

Religion Lessons and Existential Questions of Children at the Early School Stage. Case Study of a Gifted, Asynchronously Developing Child

Lekcje religii a pytania egzystencjalne dziecka na etapie wczesnoszkolnym. Studium przypadku ucznia zdolnego, rozwijającego się asynchronicznie

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Abstract: In a dynamically developing world, undergoing continuous cultural, social, economic and political changes, people for centuries now have been looking for answers to basic questions relating to the human lifecycle of birth – existence – death. Children, who are in the identity-shaping phase, experience even more acutely than adults lack of a well-established structure of thinking in terms of the continuity of their being, the meaning and purpose of life, their own death and that of those close to them. They should, therefore, be given an opportunity to find their own way in this respect during school catechesis. This article presents the importance of school catechesis in the search for answers to existential questions posed by primary school children.

The presented research was based on a case study of an 8-year-old boy, a second-grade student, whose existential functioning in the period of two years of schooling was determined by school catechesis. It is characterized by continuity in the questions posed by the child as well as a change in experiencing the sense of the lack of meaning and purpose of life, death, searching for and evaluating the elements of good and evil. In the first year of catechesis, the boy “eased” his fear of the end of human life, and in the second year he realized that the source of answers to the questions bothering him were values, principles and examples promoted in the Catholic faith and the Church community.

Keywords: didactics, early childhood education, existentialism, school catechesis, identity

Abstrakt: W dynamicznie rozwijającym się świecie, pełnym zmian kulturowo-społecznych, gospodarczych i politycznych człowiek od wieków poszukuje odpowiedzi na podstawowe pytania odnoszące się do: narodzin – trwania – śmierci. Dziecko, kształtując swoją tożsamość, mocniej doświadcza braku ugruntowanej struktury myślenia w zakresie ciągłości jego bytu, sensu i celu życia, śmierci własnej i bliskich mu osób. Powinno mu się umożliwić odnalezienie własnej drogi w tym zakresie w takich przestrzeniach jak szkolna lekcja religii, której znaczenie w poszukiwaniu odpowiedzi przez ucznia klasy II szkoły podstawowej na pytania egzystencjalne przedstawiono w niniejszym artykule.

Badania oparto na indywidualnym studium przypadku: 8-letniego chłopca, ucznia klasy II, którego funkcjonowanie egzystencjalne zostało zdeterminowane przez szkolną lekcję religii w okresie dwóch lat nauki. Charakteryzuje się ono: ciągłością w konstruowanych pytaniach oraz zmianą w doświadczaniu: poczucia braku sensu i celu życia, śmierci, poszukiwania i wartościowania elementów dobra i zła. W pierwszym roku szkolnej lekcji religii chłopiec „wyciszył” strach przed końcem bytu ludzkiego, a w drugim uświadomił sobie, że źródłem odpowiedzi na nurtujące go pytania są: wartości, zasady i przykłady zawarte w wierze katolickiej i wspólnocie Kościoła.

Słowa kluczowe: dydaktyka, edukacja wczesnoszkolna, egzystencjalizm, szkolna lekcja religii, tożsamość



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INTRODUCTION

All humans, regardless of their age, search for the meaning of their life and face problems related to the process of birth – existence – death. People shape their identity through experiences, recognition and internalization of values which includes search for answers to existential questions. The family as well as the broader society with which people interact through school, or cultural and church communities provide the base for those processes. Children tend to feel the sense of lack of meaning and loss more acutely than adults, that is why, in the process of growth they should experience as many situations as possible that would allow them to build their identity (Wadowski 2003, 177).

The aim of this article is to present research results on the role of school catechesis in the search for answers to existential questions posed by a second-grade primary school student. The core curriculum as well as didactic methods used in teaching religion at schools should focus on helping children to structure their existential world. Analysis of this process took into account both continuity and changes – the student's questions and answers before he started religious education at school and, later, during his education in grades 1 and 2.

The research used a case study of an 8-year-old boy. In line with the adopted research problem, the following areas of research have been distinguished: existential questions asked by the respondent in the home environment before starting religious education at school and existential questions asked by the respondent under the influence of both the content and methods used during school religion lessons in grades 1 and 2.

The research was conducted based on a partially guided, problem-focused interview (Rubacha 2016, 279) and observations of the boy in the home environment. The interviews were conducted at the respondent's place of residence and at school (first recorded on a dictaphone and then transcribed). They were conducted with the child, the child's parents, and a religion teacher (7 years of experience in grades 1-3; 22 years of experience in teaching religion). During interviews with adults (three meetings with each of them), emphasis was put on creating a relaxed atmosphere conducive to free expression of thoughts and opinions (Palka 2006, 102). Meetings with the respondent were organized in his room (6 meetings). Detailed research problems were reflected in the instructions prepared for the interviews – 10 open

questions with respondent's particulars and instructions. The observation was carried out using a questionnaire form with distinguished research areas congruent with the research problem (2-3 hours three times a month).

