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Narrative Understanding of Values Among Pre-School Children

Narracyjne rozumienie wartości przez dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym

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Abstract

Aim. The aim of the study was to explore how pre-school children understand values and to determine how these are manifested in verbal and non-verbal narratives. The research question focused on identifying the values perceived by children in literary narratives, as well as analysing how they interpret these values and relate them to their own social and emotional experiences.

Methods and materials. A qualitative research strategy was employed, appropriate to the exploratory nature of the problem. The research was conducted in a natural educational setting with a group of 19 children aged 4–6. A triangulation of methods was used: participant observation, guided interviews and analysis of artwork. The research tool was a series of original fairy tales serving as narrative stimuli to initiate the children’s interpretative activity. Data analysis was carried out in accordance with the principles

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of qualitative content analysis, considering the situational context and the meanings attributed by the children.

Results and conclusion. The findings indicate that children prefer positive characters and interpret values primarily through the lens of actions and their consequences. Good is understood as helping others, cooperating and building relationships, whilst evil is associated with actions that harm others. Children's narratives reflect their developing cause-and-effect thinking and their ability to relate literary content to their own experiences. Artwork serves as an equally important vehicle for axiological meanings. The findings confirm that narrative – particularly when supported by children's literature – is a vital tool for shaping an understanding of values, fostering the internalisation of norms and the development of social-emotional and cognitive competences.

***Keywords*:** moral development, pre-school education, children's literature, values, children's storytelling, narrative skills, internalisation of norms, artistic expression

Abstrakt

Cel. Celem badań było rozpoznanie sposobów rozumienia wartości przez dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym oraz określenie, w jaki sposób ujawniają się one w narracjach werbalnych i niewerbalnych. Problem badawczy koncentrował się na identyfikacji wartości dostrzeganych przez dzieci w narracjach literackich, a także na analizie sposobów ich interpretowania i odnoszenia do własnych doświadczeń społecznych i emocjonalnych.

Metody i materiały. Zastosowano jakościową strategię badawczą, adekwatną do eksploracyjnego charakteru problemu. Badania przeprowadzono w naturalnym środowisku edukacyjnym w grupie 19 dzieci w wieku 4–6 lat. Wykorzystano triangulację metod: obserwację uczestniczącą, rozmowy kierowane oraz analizę prac plastycznych. Narzędziem badawczym był cykl autorskich bajek pełniących funkcję bodźców narracyjnych, inicjujących aktywność interpretacyjną dzieci. Analiza danych została przeprowadzona zgodnie z założeniami jakościowej analizy treści, z uwzględnieniem kontekstu sytuacyjnego i znaczeń nadawanych przez dzieci.

Wyniki i wnioski. Uzyskane wyniki wskazują, że dzieci preferują bohaterów pozytywnych, a wartości interpretują przede wszystkim przez pryzmat działań i ich konsekwencji. Dobro ujmowane jest jako pomoc, współdziałanie i budowanie relacji, natomiast zło wiązane jest z działaniami szkodzącymi innym. Narracje dzieci odzwierciedlają rozwijające się myślenie przyczynowo-skutkowe oraz zdolność odnoszenia treści literackich do własnych doświadczeń. Wytwory plastyczne pełnią funkcję równorzędnego nośnika znaczeń aksjologicznych. Wnioski potwierdzają, że narracja – szczególnie wsparta literaturą dziecięcą – stanowi istotne narzędzie kształtowania rozumienia wartości, sprzyjając internalizacji norm oraz rozwojowi kompetencji społeczno-emocjonalnych i poznawczych.

***Słowa kluczowe*:** edukacja przedszkolna, rozwój moralny, literatura dziecięca, wartości narracja dziecięca, kompetencje narracyjne, internalizacja norm, ekspresja plastyczna

Introduction

Human functioning within social reality, from the earliest stages of development — referred to as childhood — involves the need to navigate the system of norms and values that govern interpersonal relationships and shape social experience. Childhood constitutes a crucial phase in the process of shaping fundamental axiological dispositions, with particular significance being attributed to the pre-school stage, during which the foundations of an individual's later moral development emerge. Values during this period are not understood abstractly or systematically, but function as meanings embedded in specific social situations and the child's everyday experiences. Their understanding is revealed primarily through action, emotional reactions, and ways of interpreting events and the behaviour of others, which indicates their practical and experiential nature. The process of internalisation is dynamic, situational and contextual – it occurs through participation in social practices in which the individual not only observes but also co-creates meanings relating to the categories of good and evil. Its course remains closely related to the quality of interactions and experiences drawn from the family, peer, and educational environments, as well as to the availability and coherence of cultural models that serve as a point of reference for the child's developing axiological orientation. One of the most important ways of revealing and organising axiological meanings is through narrative. Narrative utterances are not merely a retelling of events, but above all an interpretation of them, enabling the attribution of meaning to experiences and their evaluation. They take both verbal and non-verbal forms — including visual artworks — which reflect the way axiological meanings are constructed through the selection of characters and situations deemed significant and committed to memory. Children's literature remains a significant context for this process, providing narrative structures and axiological models that serve as a point of reference for children's own interpretations.

