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“Will I or Won’t I Be Sorry?”—Qualitative Research on Emotional Reactions of Secondary School Students in Poland after Resignation from Religion Lessons

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Abstract: There is an empirical underestimation with regard to the study of the emotional states of young people. In Poland, an increasing number of secondary school students are deciding to stop attending their schools’ religious lessons. Of these, 57 students shared their experiences during structured interviews that were subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis. Before the young people taking part in the interview were asked about their emotional state, they were previously given the opportunity to express their attitudes towards their school’s religious lessons. The students had various emotional reactions after dropping out of their school’s religious lessons. In many cases, the students had difficulty noticing and naming their emotional states. These students were in the majority. Other students did specify their emotional states related to this decision. The analysis of these emotional reactions reveals students’ attitudes towards secondary-school religious lessons. The results of the study may prove to be an important voice for those responsible for the substantive design of religious lessons at schools. In addition, young people’s inability to name their emotions may prove to be an alarming fact for mental health professionals.

Keywords: adults; religious education; emotions



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1. Introduction

A study conducted by Pew Research Center identified Poland as the fastest secularising country if we consider the youngest generation (Pew Research Center 2018). Cyclical surveys monitoring the level of religiosity of Poles—measured mainly by declarations of faith and frequency of religious practices—have, for some time now, suggested a slow departure from faith and a much faster abandonment of religious practices (Grabowska 2021). After 1990, the complementary venues for catechisation, religious instruction, in Poland are, by definition, family, parish and school. In Polish educational conditions, young people and children have the opportunity to take part in their school’s religious lessons, which are conducted by pedagogically prepared priests or lay catechists.

1.1. Participation of Young People in School Catechesis in Poland

Since the return of religion as a school subject to schools in the 1990/1991 school year, it has been controversial and the subject of academic discussion and public debate. The axis of the dispute has been, and continues to be, the relevance and consequences of teaching religion in school, as far as worldview, political, legal and organisational issues are concerned (Mariański 2020). Supporters of the presence of religion as a school subject argue that a religious lesson is an educational activity designed to position the phenomenon of

religion as an aspect of reality, which, in the form of various “subjects”, is taught at school (Kurzydło 2023). In Polish conditions, there is a phenomenon of declining attendance at schools’ religious classes which, for the first time since the 1990s, reached 75% (Jedynak 2019). In 2018, it was 70%, and in 2021, it was only 54%, which means a 16 percentage-point decrease in participation in religion lessons (Gwiazda 2022). Resignation from participation in religious lessons occurs at the beginning of secondary school (37% of respondents) or during secondary school (34%) (Grabowska 2022). A report drawn up by CBOS shows that believers make up the largest percentage of students who attend religious lessons (Gwiazda 2022). The factors causing a change in young people’s attitude to religion as a school subject are rationalism, materialism, pluralism and individualism. These symptoms of secularisation are causing young people to move towards indifference to religious matters and religious individualism, a symptom of which is the increasing number of absences from religion as a school subject (Małkosa 2018). The discussion on the presence of religious lessons in Polish schools returned after the Ministry of Education’s announcement to reduce these hours from two to one (Gotowska-Wróblewska n.d.; Dziarnowska and Przybysz 2011). In Poland, religious education (religious lessons or classes) contains both essential parts—catechesis (theological knowledge and initiation) and moral education. Children can alternatively participate in so-called ethics classes. There is currently no obligation to attend religious or ethics classes (Ministry of National Education 2020). Those who opt out of religious education do not necessarily (or even very rarely) take ethics classes (moral education) (Małkosa et al. 2022). Therefore, students usually have no moral education after opting out of religious education. The current study is in line with the theme of the importance of religious lessons at school but from the perspective of students who have dropped out of these lessons and their emotional experience.

