

Anna Walulik CSFN
ORCID: 0000-0002-5607-6974
Ignatianum University in Cracow

Synergistic Nature of Gospel-Inspired Pedagogy

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the article is to show the Gospel as a source of pedagogical thinking and action. The echo of its message is present in different pedagogical currents and concepts considered to be modern and innovative. This indicates the synergistic nature of pedagogy referring to Christianity, the source of which is the reality of the resurrection of Jesus and the hope which results from that truth that humankind can achieve salvation—a happy life with God for all eternity.

The events described in the Gospels are salvific, the components of which form a network of interconnections. Synergy is revealed in this network, understood as interaction; its result is not only the strengthening of desirable values or the weakening of undesirable phenomena, but the emergence of a new quality. It manifests itself in the fact that pedagogical reflection and educational activities inspired by the idea of the Gospel refer not only to knowledge resulting from natural cognition, but also to that enriched by cognition referring to the Transcendent. At the same time, the use of synergistic effects requires knowledge of the Gospel and the principles of its interpretation.

Synergy in pedagogy and education

Assuming that education is not about the authoritarian transmission of knowledge and canonical rules of conduct but is instead dependent on a range of social changes, pedagogy emerges as

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a discipline that subjects the experiences of learners and researchers to scientific reflection. In this way, pedagogy, both theoretically and practically, creates a space with almost unlimited potential for the emergence, identification, and activation of actions to reveal synergies (Edwards, Usher 2007). The term is not new, but, at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, much like the term *competence*, it has become a kind of “code word” without a single, fixed definition (Brzostek, Krysztofik 2022). Its ambiguity and multidimensionality are both strengths and sources of definitional challenges. The richness of the phenomenon known as synergy (sometimes called synergetics) is reflected in an increasing number of its typologies (Chadam 2012: 71–72).

Typically, synergy refers to an interaction whose effect, in some respects, is greater than the sum of the individual effects. In this sense, it is sometimes confused with catalytic or moderating interactions. However, the essence of synergy is not the amplification of a quantitative or even qualitative process, but the emergence of an additional quality that did not exist before. In social situations, synergy depends on a large number of variables, which makes it difficult to manage and easy to disrupt or block. Synergy results in a synergistic effect, an additional value arising from the integration of actions. This is particularly valuable in the process of gathering experience.

The analysis and interpretation of experience occur within an established paradigm, the researcher’s perspective resulting from membership in a particular community of thought (Ciechowska, Szymańska 2018: 25–28). One such community of thought is Christianity which has its origin in the person of Jesus Christ, God who became man, whose life, teaching, and especially resurrection bring a new quality to human thinking and acting. This has significant implications for educational processes. Based on this foundation, the pedagogy of the Good News highlights the synergistic potential of educational thought and action.

Gospel synergy

The term “good news” is synonymous with the word “Gospel” (Gr. *euangelion*). In Greek literature of the pre-Christian and early-Christian era, this word was well known and had three meanings:

(1) a donation offered as a reward to someone who brought good news, (2) an offering made to a deity in thanksgiving for a message received, and (3) a celebrated day of gratitude for good news. In Christianity, the term Gospel has a double meaning: it denotes the doctrine of the salvation of all mankind proclaimed by Christ and His apostles, and it is also the title of the four inspired books containing this doctrine.

In Old Testament times, for successive generations of the chosen people, the Gospel, or good news, was the very announcement of the coming of the Messiah and the story of the work of redemption He was to carry out on earth. This fulfillment is referred to by Christ himself. In the synagogue of Nazareth, after reading the words of Isaiah (Isaiah 62), He explains that He, His activity, His person, and His teachings are the announced good news. When asked directly about His messianic mission and dignity, He affirms that the prophetic announcements are fulfilled in Him. The specific object of Christ's teaching includes the conditions and principles set for all who wish to live in the new Kingdom of God. Everything that the Apostles hear from Jesus, what they see and experience, becomes their shared experience, built on the foundation of the Paschal mystery and transmitted through the mission entrusted to them.

