

Article

Young Children's Concepts of Good and Evil before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Qualitative Research Study

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to determine changes in 6–8-year-old children's concepts of good and evil, indicating some shifts in their religious and spiritual development due to closing schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Slovakia, religious education (RE) was one of the most neglected school subjects during the pandemic. Almost 300 children were asked to project their associations with good and evil either visually or verbally. This procedure was used several times before 2017 and after the first and second pandemic waves. The content of the children's associations from all three periods was analyzed, categorized, quantitatively summarized, and compared. The numbers of children's associations of good and evil with supernatural beings, religious rituals, and personal faith during the pandemic were reduced several times in comparison with 2017. The numbers of associations of good and evil with interpersonal relationships, inner human qualities and nature increased. The virus appeared as a concept of evil only in the second wave of the pandemic. The results point to a weakened intensity of children's use of religious language and their religious development in the period 2020–2021, which might be one of the consequences of the limited teaching of RE during the pandemic.



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1. Introduction

This study focuses on whether—and in which direction—children's perceptions of the basic human value of good and of its counterpart evil changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools closed for public health reasons. Schools had to switch completely to a shortened online teaching schedule, with the consequence that teaching of some subjects was very restricted and practically interrupted. Religious education (RE) and ethical education (EE) in Slovakia, as well as in several other countries with a confessional type of RE, were among subjects most limited by the changes necessitated by the pandemic. Nevertheless, in these countries, both RE and EE are important agents for the development of children's morality and religiosity, and to some extent also of their spirituality in the school context.

This raises another serious question—has limited RE over several months due to the pandemic had a negative effect upon the moral, religious and spiritual development of young children? So far, it is too early to prove scientifically the causality between the pandemic and a phenomenon as complex as the development of children. Of course, in addition to the interrupted teaching of RE, other important factors that might have had a negative effect on children's religious and spiritual development need to be considered, e.g., closed churches and places of worship, restricted living space, increased stress and tension in relationships, complicated family situations, especially where a parent was employed in the critical infrastructure and there were problems therefore related to taking care of children.

1.1. Concepts of Good and Evil in Children's Morality, Religiosity and Spirituality

The concepts of good and evil can be reflected on from the perspective of several classical sciences, such as theology, law, and philosophy. At present, these concepts have increasingly become a focus of various branches of ethics such as eco-ethics, ethics of technologies, human rights, and bioethics, but also of economics, journalism, research methodology, psychology, and educational sciences.

Due to the variety of definitions of good and evil, children's understanding of these concepts can also be placed on a continuum of children's experiences, thoughts, and values. Good and evil represent reference points not only of their morality, but also of their religiosity and spirituality. Coles, the child psychiatrist, began his longitudinal research on children's moral lives, focusing on children's values of good and evil. From his 500 interviews with 8–12-year-old children from many countries and religions, he learned not only about the moral, but also the religious and spiritual thinking and experience of children. In his book *The Spiritual Life of Children* (1990), Coles calls for further research in this area to learn about changes in children's moral, religious and spiritual thinking.

First of all, the concepts of good and evil are the basic pillars of children's morality, which is predominantly focused on moral behavior and moral judgements. Children's moral development is a cognitive-emotional process of internal processing and harmonization of external moral values and subjective value criteria for assessing good and evil (Čižmaríková 2013). Thus, to understand children's concepts of good and evil requires competence in examining the processes of their moral development.

The morality of children does not mean only behaving properly, but manifests itself in three interconnected spheres of human personality: in moral consciousness, in moral relations, and in moral activity (Čižmaríková 2013; Vacek 2013). It is not possible to examine children's moral concepts without understanding that they do not exist in isolation, and together they gradually form a complex structure of the moral life of children. Children's moral consciousness consists of their moral feelings—the most elementary component of their moral consciousness, as well as of the knowledge of moral requirements (moral norms, principles and ideals) and moral values. In parallel with their cognitive skills development, children develop the ability to construct their own moral judgments, expressed in statements about whether acts are morally correct, morally incorrect or morally indifferent. The process of children creating their own moral conviction and moral decision making about what is right takes place through the integration of moral feelings, moral habits, experiences, internalization of moral norms and the influence of prosocial behavioral patterns. Children's morality also expresses itself in their moral relationships with others, with themselves, and with a group or with society. They reflect the value frameworks existing in their own moral consciousness or in the whole group of children, family, etc. If a child initiates an activity of moral significance, one which he or she has freely and responsibly chosen, we can speak of the moral activity or moral behavior of the child.

Second, children's concepts of good and evil are also directly related to their religiosity. Development of children's awareness of what is really 'good' in life is one of the main aims of RE, as documented by an international analysis (Šoltésová 2013). Religiosity, with its belief, emotions, and action can be either spiritual or non-spiritual, external or internalized (Stríženec 2001). Religious educators realize that children "need to grapple with what a value might mean in everyday life, what motivates people to live by their values, where values come from and so on" . . . "Values education must go hand in hand with beliefs education" (Cooling 2010, p. 30). Developmental psychologists consider faith or belief to be one of the sources of a person's future moral intelligence (Kaliská 2013). Religious development is influenced by various factors, especially the family, religious community, school RE, but also various unexpected situations and social changes. This interactive process of religious socialization of each child through RE can be interpreted in two different ways—as a transmission of "ready-made patterns" of religious thinking and behavior (traditional reproduction RE model) or as a creative process in which the child

constantly actively reinterprets and reconstructs his/her existing religious competencies (constructivist RE model) (Pusztai and Demeter-Karászi 2019).

Third, there are also connections between children's moral concepts and their spirituality. According to Coles, "moral attitudes, including emotions . . . are a major psychological . . . side of young spirituality" (Coles 1990, p. 108). From the perspective of the psychology of religion, the traditional model of spiritual development intertwines spirituality with morality (Friedman et al. 2010). The school's attitude to spiritual development is to support the internalization of moral values and moral character (Wong 2006).

Spirituality as a tool of real change in human personality is considered an umbrella term for the search of a better, higher quality of life, for finding peace and the meaning of one's life (own identity), for finding answers to ultimate issues, wholeness, ways of life and communication, reflecting one's life, personal well-being and self-development, self-knowledge, a way of decision making (Watson), connectedness with oneself and the universe, conscience, respect for other people, concern about nature and its role in the life of humankind, creativity, caring relationships, enforcing human rights, wonder, identification with transcendent values, awareness of the existence of the 'intangible' in life, etc. (Frankl 1985; Duff 2003; Webster 2004; Řičan 2006; Bloom 2012; Smékal 2017). Spirituality covers the highest human needs and desires, creativity, love, friendship, receptivity to beauty, scientific and artistic activity, intellectual and physical performance, search for the meaning and value of life, and moral sensitivity (Piętak 2000).

Spiritual development includes growth in awareness, self-knowledge and transcendence. There are also other dimensions of spiritual development, such as values, religiosity and morality, that may contribute to its flourishing (Stríženec 2001; Duff 2003). Additionally, although some experts doubt that spirituality can be taught, teachers can prepare learning environments that facilitate the development of the spiritual awareness of children (Duff 2003).

To some extent, it is possible to distinguish between non-religious or religious spirituality depending on whether the ultimate spiritual search is for God (Anthony 2006; Řičan 2007). However, in both manifestations of spirituality, the spiritual essence is characterized by (a) 'connectedness'—by experiencing a horizontal relationship with other people and oneself, with the cosmos), wonder and the energy of everyday life (Bloom 2012), with oneself, with others, and by (b) transcendence—the effort to be anchored in something that transcends us. In other words, spirituality affects one's way of life and one's view of the world, the ways one communicates, one's formation and ways of maintaining relationships with people, and one's relationships to work (Hyde 2004; Bloom 2012).

In several post-communist countries, including Slovakia, the term 'spiritual development' has until recently caused some confusion in its interpretation and led to hesitation to accept it inside the state school system (Piętak 2000). In the Slovak language, for example, the adjective 'spiritual' evokes connotations of spiritism, a questionable inner state, or resistance to scientific facts. Unlike the National Curriculum for England (since 1988) with spiritual development being one of the four main aims alongside with moral, social and cultural development across all school subjects, a majority of the post-communist countries—even at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century—continued to be reluctant to use the term 'spiritual' in educational practice and research. Recently, however, there have been more research studies on the need for transcendence in education (Helus 2012; Bravená 2013). Even the public portal on education in Slovakia (eduworld.sk) mentions that spiritual development is becoming a natural part of self-awareness and personal development for humans. Teachers' concepts of spirituality have started to shift towards a more positive notion of spirituality as the search for a higher quality of life. This search implies understanding what is good in all directions of one's activity and relations—toward other humans, toward oneself, toward the world, and, in the context of religious education, also toward God (Kosová 1998).

