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Literary Texts of Early School Education Against the Challenges of the Anthropocene

Literackie teksty edukacji wczesnoszkolnej wobec wyzwań epoki antropocenu

We understand a text if we experience it; if we are able to experience it; if it reactivates and changes learnt structures of understanding in us.

Ryszard Nycz (2010, p. 12)

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

child, children's literature, Anthropocene, language, elementary education, education for the climate

The contemporary social crisis requires deep reflection and making the right decisions to counteract the effects of the changes that have taken place. The Anthropocene, as the time when man became the force responsible for the transformations taking place on Earth, poses specific challenges to us, living in the present times. The aim of the article is to indicate the reason for the actions taken to prevent climate change by presenting specific literary texts that fulfill this requirement. For the needs of the analyses, the document analysis method was used. Bruce's experience began with defining the concept of social crisis. In the next part, the climate crisis was pointed out as a contemporary existential threat. The opinion of the European Union in this regard was quoted. The role of education as a guarantee of changes in the process of transforming the ecological awareness of modern man was emphasized. As a result of the analysis of documents, the rank of Polish language education in this area was indicated: with full conviction and responsibility, a literary text was established as a modulator

of awareness attitudes; methods supporting the development of ecological attitudes in the education process were presented. The essence of creative work with a literary text was also emphasized. Specific, selected literary texts from the suggested reading list for grades 1–3 of primary school were recommended, the content of which develops pro-ecological and cognitive competences, taking into account the challenges of the Anthropocene.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

dziecko, literatura
dziecięca,
antropocen,
język, edukacja
elementarna,
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Współczesny kryzys społeczny wymaga głębokiego namysłu oraz podjęcia właściwych decyzji zmierzających do przeciwdziałania skutkom zmian, które zaszły. Antropocen jako czas, w którym człowiek stał się siłą odpowiadającą za przekształcenia zachodzące na Ziemi, stawia konkretne wyzwania nam – współcześnie żyjącym. Celem artykułu jest wskazanie uzasadnienia dla podejmowanych działań mających na celu zapobieganie zmianom klimatycznym poprzez przedstawienie konkretnych tekstów literackich spełniających to zadanie. Zastosowano metodę analizy dokumentów. Rozważania rozpoczęto od zdefiniowania pojęcia społecznego kryzysu. W dalszej części wskazano na kryzys klimatyczny jako współczesne zagrożenie egzystencjalne. Przywołano stanowisko Unii Europejskiej w tym zakresie. Podkreślono rolę edukacji jako gwaranta zmian w procesie przekształcenia ekologicznej świadomości współczesnego człowieka. W wyniku analizy dokumentów wskazano rangę edukacji polonistycznej w tym obszarze: z pełnym przekonaniem i odpowiedzialnością ustanowiono tekst literacki jako modulator postaw świadomościowych; przedstawiono metody wspierające kształcenie ekologicznych postaw w procesie edukacji. Podkreślono również istotę twórczej pracy z tekstem literackim. Zarekomendowano konkretne, wybrane teksty literackie z proponowanej listy lektur dla klas 1–3 szkoły podstawowej, których treść kształci kompetencje proekologiczne i poznawcze z uwzględnieniem wyzwań antropocenu.

Crises as a Challenge for the Anthropocene. Introduction

As a new epoch in geology, the Anthropocene started about 160 thousand years ago¹. The most characteristic feature of this period is the fact that “a man gradually became a geological force which transforms the planet” (Bińczyk, 2018, p. 77).

1 Ewa Bińczyk reports that the first person to use the terms “Anthropocene” and “anthropogenic” was the geologist Alexei P. Pavlov, who lived between 1854 and 1929. Analysing the literature on the subject, Bińczyk points out that in the 1980s Eugene F. Stoermer used the aforementioned conceptual categories

