

CHANGES IN THE EDUCATION OF EARLY-SCHOOL TEACHERS IN POLAND IN THE CONTEXT OF STUDENTS' ANTICIPATION OF THE PROFESSION

Małgorzata Suświłło

University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, Poland

Abstract

In this research paper I raise the problem of changes in the education of nursery school and early school (forms 1 to 3) teachers in Poland, paying attention to the political and ideological as well as the philosophical context. I provide arguments in favour of the need to care about the quality of education and continuous professional improvement of teachers. I draw attention to David Clarke and Hilary Hollingsworth's Correlation Model of Professional Teacher Development, helpful in this aspect, and to solutions applied in this area in Europe. Furthermore, I consider the philosophy of early education teacher training, citing for example Potulicka's criticism of the American neoliberal philosophy, and providing an example of a different approach (also American), developed at the Bay Area Teacher Training Institute (BATTI), which assumes that the philosophy of educating teachers is closely connected with the philosophy of education. The second part of this article presents my own qualitative study into the anticipation of students regarding the profession of an early education teacher. An analysis of essays written by students enabled me to distinguish several types of teachers: 'a professionalist', 'a teacher trainee/constantly learning', 'an artist/an animator', 'a children's and parents' friend/an authority', 'an enthusiast/a passionate teacher', 'a constructivist'.

Key words: early education teacher, education, change, development

INTRODUCTION

Issues connected with the teaching profession, especially in nursery school and in the early forms of primary school (forms 1 to 3), are a subject that interests scientists representing different research domains, even though these problems seem to form the study field of pedeutology. The complexity of this problem area, including its political and therefore also ideological ties, becomes evident owing to the research experience and practice in education of early school teachers. Efforts undertaken in Polish colleges and universities to train properly candidates for the teaching profession do not guarantee success in the preparation of their students for this occupation because of the lacking pre-entrance selection (during the enrolment into a higher education institution). The data contained in the EURYDICE Report for the European Commission of 2013 shows that only one third of the EU countries ensures entrance selection of candidates for the profession of a teacher (EURYDICE Report 2013). The dissolution of a consolidated university course leading to a Master degree in preschool and early school education was, in my opinion, a wrong decision. Subsequently, the lobbying by academic teachers, who have acknowledged the inadequacy of teacher education during undergraduate studies, has led to a decision to resume a 5-year consolidated Master degree course for teachers of preschools and first forms of primary schools (1-3 forms) in 2019. Regardless of the duration of studies, there is a tendency in Europe to continue life-long learning, also among teachers. The main reason is the fact that school is not the only place where knowledge is gained, and there are some areas where schoolchildren could even teach their teachers, which is confirmed by the Report to UNESCO of the International Commission for Education, chaired by Jacques Delors (Life Long Learning). Because of the increasingly rapid rate of developing innovative technologies and their easier accessibility to large groups of school pupils, a question arises about the role of teacher training studies, that is what knowledge, skills and competences would-be teachers should acquire. Although in Poland, same as in other EU countries, there are both European and national qualification frameworks, it appears that satisfying the above criteria does not guarantee that a university graduate will be a good teacher for young children. In this article, I intend to make readers more familiar with the problem of vocational education of preschool and early school teachers in the context of the research theory and practice –

including my investigations into the perception of oneself in the role of a teacher shared by students about to graduate from the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn.

JUSTIFICATION OF THE HIGH QUALITY OF TEACHER EDUCATION

As rightly observed by David Clarke and Hilary Hollingsworth (2002), it would be fair to speak about the professional development of a teacher as a continuous, life-long learning process. These authors propose their own model of such development, which they called the Correlational Model of Teacher Professional Development. The main category in this model is the notion of change mediated by two processes: reflection and execution. Change covers four areas – composite elements of the teacher's world (milieu): (1) personal area (domain) – comprising knowledge, views and attitudes of a teacher, (2) area (domain) of practice – professional experimentation in the classroom; (3) area (domain) of consequences – substantial outcomes of the work with pupils; (4) external area (domain) – sources of information, incentives, encouragement (cf. Suświłło, 2012). This model seems to be useful in analysing the professional development of teacher course graduates, but it does not fully help to explain or construct a model of educating teachers, in particular early education teachers. With respect to the preparatory stage, lasting three or three plus two years of university studies, we talk about models, orientations, paradigms and approaches to teacher education.

