statue unveiling ceremonies, exhibitions and presentations of items related to musicians, but also countless online posts and discussions on social media, which constitute an important area of cultural practices in the obituary field of heavy metal culture. Fans of deceased metal music pioneers co-create a rock structure of feeling and experience, meeting in Birmingham, Burs-

lem, London, Los Angeles, and other locations, in clubs, at monuments, and murals, to talk about music. They reminisce about concerts they attended in the past, exchange experiences, raise toasts, and create various forms of cultural rock *praxis*.

## Conclusion

This article draws attention to the cultural and social aspects of contemporary heavy metal narratives, using the example of the Anglo-Saxon precursors of the genre. The analysis focuses primarily on lyrics from albums released after 2020. The lyrics from the latest albums by Ozzy Osbourne, Saxon, Girlschool, and Metallica contain themes related to, to a greater or lesser extent, human functioning, its place in social reality, the formation of identity, addiction problems, loneliness, illness, and death.

There are also metaphorical images related to the elements, atmospheric phenomena, images and characters straight out of fantasy worlds (witches, devils, demons, hell or heaven, struggle). Some artists refer to religious and historical themes, sometimes also referring to content related to the stereotypical image of rock and roll life, sex, pornography, and partying.

Heavy metal narratives have critical potential. Song lyrics can be used in school lessons to encourage young students to explore certain topics (e.g. historical or environmental) in greater depth. Many metal artists, such as Metallica, Ozzy Osbourne, Saxon and Girlschool, discussed in the text, address current and socially important issues. Musicians' biographies are also interesting texts, showing the positive sides of rock stars' lives, but also describing the dark sides of fame, struggles with addiction, and problems related to the high pressure in the music industry and business. Autobiographies obviously serve to create a certain image of artists, but they are also often stories that review their artistic careers and show the process of constructing artistic identity, thus constituting important research material for further analysis in the field of contemporary culture pedagogy and popular music studies.

The heavy metal narratives analyzed are therefore part of social, identity, historical, pathological, and artistic discourses. Attention was also drawn to the biographical narratives of two precursors of heavy metal music from the perspective of mythologization processes. The stages and events (including leaving home, odd jobs, stays in detention, problems with colleagues, addictions, illness, and death) that influenced the creation of the artists' mythological narratives were identified. A separate thread that awaits further development in future work is the necrobiographies of artists. An increasing number of artists from the pioneer generation of rock and heavy metal are passing away. The death of art-

ists generates considerable interest among fans, the media, and other entities responsible for contemporary necromarketing. These are important social issues in the fields of cultural studies, anthropology, and popular culture pedagogy, among others, which should be addressed in future research.

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## Discography

Girlschool, *WTFortyfive?*, Silver Lining Music, 2023

Metallica, *72 Seasons*, Blackened Recordings, 2023

Ozzy Osbourne, *Ordinary Man*, Epic, 2020

Ozzy Osbourne, *Patient Number 9*, Epic, 2022

Saxon, *Hell, Fire And Damnation*, Silver Lining Music, 2024

## Kulturowo-społeczne wymiary współczesnych narracji heavymetalowych

### Streszczenie

W artykule zwrócono uwagę na kulturowo-społeczne wymiary współczesnych narracji heavy-metalowych. Nakreślono główne założenia dotyczące pedagogiki kultury popularnej oraz edukacyjnej wartości badań nad muzyką metalową w optyce krajowych i zagranicznych studiów z zakresu *popular music studies*. Jakościowej analizie treści poddano teksty piosenek obecne w albumach muzycznych wydanych w latach 2020–2025 przez wybranych anglosaskich prekursorów heavy metalu (Ozzy Osbourne, Saxon, Girlschool, Metallica). Zwrócono uwagę na kategorie tematyczne ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem dyskursów społecznych w twórczości artystów. Omówiono także wybrane komponenty biografii dwóch zmarłych pionierów heavy metalu: Iana „Lemmy’ego” Kilmistera i Johna „Ozzy’ego” Osbourne’a w kontekście kreowania narracji mitologicznych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** narracje muzyki metalowej, teksty piosenek, kultura rocka, biografie muzyków.

