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THE FADING FLAME OF HOPE: THE CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL EMERGENCY IN THE EYES OF POLISH PUPILS AND STUDENTS

GASNĄCY PŁOMIEŃ NADZIEI: KRYZYS KLIMATYCZNY I ŚRODOWISKOWY W OCZACH POLSKICH UCZNIÓW I STUDENTÓW

The author's motivation for undertaking this research was his own anxieties; anxieties arising from the global ecological and environmental emergency. The aim of my research was to determine young people's awareness of the climate emergency and their agency (possible actions) related to remedying this phenomenon. In conducting the research, a mixed quantitative and qualitative strategy was used with an online survey, thus examining the opinions of the respondents. The text analyses the answers to questions eliciting opinions on the climate and environmental emergency (a term used in one of the European Parliament's relevant resolutions), with particular regard to the possibility of stopping the aforementioned crisis. Respondents were primary and secondary pupils, and university students. Among the conclusions, the following should be singled out: 90.3% of respondents agree that we are dealing with an ecological and environmental emergency, but only 12.5% believe that we will stop the crisis, while 29.8% do not, and 57.7% do not know. Most importantly, the analysis of young people's statements reveals the pessimistic nature of their opinions, revealing the fading hope of remedying the emergency. In combination with the literature review, this sends an alarming message about the need to act not only to deal with the crisis but also in the field of information addressed to all social groups. In summary, there is evident fear that predictions of disaster may turn out to be self-fulfilling prophecies (as defined by Robert K. Merton). The demonstrated ability of young people to influence politicians offers us a hope that we might prevent such a disaster. For such action to succeed, it needs to take place both inside and outside of schools and universities.

Keywords: ecology; hope; self-fulfilling prophecy; environmental justice; ecological justice

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Motywacją autora do podjęcia badań były własne niepokoje wynikające z globalnego kryzysu ekologicznego i środowiskowego. Celem badań było określenie stanu świadomości młodych ludzi na temat zagrożenia klimatycznego oraz możliwych działań związanych z przeciwdziałaniem temu zjawisku. W badaniach zastosowano mieszaną ilościowo-jakościową strategię z wykorzystaniem ankiety online, badając w ten sposób opinie respondentów. Respondentami byli uczniowie szkół podstawowych i średnich oraz studenci. W artykule dokonano analizy odpowiedzi na pytania dotyczące kryzysu klimatycznego i środowiskowego (określenie użyte w jednej z rezolucji Par-

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lamentu Europejskiego), ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem możliwości powstrzymania wspomnianego kryzysu. Wśród wniosków, należy wskazać, że: 90,3% respondentów zgadza się, iż mamy do czynienia z kryzysem ekologicznym i środowiskowym, ale tylko 12,5% wierzy, że powstrzymamy kryzys, podczas gdy 29,8% nie, a 57,7% nie wie. Co najistotniejsze, analiza wypowiedzi młodych ludzi ujawnia pesymistyczny charakter ich opinii, ujawniając gasnącą nadzieję na zaradzenie kryzysowi. W zestawieniu z przeglądem literatury daje to alarmujący komunikat o konieczności działania nie tylko w kwestii zaradzenia kryzysowi, lecz także na polu informacji kierowanej do wszelkich grup społecznych. Podsumowując, wyrażono obawę, że przewidywania katastrofy mogą się okazać samospełniającą się przepowiednią (w ujęciu Roberta K. Mertona). Zdolność młodych ludzi do wywierania wpływu na polityków daje nam nadzieję, że możemy zapobiec takiej katastrofie. Niemniej aby takie działanie się powiodło, musi odbywać się zarówno wewnątrz, jak i na zewnątrz szkół i uczelni.

Słowa kluczowe: ekologia; nadzieja; samospełniająca się przepowiednia; sprawiedliwość środowiskowa; sprawiedliwość ekologiczna

I. JUSTIFICATION FOR UNDERTAKING THE RESEARCH

I believe that environmental issues should take priority over all other issues. It's a matter of life or death. We need to change our behaviour towards nature. My point of view is as follows: we need to resocialize the topic of ecology because the human race (as a whole) is behaving unethically. We are using extremely brutal violence against the natural world. This is against justice, particularly environmental justice (that is, fairness with regard to environmental issues among the human population) and ecological justice (fairness between people and the rest of the natural world).[1]