Despite the presence of the issue of values in educational research, there remains a clear need to deepen the analysis of how children's understanding of these values is revealed in their narratives, both verbally and non-verbally. Existing studies have tended to focus on declared attitudes or the effects of educational interventions, whilst paying less attention to spontaneous forms of expression, which can provide a valuable source of knowledge about how axiological meanings are constructed. Less attention has been paid to utterances arising naturally in educational settings and to children's creations, such as artworks, which reflect individual experiences and ways of interpreting reality.

Taking these forms of expression into account makes it possible to capture the more complex and situational nature of the understanding of values, as revealed during everyday experiences.

Value and Its Significance in a Child's World

Everyday situations that require choices to be made and the consequences of actions to be assessed provide the context in which a system of values is formed, serving as the foundation for personal and social development. The concept of value, rooted in philosophical and linguistic tradition, refers to that which is precious, significant and worth pursuing. Its etymology derives from the Latin *valere* ("to be able," "to be of significance") and *validus* ("strong," "effective"), which points to the connection between values and impact as well as significance in both individual and social terms (Żuk, 2016).

In everyday terms, values refer to what is considered desirable, important and worthy of approval; from an academic perspective, however, values are categories that organise an individual's experience and guide their actions. They serve an organising function, determining a person's orientation within the social and cultural world and providing a point of reference for judgements and choices. In this sense, values not only determine what is important but also help shape the way reality is understood and experiences are interpreted. According to Szymczak's definition, a value is a trait or set of traits that determines the significance of a person or thing (Szymczak, 1995, p. 543), which emphasises its nature as a property attributed in the process of evaluation. Puzynina's approach, on the other hand, emphasises the linguistic-cultural dimension, pointing out that values function as points of reference in the process of evaluation and action and are rooted in the structure of language (Puzynina, 1991, 1993). This perspective allows values to be understood as elements constituting the way the world is interpreted and meanings are communicated, and thus as an essential component of an individual's experience embedded in a social and cultural context. The diversity of definitions and theoretical approaches indicates the multidimensional character of values, encompassing both a cognitive aspect, related to their understanding and evaluation, and a socio-cultural aspect, manifested in language and social practices. Values can therefore be understood as a dynamic element of an individual's functioning, present in action, language, and ways of interpreting experiences, and their meaning is shaped during social interactions and individual experiences, which are also accompanied by an emotional component.

In pedagogical reflection, values determine the direction of educational influences. The reference to the classical triad of truth, goodness, and beauty highlights

their fundamental importance (Olbrycht, 2000). Contemporary approaches emphasise their socio-cultural conditioning and their role in shaping identity, which means that educational activities are always axiologically oriented. In educational practice, values manifest themselves in specific social experiences, relationships, and activities undertaken in the pre-school environment, where they are internalised and regulate behaviour (Siewora, 2017). Their understanding is dynamic and situational – it does not yet form a coherent system, but develops through experience, observation, and imitation. It manifests itself in action and in ways of interpreting reality, becoming embedded in memory and forming the basis for the further development of value orientation. As Suchodolski suggests, an individual's development is linked to a process of choice and confrontation with cultural norms, and the role of the educator is to support this process rather than impose ready-made solutions (Suchodolski, 1988).

Narrative Skills in Pre-School Children

The significance of a child's value system is particularly evident in the content of young children's utterances, which reflect their earliest axiological experiences. These experiences also serve as a point of reference in later stages of life, influencing decisions, relationships, and the formation of life orientations. During the developmental period under analysis, intensive changes take place, leading to the formation of attitudes, skills and the first identity structures, which intertwine and facilitate the exploration of reality (Szurek & Zmuda, 2020). Of great importance in this context is the ability to make sense of experiences, which manifests itself precisely in narrative form.