# REVIEWS





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## Lecha Witkowskiego „archeologiczne” odkrycie w filozofii Alfreda Northa Whiteheada wizji edukacji przyszłości

Lech Witkowski, znany pedagogom zaangażowany „archeolog” humanistyki, wydał intrygujące studium pt. *Whitehead. Naddania i (w)zrosty dla humanistyki i edukacji* (2024). Kolejne swoje dzieło napisał na kanwie twórczej dekonstrukcji myśli angielskiego uczonego – matematyka i filozofa, logika Alfreda Northa Whiteheada; jest ono zarazem dialogiem z własnym warsztatem metodologicznym i twórczością naukową. Wprowadzenie do rozprawy poprzedza dedykacja swoim mistrzom z okresu studiów matematycznych, w tym promotorowi pracy magisterskiej, wybitnemu matematykowi Danielowi Simsonowi z UMK w Toruniu, i promotorowi dysertacji doktorskiej – filozofowi Zdzisławowi Cackowskiemu z UMCS w Lublinie, który – jak pisze Witkowski:

[...] umocnił we mnie swoimi pracami odwagę myślenia przeciw dualizmom w historii filozofii i w poznaniu naukowym. Obaj Profesorowie przygotowali mnie, nieświadomie ale skutecznie, do zmierzenia się bez lęku z wyzwaniem Światowego Formatu matematyka, filozofa, przyrodzawcy i teologa Alfreda Northa Whiteheada (1861–1947) i do uprawiania refleksji wokół humanistyki w trybie afirmującym dwoistości strukturalne i relacje dynamiczne w procesach energetyzujących duchowo do rozwoju w edukacji i samokształceniu.

Natomiast tym, który wprowadzał Witkowskiego do i dla pedagogiki, był Zbigniew Kwieciński.

Powrót Witkowskiego do filozofii jest wyjątkowym darem dla humanistyki i edukacji, co wynika nie tylko z tytułu powyższej rozprawy, ale z fascynującej treści, która – jak każda jego rozprawa – niesie z sobą znaczące kwestie, stawia nowe pytania, ale też prowokuje oporem na inne odczytanie myśli humanisty przez rzekomo wdrażanych „do jałowości i osvajania z rytualizacją pozoru oraz dławienia postawy twórczej” (Witkowski, 2024, s. 31) pedagogów, zachęcając ich do analityczno-krytycznej recepcji także tej książki. Nie jest to jednak, jak mogłoby się komuś wydawać, rozprawa biograficzna o życiu i twórczości naukowej angielskiego filozofa czy podręcznikowa wykładnia koncepcji Whiteheada. Witkowski tak podchodzi do wszystkich dzieł klasyków humanistyki polskiej czy światowej, by nie ulegać ich perswazji czy sposobom myślenia w ich duchu, ale by wzbogacać dzięki nim własne intuicje, przekraczać dotychczasowe swoje podejścia do interesujących zjawisk, a może i pogłębiać własną „czujność dekonstrukcyjną” w toku lektury. Także w tym przypadku przytacza

[...] jedynie niektóre wątki tych prac, które najczęściej wymagają przekroczenia, jako przezwyciężenia ich słabości, dla powstania perspektywy mającej szansę otwarcia na ową „całość doświadczenia” czy do tej całości się odnoszącej, w tym z uwzględnieniem kluczowego dla mnie doświadczenia edukacji i potrzeby humanistyki stosującej narzędzia wypracowane przez Whiteheada (Witkowski, 2024, s. 114).