Data collection and analysis were carried out using a coding system (Pilch and Bauman 2001, 252): no./child (I/C); no./mother (II/M); no./father (III/F); no./religion teacher (IV/RT). Observation included preparation of notes related to the area of observation. This gave basis for creating a raw text, which was then shortened with a view to specifying analytical categories. Each category was assigned appropriate meaning, which allowed to locate the variables specified in the research problem (in the process of stratified sampling). The units (after their identification) were analysed to extract the information contained in the collected texts, which constitute the context of the data. The method of analytical induction was used to verify the data, based on comparing hypothetical data with all encountered cases (Rubacha 2016, 282).

1. CASE STUDY

The method of individual cases was adopted in the undertaken scientific investigations, as the method of research focusing on the analysis of the fate of an individual “entangled,” as Tadeusz Pilch puts it, in characteristic educational situations. Pilch points to this method as the one suitable for analyses of specific educational phenomena, taking into account individual human biographies. It allows the researcher to pursue a diagnosis of a given case or phenomenon in order to initiate therapeutic activities (Pilch and Bauman 2001, 78).

Robert Stake (1997, 127) considers case study as an approach aimed at identifying the complexity, uniqueness and exceptionality of a single case, which constitutes an integrated whole in various contexts. It is therefore a system with clearly marked boundaries – patterns.

In line with the above methodological assumptions, the characteristics of the research case are as follows: the respondent is a 2nd grade, primary school student in the Archdiocese of Warmia – he started school in 2022. He was born in 2015 and has no siblings. The boy was diagnosed at a psychological and pedagogical clinic as a gifted child developing asynchronously. Such students differ in their reception of the reality and, despite having extensive knowledge or skills, they are characterized by dysfunctions or

disorders obstructing their learning. They require special support in the process of upbringing and teaching, and their susceptibility to social and emotional trauma is determined by the level of development of their intellectual abilities. They are distinguished by a high potential for creative achievements, but at the same time they reveal problems related to speech, emotions and language disorders (Limont 2020, 19-21).

The respondent experiences adaptation difficulties and has a negative attitude towards school duties. He is characterized by a high degree of emotional sensitivity, which results in over-responsiveness to stimuli and information received from the environment as compared to his peers. He often gets distracted, and his thoughts escape into the world of dreams. At the same time, he is characterised by a slow pace of work and a low level of understanding the teacher's instructions. He also demonstrates a rebellious attitude towards performed tasks, which is manifested by such statements as: "I can't read it; I can't calculate it" – I/C. The boy is able to do exercises correctly, providing there is complete silence in the room. The respondent does not like school "because it is boring" – I/C. The child lacks motivation to take on school challenges. He is also convinced of his lack of skills and of his "being worse than his colleagues" – I/C.

The boy's abilities fall into the scope of artistic and linguistic competences. The respondent's language skills were examined by specialists from a non-public language school. The diagnosis revealed that the child has listening and speaking skills, can engage in a conversation and use grammar at the level of the 8th grade of primary school. The boy is interested in English language and culture. He willingly engages in conversations with children from other countries via online games.

Moreover, the respondent has achievements in art competitions. In the years 2022-2024, he won 4 school competitions for children from grades 1-3, and in grade 3, he took the second place for children from grades 1-4. He had achievements at the provincial level: the second place in a photography competition for children from grades 1-6 and the third place in an art competition for children from grades 1-3.

2. EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS IN CHILDREN'S LIVES

Human curiosity spurs all individuals to search for the meaning and purposefulness of the entities surrounding them. Aleksandra Pałka (2022, 28) emphasizes that this curiosity is most vividly manifested in childhood, and it has a tendency to disappear during the period of growth. According to Jaspers, this type of search is conditioned by people's ability to reflect on themselves and on the entire world around them (Jaspers 1999, 29).

Existential questions, defined as philosophical questions, express the meaning and goals of human life, determine the perception of death – the transience of existence and its fragility. They refer to the issues of moral good and evil, faith, existence of God, as well as the origins of all things (Szczepka-Pustkowska 2019, 52). Reflection on the meaning of life, including the sense of the lack of it, constitute a vital problem at both social and individual level and are related to human multidimensional, natural life activity. People make a conscious effort to satisfy their needs which they emancipate by asking questions and searching for answers (Meissner-Łozińska 2011, 70).

