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## POLISH PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE MEANING OF „PEACE”

### ROZUMIENIE POJĘCIA „POKÓJ” PRZEZ POLSKIE DZIECI W WIEKU PRZEDSZKOLNYM

**Streszczenie:** W niniejszej pracy przedstawiono rozumienie pojęcia „pokój” przez polskie dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym. Złożoność zagadnienia polega na tym, że w języku polskim słowo „pokój” ma dwa znaczenia: jedno – oznacza pomieszczenie w mieszkaniu, a drugie – brak konfliktów. Przeprowadzono badania na grupie 107 dzieci uczęszczających do 7 przedszkoli (w tym 2 katolickich). Następnie zbadano rozumienie przez przedszkolaki złożoności terminu pokój. Następnie przeprowadzono serię zajęć poświęconych zagadnieniu pokoju na świecie. Niniejsza praca zestawia odpowiedzi i próby definicji pojęcia pokój przez dzieci z różnych typów przedszkoli. Ukazuje, jak otoczenie wpływa na rozwój kompetencji abstrakcyjnego myślenia i rozumienie wartości u dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** pokój, pokój na świecie, dzieci

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**Abstract:** This study presents the understanding of the concept of „peace” by Polish preschool children. The complexity of the issue lies in the fact that in the Polish language, the word „pokój” has two meanings: one refers to a room in a house, and the other to the absence of conflicts (peace). Research was conducted on a group of 107 children attending 7 kindergartens (including 2 Catholic ones). The study examined how preschoolers understand the complexity of the term „peace”. Subsequently, a series of lessons focused on the concept of peace in the world was conducted. This paper compares the responses and attempts to define the concept of peace by children from different types of preschools. It shows how the environment influences the development of abstract thinking skills and understanding of values in preschool-aged children.

**Keywords:** peace, world peace, children

## Introduction

According to Humboldt, each language possesses a unique way of perceiving the external world, becoming a kind of mirror reflecting the extralinguistic reality (Anusiewicz 1995). Weisgerber argues that the linguistic image of the world is an image encapsulated within linguistic structures that organize external reality. Furthermore, the linguistic world picture is a source of knowledge about reality and functions as a mental schema that gathers linguistic content, which is constrained by language and defines the world (Kępa-Figura, 2007). As Bartmiński notes, the functions of the linguistic world picture include not only the interpretation of external reality but also the regulation of human behavior (Bartmiński 1999). Consequently, the image is diverse, reflecting the multiplicity of cultures and languages.

It is worth mentioning that, in order to define linguistic reality, it is necessary to consider how a given society interprets extralinguistic reality. This requires an analysis of both linguistic and cultural content, while simultaneously creating an image that reveals how a representative of particular cultural background defines and perceives an object or concept (Grzegorzczkova 2001).

We can observe the variation in definition in the example of the Polish word „pokój” as analyzed in the study. In Polish, the term „pokój” has two distinct meanings. According to the online Dictionary of the Polish Language PWN „pokój” can be understood as “(the opposite of war): for example, the Budziszyn Peace, the Torun Peace from Polish history”, “a relationship between states that are not at war with each other; also: a situation in which a state, nation, etc. is not at war”; „an agreement to end hostilities between states waging war”. The equivalent of this term in English is the word „peace”. Additionally, the term „pokój” is also defined as „a part of a house, apartment, hotel, office, etc., separated by walls from other rooms, not equipped with a stove and sanitary facilities”. The equivalent of this meaning in English is the word “room”.

The origins of peace thought and peace education trace back deep into the history of philosophy, extending as far as antiquity. From the writings of Hesiod through the Sophist philosophers, the Cynics, the Stoics, and the Epicureans, these thinkers engaged in fundamental inquiry into the causes of armed conflict, the conditions necessary for establishing world peace, and questions concerning cosmopolitan attitudes. Although, the ideas from this period have evolved over the centuries, gaining new interpretations, they have retained their relevance up to the present day (Piejka 2015; Kulska 2019). There remains a prevailing belief that issues of war and peace should be considered primarily within the context of political and historical-cultural conditions shaped by the course of history. While these factors are of great importance, they do not fully capture the complexity of the various aspects affecting the peaceful coexistence of people. Psychological and sociological research, which focuses on trends related to the human psyche and complex social relations, highlights this complexity. Consequently, peace research has been interdisciplinary for several decades (Piejka 2015).