Już we wprowadzeniu zaznacza, że ta książka – „[...] jako zaplanowana na koncentracji na myśleniu pedagogicznym – musi mieć stopniowo coraz bardziej rozbudowany tytuł: EDUKACJA JAKO ORGANICZNY PROCES, OKAZJA, ZDARZENIE I RELACJA” (Witkowski, 2024, s. 15), co natychmiast ukierunkowuje nas na inkontrolę, a więc na filozofię spotkań, buberowską pedagogikę dialogu, w odniesieniu do edukacji zaś na Wrocławską Szkołę Przyszłości Ryszarda Łukaszewicza. To właśnie w alternatywnym podejściu dolnośląskiego pedagoga edukacja wymaga kreowania okazji do uczenia się, by uczestnik zdarzenia doświadczał czegoś nowego, ważnego dla niego samego. Witkowski wyprowadza z myśli Whiteheada wnioski, że

[...] funkcją instytucji edukacyjnych jest wytwarzanie przestrzeni dla zdarzeń edukacyjnych i przekazywanie obowiązującego wzorca poznawczego i emocjonalnego; zatem bez nich i ich obecności sama taka przestrzeń wokół aktualnych podmiotów społecznych miałaby być pusta, tj. w najlepszym razie bez znaczenia (Witkowski, 2024, s. 160).

Empirycznie potwierdził ten stan rzeczy Z. Kwieciński, badając uczniowskie poczucie wartości czasu lekcji. Diagnoza stu jednostek lekcyjnych dowiodła dydaktycznej blokady rozwoju nastolatków oraz odsoniła nauczycielską pracę w szkole jako złudzenie, skoro tylko 5,5 min przeciętnej lekcji można było uznać za czas pożyteczny dla rozwoju ósmoklasistów (Kwieciński, 1992, s. 94).

Byłem ciekaw zawartości „archiwum myśli” filozofa edukacji, by wydobyć z niego te, które rzeczywiście wnoszą coś nowego do polskiej myśli pedagogicznej, i nie zawiodłem się. Witkowski czytelnie uzasadnia własny warsztat badaw-

czy, w tym sposoby odczytania myśli wybitnego filozofa oraz jak można czy też warto twórczo włączać idee minionych autorów do współczesnych teorii, na co powinni zwrócić uwagę adepci szkół doktorskich. Witkowski zachęca czytelników do tego, by nie zgadzali się także z jego odczytaniem Whiteheada, kiedy stwierdza, że filozofia angielskiego uczonego

[...] stanowi kapitalne świadectwo tego, że uczyć się i przewartościowywać własną aktualną wizję siebie i świata można od tych autorów, z którymi się zasadniczo nie zgadzamy, lecz którzy poza tym dostarczają znaczących impulsów, które można włączyć w sposób je przetwarzający na postać dającą się zintegrować z naszym dążeniem podmiotowym, jeśli podejmiemy do nich twórczo, czyli innowacyjnie wobec ich wyjściowego splotu w sferze obiektów „wiecznych”, czyli transaktualności idei i znaczeń (Witkowski, 2024, s. 52).

Na tym właśnie polega „humanistyka stosowana” Witkowskiego (2018), że upomina się wprost o krytyczną recepcję myśli angielskiego filozofa dla aplikacji metahumanistycznych, w tym także metapedagogicznych. Przeszukał źródła współczesnej humanistyki i nauk społecznych, by najpierw pokazać, także krytycznie, aktualny stan recepcji dzieł czy wybranych idei Whiteheada w rozprawach interesujących się jego filozofią teologów, psychologów i pedagogów. Do kwereńdy tych źródeł podchodzi także krytycznie, odsłaniając mielizny, niesłusznie zredukowane do czyjegoś poglądu interpretacje czy pojawiające się braki dotychczasowych analiz.

Takie podejście wymaga rzecz jasna metanarracyjnej zmiany w stosunku do relacji (a w istocie do negowania relacji) między myślą aktualnej teorii i historią myśli w jej wcześniejszych przejawach (Witkowski, 2018, s. 48).

