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Shaping the Future of Teaching Profession

Kształtowanie przyszłości zawodu nauczyciela

Introductory remarks

In the context of education debates, systemic and program solutions, the teacher undoubtedly plays a crucial role. It is the teacher who is assigned a strategic role in the functioning and effectiveness of the education system. This is confirmed by various global and our domestic educational reports in Poland, where it is emphasized that the quality of the school and the pupil's educational results largely depend on the quality of the teacher's work, while the quality of the teacher's work depends on the quality of their education (see Madalińska-Michalak, 2017). Without a doubt, the strength of current research is that it notices something that has long been known in pedagogical discourse and has often been ignored in practice: teachers play a vital role in the educational process to which pupils are subject (Darling-Hammond, 2017). This role is particularly vital when we perceive it through the lens of learning and development at school.

In this paper I put forward the thesis that reinforcing the socio-professional position of a teacher – a teacher perceived as an actor on the educational stage

(in the private, social and public areas), treated as a specific asset in education, is indispensable if we want to seriously discuss the quality of education. In many countries, including Poland, more should be invested in the development of teachers and competitive conditions of their employment. If this does not happen, then we will be caught in a certain trap spiral: lower entry standards to the teaching profession in connection with the lack of highly effective systemic solutions in reinforcing the teachers' socio-professional position, and these may lead to lower self-confidence among teachers and lower quality of their work, which may completely discourage the most talented candidates from choosing the profession. And this, in turn, will lead to lower-quality teaching staff. Therefore, striving to shape the teaching profession by reinforcing the teachers' position should become a priority both in the activities of the state and local authorities, as well as the work of teacher training universities (Madalińska-Michalak, 2018a).

Education as the task of the state

In many countries, it is believed that education, including teacher education, is one of the most important assets and should be given priority. It is also assumed that expenditure on education is not consumption (economically speaking), but rather an investment. An investment in the future of an individual and their community. Certainly, education is one of the most important tasks of the state, which takes on financial and organizational efforts. In this situation, the question arises about how this task is being implemented in practice and what its implementation depends on.

In 2023, it will be exactly 250 years since the National Education Commission in Poland established the first Universal – *The Laws of The Commission of National Education* dated October 24, 1773. In this first Universal, the Commission announced the reform of Polish education and began its activity by defining its purpose. The reform was intended to give education and upbringing of Polish youth a national and civic character. In the spirit of education understood in this way, the Commission began organizing the school structure, creating the principles of state administration and school supervision, modernizing the upbringing process, scope and curricula, introducing Polish as a teaching language, modernizing universities and creating the secular teaching profession, which is worth emphasizing in the

context of the considerations here. Undoubtedly, the state authorities will celebrate this anniversary, schools will host academies dedicated to it, and the media will bring up all sorts of curiosities from that time.

The upcoming anniversary and the complex transformations that have been taking place before our eyes for over thirty years in Poland, which also concerned schools, teachers and teacher education, force us to think about the state of education and the situation of teachers in Poland and the expectations towards them. This situation is currently intensified by discontent from teachers and their struggle for better education and better working conditions, as demonstrated by the teachers' strike in Poland in 2019. This strike is referred to as the largest strike in the history of Polish education since 1993. It is rare for teachers to raise objections against the government – in this dispute between the teachers (and their trade union) and the government, representatives of the local government were put in a corner and brought to the role of supporters. At best, they could reinforce the voice of this vital professional group, saying that they lack the funds to finance teachers' wages, that they too understand the outrage at low salaries of teachers, especially those with the shortest professional experience. Whatever happens – I am referring to the recent changes in the education system in Poland, writing up the curriculum frameworks, the new organizational solutions for educational staff – all this was done and implemented too hastily. Education reforms in many European countries are implemented over long periods of time; their implementation often takes from 10 to even 13 years - in our country it took only 3 years.

As Poles, we have witnessed a time of questioning the old rules and standards in the functioning of the education system, intensive discussion and criticism of traditional paradigms. Based on both educational theory and practice, we have managed to move away from unilateral teaching, and draw our attention to learning, creating conditions towards building/constructing knowledge, and not only its transfer. At the same time, we are seeking answers to questions regarding the role of contemporary education in social change, the preparation of young people to live in a dynamic and complex reality.

Teacher

It should be noted that when discussing the expectations towards teachers, we are addressing an extremely important and thematically rich issue, which

is determined by standards and assessments considered as binding in a given community and related to the implementation of tasks that make up the work of representatives of this profession. The area of considerations is dominated by issues related to education, working conditions and the teachers' values, attitudes and behaviors that result from the specific nature of our time and our reality.