Peace is a concept that is fundamental to the harmonious functioning of societies and human coexistence. Ongoing armed conflicts are shedding new light on the importance of education for peace, particularly in view of the suffering experienced by children who become victims of war. In the past decade, the threat of violence has affected civilians, especially children, in Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, South Sudan, as well as in Yemen, Syria, Sudan, Gaza and Ukraine. According to UNICEF (2023), more than 400 million children currently live in countries affected by war or other violent conflicts. These children are often forced to flee their homes in search of safety, with many remaining displaced for extended periods of time. Some are orphaned or separated from their parents and guardians. More than half of all civilians killed by landmines and explosive remnants of war are children. The verified number of armed attacks harming children has tripled since 2010. The absence of peace-building policies and education risks diminishing public awareness of the impacts of conflict and the need to work towards peace. Over the past century, peace in Europe has begun to erase the memory of war, with only the last living witnesses of World War II able to recall its horrors. As society gradually forgets what life without peace entails, here is a risk that new generations in the globalized world will fail to grasp the true nightmare of war and its destructive consequences. Modern societies, due to the complexity and multidimensionality of their functioning, face numerous challenges. One of the key aspects of education that influences the formation of individuals and future generations is peace education.

The purpose of the article is to present and discuss the results of research on preschool-aged children's understanding of the concept of peace. The article also points out important factors that determine the formation of ideas about peace in children's minds, such as the social context, including family education and preschool experiences.

### **Multidimensionality of the definition of „peace”**

In the context of reflecting on peace, the question of its essence is particularly relevant. It serves as the starting point for identifying the conditions necessary for its realization and considering actions that can contribute to the gradual transformation of this concept into practical aspects of life.

Contemporary researchers refer to two definitions of peace. In the first, more narrow approach (which is also characteristic of preschool children), „peace” is seen as „the absence of war” (Piejka 2015b). This definition of peace refers to relations between states or people that are characterized by the absence of war and conflict.

The second, expanded conception of peace goes well beyond the notion that the absence of armed conflict is a sufficient condition to fully achieve and nurture peace. John Galtung, a Norwegian peace researcher and founder of the Peace Research Institute in Oslo, stressed that the concept of peace should be understood as a process rather than a state. This process involves a wide range of changes not only in international relations, but also in the social structures of individual states. In his view, the creation of peace requires the elimination of various forms of violence (both structural and personal) and the establishment of conditions conducive to the satisfaction of human needs. His approach assumes that building a sense of security is crucial to individual development, both physical and psychological (Galtung 1975).

The theme of peace is an integral part of the teachings of John Paul II (1979, 1987, 1991), who connects this concept to the ethical foundations of social justice (as outlined in the encyclicals „Centesimus Annus” and „Sollicitudo Rei Socialis”), the need to respect human rights, human dignity and solidarity as the basis for building peace (as emphasized in encyclical „Redemptor Hominis”). He also challenged young people to seek common values and build lasting human bonds as the necessary foundation for lasting world peace (John Paul II 2005).

K. Olbrycht, like John Paul II, understands the concept of peace as more than just the absence of war; he emphasizes the importance of dialogue, international cooperation and effective conflict resolution mechanisms in the effort to maintain and promote peace. He describes it as a state of perceived and realistically experienced security (Olbrycht 1999).

The definition of peace is understood broadly and is not limited to the absence of armed conflict. It is seen as a constructive principle regulating human relations. However, due to lack of unanimity on its full scope, discussions on the subject continue (Piejka 2015).

Children, as developing members of society, also strive to understand this important concept. It is significant to them because it influences their behavior and attitudes toward other people. The ways in which children understand peace vary depending on their age, experiences and the culture in which they are raised.

### **Peace as a category of pedagogy**

Considerations of peace have long been present in the field of pedagogy as well. Education for peace has its roots in the pedagogical slogans of the early 20th century, associated with the New Education movement and the Geneva environment. The International Bureau of Education, which has been operating since 1925 as a private NGO under the auspices of the Institute of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the University of Geneva, promoted the principles of education for peace (Piejka 2015; Wojnar 2000).

Italian physician and educator Maria Montessori (2004) considered the education of young generations to be a priority for peace. She highlighted the existing disharmony between the dynamic progress of civilization and the lack of an adequate upbringing to prepare the individual to properly benefit from modernity. She called for changes in the education of children, emphasizing the importance of individuality for personal development and the need to respect the dignity and diversity of each person. She also warned against lack of awareness of the relationship between people and the world, and the danger of misusing civilization's potential, which could lead to total destruction.

