To Meet the Other to (Co)exist – Towards the Reflexive Becoming in a Relation: the Theoretical and Research Perspective

Spotkać Innego, aby (współ)być – w stronę refleksyjnego stawania się w relacji. Perspektywa teoretyczno-badawcza

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Abstract: This article contributes to a growing trend of reflection on the educational dimension of encounters with the Other as a space where personal stories intertwine with questions about choices, values, and existential orientation. It presents the theoretical framework for the topic, the research methodological foundations, the results, and the conclusions. The main goal of the described research was to explore and understand the meanings and significance attributed by pedagogy students at Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa to encounters with the Other in the context of their own development. In this study, I employed a hermeneutic method grounded in descriptive-interpretive text analysis. I used the students' essays as a source of insight and understanding, which allowed me to recognise that encounters with the Other are seen as a formative experience – an impulse that triggers processes of self-discovery, self-shaping, and self-fulfilment, the source of which is (self)-reflection.

Keywords: encounter with the Other, philosophy of encounter and dialogue, academic education, co-existence, hermeneutics

Abstrakt: Artykuł wpisuje się w nurt refleksji nad edukacyjnym wymiarem spotkania z Innym jako przestrzeni, w której osobiste historie splatają się z pytaniami o wybory, wartości i egzystencjalne ukierunkowanie. Prezentuje teoretyczne ramy podejmowanego zagadnienia, metodologiczne podstawy badań, wyniki oraz wnioski. Głównym celem opisywanych badań było poznanie i rozumienie sensów i znaczeń nadawanych przez studentów pedagogiki Uniwersytetu Jana Długosza w Częstochowie spotkaniom z Innym w kontekście ich własnego rozwoju. W badaniu wykorzystałam metodę hermeneutyczną, opartą na opisowo-interpretacyjnej analizie tekstów. Źródłem poznania i rozumienia uczyniłam eseje studentów, które pozwoliły dostrzec, że spotkanie z Innym jawi się jako doświadczenie o charakterze formacyjnym – impuls uruchamiający procesy samopoznania, samokształtowania i samorealizacji, których źródłem jest (auto)refleksja.

Słowa kluczowe: spotkanie z Innym, filozofia spotkania i dialogu, edukacja akademicka, współbycie, hermeneutyka

INTRODUCTION

If education is to lead to full humanity, it cannot be limited to the transmission of knowledge; it should be rooted in encounter (Śliwerski 2012, 198-203). Not in the technical exchange of messages, but in authentic presence. In a relationship that moves, engages, and transforms – becoming a source of development. It is about encounter – an event in the most profound sense of the word, inspired by the philosophy of encounter and dialogue (see Tischner 2008, 2017; Levinas 1999, 2002; Buber 1968, 1992; Heidegger 1994, 1996). As a "flash of the unique oneness of Being," an event is what "gives itself to man" (Walczak 2011, 145; cf. Heidegger 1996, 214). This gift is the revealing-concealing of the (non)sense of human existence – "and

it is a gift to the one to whom this revelation pertains" (Walczak 2011, 145; cf. Heidegger 1996, 221). In educational practice, the encounter between the "I" of the educator and the "You" of the student arises, takes shape, and is revealed in their mutual way of being with and for each other. As a gift, it exists both for each of them individually and, above all, for their shared existence in a specific time and space (cf. Walczak 2011, 145; Śliwerski 2012, 198-203).

In this context, it is an existential event – an awakening. It touches on emotions, values, and identity. It confronts a person with their own existence: loneliness, freedom, fear, and hope (see Levinas 2002, 2005; Heidegger 1994). It is not a superficial or intellectually neutral experience. It reaches deep into a person, raising fundamental questions: Who am I? What is important to me? What path do I want to follow? (cf. Heidegger 1994). In education, such an awakening can take place in seemingly ordinary moments – during a conversation, a gesture, a shared silence. These are moments that cannot be planned; they "just happen" – in extreme situations, in crises, in moments of joy. As Kierkegaard emphasised, a "moment" can be a turning point in existence – a time when a person faces themselves with full responsibility (see Kierkegaard 1976, 179).

Such a meeting is formative in nature (Śliwerski 2012, 198–203). It leaves a mark, initiates the process of maturation, and can be a decisive moment in life. Tischner, analysing the dynamics of the encounter and its consequences, was one of the first to point to "a change in the meaning of the space in which the encounter takes place. The space begins to resemble a crossroads. The other person I encounter is in motion, which awakens in me an awareness of possible movement. (…). The previously indifferent space becomes a space crisscrossed by possible paths" (Tischner 2017, 5–6). To meet – "is to experience Transcendence" (Tischner 2012, 25). In education, this means that an encounter, in its deepest form, transforms not only the student but also the educator. It makes education a shared path towards meaning. In this space, the meaning of the pedagogy of encounter as the art of accompanying, listening, and responsibly being with another in their uniqueness is revealed (Śliwerski 2012, 198–203; Tarnowski 1992, 2005).