Facing the greatest challenges of modern times requires multifaceted, wide-ranging changes penetrating various areas of human life (Gajda, 2021, p. 95). The reality in which we live expects people who are aware of the changes to reflect deeply on the complex process of seeking action to prevent crises of a diverse nature. The community, the natural environment and the complex process of cognition build a diverse space that experiences the crisis most strongly precisely in these three areas (Michalski, 2022, p. 19). Social crisis, understood as a disruption of the order in the social system, and as problems of the modern world, tensions and social conflicts (Nowak et al., 2023), is one of the fundamental challenges for many environments. One of the basic actions that must be taken for the quality of safe living is to reduce and mitigate the effects of climate change. The environmental crisis, including ecology and climate, is becoming increasingly difficult (Michalski, 2022, p. 27), which is why it requires attention and counteraction in various forms. The environmental movement, as Anthony Giddens points out, brings together different positions, perspectives and concepts addressing the challenges posed (Giddens, 2009, pp. 59–60). The bases of these considerations include the beliefs concerning the safeguarding role of the country according to which the state is responsible for monitoring social objectives, as well as fulfilling those objectives in a decent way; political convergence; economic convergence; perceiving the climate crisis as the priority in action; indicating the advantages of climate change due to which it is possible to efficiently engage people in actions against the warming; acting across political divides; taking stock of the risks and benefits; recognising the imperative of development with regard to the world; addressing the issue of sustainability; and being proactive in adapting to prepare a plan to address the crisis (Giddens, 2009, p. 78–82). Katarzyna Górczyńska-Sady & Wojciech Sady emphasize that scientific knowledge provided by high-class specialists is difficult to understand and learn by most of the people, and, at the same time, it does not eliminate our fears (Górczyńska-Sady & Sady, 2023, pp. 169–171). It is also in this context that Patryk Szaj asks the question: how to do literary studies in times of planetary environmental and climate crisis? Szaj stresses that it is not true that literary studies avoids motifs of paradigmatic change in the Anthropocene, but, at the same time, he points out that the interpretation of anthropocentric texts sometimes involves avoiding responsibility for the content (2021, p. 12).

Climate change will not be stopped without radical steps by humanity. Counteracting climate change is a key element of the external policy of the EU Member

in one of his articles, while Andrew C. Revkin, disseminating the latest findings of environmental science, used the term “Anthropocene” in a similar context. The Anthropocene narrative came to the attention of geologists around 2007. This was a time of increased research to establish criteria for the end of the Holocene (cf. Bińczyk, 2018, p. 77).

States and others outside the EU. As recommended in the Regulation of the European Parliament and of the EU Council:

The existential threat posed by climate change requires enhanced ambition and increased climate action by the Union and the Member States. [...] It is necessary to address the growing climate-related risks to health, including more frequent and intense heatwaves, wildfires and floods, food and water safety and security threats, and the emergence and spread of infectious diseases. As announced in its communication of 24 February 2021 entitled “Forging a climate-resilient Europe – the new EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change”, the Commission has launched a European climate and health observatory under the European Climate Adaptation Platform Climate-ADAPT, to better understand, anticipate and minimise the health threats caused by climate change (Regulation..., 2021, pp. 1–2).

The above fragment indicated the scale of climate crisis and the urgent need to integrally counteract the phenomenon.

Education as a Guarantee for Changes

As Bernadeta Niesporek-Szamburska and Olga Przybyła rightly point out, “researchers of the symptoms of the environmental crisis emphasise the need to work on changing people’s environmental awareness” (2021, p. 2). Education is an essential tool in this regard. Anna Guzy and Magdalena Ochwat, on the basis of their research² clearly emphasize that:

Climate crisis education should be a core part of the curricula of all subjects, so it should not and cannot be relegated to the margins. It should be placed at the centre of what we teach and learn, especially in the countries that are more responsible for this crisis, so that it can lead to the rebuilding of societies and the old civilisation (Guzy & Ochwat, 2022).

The Ministry of Education and Science makes it clear that every pupil learns about environmental education content in compulsory subjects, as everyone should care for the environment (MEiN, 2020). Everyday habits determine the way people live. In keeping with these recommendations, Piotr Skubała (2010, pp. 18-39) formulated ten theses on environmental education:

² The research was conducted within the framework of the Visegrad project entitled “V4 Humanities Education for the Climate. Recognitions – good practices – recommendations”, carried out by the Interdisciplinary Research Centre for Humanities Education at the University of Silesia in Katowice in cooperation with EUROPE DIRECT Silesian (University of Silesia, 2022).

1. Environmental education should present the world as a whole; it should show the world as a complex of interrelated beings.
2. Environmental education should foster the belief that every organism is unique, necessary and fulfils an important role in nature.
3. Man is an integral part of nature.
4. The overarching premise of environmental education should be an ecological ethic based on the belief that life, in all its forms, must be shown respect in the surrounding environment.
5. Education should present the laws governing the world of living beings.
6. Environmental education should not be built on fear.
7. Personification is an important element of environmental education.
8. Any human action that lacks respect for the environment should be subject to moral evaluation.
9. The nature of environmental education is interdisciplinary.
10. As part of environmental education, pupils should acquire the conviction that every little action that counters the environmental crisis, serves the Earth, is important and necessary.