According to Montessori, peacebuilding depends on education based on respect for every human being, the formation of an individual's identity and a sense of responsibility for bringing positive change to the world. Montessori stated, "Constructive education for peace cannot be limited to teaching in schools. It is a task that requires the efforts of all humanity" (Montessori 2021, 25). She emphasized the need for a change in humanity, focusing on the inner development of the individual and the formation of a more conscious vision of humanity and the conditions of social coexistence (Montessori 2021).

UNESCO has played an important role in promoting the concept of peace pedagogy, serving as the main promoter of the idea internationally. The organization has emphasized the need for education aimed at building peace through understanding, intercultural dialogue, and respect for diversity. The most quoted sentence on peace is found in the Preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO: „Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed” – a statement fundamental to the goal and value of lasting peace (UNESCO 1945).

UNICEF, as an organization working to resolve conflicts, rebuild conflict-affected communities and provide care and protection for children, operates on the belief that peace is a key element to ensuring the healthy and safe development of children. According to UNICEF, peace education is the process of promoting the knowledge, attitudes as well as values necessary to bring about a change in behavior that will enable younger generations to prevent violence and conflict. However, theory alone is not enough, education also involves practice and the formation of a certain worldview that prioritizes equal human rights regardless

of skin color, gender or status, respects dignity, communicates without verbal and non-verbal violence with people holding different views, avoids hatred and aggression, and promotes tolerance (Mydłowska 2021).

In Poland in the 1980s and 1990s, concepts of „peace pedagogy” were formulated by Bogdan Suchodolski (1997), Irena Wojnar (2000, 2012), Eugenia Anna Wesołowska (Wesołowska 1989, 2003) and Halina Gajdamowicz (Gajdamowicz 1997).

When considering the issue of peace in the context of pedagogy, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of the contribution of Irena Wojnar – a Polish pedagogue who placed great importance on education for peace and the promotion of a culture of peace within a pedagogical context. Her ideas often referred to German peace pedagogy and Italian thinkers, creating a kind of bridge between different pedagogical concepts and traditions. Wojnar emphasized the crucial role of education in building world peace. She believed that school should not only impart knowledge, but also shape attitudes and values that foster peace and human understanding. Her approach focused on actively building relationships based on understanding, respect and dialogue.

There are many ways to build a culture of peace, but achieving this peace ultimately depends on concrete decisions and actions of each individual. It is individuals who create institutions, corporations and political environments, and their participation in peacebuilding relies on their sense of responsibility and courage. The same holds true in the teacher–student relationship, where the teacher has the opportunity to directly influence children and young people and to create a bond with them based on trust, with peace as an integral part of this bond.

The measure of the effectiveness of education for peace is not only the content of peace messages, but also their transfer, understood as the application of acquired knowledge, skills and abilities to new situations, both now and in the future.

### **Assumptions, objectives and ways to implement the study**

Peace is a multidimensional concept that adults often associate with politics, diplomacy and international relations. In the world of children, however, the term can take on other, more direct meanings that reflect their personal experiences.

When conducting research on children’s understanding of the term „peace”, it is important to note that in the Polish language the word „*pokój*”, is a homonym. Homonymy means that one word has different meanings that do not have a logical connection with each other. In this particular case, the Polish word „*pokój*” refers to two distinct spheres of meaning:

1. As a physical space – a room in a building where people rest, sleep, work or spend time.
2. As a state of absence of conflict – ‘*peace*’. This second meaning refers to an abstract state in which there is no war, conflict, strife or unrest. It refers to harmony or a state in which people live in peace and harmony.

The fact that the word „*pokój*” is a homonym (*‘peace’/‘room’*) makes it very challenging to diagnose how children understand the concept. It is important to remember that research with preschool children completely changes the role of the researcher and the researched, bringing many methodological and ethical challenges.

The literature (Rybska & Błaszak 2016; Driver et al. 1985; White & Gunstone 1992; Rubacha 2008) lists several ways of exploring children’s concepts, their understanding of the surrounding world. These include projective techniques (Sęk 1984), concept maps (Novak & Musonda 1991; Sungur et al. 2001), interviews (Osborne & Gilbert 1980), analysis of drawings (Kaczmarzyk 2011, Fleck–Bangert 2001).