Certainly, some associate teachers with professionals perfectly prepared for their work, as regards the tasks they are to perform. We would like to have as many such teachers as possible in the education system in Poland, wish for them to be true educators.

A teacher is expected to acquire new competences and demonstrate a sort of disposition, i.e. lifelong learning. Along with the increasing demands placed on teachers and new tasks assigned to them, their field of professional responsibility is expanding. Note that teachers are expected to fully understand what they teach, who they teach it to and how they teach, and how their work impacts their pupils' development and learning. According to the primary school core curriculum, „the task of the school is to smoothly introduce children to the world of knowledge, prepare them for their pupil's duties and introduce them to self-development. The school provides safe conditions and a friendly learning environment, taking into account the pupil's individual capabilities and educational needs. The major goal of primary school education involves caring for the pupils' integral biological, cognitive, emotional, social and moral development” (Journal of Laws of February 24, 2017, item 356). Legal-wise, teachers are expected through their work to:

- introduce pupils to the world of values, including generosity, cooperation, solidarity, altruism, patriotism and respect for tradition, showing best practices and building social relations conducive to the pupils' safe development (family, friends);
- reinforce the pupils' individual, cultural, national, regional and ethnic identity;
- form a sense of dignity and respect for the dignity of others in pupils;
- develop such competences as: creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship;
- develop critical and logical thinking, reasoning, argumentation skills and drawing conclusions;
- show the value of knowledge as a basis for developing skills;

- arouse the pupils' cognitive curiosity and motivation to learn;
- equip pupils with such a wealth of information and shape skills that allow them to understand the world in a more mature and orderly way;
- support the pupil in recognizing their own predispositions and determining the path of further education;
- care for the pupil's comprehensive personal development by deepening their knowledge and satisfying and awakening their natural cognitive curiosity;
- shape an attitude open to the world and other people, activity in social life and responsibility for the community;
- encourage organized and conscious self-education based on the ability to prepare one's own workshop;
- direct the pupils towards values.

Teachers working in a modern school must meet the challenges that have arisen as a result of the development of new communication technologies, computerization, digitization, but also information overload. Teachers are expected to help students become aware consumers of Internet services and consciously use electronic media to make informed choices and avoid harmful behavior.

Note, however, that we expect much more from teachers than what is actually in their job description. We expect teachers to be passionate and understanding, devoted to their work, committed throughout their professional work, and caring. In short, that they will look after pupils and after themselves, that they will make learning and development essential values and encourage pupils to engage and take responsibility for their development. We also expect teachers to be reflective, inquisitive, creative, sensitive and autonomous. We tend to assume that the teacher should not only deal with the lesson's implementation, but also – and even above all – take care of themselves, their work, whose main subject of influence is another person, and the well-being of that person is at the center. What's important here are not only the activities carried out by the teacher, but also their specific *attitude*, related to both feeling responsible, taking responsibility, as well as following the ethics of care underlying this responsibility (Madalińska-Michalak, 2018b). But there is more still. We expect teachers to be significant people in the lives of pupils, that they will be a model and an example for them.

And finally, each of us and all of us as a society expect teachers that we will be able to trust them. It is commonly believed that a teacher is more than a public servant, and the essence of their work is inherent in the moral aspect of the profession.

Teachers' community

Teachers are one of the best-educated professional groups in our country; they constitute 1.8% of the entire population of Poles, and 2.7% of the professionally active population – almost three out of 100 employed are teachers working in the official education system.

Based on the SIO statistical data of September 30, 2018, it can be stated that there were 702,595 teachers employed in the Polish education system. The vast majority, i.e. 595,763 people (85%), were full-time teachers (see Table 1). This index varies depending on the region of Poland and the subject of teaching.

Table 1. Number of teachers in Poland – as at September 30, 2018 (available from the Ministry of National Education)

Teacher	trainee	contract	nominated	chartered	total
Persons	65 909	122 991	144 312	369 383	702 595
Full-time employees	37 638	98 586	119 818	339 694	595 736
Half-time employees	28 271	24 405	24 494	29 689	106 859
Regular posts	51 972	121 229	144 329	384 310	701 841

Source: Author's own work based on data available from the Ministry of National Education.

On the one hand, the Act places the teaching profession relatively high in Poland: *Bearing in mind the instrumental role of education and upbringing in the Republic of Poland, wishing to express the special social rank of the teaching profession in accordance with needs and expectations, intending to open the way to further legal regulations of the national education system by this Act, the following is stated* (from the preamble to the Teachers' Charter).

Teachers are a fairly homogeneous professional group with a great sense of professional identity, though – it seems – with very limited group solidarity, further weakened by rivalry and competition over jobs; this is

due to demography (decreasing number of pupils), but also to political and organizational changes in the education system.