1.2. Emotions in Decision-Making

Decisions can be seen as a certain channel through which emotions guide our behaviour and thinking in order to avoid experiencing negative feelings (such as guilt and regret) and increase the experience of positive feelings (such as pride and happiness) (Lerner et al. 2015). The issue of the relationship between emotions and the decision-making process is described in detail in the literature. This relationship is considered from the perspective of the following planes: the influence of incidental mood states and discrete emotions on decision making, the influence of integral affect on decision-making, affect and emotion as a consequence of decision-making, and the role of regret in decision making (George and Dane 2016). Given the subject matter of our research, we were most interested in the issue of emotion as an outcome of a decision made by a person. The classic approach to this issue is Bell’s disappointment theory (Bell 1985). Disappointment can be the result of receiving an outcome of an action that is lower than the one expected. People’s convictions are based on the assumption that we like to see ourselves as internally consistent in our decision-making and behaviour. We make our decisions based on stable preferences. Ratner and Herbst (2005) consider cases in which good decisions end in a bad outcome. They find that people then tend to change a good decision for a worse one as a consequence of focusing on negative feelings. It has also been shown in the literature that emotions, even those that fall under the same valence category (e.g., anger and sadness) elicit different behaviours (Lench et al. 2011). Such findings formed the basis for the development of the theory of feelings as a source of information (Reinhard and Schwarz 2012). This theory proposes that emotional states, often subtle (e.g., anger, happiness, sadness, etc.), provide the individual with very important information. Because emotions, by their nature, are either rewarding or aversive, they guide decision-making in many ways. In the simplest case, individuals experience an emotion and then act to either terminate or extend the circumstances which elicited it, depending on the emotion’s hedonic value (Escadas et al. 2019). The literature also gives the example of immediate emotions (Schlösser et al. 2013). This is the kind of emotion that results from the action itself, i.e., it is linked to the very act of making a particular decision. There is growing evidence that people’s decisions may be significantly influenced not by

the outcomes of actions but rather by what actions themselves they are considering (Lerner et al. 2015). Work on moral reasoning also shows that actions—and the emotions people attach to them—can hold sway in their decision-making (Haidt 2001). In our research, we wanted to find out to what extent emotions are present in the decision-making process of opting out of religious lessons among secondary school students.

1.3. Moral Emotions

Secondary school students in Poland can choose to attend or resign from their school's religious lessons. As the content of religious lessons strongly refers to topics related to faith, the Church, and Roman Catholicism, participation in such lessons may be perceived by young people as religiously motivated behaviour. Hence, it seems reasonable to us to think of resigning from religious lessons in terms of decisions which may have their consequences in the experience of a particular kind of emotion, which is a moral emotion.

In many of the world's religious traditions, the good go up, to heaven or a higher rebirth, and the bad go down, to hell or a lower rebirth. Even among secular people, moral motives are spoken of as the "highest" and "noblest" motives. It is our most sacred attribute, a trait that is often said to separate us from other animals and bring us closer to God. In emotion research, there has been a tendency to name the classifications of different types of emotion with increasing precision. Considering the occurrence of emotions during the formulation of various types of moral decisions, one can speak of a specific category that is moral emotions (Haidt 2001).

Moral emotions are the emotions that respond to moral violations or that motivate moral behaviour (Haidt 2003). Emotions, rather than reflection and reasoning based on explicit moral principles, were suddenly supposed to play the prominent role in moral thought and behaviour (Cova et al. 2015). Some authors propose to treat moral emotions as those affective states that emerge in specific social and decision-making situations and accompany or precede the evaluation of some behaviour in terms of "good"/"bad", "right"/"wrong" and "obligation"/"lack of obligation" (Haidt 2003). Between a specific moral standard and the making of a particular decision, there is room for the experience of certain moral emotions. Leading a moral life, in line with one's moral standards, is expressed in our behaviour and moral decisions made every day (Tangney et al. 2007).

