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THE EARLY EDUCATION TEACHER FACING THE ISSUE OF
THANATOLOGY*

Introduction: Including elements of thanatological education in early education is a necessary aspect of upbringing. Reaching the end of one's life, the needs of a dying person and of his loved ones – these are difficult subjects, giving rise to strong, negative emotions. In the modern world, the experience of death has unfortunately become much closer, often also personally painful. The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have caused a significant worsening of mental functioning in children as well as adults. Thanatological education at the stage of classes I–III in elementary school is therefore a difficult task, often overpassing the capabilities of even the most experienced and talented teachers.

Research Aim: The article presents the subject of thanatological education as a challenge for the early education teacher, on the basis of subject literature, and the study's purpose was to present the preparation of early education teachers in this area on the basis of their self-evaluation and to conduct a diagnosis of these competencies with reference to work experience on the basis of our own research.

Method: In the research, use was made of a diagnostic survey, with the questionnaire technique and an online questionnaire (Google Forms). For analysis of the study material, elements of descriptive statistics were used.

Results: Research results have indicated that most early education teachers do not possess sufficient competencies in the area of thanatological education, and for half of them, the subject of death is a difficult topic of conversation with children. At the same time, teachers realize the need to support a pupil suffering after the loss of a close person and declare that they offer help in this matter.

Conclusions: The subject of death is everywhere present. The early education teacher should be aware that a conversation about dying is a very difficult, delicate subject for the *young* child. It is often related to dramatic events and stirs negative emotions in pupils. The teacher should have knowledge in the matter of thanatology, with skills and ease of conversation on this level; he should demonstrate sensitivity, tact and empathy towards the pupil in mourning. Therefore,

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it is suggested that thanatological education be included in the program of pedagogical studies. It has become necessary to consciously perceive the role and place of thanatological education as one of the necessary elements of early school education.

Keywords: thanatological education, thanato-pedagogy, early education teacher

*Death is never at the right time or place
– too fast, too early, too sudden.
It strikes after work, before bathing, after dinner.
It comes on a Thursday, while it could have on Saturday.
It doesn't ask, doesn't inform nor discuss.
It comes and leaves pain behind.
Pain which can only be consoled by memories.*

(unknown author)

INTRODUCTION

The stage of early education, as a fundamental level of development, has particular importance in the personality development of pupils. In his/her didactic-educational work, the contemporary teacher of early education must, therefore, deal with many difficult forms of activity in this sphere. One of these issues, not included in standards of teacher training, avoided in school practice as a subject of educational reflection, is the broadly understood concept of death.

Nearing the end of life, the needs of the dying person and of his/her loved ones – these are difficult subjects, stirring strong, negative emotions. In the modern world, the experience of death has unfortunately become much closer, and frequently also painfully personal. The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have led to a considerable worsening in the mental functioning of children as well as adults. Additionally, in our modern times, death is treated as a sort of taboo. The taboo-like treatment of death is favoured by current social-cultural tendencies generating the opinion that we should speak of life, health and beauty, and not about something so unpleasant as death and dying. The prevalence of such opinions is also evident in Polish education. In schools one does not discuss death with pupils, pedagogic faculties offer no classes in the area of thanato-pedagogy, i.e. disciplines concerned with the process of educational guidance regarding death, suffering and dying from the youngest ages (Grzybowski, 2009).

However, every teacher may unexpectedly find himself in a situation of having to teach a pupil with a fatal illness, to support an orphaned child, to offer guidance in a situation of suicide or natural death of a peer, or to limit the psychological effects of a catastrophe caused by an impersonal fate or by a guilty person (Nieroba et al., 2010). A characteristic feature of the teaching profession is that he/she

takes responsibility for the life and broadly understood health of their pupils, so the early education teacher should have the ability to provide support to a child in difficult circumstances, in going through their own mourning, but also in helping others close to them. And this awareness should be the key to perceiving thanatological education as a challenge for the teacher of a *young child*.