In Polish, the concept of the Gospel is reflected in terms like *dobra nowina* (good news) and *radosna wieść* (joyous tidings)—a message bringing joy about the redemption of all people, announced and prepared by God and accomplished by the Son of God. This redemption involves the liberation of humanity from the power of evil and an invitation to eternal happiness with God (Sbuler 2000: 1110–1111). Therefore, the Gospel is addressed to every human being, regardless of their era, age, social role, or occupation. Its message is an invitation, or even a call, to participate in the mission of salvation by fulfilling one's vocation. Thus, it directly applies to educators, teachers, mentors, and anyone who cares about the happiness of others and sees the path to achieving this through teaching and learning. This is a typical path of Gospel thinking and action. As Adam Szromek points out, it is not so much about efficient as about effective achievement of goals (Szromek 2017). The good news contained in the Gospel arises from the interplay of natural and transcendent factors that shape human life. These factors not only imbue life with a new quality, which testifies to their synergistic nature, but they are themselves a new quality.

These factors include the individuals connected to a common source and purpose, the content of the good news, the methods of gathering experience, and the execution of the mission. The internal and external relationships among these elements create spaces where synergies are revealed.

The synergistic nature of relationships between people stems from embracing a personalistic concept of humanity and belief in a personal God. The personalistic nature of the Gospel, both horizontally and vertically, heightens one's awareness of the synergistic potential in its sources, purpose, content, and methods of gathering experience and fulfilling the mission. The relationships among these categories are built on the pedeutological triad known as the "Triple Teacher" (Inner Teacher—SELF, Outer Teacher—OTHERS, Transcendent Teacher—GOD). A specific feature of this triad is that the Transcendent Teacher is revealed in the intentions and actions of both the Inner Teacher and the Outer Teacher (Marek, Walulik 2000: 77–80; Paślawska-Smęder 2022). This "triple relationality" takes on fuller meaning in relation to God manifested in the person of Jesus Christ, as it sensitizes us to the dimension of the sacred, which, in the Christian understanding, also permeates what is commonly regarded as the profane. The coordination, interdependence, and interaction between the sacred and the profane result in the emergence of a new quality of understanding oneself and the surrounding world.

The content of the good news is the joyous tidings of the Messiah and the redemption that He accomplished, known as the Paschal mystery of Christ. The doctrine of Christ is new and unique because it is proclaimed with a power that introduces the complete otherness of God's final revelation. It consists of three fundamental themes: (1) the announcement of the salvation of humanity, (2) the entry of the Kingdom of God into earthly history, and (3) the beginning of the fulfillment of the Messianic-eschatological era. These are not three separate themes but one unified good news of the salvation of humankind and the world, with synergistic links between them.

The synergistic nature of the purpose is expressed by perceiving the ultimate center of reference (ultimate concerns¹) from

1 In his introduction to the Polish edition of Margaret S. Archer's book *Culture and Agency*, Krzysztof Wielecki explains that *sprawy ostateczne* are sometimes

a transcendental perspective. This means that a person experiencing an emotional interest in something important in the present relates it to the eternal and infinite. In the search for the meaning of life and the source of the world's being, one finds it in the personal God. The synergy revealed as a new quality suggests that the spiritual dimension should be considered in understanding humanity, defining life's purpose from a transcendental perspective, building knowledge through both natural and religious cognition, and recognizing God as an axiological reference point. Based on this foundation, concepts of Christian-inspired education are developed, such as the pedagogy of the Good News (Marek, Walulik 2020), the pedagogy of witness (Marek, Walulik 2019), and the pedagogy of accompaniment (Marek 2017; Marek, Walulik 2022).

Pedagogical synergy in the Gospel

From a pedagogical perspective, the synergistic nature of the Gospel is primarily expressed in the recognition of the dignity of a person as the foundation of all educational actions. A person possesses dignity with essential characteristics such as intransferability, inalienability, irreversibility, and irreducibility (Adamski 2005). This means that a person's dignity is independent of age, gender, origin, or social and historical context. It holds an absolute status and is intrinsic to the essence of God, with human beings participating in and sharing this dignity. This understanding of human dignity also underscores the equality of all human beings (Granat 1985; Mariański 2019) and man's unique place among other entities: As John Paul II noted, "Man is the only creature on earth whom God willed for himself" (John Paul II 1979, No 13).

