

(Un)intended depravity and the social system: pedagogical determinants

Deprawacja (nie)zamierzona a system społeczny – uwarunkowania pedagogiczne

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Introduction

The issue of depravity currently represents a significant challenge for professional pedagogical research. Yet, in the scholarly literature, there remains an insufficient number of studies thoroughly investigating the professional protection of the younger generation from the numerous threats posed by the modern world. Science has been unable to keep pace with the rapidly changing technological landscape, which often weakens the proper (staged) developmental process of a young personality in the context of social roles – both those performed today and those directed toward the near and distant future. It is widely accepted that

a system is any scheme of relationships among elements. It is believed that a system has certain characteristics of its own, irreducible to the characteristics of its elements, and that it possesses an internal tendency toward equilibrium. Systems analysis is the analysis of mechanisms that maintain both internal and external balance with respect to other systems (Marshall 2004, p. 373).

Given this state of affairs, it is hard to dispute the assertion that education today is an extremely difficult task – not only for parents but also for the broader social system, whose fundamental responsibility is to organize the space in which the correct (conflict-free) functioning of all entities involved in social development occurs. To bring the issue of depravity closer to understanding, it is worth highlighting the scientific analysis of silence by Marek Jeziorański (2022). He referred to this way of defining the studied reality as a “negative description”, which involves comparing the primary reality (in this case, silence) with an analogous one, simultaneously emphasizing the features of the analogous reality that the directly studied reality does not possess.

For if the understanding of silence is explained by the fact that it is not sound, then – implicitly – a comparison has already taken place with, for example, noise, which abounds in sound. This method assumes in advance – though this is rarely stated explicitly – that the researcher does not have direct access to the phenomenon being studied (in this case, silence) but rather views it only through analogy (Jeziorański 2022, p. 264).

This aligns with the common research strategy discussed by Teresa Olearczyk, who states that

every understanding of the concept of silence is phenomenological in nature – it depends on the specific conditions and the process of ‘occurrence’ of silence. Therefore, it must be accepted that depending on the circumstances, silence can successfully serve as the subject of various sciences (as cited in Jeziorański 2022, p. 264).

In other words, T. Olearczyk acknowledges that the reality of silence as such is cognitively elusive. It can only be described through the phenomena by which it is revealed. I believe that such a research assumption is both important and justified, taking into account caution and scholarly integrity regarding the reality under investigation. Nevertheless, it must not lead to a “researcher’s surrender” that would prevent the researcher from encountering the phenomenon as it truly is. In light of the lack of in-depth analyses of the phenomenon of depravity, referencing an analogy related to silence may assist in understanding the diverse perceptions within this phenomenon, where the same educational factors – when applied to different subjects – yield different outcomes, sometimes extremely divergent (Szczepański 1970, pp. 462–469).

Timeless principles of the educational process

The book *Sociological portrait of school youth* by Mariusz Zemło (2024), published by the University of Białystok Press, contributes to the body of sociological research on youth, but it also serves as an important document for the operational pedagogical practice of teachers and educators. It constitutes a unique case of diagnosing a social group that, from a strategic point of view, cannot be overlooked in any respect. As the author noted in the Introduction:

A proper reading of the characteristics of this social group allows: a) first and foremost, for an understanding of the ideals, desires of youth, their attitudes toward the environment, their efforts and concrete actions in various life situations – ac-

tions that impact the quality of the reality in which they live; b) for statements about the generation under their care, even in terms of educational outcomes (successes and failures), as well as the priorities underlying their practices, and their ability to cope with numerous elements belonging to the broader socialization environment, which often exert a greater influence on young people than the socialization that takes place in the family or at school; c) for formulating images of the future state of society in the coming decades, when this currently maturing generation will become the directors and executors of both minor and major social undertakings.

Considering even these three broadly outlined reasons, it becomes clear that directing research attention toward the youth generation offers the opportunity to grasp a much broader range of facts than the primary subject of inquiry alone (Zemło 2024, p. 7).

Almost simultaneously with the publication of Zemło's book, readers also received a work that is exceptionally important for proper education – and beyond – namely, the book by Adam Makos and Larry Alexander entitled *A higher call* (Makos, Alexander 2025). The book introduces the reader to the reality of German society, including its educational dimension, after Hitler's rise to power. Juxtaposing these two works enables the identification of certain mechanisms in the social functioning of citizens – mechanisms which contemporary reflection cannot afford to ignore. Zemło's book depicts the image of youth growing up under the influence of today's broad-ranging depraving forces that affect young people. In contrast, the book by A. Makos and L. Alexander (2025) presents the conclusion of a once-classified case involving the rescue of an American bomber by a German pilot over the North Sea near Bremen.