Otrzymujemy w tej rozprawie filozoficzną interesującą argumentację zjawisk, które znane są w naukach o wychowaniu od dawna, więc może nie będą dla każdego, kto ich nie zna, naddatkiem czy wstrząsem, ale niewątpliwie staną się potwierdzeniem odston kategorii kluczowych dla zrozumienia procesu (samo-)kształcenia. To, co Witkowski odkrywa u Whiteheada, znane jest dydaktykom od lat, a mam tu na uwadze to, co on określa mianem ontologii zdarzeniowości, pisząc o podmiocie edukacji:

Sama jakość gotowości do niezbędnego tu otwarcia siebie na spotkanie rozumiane jako zespolenie wspólnotowe w poczuciu wagi wysiłku do podjęcia we współdziałaniu, zależy od długotrwałego dążenia w zadaniu przekraczania siebie i chłonięcia nowych impulsów poddawanych przetworzeniom emocjonalnym (Witkowski, 2018, s. 32),

i co określane jest w języku niemieckim jako *Bildsamkeit*, a po polsku – „wychowalność” (zob.: Benner, 2008; Maliszewski, Stępkowski, Śliwerski, 2019; Śliwerski, 2012).

Jeśli stworzona przez pedagoga sytuacja edukacyjna staje się dla wychowanka okazją do przeżycia nowego doświadczenia, a więc gdy dochodzi do spotkania w pełnym tego słowa znaczeniu, to następuje subiektywne doznanie jego

sensu, wartości, przyczyniając się do rozwoju, wzrostu własnej osobowości. Nie się ono z sobą

[...] przemianę sytuacyjną w sensie osiągnięcia gotowości do konstituowania nowego impulsu podmiotowego integrowanego w splocie z innymi, wcześniej stanowiącymi ogniwa „historii życia” jednostki (Witkowski, 2024, s. 34).

Myśli tego humanisty wręcz ośmielały nadzieję na znalezienie w nich nowych akcentów, intrygowały swoją transaktualnością, wywoływały zachwyt, rozbuźdzały wyobraźnię, potencjał twórczego myślenia bez potrzeby rozstrzygania, czy któraś z jego idei czy koncepcji jest słuszna. Przypomina to konstruktywistyczną zasadę Jerome S. Brunera, by czytając czyjeś dzieła, wychodzić poza dostarczoną w nich wiedzę, a tym samym, by myśleć poza poglądami Whiteheada. Narracja L. Witkowskiego przybiera w wielu miejscach autoetnograficzny i introspekcyjny charakter. Dzieli się on bowiem z czytelnikami nie tylko tym, jak sam zmagał się z tekstem uczonego, ale i własnymi emocjami, jakie wzbudzały w nim niektóre zwroty, idee, podejścia Whiteheada do analizowanych fenomenów.

Jednak zamiast toczyć spory interpretacyjne wolę skupiać się tu dalej na samodzielnej lekturze proponującej akcenty bardziej otwarte na myślenie o edukacji niż u większości polskich czytelników Whiteheada (Witkowski, 2024, s. 118).

Znakomicie, że L. Witkowski przywołuje znaczenie recenzji Johna Deweya dotyczące ukazujących się w latach 30. XX wieku rozpraw filozoficznych Whiteheada, choć – jak konstatuje – amerykański filozof i pedagog nie wy dobył z myśli angielskiego uczonego wartości dla myślenia pedagogicznego i działania edukacyjnego.

Najciekawsze bywają sugestie najpierw zaskakujące, szerzące ferment, czy pokazujące coś niosącego ściśle uwypuklenie jakiejś perspektywy widzenia i rozumienia zjawisk, wydawałoby się wcześniej już znanych i opisanych, a w nowym wydaniu uzyskujących paradoksalny (a więc zrywający z poziomem mniemań i opinii) sposób ujmowania zjawisk, do których wcześniej dominujące spojrzenie nie było odnoszone (Witkowski, 2024, s. 75).

Kosmologia, astrofizyka w jego wydaniu jednak jest już jedynie historią, co nie znaczy, że nie można podziwiać go za myślenie wyprzedzające wizje istnienia człowieka we wszechświecie.