In light of the social placement of this profession, it can be said that there are no great reasons to complain. The teaching profession still ranks behind a fireman, university professor, skilled labourer, miner, engineer and nurse in opinion polls, but nevertheless – despite quite frequent media complaints – before a doctor, farmer, officer, accountant, lawyer, entrepreneur, IT specialist or judge.

Meanwhile, the teachers' salaries did not always reflect this social prestige (Table 2). 2007–2015 data show that the average teacher salary in Poland froze in 2012 and therefore the average teacher salary and the one in the national economy equalized in 2017 (Table 3). Another juxtaposition proves that over the past two decades, the actual minimum teacher earnings were at the national average level (nominated teachers), above it (chartered teachers) and below it (trainee teachers and contract teachers). Of course, it is difficult to say clearly that such salaries would meet the ambitions of, as previously mentioned, one of the best-educated professional groups in Poland (chart).

Table 2. Average monthly salary of public sector teachers compared to the average salary of people with higher education in a given country [1.00 = 100%]¹

	Teachers kindergartens	Elementary school teachers	Junior high school teachers	Teachers in upper secondary schools
Austria	0.77	0.77	0.89	0.97
Estonia	0.59	0.84	0.84	0.84
Italy	0.63	0.63	0.67	0.73
Luxembourg	1.09	1.09	1.24	1.24
The Netherlands	0.69	0.69	0.85	0.85
Poland	0.74	0.85	0.86	0.84
Slovenia	0.65	0.86	0.88	0.94
Sweden	0.76	0.82	0.84	0.88
USA	0.65	0.67	0.68	0.71
OECD countries	0.73	0.80	0.86	0.91

Source: Author's own work based on Sedlak & Sedlak – *Education at a Glance 2015*

¹ https://wynagrodzenia.pl/artykul/wynagrodzenia-nauczycieli-w-polsce-i-na-swiecie_1

Table 3. Comparison of weighted average teacher salaries with average salaries in the national economy in Poland in 2007–2015 [PLN]

Year	average teacher's monthly salary	average monthly salary in the national economy
2007	2929	2691
2008	3222	2943
2009	3598	3102
2010	3849	3224
2011	4119	3399
2012	4275	3521
2013	4275	3650
2014	4275	3783
2015	4275	3899
2016	4275	4077
2017	4275	4272

Source: http://www.solidarnosc.org.pl/edukacja/oswiata/attachments/2149_Wynagrodzenia%20nauczycieli%20w%20Polsce%20na%20tle%20innych%20grup.pdf and <http://www.infor.pl/wskazniki/prawo-pracy-i-ubezpieczen-spoecznych/emerytura-i-rent-y/110,Przecietne-wynagrodzenie-sluzace-do-wyliczenia-podstawy-emerytury.html>

The massification of education, its spread and making it compulsory triggered a huge demand for teachers, which in turn resulted in a reduction in the selection criteria for work candidates and, as a result, reduced the quality of work, strengthened corporate relations, increased the role of trade unions that are defending every employee, regardless of quality and efficiency of their work.

Certainly, a teaching professional is not helped by admitting „all volunteers” to pedagogical studies, without even checking their predisposition to work with children or youth, experience gained while volunteering or working at a children’s or youth organization.

Although innovative and badly needed, the teachers’ professional advancement levels do not meet the hopes placed in them, as solidarity among professionals requires everyone to be promoted, regardless of their work results or the environmental assessment. In 2016, the share of chartered teachers employed in general was only 31.3%; in 2014 it was already 50.0%, and in the last school year as much as 52.2%.

It seems that the age of teachers is yet another problem, and not only in Poland. „In the school year 2014/15, the largest percentage were teachers aged 46–50 (16.95% of all teachers), then 51–55 (15.47%) and 36–40 (15.46%)”. And according to OECD, based on the Education at a Glance report from 2018, 31% of Polish teachers were aged 30–39, the same share aged 40–49 and 24% aged 50–59, which makes their total seniority several dozen years (deducting studies), and the average age well over 40 years. This situation is a threat to the Polish school, of course, because we know that even now there is a shortage of teachers in such subjects as maths, physics or foreign languages, but it may also present an opportunity for generational exchange and the replacement of tired, frustrated veterans by well-educated, open, optimistic young people who have graduated from modernized studies and foreign scholarships.

Teachers in Poland have not developed their own professional self-government (e.g. Teachers' Chamber), so they do not have peer courts which would eliminate those unworthy of the title from their profession. Instead, they are subject to the state administration – their disciplinary commissions are appointed by a governor and they handle cases of violation of professional ethics. On the one hand, this is clear evidence of a lack of trust in teachers as regards them being able to do something for their own sake; on the other, it shows that teachers themselves do not care about it, so they make no effective attempts to take matters into their own hands, much less determination.