Attitudes aimed at shaping the meaning of life and the need for meaning in life appear already in childhood. It is when children formulate questions relating to the essence and genesis of things, phenomena and their own person. Their natural interest in the world result in their noticing everything that is obvious to adults. It is also a period when children experience frequent crises of values, as well as a significant weakening of sense of the meaning of life and a simultaneous need to search for that meaning (Kozubska and Ziółkowski 2012, 110).

Reflection on death, suffering, and the transience of human life often appears in exceptional moments, but also in difficult ones, in borderline situations and at turning points in the life of an individual. In various periods of life, human functioning is determined, to a higher or lower degree, by the prospect of death regardless of the fact whether this death is perceived as the end of life or as the beginning of the next, new stage of existence. It is due to the fact that the meaning of individual experiences occurring in the process of human life cannot be explained unless its end – death – is known (Yalom 2008, 11).

Death gives rise to questions about the meaning of human existence and allows us to understand that everything has a beginning and an end. People who are aware of the transience of life are able to

attach value to experienced events, while acceptance of death is a sign of maturity. Even though death constitutes a certain mystery and arouses the feelings of fear and helplessness, everyone must come to terms with it in order to obtain answers to basic philosophical questions. Children start their inquiries related to those questions in the stage of their early development, but it is most often unnoticed by parents or guardians. By facing death, children enter the path that leads to maturity and readiness to create their own hierarchy of values. Only then is the child able to move from the way of being in everyday life – being delighted with things in the world, in the state of escape, or even artificial peace – to ontological being – authentic life, to wondering at things as they are in their essence (Heidegger 1994, 18).

Jan Wadowski states that “all questions, including questions posed by science and metaphysics, are existential questions, although existential questions are, par excellence, those asked by man in the face of ultimate matters” (2003, 168). The most difficult existential questions cannot be resolved by natural reason. Wadowski creates a “network” of existential questions that result from all spheres of human research, i.e.: World, Man, God. He states that ancient times “dealt with the world, the Middle Ages dealt with God, and modern times deal with man” (Wadowski 2003, 169). Wadowski also points to the one-sided approach of particular epochs as regards the raised issues, at the same time acknowledging the bases for such an approach. In his reflections, Wadowski emphasizes that “when we deal with the world, there inevitably arises the question of God, and the same is true when we deal with man” (Wadowski 2003, 169). It is beyond question that each epoch developed its own procedures, including ways and means of solving existential questions. Moreover, all epochs pointed out the solutions to “one’s own most important questions” (Wadowski 2003, 169).

The issue of existential questions is emphasized in the *Fides et Ratio* Encyclical, in which truth occupies the central place. John Paul II points out that every human existence is guided by questions such as: Who am I?; Where have I come from?; Where am I going? Why is there evil?; What is there after this life? (John Paul II 1998, 26). The encyclical constitutes the rooting of existential questions in the ultimate truth. Man strives for truth through various paths: love and wisdom. No one can avoid searching for answers to the issues that concern him (John Paul II 1998, 27). Religious faith is an existential value in which the correlation of meaning and truth plays an important role. Truth, however, is a unique gift

inscribed in God's Revelation, necessary in shaping the sense of the meaning of human life. In the order of cognition, an individual formulates questions relating to himself, his identity. People constitute a mystery to themselves, and a wish to solve that mystery inspires them to constantly search for answers relating to the most important areas of their existence. The process of discovering meaning takes place through a gradual pursuit of truth, present on the philosophical and anthropological level, covering the issues of meaning, purposefulness, and nature. Each human person must exceed his or her own cognitive limitations (Kopiec 2020).

Truth enables people to achieve moral (existential) certainty allowing them to make decisions in fundamental aspects of their lives (Kopiec 2020). This cognition determines all important dimensions of human existence, such as: feelings, body, world of spiritual and emotional values, will, intelligence, senses. Truth, then, is an interpretation of being – the meaning of everything that lives – contained in the being itself through a specific message. Faith is here an appeal and a certain proposal of an answer (Kopiec 2020).

According to Matthew Limpan, Ann Margaret Sharp and Fredrick Oscanyan (1997, 30) the world of children's imagination comprises concern, or inquiry focused on understanding and meaning, as well as active discovery of what can give meaning to their experiences. When obtaining answers to existential questions, children make an effort to interpret and understand them – they are ready for the unknown. In a way, they organize their world of experiences, thoughts and reasoning. All human beings are born, live and then die and those fundamental facts entirely define their philosophical questions. It is a lifelong process, and it may vary depending on the method of abstraction, ways of searching for or types of references specific to a given individual. Children feel the lack of meaning in existence more acutely than adults, they are open to the unknown and therefore more actively pursue experiences that could fill this void. They pursue this goal in scientific, symbolic and, most importantly, philosophical spaces (Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan 1997, 53-54).

