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# The experience of living through a death in a school and an academic environment

## Abstract

About 1,500 children and adolescents aged 13–19 die in Poland yearly. The Constitution of the Republic of Poland, Chapter II Article 70 determines that everyone shall have the right to education and that education to 18 years of age shall be compulsory [1]. Therefore, it is highly probable that some pupils and students will face the death of some of their peers. Research projects conducted among teachers, lecturers in higher education and students describe the experience itself as well as its impact.

**Key words:** thanatopedagogy, psychooncology, education, special pedagogy

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## Introduction

According to GUS (Central Statistical Office) data for the year 2000 in Poland, 22 in every 100,000 children between 1–14 years of age died [2]. In 2009, GUS registered the death of 1,466 adolescents between the ages of 13 and 19 [3]. In the school year 2008/2009, according to data from the Polish Ministry of National Education, there were 29,328 schools of all types, from primary to upper-secondary schools [4]. This information indicates that the probability of a child or a teacher facing the death of a pupil, female or male peer equals 1 to 20, so statistically speaking in every 20<sup>th</sup> school in our country schoolchildren and teachers will come across the event of a death. Taking into account that every single child changes school at least three times on his or her educational path (due to the three-stage system of education [5]) the probability of facing the death of a school friend is even higher. One has to assume that the above

analysis is of a speculative character due to the fact that there exist no official or unofficial collective data on the matter. The research conducted and its initial results presented below, although referring to a relatively small part of the collected analytical material, indicate that the pedagogical environment as well as the pupils themselves are unprepared for the experience of death. However, it has to be underlined that this problem is more often noticed in the academic environment among the lecturers of the pedagogical faculties. Unfortunately, it is not connected with any general educational trends, but rather with the interests of the researchers. The environment of special pedagogues who more and more often include in their analyses and studies the issue of thanatopedagogy in its wide sense, constitutes a very positive factor. Pedagogy itself, however, does not seem to pay attention to thanatological matters and the pedagogy handbooks rarely touch upon the problem of death. Relatively interesting conclusions can be drawn from the content analy-

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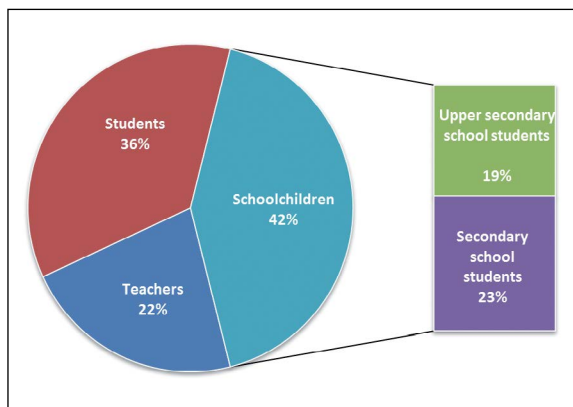
sis of the developmental psychology works, where in most cases the problem of death as an integral part of life is either not discussed at all or marginalized. Another point is that such publications seldom discuss the stages of aging and senility, as if these periods of human life were no longer subject to development and change.

Development, as Brzezińska underlines, applies to the whole period of human life, from childhood to old age [6]. However, in the context under discussion, this truth often seems to be forgotten. It is clearly visible that the topic of death and passing away is constantly neglected by the luminaries of pedagogical and psychological theories, which influences the awareness of pedagogues in consequence. In other countries, as in Poland, publications from the field of thanatopsychology and thanatopedagogy are rare and teachers' training materials unwillingly touch upon the problem of death.

### Materials and method

A research project dedicated to the perception of cancer and death in the pedagogical-educational environment was used in the present analysis. The study was conducted by means of non-probability sampling and included 1,278 people, of whom 458 were students of the pedagogy specialization and a teaching specialization on a continuous five-year Master's degree and Master's degree studies following-up a Bachelor's degree; 282 were teachers in all types of school and lecturers in higher education and 538 were schoolchildren (Figure 1).