An encounter is not neutral – it carries values. Goodness, truth, respect, beauty, emotion, stirring of conscience – these are not abstract ideas, but real experiences that manifest themselves in relationships (see Levinas 2002, 1999; Tischner 2008, 2017; Gadacz 2008, 2009;

Ablewicz 2003; Dymara 2014). They can lead to the discovery of what is truly important, but they can also reveal tensions, internal conflicts, and choices. Values here are not something imposed from outside, but something that "happens" in the space "between" Me-You/Me-Other. The encounter becomes an ethical challenge that does not allow one to remain indifferent, pointing to the primacy of responsibility towards the other (Levinas 2002, 1999). In education, this means that values are not just curriculum content, but a living experience that can contribute to the internal transformation of both the student and the teacher, the pupil and the educator (Śliwerski 2012, 198-203; Tarnowski 1992, 2005).

It cannot be predicted, directed, or "mentally enforced" (Walczak 2011; Buber 1992; Gadacz 2009; Tischner 1998). However, one can tune into it – open oneself to the "crack in Being" that emerges in our existence as "the place of the moment Somewhere and Sometime." It is not so much an event of Being – its truth – as Being that happens and unfolds in revealing-concealing – in glimpsing and at the same time concealing (Walczak 2011, 145; cf. Heidegger 1996, 221). It is the moment which – if we have matured to it – only awakens us to thinking. In human history, Heidegger emphasised, there are moments (very rare) when existence can "for a moment" take over everydayness, though it can never erase it (Heidegger 1994, 520). These are moments – "flashes" – that are extremely important for understanding oneself. In education, they can take the form of a question that stays with a person for a long time, a gesture that opens them up, or a word that moves them and prevents them from returning to the state they were in before the encounter. Maturing into such an event requires courage, readiness for uncertainty, and sometimes also loneliness. Philosophy is the art of awakening – not through communication, but through presence, questions, or silence (see Gadacz 2008).

Here, the meeting as a pedagogical category defines the horizon of thinking about education (upbringing and teaching) – not as a process of transmission, but as a path towards meaning, transcendence, towards an existential space: authenticity, dialogue, engagement. It emerges as a special kind of relationship with another person – as education in the course of encounters, education in dialogue (see Śliwerski 2012, 198-201; cf. Bukowski 1987). Here, the relationship is not a means to an end, but a space in which a person can truly exist as a person, not as a function – it is a place of self-reflection, of discovering oneself in a relationship, of

confronting one's own biography. In this form, it fits into the interpretative paradigm (see paradigms of pedagogy – Rubacha 2005, 59-67).

The phenomenon of encounter – as a philosophical and pedagogical category – has been the subject of in-depth analysis by many prominent thinkers, researchers, and theorists. Among them, it is worth mentioning Emmanuel Levinas (1999, 2002), Martin Buber (1968, 1992), Józef Tischner (1978, 2008, 2017), Martin Heidegger (1994, 1996), as well as Søren Kierkegaard (1976), Stefan Tarnowski (1992, 2005), Andrzej Nowicki (1991), Jerzy Bukowski (1987), Tadeusz Gadacz (1993, 2008, 2009), Jerzy Nikitorowicz (1997, 2017, 2019; Nikitorowicz and Guciuk-Tkacz 2021), Krystyna Ablewicz (2003), Bronisława Dymara (2014), and Urszula Ostrowska (2000, 2004). In addition, it is worth reading the reflections and research results recently published by Jolanta Rzeźnicka-Krupa (2013), Tadeusz Lewowicki (2017), Jolanta Suchodolska (2017), Barbara Chojnacka-Synaszko (2017), Agata Cudowska (2017), Hanna Rugała (2021), and Katarzyna Smoter (2020). Despite differences in philosophical, pedagogical, and anthropological approaches, the encounter in the researchers' reflections is not merely a philosophical category – it is an event, a complex educational experience with an existential, axiological-ethical, and formative dimension. It is a moment, a turning point/space for transcending oneself, going beyond one's own limitations (even in deterministic terms, see Nowicki 1991). These positions are united by the belief in relationality as a source of becoming through the presence of the Other, and the encounter itself appears as an existential moment – an event that has the power to transform.

The idea of encounter and dialogue, which has its roots in the philosophy of the aforementioned thinkers, inspires many researchers, including myself, to be part of the world of education, science, and the world in general. It has also become a subject of reflection for the students of pedagogy at Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa (UJD), who shared their thoughts on the phenomenon of encountering the Other in an essay entitled "Who is the Other? Encountering the Other as an educational situation." In the context of the research, which I presented in detail in a separate article, the encounter with the Other emerges as a multidimensional educational situation – an educational experience involving cognition, action, coexistence, and reflective being. Otherness, from the perspective of the respondents, does not appear as a barrier but as an invitation to a creative act that flows from relationships and

promotes personal development. The encounter "happens" not only in interpersonal dialogue – referring to the Other – but also intrapersonally – reflectively turning toward oneself.