In Europe, as indicated by the European Commission in the EURYDICE Report (2013), there are two models of teacher education: parallel (simultaneously acquiring general and vocational qualifications) and consecutive (gaining vocational qualifications after being conferred a professional title, or at the end of a professional course). However, in most countries, teachers who will work in nursery schools and early forms of primary schools are educated in the parallel model. This means that they acquire pedagogical skills from the first year of studies. Enrolment criteria set for candidates to teacher training studies (in the scope of early education) are highly diverse across all European countries. In most countries, the applicants are obliged to present a certificate of passing the final examinations at a senior secondary school (in Poland, the Matura examination), but in some countries (a third of the European countries) they are also required to present a certificate of aptitude for the profession of a teacher, or they need to take pre-entrance tests. The criteria of enrolment and selection methods are defined by teacher education institutions (Denmark, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Finland) or by education authorities (e.g. Italy, Lithuania, the UK). For instance, in Finland candidates for early school teachers must take a written examination and a predisposition test, which consists of an interview and team work. In the Netherlands, the test covers the Dutch language and mathematics. A low score does not exclude a candidate, but implicates that he or she will need extra support. It is only when the applicant fails the test again (at the end of the first year at college) that they are eliminated from further education in the profession of a teacher. Language tests are obligatory in some states (Spain, Luxemburg, Malta), whereas in the United Kingdom candidates are tested with respect to their reading and writing skills (EURYDICE Report, 2013). In certain European countries, although not frequently, there are alternative paths to gaining teacher qualifications. The report cited above mentions Poland as a country where it is possible to earn qualifications to teach foreign languages at school. It is required to present a certificate testifying the knowledge of a foreign language on a 'proficient' or 'advanced' level together with a certificate of graduation from diploma studies or a course confirming the pedagogical qualifications of a candidate. Another example comes from Sweden, where persons with experience in other professions can complete a special course (programme) in teaching and can teach a given subject. For foreigners with teaching experience who would like to work in the Swedish system of education, special profession improvement courses are organised. In Norway, for example, beside the regular academic education, assistant employees working as carers in preschools have a chance to obtain teacher qualifications. The working experience as carers counts as a form of practical placement for the job. In the UK (England), there is now a programme called the School Direct Training Programme addressed to graduates with at least three years of experience in another job, while in Wales there is still the Graduate Teacher Programme, abandoned in England, where individual training and support can be given at a school. In England, there is also the Overseas Trained Teacher programme, which enables participants to obtain

teacher qualifications if they have previously earned such qualifications outside the European Economic Area. Such persons are employed as temporary qualified ‘instructors’ who, having first completed an individual training and earning the final passing mark, are granted the status of a qualified teacher. Unless they gain this status within four years, they cannot continue their employment at schools. The report also informs that apart from the aforementioned programmes, there is the Teach First programme operated in Great Britain, Holland and Estonia, which was developed as a charity movement funded by business representatives for the most capable graduates from different courses of university studies, and which prepares them for the vocation of a teacher in schools situated in particularly economically disadvantaged areas (Eurydice Report, 2013).

In the past twenty years, colleges and universities, especially in Poland, have been admitting all candidate students to courses, mostly because it has become ‘a good business’. This holds true about courses with the major in pedagogy, where also future teachers are educated, particularly if they are payable courses in both public and private higher education schools. A decision to enter a teacher training university course, as proven by Hanna Kędzierska’s study (Kędzierska, 2012), is mainly motivated by the lowered entrance requirements concerning the teaching profession, short paths for obtaining professional qualifications, and the lack of selection. The latest measures taken by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education have led to significant changes in this respect. The new act on higher education, called the Constitution for Science, of 20 July 2018, puts certain restrictions on the education of preschool and early school teachers, by introducing stricter regulations concerning the quality of scientific research conducted in a given school of higher education.