Research indicates that being aware of the climate emergency causes involvement in practices designed to prevent this process.[2] In the 1990s, it was noticed that young people began to be afraid of environmental emergency,[3] but the next generation assigns less priority to this threat in the new millennium.[4] At the same time, the process of not perceiving local threats is noticeable, even when the global dimension of the climate emergency is understood,[5] or a threat that is easier to conceptualize is perceived as a greater one, therefore one not necessarily related to climate – for example related to technology.[6] We are willing to see problems related to ecology and pay more attention to them if they are geographically distant from us,[7] and are related to political orientation.[8] On the other hand, if a given region is affected by the consequences of the climate crisis, its inhabitants focus on the local dimension, ignoring

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[1] Schlosberg (2007): vii.
[2] Baldassare, Katz (1992): 602–616.
[3] Raynault, Borgeat (1994): 56–58.
[4] Carmi, Bartal (2014): 872–886.
[5] MacDonald, Milfontn, Gavin (2015): 123–132.
[6] Fleury-Bahi (2008): 185–193.
[7] García-Mira, Rea, Romay (2005): 5–10.
[8] Labarre, Felonneau (2022): 891329.

the global aspect, which is more difficult for them to identify.[9] Therefore, it is postulated to move away from presenting climate change separately, that is, locally or globally, and instead to develop narratives combining global and local dimensions.[10] Analyses show that in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, societies are more concerned about energy prices than the climate emergency.[11]

Those concerned about the climate crisis tend to be highly educated people and those who have, or plan to have, children.[12] Only a high level of concern about climate change translates into personal commitment to action.[13] Nurit Carmi and Shaul Kimhi noted the perceived psychological remoteness of environmental hazards among Israeli students.[14] On the other hand, pro-environmental attitudes are influenced by knowledge, personal responsibility and perceived risks to personal health,[15] although the study shows that perceived climate threats are not always in line with real ones.[16] The Global Risks Report 2023 indicates that currently, due to the geopolitical and economic situation, we face the risk of failing to meet climate goals.[17] A similar phenomenon was observed in the years 2006–2010, when the economic crisis, the politicization of the subject and the increase of distrust relegated the climate emergency to a position of lower importance.[18] The following statement has a pessimistic undertone: 'People are not likely to support initiatives addressing climate change unless they consider the issue a very serious societal or ecological problem, or one affecting them personally.'[19]

I have tried to make changes in my life by rethinking my consumer choices (e.g. minimizing the amount of meat I buy) and altering my behaviour (e.g. using less water). Then I considered my position at the university, as part of a community of academics, administrators, and students. I started going to class with a piece of cardboard on which I wrote, 'Will we stop the global ecological crisis?' In this way, regardless of the content of the course, I managed to spur thought and debate about this key topic: I initiated conversations on the subject.

Most of the students who spoke out gave pessimistic assessments of their chances of survival, saying it was too late. This response, which I had not expected, alarmed me. I felt that I was witnessing the triumph of pessimism. I saw indifference mixed with resignation in their eyes. Their statements implied, following Bulgakov, that Anushka had already spilled the oil. I must mention the pessimistic book: *Antropocen dla początkujących. Klimat, środowisko, pandemie w epoce człowieka* [Anthropocene for Beginners: Climate, En-

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[9] Moyano, Paniagua, Lafuente (2008): 62–70.

[10] Kyselá, Tvinnereim, Ivarsflaten (2018): 20–21.

[11] Kalistová, Huttmanová (2020): 32–56.

[12] De Rose, Testa (2014): 113–135.

[13] Kim, Wolinsky-Nahmias (2014): 79–106.

[14] Carmi, Kimhi (2015): 2239–2257.

[15] Fransson, Gärling (1999): 369–382; Antronico et al. (2020).

[16] Dettori et al. (2020).

[17] World Economic Forum (2023): 22.

[18] Pidgeon (2012): 85–106.

[19] Lorenzoni, Pidgeon (2006): 87.

vironment, Pandemics in the Age of Man] by Dawid Juraszek, which was in essence a bitter diagnosis of the current state of civilization and an announcement of the imminent end of human flourishing on planet Earth.[20] In contrast, the second one I read was optimistic. This was *12 Small Acts to Save Our World: Simple, Everyday Ways You Can Make a Difference*. This is a handbook for saving the world that does not scare you, but instead methodically shows you simple ways to change the course of events.[21]