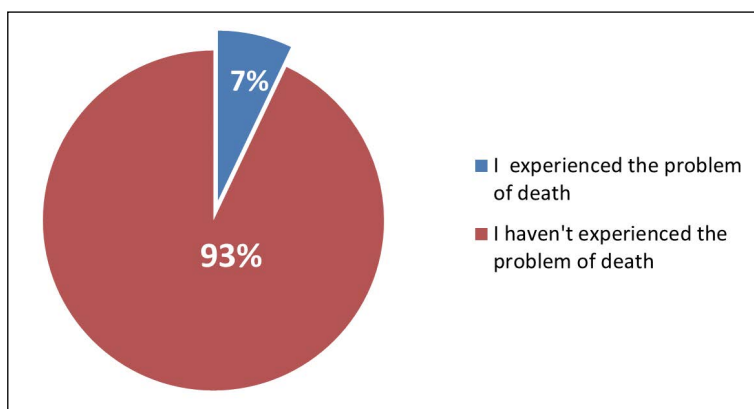
The applied research method was a diagnostic poll, whereas the technique was a questionnaire.



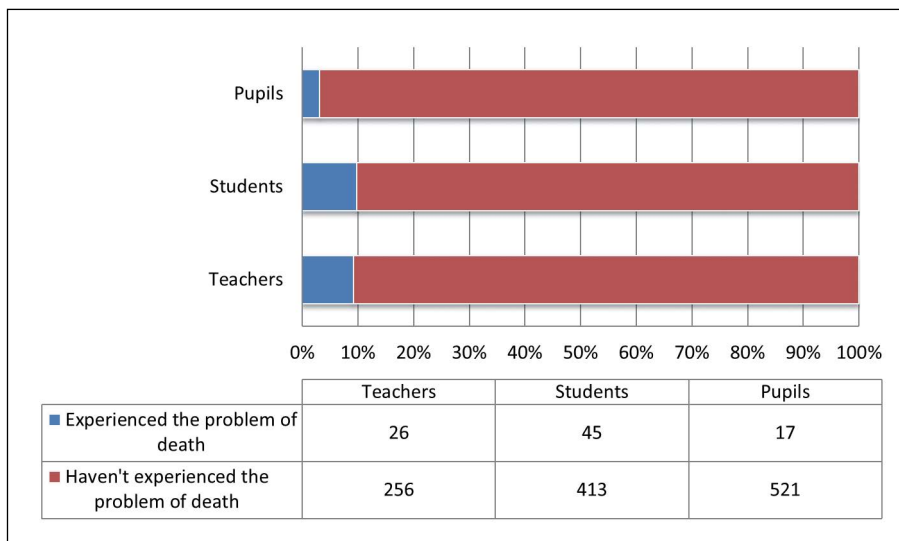
**Figure 1.** The distribution of the percentage values of the surveyed people

The results were based on a qualitative-quantitative analysis, statistically elaborated through a test of statistical compliance<sup>2</sup> (chi-square). Apart from statistical elaborations of the research results, the statements obtained by means of the questionnaire and interview were subjected to qualitative analysis. It is obvious that not all surveyed people gave a justification when answering the questions. However, in the majority of questionnaires justifications for the answers occurred. These were sometimes long and comprehensive as well as very personal reflections.

The analysis involved one set of questions dedicated to relations with a chronically and terminally ill student, a school friend. The total number of questionnaires analysed in this case is 88 because out of all the surveyed people (1,278) only that many admitted to having faced the death of a student — in the case of the teachers and lectures or a peer – in the case of pupils and students (Figures 2 and 3).



**Figure 2.** The percentage distribution indicating the experience of the death of a pupil or peer



**Figure 3:** The percentage distribution concerning the experience of death among the respondents in particular groups<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Relating to the question in the questionnaire for teachers: Have you ever experienced the death of a pupil/student in your teaching career? Relating to the question in the questionnaire for students: Has it ever happened to you that a friend from the same year, faculty or group died? Relating to the question in the questionnaire for pupils: Has it ever happened to you that a friend from school or the same class died?

## Results and discussion

Among the study participants, 88 respondents (i.e. 7%) had experienced the death of a pupil, student or peer.

A detailed analysis of this issue revealed that in the group of teachers, 26 people had faced the death of a student in their career; among students this number amounted to 45; and among pupils of all types of school, 17 individuals stated that they had experienced the death of a class peer. The figure below presents this matter according to the percentage value.