Even before his death [Charlie Brown passed away in November 2008 – emphasis T.S.], the United States Air Force completed a lengthy investigation into the events of December 20, 1943, and the actions of Charlie Brown and his crew. In its decision, the Air Force admitted that military officers had mishandled the case sixty-four years earlier. In April 2008, the Air Force invited Charlie to the Florida State Capitol to present him with the Air Force Cross – the second-highest medal for valor. Albert 'Doc' Sadok, the last living crew member, also received the Silver Star, and all other crew members were posthumously awarded Silver Stars. With ten Silver Stars and one Air Force Cross, the crew of the Ye Olde Pub remains one of the most decorated bomber crews in history. Franz Stigler never received the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross, but as he always said, he got something much better (Makos, Alexander 2025, p. 361).

The juxtaposition of these historical facts enables a deeper understanding of the role of education in shaping human character during exceptional life crises – both past and present. When viewed in this context, the profound value of human life becomes unquestionable.

In the realm of spirituality, each of us possesses a natural need to respect not only our own life but also the life of every other human being – including that of an enemy – regardless of any ideological threats. This moral imperative is primarily instilled into the spiritual dimension of the individual through the family. It is the family that plays a foundational role in moral education, and it is with the family that the broader social system should cooperate to avoid disharmony – while also remaining aware of its personal responsibility for even the smallest disturbances in this sensitive area.

Of course, in extraordinary situations – such as war, which one may experience without any personal involvement – certain moral principles may become temporarily “suspended”. However, this does not mean that they cease to apply in any fundamental way. The American example mentioned earlier serves as a particularly compelling confirmation of this principle. After several decades, the U.S. government acknowledged the mistakes made in the past and sought to correct them, despite the time that had passed and the fact that many heroic soldiers had not lived to see justice served.

In the book by A. Makos and L. Alexander (2025), we also find accounts of German pilots rescuing Soviet pilots. These were extremely rare events, but it is fortunate that these facts have finally found their rightful place in historical memory. It is worth emphasizing that amid the turmoil of the Second World War, there were, indeed, knights of the war-torn skies.

The importance of school education as support for the family

All formal education at the school level is a continuation of the educational process for young people, which begins within the family environment. This family environment is considered a natural setting for life, encompassing birth, care, and upbringing in accordance with not only individual but also socially shared values. School education, therefore, serves to complement the process initiated within the family, especially by guiding young people in discerning between good and evil and preparing them to make wise and responsible life decisions aimed toward the common good. This process is highly complex and requires educators to exercise exceptional prudence. Given the many threats

facing contemporary families, society often expects professional educators to provide meaningful support for the deficiencies present in the family environment. This underscores the crucial role of a well-organized and properly functioning state, along with its institutions, in supporting the quality of the overall educational process.

At this point, it is worth emphasizing that educating the younger generation entails much more than the legal and regulatory documentation surrounding that process. Before the systemic transformation in Poland prior to 1989, the author of this article experienced the educational process under a state-controlled socialist system, where it was strictly forbidden to even mention the name “Katyń”. Yet, there were unwavering educators who, during lessons, bravely explained what had happened in that place and what tragedy it represented. Even in the 1960s and 1970s, there were still people alive who had survived Nazi concentration camps and Soviet deportations to Siberia, even after World War II. These individuals bore witness to history, some carrying tattooed identification numbers on their left forearms – marks inflicted by the occupiers on their victims. Moreover, within many families, information was passed down that had been completely erased from the school curriculum by the authorities of the time. All of this provided young people with a view of reality that was rich not only in historical content but also in spiritual substance. From the perspective of the years that have passed, it is clear that good education involves not only the transmission of historically significant facts but also the preservation of the spirit and dignity of a society – even one under oppression.

One may ask: did depravity play an important pedagogical role in this context? (Un)intended depravity indeed had a significant role in transmitting fundamental life values. A young person growing up in the atmosphere described above learned restraint in speech and caution in behavior – especially in environments that could not be fully trusted or identified. We must remember that under communism, life was difficult, but the spirit of the nation was not broken. The role played by the Polish school system – and the noble, courageous teachers within it – was inscribed in history through exemplary figures of both social and religious stature.