The most important principle in research with children is to make them feel safe, both physically and psychologically (Radkowska–Walkowicz & Reimann 2018). The paradigm shift from thinking about research on children – or about children – to thinking about research with children completely changes the perspective of constructing research tools and the methodologies. As M. Radkowska–Walkowicz & M. Reimann wrote, it is „to empower children in the practice of social life by giving them a voice and allowing them to articulate their point of view” (Radkowska–Walkowicz & Reimann 2018, p. 28).

Conducting research also involves assessing the risks and benefits for both the adults (researchers) and the children involved in the research project (Radkowska–Walkowicz & Reimann 2018). In this case, the research had an educational role – it allowed children to expand their knowledge and experiences.

The main research problem was the question: How do children understand the concept of “peace” and “world peace”? We were interested in the children’s conceptualization of peace, both how they depict it in conversation and in drawings. To gather research material, we conducted individual interviews using the technique of unfinished sentences, which is suitable for studying young children. These personal interactions of the subjects with the researchers made it possible to initially identify the subject of the research, specifically, the understanding and definition of the terms “peace” and “world peace”.

In addition, the “Draw and Write” technique, described by Weare and Gray (Weare & Gray 1996), was used as a projective method to analyze drawing in the context of self-expression. This method involved children in drawing verbally describing their own drawings about “peace.” This approach allowed for an exploration of how children gave meaning to life situations and interpreted the world and experiences around them (Weare & Gray 1996).

The research was carried out over three months (September–November 2023) in eight kindergartens – two Catholic and six public. The study included 107 children aged 5–6, with 51 children participating in the pilot study and 56 in the main study. Students of Preschool and Early Childhood Pedagogy at the Academy of Humanities and Economics in Lodz were also involved in collecting data for the study.

Extremely different results were obtained in pilot studies conducted in two Catholic kindergartens (33 subjects) and a public kindergarten (18 subjects). Children from the public kindergarten understood the concept of peace only at the concrete-image level as a room, a space for sleeping or playing. In contrast, 70% of children from Catholic kindergartens showed an understanding of the concept of „peace” and „world peace” in two spheres of meaning: as a room and as a state of absence of war and good relations between people.

The obtained results of the preliminary research prompted the researchers to modify the research strategy. Before conducting the main (representative) research, a series of 3-4 activities on „peace” – understood as tranquility, world peace, absence of war and conflict-free life – were conducted in all kindergartens. During these classes, children took part in various activities, such as imagining a peaceful world, constructing dolls symbolizing peace, and discussing behaviors consistent and inconsistent with peace. Additionally, there were discussions about resolving conflicts peacefully and exploring the topic of using hands to do good in a peaceful world.

The sessions concluded with the creation of an association map of the word „peace.” The activities were mainly inspired by the content in „Living values activities for children ages 3-7” (Tillman & Hsu 2004) and „With the child into the world of values” (Kozłmińska & Olszewska 2007). After these activities, the children created and discussed a mind map on the topic of „peace”, and made individual drawings, which were then analyzed in dialogue with the researchers. This comprehensive research method allowed for a deeper understanding of how children perceive and interpret the concept of „peace,” providing valuable data on their perceptions and ideas about it.

To facilitate the process of children defining the concept of peace, it was decided to supplement the conversation with two more unfinished sentences. During the conversation, the children were encouraged to complete the sentences: „World peace...”; „When there is no peace, it is...”.

Many of the children interviewed mentioned war or the absence of it in the context of peace, which created an opportunity to talk to the children about war. The researchers continued the conversations by asking the children „What is war?”. As J. Maćkiewicz writes, when studying children’s understanding of concepts, it is important to ask not only „what the concept means,” but also „to what category it belongs”. This approach is valuable because children, as they perceive the world around them, notice the relations between concepts, including their similarities and differences (Maćkiewicz 1990, 52).

Through this approach, it was possible to explore how children interpret the world around them and how they form their images and mental concepts of peace. This research strategy also enabled to uncover children’s thoughts about the nature of non-peace and their understanding of the concept of war.



Due to the extensive nature of the collected research material, this article focuses only on a selected portion of the research data, the analysis of children's drawings is not included here.

