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Doctoral Dissertation:

Design and Evaluation of a Support Programme for Bereaved Children and Adolescents.
Action Research.

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As a psychologist working at the Father Dutkiewicz Hospice in Gdańsk, I frequently encountered situations involving the death of patients and the grief of their families after loss and various bereavement processes. A particular focus of my experience was concentrated on children and adolescents, who, apart from their age, faced unique challenges in entering the grieving process. It was common for families to withhold information about the terminal illness of a loved one, limit their visits to the hospital and to the hospice, or failure to understand their emotional needs after the loss and during grief. I often felt that children were the last to be informed about a family member's terminal condition, or were forgotten as mourners due to stereotypical perceptions about children's ability to cope with grief. My psychological and educational experience suggested that these dynamics could be harmful to the emotional and cognitive development of children and young people experiencing the death of a close relative.

Concurrently, through national educational initiatives and action research conducted by the Gdańsk Hospice Foundation team (of which I was a part) from 2004 to 2010, I realized that these risks could be mitigated. It was possible to organize support for young people after a loss. Motivated by a desire to change the situation for grieving children and adolescents, I aimed to introduce change in three key areas that appeared essential for the effectiveness of grief support.

The first area, the broadest in scope, involved societal awareness—particularly of the grieving process in children, their latent capacities to respond to such situations. Noticeable is

the inability of their immediate environment to offer sufficient support if grief which often remains a taboo subject for children and adolescents in the local community.

The second area, more localized but still diverse, involved the child's immediate environment—family, preschool, and school. Here, resources could be built to accompany children through the grief process, empathically understanding their emotional states, and assisting them in emotionally challenging situations.

The third area focused on the children themselves and their peers. Creating educational and therapeutic spaces for children and adolescents would deepen their psychological resources, enabling them to cope with the effects of loss and to support peers in mourning.

These three areas correspond to the three cycles of action research in this study, which introduced changes, monitored their progress, and evaluated their effectiveness. This dissertation is a theoretical-empirical report on that research. Each of the three cycles represents a separate research project, grounded in its own theoretical foundations, empirical field, and research questions derived through problematization. Each cycle follows its own methodology, leading to a solution, i.e., effective implementation of change. This approach also shaped the structure of this dissertation, which does not follow the typical format with separate theoretical, methodological, and research sections. Instead, there are three distinct theoretical, methodological, and empirical parts corresponding to the three cycles. Thus, each cycle possesses its own theoretical-empirical structure and action framework.

The work aims to present a holistic approach, a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Each section follows a similar scheme, including theoretical foundations, methodological bases, change projects, descriptions of actions leading to change, and verification of its quality. However, each part also presents a unique perspective on the problem, different research questions, and distinct approaches to finding solutions. The structure of the work is therefore non-linear, with a spiral-cyclical character, reflecting the nature of the research process.

Each of the three research cycles is presented in its entirety, starting from the conceptualization of a practical problem and leading to the solution implemented in that cycle. These three cycles reflect a temporal orientation in research, with new research problems emerging from deepening professional experience, further analysis of scientific publications, and examination of the issues from the perspective of methods applicable to the

research objectives, data collection, and analysis.

First Cycle of Action Research (Cycle I)

The first cycle focused on improving the situation of grieving children and adolescents by influencing the social environment. From 2013, I investigated the impact of national educational campaigns and training programs in breaking the taboo around death and acknowledging the difficult situation of bereaved children. Raising awareness about young people's grief through national and local media, engaging local communities by involving palliative care and hospice institutions, and organizing training sessions for participants of the "Hospice is also Life" [Hospicjum to też życie] social-educational campaigns were key to achieving the research objectives. The scope and intensity of these actions, combined with feedback from recipients, indicated that the tools were appropriately chosen to positively influence the perception of grieving children and adolescents and address societal misconceptions about their grief process and needs. A significant outcome of this cycle was the development of the "Tumbo Helps" [Tumbo pomaga] program, the creation of the website www.tumbopomaga.pl, and a range of educational materials on children's and adolescent's grief. However, these efforts were not sufficiently embedded in the social fabric, necessitating further action research cycles.

Second Cycle of Action Research (Cycle II)

The second cycle also sought to improve the situation of grieving children and adolescents, this time by focusing on their preschool and school environments. Using a triangulation of researchers, I analyzed data from the first cycle. The findings highlighted a significant demand for education among pedagogical communities on how to support grieving students. Similar gaps in knowledge about bereaved children's needs were identified, comparable to those found in hospice settings and society at large. Starting in 2014, a series of training sessions were conducted for educators, aimed at familiarizing participants with the topics of death and grief and demonstrating ways to support grieving pupils and students. It was hypothesized that by deepening educators' understanding of the multifaceted situations of bereaved children and adolescents, their conditions in educational institutions would improve. I investigated the methods and content used to train teachers, pedagogues, and psychologists during workshops I led. These actions greatly expanded my understanding of the grieving child's situation, particularly in the educational institutions of City of Gdańsk. As a result, a training program for pedagogical staff and educational materials were created,

along with a community of individuals attuned to the needs of grieving pupils and students. Nevertheless, this did not exhaust all possible interventions, especially in light of conclusions from the first and second cycles.