This view of human dignity is rooted in the Gospel, which represents the Good News of God standing with humanity. Therefore, the pedagogy of the Good News places a strong emphasis on defending human rights and dignity. By referring to the dignity of the human

translated as "ultimate concerns," though his consultations with Prof. Archer led him to believe that it would be better to refer to them as "essential concerns" (Archer 2019: 31). The use of the term "essential" instead of "ultimate" also corresponds better to Paul Tillich's understanding of faith as an ultimate concern (see Bogdalczyk 2012: 83).

person grounded in the divine, it does not propose a new ideal of humanity but offers a fresh perspective on understanding the totality of phenomena and conditions related to the essence and functioning of human beings. This approach helps safeguard pedagogy and education from the risk of ideologization (Nowak 1996). Dignity is a value to which every person is entitled, regardless of any internal or external conditions. In ancient Greek culture, dignity was already recognized as a measure of human excellence (Mariański 2017). It is one of the fundamental personal characteristics of a person and is embedded in their ontic structure (Kiereś 2009), shaped by reason, freedom, spirituality, and conscience (Chałas 2006).

Human rationality manifests in the capacity for intellectual knowledge of the truth about oneself, the world, and God. Freedom grows out of this knowledge and is expressed in the ability and possibility to choose values. Spirituality is shaped by consciousness (cognition), emotionality (feelings), and values (including religious values), with their internalized hierarchy. It reveals itself in the experiences of different spheres of life, especially within morality, worldview, creativity, and relationships with others. The conscience is the factor that creates morality, which enables the understanding of the quality of one's own behavior. This demonstrates the need to perceive the person as a dynamic subject, which is not opposed to the inalienability of dignity but shows new perspectives for understanding the importance of dignity for personal development (Kunowski 1997).

The novelty of the Gospel, concerning the components that build up the dignity of the person, is expressed in the person and teaching of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who, through His words and actions, testifies to God's concern for humanity. By His attitude, Christ gives new meaning to the qualities that express human dignity. Christ's attitude demonstrates that reason, freedom, spirituality, and conscience intermingle, creating a space for the discovery of dignity. Jesus refers to both the natural and supernatural dimensions of the human being when teaching about God. Such teaching is not indoctrination but a witness, implying conformity between thought, speech, and action. It also presupposes that it is up to each individual to accept, internalize and live this witness or to reject it.

The novelty of the Gospel is also expressed in perceiving the purpose of life from a transcendent perspective; that is, it eludes ordinary

human experience and goes beyond the reach of the five basic senses. It directs humanity towards a reality that exists beyond itself, making it possible to explain existential problems that reason alone cannot solve (Marek 2022). The perception of the purpose of life from a transcendent perspective is significantly influenced by one's image of God. This is not a question of human conceptions of this reality but about God's actions as revealed in the Bible and experienced by humanity. This understanding is made possible by the spiritual aspect of humans. Spirituality is expressed through a person's preferred attitudes, habits, and values, which are characterized by a reflective attitude towards everyday life, a respectful attitude towards the world, belief in immortality, and hope of communing with God for all eternity (Marek 2017).

The essence of Christianity is to be in a relationship with God that is limited neither by time nor space because it has its origin in the resurrection of Christ. This event is unparalleled and incomparable within natural experience, cognition, and spirituality. It defies both reification and spiritualization. The experience of the resurrection is born out of a transformative encounter that gives relationships a new quality. It signifies the risen Jesus illuminating the darkness of sin and evil, drawing people into the realm of eternity. Recognizing and acknowledging the risen Jesus as the living One alters the existential situation of human beings. Faith is the condition for this transformation—a fundamental orientation toward the concerns of Christianity that entails openness to God. Faith in God is a gift that requires a human response. It is grounded not only in feelings, but primarily in reason and the decisions of the will. Without engaging reason and the will, faith would succumb to adversity and difficulties. Simultaneously, faith ventures into a reality that is inaccessible to reason (Marek, Walulik 2020: 51–54). This points to another novelty of the Gospel: its openness to the potentials of natural and religious understanding. These avenues generate a novel approach to pedagogical thought and action, exemplified by Jesus' proclamation about Himself: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6). This testifies to the relational dimension of education and validates the concept of the "Triple Teacher" discussed earlier.

Human dignity also unveils the link between moral values—understood as particular qualities and behaviors of the human person,

and metaphysical qualities that transcend full definition by reason, yet infuse life with deeper significance. These qualities reveal themselves in intricate interpersonal dynamics and enhance our comprehension of the world around us. They are particularly evident in art (Ingarden 1960).