### **Preschool children's understanding of the Polish term „pokój”**

The first part of the analysis concerns the pilot study conducted in Catholic kindergartens, where children demonstrated a dual understanding of the term „pokój”. First, they interpreted it as a physical room, reflecting their connection to the material world and their daily surroundings, such as *A child's room; My room with a bed; Where one sleeps; A room where one puts things*. Secondly, they understood „pokój” as a general state, free of wars and disagreements, associating it with a sense of peace and harmony, e.g.: *Where one lives and there is peace in heaven; Such a thing as love, friendship; That they do not fight*.

The understanding of the word „pokój” by children attending Catholic kindergartens indicates that they perceive it in two areas of meaning: the physical and multifaceted, including the opposite of war, good human relations, peace of heart. It can be assumed that such mature conceptualization of the concept of „peace” is the result of children's deep immersion in spiritual values. In the Catholic kindergartens where the study was conducted in each age group, the children begin the day with a short prayer.

First of all, preschoolers formulate their own intentions for which they pray, e.g. for mom, for dad, for peace in the world, that there would be no war in Ukraine, that mom would get better, among others. The adult leading the prayer always summarizes the children's words, often rephrasing them briefly, for example: let's pray for peace on earth, so that there are no wars and people love each other; let's pray for peace in the world, so that people can live safely in their homes. This practice can be crucial for enhancing children's understanding of abstract concepts and developing their ability to mentalize, which is important in identifying and naming their own emotions and feelings (Fonagy et al. 2014, Białecka-Pikul 2012; Frith & Frith 2003).

It is noteworthy that no differences were observed in the concept of „pokój” between boys and girls. This suggests that at this age, in an environment with clear spiritual values, children form similar ideas about the essence of „pokój”, seeing it both as a physical place and a state free of conflict.

The children described the concept of „world peace” as: *Love, sharing; There is no war everyone loves each other; They don't beat each other or shoot each other; That is, so that someone doesn't jerk, beat or bite each other; That there is no war in the world; no beating or saying ugly words; That they don't fight in the world and love each other, the world is nice; That there is no war; I don't know* (4 children).

An analysis of children's responses to a question about the concept of „world peace” reveals a deep understanding of the concept, even among the youngest

children. They define „world peace” in terms of emotional and affective states, such as love, absence of conflict, and mutual acceptance. Their responses reflect a desire for harmony, peace and positive human relations on a global scale. The children also associate this concept with the absence of wars, violence as well as the presence of love and respect in relations between people around the world. It is interesting that the children emphasized importance to human relations as a key factor in understanding peace, highlighting their awareness of the importance of good relationships, cooperation and the absence of aggression or conflict as defining elements of peace on a global scale.

A group of surveyed children from Catholic kindergartens provided mature and relevant insights into what can happen in the absence of world peace. Their responses demonstrate a clear understanding of the tensions and negative consequences associated with a lack of peace. The children’s statements highlight the presence of war, violence, and a lack of love and peace as elements that define the state of no peace in the world. Here are some examples of how the children completed the following sentence – *„When there is no peace, there is ...: War, there is no love, they beat each other; There is war; War (5 times); Children are naughty and they beat and bite each other; War and beating, unpleasant and sad; it is very bad. We say ugly words and beat each other; People throw bombs; There is war and people fight for their country; It is war and there is no love”*.

It is worth noting that the children, when responding to the question about the lack of peace, clearly identified it with war. They tried to define the concept of war, describing it as evil, fighting for the country, using weapons. These statements reflect the children’s perception of war as a destructive and violent phenomenon and may suggest their exposure to the topic of violence in various forms within their environment and through the media. These responses provide important insights into their understanding of the concepts of peace and war, demonstrating their sensitivity to the topics of violence and non-peace in the world around them.

At the end of the study, the children’s active participation in conversations about peace and their strong commitment to the topic were observed. The frequency of questions asked by the children and the continuation of the discussions over the following days highlighted their interest in the theme of peace and their desire to understand and deepen their knowledge of the subject. This proves the need to understand peace values and their essence in social life at an early stage of children’s development.

As mentioned earlier, in a pilot study in one kindergarten, where 18 six-year-olds were surveyed, all the children understood „*pokój*” only as a room -a place to sleep, play or store things. There was no other understanding of „*pokój* = peace” meaning a state of calm, harmony, or absence of conflict. The word „room” was understood by the respondents exclusively as: *A room for playing; A room (3 children); Where I have a bed and toys; Hiding things; I don’t know; Such a place where you can play;*

*You can play in it eat breakfast; Someone lives in it; Where you sleep and play; A place where, there are our toys; A thing where you can sleep; No answer (2 children).*

Also, the expression „world peace” (PL: „pokój na świecie”) was a distant and incomprehensible concept in this group of children. Their answers oscillated around concepts such as: *a picnic; nothing bad happens; a house; you keep your own toys; a store?; the world doesn't end; there is no war; we can live, we can play; one room; that it is quiet and nothing happens; a house; a separate room.* This group of children showed difficulty in grasping the abstract concept of peace, focusing mainly on the material or more concrete aspects of the concept.