The issue of moral emotions is an important but very often overlooked component of the human decision-making process related to moral behaviour (Haidt 2001). Moral emotions provide the motivational force to do good and avoid evil (Kroll and Egan 2004). Then, is there anything special about moral emotions? The list of moral emotions seems no different from the immoral ones. Whether people are confronted with rotten meat or rotten deeds, they still feel disgusted. However, the structure of moral emotions is unique (Gray and Wegner 2011). Indeed, not only do certain emotions present their objects with a certain moral value, but some have proposed that emotions constitute a privileged way by which we come to know (or believe) that these objects have such and such value (Cova et al. 2015). It is now widely accepted that emotions present their object (their "intentional object") in a certain evaluative way (Tangney et al. 2007). The value of the circumstance presented by the emotion is the "formal object" of that emotion. That is because moral emotions present their object as instantiating a certain moral value (Haidt 2003). From this standpoint, an emotion's moral pedigree is not determined on the basis of its intrinsic properties (what it is directed at, what it motivates us to do) but on the basis of its effects at the level of an individual's life or of whole human societies (Tangney et al. 2007). Existing research focuses more on numbers, statistics and reasons why students drop out of schools' religious lessons. The presented research responds to an underestimation of the importance, function and effects of the experience of emotions in young people who, for various reasons, do not attend their schools' religious lessons.

2. Method

This study was conducted in Poland in 2022 and 2023 under the grant of Religious Education of Polish Youth—Current State, Opportunities and Challenges sponsored by the Ministry of Education and Science. The study was guided by the framework of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a particularly useful methodology for exploring people's personal experiences and how they build their interpretations of phenomena. The aim of IPA is to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world, and the main currency for an IPA study is the meanings that particular experiences, events and states hold for participants (Willig 2001). This methodology was chosen in order to gain a deeper understanding of how adolescents emotionally experienced and reacted to their decision to opt out of their schools' religious lessons. The IPA samples were small, homogeneous and purposefully selected, and the data were carefully analysed on a case-by-case basis. Willig (2001) highlights that small qualitative studies may generate hypotheses that can later be tested by methods of the hypothetical-deductive paradigm. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) explain that IPA combines ideas driven from phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. It employs "double hermeneutics," in which participants share their interpretations of phenomena under investigation, followed by researchers trying to analyse, make sense of and comment on these interpretations. The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world. IPA is, therefore, intellectually connected to hermeneutics and theories of interpretation (Willig 2001).

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 57 secondary school students aged between 15 and 18 years ($M = 16.42$; $SD = 1.51$). The study involved adolescents who, at some stage of their education, had given up on participation in religion as a school subject. The survey featured $N = 33$ female and $N = 24$ male participants. Almost 70% of the respondents attended a general education secondary school. The remaining respondents were a group of students attending technical secondary schools. Of those students, $N = 26$ were first-years, while $N = 31$ were in their final year of secondary school, i.e., their last year at this level of education.

2.2. Data Source

We used semi-structured interviews ranging from 20 to 30 min in length, which included open-ended questions about participants' religious education. Questions relating to the emotions experienced by the students were part of the interview on the religious behaviour of young people. The questions in this part of the survey focused on the emotions that young people experienced after deciding to opt out of their school's religious lessons. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded.

2.3. Procedure

The research project was approved by the University Committee for Research Ethics. Interviews with students were conducted at school. The main criterion for taking this part of the survey was a previous decision not to attend a school's religious lessons. To take part in the survey, students were invited and selected at random.

Data collection. The research problem was relevant to all participants, that is, students were asked to describe the emotional states accompanying them after they had made the decision to leave their school's religious lessons. Data were collected using audio-recorded, semi-structured, in-depth interviews, including open-ended questions such as the following: What feelings and emotions did you have after you gave up taking part in lecture lessons? Did you notice any negative reactions and comments from your classmates? The researcher aimed to cover key areas with every participant and asked additional questions to explore topics emerging during interviews.