Member states of the European Union, including Poland, in the context of teacher education are obliged to develop students’ competences in three dimensions: knowledge, skills and attitudes, and higher education institutions should design such curricula and syllabuses that will take into account the area and course standards established by the appropriate national authorities (in Poland, by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education) for education of teachers, in compliance with the general EU standards. The documents of the European Council and the European Commission, cited by Wanda Dróżka, maintaining that „teachers should be equipped to respond to the evolving challenges of the knowledge society, participate actively in it and prepare learners to be autonomous lifelong learner” (Dróżka, 2012), are general enough for particular teacher training institutions to fill in own contents, which – as seen in the teacher education standards developed in Poland – is not always entirely possible. The limitation of the autonomy of universities in this respect arises mainly from economic reasons, and is manifested by cutting down the number of teaching hours. Although gaining the latest information about the world through the latest technological solutions occurs mostly outside the formal system of education and can be achieved by self-learning, it seems that learning to be a teacher requires face-to-face contacts with experts and support by mentors already at the preconventional stage of vocational development. The question about the aim is also the question about what or who the future teacher is to be. Mary A. Jensen suggests adopting two main goals in the education of early childhood teachers: 1) inclusion of transdisciplinary approaches and in-depth pedagogical knowledge in the curricula of educating practitioners, so as to increase their knowledge of related disciplines, and 2) promotion of various strategies, which will help future practitioners to assume managerial roles, to engage in provision of advice and collaboration, which will enable them to construct the capacity of supporting one another and coordinating social services (Jensen, 1999). She gives an example of the need to have knowledge in ethics and values, as well as the ability not to evaluate or make assumptions too hastily, the need to understand how social groups, friendships and the sense of identity function, the need to possess the knowledge of aesthetic expression and evaluation of beauty, to show interest and ability to inquire, and the need to gain knowledge about communication and evaluation of linguistic expression.

It is therefore important to assume a certain orientation in teacher education, and to be aware of its limitations, regardless of the type of this orientation, be it technological ones derived from behaviourism, humanistic – having the foundation in humanistic psychology, or functional – drawing on cognitive psychology (Kwiatkowska, 2008).

The objective set by the state is to 'obtain' certain outputs from education, such as a pro-civic teacher, who implements the imposed curriculum in the education of school children without questioning its purposefulness, while the goal of a teacher during his or her development is (or at least it happens to be) to gain autonomy (emancipation). Without going too deep into the axiological dimension of education, it is worth noting that personal values of a future or practicing teacher are not always coherent with the values imposed from external sources, and such cohesion may not always be necessary. A compromise reached while reflecting over one's development and pedagogical practice seems to be a universal solution in this regard because, as noted by Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak (2006, p.71), „a new concept of education and care (here: education of teachers – the author's remark, M.S.) developed in the process of emancipation acquires features of a new ideology, and as such it can be ensalving [...]. Freedom of education is a value set to be achieved.”

The process of becoming a teacher is a dynamic one. This dynamics, as observed by Sylvia Yee Fan Tang (2003, p. 19), requires that challenges be set (appear) in the domain of a student's experience; it also entails support on behalf of an academic teacher or a mentor assigned during practical placements. While facing challenges, students – would-be teachers – feel insecure and travel from instability towards stability. If the challenges are too serious, they can lead to negativity and stagnation. Support is therefore needed, which - for the sake of successful professional development of future teachers - should entail assistance to make students feel safe, to perceive one's individuality and own worth, to sense that actions taken and assessments made by a teacher are important, etc. Challenges and support should complement each other, and ought to lead to the formation of a teaching self. The way future teachers are educated relies on the assumed orientation, although to a large extent it also depends on individual capabilities and knowledge of academic teachers.