Currently, apart from books and scientific articles, films – especially documentaries – are also a source of knowledge. I will single out three of them: Firstly, *It's Okay to Panic* (2020) by Jonathan L. Ramsey, narrated by Szymon Malinowski. A professor of earth sciences at the University of Warsaw, Malinowski paints a dramatic picture of what awaits us if we do not change our behaviour.[22] Secondly, *David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet* (2020), in which the world-famous naturalist talks about the ravages inflicted on the natural world he has observed since the 1950s.[23] Thirdly, *Ice on Fire* (2019) by Leila Conners Petersen, produced and narrated by Leonardo DiCaprio. This film shows that there are feasible ways to deal with the ecological crisis.[24] These films, although they pull no punches – they leave us in no doubt that time is scarce and the threat extremely real – brought me hope that if we roll up our sleeves, we will save civilization. My ideological turn towards activism to combat the climate and environmental emergency finds support in certain provisions of the Polish Constitution, that is, those which respond to the postulates of the third generation of human rights. I draw the reader's attention to the content of Article 74:

> 1. Public authorities shall pursue policies ensuring the ecological security of current and future generations. 2. Protection of the environment shall be the duty of public authorities. 3. Everyone shall have the right to be informed of the quality of the environment and its protection. 4. Public authorities shall support the activities of citizens to protect and improve the quality of the environment.

And Article 86:

> Everyone shall care for the quality of the environment and shall be held responsible for causing its degradation. The principles of such responsibility shall be specified by statute.[25]

Also important to me was the content of the European Parliament resolution of 28 November 2019 on the climate and environment emergency,[26] along

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[20] Juraszek (2020).

[21] World Wildlife Fund (2018).

[22] Ramsey (2020).

[23] Fothergill, Hughes, Scholey (2020).

[24] Petersen (2019).

[25] The Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997, Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland, https://www.sejm.gov.pl/prawo/konst/angielski/konse.htm.

[26] European Parliament resolution of 28 November 2019 on the climate and environment emergency (2019/2930(RSP)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0078_EN.html

with the European Parliament resolution of 28 November 2019 on the 2019 UN Climate Change Conference in Madrid, Spain (COP 25).[27] In the first of these, the European Parliament:

> Declares a climate and environment emergency; calls on the Commission, the Member States and all global actors, and declares its own commitment, to urgently take the concrete action needed in order to fight and contain this threat before it is too late.[28]

Precisely because of the content of this resolution, as a citizen of an EU Member State, I feel obliged to use the term: 'climate and environmental emergency'.

In the latter resolution, the European Parliament declared the following:

> The EU, as a global leader and together with other major global economies, needs to strive towards reaching net-zero GHG emissions as early as possible and by 2050 at the latest.[29]

It should be noted that the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report indicates that an increase in temperature above 1.5°C will have catastrophic consequences for the ecosystem and the most vulnerable (island) countries.[30] UN Secretary General António Guterres, commenting on the publication of the latest IPCC report in 2021, indicated: 'The IPCC report is a red alert for humanity. The emergency sirens are deafening and the evidence is incontrovertible.'[31]

II. METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF OWN RESEARCH

According to research, young people in Poland are aware of human responsibility for the climate emergency.[32] When designing and conducting research, I was inspired by the reports from two editions of the 'Humans attack' Report (2019 and 2020).[33] The first report states: 'One thing is certain: the majority of Poles (72%) believe that the condition of the Earth is serious and that immediate remedial action are needed. … N = 4,004, Poles 18–65'.[34] By 2020, the number had risen to 78% of Poles (N = 1,000, Poles 18–65).[35]

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[27] European Parliament resolution of 28 November 2019 on the 2019 UN Climate Change Conference in Madrid, Spain (COP 25) (2019/2712(RSP)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0079_EN.html

[28] European Parliament resolution of 28 November 2019 on the climate and environment emergency (2019/2930(RSP)).

[29] European Parliament resolution of 28 November 2019 on the climate and environment emergency (2019/2930(RSP)).

[30] IPCC (2019): vi.

[31] UN News, 9 August 2021: IPPC report: 'Code red' for human driven global heating, https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/08/1097362.

[32] Center for Citizenship Education (2020): 74–75.

[33] Kantar Poland (2019), (2020).

[34] Kantar Poland (2019): 24.

[35] Kantar Poland (2020): 22.