Thanato-pedagogy is a relatively young inter-disciplinary subdiscipline of the pedagogical sciences. Grzybowski (2009, p. 8) states that it is “educational guidance on (co-)suffering, (co-)illness and (co-)dying”. Meanwhile, Binnebesel (2013, p. 251) defines thanato-pedagogy as knowledge “about educating with awareness of the mortality that is part of human nature, based on the fundamental principle of respect for the dignity of each human being and the inviolable and *a priori* value of each human life”. Historically, in its narrow meaning, thanato-pedagogy “refers to assistance for people directly affected by the experience of death – thus, its close relation to hospice care and palliative medicine” (Sztobryn-Bochomulska, 2017, p. 58). It seems, however, that the role of thanato-pedagogic activities in practice is not only that of crisis intervention during the last moments of a child’s or parent’s life, but comprehensive and long-term support of an individual’s personal development through greater awareness and individual understanding of their own mortality; only then, living with the perspective of the inevitable end of life, can one achieve a full and true existence (cf. Zdunik, 2021).

As noted by Sztobryn-Bochomulska (2017, p. 160), “thanatological education, whose main purpose is building a person’s ability to perceive death in a mature manner (their own and others), in essence is a form of shaping the human being, manifesting and developing humanness on the way to obtaining certain educational experiences regarding the phenomenon of death”. According to Zamarian (2015, pp. 75–76), these experiences should lead “to the undertaking of effort to understand oneself (the finiteness of one’s existence, the current manner of living regarding one’s own death and that of others), as well as the world in which one is (the mortality of other beings and other possible ways of living regarding one’s death and that of others), and in consequence – to a sort of existential transformation that is the result of a conscious decision regarding the manner of living with regard to death”.

It is difficult to find an appropriate time to introduce a discussion on the concept of death with pupils. A frequent manner of thinking among teachers is that a given problem – a terminally ill pupil, the sudden death of his parents, brother, sister – is an event that may occur, but to someone else, not in our own surroundings. It may also be considered that this is a matter for a psychologist. However, it is especially the early education teacher, who spends the most time with his pupils, who should take responsibility for the mental health of his pupils. Therefore, he cannot *remain indifferent* to such a subject. If the matter is discussed before a tragedy occurs, it will be easier to return to the issue when it needs to be

faced. Thus, there is an enormous need for educational activities conducted by appropriately prepared early education teachers. The issue of thanato-pedagogy requires of a teacher a high level of sensitivity, tact and subtleness, empathy and emotional balance. Without having this sphere of existential experience basically in order with oneself, it is easy to commit the pedagogic sin of moralising or minimizing difficult and overlapping feelings such as: sadness, desperation, anxiety, anger, rebellion, hope, relief, calmness, as well as the need for sympathy and care, and at the same time for seclusion and a feeling of loneliness in mourning (cf. Godawa, 2021).

A teacher appropriately prepared in the area of thanato-pedagogy may enrich the opinions of his pupils on the subject of suffering and death, broadening the content being the subject of common reflection, based usually on superstitions and stereotypes (Nieroba et al., 2010). Thanato-psychological literature is rich in scientific findings regarding the effects of belief in superstitions and stereotypes concerning death. Their destructive character is clearly evident in the interaction of healthy people with the dying. This very often leads to the alienation and isolation of the dying person because of the belief that it is better not to talk to the dying person about their state of health, or to completely avoid conversations about death and dying; meanwhile, conversations on any other topic become senseless, unpleasant and tiring when faced with the fact of passing away. This is a problem of great significance, as one of the greatest sources of anxiety that the dying person experiences is the fear of dying alone (Ostrowska, 1991). To emphasize the importance of this matter, it is worth mentioning one more stereotype that is strongly ingrained in people's consciousness. It is generally considered that younger children should be isolated from their dying loved ones and kept in a friendly environment while the funeral is taking place. Psychologists have long described the tragic consequences of this conduct on the child's development, as well as the fact that small children often cope better with the fact and image of death and dying than adults (Ostrowska, 1991; Binnebesel, 2017; Sztobryn-Bochomska, 2020). As Kübler-Ross (1996, p. 9) states, "even a child a few years old is aware of what is happening with their dying parent or sibling and one should not hide or overly infantilize this fact". If a teacher has good contact with his pupils, and they feel safe in his company, he may ask the pupils about their experience related to thanatological matters. Of course, this sort of conversation should be conducted in a highly delicate manner, and the participating children should be ensured an atmosphere of intimacy and trust. During such a meeting, it is appropriate for the teacher to use a so-called *therapeutic style* of pedagogic communication, paying particular attention to the pupil's needs (Włodarczyk, 2007).

RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTION

A profound, purposeful reflection on thanatological or even eschatological matters is, therefore, a necessary requirement on the path to becoming a good, mature teacher (Grzybowski, 2009). In this regard, the purpose of the study was to check the preparation of early education teachers in the area of thanatological education, based on their self-evaluation and the conduct of their diagnosis over all their years of professional activity. The framework of interest was determined by three problem areas:

1. Do early education teachers have knowledge of thanatological education and to what extent?
2. Do early education teachers have the ability to talk to students about death and to what extent?
3. Do early education teachers support students experiencing mourning, and to what extent?

RESEARCH METHOD AND SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

In the study, use was made of a diagnostic survey and the technique of a questionnaire. In March 2023, a research survey was conducted online, based on a questionnaire prepared in Google Forms, made available to early education teachers through the social media platform Facebook. Return forms were obtained from 104 respondents. All of the participants had received a Master's degree. On top of that, most of them had finished an additional course of postgraduate studies or a range of courses and training. Among the study subjects, there was not a single man, which is indicative of the particular characteristics of the profession of early education teacher. The largest group of respondents (39%) gave their teaching experience in the range between 16 and 25 years. 35% of the teachers participating in the study were in the range of 6 to 15 years, 16% of respondents had been working more than 25 years, while only 10% were young teachers with less than 5 years' experience.

STATISTICAL DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

The collected research material was subjected to statistical analysis. Elements of descriptive statistics were used (average, percentage). A quantitative representation of the obtained results is reflected in the tables.

RESULTS

Thanatological education is a challenge for all teachers who participate in the path of development and maturation of pupils at a young school age. The essence of thanatological education requires teachers' appropriate knowledge, as well as interpersonal and educational skills in this area. Therefore, in the first part of the questionnaire the teachers were asked if they possess knowledge on the matter of thanatological education.

Table 1.

Self-evaluation of the degree of knowledge on thanatological education of teachers in the context of their work experience

Self-evaluation Category	Work experience in years								Total	
	0-5		6-15		16-25		over 25		N	%
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
High	1	7	3	8	5	12	2	10	8	8
Medium	3	24	5	18	7	18	4	22	21	20
Low	10	69	22	74	28	70	14	68	75	72
Sum	14	100	30	100	40	100	20	100	104	100

Source: Author's own study.

The obtained results indicate that a clear majority of teachers (72%) declare not having knowledge in the area of thanatological education. Only 20% give themselves a medium mark in this matter and 8% a high mark. Similar study results were obtained in all the groups according to work experience.

The next survey question referred to the conversation skills of early education teachers on the subject of death with pupils at a young school age.

Table 2.

Self-evaluation regarding conversation skills of teachers with young school-age pupils on the subject of death in the context of their work experience

Category self-evaluation	Work experience in years								Total	
	0-5		6-15		16-25		over 25		N	%
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
High	8	56	15	50	19	47	9	44	49	47
Medium	4	26	10	34	12	29	3	18	29	28
Low	2	18	5	16	10	24	8	38	26	25
Sum	14	100	30	100	40	100	20	100	104	100

Source: Author's own study.

Analysis of the data given in the tables allows one to conclude that nearly half of the respondents (48%) highly assess their conversation skills on the subject of

death with pupils. Nearly the same percentage of participants described these skills as medium (28%) and low (25%). There were no significant differences in the study results between groups of teachers with experience up to 5 years and from 6 to 15 years, in which around half – 56 and 50%, respectively – are able to conduct conversations on death with pupils, about one third – 26 and 34% – barely, while a clear minority – 18 and 16% – admit that conversations on the subject of death are difficult for them. Teachers working from 16 to 25 years had a somewhat worse result – 47% of them highly assessed their skills at conducting a dialogue on dying; however, 34% admitted being afraid of such conversations. 24% of respondents do not touch on thanatological issues with pupils. It is teachers with the longest work experience who have the greatest problems in the area of conversation with pupils about death. While 44% (9 people) consider that they are capable of conversing with pupils about death, as many as 38% (8 people) do not do so at all.