Data Analysis. Verbatim transcriptions of all audio recordings were made and analysed. For each interview, both researchers listened to the recording several times and carefully read the transcriptions. They individually made notes on content and language use and recorded their interpretive comments. They categorised the notes into emerging themes, assigning them descriptive tags. Then, the researchers compared and discussed their coding and interpretations. They analysed the connections between themes in each interview and between cases and grouped themes according to conceptual similarities into overarching themes.

3. Results

Participants were asked about their emotions after deciding to give up religion as a school subject. Significant themes that appeared repeatedly in the interviews were grouped into 10 superordinate themes as listed in Table 1. These are discussed and illustrated with verbatim excerpts from the interviews, in accordance with IPA principles.

Table 1. Constituent themes.

Superordinate Themes and Sub-Themes		No. of Participants	Women	Men
Theme 1	No emotions experienced	21	7	14
Theme 2	Relief	14	10	4
Theme 3	Happiness/joy	6	2	4
Theme 4	Mixed feelings	4	2	2
Theme 5	Stress/uncertainty/doubt	3	3	0
Theme 6	Calm	2	1	1
Theme 7	Description of how I do not feel	2	1	1
Theme 8	Regret/guilt	2	2	0
Theme 9	Emptiness	1	1	0
Theme 10	Pride	1	0	1
Theme 11	Surprise	1	1	0

Theme 1: No emotions experienced

The analysis of the interview data indicates that the most common emotion accompanying the secondary school students after dropping out of religious lessons was a kind of emotional ambivalence (no emotional reaction/indifference). In their statements, the young people most often referred to this emotional state accompanying them as no experienced emotions. These were statements in which the respondents declared that their decision to opt out of their school's religious lessons did not involve any emotional reaction. One gets the impression that many of the students who fell into this category answered the question about emotions very perfunctorily, and in many cases, even in one sentence. In cases where the interviewer asked them to elaborate or ponder longer in order to develop the description of their emotional state, the young people in many cases did not enter into dialogue with the interviewer, cutting off the dialogue.

I don't think I experienced any, I made the decision just like that, I didn't attach any great emotion to it.

No, I don't think so.

I didn't really experience any feelings.

There were also statements consisting of a simple negation:

No

There were cases in which young people, when asked about the emotions they experienced, began to describe the circumstances surrounding the event of resigning from religion lessons, but this was not a description of an emotional state.

I never saw any reason why I should address someone who teaches another subject differently from other teachers, so I called the catechist, a nun, simply Miss and not Sister, as most do, and I was admonished many times for this reason too.

Nobody accused me of anything and nobody commented on anything. The only thing is that I occasionally see a disapproving glance from the priest in the corridor, but that's practically it.

To assess their emotional reaction after dropping out of their schools' religious lessons, the respondents attempted to estimate and compare the emotions they experienced at present (no religion lessons) to the time interval in which they attended religion lessons.

I think it was the same as before.

I'll be honest, it didn't affect me too much that I stopped attending [the lessons].

Theme 2 and 6: Relief/calm

In trying to understand the phenomenon of secondary school students leaving their schools' religious lessons through the emotional states that emerge in them, we noted that a frequently presented emotion was relief/calm. The emotional experience of relief occurred in the context of students gaining additional free hours that they can manage on their own. The statements pointing to gaining free time were the most common.

I think it was even a kind of peace of mind, that I don't have to attend it anymore and that I have more free time for some of my passions and other things.

It was a bit of a chore. So I thought it was one less such chore

It gave me a bit of relief when it came to the time specifically, after all two hours of religion lessons is a bit much.

One student saw opting out of religious lessons from the perspective of downright respect for her free time.

No, there were no negative reactions. And I, myself, was very happy with the fact that I resigned. Because I viewed it as respecting my time. That I'm not going to something that doesn't interest me. Nor does it make me feel any better.

Some students saw the relief of being absent from religious lessons not only in terms of getting an hour off, but also in terms of not having to attend lessons that were stressful and during which the atmosphere was tense.

Oh, yeah, I remember it was a really big relief, I didn't have to study for it any more and I didn't have to stress during those lessons, since the teacher created a very nervous atmosphere.