Among the respondents who had experienced death in their education course (as pupils or students) or in their didactic work (as teachers or lecturers), women constituted the majority, that is 88% (77 respondents). Among the teachers (lecturers) the number amounted to 92%, among students to 87% and among pupils the number equalled 82%. The fact that there is a strong feminization of the pedagogy and teaching specializations is the reason why women constitute the majority of the respondents in the above distribution as well as in the whole study [7].

The accepted method of research and outcome interpretation has created an opportunity for conducting, except for statistical analysis *sensu stricto*, an in-depth qualitative analysis relating to con-

cepts found to be difficult to describe in a quantitative context. The results obtained in this way (quantitative-qualitative) give a broader perspective to the aspect not only of 'who', 'when' and 'how', but also 'why' and 'in which way' the given individual went through a particular situation and motivated the choice that was made. Among the respondents describing the experience of death in the course of their education or work, one could point out five types of indication relating to the memories connected with the death of a student or peer. Table 1 below illustrates these results.

The analysis of Table 1 highlights that the experience of death for the greatest number of respondents (90%) was connected with the **feeling of closeness to other people**. The table above indicates, however, that in most cases such indications were given by students (53%) and pupils (39%) but merely 8% of all such indications belong to teachers. This kind of indication demonstrates the difference in the understanding of the experience of closeness in the qualitative analysis. The experience of becoming closer to one another within a group prevailed among pupils and students. It is clearly visible in the example given in the statement by Patrycja from an upper-secondary school: *When Dorota from our class died, we felt somehow closer to one another, Dorota's death at the end of school paradoxically gave us more than any parties and*

**Table 1. The distribution of the percentage value of statements describing the memories of situations connected with death in particular groups<sup>1</sup>**

	Experience of loneliness	Experience of human stupidity and lack of tact	Experience of being closer to other people	Shock and numbness	I treated it as a challenge	other
Teachers	2	12	6	3	25	3
Students	7	31	42	23	0	6
Pupils	3	5	14	10	0	2

<sup>1</sup>Relating to the question in the questionnaire for teachers: If yes (one of your students/pupils died) how do you recall this situation? Relating to the question in the questionnaire for students and pupils: If yes (one of your school friends died) how do you recall this situation?

*trips all together, probably our class will always be together now, the memory of Dorota will still be uniting us.* The students expressed themselves in a similar manner: *The information that Grzegorz had an accident came as a great shock for us, we stood there frozen with horror, but from the perspective of those three years it brought us closer together, now it isn't exactly as it was a week or a month after the accident, but still we are closer to one another. I think we got to know each other better, we didn't feel ashamed of our emotions, we will remember it.*

It is also worth pointing out that in the case of schoolchildren, one more significant difference relating to the analysed indication was visible. It is best exemplified by the words of 16-year-old Mikołaj: *Probably after all this we all understood the true meaning of the word 'class master'. Before Iza passed away our math teacher was our class master and it was so so, well, what was it exactly then? We had those weekly class meetings with her, parent-teacher meetings, sometimes class trips, but now she has become the real CLASS MASTER spelled with capital letters; all the time she was with us, she cried, but she also tried to explain and helped us live through it.* The best conclusion for all the above statements shall be the words of a female pedagogical specialization student, who remembered experiencing the death of her male friend from the same class in upper-secondary school. In her questionnaire she wrote the following statement: *Maybe it's not the right place for such confessions, but I would like you to know and put it in the analysis (PLEASE), only after four years, I regret not straight after graduation, but I believe I still wasn't mature enough to do it then, I would like to say thank you to my class master, because after Paweł's death from cancer, she became a TRUE CLASS MASTER for us. Now, as I finish my studies, looking in perspective, she is the role model of a good educator and as a pedagogue I would like to follow her example.* In the case of the teach-

ers the indication of closeness relates above all to family (four respondents) and to the class (two respondents).