Polish language education is particularly privileged in the process of shaping ecological attitudes. Maciej Michalski's (2021, p. 4) statement that the ecological crisis is a cognitive challenge that is more complex than other didactic tasks, is strong and correct. This fact determines that pro-environmental pedagogy even imposes proceedings of a different nature from the previous ones. In this respect, Michalski (2021, p. 13) formulates specific demands for education:

1. The cognitive complexity of environmental education requires that it respects the complexity of the didactic issues. Part of the education in this area should refer to the formation and consolidation of correct cognitive habits, including knowledge of fallacies, as well as learning to think critically. The latter is particularly useful when confronted with fake news.
2. Pro-environmental education should be integrated with other kinds of education, especially with those that have similar cognitive assumptions. This should be the foundation for a common integrated space of educational interaction.
3. Any subject education should convey confidence in science and, above all, explain the ways in which science can influence people's lives.

Bearing in mind the firm position of Ryszard Nycz (2010), who believes that the text as a meaningful discursive whole exists in conjunction with experience and is embodied in the utterance (rearticulation), it seems justified to expand the above postulates by:

4. Pro-environmental education, aimed at changing attitudes to act against the crises of the modern world, should involve creative work in relation to textualism.

Modern cognition is involved in a complex process of seeing the world, acquiring knowledge about it and critically verifying it under conditions of cognitive crisis (Michalski, 2021, 2022). Textualism, which argues that the world is a text (that it has a textual nature), assumes the reality of the text as characteristic of the existing reality. In such an approach, the text is read as a paradigm of culture. Its analysis and interpretation requires a choice of reading methods in which context plays a special role. Textualism has developed its own methodology of text analysis. Assuming a “weaving” of traces and figures, it decoded meanings by uncovering successive layers of them. A semiotic analysis grounded in the reading of signs and symbols encoded in culture alongside discursive analyses was presented as fundamental in this research perspective (Nycz, 1993; Domańska, 2012).

Ecological literature aims to present the pro-ecological human actions that are undertaken in the Anthropocene in order to save the Earth – everyone’s common home. It draws on Anthropocene literature, eco-phenomenological literature, ecocriticism and ecomelancholia, thus providing space and opportunity “for different interpretations and analyses of the overlapping of words, art, ecology and nature” (Đurđević et al., 2022).

The core curriculum of general education in grades 1–3 of the primary school assumes that:

The school fosters the upbringing of children and young people in a spirit of acceptance and respect for others; it fosters an attitude of respect for the natural environment, including the dissemination of knowledge about the principles of sustainable development, encouraging for protecting the environment and developing interest in ecology (*Podstawa programowa...*, 2017).

Text as the Modulator of Attitudes. Methodological Solutions

The list of books recommended for Polish language and culture education³ takes into account the needs of the contemporary reality one of the tasks of which is facing crises. Environmental crises, including the climate one, occupy a special place within this area.

³ The text refers only to the literary texts included in the curriculum of general education in grades 1–3 of the primary schools. The author is fully aware of the multitude of motifs related to environmental education in Polish children’s literature.

Anna Janus-Sitarz emphasises that interpretation ensuring the extraction of the essence of problems taken up in the content of a text takes place when the reader gives consent to a broader reading taking into account selected perspectives (2023, p. 39), including the ecological one. Insightful reading implies a readiness to negotiate the meanings of the content, thus bringing out values that constitute a kind of preparation for taking an engaged stance in life and also a mediating approach in solving possible problems (Janus-Sitarz, 2023, p. 40). The analysis of all readings included in the core curriculum requires the teacher to engage in discussions with students as well as parents. These conversations should provide answers to the following questions:

[...] Why do texts need to be interpreted? How is the understanding of a text related to the relationship with the human speaker (author, actor, co-interpreter)? What influences different interpretations of the same texts? What is the relationship between knowledge (poor, broad) and interpretation (faulty, superficial, in-depth)? Why is it important, in communication, to be able to verbalise one's understanding of the message? (Janus-Sitarz, 2023, p. 47).