Some statements draw attention to the experience of relief that occurs as a result of deciding one's own life and freeing oneself from the pressure imposed by parents in this regard.

Certainly such a peace of mind, I felt relieved that I didn't have any problems persuading my parents. I just felt reassured that I could believe what I wanted and there was no pressure to do so.

And then as for my friends, some of them said they were envious that I could just tell my parents that I didn't want to and they would respect that.

And now after resigning it's such a relief that I can decide for myself too, I can simply believe or not believe what I want.

Relief because I didn't have to sort of argue with my parents anymore.

Theme 3: Happiness/joy

The secondary school students taking part in the study mentioned a feeling of happiness and joy as an emotional outcome following their decision to resign from their school's

religion lessons. This emotion was linked to the possibility of getting extra time, being free of obligations.

I was happy.

After resigning, I felt joy, inner peace, that I no longer had to go there.

It appears that in this category, as well as in the category concerning the emotional experience of relief, young people attach great importance to the desire to take charge of their own lives.

I was happy that I was just not going to have to sit there anymore and listen to these things that I don't believe in and that's it. I was happy that I can do that, sort of get my way

Well, I was glad. I had more time, I could go home earlier. Well, I don't know. Well, I was. . .

Theme 4: Mixed feelings

Respondents also described their individual reaction to their decision to drop the school subject of religion in terms of mixed, ambiguous emotions.

There were reactions tinged with guilt, confusion and hope.

[I had] quite mixed [feelings], because I thought to myself—man, yes, I'm quite a strong believer, and yet I can't even attend those basic religion lessons. So I didn't really know how to take it, but I think that considering what do myself I can make up for it a little bit, but, well, I'll still try to negotiate it with them for sure.

One student, after he resigned from religious lessons, at first felt indifference; then, he felt relief and calmness; and, consequently, he felt anger caused by the fact that religious lessons, which should have positive connotations, were ultimately associated by students with bad things.

Probably indifference. At first just indifference, then a bit of relief and this peace of mind that I don't have to deal with these negative comments and, well, there was also mainly anger at the fact that something that should guide me through life, that should give me hope, makes me feel worse,

The following is a statement from a person who experienced anxiety and uncertainty because of the decision they made. However, in retrospect, as a result of the process of giving meaning, the person began to see the new situation as a challenge.

I think I may have felt this responsibility for my decision, for a moment I thought about whether I was somewhat turning away from God, but I came to the conclusion that no, if I continued to practice and nurture this faith in some other way then such a departure from religion at school would not be a turning away from God and a betrayal of him at all.

Theme 5: Stress/uncertainty/doubt

Some survey participants, having dropped out of religious lessons at school, felt a kind of uncertainty regarding concerns about being a good-enough person who helps others, while at the same time excluding themselves from school catechesis which is a source of important information.

Now I think I'm a little bit less—I mean I'm not sure if this was really influenced by the fact that I didn't go to religion and I didn't hear often about it—but it seems to me that now I am sometimes kind of less helpful towards others.

The stress emerging in students was related to uncertainty about the acceptance of their decisions by their parents.

I was more stressed by the fact that my parents didn't fully support my decision

Another emotion emerging in the experience of the students surveyed was the fear associated with the anticipated reaction of teachers not accepting this decision.

a little bit of fear as well, because, like, these teachers were still at school and they knew that I had opted out.

Theme 7: Description of how I do not feel

The analysis of the students' statements made it possible to notice a certain technique used by the students to talk about their emotions by introducing and describing those which, on a declarative level, they definitely did not experience.

I didn't feel bad about it and I didn't have any remorse or problem with myself for having resigned. I didn't feel guilty.

No. No such sadness or anger about it crossed my mind

Theme 8: Regret/guilt

Another emotional reaction to dropping out of religion lessons is regret and guilt. It is usually experienced by students who may have disappointed their parents with their decision not to attend religious lessons at school.