The last question related to the early education teachers' showing support for pupils in mourning.

Table 3.

Self-evaluation of the degree of showing support to pupils in mourning by teachers in the context of their work experience

Self-evaluation Category	Work experience in years								Total	
	0-5		6-15		16-25		over 25		N	%
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
High	14	100	30	100	33	83	15	74	90	87
Medium	0	0	0	0	7	17	5	26	14	13
Low	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sum	14	100	30	100	40	100	20	100	104	100

Source: Author's own study.

As results from the set of data in Table 3, the teachers highly assess their degree of showing support to pupils undergoing mourning (87%). According to the self-evaluation, all the teachers working no longer than 15 years always support their pupils in difficult life situations. The more experienced teachers also demonstrate interest in their pupils. 33 teachers (83%) whose work experience is between 16 and 25 years highly assessed themselves, as well as 15 teachers (74%) working longer than 25 years. Only 17% of the study participants give themselves a medium mark for their attempts at supporting children – that is seven teachers in the group with professional experience of between 16 and 25 years and five (26%) among the teachers in the group above 25 years. None of them gave a low evaluation of their attempts at ensuring children faced with the death of loved ones

DISCUSSION

The obtained results indicate that the majority of teachers do not have knowledge in the area of thanatological education. This may be caused by the fact that thanatological content is not included in the curriculum of pedagogic studies. It is proposed that this be distinguished as part of another subject developing teachers' competencies in this regard or that it be implemented as a separate subject. The level of knowledge of future teachers in the matter of thanato-pedagogy has also been studied by Nieroba et al. (2010); the obtained results clearly indicate that this knowledge is insufficient. After courses on pedagogy and psychology, students have insufficient knowledge on the pedagogical aspect of the phenomenon of death and dying, and this area is dominated by intuitional knowledge unfortunately based on superstitions and stereotypes. Sielicka (2015, p. 164) states that it seems important

to prepare and popularise methodological materials for teachers, especially those of class groups. These materials should include the following matters: – a range of concepts (terminology, language) referring to dying, death, mourning and support for those in mourning, – examples of model solutions that may appear in school in situations that are thanatologically difficult, – class scenarios, workshops related to thanatological education, a list of tools for work with thanatological content, information on ways of organising educational situations introducing thanatology, – information on the forms of support for a pupil in mourning, places, people, websites, e-mail addresses which may assist the teacher in this support, – a list of publications in which one may find additional assistance in difficult situations.

The analysis of data regarding the conversation skills of early education teachers on the subject of death with pupils at early school age indicated that the respondents do not feel very comfortable while discussing thanatological matters with their pupils. Only slightly less than half of them highly assess themselves in this area, while the others have a medium or low assessment. The obtained results also demonstrate that in the context of the participants' work experience, the group of older teachers had the weakest results. Teachers need to pay more attention to strengthening their interpersonal and guidance skills. They should take part in workshops on interpersonal communication, training courses improving educational skills, especially regarding work with pupils in difficult situations. Cooperation of teachers with school psychologists should also bring satisfying results, as professionals in the area of thanatology could offer support not only to pupils, but also to teachers. Such a possibility of supporting teachers in crisis situations would allow one to ensure an objective view of the situation, a common search for necessary solutions, and psychological support which they also sometimes need, particularly in difficult situations (cf. Sielicka, 2017).

In light of the self-evaluation of early education teachers, the majority of them demonstrate support for pupils experiencing mourning. Especially teachers who have been working a relatively short time in school do not have problems in supporting pupils in this difficult period. Only a small number of those with longer work experience admit to having problems in offering help to children at young school age. The results may also give evidence that teachers working a longer time in the profession are aware of the seriousness of the matter, but also of their insufficient knowledge on the subject of thanato-pedagogy; thus, they do not want to commit a mistake in upbringing regarding the child in a difficult life situation. Among the older teachers, there may also appear certain symptoms of professional burnout, e.g. a gradual loss of interpersonal skills, i.e. empathy, listening, sensitivity, skills of communicating with pupils.