1.2. Characteristics of 6–8-Year-Old Children and Their Concepts of Good and Evil

Pre-school children's views of good and evil reflect what their parents and other authorities in their life believe to be good or wrong. They are convinced of the immutability of rules and of the necessity of punishment when violating or not heeding these rules, which they try to avoid. These rules apply to children's hygiene routines, duties, common behavior, order, interpersonal interactions, and moral values. They understand that to avoid punishment, one has to be 'good' and obey the rules; moral evil is that which is forbidden by the authority—typical signs of heteronomous or pre-conventional morality (Piaget [1932] 1997; Kohlberg 1969; Vacek 2013).

At 6–7 years old—the age at which children begin their education in schools in Slovakia—children still think rather purposefully, obeying moral rules set by external authorities in order to obtain a reward or appreciation (Čižmaríková 2013; Vacek 2013). Their moral thinking sets them on the path to a transition toward moral autonomy, which develops fully at approximately the age of 11 (Piaget [1932] 1997; Anthony 1992). As soon as they reach the age of 10–11, most children are able to perceive the objective rules or general laws and take on the duty to observe and follow them.

At approximately the age of seven, children are able to understand the meaning of the concepts of good and evil, and develop their own moral values, which is a sign of the conventional phase of morality (Kohlberg 1976). Most of them are still not able to explain these concepts in an abstract way, because their thinking 'remains' on a concrete operational level, but they can describe them by mentioning concrete examples (Piaget and Inhelder 1993; Coles 1997). Children at the age of 6–8 still want those in authority to set the rules and to provide a sense of security. They pay close attention to the behavior of other children and compare themselves with them, as it is their desire to be recognized as significant in their peer group and valued by the adults (Erikson 1997). They have a very strong sense of justice, and they expect to be treated fairly by adults. Although they are aware of the consequences of disobedience (Vacek 2013), they struggle with obeying them in everyday situations and their behavior is often inconsistent with their moral consciousness (Heidbrink 1997). According to Peck (1995), this is typical of entering the second phase of their spiritual development.

Gradually, 6–8-year-old children begin to empathize with other people's needs and to see situations not only from their egocentric motivation point of view, but from more than two perspectives. They judge not only the specific expressions of other people's behavior, but they are increasingly able to notice the intentions behind other people's behavior (Čižmaríková 2013). The older they are, the less rigid about the rules they become and the more capable they are of understanding the true nature of rules and internalizing them (Kohlberg 1969).

As the moral thinking of younger school-age children is still relatively fragile and unstable, depending somewhat on the context, it is open to external intervention and can be easily manipulated. The role of their teachers is not only to help these children distinguish between good and bad behavior, but to understand the broader meaning of rules, actively construct their own generalizing concepts, emphasize their inner motives, draw their own conclusions in specific situations and construct moral values, altruism and responsibility for others (Gilligan 1993). Creating learning environments that facilitate the flourishing of children's values development is an cross-curricular task of the school, and also one of the basic tasks of RE.

As for the characteristics of the religious development of 6–8-year-old children, this is a typical period in which their religious concepts and religious identity are based on that of their family, church and RE. Children's faith is a reflection of the faith of the adults (Gillespie 2007). They distinguish their religion according to the specific behavior of its members (Elkind 1978). At the age of 6–7, they are still in the stage of 'intuitive-projective faith' (Fowler 1987). They show an emotional inclination towards the symbols of faith. Children over 7 years old enter the next stage called 'mythical-literal faith', in which children associate their faith mostly with drama or story.

Children at this age are able to ‘transcend’—to shift their attention from a restricted interest in only their own good to the pursuit of good and well-being for others, to the care of nature, to the protection of material goods, etc. In addition to this horizontal direction of transcendence, they are able also to transcend in the vertical direction too—that is, toward question on the meaning of life, toward God, the cosmos, etc. (Bravená 2013).

If 6–8-year-old children are to talk about their associations of good and evil, especially their religious or spiritual experience, there is one problem, and that is language itself. In 1969, Smith had already warned about the possible negative impact of religious language upon young children, especially in case of denominational schools. Although the situation has changed and RE teachers are not allowed to isolate children “from ‘the acids of modernity’”, as Smith requested (Smith 1969, pp. 33–34), the question remains whether children’s religiosity can be judged on the basis of their statements. It is possible that children experience something they do not yet have the necessary language skills for (Hay and Nye 2006). This can happen if they do not have a reference point with which or with whom they can compare and share their experience verbally. On the other hand, encouraging them to express their experience in a few words can lead to limiting the true extent of their experience. Berryman (1985) noticed both influences of language in theologizing with children. Children aged 6 and over need stories to develop their spirituality (Fowler 1995; Ratcliff and May 2004).

1.3. Religious Education—A School Subject Developing Children’s Concepts of Good and Evil

Comparisons of the educational aims of RE from different national contexts has shown that encouraging pupils to clarify and justify their own concepts of good and evil as well as other values, and constructing value-based decisions are two of the main aims of current RE. The depth, direction, and intensity of the fulfilment of these aims by means of RE as a school subject vary greatly depending on the type of RE. Investigating children’s concepts requires paying attention to the wider context of the role of RE in each country as “sensitivity to context is central in qualitative inquiry and analysis” (Patton 2014, p. 48).

In the second half of the 20th century, two complementary models of RE in Europe evolved (Hull 1999; Schreiner 2013). The confessional RE model has traditionally introduced children to a specific religion in order to encourage their personal involvement in that faith via religiously-focused instruction (e.g., Christian, Muslim, and humanistic). Usually it is not compulsory for all children, just for those whose parents decide to place their children in such RE. This model is typical for the majority of post-communist central and eastern European countries, where it expresses a symbol of religious freedom and plays the role of a kind of remedy after years of ideological indoctrination of the population. For example, in Romania, RE “invites to reflection, self-conscience, direct acquisition of the moral values . . . to create solidarity among a community’s members and to delineate an authentic consciences . . . For the Romanian society as a whole, moral-religious education assures the access to its own spirituality.” (Croitoru and Munteanu 2014, p. 2156). This RE type supports predominantly moral, religious and religiously spiritual associations of children with good and evil. As follows from a comparative primary school curricula analysis of RE and its alternative EE in Slovakia, initially this model focused exclusively on children’s religious spirituality development (at least its ritualistic, intellectual and experiential dimensions) (Říčan 2007; Pusztai and Demeter-Karászi 2019), and not so much on other non-religious dimensions of their spiritual competence (Korim and Hanesová 2010). In developed countries with this RE model, however, it has been a common practice for some time that—for various, often pragmatic reasons—this RE is attended also by children from other churches or even religions or that the children do not have to conform to the rituals typical of the religion of the founder of this RE. So the aims of this RE have started to include several wider issues belonging to universal human spirituality (Hanesová 2006).

Since the first decade of the 21st century, the non-confessional RE model (other versions: R.I.—religious instruction, E.A.R.—education about religion) has become more and more widespread in Europe. It is a compulsory subject for all children, as it offers

information ‘about’ religion(s) necessary for creating global competencies of citizens living in the 21st century. It also encourages learning through reflection on various religious values ‘from’ other religions. This RE’s aim is to contribute to the development of children’s spiritual competence to such an extent that it helps children to advance in their knowledge and understanding of the world, but also in their knowledge and understanding of the highest possible transcendence from the point of view of various religions (Hull 1999). In some countries, both versions of RE co-exist in state schools.

The Council of Europe (CoE 1999) emphasized the role of RE in combating ignorance and stereotypes, and developing knowledge of human rights as well as civic and intercultural awareness in a multicultural society. Recent changes in societies, such as massive immigration and growth of violence and xenophobia, have given rise to the gradual convergence of teaching methods used in various RE models worldwide (Kay 2001; Schreiner 2013). The task of both REs is not only to offer acquaintance with facts about religion but to deepen the overall spiritual competence of children, including mutual respect and tolerance towards other religions (Schreiner 2001; TOLEDO 2007), which used to be the dominant emphasis of the non-confessional model.