I felt that I was letting my dad down, for example. And generally that, well, that's not how I was brought up, and that. . .

When I was younger there was surely some kind of regret that, no, gosh, how can I, but somehow I think they kind of. . . As I've got older I've put things into perspective.

Theme 9: Emptiness

The emotion of emptiness in the person's statement cited below is caused not by being rid of the opportunity to take part in an activity that offers the prospect of developing knowledge or faith, but by a previously developed habit of attending religion classes. The person experiences an absence, but apart from the habit, she is unable to specify what else this feeling of absence is related to.

I didn't feel too much of a difference, but sometimes I had this feeling that maybe to some extent I was. . . not missing something, but

Theme 10: Pride

One person described his emotional experience after resigning from religious lessons in terms of pride. This is the kind of pride that results from opposing the catechist's way of teaching. The student recalled religious lessons in which it was not possible to express one's opinion on a topic if it differed from the opinion of the teacher in charge of the lesson.

If there was something that he thought actually deviated from what the Bible says then he was usually actually undermining our opinion and, in front of the rest of the class, trying to somehow ridicule and undermine our opinions in this quiet way.

Actually, I could have been ridiculed again in some way, so I was, I am, and I think I will be proud and pleased to have opted out. Those are the only kind of feelings I really had about it.

Theme 11: Surprise

A student linked his experience of surprise to the fact of noticing the small number of people who, after he decided to opt out of religion lessons, still wanted to attend school catechesis. It was a small number of people limited to two thirds.

It was more of a shock in the opposite direction—that these two/three people stayed because so few people were going to these lessons, and our form mistress is now also sort of surprised that "oh Jesus only two/three people attend religion, what's the matter with you

It appears that the adolescents surveyed differed in the frequency of emotions experienced due to the gender divide. Men were significantly more likely than women to express a state of not experiencing any emotions. In the case of the emotion of relief, it was

women who were more likely to describe their decision to opt out of religious classes in these experiential terms. Also for women, dropping out of religious lessons was associated with emotions such as stress, grief, guilt or emptiness, which we did not observe in the male respondents.

4. Discussion

The purpose of our research was to gain insight and analyse the emotional experiences of secondary school students following their decision to leave their schools' religious lessons.

An analyses of the statements of secondary school students who had resigned from participating in religious lessons, in terms of the emotions they experienced, characterised them as showing a high degree of emotional indifference. This can be interpreted as follows. Firstly, this difficulty in expressing their emotions can lead to two interpretative paths. One might suggest that young people, in general, have a problem naming their emotional states. The other might suggest that religious lessons were such a low priority for young people that opting out of participation was not associated with any emotional response. Lack of emotional response was, according to the largest group of respondents, the most frequently described consequence of such a decision. Yes, it can be explained by the argument that it was a very rational, thoughtful decision. However, if this were the case, the young people would express more emotions indicating joy, fulfilment and relief. Secondly, not admitting one's emotions can either indicate a phenomenon of suppression and denial or show a kind of "poverty" in experiencing emotions or an inability to express emotions. In extreme cases, it may indicate the presence of the alexithymia disorder. Alexithymia is a peculiar disorder in the process of emotion regulation that manifests itself as difficulty in identifying and verbalising emotions, difficulty in differentiating between emotions and the physiological arousal accompanying them, as well as an operational style of thinking and an impoverished imaginative life (Płońska and Czernikiewicz 2006). Thirdly, such a state of perceived emotional emptiness may indicate a high degree of indifference towards the subject of religion. Therefore, the absence of these hours in the timetables of the secondary school students surveyed may indicate that they became indifferent towards this type of religious activity. Abandoning religious lessons can be seen as an expression of distancing oneself from the institution of the Catholic Church. Only a small percentage fully accepts the Church's teaching on this matter. The crisis is also noticeable in relation to the Church, whose authority is weakening, and, thus, fewer and fewer young people are involved in the life of this community (Małkosa and Kiełb 2021; Grabowska 2021). The opinions of teachers who teach religious lessons at school seem interesting in this context. The results of this research are consistent with ours. It appears that the majority of teachers of religious lessons do not feel that students are averse to this school subject (Małkosa 2022). Students have an indifferent attitude towards religious lessons at school. The emotional indifference of adolescents towards giving up religious classes can be interpreted as follows. Young people give up such religious education primarily because they consider themselves non-believers, not belonging to the Catholic Church, and disagree with the teachings of this Church on faith and morals (Małkosa et al. 2022). The ambivalent emotional attitude of the students to Church indicates their ambivalent attitude towards religious lessons, which are strongly associated with the institution of the Catholic Church.