W przypadku odniesień do pedagogii Marii Montessori ów uczonego nie rozumiał jednak wagi jej odkrycia, toteż można jedynie odnotować, że nie była mu ona obca. Podobnie z pedagogiką pragmatyzmu Deweya, co trafnie a krytycznie zdekonstruował w jego pracach L. Witkowski. Intuicje Whiteheada i interpretacje zdarzeń edukacyjnych były znacznie wcześniej rozpoznane przez Roberta Baden-Powella (1938), Montessori (2014; 2019), ale także Ellen Key (1928) i kolejnych pedagogów nowego wychowania (Szymański, 1992). Mam nadzieję, że znajdzie się wydawca w Polsce, który przetłumaczy na język polski i opublikuje tekst Whiteheada „The Aim of Education”, skoro zdaniem L. Witkowskiego po-

winien być „[...] traktowany jako wręcz klasyczny czy kanoniczny dla pedagogiki” (Witkowski, 2024, s. 223).

Obawiam się, że rozprawa nie będzie chętnie czytana przez młode pokolenie, które jest przyzwyczajone do skrótowego, powierzchownego rejestru zdażeń, wiadomości, ale nie do niego jest ona adresowana. Wymaga bowiem czytania w literaturze naukowej, znajomości klasycznych nurtów i (meta-)teorii współczesnej humanistyki, by wydobyć z erudycyjnego labiryntu jej analiz te kategorie, które pozwolą na dostrzeżenie podejścia relacyjnego, organicznego i procesualnego do działań także edukacyjnych. Nie o filozofię samego Whiteheada tu chodzi, ale o to, w czym może jej odczytanie stać się wydarzeniem kulturowym dla czytelnika książki L. Witkowskiego.

Autor zachęca do zanurzenia się w jego sposobie myślenia, ale nie po to, by się mu poddać, tylko podjąć próbę zderzenia z niedostrzeżaną tradycją myśli, która musi unikać negatywnych przedzałożeń, kiedy ją poznajemy.

Warto pamiętać w punkcie wyjścia próby aplikacji rozważań Whiteheada do teorii pedagogicznej, że autor ten uczulał na to, że „krytyka teorii nie zaczyna się od pytania, czy jest ona prawdziwa czy fałszywa. Polega ona na rozpoznaniu jej zakresu użytecznego zastosowania i jej nieprzydatności poza tym zakresem” (Witkowski, 2024, s. 147).

Dzieło L. Witkowskiego ma swoje słabe miejsca, jakże typowe dla jego pisarstwa. Męczące jest wielokrotne powtarzanie tych samych kwestii, ponowne wyjaśnianie tego, o czym pisał w innym rozdziale tej pracy, co sprawia, że być może lepiej one zapiszą się komuś w pamięci, ale nie tworzą one naddatku rozwojowego, nie przyczyniają się do wytworzenia sobie nowego ogniwa *procesu własnego „współwzrastania”* czy *(w)zrostu* (Witkowski, 2024, s. 254). Być może wynika to z akceptacji podejścia Deleuze’a i Guattariego do pytania „co to jest filozofia”, które

[...] polega na wykorzystaniu inspiracji z Whiteheada, aby budować „pedagogikę pojęć” wymagającą powstawania zdarzeń znaczących w relacji z uczestnikami procesu oddziaływania, jeśli ten nie ma być dla nich jałowy i degradowany zarazem (Witkowski, 2024, s. 236).

Peregrynacja Witkowskiego po literaturze filozoficznej, odnoszonej do stanu rozwoju myśli naukowej od XVII wieku, w tym także historii socjologicznych teorii, pozwala prześledzić zmieniającą się w toku dziejów historię recepcji myśli tak oryginalnego filozofa, tropy jej przywołań przez kolejne pokolenia filozofów, dzięki czemu można odnieść je do współczesnego stanu wiedzy. Rozproszony zakres recepcji różnych jego idei, pojęć, koncepcji zarazem potwierdza, że ma ona zróżnicowane źródła analiz i własne konstrukcje metafizyczne, metateoretyczne. Ciekawe są egzemplifikacje „atraktorów” i blokad nie tylko wśród polskich odniesień do Whiteheada.