Narrative skills are of particular relevance in this process, as they constitute the fundamental means of communicating experiences. Narrative, rooted in the imagination, supports the development of language, thinking, and the interpretation of everyday life, enabling experiences to be woven into a coherent whole of meaning. It is defined as "…a statement presenting a sequence of events linked in time and space, constructed from a specific perspective" (Szczęsna, 2002, p.166)[1]. Creating it requires the integration of verbal and non-verbal means, as well as an awareness of the structure of the utterance. Narrative competences therefore encompass cognitive and communicative skills that enable the construction of coherent and comprehensible stories, in which events are not only recounted but also interpreted and organised (Grabias, 2019).

In narrative research, the structural model — comprising orientation, complication, climax, resolution, and coda — plays a significant role (Bartmiński, 2009). Although developed based on adult utterances, it is also applicable to the analysis of children's

[1] Translated by the author.

narratives, allowing us to capture the gradual transition from fragmentary utterances to more organised structures. In the early stages of development, stories are discontinuous and situational, but over time they take the form of sequences of events that are logically and temporally connected. Gradually, cause-and-effect elements emerge, along with attempts to bring the story to a close, sometimes in the form of simple generalisations or judgements, which indicates a developing ability to assign meaning to experiences. The cognitive approach, inspired by Bruner's concept, treats narration as a mechanism for organising experiences and interpretations (Bruner, 2006). Storytelling enables the linking of individual events into a coherent whole and the attribution of meaning to them, which fosters the construction of an understanding of reality. In children's narratives, there is a clear blending of elements of experience with products of the imagination, reflecting both emotional experiences and the process of learning social norms. Narration thus fulfils both an expressive and a cognitive function, enabling the expression of experiences and their cognitive processing. The functional perspective views narration as a structure performing specific social and cognitive functions. From this perspective, stories serve as a tool for organising experiences, solving problems and expressing one's own point of view (Garbula, 2020). Their development progresses from simple descriptions towards increasingly complex forms of interpreting reality, also encompassing the ability to take others' perspectives into account and regulate emotions. As narrative ability develops, a child's capacity to understand social relationships and anticipate the consequences of actions increases.

The development of narrative skills begins as early as the pre-linguistic stage and then intensifies as speech develops. In the years that follow, children develop the ability to combine events into sequences, use conjunctions and construct more complex utterances. Narration then becomes not only a tool for communication but also a space for shaping cause-and-effect thinking and interpreting experiences. However, its development depends both on the individual's maturity and on environmental factors, such as access to language and literature, as well as the quality of social interactions. Family relationships have a special role to play in this regard, creating natural conditions for developing storytelling skills and jointly constructing meaning (Rostek, 2019; Szurek & Zmuda, 2020).

Another important aspect is the development of self-narration, understood as the ability to create stories about oneself. It enables the construction of a self-image, the organisation of experiences and the attribution of meaning to them (Soroko & Wojciechowska, 2015). This process is reinforced by the social environment, in which sharing experiences fosters the development of linguistic, cognitive and social skills. At the same time, self-narration serves an integrating function, enabling the connection of individual experiences into a coherent structure of meaning relating to one's own person. While shaping this narrative, the child learns to view themselves as the agent of actions, experiences and relationships, which fosters the development of a sense

of identity. An important role is played here by the ability to select events considered important and to assign them a specific meaning, often in relation to categories of values. Jointly constructing narratives with adults and peers also fosters the internalisation of social ways of interpreting experiences. As a result, self-narration becomes not only a form of expression but also a tool for understanding oneself and the social world.

Disorders in language and cognitive development may lead to difficulties in narrative formation. Delays in speech development are of particular significance, as they increase the risk of narrative disorders. In such situations, diagnosis and therapeutic support focused on the development of vocabulary, memory, and grammatical structures are crucial (Grabias, 2019). Environmental factors also play a significant role, including educational and adaptive conditions, which may support or hinder the development of narrative competence (Musiał, 2019). Narrative difficulties are manifested in a limited ability to construct coherent utterances, maintain the continuity of events, and identify cause-and-effect relationships. Children may also have difficulty selecting information relevant to the course of the story and bringing it to a close. In some cases, a limited vocabulary and formulaic speech are also observed, which restrict the ability to express meaning and interpret experiences. These difficulties can affect a child's functioning in social situations, hindering communication and the understanding of others' perspectives. Early identification of difficulties and the implementation of measures to support narrative development in natural educational settings are significant. Support should include not only language exercises, but also creating opportunities for storytelling, conversation and the joint construction of meaning. It is particularly important to use literary texts, narrative games, and activities that engage the child's imagination. A supportive educational environment fosters the development of narrative skills by modelling speech and encouraging children to speak. The quality of interaction with adults is also significant, as they can guide the child's speech through questions and comments. Consequently, appropriately planned interventions can mitigate difficulties and support the development of narrative skills as a crucial element of cognitive and social functioning.