Even though children's world of references is not fully formed in relation to their life experiences, they formulate metaphysical, logical and ethical questions. It is as if they demanded an explanation of what was incomprehensible for them due to their lack of knowledge, certainty or ability to give meaning

to the “incomprehensible.” Looking for possibilities (circumstances) of interpretation, they delve into the planes such as religion that would explain their doubts and answer their questions (Szczepska-Pustkowska 2019, 55).

While observing his own children, Erich Stern (1957) noticed the dynamics with which they asked questions relating to everything that exists, including God – a supernatural being. At the same time, he highlighted the ease of generalizations made by children in their philosophical investigations focused on religion and God’s place in the world.

Research on existential questions and philosophy in the life of children and adolescents, initiated in Sweden in the second half of the 20th century, showed that young people, regardless of age, are looking for answers to several basic philosophical issues such as race, sexuality, love, responsibility, but also suffering, values and norms, as well as trust, guilt and punishment, community and loneliness, as well as good and evil. The research also indicated that existential reflection is an important aspect in the lives of preschool and early school children (Szczepska-Pustkowska 2019, 55-58).

3. ASSUMPTIONS OF SCHOOL RELIGION LESSONS IN GRADES 1-2

School religion lessons in Poland are conducted based on the core curriculum: approved on June 8, 2018 at the 379th Plenary Meeting of the Polish Episcopal Conference; prepared on the basis of: the Act of December 14, 2016 – Law on School Education (Dz.U. poz.59) and the Act of December 14, 2016 – Provisions introducing the Act – Law on School Education (Dz.U. poz. 60).

Religious education in primary schools should pursue didactic, practical, educational and formational goals. Its most important aspects include acquisition of religious knowledge by students and gradual incorporation into their own experiences and thoughts, values and moral norms, as well as conscious deepening of understanding of themselves as moral individuals, responsible for their humanity in many fields of moral life (*Core curriculum* 2018, 29-30). In turn, in *Curriculum for the Roman Catholic Religious Instruction in Kindergartens and Schools (Roma Catholic Religion Curriculum* 2018, 39-60) specifies the catechetical goals characterized in Table 1.

Table 1. Catechetical goals for grades 1-2

Grade 1	Grade 2
introduction into the life of the class – catechetical community of God’s children	representation of God who out of His love desires man’s salvation
familiarization with secular and Christian greetings	familiarization with the reality of sin and the truth about the Incarnation
building an attitude of respect towards other people; the Holy Scriptures; the sign of the Cross; church – the house of God	showing the fullest revelation of God in Christ and of Jesus – the promised Saviour
shaping appropriate peer interactions and contacts between children and adults	showing Jesus present in the events of the liturgical year; the value of His words, deeds and love visible in the forgiveness of sins
realizing the truth about the closeness and presence of God in the life of every person	indicating the saving significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection
getting acquainted with God’s commandments; the biblical account of creation; the meaning of signs, gestures and liturgical symbols	presenting Jesus’ public ministry and the pattern of prayer based on His example
gaining awareness of God’s presence in the liturgy and His words in the Holy Scriptures	explanation of the royal dignity of Jesus, revealing the will of God, transmitting it in the attitudes of listening to the word of God, trusting and confessing faith in God
awareness of the value of the Church community – the family of God; forming attitudes of trust towards: Mary – the Mother of Christ and every person; God – leading people along the path of commandments	presentation of the Holy sacraments – the ways of Christ’s presence and the saving truth about Jesus’ activity in the Church and His second coming
indicating the importance of school in creating interpersonal relationships and working on the ability to assess behaviour in accordance with the commandments	outlining the value of Jesus’ teaching (in the Church, which is His kingdom) and the Decalogue leading to Christian life
presenting the value of family in human life; the importance and place of the child in the family – the dignity of the child of God	awareness of the importance of God’s grace needed for salvation and ways of caring for life in a state of grace and love for one’s neighbour – the consequences of God’s love
shaping proper bonds in the family and Church community – showing prayer as a conversation with God	pointing to the value of human freedom and the consequences of human choices – faith which is the basis of Christian behaviour
presentation of God: the Creator of all things; as a merciful Father and His goodness	discussion of human conscience and the way of shaping it as well as obligations towards oneself and others

awareness of God's love during the act of creation – the source of human life	presentation of the truth about the Holy Spirit and His role in the Church: openness to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. and prayers for His gifts
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Source: own study based on *Program nauczania religii rzymskokatolickiej w przedszkolach i szkołach* 2018, 39-60.