Podejście Whiteheada może być negowane bądź spływane ze względu na sztywną perspektywę odbiorcy, zamkniętego we własnych ramach interpretacyjnych i odrzucającego

z góry całość ze względu na naruszenie jakiegoś istotnego składnika jego interesowności badawczej (Witkowski, 2024, s. 366).

Dlatego tak ważne jest w badaniach myśli klasyków humanistyki krytyczne analizowanie jej recepcji, by dostrzec inne impulsy, jakie ona uruchomiła u innych badaczy. Jak cytuje Witkowski za Bertrande Russelllem, takie odczytanie może stanowić „przebudzenie z «dogmatycznej drzemki»” (Witkowski, 2024, s. 286), czy za Ervinem Laszlo – pozwala ujawniać i tym sposobem umożliwiać krytykę i doskonalenie czyjejs filozofii (Witkowski, 2024, s. 292).

Nie ulega wątpliwości, że rozprawa L. Witkowskiego wpisuje się w znaczący zasób współczesnej pedagogiki ogólnej, w tym filozofii edukacji. Jak pisze w zakończeniu jej autor, jest on

[...] uwikłana w trwający nadal organiczny proces integrowania – wymagającego dalszego i szersze go wysiłku monograficznego – idei i tropów służących do odślaniania aspektów filozofii edukacji i pedagogiki filozoficznej jednocześnie w bogatym narracyjnie i wielowymiarowym dyskursie rozważań Whiteheada (Witkowski, 2024, s. 451).

Wprawdzie odniesień do pedagogiki i edukacji nie ma tu zbyt wiele, ale to dobrze, bo każdy z pedagogów powinien studiować bogactwo myśli filozoficznej i społecznej oraz jej recepcji nie tylko angielskiego uczonego, ale także kolejnych generacji wielkich myślicieli, których odczytanie przywoływali w wymiarze międzynarodowym w swoich studiach biograficznych m.in. Czesław Kupisiewicz i Irena Wojnar (1995; Kupisiewicz, 2000). Lech Witkowski z pokorą przyznaje, że:

[...] szereg wyzwań nie zostało jeszcze podjętych przeze mnie wystarczająco, ani tym bardziej wykorzystanych dla wnikliwszego przebiccia się przez masę stanowisk, która utrudnia przedarcie się w pracach nad tunelem udrażniającym racjonalność czy wręcz rozumność postaw pedagogicznych i szerzej – jakości samokształcenia na ogromnym polu humanistyki jako gleby symbolicznej dla radzenia sobie z kulturą i naturą. Pozostają także do podjęcia rozważania czysto teoretyczne, dotyczące kategorii „procesu” czy „relacji”, które często są dopiero w punkcie wyjścia bez szerszej konfrontacji z Whiteheadem właśnie (Witkowski, 2024, s.456).

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## Zasady przygotowywania publikacji

### I. Wymagania podstawowe

1. Dokument powinien zostać dostarczony w postaci elektronicznej (adres mailowy: pe@ujd.edu.pl) w pliku typu „doc” lub „docx” (program Word).
2. Format: A4 standardowego maszynopisu (marginesy: 25 mm), czcionka Times New Roman, 12 punktów, odstęp 1,5 wiersza.
3. Stopień pisma w materiałach uzupełniających (tabele, przypisy, podpisy) powinien być o 2 punkty mniejszy od stopnia pisma tekstu głównego (10 pkt). Maksymalna szerokość tabel i rysunków to 12,5 cm przy układzie pionowym i 18 cm przy układzie poziomym.
4. Imię i nazwisko autora w lewym górnym rogu, poniżej afiliacja; tytuł tekstu wyśrodkowany i wytłuszczony.
5. Do artykułu należy dołączyć: jego streszczenie w języku polskim i angielskim oraz słowa kluczowe (maksymalnie 5 terminów) w języku polskim i angielskim.
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7. Przy wykorzystaniu jakichkolwiek materiałów pochodzących z innych publikacji należy stosować się do przepisów wynikających z prawa autorskiego.