The main research with a group of 56 kindergarten children was carried out after an approximately two-week break from classes on peace (described above in the research methodology). Following the classes focused on peace, about 60% of children from the public kindergarten demonstrated the ability to define the concept of peace and world peace. The children developed a more complex, abstract understanding of peace, identifying it with the absence of conflict, both in the immediate environment and in the world. Their statements focused on and absence of war, peace and love between people.

The preschoolers said: *There are different understandings of the word „pokój”. The first meaning is „room in the apartment”. The second meaning when there is „no war”; That it is peaceful and I am peaceful; It is peaceful in the world; Such a thing when it is okay, when no one quarrels. It's also at home; How there is no evil and war and how everyone loves each other; How everyone likes each other and doesn't fight”.*

In contrast, nearly 80% of children (of the 56 preschoolers surveyed) associated the phrase „world peace” (“pokój na świecie” in Polish) with the absence of armed conflict. This understanding is reflected in the children's statements, such as: *peace in the world is... That there is no war; It looks like now, people walk on the street, it rains and snows; We can also go abroad; That there is no war (10 children), freedom, nature, they feel good, safe.* Their statements focused on the absence of war, freedom, feelings of security, and positive aspects such as the presence of nature, and people walking freely in the streets. These responses indicate a deeper understanding of peace as a state free of violence and uneasy situations, both at the interpersonal and social levels.

The children provided interesting and mature responses when completing the sentence: : when there is no peace it is ...: *War (35 children); Screaming and a lot of crowded children; War – we have to hide somewhere, e.g. Behind a tree; to another house we have to move; War, it's beating each other for their space, people are not happy; Noise, screams feel that when something falls you can hear it; War, there is no love, they are beating each other; Where people are beating each other; There is war and no one likes each other; Sadness, running away to save themselves, sad that others destroyed their house; War and beating, not nice and sad, it's very bad that there is war, they shoot bombs; War such a thing. That people fight for their country, when there is no war, no one fights and leaves; This is war and there is no*

*love; Not cool. They argue and beat and kill, but I don't know why; Bad and sad; There is chaos; There are domestic wars when they shoot and kill, in Poland there is peace.* These responses suggest that the lack of conceptualization of „peace” among children was largely due to the lack of education on this subject. After participating in activities focused on peace, the children presented well-established, richly varied and interesting definitions of the lack of peace in the world. They demonstrated a deep understanding of the importance of peace issues and their relevance both in everyday life and society. The children pointed out that peace begins among them in kindergarten.

Particularly moving was a conversation with a six-year-old girl who metaphorically expressed the lack of hope and chaos associated with the absence of peace, referring to the disappearance of the world, she said: *„when there is a war the world disappears and is no longer there, there is nothing.”* She also referred to wars in Africa, starving and dying children on the street. Later in the day she returned to the topic, approaching her teacher to discuss the images of war seen in the media. This girl exhibits a high level of empathy, far exceeding what is typical for her age. Her empathy is evident in her everyday interactions, where she shows deep understanding and sensitivity to the emotions of others. This is reflected in her willingness to provide support and show interest and concern for others—behaviors that go beyond what is commonly observed in children her age.

During the dialogue about peace, the children often referred to their own group experiences, pointing out the lack of harmony in relationships among themselves. They mention the use of ugly words, aggressive behavior and difficulties in spending time together. This indicates that children's understanding of „peace” is closely associated with „tranquility” in the immediate environment. When addressing the topic of peace with children, it is important to focus on what is closest to them, which includes discussions about peace, the absence of conflict and the ability to cooperate.

Several children frequently referred to the lack of peace within their group, expressing it in statements such as: *we say ugly words and fight each other, there are children who are naughty and beat and bite each other, it is impossible to play.* This understanding of peace is natural at this developmental stage, an example of concretized thinking.