The second most often pointed-out type of indication (55% of the respondents experiencing death) was the statement concerning the **experience of human stupidity and lack of tact**. Among those choosing this type of answer, the nominal majority were students and then the teachers. In the percentage values relating to the groups that had experienced death, this answer was given by 69% of students, 46% of teachers and 29% of pupils. These statements could be categorized as referring to school and university peers, co-workers and teachers (lecturers). In the case of the first group, young people (pupils and students) indicated first of all behaviour which was inadequate to the situation. By this type of indication the respondents often pointed to the emotional immaturity of those people. The most important indication in the pedagogical sense was the aspect of teachers and lecturers. Among pupils, this applied to four out of five children and among students to 11 out of 31 respondents (that is, 35%). The essence of this problem is precisely expressed by a 16-year-old school girl, Ewa: *It's sheer oddity, when we wanted to take part in the funeral of our friend, the headmaster of our school said that she wasn't in our class so no way could we go.*

Seventeen-year-old Patryk wrote: *Our math teacher did the worst thing she could do at that time. We wanted to attend the funeral, to be together with our friends from Class III b, but for her the test was the most important thing, and when she said that we only prey on somebody's misfortune and we only want to avoid taking the test, it was killing us. It was mean.* The students referred in a similar way to some individual lecturers and year advisors or, in a couple of cases, to the deans. Special attention should be paid to the group of priests negatively evaluated both by teachers and students. The refer-

ence to clergymen applies to 11 indications, out of which 10 refer to the celebration of the funeral. There are seven opinions critical of the haste and lack of a priest's commitment and five directly refer to the sermon.<sup>1</sup> Let the utterances of the respondents serve as the illustration. One teacher said: *The priest simply bungled the funeral ceremony; he didn't even make an effort to know the name of the late girl, there was the whole school in the church, and he was the religion teacher at that school, it doesn't need any comment, and then they are surprised that the young people leave the church.* A student: *A priest came and I say nothing of the fact that he didn't know the name of our friend, but he could have prepared himself a bit instead of talking rubbish during the sermon.* There is no need to comment on the above statements because they illustrate the whole problem quite well. In one case the issue discussed referred to a lesson on religion, during which the priest tried to prove to the students that the fact their friend died of cancer was the punishment for his sins: *What shall we think when that ..... said to the class that Michał had to die because that was the consequence of his faults, you have to be a complete prick to say something like that* (17-year-old Damian). One could argue with the form and style of that statement but its essence is rather in the emotions it conveys.

The next indication is the **shock and numbness** resulting from a death experience in a school class or in an academic year. This type of answer was given by 41% of the respondents in that group (36 people), which constituted 59% of pupils, 51% of students and 12% of teachers. In the case of the teachers, this kind of indication referred to a situation in which the death of a pupil (student) was caused by an accident: *It was shocking that only yesterday I saw him in my class* (a secondary school teacher). Whereas, in the case of the pupils and students, there is no such correlation in the statements; exactly the opposite is visible, for it was often indicated (19 respondents) that despite the fact that they knew their friend was ill, they could not accept it: *For the last year we had known that Daria had cancer, we visited her in the hospital, some of us visited her even at home in those last days, but when the teacher said she died, it was a shock for us* (a 16-year-old school girl). *We knew much earlier that Monika was dying, but when it really happened it was a shock, before we couldn't accept it, of course, we accepted the fact that she was ill, but not that she was dying*

<sup>1</sup>Two people pointing to the negative content of the sermon also indicated that the ceremony was conducted in a hurry.

(a second-year Master's degree student following-up a Bachelor's degree).

**The experience of loneliness** was indicated by 14% of the respondents (12 people), whereas on the group level this answer was provided by 8% of the teachers, 16% of the students and 18% of the pupils. The words of a third-year Bachelor's degree student of pedagogy are characteristic of all the groups and express the substance of the analysed indication: *This death revealed the frailty and loneliness of human life, we are doomed to loneliness, because we are always going to lose somebody.* Among the students one could notice a significant inconsistency in the indications, because at the same time four people in this group also pointed to the fact of experiencing closeness. This inconsistency, however, could be explained by the analysis of the statements justifying the choice given. Let this be illustrated by the words of a first-year Master's degree student following-up a Bachelor's degree: *Monika's death filled me with loneliness, emptiness and loss inside, but on the other hand it allowed me to get closer to others.*