Catechetical goals are complemented by the methods of education, which are subject to criteria relating to the ideas and situations catechized. Selection of those methods is based on: the level of intellectual development and well-being of students, varying levels of knowledge, varying levels of faith, religious experiences, responsibility for others, and the way of communicating and establishing relationships. The personality of the catechist (professional experience, gender, age), personal approach to the truths of faith and appropriate adaptation of didactic methods to the content of the lesson play an important role here (Łabendowicz, 2019, 29).

Religion teachers in grades 1-2 use didactic methods and techniques corresponding to early school education, i.e., description, guided conversation, storytelling, artwork, educational and physical play, staging, singing, presentation, simple didactic games, playing short film fragments, performance. In the 2nd grade, short lecture methods are introduced together with activities aimed at attempts to imitate personal role models in minor life tasks, using comparisons from students' everyday lives to convey information preparing for confession and First Holy Communion. (*Roman Catholic Religion Curriculum* 2018, 59). The task of religion teachers is to lead students to a closer contact with God using the described forms and methods of work, and to inspire and enhance their internal motivation. At the same time, they help children initiate their dialogue of love with God, and shape their conscious activity, independence and commitment (Łabendowicz, 2019, 29-33).

In grade 1, the adopted forms and methods of work are aimed at developing children's beliefs and attitudes as well as a sense of trust and readiness to offer the gift to giving themselves to others. They enable children to develop their ability to plead and joyfully participate in the life of the school, family and parish community, as well as effectively assimilate the value of admiration for the work of God – the Creator. In grade 2, the aim is to imitate Jesus Christ, develop the attitudes of faith and prayer, and bring

out joy in students. School religion lessons, which have an evangelizing function, should be continued in the student’s family environment (*Roman Catholic Religion Curriculum* 2018, 60).

The core curriculum and teaching methods are reflected in the education program, which in grade 1 of primary school focuses on inspiring children to find traces of God in various situations and environments, i.e. at school, family home, Church and nature. In grade 2, the curriculum focuses on helping students to discover the selfless and unconditional love of God, to which children should be open. It reveals God’s closeness to man and highlights the fact that God, out of love, sent Jesus Christ His Son. It also supports students in making friends with Jesus and discovering His gifts (Table 2).

Table 2. Curriculum for grades 1-2

Grade 1	Grade 2
Community as the student’s closest environment	Jesus, the beloved Son of God the Father
Basic places and signs that appear on the path of a believer	Jesus is man’s best friend
Man – a being created by God	Jesus is the creator of the Kingdom of Love
The world of angels – gifts of God’s love	Jesus inviting children to work in His Kingdom
God who loves man and cares for His family, to which every man belongs	A gift for believers in the form of the Holy Spirit.
Occasional catechesis	
the most important events in the liturgical year – a symbol of common celebration	

Source: study based on *Program nauczania religii rzymskokatolickiej w przedszkolach i szkołach* 2018, 41-60.

In the Archdiocese of Warmia, the first grade uses a textbook titled *In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* and in grade II: *This is my beloved Son*. The books are complemented with a calendar of Church and state holidays, worksheets, a songbook and occasional catechesis – relating to the cultural specifics of the region (Table 3).

Table 3. Textbooks grades 1-2

Grade 1	Grade 2
Part I	
Let’s meet in our community	Jesus the Beloved Son of God the Father
God created me	Jesus is my Friend
God loves me	
Part II	

God cares for me	Jesus my King
We are God's family	The Kingdom of Jesus – the Kingdom of Love
	Jesus invites me to work in His kingdom
	Jesus gives the Holy Spirit
Occasional catechesis	
Christmas in Warmia; Old Warmia customs of the Holy Week	Holidays – The Kingdom of God among us. Marian sanctuaries in the Archdiocese of Warmia

Source: own study.

Each textbook is accompanied by a home workbook titled *Domownik* containing tasks for the whole family: descriptions and explanations of topics, questions and issues to think about. Its content complements the topics discussed during school religion lessons. Its aim is to encourage the family to search for manifestations of God's presence in everyday life and help to combine community life with faith. *Domownik* contributes to a deeper, religious reflection on human existence. It is a tool encouraging the family community to consciously and actively participate in its functioning. The workbook assigns the children's parents a place in their religion lessons reminding them that they are the first teachers and preachers of faith, the experience of which takes place most fully in the home and parish environment.

4. EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS IN THE CHILD'S HOME ENVIRONMENT BEFORE STARTING RELIGION LESSONS AT SCHOOL

Based on the interviews conducted with the child's parents, it can be concluded that the boy began searching for answers to questions related to the end of human life from the moment he reached preschool age. At the age of 5/6, those questions began to be the source of big emotional problems. There were periods when his thoughts about death were especially intense. In result, the boy had nightmares and would cry all day long. "My son couldn't calm down. He kept thinking about his own death" – II/M. The boy's words indicated his fear of death. Those thoughts returned when the family celebrated one of the parent's birthday, and they caused much anxiety – "I was afraid that mom or dad were old and would die" – I/C. On perceiving the child's high sensitivity, the parents made various attempts to accustom him to the fact of human mortality. They focused on emphasizing the length of human life, as well as the pleasure and happiness of being with family and friends. They talked about adventures awaiting every person at various stages of education or in adulthood. It can be stated that the approach to existential

dilemmas in the respondent's home environment focused on presenting life as a value in itself and on explaining the fact of biological mortality of human beings. The pivotal point in the question of life and death was the feeling of happiness by being part of a specific community or belonging to a given cultural group and the possibility of remaining in it.

Family discussions on the topic of faith revolved primarily around the question of life after death. Here, the parents pointed out to the boy that according to the Catholic faith which they confessed, people after death go either to hell or to heaven. This was presented as conditional to human behaviour, their deeds: "if children listen to their parents, study conscientiously, they will definitely be taken to heaven after death" – II/M.

The boy began to raise existential questions related to good and evil along with his growing awareness of experiencing pain and discomfort caused by the behaviour of other people in his environment. Such experiences involved in particular situations taking place in kindergarten and contacts with the peer group. They revolved around helping the weaker, showing tolerance towards people who were physically different, and respecting other children and adults. As a highly sensitive child, the respondent was much affected by every argument among his peers, inappropriate interactions among them and especially by ridicule and mockery. In conversations with his parents, he sought answers to the question – "How can someone be mean to other people or laugh at them when, for example, they fall down or don't have such nice things as they do" – I/C. The parents emphasize that such dilemmas required primarily explaining to the boy the complex nature of the society in which he lived and pointing to the diversity of human behaviours. Questions focused on the purpose of human existence appeared when the boy started school. This time, the parents used elements stemming from being part of the Church community – content conveyed during religious education at school combined with their own life experiences. They also emphasized that every person has their own conscience and free will. It depends on them how they will direct their lives.

5. EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS OF THE SECOND-GRADE STUDENT VERSUS METHODS AND CONTENT OF RELIGION LESSONS AT SCHOOL

As the respondent developed and began school, the scope of existential questions asked by him did not change thematically, but he deepened his inquiries into the aspects of life and death. The boy was still preoccupied with questions about the meaning of human life: “I was afraid what I was for. Why did grandpa have to go to heaven? And did he meet my old doggy there? And most of all, I am afraid that after death I will not be with my parents” – I/C.

He also wondered about good and evil: whether hell and heaven really exist. “If I am good to mom and dad, will God help me with math? And most importantly, will I have friends? Because I would like to have lots of friends” – I/C.

The research shows, on the one hand, continuity of dilemmas impacting the boy’s functioning and, on the other hand, change in the explanations he formulates and the values he begins to accept as regards the concept of man as a mortal being who undertakes the hardship of living in between good and evil. The experiences of the parents and the religion teacher made it possible to build a model of the relationship between the boy’s existential questions – and the examples, the content, presented to him in the space of religious education at school due to the adopted methods – and the explanations that he considers correct (Table 4).

Table 4. Model of the relationship between the respondent’s existential questions and religious teaching at school based on data from interviews with the child, parents, and the religion teacher

Existential di-lemma	Method (content) determining explanation	<i>Domownik</i>	The boy’s explanations considered correct	grade
death	description and conversation: family, school class	+	belonging to the family of Jesus Christ	1
	artwork		man was created by God, who is always near	
	guided conversation: life and death	+	Jesus Christ will come again at the end of the world – one should not be afraid of death, but put hope and trust in God	2

	story: resurrection of Jesus Christ		man is part of the Kingdom of Heaven – he learns through the testimony of the Lord Jesus present in the Eucharist and God's gifts in the form of the Holy Spirit how to stand before God at the moment of death and enter the Kingdom in heaven	
good and evil	singing and presentation	+	the world is not perfect – God gave us conscience and the ability to renounce sin	I
	artwork		we must love others as much as ourselves; take care of our soul and body, which are gifts from God	
	guided conversation: conscience		the Lord Jesus forgives us and teaches us to apologize	
	artwork	+	God wants us to be happy and do good – staying in friendship with the Lord Jesus helps us make the right choices promises a Savior who defeated the evil spirit that separates people from God's love	II
	imitating the mercy of God, the goodness and friendship of Jesus Christ in everyday contacts with colleagues		God is merciful and forgives our sins – He teaches us how to apologize to family and colleagues for our mistakes	
	description of God's mercy		The Decalogue and the teachings of the Lord Jesus are the source of the rules of conduct; all children are disciples of the Lord Jesus, they care for their neighbours and are grateful for the good they receive	
life goal	artwork	+	staying in the family is the way to God and the Church is God's family	I
	guided conversation: family		faith and love can be shared with others	

	description of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ		Jesus Christ died for us on the cross so that we could live	
	imitation of Jesus Christ in contacts with colleagues	+	Jesus Christ is present in the life of every person, who as a friend teaches us how to become full members of the Kingdom of Heaven	II
	guided conversation: man's perseverance in the Kingdom of God on earth		everyone is part of the Kingdom of Lord Jesus on earth and in heaven; Jesus sends each person to work in the Kingdom on earth	

Source: own elaboration.