In Slovakia, the main responsibility for the development of children’s morality, religiosity and spirituality is entrusted to two parallel school subjects, of which the parents must choose one: confessionally-oriented RE and a religiously-neutral subject called ethics (EE). They are both responsible for achieving the educational outcomes in the educational area called Humans and Values within the Slovak State Education Curriculum (Štátny pedagogický ústav 2011). According to it, the RE aim is “it form children’s religious thinking, conscience, religion and personal faith as a personal manifestation of religious thinking and an integral part of human identity.” Throughout the whole State curriculum, the term “spiritual” is mentioned only once in connection with building and cultivating the mental, spiritual and social dimension of young people (Štátny pedagogický ústav 2011).

1.4. Religious Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

RE in schools was reduced to the maximum extent possible due to lockdown measures during both waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. Together with the USA, Canada, Brazil, Latvia, and Turkey, Slovakia ranked among the fifth group of countries with the highest level in terms of the number of weeks of full school closures (over 41 weeks) (UNESCO 2020). The ministry of education insisted explicitly on online teaching of main subjects, a deficit in which could affect students’ future educational attainments, such as mathematics, languages or sciences. The other subjects, the main role of which is to enhance the skills or abilities of children (such as physical education, music education, art and technology, RE and EE) were not given any official attention (Štátny pedagogický ústav 2021). Their teaching depended on the initiative of the teachers. School systems in which RE has the status of an elective subject did not create adequate space in the online school curriculum for this subject due to the shortened time available for instruction. In the spring of 2020, RE in Slovakia practically stopped being taught; a similar scenario was to some extent repeated in the winter months of the period 2020–2021. Based on various indications from interviews with classroom teachers of 6–8-year-old children after both pandemic waves, Slovak religious educators started to wonder whether the closure or limitation of teaching RE during the pandemic might have impacted the children’s understanding of good and evil. The decision was made to investigate at least the difference between their concepts of good and evil in the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic periods.

1.5. Research Aim and Questions

This research is a direct follow-up of a previous, nine-year qualitative research project (2009–2017) by a team of Slovak researchers. Its purpose was to repeatedly ask children aged 6–15 the same questions every year and to learn about the development of their religious and spiritual thinking. The data on a total of approximately 500 children (groups of the oldest of them were researched up to 8 times, which allowed a longitudinal comparison)

were acquired via various research techniques, especially from recorded interviews with children about their religious or spiritual experiences, worries, or dilemmas, resulting in the development of a grounded theory related to children's spiritual and moral values.

The aim of this research is to determine whether there are any differences in children's concepts of good and evil between the samples of children before and during the pandemic. By setting this aim we tried to answer the following questions: Has the perception of moral values of good and evil by 6–8-year-old children changed during the COVID-19 pandemic when RE was reduced or even suspended? If it has changed, in what way? What effect did COVID-19 have on children's concepts of evil? Are there any indications of what such reductions or suspensions imply about the orientation of spiritual or religious life and thinking of children during a pandemic?

Repeating the same procedure from 2017 after the first and second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (in 2020 and 2021), we assumed that due to the closed RE and churches, children will mention religious topics to a lesser extent. We expected children to make more associations with family, and other interpersonal relationships because the pandemic lockdown offered an unprecedented opportunity to be with family members but at the same time a challenge for long-term confinement with a small group of people.

2. Method

Research with young children under 10 years old brings with it many risks and demands in order to avoid pressure on children or influencing their answers, artificial research setting, a lack of evidence and grounding theory on insignificant anecdotes, and thus lack of clarity in research.

2.1. Research Instrument

In order to determine 6–8-year-old children's concepts of good and evil, a data acquisition tool was used. Methodologists suggest the use of this instrument as it makes it possible to discover unconscious personality tendencies of children and to avoid tendentious answers or the presentation of socially desirable answers (Gavora 1996; Kollárik 1998; Halama et al. 2006). Based on the principle of an ambiguous stimulus, the projective technique allows personal experience, motives, and opinions to be obtained from the respondents. For example, a participant might be asked to provide a picture or finish an unfinished sentence provided by the researcher. Children can share their attitudes, values, or opinions in an unstructured, free way, verbally and/or by drawing pictures. "Using children's drawings" represents one of the creative approaches to research with children, as drawing is an activity that is familiar to young children, giving them space to create drawings in any way, colors, size and number of drawings. This activity is limited by the amount of information that young children can capture in drawings (Bolshaw and Soephidou 2019).

The projective technique was originally used by clinical psychologists in the early 20th century (Catterall and Ibbotson 2000) as it allowed greater use of creativity and engagement with respondents than did classical research techniques, which would be inappropriate for this age group. The projective technique has some features of a phenomenographic approach, allowing for the identification and categorization of subjective (pre-) concepts and ideas of children, including those about moral, religious, and spiritual values (Saur and Saur 1993). It is effective in disclosing the experience and differences in the experiences of children in relation to the selected phenomena. It is suitable for the school environment, as it reveals children's thinking and experience without directly asking each of them and exposing them to anxiety about whether they are answering correctly.

2.2. Research Sample

The sample consisted in total of 294 children, attending the first, second and third grades, in 2017: 108 children, in 2020: 65 children, and in 2021: 121 children. First-graders included 6–7-year-old children, second-graders 7–8-year-old children and third-graders

8–8.5-year-old children. The exact numbers of children and the ratio of girls and boys in each year can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Research sample.

Grade/Sums	Before Pandemic April 2017			1st Wave of Pandemic May 2020			2nd Wave of Pandemic March 2021		
	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3
Boys	26	23	10	10	10	11	20	21	19
Girls	16	21	12	10	13	11	19	22	20
Total	42	44	22	20	23	22	39	43	39

To compare children’s concepts of good and evil from the time before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the research sample was purposefully selected from the same region. Children from a certain denominational school were selected. It is an inclusive school in the sense that it does not, in principle, require children’s church affiliation. On average, approximately 20–30% of children in the class come from religiously oriented families. The reason why the pupils of only this school were chosen for this comparable research is simply that the pre-COVID-19 data had already been collected there and this school allowed the repetition of the research at the end of the first and during the second wave of the pandemic.

2.3. Procedure

Given the age of children, two simple questions—What is good? What is evil?—were used as stimulus for children which took into account the requirement that children from different religious or a-religious backgrounds would be able to respond to them. The researcher asked the children to create their projection either by drawing their idea and/or by verbally finishing the sentences: Good is Evil is

The safety of children involved in the research was ensured by conducting the research in their natural environment with pre-trained class teachers, who had already known their children for some time and who thus could build on the rapport they had already established with the children (Almy and Genishi 1979). The teacher first explained to the children what they would do and why, and then handed them a large enough plain paper, which they folded into two halves to draw their attention to the need to express themselves on both of the complementary concepts. Due to the concentration spans of children at this age, the children were only given a 20 min time slot to either write or draw or both write and draw their own conceptions of good and evil that came to mind. In this way, we supposed they would express their strongest or most recent impression, their experience of the last few days or periods. The children were told to create as many associations as they wanted. Thus, they were not forced into any demanding, unnatural activity. During the activity, the teacher—in some cases another assistant researcher—walked among the children and asked them for more detailed explanations of the pictures which complemented children’s projections in a distinguishable way. If the drawing was difficult to understand, the teacher wrote the child’s explanation on the same paper. Time was limited. They were encouraged to focus on their own concept and not be distracted by what other children were doing. The research was carried out with the whole class. All children, including those with special educational needs (SEN), enjoyed this activity and got involved in it in their own way (Catterall and Ibbotson 2000).

This activity was repeated three times: before the pandemic (2017), then at the end of the 1st wave (June 2020), and after the 2nd wave of the pandemic in Slovakia (March 2021). This predominantly qualitative research design was supplemented by quantitative data summaries (in Tables 2–7).

Data acquired from children’s projections were analyzed and coded. This combination of data acquisition and processing methods is well documented in previous research (Das 2018). The drawings in several groups were subsequently analyzed by a school

psychologist, especially focusing on SEN children and on any pathological drawings. Based on the analysis of the projection results, qualitative categories of children's associations of good and evil were created. These were finally supplemented by descriptive statistics. In this paper, we will not focus on the visual analysis of children's drawings, but only on their content.