Today, we witness a repetition of history, with mechanisms reminiscent of the previous era. There are now ongoing attacks not only on the quality of education and upbringing in Polish schools but also on the presence of national heroes in museum spaces – spaces essential for proper education and the respect for national heritage.

Under cover of night, exhibitions presenting our national heroes – Captain Witold Pilecki, Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe, and the Blessed Ulma Family – were removed. [...] This is an outrageous and shocking action by the new management of the Museum of the Second World War. We are returning to the times of the pedagogy of shame promoted by left-liberal circles over the past three decades – noted Bogusław Niziński, a veteran of the Polish independence movement (Baranowski 2024a, p. 1, 3; Baranowski 2024b, p. 1–2; Baranowski 2024c, p. 3; Bochenek 2024, p. 1, 3).

We might say metaphorically that depravity takes many forms. On one hand, it is the outcome of authoritarian rule – be it through occupation, partition, or enslavement. On the other hand, it may take the form of steadfast resistance against such conditions, through personal commitment to the battle for truth. Like evil more broadly, depravity is not only harmful but also exceedingly dangerous. Fighting against it requires continuous exposure and comprehensive prevention. This, however, can only be done by individuals of responsibility and strong moral character.

Conclusion

The natural fading of memory is beyond dispute. However, the deliberate trampling of memory requires deeper reflection – particularly when considering behaviors and attitudes toward the past that demand collective respect. It may be assumed that depravity is primarily committed by irresponsible individuals – people already depraved – whose awareness deviates significantly from honoring the dignity of others. The media documents many such examples.

A shocking lack of respect and decency toward victims and their families. In a place soaked with the blood of Polish workers, a dance party is planned. The European Solidarity Centre is organizing events to commemorate the 44th anniversary of the signing of the August Agreements. It proposes celebrating this occasion with a ‘Starlight Swing Dance Party’, scheduled for Saturday evening... in the immediate vicinity of Gate No. 2 of the Gdańsk Shipyard. This is the last place where one should organize an infantile, sentimental dance party to showcase how ‘smiling’ today’s Poland supposedly is! [...] This place is sanctified with the blood of the shipyard workers who were killed and wounded on December 16, 1970! It also witnessed many other crucial but painful events for our country. [...] Organizing dance events here is simply scandalous! The people making these decisions live in a different world, promoting an ideology that cannot be accepted (Guzinkiewicz, as cited in Stefaniuk 2024, p. 1).

This is yet another reminder that freedom is not something one simply possesses – it must be continuously fought for. A democratic society elects its representatives, though not always through wise decisions. The entire society bears the cost of mistakes made in this act. This is not an easy lesson – but perhaps we should reflect on wisdom before the harm is done, not only after. “It pleases me, this rhyme: ‘A Pole is wise after the harm is done’, But truth also teaches us one more, A new proverb the Pole shall acquire – That both before and after harm, he’s still a fool” (Kochanowski 1970, *Songs*, Book II, Poem V). At this point, one might ask whether it would be appropriate to organize such parties on the grounds of a former concentration camp. In short, education is no easy task for contemporary society. Memory plays a crucial role in this regard.

Many years ago, Jan Szczepański wrote:

I am deeply convinced that the negative phenomena emerging among youth are a reflection of the negative phenomena taking place in adult groups and collective life. It cannot be otherwise – unless we resort to the hypothesis of a malicious devil corrupting the youth. The only chance for improvement lies in scientific understanding and, based on it, a rationally organized activity that encompasses the entirety of social life. If even a hundredth of the funds spent on armaments around the world were allocated to international expert teams for physiological, psychological, pedagogical, and sociological studies on youth – perhaps it would change something. Even if that does not happen, scholars will still do their part. The history of science is quite clear on this point. Before our eyes, science and technology, finally emerging from their ‘infancy’, are creating a new, more rational world. Today’s pessimism stems from underestimating intellect and overestimating madness. Ultimately, however, intellect puts the world in order – often in defiance of madness (Szczepański 1958, p. 10).

This decades-old statement by Szczepański finds a powerful contemporary resonance in today’s visible attempts to capture the minds and hearts of young people. This is nothing new. All totalitarian regimes of the past have sought the same. Today, this represents a profound challenge for educators: to strengthen the personality of young people so they can resist harmful and irresponsible influences.