The last indication under discussion (referring to the memories connected with death) was the answer given by 100% of the teachers, who underlined that **the death of a pupil was a challenge for them.** Such an answer was given by 96% (25 out of 26) of the teachers in the analysed group. The aim of the present study is the presentation of the general results of the conducted research, so let the words of a 48-year-old primary school teacher serve as the summary of this kind of indication: *It's weird, but I accepted the information about Lukasz's death calmly for I knew that it was exactly the moment when I had to be 100% professional and help my pupils.*

Among the indications studied above, there is only one type that actually has essentially negative implications and correlations because it is hard to agree with the content of the indications concerning human stupidity and lack of tact. The fact that such a tough experience as death can also generate positive feelings, mutual closeness and understanding, instils optimism. The most important in the pedagogical, but not in the statistical (quantitative), context are those indications of pupils which show the positive image of a teacher as a truly supportive leader and pedagogue.

The actions undertaken which were connected with death and evaluated as positive were another issue under analysis, as illustrated in the table below.

An analysis of the answers obtained allowed the creation of two types of indication. The first type

**Table 2. The distribution of the percentage values of the statements referring to the actions connected with death and evaluated as good according to particular groups<sup>1</sup>**

	I tried to keep that person in my memory	I tried to know if the relatives needed any help	Other
Teachers	17	22	2
Students	40	29	4
Pupils	12	8	4

<sup>1</sup>Relating to the question in the questionnaire for teachers: Name five things which you did well in the mentioned situation. Relating to the question in the questionnaire for pupils and students: Name five things which you did well in the mentioned situation.

**Table 3. The distribution of percentages of the answers referring to the actions connected with death and evaluated as wrong in particular groups<sup>1</sup>**

	I didn't take part in the funeral ceremony	I couldn't control my emotions	I wasn't able to help the relatives	Other
Teachers	4	20	8	2
Students	19	40	2	3
Pupils	13	9	0	1

<sup>1</sup>Relating to the question in the questionnaire for teachers: Name five things which you did wrong in the mentioned situation. Relating to the question in the questionnaire for pupils and students: Name five things which you did wrong in the mentioned situation.

refers to the belief that a good thing being done by the person questioned was **keeping the memory of the late student or peer**. Such an indication was given by 78% of the respondents having experienced the event of death; among teachers this indication was chosen by 65% of the group, among students 82% and among pupils 71%. All utterances, regardless of the type of group, included similar content, whereby the respondents underlined that the memory of the dead is significant. Some differences were only to be observed in the direction of the action. Among teachers, except for the memory of the late pupil kept by the teachers themselves, 69% (11 respondents) stated that it is important to take good care of this memory and undertake steps to make their pupils remember the late friend for longer. The second type of indication given by 67% of respondents having experienced the event of death concerned the **help for the relatives of the late person**. The general percentage value in the analysed groups comprised 85% of teachers, 28% of students and 47% of pupils. Among teachers, the sense of obligation prevailed, e.g. *As the class master I had to take care of that* (class master in a secondary school). Additionally important is the fact that out of 22 teachers pointing to the type of indication analysed, 19 (86%) answered the question: *If yes (one of your pupils died), how do you recall this situation?* (see Table 1) by stating that their pu-

pil's death was a challenge for them. While summing up the above analyses, one should pay attention to the striking fact that none of the respondents indicated five issues which they would evaluate well, as was required by the question content. This result demands further reflection and more precise analyses, which will be conducted in detailed research of the study results.

The last question referring to people who had experienced the death of a student or school peer in their professional career as a teacher (lecturer) or as a pupil or student on an education course required an indication of something they had done wrong according to themselves. The answer analysis helped to generate three types of indication (Table 3).

The largest number of respondents — 78% of the surveyed group — conceded that **the inability to control their emotions** connected with the death of a pupil or a friend was wrong. In that group, 77% were teachers, 89% were students and 53% were pupils. Another indication given by 41% of these respondents was the matter of **not taking part in the funeral**. Among the respondents pointing out this aspect were 15% of the teachers in the surveyed group, 42% of the students and 48% of the pupils. The last type of indication was the **inability to help the relatives of the late person** (11%). Among the respondents giving such an answer, there were eight teachers (31%) and two students (4%). From the

group of pupils, however, no one gave the analysed indication.