The respondent's search for answers to existential questions was possible thanks to the combination of religious education at school supported by the *Domownik* home workbook, in particular: works of art, guided conversations and discussions, presentation of events from the life of Jesus Christ, but also from the lives of people imitating God and Jesus with the aim to teach the child how to follow these examples in his functioning at school and at home. "It makes me feel better when we talk about the Family of God at school and at home, that I am a part of it. I already know that I will be with my parents in heaven if I am good. I am glad that there is Jesus, who loves me and that thanks to Him we can all live here on earth and that I can go with my parents to various nice places" – I/C

The methods and content used in grade 1 were supplemented in grade 2, which allowed the boy to discover in a conscious process the "sequence" of human fate: birth-life-death-eternal life. "I like drawing and it is cool when we draw saints and the teacher at school tells us about their lives, what good things they did. I like it the most when she talks about Jesus, because I always pray to Him, because it helps me when I feel bad or nervous or when I worry, when grandma is sick" – I/C.

The changes occurring in formulating and obtaining answers to the existential questions asked by the respondent, in the process of participating in a school religion lesson, are illustrated by the analysis of the model (Table 4) of the relationship between the existential questions of the respondent and the teaching of religion at school based on data from interviews with the child, parents, and the religion teacher, with particular emphasis on the boy's statements.

At the same time, the religion teacher points to the *Domownik* home workbook as a tool to arouse a sense of meaning in the child's life by consolidating and directing it towards perceiving the world as the Kingdom of God. "Parents receive a tool from us to help the child find their way in a dynamically changing reality" – IV/RT.

Based on the collected material, it can be concluded that *Domownik* provides an invaluable aid in building a family space that the respondent could recognize as safe and at the same time sufficient for considering his own existential problems. The most frequently mentioned activities contained in the *Domownik* home workbook that, according to the parents and the religion teacher, enable the child to understand human fate include:

- attending Sunday mass;
- learning about the wonders of God's world through films and trips around the area – visiting churches;
- introducing conversations about the world, the pressing problems of all household members, faith and its significance in the life of every person in the family;
- discovering signs of faith in family life: related to the baptism of the parents and the respondent;
- seeking answers to the questions bothering the child in the Holy Scriptures;
- morning and evening prayer undertaken by the whole family; thanking God for the gifts of other people, life, water, animals and plants, the closeness that He offers to man;
- joint learning: *5 conditions of the sacrament of penance; Commandments of love; To the Guardian Angel; Act of Love; Prayer to the Holy Spirit;*
- creating questions for examination of conscience based on a film conveying a Christian message.

The boy emphasizes that the suggestions contained in *Domownik* made it easier for him to understand how "the world works. Why are there churches and what are they for? What is baptism and communion for? And why do I have to learn these prayers by heart?" – I/C. The films and trips made the child aware of the church community and showed the purpose of participating in the Holy Mass as well

as of prayer as ways of meeting God and Jesus. Such meetings “make me feel good, I am no longer nervous, and I don’t cry that much when I remember that we can die” – I/D.

During the interviews, the respondent pays special attention to discussions held in the home environment. He recalls situations in which, together with his parents, he considered various ways of solving problems, behaving in a specific situation, using for this purpose the tips and questions added to each school religion lesson in *Domownik*. “Thanks to religion, I know that I have to help others, because it is good. I know that Jesus is my friend, and that He will always help me” – I/C. He also notices the differences between grade 1 and grade 2: “In the beginning, there were a lot of short tasks in the book, a kind of “challenges” to do, and then there was a lot of talking. Sometimes talking helps, because you can say what you think. Talking helps to say that you are afraid that you will die and will be gone. But then you can talk to Jesus. It is good, because I know that even if I die, I will be in heaven” – I/C. According to the religion teacher, most children at the first stage of education ask themselves many questions of an existential nature. However, few have the courage to formulate them in front of the class or a group of peers. “Fear of death is common among children who are afraid that they will die or that people whom they love will die. They are also afraid to express thoughts about death in their statements, questions and descriptions. Students find it easier to express such thoughts when they talk about unreal characters or people unrelated to them. More students from grades 1-2 decide to talk about the questions of good and evil” – IV/RT. What the catechist emphasizes is the sensitivity and reflection on the problem of mortality and human conscience, which emerges in the statements of the respondent. These reflections and a “certain adult-like maturity” in the statements formulated by him indicate an internal experience and a search for understanding the human essence – stronger than in other children of his age. According to the religion teacher, this is related to the sensitivity characterising the respondent as well as to his direct reception of stimuli. This is confirmed by the following statements made by the boy: “When someone is sick in a film or a fairy tale, my heart hurts. I always think that it is real and worry what will happen to him. Was he good or bad? Will he go to heaven or hell? Did he talk to Jesus?” – I/C.