### II. Tekst główny

1. Akapity należy rozpoczynać wcięciem ustawionym jednakowo dla całego dokumentu (za pomocą linijki górnej bądź w oknie formatowania akapitu).
2. Dokładne **cytaty** wprowadza się za pomocą cudzysłowów „drukarskich”. Cytat w cytacie oznacza się cudzysłowem «francuskim». Cudzysłów francuski należy wstawiać z tabeli znaków (polecenie: wstaw symbol). Można też stosować oddzielny akapit o mniejszym stopniu pisma.
3. Omawianą leksykę zapisuje się pochyłą odmianą czcionki (*kursywą*).
4. Odmianą pochyłą (*kursywą*) zapisuje się ponadto: tytuły dzieł drukowanych (*O dobrej i złej polszczyźnie, Hamlet*), wtrącenia obcojęzyczne (*à propos, ex lege*), łacińskie nazwy systematyczne (*Corvus corvus*), włoskie terminy muzyczne (*legato*).
5. Partie tekstu można wyróżniać przez **pogrubienie** lub r o z s t r z e l e n i e. Nie stosuje się wyróżnienia poprzez podkreślenie. Należy również unikać łączenia **kilku rodzajów** wyróżnień. Wyróżnienia powinny być stosowane jednolicie i konsekwentnie w obrębie danej pracy.

### III. Zasady podawania informacji bibliograficznej

1. Obowiązuje styl APA. W tekście umieszcza się odsyłacze bibliograficzne, na końcu artykułu – bibliografię.
2. Odsyłacz bibliograficzny w tekście składa się z umieszczonego w nawiasie okrągłym nazwiska autora i daty wydania źródła, oddzielonych przecinkiem, np. (Łukaszewicz, 2005).

W przypadku dokładnych cytatów podaje się też numer strony oddzielony od roku wydania przecinkiem, np. (Łukaszewicz, 2005, s. 74). Jeśli kilka prac tego samego autora opublikowano w tym samym roku, należy po dacie dodać litery „a”, „b”, „c” (bez spacji).

3. Nie stosuje się formy tamże/ibidem. Nazwisko autora podaje się za każdym razem. Prace dwóch autorów zapisuje się z przywołaniem obu nazwisk (Prigogine, Stenger, 1990). Prace 3–5 autorów: w pierwszym przywołaniu podaje się wszystkie nazwiska, w kolejnych tylko pierwsze i formułę „i in.” Prace sześciu i więcej autorów: zarówno w pierwszym, jak i kolejnych przywołaniach podaje się tylko nazwisko pierwszego autora i formułę „i in.”.

## IV. Przykłady opisu bibliograficznego

### 1. Monografia

Klus-Stańska, D. (2010). *Dydaktyka wobec chaosu pojęć i zdarzeń*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie ŻAK.

Bandura, A. (1973). *Aggression: A social learning analysis*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

### 2. Artykuł w pracy zbiorowej lub wydawnictwie nieperiodycznym

Bakuła, K. (2006). Efekt motyla, swobodnie mówiąc. W: K. Bakuła, D. Heck (red.), *Efekt motyla: humaniści wobec teorii chaosu* (s. 24–78). Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego.

Smetana, J. (1991). Adolescents' and mothers' evaluations of justifications for conflicts. W: R. Paikoff (red.), *Shared views in the family during adolescence: New directions for child development* (s. 252–273). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

### 3. Praca pod redakcją

Bakuła, K., Heck, D. (red.). (2006). *Efekt motyla. Humanisci wobec teorii chaosu*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego.

Paikoff, R. (red.), *Shared views in the family during adolescence: New directions for child development*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

### 4. Artykuł w czasopiśmie

Serafin, K. (2013). Aksjologiczny wymiar tożsamości podmiotu osobowego w ujęciu Marii Gołaszewskiej. *Świdnickie Studia Teologiczne*, 10, 319–331.

De Wied, M., Branje, S., Meeus, W. (2007). Empathy and conflict resolution in friendship relations among adolescents. *Aggressive Behavior*, 33(1), 48–55. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/ab.20166>.