In this article, I will focus on the latter aspect of encountering the Other – on the intrapersonal dimension, in which not only the other person is revealed, but also one's own "I" – fragile, searching, (un)ready for change, reflecting on oneself, questioning sense, value, choice. The research develops the theme of encountering the Other as an impulse leading to a deeper awareness of one's own "I" in the space of tension between the I-Other, initiating the process of becoming in a relationship. I would like to emphasise that the research material used in the present study also served as a starting point for the analyses and interpretations in the previously mentioned text, in which I focused on the educational meanings given by the respondents to their encounters with the Other.

The article is part of a trend of reflection on the educational dimension of encountering the Other as a space where personal stories intertwine with questions about choices, values, and existential orientation. It presents the theoretical framework of the issue, the methodological basis of the research, its results, and conclusions. The open, understated, or unresolved issues left in the text are intended to encourage thinking about the encounter with the Other as an event that not only initiates a process of deep self-reflection, self-discovery, and self-formation, but it also opens up space for further questions about the meaning of being in the world, presence in relationships, and responsibility for other people. The encounter with the Other remains an open-ended event – the one that continues to demand thought, experience, and pedagogical engagement.

1. METHODOLOGICAL BASIS OF THE RESEARCH

The issue I have taken up appears to be multidimensional, diverse, and full of dilemmas, antinomies, and controversies. In my research, I focused on its selected aspect: learning and understanding the meanings and significance attributed by students of pedagogy at Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa to encounters with the Other in the context of their own development, the main objective of the research. The subject of the research was the meanings and significance attributed to this experience by the respondents. As a result, the main research

question emerged: What meanings and significance do students of pedagogy at Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa attribute to encounters with the Other in the context of their own development?

The achievement of the objective and the search for the answers to the research question were possible thanks to the use of the hermeneutic method, rooted in descriptive and interpretative text analysis. The nature of my research, therefore, falls within the scope of qualitative research, which allows for in-depth reflection on the meaning and significance of human experience. In this space, the researcher asks questions about the meaning and significance of what is happening – striving to understand the world of man, the world of culture, and within it, the world of education.

Uncovering the meanings and significance hidden in cultural texts – creations, encounters, behaviours, situations, and people – determines the direction of most of my research journeys. I am particularly interested in revealing the meanings and values that build the world of education. Hence, my involvement in pedagogical hermeneutics, defined as the pedagogical theory of understanding and interpretation (general meaning) and as a methodological orientation (narrow meaning) (Milerski 2011, 12). At a general level, it takes into account "the importance of understanding and interpretation in education and pedagogical research, as well as the influence of pedagogical experiences on understanding and interpretation" (Milerski 2011, 12), while in a narrower sense, it takes into account understanding and interpretation as methodological categories relating to "the process of identifying the meanings and values that organize educational reality and its interpretation" (Milerski 2011, 13).

In my approach, understanding is fundamentally an act of interpretation embedded in a cultural, historical, and personal context. Understanding is not merely a cognitive method, but a way of being in relation to the world – open, reflective, dialogical (see Ricoeur 1989, 206).

The multitude of meanings hidden under the concept of "understanding" is reflected in various trends in hermeneutics, from the psychological and historical reflection of Wilhelm Dilthey (2004), through Martin Heidegger's ontological hermeneutics (1994), to Hans-Georg Gadamer's dialogical concept (1979, 1993) and Paul Ricoeur's existential-narrative approach (1989). The common denominator of these positions is the circular structure of the process of understanding: "individual elements of a text can only be deduced from the whole, and

conversely, the whole text can only be understood on the basis of its constituent elements. Thus, for example, individual important concepts can often only be deduced after reading the entire text, while a full understanding of the text presupposes the understanding of these concepts. The hermeneutic circle, therefore, also consists in the fact that we understand, modify, and expand on the part, starting from the whole, and vice versa – the whole is defined by its parts. Hermeneutic understanding, therefore, never ends completely, but is a process, and the goal of hermeneutic efforts is not to produce some kind of finished product" (Krüger 2005, 145).

Understanding occurs within a specific context – space, time, culture – which not only gives meaning but can itself become the subject of interpretation. The interpreter, as a participant in this process, brings their own perspective, which is socially and individually conditioned. Therefore, they cannot completely "enter" the world of the author of a cultural text, because their understanding is based on personal experience, language, and the horizon of meanings in which they operate (cf. Sawicki 2012). Pre-understanding is a prerequisite for understanding, which constitutes the starting point for the interpretative process (Heidegger, Gadamer - see Sawicki 2012, 81; Sawicki 1996, 18-19) and underlies the hermeneutic circle, which I have adopted as the interpretative framework for the collected research material (Krüger 2005, 145; Sawicki 1996, 18-19). Movement around the circle follows the specific rules:

– understanding the whole comes after understanding the details and vice versa – in order to understand the details, one must know the broader context – the first hermeneutic rule,

– understanding requires participation, not distance; in order to understand the linguistic medium that is the human world, one must immerse oneself in it, live in it, co-create it – the second hermeneutic rule,

– understanding is not a one-sided reading of meanings, but a mutual unveiling of both the interpreter and that which is interpreted: a text, an experience, an encounter; by discovering the truth about ourselves, we reveal the fullness of the world of which we are a part – the third hermeneutic rule (see Sawicki 1996, 18-19; cf. Krüger 2005, 145).

