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The Value Systems of Female Teachers in Early and Middle Adulthood —Similarities and Differences

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to examine the value systems of female preschool teachers in early and middle adulthood. The research was conducted among 45 female teachers from Białystok. The research employed the diagnostic survey method, drawing on the classification of values proposed by Dyczewski. The results indicate that the values most highly regarded by the female teachers participating in the research are higher-order values (ethical and cognitive), as well as sociocentric and aesthetic values. The differences observed between the groups are generational in nature: younger teachers are more inclined to value material and hedonistic goods, whereas older teachers tend to emphasise religious and vital values.

KEYWORDS: value system, preschool teacher, axiology, preschool education

Introduction

Values play a fundamental role in the lives of individuals and society, providing the foundation for decision-making, taking actions, and the formation of identity (Dakowicz, 2006; Karwatowska, 2010; Stawiak-Ososińska, 2005). Human beings, functioning within various social systems, continually make choices based on an internalised value system whose aim is to achieve happiness and satisfaction (Lachowski, 2012; Podgórecki, 2010). In an ever-changing world, preserving one's identity, values, beliefs, and aspirations is of particular importance. Values serve as a stabilising factor for identity amid changing circumstances. They help to define aspirational goals, guide

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behaviour, and influence everyday decision-making (Scharfbillig et al., 2021). They enable people to keep their identity consistent while adapting to new circumstances, and can serve as a bridge between local and global contexts (Maśloch, 2005).

This article analyses the results of a survey concerning value systems which was conducted among a group of 45 female preschool teachers in early and middle adulthood.

Definition and classification of values

The concept of values has always been examined by philosophers, educators, psychologists and sociologists, which demonstrates its multidimensional nature (Dakowicz, 2006; Śpiewak, 1982). The ambiguity and multidimensionality of the understanding of values as fundamental determinants of human behaviour make them a central subject in the social sciences. For the purposes of the research, it was assumed that values are any material or ideal object, idea or institution, real or imaginary object, in relation to which individuals or collectivities adopt an attitude of respect. Assigning them an important role in one's life and striving to achieve them is felt as a compulsion (Szczepański, 1972).

Given the widespread use of Max Scheler's classification of values in the social sciences, this paper is based on an expanded version of it, which was proposed by Leon Dyczewski (2001). Dyczewski distinguished eight groups of values, which he divided into instrumental and spiritual. He further divided instrumental values into: hedonistic—focused on seeking pleasure and comfort in life; vital—related to physical health, vitality and appearance; material—relating to the pursuit of wealth and economic goods; sociocentric—relating to an individual's connection to a nation, society, family or religious group. Spiritual values, in turn, include such values as: aesthetic—relating to the appreciation of beauty, harmony and order, both in the material and spiritual world; ethical—focused on goodness and moral principles; cognitive—related to the pursuit of truth and knowledge about the world and oneself; religious—relating to God, transcendence and eternal life. Instrumental values are considered a means to an end: they serve to preserve existence, but do not guarantee complete happiness and a meaningful life. Spiritual values are the foundation of personality development, since they go beyond the practical dimension, lead to transcendence and constitute the integral development of a human (Dakowicz, 2006; Dyczewski, 2001; Perz, 2020).

Historical background

Living conditions in Poland before 1989 and after 1989 were significantly different. The turning point was the change of the political system in Poland from a one-party socialist rule to a democratic system. The socialist system restricted free access to material goods, travelling and modern technology, while education—although formally universal—was largely subordinate to state ideology, selective in nature, and often created barriers to accessing university education (Rykowski, 2017). Entertainment and social life relied mainly on state institutions of culture, local traditions and celebrations of religious holidays in families. Despite the officially secular nature of the Polish state, celebrations of religious holidays had a largely religious dimension, emphasising the significance of the Catholic Church for both identity formation and social resilience (Mariański, 2018). Things changed fundamentally after 1989—democratisation of public life, liberalisation of the economy and full opening to global markets created new conditions for education, travelling, and the enjoyment of consumer goods. Access to digital technology, the Internet and mass culture from the West influenced the daily life of the generation growing up in the 1990s. Their value system was already forming under conditions of cultural pluralism, a wide range of educational opportunities, and new opportunities for individual and professional development (Goban-Klas, 2005).