Table 2. The concept of good by 6–7-year-old children (Grade 1).

Grade 1 (6–7-Year-Old Children): Good Is ...	2017	2020	2021
1. Supernatural world and its beings	41%	0%	8%
2. Behavior toward other people	24%	48%	20%
3. Symbols	13%	39%	12%
4. Human qualities/attributes	3%	2%	18%
5. Family	1%	0%	4%
6. Nature, animals, ecological behavior	8%	0%	8%
7. Religious rituals and personal faith	8%	2%	2%
8. Positive events in society	1%	2%	2%
9. Own well-being	0%	2%	10%
10. Friendship/friends	0%	5%	10%
11. Objective phenomena	1%	0%	0%
12. Material things	0%	0%	0%
13. Positive phenomena during the COVID-19 pandemic	0%	0%	6%
Together	100%	100%	100%

Table 3. The concept of good by 7–8-year-old children (Grade 2).

Grade 2 (7–8-Year-Old Children): Good Is ...	2017	2020	2021
1. Supernatural world and its beings	27%	13%	11%
2. Behavior toward other people	17%	33%	54%
3. Symbols	9%	0%	11%
4. Human qualities/attributes	11%	25%	8%
5. Family	4%	2%	0%
6. Nature, animals, ecological behavior	4%	11%	7%
7. Religious rituals and personal faith	11%	2%	2%
8. Positive events in society	6%	1%	0%
9. Own well-being	3%	2%	4%
10. Friendship/friends	5%	9%	3%
11. Objective phenomena	1%	2%	0%
12. Material things	2%	0%	0%
13. Positive phenomena during the COVID-19 pandemic	0%	0%	0%
Together	100%	100%	100%

Table 4. The concept of good by 8–8.5-year-old children (Grade 3).

Grade 3 (8–8.5-Year-Old Children): Good Is ...	2017	2020	2021
1. Supernatural world and its beings	21%	1%	12%
2. Behavior toward other people	7%	29%	16%
3. Symbols	7%	1%	4%
4. Human qualities/attributes	24%	16%	26%
5. Family	1%	5%	1%
6. Nature, animals, ecological behavior	2%	14%	9%
7. Religious rituals and personal faith	26%	6%	8%
8. Positive events in society	1%	1%	4%
9. Own well-being	7%	3%	6%
10. Friendship/friends	2%	5%	4%
11. Objective phenomena	2%	10%	8%
12. Material things	0%	9%	0%
13. Positive phenomena during the COVID-19 pandemic	0%	0%	2%
Together	100%	100%	100%

Table 5. The concept of evil by 6–7-year-old children (Grade 1).

Grade 1 (6–7-Year-Old Children): Evil Is ...	2017	2020	2021
1. Supernatural world and its beings	31%	0%	6%
2. Behavior toward other people	19%	59%	40%
3. Symbols	9%	15%	7%
4. Human attributes	0%	9%	4%
5. Family issues	2%	0%	0%
6. Ill-treatment of nature, non-ecological behavior	3%	6%	4%
7. Religious rituals and personal faith	1%	9%	0%
8. Negative events in society	33%	0%	4%
9. Own well-being, inner states	1%	1%	4%
10. Battle between good and evil	0%	0%	18%
11. Bad habits, addictions	0%	0%	0%
12. COVID-19 pandemic	0%	0%	6%
13. Objective facts	1%	1%	7%
Together	100%	100%	100%

Table 6. The concept of evil by 7–8-year-old children (Grade 2).

Grade 2 (7–8-Year-Old Children): Evil Is ...	2017	2020	2021
1. Supernatural world and its beings	21%	6%	12%
2. Behavior toward other people	27%	69%	60%
3. Symbols	8%	0%	0%
4. Human attributes	0%	8%	8%
5. Family issues	1%	0%	0%
6. Ill-treatment of nature, non-ecological behavior	0%	11%	6%
7. Religious rituals and personal faith	3%	1%	0%
8. Negative events in society	40%	0%	6%
9. Own well-being, inner states	0%	3%	5%
10. Battle between good and evil	0%	0%	0%
11. Bad habits, addictions	0%	1%	0%
12. COVID-19 pandemic	0%	0%	2%
13. Objective facts	0%	1%	1%
Together	100%	100%	100%

Table 7. The concept of evil by 8–8.5-year-old children (Grade 3).

Grade 3 (8–8.5-Year-Old Children): Evil Is ...	2017	2020	2021
1. Supernatural world and its beings	16%	0%	4%
2. Behavior toward other people	27%	44%	20%
3. Symbols	3%	0%	1%
4. Human attributes	8%	3%	18%
5. Family issues	0%	0%	0%
6. Ill-treatment of nature, non-ecological behavior	1%	21%	3%
7. Religious rituals and personal faith	5%	6%	5%
8. Negative events in society	22%	17%	12%
9. Own well-being, inner states	11%	0%	18%
10. Battle between good and evil	2%	0%	0%
11. Bad habits, addictions	0%	8%	0%
12. COVID-19 pandemic	0%	0%	16%
13. Objective facts	5%	1%	3%
Together	100%	100%	100%

2.4. Variables

The societal context associated with various phases of the COVID-19 pandemic and its lockdown measures, especially the closure of school RE, represented the independent variable within this research. In Slovakia, the two pandemic waves differed massively in intensity and in their affects on people's daily lives. During the first wave (spring-summer

2020), Slovakia was one of the “relatively mildly affected countries” by the pandemic, with “no excessive deaths” compared to previous years (Zavarská 2020, p. 2). At the end of September, a total of 44 deaths from the pulmonary form of COVID-19 were recorded in Slovakia (Ministerstvo zdravotníctva 2020). In the second wave, on the other hand, according to Our World Data (Johns Hopkins University 2021), the number of deaths increased and Slovakia even had the highest number of deaths from COVID-19 per million inhabitants worldwide in the last 7 days of February and by the beginning of June 2021 more than 12,300 people had died per 5.45 mil (Slovak Government Statistics 2021). Over 700,000—approximately 15% of the population were diagnosed with COVID-19, which probably influenced them and their families, as well as other families of critical infrastructure professionals (medical staff, politicians, police, army, shop assistants, etc.).

The dependent variable was the children’s concepts of good and evil, collected in three distinct phases of the pandemic context: before the pandemic started (March 2020), during the 1st wave of the pandemic (March–June 2020), and during the 2nd wave of the pandemic (September 2020–March 2021).

Of course, there were a few other family and school factors (the personality of teacher, the families’ experience with COVID-19, etc.) influencing the children’s inner life during the pandemic. They were not taken into account into this research, as in situations like these “there is no practical or ethically acceptable way to regulate most of the variables when you are investigating the opinions and experiences of a group of children” (Hay and Nye 2006, p. 90).

2.5. Reliability, Validity, Objectivity

As in any qualitative research, reliability—the level of the “consistency of the measure”—is often its weakest point in comparison with quantitative research. We are aware that the results of our qualitative research cannot be evaluated using inferential statistics. Simple descriptive statistics were used to develop an overall picture of the examined shifts. The reliability of this method was enhanced by repeating the same procedure in the same age group and in the same school with the same ethos and by the same pre-trained teachers of RE. In all samples, the structure and form of the research tool produced comparable outputs.

For qualitative research, especially in the case of child respondents, to bring valid results, i.e., correct data, the projective method of data acquisition was used repeatedly with several classes of children in three subsequent phases, followed by multiple data analysis done by several researchers (Silverman 2003). We were interested in obtaining the most genuine statements possible from the children regarding their understandings of good and evil. Of course, we anticipated, in light of their developmental limits, that we would find only limited measure due to their developmental abilities to reflect their perception of mental states and spiritual experience of “here” and “now”.

The objectivity of the research was ensured by the triangulation of the researchers who carried out the research. A total of 5 researchers participated in the individual phases of the research. First, they were all trained to use the research tool properly. In one group, the research tool was used right after the children’s participation in RE lesson on Adam and Eve in Paradise, which affected the children’s projections—most of them drew pictures of good and evil related to this biblical story. For this reason, the data from this group were excluded from the overall research results.