CONCLUSIONS

The recent COVID-19 pandemic and the continuing war in Ukraine have had the effect of the matter of death making its presence felt. The teacher should remember that a conversation about death may touch on difficult personal experiences and stir various emotions in pupils (Szejnach, 2015). He/she should be aware of the delicate nature of this subject and refer to it in a careful, empathetic manner, with respect for the pupil. However, the research results have shown that most early education teachers do not have sufficient knowledge in the area of thanatological education, and for half of them the matter of death is a difficult subject of conversation with children. At the same time, teachers realize the necessity to support the pupil suffering after the loss of a loved one and declare that they offer support in this area. Therefore, it is proposed that thanatological education be introduced in the program of pedagogic studies. This also makes it imperative to consciously perceive the role and place of thanatological education as one of the necessary components of early school education (cf. Nieroba et al., 2010; Sielicka, 2017; Zdunik, 2021).

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Due to the profession of early education teacher being dominated by women and the gender homogeneity of the study sample, the presented study results provide limited knowledge on teachers' preparation to conducting thanatological education between women and men working in this profession. Moreover, the conducted analyses did not consider other demographic-social factors as the surveys were conducted on-line (Google Forms), made available through the social media

platform Facebook. Therefore, the obtained results do not allow one to formulate general conclusions, and the identified problems require further analysis. The presented results may merely constitute a research proposition and inspiration for further studies in this area.

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NAUCZYCIEL WCZESNEJ EDUKACJI W OBLICZU PROBLEMATYKI TANATOLOGICZNEJ

Wprowadzenie: Włączenie elementów edukacji tanatologicznej do edukacji wczesnoszkolnej to niezbędny element wychowania. Dobiegające końca życie, potrzeby człowieka umierającego oraz osób z nim związanych – to trudne tematy, budzące silne, negatywne emocje. We współczesnym świecie doświadczenie śmierci stało się niestety dużo bliższe, nierzadko zaś także boleśnie osobiste. Pandemia COVID-19, wojna na Ukrainie spowodowały znaczne pogorszenie funkcjonowania psychicznego zarówno dzieci, jak i dorosłych. Edukacja tanatologiczna na etapie klas I–III szkoły podstawowej jest zatem trudnym zadaniem, często przerastającym możliwości najbardziej doświadczonych i uzdolnionych nauczycieli.

Cel badań: Artykuł przedstawia tematykę edukacji tanatologicznej jako wyzwania dla nauczyciela wczesnej edukacji na podstawie literatury przedmiotu, a celem badań jest zaprezentowanie przygotowania nauczycieli wczesnej edukacji w tym obszarze na podstawie ich samooceny oraz dokonanie diagnozy tych kompetencji w odniesieniu do stażu pracy na podstawie badań własnych.

Metoda badań: W badaniu posłużono się metodą sondażu diagnostycznego, techniką ankiety oraz kwestionariuszem ankiety online (Google Forms). Do analizy materiału badawczego zastosowano elementy statystyki opisowej.

Wyniki: Wyniki badań pokazały, że większość nauczycieli wczesnej edukacji nie posiada wystarczających kompetencji w obszarze edukacji tanatologicznej, a dla połowy z nich zagadnienie śmierci to trudny temat do rozmowy z dziećmi. Jednocześnie nauczyciele zdają sobie sprawę z potrzeby wsparcia ucznia cierpiącego po stracie bliskiej osoby i deklarują udzielanie mu pomocy w tym zakresie.

Wnioski: Obecność tematu śmierci jest wszechobecna. Nauczyciel wczesnej edukacji powinien mieć świadomość, że rozmowa o umieraniu to bardzo trudny, delikatny temat dla *małego* dziecka. Często dotyczy dramatycznych przeżyć i wzbudza negatywne emocje u uczniów. Nauczyciel powinien posiadać wiedzę na temat edukacji tanatologicznej, umiejętność i łatwość konwersacji na tej płaszczyźnie, okazywać wrażliwość, takt i empatię uczniowi przeżywającemu żalobę. Dlatego postuluje się wprowadzenie do programu studiów pedagogicznych edukacji tanatologicznej. Konieczne staje się świadome postrzeganie roli i miejsca edukacji tanatologicznej jako jednego z niezbędnych składników edukacji wczesnoszkolnej.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja tanatologiczna, tanatopedagogika, nauczyciel wczesnej edukacji