The environment in which a person is raised has a profound influence on their worldview, priorities and aspirations. Values, on the other hand, have a stabilising and adaptive function. In times of oppression, they allow people to preserve their identity; under conditions of social and cultural changes, they help to adapt to the new reality (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Undoubtedly, Poles raised during the communist era have different experiences than those who grew up in free Poland.

Values in education and the role of the preschool teacher in transmitting values to children

Upbringing should lead not only to the formation of habits, but above all to the internalisation of values. Values incorporated into one's own structures determine what kind of axiological system is characteristic for an individual (Bereźnicki & Świrko-Filipczuk, 2007; Klimek, 2007). Each person has an individual set of values, which guides their everyday life, is the framework of making decisions and the basis of assuming responsibility for others (Chałas, 2003; Dakowicz, 2006; Jankowska & Krasoń, 2009; Noyszevska, 2010; Smolicz, 1987). Living in a certain social and cultural setting, the social groups that form have a common value system that unites the group, allows individual members of the group to understand each other and pursue similar goals. Certainly,

one such group that shares common goals is teachers. Their task is to shape the young generation not only through teaching but also through upbringing.

The beginning of a child's journey is particularly important; early childhood is a key stage in a child's development, because it is the time when children learn to reconcile their own desires with the demands of the environment and to form socially acceptable behaviours. It is a period of profound changes in the cognitive, emotional, social and moral spheres, which enable a better understanding of oneself, others and the surrounding reality (Brzezińska et al., 2014; Matejczuk, 2014). Therefore, preparing a child to live in the world of values becomes one of the basic tasks of the upbringing process (Sałaciński, 2010). In this context, the role of the teacher, whose attitude, value system and moral authority set the direction of upbringing and serve as a role model for the child, gains particular importance. The teacher, living in accordance with certain values, acts as a guide through the axiological world, enabling their pupils to gradually assimilate and internalise them (Denek, 1999; John Paul II, 1997). As research indicates, upbringing is realised primarily through personal example, and the teacher's value hierarchy is directly reflected in their educational decisions and pedagogical practice (Gajewska & Zapeński, 2018; Horowski, 2008; Łobocki, 2006).

The development of axiological competence, from recognising values, via making conscious choices, to behaving consistently in line with the chosen system forms the foundation for the development of the child's identity (Błasiak, 2009; Sałaciński, 2014). Hence, axiological education should be based on an authentic dialogue between the teacher and the child, fostering evaluation of moral principles and developing the ability to make decisions based on ethics (Frąckowiak, 2007; Okrasa, 2015). The teacher, knowing their own axiological system, can consciously guide their pupils towards understanding and respecting values (Langier & Siembida, 2019; Śliwerski, 2010).

Research methodology

Subject and objectives of the research

The subject of the research was **the value systems of female preschool teachers in early and middle adulthood**. The objective of the research was to find out the declared value system of female preschool teachers and to demonstrate similarities and differences in the perception of values by female teachers at different stages of adulthood. The following research problems were examined: 1) What value systems are declared by female preschool teachers who are in early and middle adulthood. 2) What are the similarities in the declared value systems of female preschool teachers in early and middle adulthood. 3) What are the differences in the declared value systems of female preschool teachers in early and middle adulthood.

Data were collected by a diagnostic survey method using a survey questionnaire prepared by the author of the research. The tool was based on the survey questionnaire entitled “Values vs functioning as a teacher” (Dakowicz, 2006), which uses the classification of values proposed by Leon Dyczewski.

Characteristic features of the research group

As many as 45 female teachers working in preschools in the city of Białystok participated in the research. The participants ranged in age from 21 to 61 years. They were divided into two research groups based on their year of birth, with 1989 as the dividing year. The first group consisted of female teachers born before 1989 (45%), who can be characterised as being in the middle adulthood. The average teaching experience of the respondents was 20.5 years. The majority of the participants declared they belonged to the Roman Catholic Church (70%), one person was a member of the Orthodox Church (5%), while five teachers refused to answer (25%). Most teachers described themselves as religious or deeply religious (75%), while five described themselves as seekers, indifferent or refused to answer (25%). Almost half of the female respondents rated their social and economic status as corresponding to the Polish average (40%). One-third of the respondents declared a below-average status (30%), another one-third of the participants described their status as above the Polish average (30%). As many as 85% of respondents were satisfied with their social position. A negative attitude toward their social position was expressed by 15% of participants. 75% of the teachers surveyed were married, 12% were single, and 10% were divorced. The vast majority of them have children (65%) who attended or are attending preschool, while the remaining respondents have no such experience (35%).