Meaning is contained in human expressions, e.g., musical, cinematic, artistic, in a meeting, an event, or a situation. However, it is the recipient who attempts to interpret them, to discover the meanings assigned to them, to search for their significance. Meaning is what a text,

a meeting, or an event "says"; the reference object has meaning in relation to what the text "says"; it goes beyond extra-linguistic reality, touches upon it, and refers to it (Sawicki 1996, 18-19). According to Ricoeur, "to understand is more than to repeat an event of speech, to reproduce it in a similar event; it is also to produce a new event, starting from the text in which the original event has been objectified" (Ricoeur 1989, 161). Ricoeur emphasized that discovering the meaning of a text is not enough for the revealer. From what the text "says" (the general meaning of the text), one must move on to what it "talks about," what it refers to (the meaning of the text). One must therefore move from meaning to significance. This can only be achieved through critical understanding, which complements structural analysis (Ricoeur 1989, 178).

Understanding in this sense is not an individual act, but a process that is open, infinite, existential, complex, and dynamic, rooted in the human way of being in the world (Heidegger's approach, see Sawicki 2012, 81; Ricoeur 1989, 206). The interpretation of a text grows out of prior understanding and leads to its deepening. Each subsequent attempt brings the interpreter closer to the interpreted, although it never completely eliminates the distance between them. This distance, resulting from the historicity, contextuality, and uniqueness of human existence, constitutes the essence of hermeneutic difference (Krüger 2005, 144-145; Adamska-Staroń and Łukasik 2012, 119-138).

Understanding appears here as a dialogue with another person, with their experience, with their works – cultural texts that demand to be revealed.

I understand text not only as a record, but as a complex form of presence – an educational event, a meeting, or another cultural entity that carries traces of imagination, experiences, and events. Text is not a neutral entity here; it speaks – it becomes a "You" that addresses us, invites us to conversation, and provokes interpretation. Understanding text here consists in discovering its meaning, i.e., what the text "says," and in searching for its significance, i.e., what it "says about" (Ricoeur 1989, 178). When engaging in dialogue with a text, the researcher not only listens to it, but also reconstructs the question to which the text is the answer (Folkierska 1995, 172). In this process, their pre-understandings create a horizon of understanding within which various questions are revealed, which, in turn, reveal various answers. Such an understanding of the text makes it possible to grasp the meanings hidden in

gestures, encounters, or narratives that go beyond literalness and open up a space for dialogue with the world that is being discovered.

In the context of the research, it was about a dialogue with the students' essays – symbolic and cultural entities: carriers of educational meanings and significance, and at the same time a space revealing new ways of being in the world, including the world of education. I understand them as signs of symbolic culture (Kmita 1977, 211) – traces of experiences that are actualised through various forms of expression and communication. From this perspective, the students' essays, as cultural stories about the world (Kmita 1977, 211), became research material, a source of knowledge and understanding, a point of analysis and interpretation. They provided a space for learning not only what was said, but also what was hidden, implied, and symbolic. The process of analysis and interpretation proceeded in accordance with the principles of the hermeneutic circle, fitting into a multi-stage narrative analysis (see Sawicki 1996, 18-19; cf. Krüger 2005, 145).

During the study, I collected 87 essays written by students entitled "Who is the Other? Encountering the Other as an educational situation." The next stage of the work was data reduction. As Krüger (2005) notes, qualitative research, as a form of theory building, is processual in nature – this means that "data collection, interpretation, and the resulting knowledge are closely intertwined, and the search for further data ends only when theoretical saturation of knowledge about a given field of research is achieved" (Krüger 2005, 161). Guided by this approach, I ultimately selected 25 works for the in-depth interpretation, the content of which not only confirmed but also reinforced the categories of meaning identified in the analysed essays. To maintain the transparency of the research process and the compliance with the principles of qualitative research ethics, the essays were coded as E1, E2, E3, etc., where "E" stands for essay and the number is the sequential number. This method of coding ensured the anonymity of the participants, the consistency of the analysis, and the interpretation.