WHAT PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHER EDUCATION?

Search for the philosophy of education which incorporates both the philosophy of constructing a curriculum and the philosophy of educating teachers is not an easy undertaking, especially in a time when culturally alien trends are trying to permeate into Polish education. What I have in mind is the neoliberal ideology, criticised by Eugenia Potulicka¹, which has arrived in Europe, including Poland, from the United States of America. The analysis of American education made by Potulicka reveals certain similarities to the currently suggested foundations of the reform of Polish education. A characteristic feature of neoliberalism as a philosophy/ideology, implicated by many authors², is free market. Among theories exploited by neoliberalism, E. Potulicka mentions monetarism, theory of transactions, and transaction cost theory. In Poland, the theory that is best known and most often used in economy and social policy is the one of human capital. Investing in education and treating education as capital contribute to the country's economic growth. As reported by E. Potulicka, after Pineda: „the measure of human capital is the usefulness of an individual and this individual's education. Knowledge and skills as capital assume the form of goods. The economic value of skills not only supports individual capabilities, but also adds to mutual good in the form of human capital, intellectual resources which drive innovations and economic efficiency. The key justification for market-oriented reforms in education consists of the expected greater contribution of education in the country's economic development.”³ It is also maintained in Poland that worth learning and training are such skills which are needed by economy, which is why some colleges and universities open so-called 'commissioned courses', the implementation of which is made possible through special subsidies. There are information campaigns conducted to encourage young people to study technical courses. Neoliberalism is interested in an individual's productivity, and schools should be managed like market enterprises, where the consumer choice and competitiveness are promoted. However, empirical investigations carried out by Kevin B. Smith⁴ did not verify the relationship between education and

¹ E. Potulicka, *Neoliberalne reformy edukacji w Stanach Zjednoczonych. Od Ronalda Reagana do Baracka Obamy*, Kraków 2014.

² Cf. as above

³ E. Potulicka, op. cit. p. 46.

⁴ After E. Potulicka, op. cit.

economy as a science. This author concluded that ideology „is suspected in multiple key elements of education. Seriously underrated are the negative social effects of market-oriented reforms in education, their influence on goals of education and on civic values.”⁵ Nevertheless, it would be worth considering whether in Poland we should follow exactly the same pathway as the USA, and whether we should subordinate schools to normative assumptions and recommendations of economism. It seems that neoliberalism is not the best solution in the Polish circumstances surrounding the professional education of young children’s teachers.

Questioning the use of neoliberal ideology, it would be advisable to consider what ideology or theory could provide a firm foundation for introducing changes in the education of teachers. In academic education, a certain equilibrium is searched for between theory and practice, between what Kwaśnica calls adaptation pedagogics and emancipation pedagogics. Perception of preparing students to teaching profession, as demonstrated by the study of Małgorzata Suświłło (2012), is a result of the adaptational view, in its rationality, of academic studies. This rationality is most probably rooted in adaptational pedagogics practised by most academic teachers, who are assessed through the prism of teaching and scientific achievements, typical of the above rationality.

It seems that the principal assumption of the emancipational philosophy of education is the adoption of the developmental approach to the vocational training of teachers and, on the other hand, the inclusion of constructivism in both early school education and teacher education. A ‘transmission’ academic teacher will form a ‘transmission’ early school teacher, who will consider his or her work with schoolchildren as a transmissional task.

A certain and quite interesting solution in the philosophy of teacher education has been suggested at the Bay Area Teacher Training Institute, University of the Pacific in Oakland, California (the USA), known under the acronym BATTI, where it is assumed that teacher education philosophy is closely connected with the philosophy of education.⁶ The key philosophy adopted at that university is Dewey’s ‘learning by doing’, and students are ‘full-time’ teacher assistants. The core of this philosophy is that teaching must be personal, personality-based and pragmatic. A teaching curriculum is created on the assumption that learners (including university students) learn the best when they realise that learning is associated with who they are and what they know and care about in a given time, and that the things they learn have a deep, meaningful sense, and learning appears in a form which allows learners to construct own understanding in time and with a strong emphasis on doing.