2.6. Research Ethics

During the implementation of all three phases of the research, the research team paid attention to ethical principles: (a) acquainting the children, teachers, and the school principal with the purpose of the research; (b) obtaining the consent of school and parents for the research in the beginning of each school year (Cohen and Manion 1996); (c) the formulation of questions that would not disturb the children; (d) the incorporation into the database of all children’s answers; (e) attempting to discuss research results

with other experts; (f) reporting unexpected findings to the teacher (Kasáčová et al. 2016; Bolshaw and Soephidou 2019).

3. Results

As the analysis of children's projections showed, some children drew in detail one situation, others drew multiple pictures and/or wrote a few words. The highest fluency of associations was in the 3rd grade, as these children drew much less and expressed their associations verbally. The average number of associations in individual grades was similar in all three phases: the number of associations with good per child in the 1st grade was 1.75 associations, in the 2nd grade 2.75 associations and in the 3rd grade 5.5 associations. In the case of associations with evil, the average incidence of associations was lower: 1.4 associations per child in the 1st grade, 1.75 associations per child in the 2nd grade, and 4.4 associations per child in the 3rd grade. In both cases, the third graders in 2017 had twice as high fluency, i.e., the number of associations then the third graders during the pandemic.

Then, the children's associations were divided into several content clusters. Given the goal of the research, it was important to evaluate the dimension of flexibility, i.e., what different clusters of associations with the terms good and evil were represented by the children. Within these categories, the sums of incidences were also evaluated, i.e., the frequency with which the associations of good and evil occurred in each grade (1st, 2nd, 3rd) in years 2017, 2020, and 2021.

In the case of associations with the term 'good', it was possible to distinguish the following clusters of children's associations with:

1. Supernatural world, transcendental beings (God, Jesus, angel, heaven . . . is good);
2. Behavior toward other people:
 - positive verbs—what to do to others, e.g., it is good (in the sense of 'right') to help, give stg, forgive, lend, love, forgive, ask for forgiveness, make somebody happy;
 - negative verbs—what not to do, e.g., it is not good/right to do bad things, not to steal or to lie;
3. Symbols expressing goodness and emotions associated with good (good, red, white, or clean heart; smilies, sun smiling; presents/gifts);
4. Human qualities/attributes (nouns/adjectives), e.g., grace, mercy, love, kindness, willingness, respect for others, care, fairness, to be diligent, sincere;
5. Having own family and family issues (birth of a baby, weddings, birthdays, family holidays);
6. Nature, environment and ecology: countryside, beauty of nature (trees, animals & pets), ecological behavior—nature protection, waste separation), nature walks, etc.;
7. Religious rituals (going to church, prayer, reading the Bible) and personal faith (believing, obeying and praising God, belief in biblical doctrines and God's blessing);
8. Positive events in the society and behavior of adults (modesty, taking care of patients, saving people in dangerous situations, helping families to move furniture, crime detection);
9. Own well-being, own security, own happiness, hobbies;
10. Friendship (having friends, having a party, playing together—football);
11. Objective phenomena (homeland, light, life, beauty, literature, school, presence of teachers);
12. Material things (mobile, computer games, place to live, food, drink, ice-cream);
13. Positive phenomena during the pandemic (getting out of quarantine, be recovered from the coronavirus).

The numbers of incidences of associations with the term 'good' in the mentioned categories in 2017 (before the pandemic), in 2020 (after the first wave of the pandemic) and in 2021 (after the second wave of the pandemic) were as follows:

In the case of associations with the term ‘evil’, it was possible to distinguish the following clusters of associations:

1. Supernatural world, transcendental beings (devil, demons, hell);
2. Behavior toward other people (verbs), e.g., to beat somebody, steal, lie, mock, bully, verbally hurt, argue, disobey parents/teachers;
3. Symbols expressing evil and emotions connected with evil (heart—dark, dirty, broken; sad-faces, sad sun);
4. Human attributes (selfishness, pride, conceit, laziness, rage, greed, infidelity, etc.);
5. Family issues (quarrels of parents);
6. Ill-treatment of nature, non-ecological behavior (nature destruction, food disposal, non-recycling of waste, nuclear power plants, etc.);
7. Religious rituals (abuse of religious symbols, taking the name of God in vain, cursing, worshipping Satan) and personal faith (considering oneself as sinful, bad—realization of sinful human nature/sinning);
8. Negative events in society, behaviors of adults (terrorism, wars, killing, murder, traffic accidents, abuse, arson, robbery, etc.);
9. Own well-being, states of mind, heart, body (diseases other than COVID-19, loneliness, sorrow);
10. Battle between good and evil (armies of evil and good fight against each other);
11. Bad habits, addictions (smoking, taking drugs);
12. COVID-19 pandemic (wearing masks, virus, being sick, lying in bed, quarantine);
13. Objective facts (death, darkness, mummy, dirt, storm, existence of videogames, attacks of wild animals).

The number of occurrences of associations with the term evil in the categories mentioned in 2017 (before the pandemic), in 2020 (after the first wave of the pandemic) and in 2021 (after the second wave of the pandemic) were as follows.

4. Interpretation and Discussion

When comparing the results of content analysis of data obtained in three different periods, it is possible to identify certain quantitative and especially qualitative differences among the data collected in them. It is important to note that children in the research sample belonged to 14 different class collectives: 5 first-grade classes, 5 second-grade classes, 4 third-grade classes. In spite of the different constellations of their teachers, home backgrounds, and educational needs, some changes were repeated across all of the groups or grades. Other categories did not show any significant quantitative variance, but it is interesting to mention the shifts in their content.

4.1. Children’s Associations of Good/Evil with Supernatural World/Beings

In this category of children’s associations, the most striking differences between the periods before and after the pandemic were noted. Our hypothesis was confirmed in this point. It can be said that during the pandemic, children less often mentioned the supernatural beings as their idea of good or evil. In the case of the concept ‘good’, this decline was most evident with the 1st grades, where the 41% ratio of all pre-COVID-19 association with supernatural word fell to 0% in the 1st wave, and to 8% in the second wave. In the second grades, the number dropped by half, and there was not much difference between the 1st and 2nd wave. In the 3rd year, again in the 1st wave, only 1% of children’s associations mentioned this category, although in 2017 it was 21%, the halving was also in the second wave of the pandemic.

We observed a similar trend in connection with the concept of evil. In the first grades, children’s associations dropped from 31% before the pandemic to 0% during the first wave. The zero incidence during the 1st wave also appeared in the 3rd grade; in the 2nd grade, it decreased from 21% to 6%. Data from the 2nd wave also show a decrease to a fifth in the 1st grades, by half in 2nd grades, and to a quarter in the 3rd grades.

In all 14 groups of students, a similar pattern of decline was repeated in both waves, most massively in the 1st wave, when the schools throughout the whole country were closed and online teaching was not yet fully established. The teaching of RE was completely eliminated. During the second wave, the situation repeated, especially in state schools. In addition to the elimination of RE in schools, there was at least one equally serious cause of the religious decline: the closure of churches and the exclusion of the possibility of physically attending services, although later the transition to some online form of services. Both these circumstances meant that children did not hear teaching about God, heaven, and other transcendent issues as often as they did before the pandemic in RE classes. During the 2nd wave, the decline was a little less sharp (e.g., to 1/4 from the pre-pandemic state in the 3rd year), which could be due either to the efforts of teachers in denominational schools to at least pray with children or talk about spiritual topics through occasional online class meetings and thus start directing their attention to God, or due to the raised awareness of some parents who realized the situation and started to care more about how to substitute for the deficit of school-based RE and church in the lives of their children. For example, they included family prayer as a very important spiritual aspect in family life (Hooton 2014).

The question arises as to why, during the first wave of the pandemic, the children hardly mentioned terms such as God, angel, or heaven. Although in our research we did not examine the causes, these results may indicate that children were not taught these areas of the curriculum. Their exposure to religious discourse and religious teaching was radically limited, they did not have many chances to grow their religious vocabulary. Children paid much more attention to “here and now” situations and appreciated the beauty of mundane things (e.g., helping mother to wash dishes).