The research group consisted of the first-year students of pedagogy – both bachelor's and master's degree programs, full-time and extramural, at Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa. I conducted the research between 2021 and 2024. The participants came from various locations, mainly from the voivodships of Silesia, Łódź, and Opole. The participants' age range was 20 to 24 years. The choice of this group was not accidental. First-year students,

standing at the beginning of their academic and thus professional path, are at a particularly sensitive moment in the formation of their pedagogical identity. Reflecting on their encounter with the Other provided them with an important impulse to think about themselves, their relationships with other people, and their way of being in the educational space – imagining themselves as present, responsible educators who are open to the Other. That is why I invited pedagogy students to reflect on this experience, to realise its significance, and treat this activity as an important moment in the process of shaping pedagogical awareness.

In the research approach I adopted, thinking about education meant above all reflecting on the conditions of its possibilities – on what knowledge and what experience have educational potential: the ability to open up the space for development for the educated. This approach implies a specific attitude on the part of the researcher as a participant in the process, who reflects on the preconceptions of pedagogical thinking "in order to discover the real meaning of knowledge, making it at the same time problematic and unnecessary" (Śliwerski 1998, 21).

The research undertaken, together with the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions adopted, fits into the scope of idealistic-subjectivist orientations in the interpretative paradigm.[1]

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[1] Entering this area involves adopting a position of ontological and methodological anti-naturalism and recognizing the subjective nature of the subject of research. The acceptance of the beliefs characteristic of the adopted methodological perspective is the result of ontological and epistemological assumptions that I recognize. I recognize the thesis that there are differences between beings that exist in nature and cultural beings. Consequently, I believe that the beings that make up the socio-cultural world can be studied, among other things, by means of: the method of hypothesis formulation and criticism, or the hypothetical-deductive method, an empirical method that refers to facts; reductionist methods, also empirical in nature (inductive enumerative or eliminative method, method of idealization and gradual concretization), and methods characteristic only of the social sciences and humanities: the method of humanistic interpretation, the historical-comparative method, the hermeneutic method (see Such and Szcześniak 1999). I assume that knowledge can be created in relation, meanings are subjective and contextual, and understanding requires immersion in the experience of the subjects. Knowledge is understood here as the result of the researcher's personal experiences (Jankowska 2021, 188), his "substitute experience" (Hałas 1991, 26-27), as well as the analysis of data from participants in socio-cultural life in various forms of expression: verbal (interviews, essays, autobiographies, drama, screenplays), visual (works of art, illustrations, sculptures), musical (instrumental, symphonic, rock compositions), behavioural (e.g., dance), as well as from observations of social experiences recorded, among other things, in art. Knowledge here is not an objective reflection of reality, but arises in the process of individuals assigning meanings in a specific social and cultural context. In social sciences and humanities, therefore, both a "scientistic" research approach, which values quantitative research more, and a humanistic approach, which emphasizes qualitative research, are acceptable. An example of this can be found in two opposing traditions: Durkheimian and Weberian, which, despite setting different research goals (see Buchowski 1990), do not abandon the "scientistic" approach in the practice of social sciences (Buchowski 1990, 66; Adamska-Staroń, Piasecka and Łukasik 2007, 71-72).

2. RESEARCH FINDINGS

This part of the article attempts to answer the main research question: What meanings and significance do students of pedagogy at Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa attribute to encounters with the Other in the context of their own development?

The hermeneutic method enabled me to achieve the research objective and find answers to the research question. The analyses and interpretations were carried out in accordance with the rules of the hermeneutic circle (see Krüger 2005, Milerski 2011, Rubacha 2008, Sawicki 1996, methodological part). The adopted hermeneutic interpretation strategy had its origins in the hermeneutics of Heidegger (1994), Gadamer (1979; 1993), Ricoeur (1989) and was based on a scientifically defined scheme: author – text – interpreter – interpretations, highlighting the text and the interpreter (Szahaj1994). This approach allowed me to go beyond the author's intentions, without ignoring them (Tischner 1989). As Gadamer (1979) emphasised, it is impossible to translate a text from one language to another without speaking oneself.

Given the methodological assumptions adopted, the attempt to reveal the meanings and significance attributed by the students to encounters with the Other began with becoming aware of my own approach to the issue, my own preconceptions on the subject. Next, my research activity consisted in searching for the general meaning of the essay, revealing its constituent elements – categories of meaning, according to the rule: in order to understand the details, one must know the broader context and vice versa, indicating the meaning of the entire text.

The analysis and the interpretation revealed the general meaning of the respondents' statements, which can be summarised as follows: an encounter with the Other appears to be a formative experience – an impulse that triggers processes of self-knowledge, self-development, and self-realisation, which begin with (self)reflection. They also allowed me to identify interrelated categories of meaning: (self-)reflection, existential questions, relationships, values and emotional experiences, transcendence as going beyond oneself towards a fuller (co-)existence with another person. The general meaning of the analysed statements allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the categories that constitute it, and vice versa.