The research shows the respondents expressing a large variety of opinions. Only 12% (in 2019 and 2020) of Poles expressed an attitude that can be characterized as follows:

> They are aware that the environment is in a terrible condition, and global warming is a fact, and they are well aware that humans are to be blamed for both. They know it is important to act so they take action. They do more than anyone to avoid harming the planet, even though they realise it's not enough, so they want to do more.[36]

The remaining groups are:

> 16% – facade environmentalists, they are worried, but they are not ready for real changes. [19% in 2020], 29% – lost, anxious but open. They would like to do more, but they don't know what. [25% in 2020], 26% – Sovereign Landowners. They are not convinced that the condition of the Earth is very serious, and they certainly do not blame humanity for it. [32% in 2020], 17% – "They don't believe in all those environmental tall tales. … it's none of their business, some fabrications and big corporations [11% in 2020].[37]

I admit that the above results were alarming for me. I was interested in the opinions of pupils and students (the respondents in the report 'Humans attack' were between 18 and 65 years old) regarding the climate and environmental crisis (its existence) and their agency in this matter, that is, having the power to do something about it.

The generation of people who are currently studying is already affecting the climate. In the future, along with the acquisition of voting rights and gaining social positions (and the gradual departure of older people), they will ultimately determine the shape of our civilization, because the next 10, 20 or 30 years will be decisive.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic which was then ongoing, I decided to ask primary, secondary, and university students for their opinions by means of an electronic questionnaire. They provided answers from 13 October to 29 December 2020: 6 primary school students, 139 high school students, and 152 university students participated in the study; 3 people did not indicate which of these groups they belong to. In total, the survey was completed (at least in part) by 300 people (women and girls – 178, men and boys – 119, did not specify – 3). I informed my students about the survey, moreover, I asked my teachers' friends for help and joined Facebook groups that gathered potential respondents to disseminate information about the survey I was conducting. The sample selection was not deliberate. In addition to using a quantitative strategy, I used a qualitative one by asking for open-ended statements, which were then analysed by coding and searching threads in the given answers to open-ended questions. The adopted strategy and the consequent limitations do not allow the conducted research to be treated as representative, but only as giving an illustrative insight into the analysed problem, nevertheless, it indicates tendencies and opinions present among the respondents, which allows

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[36] Kantar Poland (2019): 28; (2020): 28.
[37] Kantar Poland (2019): 28–29; (2020): 28–29.

the analysis of nearly 1,000 statements (989). Considering the above, I treat the quantitative research as illustrative, constituting an introduction to the qualitative analysis, giving insight into research problems. The aim of my research was to determine the state of awareness about climate emergency and the perceived agency related to remedying this phenomenon.

Therefore, using the online survey form (Google Forms), I first asked a closed question: '*Are we dealing with a climate and environment emergency?*'. I also asked for a justification of the answer. Then I asked: '*If you answered "Yes", please answer the next one: Will we stop a mentioned emergency?*', and again I asked for a justification of the answer.

In the next part of the survey, I asked the following open-ended questions: '*Who has the biggest influence on stopping a mentioned emergency?*', '*What could you and your peers do to stop a mentioned emergency? What do you expect from yourself and your peers?*', '*What could people who are your parents' age (or older) do to stop this emergency? What do you expect from them?*', '*What could those in power do to stop this emergency? What do you expect from them?*.'

Thus, I asked two closed questions and asked for six open-ended responses.

III. ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

I analysed the answers to eight questions: two closed and six open-ended. To the first question ('*Are we dealing with a climate and environmental emergency?*'), I got the following answers: '*Yes*' – 270 (90.3%), '*No*' – 14 (4.7%), '*I don't know*' – 15 (5%) (*N*=299).

Then, in the second open-ended question, I asked for a justification of the answer. Respondents who chose the answer '*Yes*' referred to their own experiences and observations, and also to their scientific knowledge. Pupils and students pointed to, among other things: CO_2 emissions, exploitation of the planet's resources, the unpredictability of the weather, and rising sea and ocean levels; but they also linked the crisis with the functioning socio-economic model. Here are some sample statements: '*Yes, we are able to feel climate change ourselves*', '*There are many crises in the world such as the melting of glaciers, climate change in climate zones, not to mention the Amazon fire this year*', '*Global economic growth causes more gas emissions to enter the atmosphere. This is a particularly dangerous crisis because governments often do not realize the gravity of the situation, and when faced with a choice between economic growth or environmental care, they tend to choose the former.*'

The conclusion is as follows: pupils and students are environmentally conscious people. They carefully observe the world and draw their own conclusions. I hypothesize that their opinions are not the result of them being subject to any indoctrination, the purpose of which would be to impose a specific view on the climate emergency and ecological situation. An analysis of more than two hundred written statements indicates that this is their (generational) shared view.