Considering the axiological complexity of teacher education, and bearing in mind the personological character of the early school teacher’s profession, it seemed justifiable to gain knowledge about how students learning to become teachers perceived their future vocational role.

ANTICIPATION OF ONESELF IN THE PROFESSION – QUALITATIVE STUDY AMONG FUTURE TEACHERS OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN PRESCHOOLS AND EARLY SCHOOL FORMS 1 TO 3.

The purpose of my research was to find out how students in the final year of Master degree studies with the major in Pedagogics, speciality in Early Education, perceive themselves in the role of a teacher.

The main research question was: how do students – future preschool and early school teachers – anticipate themselves in the role of a teacher?

All students about to graduate from the second-cycle studies leading to a Master Degree were included in the study: 38 persons, including 3 male students (non-random selection).

A qualitative approach was adopted, where the research method consisted of an analysis of essays written by students. The study was conducted at the end of a cycle of monographic lectures, and the written papers (essays) dealing with the task: *Myself as a future teacher in a preschool or early*

⁵ E. Potulicka, op. cit. p. 60.

⁶ www.batti.org/program/philosophy/ [accessed on 28 July 2016]

primary school, were not graded. The research procedure did not include an option of reducing the collected empirical material because the first round of reading the delivered papers showed that it would not be necessary. A subsequent step in the research process was to encode the papers, which meant that all essays were re-read and features describing authors as future teachers were identified, after which anticipation categories were determined.

Six categories were arrived at:

- Professionalist
- Teacher trainee/learning all the time
- Artist/Animator
- Friend of children and parents/authority
- Enthusiast/passionate teacher
- Constructivist

The ‘professionalist’ is characterised by being open, taking initiative, driving towards perfection, catching up with the civilisation progress; this is a person who takes advantage of theoretical knowledge in practice, and who cooperates with parents like partners.

An example description by ‘a professionalist’:

- *In my future work I would like to be a professionalist and some kind of an expert. I would like to build relations with parents of the children who I will teach and supervise in the future, based on cooperation and partner-like attitudes of parents to the school their child attends. When I look into the future and see myself as a teacher, I would like to see someone who performs her duties in a reliable and consistent manner; I would also see myself as someone who can skillfully use the theoretical knowledge in practice.*

The ‘trainee teacher/constantly learning’ is distinguished by: self-development, constantly upgrading one’s qualifications, being a diligent employee – gaining better qualifications and competences, learning from one’s own mistakes.

Examples of a trainee teacher/constantly learning:

- *A teacher improves professionally all his or her life, they broaden their knowledge, gain new information and acquire technological innovations. When choosing this job, especially in a nursery school or in early education, I am aware that I will have to broaden my knowledge all the time.*
- *Another significant aspect is my mobility as a future teacher; I mean it is important for me to take part in courses and trainings (both at home and abroad), which will have influence on my self-development.*

An ‘artist/animator’ is another type (anticipation category), who is characterised by: being able to improvise in arts, placing emphasis on finding out children’s abilities, on children’s creativity, disregarding routine at work, wishing to make children familiar with culture and science.

Example descriptions of an artist/an animator:

- *I think it is important to talk about children’s creative work, as that they become able to express their emotions in own words.*
- *Most of artistic forms, free transmission of emotions, nurturing skills within the activities a child is interested in doing in the domain of fine arts – these are my objectives.*
- *I will encourage children to be active, e.g. by organising trips, school clubs, or a day of artists. In my work, I will also strive towards making each child feel acknowledged, and making sure that every child discovers a talent and notices their strengths.*

Another type is ‘a friend of children and parents/an authority’, with such distinguishing features as: having the right to making mistakes, being fair, taking care, building relationships with schoolchildren, supporting and helping others, being kindness, having trust (trusting others and being trusted by others), developing partner-like relations with children and parents.