4.2. Children's Associations of Good/Evil with Good/Bad Behavior toward Other People

In this category, our hypothesis was confirmed in accordance with the theories mentioned in the Introduction. Before the pandemic, the second most frequently mentioned area of good by first graders was the area of good behavior toward other people. In connection with the term ‘good’, children commented that ‘good’ is the right thing to do. This category was saturated with statements about relationships and behavior toward other people, but it included only those actions that could be done by children and excluded behaviors that children considered to be adult, such as murder or robbery. It included positive behavior toward others, namely helping and doing other good things, sharing one’s own things with others, and, especially, forgiving. During the pandemic, most associations with good belonged in this area, in contrast to the pre-pandemic group of children who made more associations with supernatural beings. In 2020, almost half of the first graders had identified good as helping others, the ability to praise and please others, to thank them, to forgive and to apologize.

In the second wave of the pandemic, the children’s associations expanded this category to include proactively helping others, giving away things for free, and communicating with others. Children especially emphasized the ability to forgive, which is considered a sign of deeper inner religiosity (also in research by Šoltésová 2013).

Similarly, in 2020, the number of first-graders’ associations of evil with bad behavior toward other people increased threefold from 19% to 59%. Here, subcategories could be identified: (a) physically aggressive behavior was repeated in all the periods examined (especially beating, fighting, kicking and other forms of physical attack); (b) negative verbal behavior (shouting at others, swearing and using bad language); (c) bad behavior toward the property of others (stealing, not lending and not returning other people’s things); and other types of bad behavior (sticking out one’s tongue, etc.). Unwillingness to forgive was seen as a big evil in all grades. During the pandemic, the children were especially aware of bad behavior toward their parents (e.g., disobedience to their parents, shouting at their mothers, taking forbidden sweets, etc.) and also if someone did not want to befriend them.

Among the second graders, the gradual increase in the number of associations of good behavior toward others was even more pronounced—from before the pandemic 17%, up to 54% after the 2nd wave. In addition to the verbs already mentioned by first graders, the second graders emphasized encouraging sad people, saying positive things to others, making friends, obeying one's parents, and helping to fix something. Associations of evil with bad behavior toward people tripled in comparison to 2017 in both waves. During the pandemic, up to 60–69% of second graders associated evil with behaving badly toward each other. Again, this category included occurrences of verbs describing several kinds of verbal and physical attacks on others (bullying, harm), harmful attitudes to the property of others (theft, greed), disobedience to parents, tempting others to do wrong things, and not telling the truth—lying. During the pandemic, children often reported as bad the inability to forgive and ask for forgiveness, greed, fighting, disobedience to parents and teachers, not helping others, and hatred.

Additionally, in the group of third-graders, the highest number of associations with good/bad interpersonal behavior was during the first wave of the pandemic. Compared to 2017, associations with good rose from 7% to 29%, with evil from 27% to 44%). The third graders associated good mostly with helping others and doing good to others, and evil with physically attacking others, stealing, being greedy, bullying, and lying. In the 2nd wave, instead of these associations with behavior (what to do/not to do), more associations with positive or negative human qualities were shown.

Overall, the children in our sample associated good most with interpersonal relationships, similar to their association of evil with broken relationships. Hay and Nye (2006) also emphasized the importance of the connection between children's relational consciousness and their spirituality. Our research showed that this awareness of 'connectedness' with other people intensified during the pandemic. Overall, both the images and the verbalizations of the children reflected the lockdown context, in particular the fact that the children spent the biggest part of their days in the presence of the parent(s) who guided their activities. During the pandemic, for example, new associations with helping parents occurred (help to hang the clothes, set the table, help prepare lunch or dinner), or transgressions (such as taking the forbidden sweets from the cabinet, shouting at mom). In the first wave of the pandemic, the children did not draw situations evoking relationships with classmates as they had done before the pandemic; rather, in the first wave, they drew sibling relationships. There have been more associations with internal attitudes in relationships—the need to confess, to show initiative in aid, and in 2021, for the first time, the category of assistance to the elderly appeared several times. The significant increase in associations with the verb 'help' might suggest an increase in children's altruism during the pandemic.

4.3. Children's Symbolic Pictures and Verbal Associations of Good/Evil with Human Attributes

Although in our analysis we separated the associations with human qualities and those with symbols by which children expressed good and evil into two different categories, in their interpretation it is possible to show their logical connection. The first-graders quite often expressed good through drawing symbols of love, happiness, friendship, joy (various kinds of hearts—pure, good, clean, white; smilies, suns, gifts) and symbols of evil attitudes of hatred, harming others, making others sad-facies and various kinds of hearts—evil, dirty, black, red), in all the periods we examined. In 2020 they represented 39% from all first-grade associations. These findings are in line with Fowler's characteristic of 6-year-old children who are attached to symbols of faith. The older the children, the fewer symbols appeared in their projections; the least appeared in the 3rd grade during the pandemic (1995).

On the other hand, these symbolic expressions of children were to some extent balanced by verbal associations with human qualities, which children expressed by way of nouns or adjectives (love—kind, proud—pride, etc.). Among the good qualities, love clearly dominated, but also kindness, honesty, and courage. During the pandemic, children added kindness, fidelity, cheerfulness and joy, justice, care, responsibility, truthfulness,

sacrifice, sincerity, diligence, grace, mercy, love, kindness, willingness, modesty, humility, satisfaction with material things. Before the pandemic, the first- and second-graders did not associate evil with any negative human qualities. During the pandemic, this category was mentioned in 8–9% of associations by first- and second-graders, and 18% by third-graders. They mentioned negative human features, such as laziness, conceit, greed, unfaithfulness, pride, greed, selfishness, distrust, ruthlessness, hardness.

To sum up the results in these two categories, there is a noticeable departure in the data from the two pandemic waves from traditional abstract symbols (heart, smile) being used to express interpersonal relationships and an increased willingness to express a wider range of specific human characteristics, which one notices especially in situations of longer, deeper contact with a person. This might be one of the influences of the lockdown or being quarantined in families.

4.4. Children's Associations of Good/Evil with Religious Rituals and Personal Religious Faith

The number of associations of good with religious rituals and personal religious faith also decreased in all grades (with first-graders from 8% to 2%, with second-graders from 11% to 2%, and especially with third-graders from 26% in 2017 to 6% in 2020 and 8% in 2021). The fact that churches were closed during the pandemic was revealed in the absence of children's associations of good with extrinsic religious activities, such as the attendance at church services (as opposed to 5–7% of statements before the pandemic). In the case of associations with evil, there was in evidence children's more intensive struggles with specific temptations to behave badly (i.e., with sin). During the pandemic, children more often mentioned personal prayer, obeying and praising God, and reading the Bible.

4.5. Children's Associations of Good/Evil with the Nature and Relationships toward the Environment

We have included in this category, on the one hand, the associations of good and evil of children with the very existence of nature and, on the other hand, with people's treatment of the environment.

Although the totals of associations in this category differ across grades, there is an evident shift in the content of children's associations during both pandemic waves. Before the pandemic, the children's pictures—especially of the first-graders—demonstrated their associations of good with flowers, walks in nature with their parents, having a pet, or grandparents living in the countryside. During the pandemic, the range of the associations of good with nature expanded and deepened by expressing the feelings of joy of having nature, wild animals, trees, and especially by adding various types of ecological behavior. The largest increase in associations with ecological behavior was in the third grade in 2020—up to 14% of all their associations with good and 21% of all their associations with evil (not only to recycle waste at home, but to use both sides of a paper, collect waste outside, etc.). During the second wave, the children added global harmful treatment of our planet, such as the existence of nuclear power plants, oil extraction, tree cutting, and, for the first time, they also condemned throwing away food. Increased children's delight over the value of nature might be considered as one of the indications of their growing spiritual awareness (Nye 1998).

4.6. Children's Associations of Good/Evil with Relationships (Family, Friendships)

Our hypothesis was not confirmed in this point. What really surprised us was the fact that children rarely mentioned family explicitly—in either a good or a bad sense (maximum 5% per grade, which means only 1–2 children per whole grade group). When we compared this finding with our similar research 10 years ago, we found that the number of times children mentioned family in their responses was at least 10% higher. The lack of mention of family is particularly striking given the pandemic period, when children spent most of their time in the family. The few positive associations included the birth of a baby, weddings, birthdays, and Christmas at home.

However, implicit indications of good or bad family relationships can be found in other categories (interpersonal behavior and human traits such as love, dedicated care, help). It is typical for this age that even though children understand abstract conceptions, they rather think about them in more concrete ways, in relation to their own lived experience (also Nye 1998, pp. 136–37).