The second group consisted of female teachers born after 1989 (55%), who can be characterised as being in the early adulthood. The average teaching experience of the respondents was 2.5 years. The majority of the participants declared they belonged to the Roman Catholic Church (68%), three women were members of the Orthodox Church (12%), while five teachers refused to answer (20%). Most teachers described themselves as religious or deeply religious (76%), while six described themselves as seekers, indifferent or refused to answer (24%). Half of the respondents rated their social and economic status as corresponding to the Polish average (52%). Ten respondents declared a below-average status (40%), while two described their status as above the Polish average (8%). As many as 84% of respondents were satisfied with their social position. A negative attitude toward their social position was expressed by 16% of participants. 64% of the teachers surveyed are single, 28% married, and 8% are divorced. The vast majority of them do not have children (72%), while the remaining women have children who attended or are attending preschool (28%).

Research results

In order to answer the question about the declared value system, the female preschool teachers were asked three closed questions based on a rating scale. The answers to these questions comprised the declared value system. In order to find out what values are dear to the teachers, they were asked the following question: *To what extent do you appreciate the following values in your life?* The second question concerned the attitude of respect towards those who accept a given value, that is: *In your opinion, nowadays, is respect and recognition deserved by those who...?* The third question related to the declaration of the pursuit of selected values in one's life, that is: *To what extent do you seek to realise the values listed below in your own life?* The surveyed teachers were asked to analyse each of the listed values (pursuit of knowledge; belief in God; being a good person; nation, state, social involvement; love of beauty, harmony and order; pursuit of wealth and comfort in life; pursuit of pleasure and comfortable living; concern for physical fitness, attractive appearance) and choose one of five possible answers (more than others/is definitely deserved/more than to others; to the same extent as others/is rather deserved/to the same extent as others; less than to others/is not deserved/less than to others; it is not important to me/is definitely not deserved/I do not seek it at all; difficult to say). The results obtained are presented in Chart 1.