The dialogue on peace naturally led to children's statements about war, which they were able to describe more easily. Their statements focused on the perception of war as an armed conflict, referring to world events, such as Russia's conflict with Ukraine, or images related to fighting, the use of weapons and the loss of human life. These narratives highlight the complexity of children's understanding of such difficult topics. They very vividly captured that war is: *Where people are fighting; Russia wants to beat Ukraine; Tanks and soldiers; Fighting for the country; Shooting with a gun; When people and dogs die; Where people are fighting; When they shoot and kill, there is peace in Poland; Evil; That everyone is fighting for one country;*

*Shooting with bombs and guns; Fighting with rifles, tanks with jets; People have to kill each other, is that they shoot a gun at each other; Knights fight.* In the perception of children, the lack of „peace” is war. They listed various aspects of such a situation, including anxiety, the need to flee, and the destructive impact of conflict on daily life.

During a conversation with one of the girls who, due to illness, was unable to participate in the activities on the topic of peace, she expressed her unawareness of the definition of peace by saying: „*I don't know, because no one explained it to me*”. Her interest and openness to this discussion suggested an important need to satisfy children's curiosity and exploration of peace. The thoughtful statements made by the children demonstrate their sensitivity to the topics of peace and war, underscoring the need for appropriate dialogue and education on these issues.

### Discussion of study results

The group of public kindergarten children surveyed understood the word „pokój” only in the sense of a room, while the expression „world peace” was a distant, ambiguous concept for them, which they did not define correctly.

In contrast, the children surveyed from Catholic kindergartens demonstrated an adequate understanding of the concept of „peace” and „world peace”. They had mature and relevant insights into what could occur in the absence of world peace, reflecting a clear understanding of the tensions and negative consequences associated with a lack of peace.

In the group of children where the activities were conducted on the topic, 60% did not associate the word „pokój” solely with a physical room. Instead, they understood „peace” as a general state, free from wars and conflicts, and linked it to a sense of calm and harmony.

Both Polish children from Catholic kindergartens and those who participated in the classes demonstrated varying levels of understanding of the term „pokój,” as shown by the different degrees of detail in their verbalizations. The children explained the meaning of the term „peace” by referring to specific situations from preschool and family life, for example, *we don't fight, such a thing as love and friendship*. For them, peace was a state in which those around them interact, resolve disputes peacefully, and respect rules and laws. As J. Trempała writes, „A child knows more and can do more than we think” (Trempała 2012, 10). Preschool children are much more competent than suggested by the research and theory of J. Piaget, and are able to conceptualize concepts (Donaldson 1986, Gelman 1994). Depending on the quality of information they receive, children form more or less scientific representations of the world in their minds.

According to E. Marti, in an approach based on the theory of J. Piaget, the process of the child's knowledge construction occurs within the child at the intraindividual level. At the initial stage, this process manifests itself through interactions between

the child's internal world and the environment, evident in the child's activities. Later, this process moves to the child's inner sphere, where representations of the world are formed in the child's mind. During cognitive development, this internal image of the world becomes visible through social interactions. Marti emphasizes that the internal construction of a child's representations of the world influences their behavior in social interactions (Marti 1996).

In the cognitivist perspective, it is important to emphasize the personal meaning of knowledge, which involves recognizing the subjective understanding of the meaning of concepts in the minds of children and the ways they interpret reality. A natural consequence is the abandonment of the so-called „one right answer” approach and providing children with opportunities to engage in dialogues. These dialogues facilitate the transfer of personal experiences into categories of knowledge. Thus, it can be assumed that during the activities and dialogues with the researchers about the concept of the room, children actively created various cognitive structures in their minds, organizing information about the surrounding world. These structures have certain formal characteristics that describe the relationship between the different elements of information: the level of complexity, abstractness, openness and usefulness of information. Changes in these structures result from the process of accumulating experiences, which become integrated into the child's internal cognitive structures (Piaget 1929, 1930, 2009; Bruner 1974).

The environment in which a child grows up plays a significant role in shaping his understanding of the concept of peace. Family, school, media and personal experiences influence how a child understands the world and human interactions. The research results indicate that children who engage with values and dialogue with adults about peace form mental representations of „peace” much more quickly (Donaldson 1986). After participating in activities on the topic of peace, children who perceived a cognitive discrepancy attempted to modify their existing images of the world, so that the new experiences would better align with those already present in their minds. By modifying their own cognitive schemas to accommodate these new experiences, they achieve a state of equilibrium, and in this way, the child constructs an image of the world in their mind, fostering cognitive development (Piaget 2009).