There were also voices that commented pessimistically on the condition of the human race: '*We like comfort, so we will do everything to make our lives easier – even if it means losing the environment we know*', '*The world is ending*', '*Yes, because we do not jointly care for the environment, we rely on the smallest and simplest tasks that even a small percentage of it could prevent it*'.

Respondents choosing the answer '*No*' (4.7%) offered various justifications including the following: '*Nothing is missing and everything is ok*', '*Climate change is not so great that it can be called a crisis*', '*The climate has warmed and cooled down over the millennia*'.

So it is a set of denials nuanced in different ways. There are also responses that can be interpreted as attempting to change the subject (by shifting the focus to other aspects of the situation), and talking about our supposed inability to influence the condition of the Earth: '*Change is part of life, I don't think people want to give up driving cars, or benefitting from cheap electricity in poor countries*', '*Europe's direct impact on the climate is much less than that of other western and eastern countries. The indirect one is due to the relocation of production to China, and the relocation of the environmental impact to China's vicinity*'.

Respondents choosing the answer 'I don't know' (5%) justified it by a lack of knowledge or claimed that they did not understand the meaning of the term indicated in the question. Examples of answers: '*I don't have such knowledge*', and '*I don't know what it means*'. There were also responses in which one could detect a desire to distance oneself from the problem: '*Personally, I am not interested in this topic and I do not know a reliable source of information on which to base a comment on it*', belittling its importance: '*Everywhere in the media you hear about global warming, littering of the environment, depletion of raw materials, etc., but just look back a dozen or so years, when the main problem was the hole in the ozone layer, and now you don't hear so much about it; the problem has gone away.*'

To sum up: 90.3% of those questioned share the view that we are dealing with a climate emergency and environmental crisis. On the other side of the divide we have people who chose the answers: 'No' and 'I don't know' (the analysis of the justifications given shows that to some extent they have similar views). That a large majority chose the answer 'yes' is good news for educators. It means not quite as much work needs to be done by those who want to raise awareness about the climate and environmental emergency.

However, it's also clear that for educators, encouraging action to deal with the problem is more challenging than simply getting students to recognize its reality. To the question '*Will we stop the mentioned emergency?*' the following answers were given: '*Yes*' – 35 (12.5%), '*No*' – 83 (29.8%), '*I don't know*' – 161 (57.7%) (N = 279). I asked people who answered yes to the first question to answer this question.

The justifications put forward by respondents who chose the answer '*Yes*' included (but were not limited to) the following: '*If people get involved, we might be able to stop it. Time is short, but there is still a chance,*' '*If we reduce emissions and the warming of the planet, there is a chance*', '*Just change the way of thinking, energy follows attention* ☺)'.

There was also a theme of hope, for example: '*I hope so. Our world is beautiful and worth saving. In the future, I would like my children, whom I do not yet have, to be able to grow up on this planet, which in terms of landscapes can surprise us very much.*' Moreover, pupils and students formulated statements that can be classed as miniature socio-political programs, demonstrating an understanding of the need for concrete plans and solidarity: '*If all people and governments of countries mobilize and new regulations are introduced and people comply with them, it is possible that we will still be able to stop it. But it would have to happen worldwide and as soon as possible.*' There is a note of optimism in these answers.

Respondents choosing the answer '*No*' (29.8%) justified this in various ways including the following: '*People underestimate the problem*', '*We will not be able to deal with it, the government is not doing much in this direction. People have no awareness*', '*Politicians don't care.*' These are the voices of those who believe that a global catastrophe is imminent.

This does not necessarily mean that they are reconciled to it, that they have accepted such a turn of events, but it is most likely an expression of resignation and lack of hope. They have this view of the situation and they are critical of the human race while reserving their sharpest criticism for those in positions of power. The end of our civilization is coming – this is the message conveyed by these statements, and in the eyes of these people, only some miraculous twist of fate can save us ('*There is still the possibility of some miraculous invention, such as bacteria that absorb plastic, but the global introduction of such a solution is not expected in the near future*'). These are voices saying that, at best, we will only be able to mitigate the effects of the catastrophe: '*I think that the problem is so huge that humanity will not be able to stop this crisis, it can only postpone it.*'

Importantly, pupils and students recognized the threats posed by certain common psychological tendencies – tendencies which must be considered negative and undesirable from the point of view of dealing with the climate and environmental crisis. Here is an example of such a statement: '*The community should take environmental and climate issues seriously. Man as an individual seems to be unable to do anything on his own. This causes a kind of laziness, a lack of interest, and a lack of willingness to take responsibility for climate change*'.