Jeśli artykuł posiada numer DOI, należy podać go na końcu opisu bibliograficznego (po kropce), w formie aktywnego hiperlinku.

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2. Format: A4 standard typescript (margins: 25 mm), Times New Roman, 12 points, 1.5 line spacing.
3. The font size in supplementary materials (tables, footnotes, captions) should be 2 points lower than the font size of the main text (10 points). The maximum width of tables and figures is 12.5 cm vertically and 18 cm horizontally.
4. Author's name in the upper left corner, affiliation below; the text's title is centred and bold.
5. The article should be accompanied by: its summary in Polish and English and keywords (maximum 5 (five) terms) in Polish and English.
6. The author himself prepares summaries in Polish and English. The outlines should be a shortened version of the article. Each attached abstract should not be longer than 200 words. The article's title should be placed above the text of the abstract (if the abstract is in English, the title should also be translated into English).
7. When using any materials from other publications, the provisions of copyright law must be observed.

### II. Main text

1. Paragraphs should be started with indentation set the same for the entire document (using the top ruler or in the paragraph formatting window).
2. Exact quotations are entered using "print" quotation marks. In addition, a reference within a quote is marked with «French» quotation marks. French quotation marks should be inserted from the character table (command: insert symbol). You can also use a separate paragraph with a smaller font size.
3. The lexicon in question is written in italics (*italics*).
4. The following items are also written in *italics*: titles of printed works (*O dobrej i złej polszczyźnie, Hamlet*), foreign-language insertions (*à propos, ex lege*), systematic Latin names (*Corvus corvus*), Italian musical terms (*legato*).
5. Parts of the text may be distinguished by making them **bold** or s p a c e d o u t . Emphasis by underlining is not used. You should also avoid combining **several types** of distinctions. Instead, distinctions should be applied uniformly and consistently within a given work.

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the case of exact quotations, the page number is also given, separated from the year of publication by a comma, e.g. (Łukaszewicz, 2005, p. 74). If several works by the same author were published in the same year, add the letters "a", "b", and "c" (without spaces) after the date.

3. The form *ibidem*/*ibidem* is not used. Instead, the name of the author is given each time. Works by two authors are listed with both names mentioned (Prigogine, Stenger, 1990). Works by 3–5 authors: in the first citation, all names are given; in subsequent citations, only the first and the formula "et al." Works by six or more authors: in both the first and following citations, only the name of the first author and the formula "et al." are given.

## IV. Examples of bibliographic description

### 1. Monograph

Klus-Stańska, D. (2010). *Dydaktyka wobec chaosu pojęć i zdarzeń*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie ŻAK.

Bandura, A. (1973). *Aggression: A social learning analysis*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

### 2. An article in a collective work or non-periodical publication

Bakuła, K. (2006). Efekt motyla, swobodnie mówiąc. In: K. Bakuła, D. Heck (eds.), *Efekt motyla: humaniści wobec teorii chaosu* (pp. 24–78). Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego.

Smetana, J. (1991). Adolescents' and mothers' evaluations of justifications for conflicts. In: R. Paikoff (ed.), *Shared views in the family during adolescence: New directions for child development* (pp. 252–273). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

### 3. Edited work

Bakuła, K., Heck, D. (eds.). (2006). *Efekt motyla: humaniści wobec teorii chaosu*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego.

Paikoff, R., (ed.), *Shared views in the family during adolescence: New directions for child development*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

### 4. Journal article

Serafin, K. (2013). Aksjologiczny wymiar tożsamości podmiotu osobowego w ujęciu Marii Gołaszewskiej. *Świdnickie Studia Teologiczne*, 10, 319–331.

De Wied, M., Branje, S., Meeus, W. (2007). Empathy and conflict resolution in friendship relations among adolescents. *Aggressive Behavior*, 33(1), 48–55. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/ab.20166>.

If the article has a DOI number, it should be given at the end of the bibliographic description (after a period) in the form of an active hyperlink.