Meeting the Other on your path, opening up to them and to other cultures, is constantly desirable; it is even a duty of modern man, the students note. In the encounter, the Other appears to the respondents as a mirror in which they can see themselves (cf. Gadamer 1992; Levinas 2002). For future educators, the space of encounter is an opportunity to build identity (cf. Nikitorowicz 2019, 6-17; 2017, 13-24; 1997, 168-175). Identity is not given; it is constantly updated, precisely thanks to the Other, both individually and collectively (cf. Nikitorowicz 2019, 6-17; Tischner 1978, 2012). The Other, as they emphasise, is an important figure in human development.

The respondents' statements describing their encounters with the Other reveal a diversity of perspectives. What they have in common is the belief that an encounter with the Other can be a moment that initiates reflection on oneself, on one's life path, which in turn can trigger a range of processes, including self-discovery and self-development. The following statements illustrate this view: "An encounter with the Other can cause us to reflect on the world of another person, on another culture, but also to reflect (...) on our own path in life (...)" (E6), "(...) it can prompt us to reflect on ourselves (...), to think about what kind of person I am, where I am going, what I want (...)" (E4), "(...) it allows us to understand the meaning of human existence. Going beyond what we know, going beyond our own circle allows us to coexist with others, to reflect on ourselves, to develop ourselves (...)" (E10). These statements can be complemented by the following reflection: "(...) Encountering the Other is undoubtedly a constitutive experience for reflection" (E20).

Reflection, so important in human life, when undertaken systematically, promotes personal development. It constitutes contemplation of the world – people, events, values, or ideas – promoting understanding. Essential in the teaching profession, it refers to both thinking and acting, enabling changes in everyday behaviour. "it is understanding meaning, entering and functioning cognitively at the 'meta' level, returning to what is the consequence of attempts to explain specific events (situations), reflecting on one's own thinking" (Szymczak 2009, 53; cf. Bruner 2006, 128). Reflection promotes becoming a conscious participant in the socio-cultural world, including the world of education – in this sense, it is a reflection on the process of education and one's attitude towards it (cf. Łukasik and Janukowicz 2013, 131-166; Zacharuk 2011, 7). When it is directed towards oneself, one's own thoughts and emotions, it is referred

to as self-reflection. It has an existential, axiological and ethical dimension. It is not only an awareness of "who I am," but also a question about the meaning of one's own existence. For Kierkegaard (1976), self-reflection was a condition for authentic existence – a person becomes themselves only when they begin to understand themselves and confront their own existence. Heidegger saw it as a way of "being-in-the-world" (1994), while Tischner emphasised that self-reflection arises from dialogue with the Other (2012; 2017). In education, it means reflecting on oneself as an educator, a teacher, a tutor, a human being, and a participant in relationships. A pedagogue, a teacher, or an educator who does not understand themselves, who is not in constant dialogue with themselves, is unable to accompany others in their development. Hence, (self-)reflection in the pedagogical space is treated as a condition for authentic upbringing, a fundamental dimension of the educational process (see Ablewicz 2003), and a key element of the professional and moral development of self-knowledge and self-education of teachers and educators (cf. Śliwerski 2012). It is essential for building an open and conscious identity, and thus one capable of (co)existing with the Other, of being in a world of cultural diversity (cf. Nikitorowicz 2019).

The importance of (self-)reflection in human life and in the formation of pedagogical identity is also recognised by the respondents. They point out that it is a prerequisite for being in the world, including the educational space, that it arises in relationships – in encounters with the Other, in dialogue, in the space "in between," promoting self-understanding. Thus, the image of an encounter as an existential event emerges here – a moment of confrontation with one's own identity, one's own possibilities and limitations, values, and the search for the meaning of existence. The respondents emphasised that "(...) The Other can allow us to find the courage to be a fully individual and autonomous entity, a free entity that has the right to make its own choices without fear of rejection (...)" (E19). Freedom is indicated by future educators as one of the fundamental values, as a condition for experiencing other values – it gives the opportunity to be oneself. Freedom is revealed here as a way of being in the world, connected with choice, intellectual independence, and truth. This approach is in line with the philosophy of Tischner, who wrote about freedom: "it is a unique ethical value, on the realisation of which the realisation of all other personal values depends. You cannot improve yourself without freely accepting the proposed values (...), the first good of freedom is truth. (...) The more truth there

is between us, the more freedom there is between us" (Tischner 2005, 17-18). Freedom that develops, brings out the best in people, their strength and potential, and also directs them towards being together, as the respondents note.