The analysis conducted offers a preliminary insight into the study results obtained. However, at this point, without going any deeper into the details, which will be included in a separate and broader work, it should be signalled that a section of the teachers made divergent indications when addressing the issue of the positive aspect of their actions and pointing to an interest in the needs of the relatives of the late person (Table 2). This apparent divergence in the indications has a significant meaning in the case of the qualitative analysis of the study results. Those teachers stated that they wanted to help, but yet could not. This deepened their frustration with the whole matter and their attitude towards themselves and was reflected in direct reference to the justifications for the analysed question, as well as indirectly in the statements corresponding to the question about their emotions connected with experiencing the event of death (Table 2) and statements describing them as a professional challenge. *I couldn't cope with that challenge, it surpassed my abilities as a human being, as a class master (class master in a primary school).*

## Summary and conclusions

The presented results, as has been underlined a few times above, form a preliminary analysis of the quite extensive research material collected. The applied quantitative-qualitative method fosters in-depth analyses and reflection and the data presented above indicate explicitly that the event of death experienced by the teachers and their students has had various impacts on their psyche, self-perception and the steps taken. It seems that those initiatives undertaken by the Hospice Foundation which are heading towards the use of straightforward discussion about death, dying and hospices could make it easier for pedagogues, pupils and students to cope with the tough situation of living through loss and mourning. May the indications of teachers and students, the analysis of which will be included in a separate text, concerning their being prepared for the above-described situations serve as a good example. One female second-year Master's degree student following-up a Bachelor's degree (pedagogical specialization) said this: *I think I would cope with the situation, during the special pedagogy classes we talked a lot about it, of course it's only theory, but I know what to expect, where to look for help and I think I know how to behave.* A secondary school

teacher: *I haven't experienced it myself, I can only speak theoretically but after post-graduate studies in oligophrenopedagogy, when during the special pedagogy classes we discussed the topic, it would be easier for me, probably the recently published books could also give me some background, but first of all it isn't taboo any more, people started to talk about it.*

The Foundation mentioned above has taken certain steps aimed at breaking the taboo of talking about death, dying, suffering and illness. It has co-created the social actions *Umierać po ludzku (To die decently)* [8] and *Hospicjum to też życie (Hospice means life as well)* [9], on the basis of which some publishing actions with the purpose of helping those in various environments were undertaken. First, the handbook for teachers and class masters entitled *How to talk with students about the end of life and hospice volunteering*<sup>1</sup> [10] was created. Then came a handbook for lecturers in higher education under the title *Non-medical aspects of hospice-palliative care* [11], which appeared to serve as didactic help in educating students on humanistic faculties. Two more handbooks for people from a hospice environment dedicated to hospice volunteering were published: *The handbook of a hospice volunteer* [12] and *The handbook of a coordinator of hospice volunteering work* [13]. These publications have created a sound basis for deepening knowledge as well as improving abilities. Their content helps to understand problematic situations connected with death and passing away. They also strongly underline the necessity of cooperation between schools, pedagogues and psychologists as well as the people from the hospice environment in its broad meaning. The studies discussed above also point to this aspect. It seems that the final analysis of the whole research will indicate the need for the closer cooperation of pedagogical-psychological environments in education and hospices as well as the necessity for creating and introducing thanatological concepts into those faculties educating teachers, pedagogues and psychologists. Another conclusion also underlines the need for wise teaching about such issues at every school stage with regard to the specific development phases. It seems, however, that the most appropriate summary of the above considerations of the research results should be the words of a teacher

<sup>1</sup>This handbook was published in 2011 in Italy in an altered form: Binnebesel J., Formella Z., Janowicz A., Krakowiak P. (2011) *Parlare di cose serie con i bambini a casa a scuola. La sofferenza e la fine della vita*, LAS-Roma.

taking part in the performance of another research project dedicated to the perception of death: *We feel completely alone with all that, nobody can or is willing to help us in such situations. When we visited Łukasz together with the class, first in the hospital and then at home, somewhere deep in our souls we expected that the hospice psychologist will also take care of us, that the doctor will tell us what is happening, what we should expect, we were also preparing ourselves for this loss and now we are all also mourning, but the difference is that we are alone with that fact, and except for my own emotions, I still have 28 fourteen year olds on my mind.* I guess those words superbly define the goal and the path we as pedagogues, teachers, physicians and psychologists have to **WALK TOGETHER**.

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