Methodological Basis of the Research

The empirical research was conducted between March and April 2025 at the *Tuptusie* [tiptoe-ers] Private Nursery School in Smolec, within the *Pszczółki* [little bees] group, comprising 19 children aged between 4 and 6. The research process lasted six weeks and was integrated into the daily routine, which enabled observations to be made in the children's natural environment without disrupting their activities. The research was carried out over a specific period, comprising regular teaching sessions during which the children participated in planned narrative activities.

A qualitative research strategy was employed, appropriate to the exploratory character of the problem and the specific nature of the study group. As Earl Babbie (2008) indicates, qualitative research focuses on understanding the meanings participants ascribe to their experiences, which makes it particularly useful for analysing phenomena of an interpretative and contextual nature. Pilch and Bauman, however, emphasise that

> …qualitative strategies enable the capture of the complexity of educational processes and the meanings constructed in the course of social interactions. The choice of this perspective stemmed from the research objective, which was to identify children's ways of understanding values, rather than to measure them quantitatively. (Pilch & Bauman, 2001, p. 267)[2]

The research question focused on identifying which values children recognise in literary narratives, and how they interpret these values and relate them to their own social and emotional experiences. The analysis examined the characters that children found particularly memorable, the motivations attributed to them, and the meanings assigned to the categories of good and evil. Various forms of children's expression were also considered — oral statements, text-inspired narratives, and visual artworks — treating them as equivalent carriers of meaning. A qualitative content analysis method was employed, enabling the interpretation of children's statements and artworks in the context of the meanings they ascribe to them. Three research techniques were utilised: participant observation, guided interviews, and the analysis of artworks. The choice of techniques is consistent with the recommendations of educational research methodology, which emphasises the importance of data triangulation as a means of enhancing the reliability of interpretation (Pilch & Bauman, 2001). The research tool was a series of original fairy tales, serving as narrative stimuli. This material prompted the children's interpretative activity and enabled their understanding of values to be revealed indirectly, in a manner appropriate to their developmental capabilities. The use of literary stimuli is part of a qualitative research approach in which — as Babbie (2013) emphasises — it is essential to create situations conducive to revealing the meanings constructed by the research participants.

Research Findings and Discussion

The original fairy tales *Gazduszka* and *Raspi* formed the central element of the research situation, structuring the participants' activities and the way in which they revealed axiological meanings. Their structure — based on a clear opposition between

[2] Translated by the author.

good and evil, the presence of clear behavioural models and symbolic motifs such as light, the path or community relations — encouraged the interpretation of the content in terms of values. The narrative of *Gazduszka* highlighted good as a driving force capable of transforming reality, whilst *Raspi* depicted the process of arriving at values through action and experience. Setting both stories in the natural world allowed the situations presented to be related to familiar contexts and helped to concretise their meanings.

An analysis of the children's comments and artwork reveals a clear preference for positive characters and a moral judgement based primarily on the characters' actions and their consequences. Goodness was interpreted as actions directed towards others, including helping, sharing and building relationships. Hania (aged 4.5) equated "magic" with the ability to do good and help others; Liliana (aged 5) emphasised the importance of community, pointing out that "no one is alone"; whilst Natalka (aged 6) portrayed goodness through harmonious relationships, depicting the heroine surrounded by animals and stars. Zosia (aged 5) pointed out that "a good character shares and helps," and her drawing depicted the act of giving gifts to others.

Regarding the narrative of *Raspi*, the children's interpretations focused on the protagonist's actions and their consequences. Jasiu (aged 4.5) described the protagonist as "brave" and "kind," whilst characterising the fox as "bad and mean." Kuba (5 years old) noticed that Raspi "wasn't afraid and helped others," whereas Oliwier (5 years old) pointed out that the protagonist "sometimes did wrong, but then he was good." These statements reveal both the presence of unambiguous moral judgements and an awareness of the possibility of behavioural change, which indicates a developing ability to view actions from a process-oriented perspective.

The children's assessments were based primarily on the characters' observable actions, which formed the basis for attributing specific traits to them. Situations requiring help, courage, or the overcoming of difficulties were of particular significance, as they revealed the criteria for evaluation. At the same time, the interpretations indicate the development of cause-and-effect thinking in the realm of social relations, manifested in the children's assessments of the consequences of the characters' actions for other characters. In this context, the narrative became a space for organising and interpreting experiences related to the categories of good and evil.