Example descriptions of ‘a friend of schoolchildren and parents/ an authority’:

- *I believe that if I treat children with respect, they will respect me and my work.*
- *In the future I would like to become a teacher who enjoys friendly relations with schoolchildren. In my opinion, a teacher is not only a person who transmits knowledge, but also someone who helps and gives encouragement in everyday matters.*
- *I would like to build good relations with parents, because I think that first impressions matter the most.*

‘An enthusiast/a passionate teacher’ – in this category, the following traits can be identified: an inspiring person, someone who organises picnics, trips, outings, a person who uses modern technologies, a companion in searching for and acquiring knowledge, active in organising trips, cooperating with the local community and with parents, someone who raises interest among pupils in various matters.

Example descriptions of ‘an enthusiast/a passionate teacher’:

- *I would like to conduct classes with the participation of parents – adults often have no time for their children, so I think that they could find one day in a month, one lesson, to work with their child and to see how the child is doing.*
- *In my teaching work I would like to be active and to inspire others as much as possible. I would try various methods and forms of teaching. I wish to take part in trips, camps, hiking trips, and even co-create them with children.*

‘A constructivist’ – with comprehensive education, having courage to raise difficult subjects, showing the usefulness of knowledge, practicing the teaching principle ‘in the search of a trace’, creating for students opportunities to examine things, to carry out search.

Example descriptions of ‘a constructivist’

- *I see myself as a teacher who shows the real world, not an idealised one. I am not afraid to raise difficult subjects during lessons, such as death, violence or adoption.*
- *I would like my lessons to inspire children to act and to arrive at interesting conclusions.*

The analysis of students’ essays led to the following conclusions:

1. Future early education teachers predominantly (most often) anticipate themselves in the model of ‘new professionalism’ developed by Julian Elliott, where the distinguishing features are: interactive and experiment-based teaching, professional education based on case studies – selected with respect to their problem content, complexity, openness to interpretation, taking into account different viewpoints; pedagogics which supports professional learning by arranging conditions which are beneficial for the development of the skills necessary for competent reflection practice, i.e. empathy, self-reflection (a few cases).
2. Some essays correspond to the model of ‘professional artism’ by Della Fish, which assumes *inter alia* ‘a personal repertoire’, which consists of personality traits, character, general knowledge, self-knowledge (sensitivity to others, self-awareness, ability to make well-balanced judgment), open mind, empathy, enthusiasm, imagination; an adequate level of knowledge to teach the courses a teacher is designated to teach; ‘a repertoire of skills defined in the accreditation requirements’, a personal development.

CONCLUSIONS

The study reported in this article, by being a qualitative one, does not aspire to give ground for drawing general conclusions. The results can be referred to a specific school of higher education, i.e. the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, and allow us to try and reflect on how we teach and whether the recent changes create a chance for students in the preconventional stage of teacher's vocational development to pursue in the direction of becoming an autonomous, emancipated, professionalist teacher.

A comparison of the study presented herein, by necessity very briefly, with another study I conducted in 2015⁷, although using different methodology, provides us with arguments to evaluate changes in the quality of education. The teaching system based on modules, both in the first- and second-cycle university studies, largely responded to the suggestions made by students, who wished to be able to develop own interests and to gain higher language competences. These proposals were presented in greater detail in another article⁸, which explains why I did not decided to discuss them again.

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⁷ M. Suświłło, *Przygotowanie do zawodu nauczyciela wczesnej edukacji w percepcji studentów Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego w Olsztynie*. „Forum Oświatowe”, vol. 27, No 2(54), 2015, p. 75-94.

⁸ M. Suświłło, *Filozofia kreowania programu kształcenia nauczycieli wczesnej edukacji z wybranym przykładem w tle*, [in:] M. Nowicka, E. Skrzetuska, (ed.) *Problemy kształcenia nauczycieli edukacji wczesnoszkolnej w uczelniach wyższych w Polsce*. Wyd. Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2016.

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