The study *Sociological portrait of school youth* by Mariusz Zemło concludes with an analysis of how students spend their free time. The results showed that their top activity was immersing themselves in the world of the internet, online games, social media, and music. This correlates with a lack of direct contact with others.

Among the values declared as most important by respondents were: family, friends, and mutual love. One would assume that spending time with loved ones would be a high priority – something they would strive for. However, practice shows that they are not making enough effort. Paradoxically, in spite of the values they claim to hold, they are turning away from people – including meaningful others – and diving into a world devoid of them. This is accompanied by a decrease in mood, increased sadness, a heightened sense of loneliness, deepening pessimism, and a loss of life's meaning. Youth are drawn to a world that is destructive to them – and they seem unable to break free, despite the existence of a real-world alternative (Zemło 2024, p. 271).

This grim picture is further completed by the behaviors observed in educational settings. The image is exemplified by students' attitudes toward caregivers and educators, disruptions of school lessons, and refusal to follow instructions.

The students' behaviors do not resemble the standards expected in educational institutions. The recreated image more closely resembles that of special care centers – yet these are mainstream schools. The data undeniably point to a rejection of the teacher's authority – both as a knowledge carrier and as an educator. This fits within the broader trend: 'Today's youth do not need authority figures – they consider themselves their own authority'. The data (extending beyond the school setting) reveal a fundamental lack of respect among youth for the adult generation. And there is no indication that their behavior will differ in other social situations (Zemło 2024, p. 268).

Zemło's study presents a portrait of life in the Podlasie region, where the research was conducted. These findings correspond to some of the results obtained in other parts of the country by researchers such as: Janusz Mariański, Jan Szymczyk, Mirosława Marody, Grzegorz Adamczyk, Justyna Horbowska, Anna Dudkowska-Sadowska, Janusz Szymborski, Stanisław Kowalczyk, and Rafał Boguszewski, among others.

These results raise concern for the future of Polish youth – and most of all, for the family. Given the deficiencies of family-based education, the school environment has inherited the bulk of the responsibility for shaping the next generation. Today's teachers face the difficult task of resolving tensions between students, their parents, and school staff. This is why attention is increasingly being paid to the importance of NGO-led initiatives that promote civility and good manners in challenging times. However, we must remember: concern for proper education has always been, and always will be, an integral part of the school's existence – for as long as it exists at all.

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SUMMARY

The article addresses the problem of (un)intended depravity as a pedagogical and sociocultural phenomenon within the broader framework of the social system. It highlights the growing need for professional and institutional support in moral education, especially in the face of contemporary threats to the integrity of youth development. Drawing on theoretical perspectives and case studies – including educational experiences under totalitarian regimes, symbolic degradation of memory, and empirical research on youth behavior – this study reveals the crucial role of educators, families, and social institutions in preserving values, identity, and intergenerational responsibility. Special attention is given to the contrast between declared values and actual behaviors of students, the erosion of authority in schools, and the challenges of cultivating civic and ethical maturity in a destabilized social environment.

KEYWORDS: educational depravity, moral education, social responsibility, family-school relations, youth

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł podejmuje problematykę deprawacji (nie)zamierzonej jako zjawiska pedagogicznego i społeczno-kulturowego w kontekście funkcjonowania współczesnego systemu społecznego. Podkreślono narastającą potrzebę profesjonalnego i instytucjonalnego wsparcia wychowania moralnego, zwłaszcza w obliczu zagrożeń dla integralności rozwoju młodego pokolenia. Na podstawie analiz teoretycznych oraz studiów przypadków – w tym doświadczeń edukacyjnych w systemach totalitarnych, symbolicznego niszczenia pamięci oraz badań empirycznych nad zachowaniami młodzieży – ukazano kluczową rolę nauczycieli, rodziny i instytucji społecznych w kształtowaniu wartości, tożsamości i odpowiedzialności międzypokoleniowej. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono rozbieżności między deklarowanymi wartościami a rzeczywistymi postawami uczniów, kryzysowi autorytetu w szkole oraz wyzwaniom związanym z kształtowaniem dojrzałości obywatelskiej i etycznej w destabilizującym się otoczeniu społecznym.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: deprawacja edukacyjna, wychowanie moralne, odpowiedzialność społeczna, relacje rodzina–szkoła, młodzież