Self-awareness in describing experienced emotional states proved more problematic for men. This result may be part of the existing debate on gender differences in emotional intelligence. Research suggests that women are more emotionally intelligent than men (Lopez-Zafra et al. 2012).

The second category of emotions most frequently expressed was a feeling of relief/joy. In this case, it is possible to point to the rewarding and reinforcing function of emotions after a decision has been made (Escadas et al. 2019). Students describing their decision using the emotions of relief and joy can be described as those who identified themselves with the decision they made. Relief occurs in our psychological functioning when the

stimulus or circumstance that previously led to the negative emotion experienced ceases. Relief is a distinctive emotion in that its occurrence must always be preceded by another emotion. Relief never occurs alone; hence, the young people in our study attributed the experienced emotion of relief the accompanying emotion of joy (Paul Ekman 2013). Thus, this state of experienced relief that occurs can be explained as follows. The young people understand resigning from their school's religious lessons as a way of freeing themselves from experiencing unpleasant experiences there. Indeed, in the interviews conducted, it is common to find young people's opinions regarding schools' religious lessons as an obligation to write tests, work in class, do homework, "be quizzed personally by the teacher" and improve their grades (Kurzydło 2023). In such a case, dropping out of religious lessons is automatically associated by the youth with relief and joy. We noticed that some students put into words how they did not feel, which also indicates a certain lack of ability to communicate their emotional states.

Other types of emotion experienced by the adolescents after giving up religious lessons were the emotions of happiness and joy. The co-occurrence of these two emotions seems to be no coincidence. In psychology, there are differences between joy and happiness, both considered to be emotional responses to the process of accomplishment. The joy accompanies the process throughout, whereas happiness seems to be more strictly tied to the moment of completion of the process (Summa 2020). Respondents use the past tense when describing the experience of happiness and emotions related to the decision to leave religious lessons. That is, opting out of religion is strongly equated with happiness (a decision made) and the benefits of the decision in the form of an extra free hour in the timetable are a source of joy. There is, therefore, no doubt that resigning from religion lessons was an important decision for the respondents since it is linked to the experience of happiness. This type of happiness can be identified more as hedonistic happiness than eudaimonistic happiness (Czapiński 2008). The perspective of gaining free time or the possibility of not attending, according to some students, boring religious lessons, is associated with happiness from the hedonistic category. Probably, it is the longitudinal research perspective that can provide an answer to the question of whether the happiness associated with disengagement from religious classes is eudaimonistic happiness. Eudaimonistic happiness is the result of developing fundamental virtues and valuable attributes.

In addition, it is also worth mentioning that the statements featured the theme of perceived stress/uncertainty/doubt. In some cases, this had to do with anticipated consequences from parents and teachers for these students. Some of the young people were concerned that their teachers and parents would change their positive attitude towards the students as a result of such a decision. Significantly, this is not an unfounded perception—cases have been mentioned in which differences were indeed noted in the treatment of students by teachers before and after their resignation from school catechesis. Some students feel psychologically unwell after opting out of religion lessons. The analysis of the students' statements provides grounds to conclude that the withdrawal from religion lessons is an event related to worldview and even a kind of defiance of the youth's previous commitment to faith. This is consistent with previous research showing that faith abandonment predicted lower adolescent satisfaction (Zarzycka et al. 2022).