Asking the child questions like: „How do you understand this”, „Describe how it looks like”, helps them build their knowledge on a topic. In this way the child adapts existing cognitive structures to minimize discrepancies between their own perception of the world and the perspectives of others, particularly adults (Vasta et al. 1995). Internal cognitive structures develop to expand the range of information, the ability to form abstract concepts, incorporate new information and become more operative. Environmental factors influence the pace and nature of this development (Vasta et al. 1995).

Studies conducted by Polish researchers show that children from families where they experience violence, or strong conflicts may have a distorted understanding of peace or difficulty perceiving it as a stable and positive state (Zawadzka 2018). On the other hand, children raised in an environment that promotes peaceful conflict resolution often show greater empathy and social competence (Jasińska 2020).

### **Conclusions and recommendations for pedagogical practice**

In defining the concept of „peace,” it is important to determine what it means for people, and to what extent the general term reflects their understanding of it. This is crucial because how „peace” is understood determines whether it becomes a motivating factor for future actions. When describing children’s understanding, it is important to determine what features children consider important and to what extent their understanding aligns with the meaning of the concept in general language (Wiśniewska–Kin 2007).

The misconception among teachers that children are too young to address the topics of peace or war leads to the underestimation of their cognitive abilities and limits their development. It is necessary to listen to the voice of children, treat them as equal partners in dialogue, draw on their experiences, and avoid limiting their involvement from the start.

It is important for children not only to understand the concept of „peace” as a reflection of their inner world and experiences but, to internalize the value of peace, assimilating and incorporating it into their own system of views. Polish literature in this area emphasizes the role of education and the home environment in shaping the concept of peace in the young children. The responsibility for imparting universal values of peace to children rests with both parents and society as a whole (Marek 2021).

The lack of awareness of this difficult but important topic of „peace” expressed by some children shows the existence of a gap in their understanding and knowledge of the subject. Their interest and openness to this discussion suggest an important need to address and explore peace issues with children to satisfy their curiosity and deepen their understanding.

In conclusion, it is evident that children have the ability to categorize and grasp concepts at different levels of abstraction. This is demonstrated by their differing expressions, with the most frequently repeated ideas being the most ingrained in their consciousness. The lack of abstract understanding of the concept of „peace,” especially in the context of peace on a global scale, is not simply due to their cognitive abilities or mentalizing skills. Rather, it results from a lack of addressing the topic of peace as part of preschool conversations and activities. Some teachers may mistakenly consider the topic too difficult for children and avoid it during educational activities. The teacher’s role is to understand how children interpret different concepts and how they perceive the world, recognizing that there is no

single „correct” answer. The primary goal of education is to create an environment that encourages frequent conversations and discussions, allowing children to bring their personal experiences to the preschool setting.

Children who had the opportunity to participate in activities on the topic of „peace” demonstrated a clear and deep understanding of the concept. Their interpretations were comprehensive and full of understanding of various aspects of peace. This suggests the importance of creating opportunities for children to develop their thinking and construct their own concepts and definitions, even on topics that are considered challenging for young children. Creating such an educational atmosphere can promote a deep understanding of the concept of „peace” and support the development of positive values from an early age.

In summary, the process of understanding the concept of „peace” from the perspective of children is essential for planning and implementing pedagogical work. It is important to assess the individual needs of the child and adapt the content and methods of instruction accordingly.

It is important to reflect a shift in education from the concept of “education for peace”, to “education for peacebuilding” (Cabedo–Mas 2020; after Piejka 2021, 42). Education for peacebuilding changes the perspective of the activities undertaken with children. As Agnieszka Piejka writes, “Incorporating openness and unfinishedness into the very nature of peacebuilding activities is, in my opinion, essential if we want to boldly and responsibly define tasks in this area, to discover further commitments and opportunities” (Piejka 2021, 43).

As Wojnar notes, it is crucial that peace is emphasized as an element of education in all curricula, particularly because it is increasingly overlooked in today’s consumerist world, where there is a crisis of universal values. The state of peace in modern times should be understood as harmony in all areas of life, not merely as a „state without war” (Wojnar 2000a). However, it is not sufficient to include peace-related topics in educational programs; a deeper revision of methods, forms of work, and the experience of peace in family and social life is also necessary. As Gandhi said, „If you want real peace in the world, start with the children” (Gandhi 2020, 12). Education aimed at building a culture of peace should encompass knowledge, values and behavior.

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