In the case of the positive associations with friendship (having friends, having a party, playing football together), it was evident, especially with the first graders, that they cherished friendships more during the pandemic when it was not possible for the friends to meet each other (increased from 0% to 5% in 2020 and to 10% in 2021). The appreciation of friendships by second- and third-graders was highest during the period of the first lockdown when people were quite afraid to meet other families and friends.

4.7. Children's Associations of Good/Evil with Events in the Society and the Behavior of Adults

Although the category of children's associations of good, as seen in the behavior of adults and world news, included only a few associations, there was an evident increase in children's associations of adults' behavior and world news with evil. Positive behavior of adults and events in society that children defined as good (such as modesty, taking care of patients, saving people in dangerous situations, helping to move furniture, crime detection) comprised up to 6% of associations throughout all three grades.

The category of negative associations of children with social phenomena and adult behavior was most saturated in all three grades before the pandemic. The children were concerned about many things, including terrorism, wars, killing, murder, traffic accidents, abuse, arson, and robbery. As many as 33% of associations with these social events and behavior of adults in the first-grade group, 40% in the second-grade group, and 22% in the third-grade group were identified as evil. During the first pandemic wave, the first-graders and second-graders did not mention this category at all (0%) and after the second wave only minimally (4–6%). The incidence of third-graders' associations with this category also decreased during the pandemic (from 17% in 2020 to 12% in 2021). However, the content of their associations in this category has broadened: they mentioned poverty, torture, and other drastic crimes. The associations of evil with COVID-19 were not included in this category.

4.8. Children's Associations of Good/Evil with Personal Well-Being and Inner States

Overall, this area was very little saturated by children, which is adequate for this age period. However, it is still possible to observe a slight increase of associations in this category during the 2nd wave of the pandemic. An increase in the awareness of various areas of personal well-being as good can be seen especially in the youngest children in the sample. Before the pandemic, the first-graders did not mention this category at all, but in the 2nd wave they mentioned several 'goods'—life, happiness, admiration, glory, security, play. They made up 10% of all associations with good in their group. The third-graders mentioned also other good, such as their own hobbies, the opportunity to be a scout, to exercise, swim and do various sports, in one case to play computer games.

Before the pandemic, a negative attitude toward oneself included condemning oneself as an evil sinner. In addition to those responses, during the pandemic, first-graders and second-graders associated sadness and loneliness with evil. During the 1st wave, the second-graders mentioned various addictions—especially smoking and alcoholism (which they may have faced also in their own families). Before the pandemic, as many as 11% of third-graders' associations identified evil with fear, crying at night; during the pandemic they identified various diseases (except COVID-19), death, feeling sad, darkness, nightmares, suicide. These associations created almost 1/5 of all associations in the group. The older the children, the more they were able to name their various negative mental states, which might have been indirectly related to the pandemic. After the second wave of the pandemic, up to 18% first-graders' associations were related to the battle between good and evil. According to Peck (1995)'s and Fowler (1995)'s theories of spiritual and religious development, dividing

the world into what is right and wrong is typical for this age. Children are very sensitive to the competition between good and evil characters in drama and stories, and they are particularly good at distinguishing between good and bad characters.

4.9. Children's Associations of Good/Evil with Owning Material Things and Objective Phenomena

The category of ownership of material things belongs to the least saturated category of children's associations. Since we started doing this research, it has been surprising that 99% of children did not associate good with material things, e.g., toys or computers (with the exception of 1 mention of a mobile, 1 mention of computer games, and 1 mention of ice cream). Three associations were expressions of gratitude for having a place to live, for food and for drink.

Among the objective phenomena that children identify with good in their lives belong homeland and light. In the first wave (10%) and in the second wave (8%), in addition to the goods already mentioned, associations of good with beauty, smiles, white color, reading books, school, classmates, and teachers appeared in the third-grade groups. It seems that these children obviously missed school life and their classmates during the pandemic and they explicitly appreciated active contact with teachers. The objective phenomena that children, especially first-graders, associated with evil included storms, darkness, dirt, video games, mummies, graves, and cemeteries.

4.10. Children's Associations with the COVID-19 Pandemic

Associations of good and evil with the pandemic did not occur until the 2nd wave. Although the first wave was unpleasant, with uncertainty and fear of the unknown, parents probably tried to shield their first-graders from news related to the pandemic, and especially, the first wave affected only a minimal number of Slovaks. After the second wave, 6% of first-graders' and 2% of third-graders' associations of good referred to situations of healing their relative from the COVID-19 disease, ending quarantine, the joy that they could be again together. As one might expect, more children mentioned the pandemic in the negative sense. These associations comprised 6% of all first-graders, 2% of the second-graders and 16% of the third-graders associations in total. Most of the projections are drawings of the corona virus, masks, injections with the vaccine, social distancing (2 m spacing between people), dedicated doctors and nurses.

While drawing people's behavior, children paid much attention to the details of their drawings. For example, in comparison with the well-behaved persons, they drew their misbehaving figures with frowning faces (different image of eyes, eyebrows, mouth, shaggy hair, unfinished details of fingers and hands, without shoes), indicating that not only their behavior but their whole persons were bad or good. This is in line with the findings of [Núria and Marco-Pallarés \(2021, p. 1358\)](#) that children are very sensitive to the (in)congruences "between the moral identity of a character and the moral identity induced by his/her physical appearance". In two cases, there were hints of gender prejudices—a picture of a beautiful woman with the verbal note "a good lady", a picture of an ugly man with the note "a bad man".

4.11. Limitations

We realize that the quantitative results of our research cannot be generalized due to the relatively small samples of children investigated by the qualitative method. Nevertheless, in all groups, whether across years or grades, the same structure of categories of children's associations was found, as well as the ratio of the extent of occurrence of individual associations.

We do not consider the process of applying the projective technique described here as sufficient to provide an overall picture of children's moral, religious and spiritual thinking. As we already mentioned, in our wider pre-pandemic research, we used more research tools, including recorded interviews (similarly to [Coles 1990](#)). Under the limited conditions introduced for entering schools during the pandemic, we used only the projective technique

with a shorter contact time with children in order to still allow us to compare the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic concepts of children.

Another limitation in the accuracy of our research results might have been that we did not ask children to write/draw a specific number of associations with the given concepts. Therefore, the sums of the associations in the different groups are different. However, it was our intention to avoid interfering with the process of children's projections as much as possible, and rather to let them share their genuine thinking and feeling. We are also aware that due to the creation of the drawings by all the children in the classroom at the same time the researcher was not allowed enough time for additional questions which is considered to be one of the disadvantages of this procedure by children's researchers (Freeman and Mathison 2009).

4.12. Final Comments on the Research Findings and Recommendations

As can be seen from the results (Tables 2–7), children's views of good and evil encompass more than just than moral standards or moral reasoning. The results show that by asking children these questions, it is possible to also uncover something about their religious thinking and spiritual well-being. The results are in line with already mentioned research studies and developmental theories of children's moral thinking, religiosity, and spirituality (Kohlberg 1969; Coles 1990; Gilligan 1993; Fowler 1995; Piaget [1932] 1997, etc.).

Children's projections of good and evil opened up a space for them to share verbally or visually about their inner relationship with the Deity (vertical transcendence), as well as their connectedness with people, with themselves, and with the world around them (horizontal transcendence). The concept of 'good' evokes in them the ideas of good interpersonal relationships, good people, happy life, fulfillment of desires, well-being, perfection, beauty, the ideal, as well as the peak life experience—anything that transcends them. The concept of 'good' connects not only with supernatural beings (such as God, Jesus, angels, and heaven), and religious rituals and issues of personal faith, but especially with the more immediate contexts of their lives in the world around them (such as interpersonal relationships and their relationships with nature). Similarly, in their associations with evil, while children mentioned evil supernatural beings (Satan, demon, devil), they focused mostly on wrong behavior toward other people, nature, property, and also toward themselves. Additionally, from the point of view of contemporary psychology, empathy and selflessness are typical characteristics of 'good', and selfishness and inability to empathize are the most common manifestations of 'evil' (Taylor 2013).