Negative characters also played a significant role in the evaluation process, serving as a clearly defined point of reference for formulating moral judgements. Their presence enabled the children to distinguish more precisely between the categories of good and evil and to organise axiological meanings in relation to specific behaviours. Igor (aged 5), by emphasising the fox's sharp teeth and distinct contours, and Franek (aged 5), by depicting the witch's deformed figure in dark colours, visually reinforced the negative nature of the characters, endowing them with traits that evoked unease

and distance. Mikołaj (aged 6) described the fox as "the one who teases and has no friends," relating its behaviour to consequences in social relationships and pointing to the connection between an action and its effects.

An analysis of the artwork reveals that depictions of negative characters were devoid of elements associated with positivity, such as hearts or the sun, which further emphasised the unambiguous nature of the judgements and the lack of ambivalence in their interpretation. The choice of expressive means, such as dark colours, sharp contours or character deformations, served a symbolic function, reinforcing the axiological message. This way, the children not only identified the negative traits of the characters but also gave them meaning through visual means. These characters, therefore, served as a contrast to the positive characters, enabling the children to construct a more structured picture of the world of values.

The empirical data also indicate a clear connection between the narrative content and the children's own experiences. Alicja (aged 4) linked the theme of giving with sharing toys; Michał (aged 5) attributed the meaning of caring for others and ensuring safety to the symbol of a net; and Lena (aged 5) pointed out that "if someone is sad, you have to help them so that they can be happy." These statements demonstrate the transfer of meanings from the level of the story to everyday social situations.

The suggested endings to the story, such as "everyone should be happy," "they must make peace," or "the king should return the treasures," indicate a desire to restore balance in relationships and bring order to the situation depicted in the story. The statements made are rooted in specific events and the characters' actions, drawing on familiar experiences and ways of resolving conflicts.

The findings of the study are consistent with the conclusions of the existing literature. As Nazaruk (2016) notes, books are an important medium for preschool-aged children to make sense of their experiences and articulate values, particularly when the child can discuss and express themselves. Molicka (2011), meanwhile, emphasises that identification with the protagonist and the symbolic resolution of conflict foster the internalisation of norms and the regulation of emotions, allowing literary narrative to be viewed as a safe space for processing experiences. The preference for positive characters and the presence of symbolic representations of goodness correspond with the findings of Leszczyński (2012, p. 18), who highlights the importance of symbols and personification as tools enabling the conveyance of existential content in a form that is cognitively and emotionally accessible. From this perspective, children's literature not only describes reality but also organises it in axiological terms. In a broader perspective, the research findings align with Ungeheuer-Gołąb's (2020) concept, according to which children's literature serves as a space for building a bridge between the individual's experience and the world of values, enabling identification with characters and the development of moral thinking. The importance

of narrative in the process of understanding the social world is also emphasised by other theoretical approaches. As Brzezińska (2000) points out, a child's narrative activity constitutes a way of organising experiences and giving them meaning in the context of social relations. Klus-Stańska (2018) also notes that the interpretation of educational and social situations takes place through the active construction of meaning, in which the individual's experiences and their narrative elaboration play a significant role.

Conclusion

Current pedagogical findings and research into children's literature indicate that carefully selected reading material has a significant role to play in a child's development, particularly in shaping attitudes, values, and social-emotional skills. Stories that draw on universal ethical themes not only encourage children to identify with the protagonist but also help them make sense of their experiences and give them meaning. In the pre-school years, storytelling is a naturally occurring tool for interpreting reality and expressing experiences.

The research carried out has revealed significant patterns in children's understanding and experience of values. Analysis of the empirical data suggests that children's literature serves not only an educational function but also an axiological one, providing a space for the internalisation of norms, the experience of emotions, and attempts to interpret the social world. Literary narrative facilitates the construction of meaning, enabling children to connect plot content with their own experiences and gradually organise a hierarchy of values. The findings confirm that engagement with literature supported by conversation and creative activity constitutes a significant element of values education and the development of narrative competences. They also indicate that literary experiences foster the development of the ability to evaluate, make decisions and understand social relationships, which gives them not only cognitive but also practical significance.

The value of the research conducted is evident both in its ability to provide a deeper understanding of children's ways of comprehending the world of values and in its potential for application in educational practice. The findings may serve as a basis for designing teaching and educational activities that take into account the importance of narrative in a child's development. It seems appropriate to continue research in the direction of comparative analyses involving pre-school children and early-school pupils, which would allow us to capture changes in the ways values are interpreted and in the development of moral thinking. In this context, children's literature emerges as an integral component of the educational process, supporting the child's cognitive, emotional and axiological development.

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