By virtue of his inherent dignity, man functions within culture yet also transcends it. Human nature “is the measure of culture, and it is thanks to it that man does not become a prisoner of any of his cultures, but strengthens his personal dignity by living in accordance with the profound truth of his being” (John Paul II 1993, no. 53). Thus, the new quality of the Gospel is expressed in the recognition of God as the axiological point of reference. At the same time, the Gospel is not a mere set of commandments, precepts, or moral rules. Instead, it centers on the person of God, who enters into a relationship with man, acts on his behalf, and is motivated by love and mercy. This love surpasses the notion of loving one’s neighbor “as oneself”; it is a love so profound that it involves giving one’s life for one’s neighbor, that is, making daily sacrifices through free and conscious decisions. It entails respecting every person and building a sense of personal dignity.²

When Jesus said, “As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34), He introduced a new commandment that centered on love: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love (John 15:9–10). This teaching embodies the new justice and proclaims the ethics of the kingdom of God. The new righteousness does not emphasize what is new (in a revolutionary sense but breaks from previously accepted customs, stemming from a “new” interpretation of the “old” Law.³ Christ profoundly reveals its essence, giving the commandments their proper meaning, greater clarity, ultimate form, and fullness (Marek, Walulik 2021).

2 This distinction is evidenced, for example, by Christ’ many confrontations with the Pharisees, who do not understand His attitude towards tax collectors—viewed as supporters of the enemy and thus as sinners (e.g., Matt. 9:9–13)—or by His attitude towards women, which differs from that of the Jews (e.g., Luke 8:1–3).

3 The term refers to the rules that applied in the Old Testament.

The new righteousness should be understood as an eschatological work: it is given to people as a new revelation and inscribed within them. It is characterized by activity, freedom, and gratuitousness. At the same time, freedom of choice presupposes knowledge of the Gospel, i.e., attaining the ability to distinguish the “new” from the “old.” This righteousness has a personal character: Christians are to live by faith in Jesus, with discipleship as the essence of their lives. The criterion for Christian morality is not solely the words of Jesus but His entire life. “In this way, thinking about the human being has left the shallow waters of psychologism and entered the depths of agathology” (Tischner 1990: 226). Emphasizing the importance of virtues in creating synergistic spaces stems from the conviction that every action of a human as a rational being begins with a decision made by the spiritual faculties of intellect and will (Horowski 2020).

Conclusion

The synergistic nature of Gospel-inspired pedagogy (i.e. bringing a new quality) is evident in how the person and teachings of Jesus Christ form the foundation of pedagogical thought and practice. This influence is present, whether consciously or unconsciously, among researchers. It is unjustifiable to pit traditional pedagogy against so-called modern pedagogy. The real difference lies in their ultimate concerns and the meanings they assign to their values. The most cherished values in modern pedagogical currents—such as humanism, subjectivity, freedom, emancipation, creativity, and flexibility—originate from the Gospel and have a deeper understanding than what is typically discussed in mainstream pedagogical discourse. From the perspective of the Gospel, thinking in terms of human sciences is enriched by personalism, which makes a clear distinction between a person and personality, recognizing the person as the highest category of being. A person is a dynamic being, capable of discovering the truth about themselves, and thus open to the world, others, and God. For pedagogy, this means that the person is both the subject who educates and who is educated.

In the evangelical view, being a subject comes from the inherent dignity of the person. Pedagogically, this implies that recognizing a person’s dignity as an inalienable and irreducible value sets

the framework for understanding the goal of education, which is human happiness beyond the material realm—happiness understood in a transcendent, spiritual dimension, as life with God throughout eternity. Achieving this goal involves making free decisions based on love, adopting certain attitudes, and displaying specific behaviors. The Gospel defines freedom as liberation from the most enslaving oppression, which is evil: individual and social sin. Therefore, the Gospel does not impose ready-made solutions but encourages creativity and the discovery of personal potential. It enables us to bear witness and find our place in the unpredictability of everyday life.

Discovering and initiating Gospel synergies requires understanding the Gospel's content and principles of interpretation, and appealing not only to natural cognition but also to supernatural, religious cognition. This approach helps avoid the errors of historicizing, moralizing and psychologizing, and prevents overinterpreting one's own experience. Only then will Gospel synergies truly enhance pedagogical thinking and action.

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CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESS:

Anna Walulik CSFN
Ignatianum University in Cracow
Institute of Educational Sciences
e-mail: anna.walulik@ignatianum.edu.pl