So, to what extent has the religiosity, morality and spirituality of children shifted during the pandemic? Let us take a closer look at each of them:

Religiosity: The biggest shifts in the understanding of good and evil before and during the pandemic have been in the area of religiosity—toward a reduction in its intensity. It seems that during the pandemic there was a kind of stagnation in the children's religious development. Still, several children's statements reveal that even during the pandemic they had personal religious experiences and needs. There is a question to what extent one can speak of shifts in religiosity, and to what extent are the observed differences simply due to reduced exposure to religious language. In order to distinguish the difference between the actual state of children's genuine religious faith and the effect of the reduced exposure to RE and religious language, more research, for example, more detailed interviews with children would be needed—similar to the research done by Coles (1990).

Morality: The results reveal a rise in children's awareness of moral human qualities and human behavior toward others during the pandemic. The number of associations with them increased, which might be the influence of more intense relationships with the nearest family members during the pandemic and the urgent need to establish rules of household conduct. Before the pandemic, the children were more concerned with generally reprehensible events (wars, terrorism, robberies, murders). Again, one might hypothesize that both children's awareness of their connectedness to other people and the reflection of this need fulfillment have deepened or intensified.

The extended range of moral relations of contemporary children to other current problems in society underlined the need to pay attention to intercultural, environmental and human rights education (Pupala 1998). In our sample, children showed that they perceive not only ecological good and evil more intensely than in the past, but also justice in interpersonal relationships and empathy for hitherto unnoticed groups of people.

Spirituality as well-being and ‘connectedness’ to other people: During the pandemic, children’s associations pointed at their increased needs to be connected to other people, quite practically, e.g., by doing something good for them or by avoiding something bad to other people. Relations are a crucial element in children’s spirituality (Hay and Nye 2006).

There was also an evident growth in self-reflection and awareness of the good, especially with regard to their own needs of self-acceptance and connectedness with themselves. It is also surprising to find that today’s children value connectedness with other people much more than material things. They also demonstrated an increase in connectedness to the world around them which children in 2017 did not mention explicitly (such as beauty, nature, light, homeland, the opportunity to play with someone, talk to someone, the provision of housing, food, the benefits brought by health-care professionals such as doctors and nurses, vaccines, but also reading books, school, education and teachers).

Children’s associations with good indicate that even in the middle of the pandemic they perceived spiritual needs, reflected on spiritual values and had different spiritual experiences. Evidently, their concepts of ultimate good overlap to some extent with Maslow’s features of human ‘peak-experiences’ (Maslow 1964) (Table 8).

Table 8. Characteristics of Maslow’s peak-experiences vs. children’s concepts of good.

Peak-Experiences	Children in the Research Describing Good in Their Lives
Truth	Being honest, opposite of lying/Lying, deceiving
Good	What is correct, desirable, likeable, agreeable/and the opposites
Beauty	Drawings of beautiful figures, nature scenes, fullness of color
Wholeness	Importance of connectedness/relationships: to other people, to the world and nature, to God, to self
Dichotomy-transcendence	Two worlds: good and evil and the battle between them (God/Satan, angels/demons, good/bad behavior, empathy/selfishness)
Perfection	Children’s attempt to express the good beings, good emotions, good behavior as a perfectly as they could (the expressions of faces, good characters with all fingers on their hands, or shoes on their feet—the evil ones were drawn in less detail)

After evaluating some shifts in the associations of children with good and evil before and during the pandemic, we can move on to the last question, which would, of course, require further research: What role does the limited teaching of RE, due to the pandemic, play in the shifts, especially in the decreased level of religious associations with good and evil in 2020 and 2021?

According to several authors, RE in schools has played a unique role in children’s personal, religious, moral and spiritual development, especially in solving social conflicts (Cordero et al. 2021). “Moral-religious education represents a support for man’s natural thirst for finding himself and occupies a central area in the curriculum as far as its training potential is concerned; it can have a major contribution in shaping the pupils’ developing personality, in agreement to the eternal, God-inspired values” (Croitoru and Munteanu 2014, p. 2161).

Religious stories in particular play an important role in the development of younger school-age children. According to Coles, these stories help children “to look inward as well as upward”, and thus they are “inspiring—exciting their minds to further thought and fantasy and helping them become more grown, more contemplative and sure of themselves” (Coles 1990, p. 121). Because children received only minimal exposure to RE, religious stories, and also religious language due to limited or absent RE during the pandemic, there

could be a direct connection with the findings of reduced religiosity, or at least, reduced use of religious language by the children.

On the other hand, during the pandemic the number of children's associations with morality and non-religious spirituality increased. Children's internal needs for quality human relationships and peaceful life on our planet Earth intensified which indicates an important recommendation for schools in the pandemic as well as post-pandemic era.

It seems that changes in the way of life last year as a result of the pandemic have stimulated in children the process of reinterpreting the meaning and purpose of good in their reality—both material (physical presence at school or church, distance from a close relative) and spiritual (growing importance of good relations with people, nature and the world, as well as growth in their transcendent abilities to perceive good intentions, beauty, friendship, love). Data acquired from our research can therefore also be explained as a result of this active process of children's reconstructions of learned concepts (Pusztai and Demeter-Karászi 2019).

School managers and teachers have to pay attention not only to teaching math, sciences and other key subjects, but also to the cross-curricular nurturing of children's morality, religiosity and spirituality. Schools' influence plays significant role in children's spiritual and moral development, in their "search and quest for the meaning of life as well as their personal recognition and self-actualisation" (Lee 2020, p. 3). According to Breslin (2021, p. 114) it is especially crucial in the 'schooling post-lockdown' era, in the chapter on the primacy of personal well-being and relationships that they should become "a prerequisite for curriculum catch-up, not its poor relation".

The results of research in several categories also indicate that parents intervened more in their children's education during the pandemic than previously. As can be seen from children's drawings of moral behavior, children in lockdown at home were under greater influence of their parents (especially during social distancing); parents paid more attention to their children and the formation of their character. The drawings of children from multi-members families demonstrate the influence of parents on children's relationships with their siblings. In many families, children had to help more and learn to do housework or activities with their parents, such as sports or nature trips in the process, and these requirements produced a strong impact on children's morality and spiritual experience. The importance of parents' influence on the moral development of children during the pandemic has been pointed out in another pandemic research: "It is so crucial for parents to pay attention to the moral development of their children, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Parents who initially reasoned working outside the home so that they paid less attention to their children during the Covid pandemic are slowly becoming aware of the importance of paying adequate attention to their children." (Susanto and Suaydi 2020, p. 358).

5. Conclusions

The aim of our research was to determine whether there are any differences in children's concepts of good and evil between the samples of children before and during the pandemic. In this study, we presented the results of our qualitative analysis of the drawings and verbal statements about the concepts of good and evil by 6–8-year-old children, which were collected immediately when schools were re-opened after both the first and the second waves of pandemic (in May 2020 and March 2021). These data were then compared with data collected in similar research before the pandemic, in 2017.

In terms of religiosity, an observable reduction in the intensity of associations with the supernatural world and manifestations of extrinsic religiosity was found. On the other hand, the number of children's associations with good or bad human behavior, human features and relationships between people, but also relationships with nature, the world and oneself, increased. In relation to spirituality, the results indicate a shift from religious spirituality to non-religious spirituality, expressed as a growing connectedness to people,

nature, or oneself. Intensified children's appreciation of connections with other people can be one of the consequences of social distancing during the lockdowns.

Children started to perceive COVID-19 and the pandemic measures as a major evil in their lives only during the second wave of the pandemic with a higher number of infected and victims.

Overall, therefore, these shifts in children's development during the pandemic can be indicated: Their moral awareness has increased, as has their wider non-religious spiritual awareness, including their admiration for beauty, their desire for nature, and their sense of well-being. The intensity of their associations with the supernatural world has decreased, which can be an indication of a limited approach to the acquisition of religious language, or even stagnation of their religious development. Most probably one of the reasons for this decline was the radical limitation of the teaching of RE in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic—of course, alongside with other factors such as the closure of places of worship. On the other hand, the growth in wider spirituality of children might point to the shift in children's view of good learned via RE, churches, or religious relatives who they could not meet during the lockdowns, to their own discovering of the meaning of good primarily in deeper relationships (similar in the case of evil).

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study, no specific consent for research on children in the researched school was required for this study due to receiving approvals from all parents and other legal guardians to allow their children to participate in research deemed appropriate by the principal and the teaching staff, which this was the case with this repeated research as well. The consents were received at the beginning of each school year in the period 2011–2021. The school wishes to remain anonymous.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available from the school teachers upon reasonable request.

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