Being together – in an encounter – is the kind of experience that triggers a series of existential questions concerning the meaning of life, interpersonal relationships, and authenticity. Who am I? Where am I going? What do I want? Which path do I want to follow? What values are important to me? Does what I do bring me joy? Am I happy? Who am I to other people? What is the meaning of my life? These are questions of an initiatory nature which – according to the students – awaken them from mental lethargy and internal stagnation, opening up space for reflection on their own "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger 1994) and "being-for-others" (Levinas 2002). In the opinion of the respondents, they lead to conscious work on oneself, *"to better self-knowledge, to being in harmony and balance with oneself"* (E6), to thinking that the attitude of a pedagogue, a teacher, or an educator requires not only knowledge, but also the ability to understand one's own existence and its meaning. They constitute a moment of reflective awakening, in which, as they emphasise, the process of understanding education (upbringing and schooling) as a phenomenon that only makes sense when rooted in the experience of one's own subjectivity begins (cf. Ablewicz 2003). The emergence of questions of an existential nature also reveals the hermeneutic dimension of encounter – they serve to interpret one's own experience of encountering the Other. Students note that the Other not only "provokes" questions but also helps them to formulate and experience them. In an encounter with the Other, one may be shaken out of complacency, invited to think, to become – in Tischner's sense – more fully oneself, "for the good." Biographical thinking, according to the students, is important for at least two reasons. First, it helps them deepen their understanding of their own lives, its conditions and possibilities of shaping it themselves. Second, it serves to prepare, undertake and facilitate the implementation of actions/steps related to leading one's own life and developing towards oneself and the Other.

In this context, encountering the Other is not a confrontation with otherness, but a relational space. "It is an event that brings many benefits" (E20), allowing us to see ourselves as beings capable of empathy, openness, self-reflection, and development: "It awakens empathy. (...) it allows us to become better people" (E19), "It teaches humility, understanding,

and mutual respect" (E25), "(...) it teaches openness and tolerance" (E2), "it gives joy of being, evoking positive experiences and feelings, but it can also cause anxiety" (E9). What emerges here is an image of the Other as a person who reminds us of the human need for community, dialogue, and presence: "(...) People are social beings, they want to surround themselves with others, to be in constant contact with one another" (E4). The concern for the community is evident here. Being together can be interpreted as a genuine encounter with another person, understood as one of the most valuable experiences "a person can have in their life. Those who have not met another person on their path have, one might say, wasted their lives" (Tischner 2012, 25). To meet the Other is to explore their history, to free oneself from immediate criticism, to discover their hierarchy of values, to "go beyond certain patterns of thinking that we are not aware of" (E18), to come out of our "hiding places," out of the corset of our values, to open ourselves to a new situation. Coming out of "hiding," crossing one's own boundaries is "the beginning of some kind of community, perhaps the beginning of a home. How many obstacles sometimes need to be overcome in order to start a dialogue! How much patience is needed to continue it! Not only must fear be overcome and prejudices removed, but a language must also be found that means the same thing to both sides" (Tischner 2012, 8). This way of thinking reveals the connection between I and You, reaching out to each other, but also beyond ourselves, seeing ourselves from the perspective of the Other within ourselves, but also seeing ourselves from the point of view of another person. "By experiencing the presence of You, "I" becomes capable – as if by resonance – of a deep feeling of oneself, of own self; a full and real experience of own life becomes possible only when entering into a relationship with You" (Buber 1992, 93). A similar position can be found in Jerzy Nikitorowicz, according to whom "the basic feature of human existence is the creation of interpersonal bonds and being in relationship with others" (Nikitorowicz 2019, 6). In this perspective, what is important is "the desire and need to notice and discover differences, to be open, to get closer and to learn, as well as to understand, exchange and cooperate, thanks to which a person achieves understanding of themselves and, at the same time, of others" (Nikitorowicz 2019, 6-7). An encounter is therefore an event "that causes a person to search for themselves-the Other" (E12).

The meeting also appears to be a creative challenge – "inspiration to take up one's own activity" (E15), "(...) to realize personal plans, intentions, or desires" (E6), "to discover (...)

oneself – new character traits, the level of tolerance and acceptance of the unknown world" (E21), "making our goals a reality or opening us up to completely new horizons that we were previously blocked from or not ready for" (E13), "making changes in thinking, attitude, changing bad behaviours" (E17), or "bringing about a complete change in one's life path or changing goals and dreams" (E20). Otherness is not a barrier here, but an invitation to "become more sensitive, open your mind. (...), stepping out of your comfort zone and learning from each other" (E14). It is like a gateway that opens up to independence in thinking and acting, searching for the truth about oneself and the world. Such statements lead us to think of an encounter with the Other as a moment that encourages the initiation of various activities, has the power to awaken certain forces in a person that can help them face various adversities, encourage them to engage in a creative activity, help revive their desire to explore the world in their own way, and encourage intellectual independence and reflective (co)existence in the world. Therefore, encountering the Other can stimulate actions aimed at personal development, focused on values, goals, attitudes, character traits, beliefs, and motivation. It appears as an experience conducive to transcending oneself – one's limitations, thought patterns, existing roles, and identity boundaries – toward development, meaning, and goodness, the realisation of personal values, and the pursuit of what transcends everyday life.