The change that took place in the way that the respondent finds himself in the space of existential problems was induced by his conscious and full participation in religious education at school and at the

same time by his acquisition of new knowledge and skills allowing him to actively participate in religious life. “When I went to school, I couldn’t pray. I didn’t know so much about Jesus, about God. I didn’t even know that there were holy people who helped others. Well, now I know” – I/C.

Praying together in the home environment, the use of the *Domownik* home workbook and the discussions stimulated by it, helped develop in the boy: sensitivity to distinguishing good from evil, searching for the purpose and meaning of life in the love for God, solving problems based on the wisdom of Jesus Christ. “Now I know that God loves me, that Jesus loves me. And I know that if I die and my parents die, we will be together in heaven. But you have to be good all your life to get there” – I/C.

CONCLUSIONS

Questions about the meaning of human life, about human place in the world, community, family, or about distinguishing good and evil inscribe in the natural process leading to the formation of each person’s identity. This also includes children who in the process of growth draw on their various experiences. The possibility to find answers or paths of searching for answers in this area are conditional to proper human development in the emotional, personality and social spheres. Children who experience the world through the prism of their feelings have a heightened sense of meaninglessness and loss and thus more eagerly seek answers to questions about the structure of their existence, origin, supernatural beings, and God (Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan 1997, 53-54). Based on the conducted research, the school religion lesson, or more precisely didactic methods such as: description, guided conversation and discussion and the content conveyed through them, should be considered a success factor determining stability of the path in searching for answers to the child’s philosophical questions. They allowed to stimulate the boy’s motivation, sense of commitment and directed him towards the meaning of human existence, which he will discover throughout his life. Of particular importance were the methods and content related to artwork, but also to examples and stories from the life of Jesus used by the boy in his living environment. During the analysis, it was found that the respondent gained knowledge of the life of Jesus Christ and the saints as well as of the places of their worship. It was also noted that the child developed an awareness of the possibility of starting a conversation with Jesus through prayer, turning to Him in difficult situations, as well as of the feeling that Jesus was his best friend. The research results in this area

are best illustrated by the model (Table 4) of the relationship between the respondent's existential questions and religious education at school based on information from interviews with the child, parents, and religion teacher, with particular emphasis on the analysis of the boy's statements.

At the same time, the *Domownik* home workbook which provided an extension of educational and teaching work in the home environment, provided the child with a sense of stability and allowed him to find his way in the existential structures of life. On this basis, the religion teacher could establish a dialogue with the parents of the respondent and introduce this form of work as an element consolidating the deepening of knowledge and skills acquired during religious education at school, focused on searching for manifestations of the love of God and Jesus as the meaning of human existence. This is evidenced by the child's statements in which he expresses his conviction that after death, people find their place in the Kingdom of God where they meet their loved ones and that they go there thanks to the testimony of their lives (filled with goodness) that they lead on earth and to their being part of the church community through participation in masses and prayer, i.e. conversation with Jesus.

It should be noted that the school religion lessons, together with the employed methods and the presented content helped the respondent to organize his sensations related to: a sense of lack of meaning and purpose in life, death, as well as the search for and evaluation of the elements of good and evil. Religion lessons in grade 1, helped to quieten the emotions "governing" him, i.e., deep fear of his own death and that of his loved ones. In grade 2, they directed the boy's existential searches to values and examples stemming from the Catholic faith and the principles governing the community of God. The analysis of the interviews with the boy shows that he currently feels a part of the community of God's Church, which makes it easier for him to cope with aspects of illness and death and the dying of family members. His approach to the experiences of human fate also changed. He is convinced now that it should be directed towards the feelings of love and friendship towards others. Such a path should allow him to become part of the Catholic community and guarantee his friendship with Jesus, to whom he can turn at every difficult moment in life. These statements are also reflected in the analysis of the model of the relationship between the respondent's existential questions and religious education at school.

The presented investigations should be expanded to include a larger research sample, qualitative and quantitative research, as well as case studies that show no changes in the existential perspective under the influence of school religious education.

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