The largest group of respondents choosing the answer '*I don't know*' (57.7%) justified it in ways similar to those who chose the option '*No*': '*People's mentality is hard to overcome*', '*Changes leading to stopping the crisis would have to be carried out on many levels and would require large financial outlays (e.g. construction of power plants with alternative energy sources)*', '*Despite many calls to stop the climate crisis, people who could actually influence the climate (billionaires, owners of global companies) mostly do not help the Earth*'.

Yes, there was a dim light at the end of the tunnel, manifesting itself in a willingness to maintain an, at least somewhat, open mind about how things will turn out. Nevertheless, it had a pessimistic dimension, with the notion of the individual's impotence mentioned again: '*Everything depends on the*

individual choices of many people', '*I doubt it more and more every day. Our government is completely ignoring the situation, and the catastrophe is getting closer. But hope dies last*', '*It depends on the attitude of governments*'.

The statements clearly showed the young people's disbelief in the possibility of preventing emergencies and pointed to the responsibility of the decision-makers. This was very strongly articulated in the following statement: '*Stopping the "wearing out" of the planet requires radical actions taken not only by individuals but mainly at state level and by owners of companies/corporations/factories. So far, the owners of the plants are not in a hurry to, for example, reduce emissions of harmful substances or the amount of waste they produce. Stopping the climate crisis by e.g. limiting the consumption of plastic by individuals will be of little use in the face of tons of waste continuing to be produced by factories. The same is true of means of transport used on an individual basis. The change requires a systemic solution and huge investments from the government, but at present these things are not happening.*'

Later on in the survey I asked a question on the subject of agency. There were 261 replies. Three equally prominent categories of entities can be distinguished: humanity as such and representatives of the species ('Ordinary People'), corporations ('Huge concerns'), and politicians, both those representing states and those belonging to international organizations ('Heads of the largest states in the world'). Secondary, incidental categories include young people, scientists, and nature. It seems this is also a list of who is seen as responsible for the current state of affairs. The infrequency with which young people were mentioned in the answers (only twice) is a testament to the lack of faith in one's own agency.

In response to the questions, 'What could you and your peers do to stop this crisis? What do you expect from yourself and your peers?' I received 249 replies. These answers focused primarily on respondents' own activity ('*Definitely buying less plastic in any form, sorting waste*'), including awareness of their surroundings. In addition, there was mentioned (in a total of 13 statements) the possibility of activism against the government, which may indicate ignorance about the possibility of protesting or a lack of faith in this type of activity. What is pleasing, however, is the small number of responses in which pupils and students stated that they were unable to do anything. An interesting but isolated viewpoint was put forward with the statement: '*Trust scientists on climate issues.*'

Later on in the survey, another question: '*What could people who are your parents' age (or older) do to stop this crisis? What do you expect from them?*'. I received 236 answers. In the opinion of pupils and students, their parents' generation should do the same as them (e.g. '*My answer to the previous question ideally also applies to older people*'), communicate ('*Talk to the younger generation about the growing problem*'), take political action ('*They could go on strike with us and set an example for the younger ones*') – there were a total of 10 statements of this kind.

I concluded the section of the survey focused on agency by asking '*What could those in power do to stop this crisis? What do you expect from them?*'

(243 replies). The answers range from persuasion ('*encourage citizens to care for the environment*') to instruction ('*Educate*') to prohibition ('*ban the use of plastic*', '*Do not cut down trees*'), as well as assertions that seem to point to a lack of faith in the ability of the contemporary political class to change their thinking ('*Leave power*', '*Start thinking*').

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Respondents who believed the crisis can be stopped expressed hope, stressing involvement, emission reduction, and change of mindset. However, a significant number felt helpless, blaming underestimation of the problem, lack of governmental intervention, and human inaction for their pessimism. The largest group was unsure, with reasons mirroring those who said no, underscoring the perceived difficulty of changing people's mentality and the substantial financial outlay required to mitigate the crisis. Overall, despite the predominantly pessimistic outlook on whether the crisis could be halted, the respondents' responses reflected a keen awareness of the crisis, identifying key areas of responsibility and highlighting the need for systemic change.

This survey reveals that respondents largely attribute the responsibility for mitigating environmental crises to individuals, corporations, and politicians, and recognize a role for everyone in addressing these issues. However, scepticism exists about the political class's ability and willingness to bring about the necessary changes.

This is my worldview: I have no doubt that the climate and environmental emergency announced by the European Parliament will determine the future of our civilization. The crisis has already dealt us our cards, and in the future, it will also affect who will participate in the game. Some countries will disappear from the map, and their former inhabitants will wander around the world as climate refugees.