The emotion of stress, uncertainty, doubt, regret, guilt and emptiness can be categorised as an emotion from the spectrum of moral emotions (Haidt 2003). This means that, for some respondents, dropping out of religious lessons was a morally significant decision that could be classified as bad. This extends beyond the present topic, but the issue of young people making decisions slightly against themselves seems interesting in the perspective of further research.

Young people do not regret and do not experience a sense of guilt in connection to resignation from school lessons.

This fact might be alarming for those responsible for the substantive and qualitative form of religion lessons in Polish schools. This means that, in the view of young people, resignation from religious lessons is not associated with any real experienced loss or lack.

This can be a very important piece of quality feedback for those organizing religious education. A lack of a sense of loss may mean that participants do not find the classes valuable or interesting. It appears that not only was the emotion of regret expressed by only two people but, in addition, it was related more to the guilt that arose from a parent's reaction to their child's decision to opt out of religion lessons rather than the student's personal ruminations. This, in turn, can be a kind of information on the motivation of those participating, that it happens to be external. In a situation where the external pressure disappears (and such a moment is the entrance to high school), students may give up without guilt and loss. A qualitative analysis of the students' statements in terms of emotional experiences does not indicate the presence of these emotions, which may indicate a positive retrospect related to participation in religious lessons at school. Indeed, adolescence is an important time for the construction of a person's identity, a time of making choices and decisions which will be the centre of building a young person's own system of values, principles and basic life goals, which are the basis for creating one's own self-concept and assuming obligations towards oneself and the world (Erikson 2004). It is worth emphasising that the system of priority values acquired during the formative period of a young person's personality is no longer easily susceptible to change after reaching adulthood (Oleszkowicz and Senejko 2022). Indeed, the literature highlights the relationship of participation in religious classes to axiological education. The formation of the sensitivity of conscience is an essential part of integral education (Zellma 2016). Moral education, which is an essential component of religious education, consists, above all, of the formation of conscience, since the mere knowledge of what is morally good and what is morally evil is not sufficient (Congregation for the Clergy 1997). It is important to remember that this is the assumption: the intention and the reality of teaching moral aspects within religious classes can be quite different. Introducing obligatory moral education classes in schools could be a beneficial alternative.

5. Limitations and Further Directions

Due to the highly idiographic nature of this research, the emotional experience of an individual student in the situation of withdrawal from their school's religious lessons warrants further exploration using different samples. For example, a research perspective that takes into account differences resulting from the place of residence or the time that has elapsed since leaving religious education seems interesting. In addition, it is useful to investigate the emotions of students still participating in their school's religious lessons. In our research, we did not make a distinction between those students who opted out of religious classes in their first and last years of secondary school. The perspective of the research that takes into account the division of students into those who dropped out of religious education classes in the first year of secondary school or the final year of school also seems interesting. The results could provide groundwork for developing quantitative instruments to measure the emotions accompanying an adolescent in a situation after making a difficult decision. Analysing the emotions experienced by young people in situations of loss or decision-making can provide an opportunity to explore the students' hierarchy of values and yield information about their lives extended by the emotional aspect. Case studies may provide more insights into the specific challenges with regard to seeking and using help by secondary school students.

6. Implications

Our research suggests that students have poor insights into their emotional experiences. Workshops to help students recognise emotions, express them and develop greater insights to learn about themselves can, therefore, be valuable. Students who opt out of participating in their school's religious classes are often not required or given the opportunity to participate in ethics classes. This is a situation that deprives young people of participation in classes that introduce and familiarise them with concepts and theories in the field of axiology. We recognise the need for substantive cooperation between catechists

and teachers who teach those school subjects in which the themes of values, life in the family and the meaning of life are taken up. This is due to the fact that young people who do not participate in religious lessons do not have the opportunity to become aware of the content taught and covered during their schools' religious classes, and to which other teachers can draw attention.

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