The readings offered to the pupils are intended to present the surrounding immediate world of a person, taking into account their sensitivity. Describing nature, the animal world, the world of plants and man's place among them, shows pupils the importance of a responsible attitude towards all living beings in the world. The texts show ethical human behaviour and teach pro-ecological attitudes. The teacher's task is to make pupils curious and interested in the contents of the texts, and to teach them to interpret the texts in relation to the real and natural conditions. Claire Kramsch (2008) points to methodological solutions to support an ecological attitude in the learning process. Magdalena Steciąg (2021) emphasises the importance of their application. Although the guidelines apply to foreign language teaching, as they are based on reference to a text, they are also most appropriate for application in creative work with literary texts. According to the guidelines, the teacher should create a space for understanding texts; he/she should let the content be interpreted from the student's own point of view conditioned by personal experience and cultural knowledge. The teacher should encourage students to reflect on what is important in the process of understanding texts; to make them aware how images or multimedia didactic means, as well as the form of communication and their own feelings influence learning.

An important activity in students' reading comprehension and language proficiency training is the creation of paraphrases. These reveal an individual's sense of understanding of the content by subtly differentiating the personal meanings derived from them. The awareness of the fact that meanings are subjective should instill in teachers the conviction that intonation, accentuation, and the way statements are formulated through the use of specific speech sounds, are important in the process

of interpreting texts. The teacher should directly ask the pupils what is important to them in the content of the text they have read, what feelings the text evokes or perhaps it evokes some associations or reminds them of something. Meta-linguistic, meta-discursive and metastylistic explanations will play an important role in such work. The possible meanings should be discussed (Kramersch, 2008; Steciąg, 2021) and the possible field of interpretation should be made aware to students. Such an approach in creative work with a literary text will certainly make it possible to understand the meanings of the content described.

The content of selected readings in early childhood education allows the classification of attitudes of modern man towards the challenges of the Anthropocene. Children's literature from this stage of school education raises awareness and shapes sensitivity in terms of a person's relationship with nature, with animals and with selected environmental resources in the world. By making a general description of the content of selected readings on the basis of the analysis of meanings, it was determined which of them, within the framework of Polish language education, teach pro-ecological and cognitive competences with regard to the challenges of the Anthropocene. Among the suggested texts, the above indicated function is particularly fulfilled by the following books: Aleksandra and Daniel Mizieleńscy, *Którędy do Yellowstone? Dzika podróż po parkach narodowych* [*How to Get to Yellowstone? Wild Trip across National Parks*]; Łukasz Wierzbicki, *Afryka Kazika* [*Kazik's Africa*]; Rossana Bossu, *Jak drzewo* [*Like a Tree*]; Zofia Kossak, *Kłopoty Kacperka górckiego skrzata. Baśń* [*Trouble of Kacper, the Mountain Dwarf*]; Maria Terlikowska, *Drzewo do samego nieba* [*A Tree as High as the Sky*]; Tom Justyniarski, *Psie troski* [*Dog's Worries*]; Agnieszka Frączek, *Rany Julek! O tym jak Julian Tuwim został poetą* [*Oh Julek! How Julian Tuwim Became a Poet*]; Julita Grodek, *Mania, dziewczyna inna niż wszystkie* [*Mania, a Girl Different than Others*]. According to Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek, the literary discourse on the Anthropocene included popular genres into literature. Texts make readers sensitive to changes taking place in the environment and suggest searching for methodological solutions preventing the escalation of the crisis. Ecological humanities and ecocriticism refer to modes of interpretation, but also, above all, they suggest new ways of reading texts, thus preventing an anthropocentric understanding of the world from a non-anthropocentric perspective that should not dominate the study of contemporary culture (Wójcik-Dudek, 2021, pp. 84–85).

It should be emphasised that a detailed discussion on the leitmotifs taken up in the literary texts included in the core curriculum for primary school grades 1–3 is a very broad issue, and it may constitute the subject of considerations in a separate article. Nevertheless, the identification of the above iconotexts, which take up the challenge of reducing the effects of environmental crises by changing attitudes and worldviews, demonstrates the elevated role of early childhood education, especially

Polish literature and language education, which determines the understanding of content in other subjects as well. The ability to read and write is the basis for school success. A change in attitudes and awareness is made possible by learning about the content of children's literature. Iconotexts that use images in addition to words appeal to children's imagination and explain the intricate meanings of the world by referring to experience. Sequential structure, narrative, dialogue, and iconotextuality (Suchańska, 2021) guarantee the achievement of the didactic goal.

To sum it up, it may be emphasised that "what is disturbing in reading is only its absence, such as rejection for fear of being misunderstood, or indifference as a result of the blandness of previous contacts with literature" (Janus-Sitarz, 2023, p. 43).

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