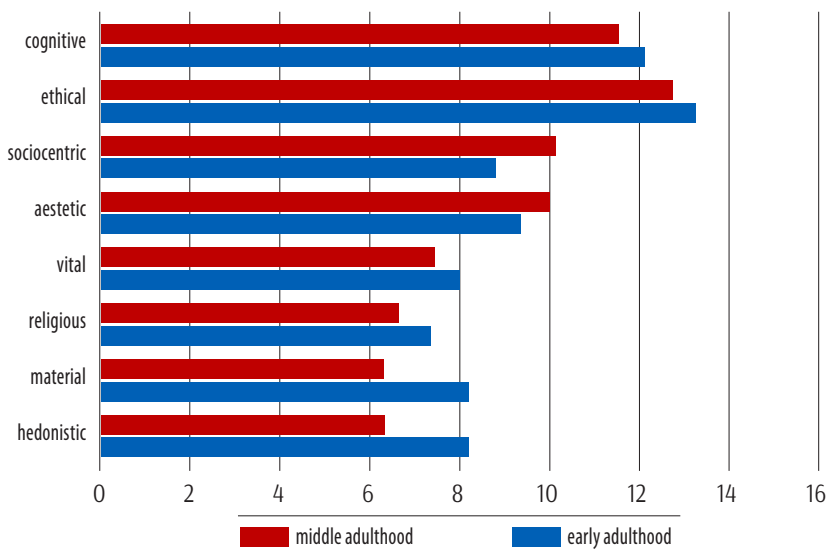


Chart 1. Value system of preschool teachers

Source: own research

The analysis of the data presented in the chart shows the declared value systems of female preschool teachers in early and middle adulthood, as well as similarities in the declared value systems. Teachers both in early and middle adulthood are characterised by a similar distribution of preferences in terms of their declared value systems. Ethical and cognitive values are the most appreciated values in both groups, which proves that female teachers share similar understanding of their professional mission and are strongly committed to the idea of self-development, responsibility and acting in compliance with moral principles. Such an approach to the value system can be considered characteristic of a pedagogical environment in which working with children requires both intellectual reflection and a high standard of ethical conduct. In the literature, it is emphasised that a professional teacher is a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983) who is able to combine subject-matter knowledge with pedagogical knowledge in action (Shulman, 1986). In turn, a high standard of ethical conduct and an attitude of moral responsibility are considered the foundation of the teacher-pupil relationship, constituting one of the principles of the ethos of the teaching profession (Noddings, 1984; Kwiatkowska, 2008; Day, 2004). Research on teacher professionalism (including OECD TALIS), indicates that an effective teacher is someone who integrates cognitive competence with a reflective stance and ethical sensitivity (OECD, 2020). Both groups of female teachers surveyed also highly value sociocentric and aesthetic values. The teachers attach great importance to interpersonal relations, cooperation, empathy and responsibility for others, that is attitudes that are essential in educational work and building a preschool community. On the other hand, the need for harmony and order in the surrounding world can reflect emotional sensitivity and the need for beauty, which in pedagogical practice are manifested in concern for the aesthetics of the educational space, in developing the sense of taste and order in children, and in striving to create a positive, harmonious educational setting. Despite generational differences, both groups of teachers surveyed are guided by similar social and aesthetic sensibilities, stemming from the ethos of the teaching profession and the deeply rooted pro-social values that underpin pedagogical work.

The differences shown in the analysis of the research material obtained indicate that female teachers in early adulthood value material and hedonistic values to a higher extent, while religious and vital values are more clearly emphasised among female teachers in middle adulthood. These differences can be interpreted in different contexts. Due to psychological and social changes coming with age and life experience, younger people may be more likely to focus on tasks typical of early adulthood, i.e. professional stabilisation, self-development and the search for life satisfaction (Dąbrowski, 1996; Obuchowski, 2000). Hence the higher importance of values related to wealth and pleasure. On the other hand, taking into account the generational and socio-cultural dimensions, female teachers in early adulthood, born after 1989, were

raised in a free-market reality dominated by the idea of self-development, individualism and achieving personal success. They grew up in a culture that shaped material aspirations, emphasised the need for convenience and pleasure. The environment in which they were brought up enabled them to focus on professional development, creativity and flexibility, perhaps at the expense of traditional community or religious values. In contrast, female teachers in the middle adulthood demonstrate a tendency to be more concerned with health and inner harmony, and to focus on the spiritual aspects of life. The growing importance of vital and religious values may therefore be interpreted as an expression of the desire to balance professional commitments with concern for mental and physical well-being (Erikson, 2004). What is more, a reference can be made to the educational environment in which they grew up: limited access to consumption and individual expression, where family, religious and community values were a natural source of security and meaning in life. Their greater attachment to religious and vital values can be interpreted as the result of being raised in a culture that emphasised the significance of stability, tradition and health understood not only physically, but also morally.

Thus, it can be assumed that the declared value systems differ due to generational differences resulting from different historical and social experiences that shaped behaviour patterns, hierarchies of needs and ways of understanding success in life.

Conclusions

Female preschool teachers, regardless of their age, appreciate higher values to the highest extent—primarily ethical and cognitive values, indicating the need for self-improvement, being reflective and acting in line with moral principles. Sociocentric and aesthetic values are also highly valued, as they emphasise the importance of relationships, empathy and harmony in educational work. Among female teachers in early adulthood, lower values (material and hedonistic) are more important, while in the middle adulthood group, higher values (especially religious and vital) are more strongly emphasised, indicating a more mature, reflective axiological system.

The value system of the teachers participating in the research is consistent and reflective, based on higher values. However, it is worth remembering that, as research conducted by Agnieszka Laskowska (2023) shows, for preschool children it is the family that remains the most important value, which is an area primarily associated with sociocentric values that are merely one component of higher values. This can provide an important guideline for teaching practitioners: the teachers' value system, while based on development and ethics, should also emphasise what is most important in the child's perception, i.e. the bond, closeness and sense of security that are born in

family relationships. Therefore, in their educational work, teachers should not only be guided by their own mature value system, but also make children sensitive to the importance of family and community ties, building a bridge between values important to adults and those that the child spontaneously experiences and understands. Integrating these two perspectives—the teacher's and the child's—can contribute to a more comprehensive axiological development of the child and to the consistency of the educational message taught in preschools.

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