We do not know the future, but we can try to predict it and, more importantly, to influence it. I will quote again one statement that I consider very important: '*The community should take environmental and climate issues seriously. Man as an individual seems to be unable to do anything on his own. This causes a kind of laziness, a lack of interest and a lack of willingness to take responsibility for climate change.*' One of the protagonists of Ramsey's documentary *Hope Dies Last*, about the activists of the Youth Climate Strike, states: 'Saying that nothing can be done is like giving up. And we cannot give up.'[38]

Well, I express concern that the main danger is one of 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. Robert K. Merton in the book *Social Theory and Social Structure* points out:

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[38] Ramsey (2021): 6 m. 20 s.

W. I. Thomas … set forth a theory basic to the social sciences: 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.' … Though it lacks the sweep and precision of a Newtonian theorem, it possesses the same gift of relevance, being instructively applicable to many, if indeed not most, social processes.[39]

Commenting, Merton notes:

men respond not only to the objective features of a situation, but also, and at times primarily, to the meaning this situation has for them. And once they have assigned some meaning to the situation, their consequent behavior and some of the consequences of that behavior are determined by the ascribed meaning.[40] [Subsequently] The parable tells us that public definitions of a situation (prophecies or predictions) become an integral part of the situation and thus affect subsequent developments. This is peculiar to human affairs.[41]

I use the term 'climate and environmental emergency' due to the aforementioned European Parliament resolution of 28 November 2019 on the climate and environment emergency. As a citizen of a country that is a member of the EU, I am obliged to respect the legal acts of Community institutions. Therefore, if a self-fulfilling prophecy is recognized as: 'a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true',[42] then after operationalization, in the context of the climate and environmental crisis and the desire to prevent it, one can state: a false definition of the situation regarding the state of the climate and the environment, which says that it is impossible to effectively deal with the crisis, triggers a spectrum of new behaviours (including omissions), which cause the initially false notion of an inevitable catastrophe (false because it did not have to happen) to become true, that is, the crisis unfolds in such a way as to affect the inhabitants of the Earth in every possible respect.

As Merton points out, successfully challenging the false definition of the situation leads to the adoption of a different scenario, that is, one in which we humans stop the aforesaid crisis and lay the foundations for a new reality.[43] To put it simply: two stories about the future clash in our collective consciousness, one pessimistic and the other optimistic. If we believe in the optimistic story, we will start working toward its fulfilment. It bears repeating that one of the respondents wrote: '*Just change the way of thinking, energy follows attention* ☺)'.

Concluding, Merton states:

These changes, and others of the same kind, do not occur automatically. The self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby fears are translated into reality, operates only in the absence of deliberate institutional controls. And it is only with the rejection of social fatalism implied in the notion

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[39] Merton (1968): 474.
[40] Merton (1968): 475.
[41] Merton (1968): 477.
[42] Merton (1968): 477.
[43] Merton (1968): 477.

of unchangeable human nature that the tragic circle of fear, social disaster, and reinforced fear can be broken.[44]

The above-cited legal acts adopted by the European Parliament, which contain instructions about what should be done, will help to prevent the worst from coming. At the same time, it should be noted that these are only resolutions and are therefore not legally binding. Therefore, there is no implementation of Merton's postulate on institutional regulation that can be understood as an absolutely binding law. The authors of the report 'Humans attack', in the spirit of Mertonian science, note:

> Knowledge is key! Fear alone is not effective. Only knowledge can prompt people to take action. … Knowledge significantly influences the readiness to support systemic solutions, while the presentation of negative visions of the future does not influence attitudes. … It is not a good idea to scare people too much (fear is not motivating: instead, it causes depression).[45]

In conclusion, the authors state: 'Educate, educate and educate again – this is one of the most important conclusions of this study.'[46]

Dealing with a climate and environmental emergency is a difficult task. The urgency of the emergency, the awareness of its reality traumatizes young people as consumers of pop culture and observers of social life.[47] The point is to spread the belief that we will stop the climate and environmental emergency, and then roll up our sleeves and act for the common interest. If destroying the planet is our common, collective criminal act,[48] then the process of change could prove to be the greatest resocialization event of the coming decades.