The respondents indicate that the tension between the Self and the Other conceals a special space for development – a place where it becomes possible to transcend cognitive, emotional, and cultural limitations. It is in this tension, understood not as conflict but as a field of encounter and difference, that the potential for deconstructing entrenched stereotypes and prejudices, which often determine how we perceive other people, is born. As the students emphasise, contact with the Other "can awaken in a person sensitivity to social and cultural differences and the differences of other people" (E8), which is the first step towards understanding that difference is not a threat, but an opportunity for learning and development.

In this sense, encountering the Other is transformative – it triggers a process of change in the way we think about ourselves and the world. The study participants note that "we can learn many interesting things about culture, traditions, and customs from someone from another country (...), and we can then look at our own from a different perspective" (E9). Such an experience can be interpreted in the spirit of hermeneutics of difference, as a moment when the

Self is knocked out of its self-referential circle and the world is seen through the eyes of the Other. It is an act of transcending one's own horizon (cf. Gadamer 1993), in which two perspectives meet and, as a consequence, understanding is broadened. The respondents' statements point towards learning diversity through co-presence and dialogue (cf. Nikitorowicz 2019). The Other is not perceived here as a "stranger," but as a co-participant in the educational experience, thanks to which it becomes possible to perceive and appreciate the multitude of ways of being in the world. As one of the respondents notes, such an encounter develops "the ability to perceive and appreciate cultural diversity" (E4). Thus, the tension between the Self and the Other can be interpreted as a space of educational meaning: a place where, when confronted with difference, a person comes to know themselves through the other. In the spirit of Levinas (2002), the face of the Other becomes a call to responsibility, and the encounter becomes a moment of ethical awakening. In Buber's view (1992), the I-You relationship transforms into a dialogical experience in which the presence of the Other allows for authentic (co)existence. Understood in this way, an encounter with the Other, grounded in openness, attentiveness, and empathy, not only counterbalances stereotypes and discrimination but also forms the foundation of reflective education, in which diversity becomes a value and dialogue a path to mutual understanding.

CONCLUSION

The analysis and interpretation of essays written by students of pedagogy at Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa revealed that encountering the Other appears to be a formative experience. The reflections of the respondents reveal the belief that the Other is not just someone "from outside" – a representative of a different culture, worldview, or way of life – but they become a mirror in which a person can see themselves, their limitations, and their potential for development. The relationship with the Other is treated as a space for negotiating meanings, breaking patterns, and co-creating a world based on the recognition of diversity. Otherness is seen as a value – uniqueness, inspiration, a source of (self)reflection, but also as a challenge – bringing distance, anxiety, and fear. This ambivalence reveals the need for an individual approach, empathy, respect, and recognition of the dignity of another person.

Distinct categories of meaning – (self-)reflection, existential questions, relationships, values and emotional experiences, and transcendence – reveal the dynamics of the encounter and draw attention to the fact that this experience initiates a movement towards oneself through the other: it leads from emotional stirring, through reflection and questions about meaning, to a deeper understanding of oneself and the world. Self-reflection, awareness of values, and openness to diversity become the basis for becoming a reflective, empathetic, and responsible person in this process. The respondents perceive the encounter with the Other not as a confrontation, but as a space of (co)existence – a place where dialogue, understanding, and mutual becoming become possible. The encounter does not end with dialogue – it continues as an internal echo, as a question that demands an answer. It is therefore not only an event in the interpersonal space, but also an event in the space of existence. Man is a being on a journey, as Gadacz (1993) emphasised, and his development takes place in the rhythm of questions and encounters.

The conclusions drawn from the research are significant not only for interpreting the experience of encountering the Other, but also for pedagogical and social practice. In the pedagogical dimension, they draw attention to the need to build an educational space in which authentic encounters are possible – understood not as formal interaction, but as an experience of mutual presence, attentiveness, and dialogue. Education then becomes not only a place for the transfer of knowledge, but also a space for shaping attitudes of sensitivity, openness, and attentiveness to other people. The research results also draw attention to the importance of relationship-based pedagogy. The relationship with the Other – in its ambivalence – reveals the need for individualisation, an empathetic approach, and recognition of human dignity. Pedagogy understood in this way requires the creation of situations in which students and pupils can experience diversity not as a threat, but as a source of development and inspiration. This means the need to stimulate a dialogical attitude, ethical sensitivity, and intercultural communication skills.

In social terms, the research findings highlight the importance of education as a space for overcoming indifference, polarisation, and exclusion. Reflection on Otherness allows us to break down stereotypes, familiarise ourselves with differences, and build relationships based on dialogue and mutual trust. In this context, encountering the Other becomes an expression of

readiness to co-create a world based on respect, empathy, and a shared search for meaning. Pedagogical practice should therefore promote learning to understand oneself in the context of diversity and the development of the ability to participate responsibly in social relations.

Encountering the Other is an exceptional experience – a unique moment, an impression that is not without significance for both the present and the future, revealing a person's openness to transcendence. To encounter – "is to experience Transcendence" (Tischner 2012, 25).

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