Third Cycle of Action Research (Cycle III)

The missing element in the research was a direct focus on children and adolescents themselves. Through my work with the Hospice Foundation's research team, I understood that changing the situation of grieving children and youth was impossible without engaging their peers and, indirectly, their parents. Concurrent with the first and second research cycles, I initiated the third cycle in 2015. The centerpiece of this cycle was the "Tumbo Day – Solidarity Day with Children and Adolescents in Grief" project, implemented in over 100 kindergartens and schools in Gdańsk. The project's primary aim was to raise awareness about death and grief within school communities (teachers, parents, and students), create a supportive school environment for grieving children and adolescents, and break the taboo around death. The research also focused on developing an educational event and lesson format for students that aligned with contemporary recommendations in thanatology education, health education, prevention, and mental health promotion. Through this research, I developed a framework for working with pupils and students and a set of educational tools for teachers to facilitate death education. Consequently, a series of therapeutic storybooks was published, and, most importantly, a community of educational institutions in Gdańsk was created. Educational institutions with "Tumbo helps" logo were attuned to the needs of bereaved children and adolescents, and have had established a system of psychological support for grieving youth. These actions continue to this day in Gdansk and Pomeranian Region, subject to ongoing evaluation and adaptation, with local initiatives evolving into national-scale projects.

Methodological Considerations

1. Research Strategy

The research primarily followed a qualitative strategy, with elements of quantitative methods applied when precise measurements were necessary.

2. Research Design

The study was conducted using an ethnographic research framework. I immersed myself daily in the research field, actively and spontaneously participating in the lives of the study participants while simultaneously introducing a planned intervention. This ethnographic approach allowed for the detailed description of the process by which new qualities in social

relations were generated, as well as the development of novel cognitive, emotional, and motivational responses towards children and adolescents in mourning. Given that ethnographic research seeks to uncover the rules underlying cultural creation, in this context, the element of culture is represented by the final educational program described in the dissertation. This program emerged through engagement with individuals affected by the research topic. Through continuous interaction, I co-created new values and cultural goods with the participants, which served to unite the group. I will return to this issue in the last paragraph of the conclusion of the dissertation, on page 445.

3. Type of Research

The research was designed as practical, diagnostic, and evaluative. The empirical field underwent transformation based on an initial diagnosis and ongoing evaluation of the current situation. Although the research was oriented towards achieving specific practical objectives, it also respected the existing environment by adapting the pre-planned actions to fit the local context.

4. Research Methods

a. Data Collection Methods

The following methods were employed for data collection: participant observation, survey questionnaires, educational assessments, interviews, secondary source review, quantitative observation, and ethnographic (qualitative) observation.

b. Data Analysis Methods

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. For qualitative data, semiotic analysis was employed to uncover the meanings embedded in social interactions and the interpretations participants attributed to their actions. Additionally, multiple forms of triangulation (methodological, data source, researcher, and theoretical) were applied to continuously verify the recorded indicators and outcomes, which reflected various aspects of the implemented change.

c. Sampling Methods

In action research, sampling is not random but guided by theoretical criteria. In this study, the criterion for participation was involvement in the designed change. Since the objective of the educational program was to enhance the understanding of the mourning process in children and adolescents by their social environment, research had to be conducted within this community, particularly among the general public, the school community, and

specifically among teachers, school counselors, psychologists, and students.

The dissertation presents a multifaceted account of the entire process of designing, implementing, and theoretically and empirically validating an action research project aimed at introducing a support program for bereaved children and adolescents. This multifaceted nature is reflected in the structure of the work, which is divided into the three aforementioned sections. In it, I systematized the theoretical aspects of various issues related to children's experience of grief in their living environment and the role of teachers in this process. I also described the empirical research that tested the formulated research questions and specific actions. Furthermore, I included the educational materials developed during the research, making an effort to ground them in current scientific knowledge and to demonstrate how this knowledge is integrated into everyday educational practices. Throughout the dissertation, where necessary, I presented the results of triangulations, which in this context are understood as a method of verifying indicators. Importantly, in line with the methodology of action research, I provide numerous reflections on the experiential aspect of the research process, illustrating diverse trajectories of thought and emotion, as well as doubts regarding various actions and their observed outcomes. These analyses of the day-to-day dynamics somewhat disrupt the cohesive scientific structure and narrative of the dissertation, yet they seem essential to the work as a whole, offering insights into the complex research process I have undertaken.