First we must act. Understand education in an active way. This requires a new policy, including changing the language used to describe the situation[49] and due to the high levels of uncertainty resulting from the lack of knowing which source of information to trust, it is necessary to increase policy support and foster behavioural changes in the future through well-designed communication programmes.[50] Passivity is pessimism, and a direct path to the graveyard of civilization. In this case, conscious institutional regulation must mean policies (including education policies) that prioritize the problem of the climate and environmental crisis. European universities are joining the green network – there are debates on this topic.[51] Polish schools and universities should do likewise. However, this last idea is yet to become reality. Meanwhile, the goal is to inspire the conviction (at universities as well as in schools) that we will stop the climate and environmental emergency, and then act for

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[44] Merton (1968): 490.
[45] Kantar Poland (2019): 62–64.
[46] Kantar Poland (2019): 64.
[47] Richardson (2018).
[48] Harari (2019): 185.
[49] Lorenzoni, Pidgeon, O'Connor (2005): 1387–1398; Lahsen, Couto, Lorenzoni (2019): 213–233; Baiardi, Morana (2020).
[50] Hagen, Middel, Pijawka (2015): 170–183.
[51] Gaebel, Stoeber (2021).

the common interest. This means encouraging a new political identity, one of the key elements of which will be the conviction that there is hope. I postulate pedagogies in which the academic teacher returns to the subject of ecology ad nauseam, no matter his/her educational focus. Such a school and university will educate, in a short time, masses of ecologically oriented activists.

Secondly, these pupils and students, educated in the spirit of environmental and ecological justice and – more broadly – climate justice, will be ready to engage in a new kind of action. I see a chance to educate a particular group of people, namely politicians, especially through peaceful protests. Pupils and students must understand that the way to change leads through their own political activity, which may take the form of exerting pressure on politicians.[52] In the past, a consequence of such pressure has been politicians taking action in accordance with the current state of the science. As a side note: a different strategy is argued for by those who urge acts of violence, for example against the infrastructure used to extract and transport fossil fuels.[53] This, however, cannot be treated as an effective or morally correct way of acting.

In this regard, it seems helpful to establish the state of knowledge of the political class regarding environmental and climate issues. Perhaps we overestimate the extent to which these people, educated several decades ago, understand these issues. While they perhaps know enough to manipulate public opinion, they are themselves manipulated by advisers and lobbyists who lack even elementary knowledge of ecology. Since our lives depend on educating these politicians, we should not hesitate to do it. Hans Rosling and his team convincingly show how poor the state of public knowledge is, even among educated people, when it comes to important data on the condition of our planet, for example 90% of people do not realize that most global warming is hidden in the seas and oceans, and as a result wrongly focus on rising air temperatures.[54]

Johan Rockström asks in the documentary *Breaking Boundaries: The Science of Our Planet* (2021): 'Are we at risk of destabilizing the whole planet?' and replies: 'It's just a mind-boggling situation to be in. For the first time, we have to seriously consider the risk of destabilizing the entire planet.'[55] Rockström states,

> What we do between 2020 and 2030, from the evidence we have today, will be crucial. My conclusion is, it will be the decisive decade for humanity's future on Earth. The future is in our hands. What happens over the next centuries will be determined by how we play our cards this decade. … What would we do if we had a report tomorrow morning saying that an asteroid is on its way to Earth? Well, I'm sure that we would just put everything else aside and just focus then on solving the problem. Expend whatever it takes. … The risk of destabilizing the planet is a question of security and stability for all societies in the world.[56]

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[52] Markiewka (2021): 16–21.
[53] Malm (2021).
[54] Gapminder, https://upgrader.gapminder.org/t/sdg-world-un-goals/5/explanation; Rosling (2018).
[55] Clay (2021): 6 min. 31 s.
[56] Clay (2021): 1 h 8 min. 23 s.

To sum up, instead of putting themselves under the care of politicians, the young generation must take responsibility for what is happening and exert pressure on politicians, by peaceful means, so that they take the necessary actions (also in the matter of self-education). It is time for a green University, which will be a training ground for ecological change, giving hope that we will save our civilization. Karl Jaspers points out:

> Its [university – A.C.] principle is to furnish all tools and offer all possibilities in the province of the intellect, to direct the individual to the frontiers, to refer the learner back to himself for all his decisions, to his own sense of responsibility. This sense of responsibility has become awakened through Ms learning and is brought through it to the highest possible level and the clearest awareness. The university demands a ruthless will to know.[57]

Marcin Napiórkowski writes in the context of the climate catastrophe that our tomorrow increasingly depends on the answers we believe in, and if we do not believe that it will work, we do not take action and we fail.[58] We already know, and now it is time to act.

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[57] Jaspers (1959): 53.
[58] Napiórkowski (2022): 267–268.

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