Recent years (the liquidation of junior high schools in Poland) have proved that teachers are not able to show positive professional solidarity in situations of danger and encroachment – those from elementary schools were silent, because their jobs were not at stake; those from high schools were glad that they would be receiving a new class in a few years, so they will have more work (meaning more hours and thus, more money); teachers from junior high schools remained alone, focused on seeking employment and forgot about the principles. The ancient maxim *divide et impera* has once again passed the exam, and a large group of teachers found themselves on the losing side. The teaching community cannot stand up for itself; constantly harassed with the so-called education reforms, they are more focused on protecting their personal source of income, i.e. their own workplaces.

Strengthening the teacher's position – challenges

When discussing the need to reinforce the teachers' position so that they are treated as a real asset in education, it is worth asking the question to what extent is the policy and actions being subjected to the expectation that education taking place at school should be at the highest level. Along with this question, one should take a look at the socio-professional position of teachers in the country, by at least answering such questions as: how is this position shaped on the labour market and in the social perception? What is the status of the teaching profession? How are teachers' wages compared to those of other professions – for instance, in the public sector – who are required to have at least the same level of education?

Apart from these questions, attention should certainly also be drawn to other issues: how do the media inform about the teacher and the school? How is the teachers' preparation for work and the work of teachers rated? How is the teacher's competence assessed? How are teachers' progress and professional development evaluated? Another, quite intriguing issue is the question of the teaching profession's attractiveness and social recognition. The final questions are thus justified: what to do to make the teaching profession socially respectable, treated with respect and make it a really attractive career choice – both intellectually and financially.

One of the basic ways to strengthen the teacher's position is – I assume – building trust in the teacher and the school, which manifests itself not only in interpersonal contacts, but also in systemic solutions, and dialogue reflecting on education, teachers, teacher education, on building their social and professional position.

Teacher education and teacher promotion should certainly be rethought. To what extent is it the fulfilment of the idea of self-development and to what extent is it a springboard for a higher salary? Alternatively, we may consider introducing a state teacher's examination for anyone who has graduated and wants to go work at a school. Since medical advisors or lawyers (or even amateur drivers) undergo such verifications, it would hardly be an insult to future teachers. Those already practicing the profession could voluntarily undergo such verification and certification, e.g. for the sake of better material status in the future. All the more since we have this kind of solutions in European countries.

It would be necessary to develop a solid motivating system for teachers, since we have difficulties in improving the quality of their work in Poland. Attempts to introduce measurements of educational added value in school environments were abandoned due to subsequent forced changes, not only in the system but also in the Polish curricula. And it would seem that it was one of the most relevant platforms, successfully used in other countries, facilitating the linking of teachers' work with its results, taking into account all individual and environmental factors. There was also a chance of developing a future system that would allow the promotion of the most diligent educators who treat their daily duties with utmost professionalism.

Of course, when talking about reinforcing the position, one should also consider whether publicly discussing the need to reinforce the position of the teaching profession serves that reinforcement and whether teachers need this (are aware of this). Are they working on this reinforcement, on improving their position? Do they expect support in these efforts? If so, from where or from whom? After all, when analyzing and considering the potential problem of empowering teachers, the following questions should probably be answered:

- Do the teaching practitioners expect/need their position to be reinforced?
- Are there people/environments for whom reinforcing the teaching profession appears as a desirable/needed/necessary?
- What (or who) is this potential reinforcement supposed to serve? The system, the environment, the school or the teacher themselves? Or perhaps the pupil, implied as a future citizen who will some day co-create (whatever that means) the social, human, cultural capital or the gross domestic product?

It is only based on these or similar analyzes and considerations that one could try to make a diagnosis whether there is a need to reinforce the teachers' professional position and how to do it – if at all.

Summary remarks

In this paper I put forward the thesis that reinforcing the socio-professional position of a teacher – perceived as an actor on the educational stage, treated as a specific asset in education – is indispensable if we want to seriously discuss the quality of education in our country.

My considerations here certainly draw attention towards values that build the profession and the position of a teacher in society. It is assumed that the teachers should enjoy the society's recognition and have authority and appropriate working conditions. Over 20 years ago, the UNESCO report of 1998 „Learning: the Treasure Within” rightly postulated that it is necessary to raise the status of teachers if we want lifelong learning to fulfill its fundamental mission.

Reinforcing the socio-professional position of teachers is indispensable if we are to offer pupils education at a really high level. The status awarded to education and teachers has an impact on whether or not the public opinion values the views of professional teachers and takes them seriously.

It seems that investments in teacher development and competitive employment conditions are becoming a necessity. Hence, as I have already pointed out, there is a need for highly effective systemic solutions to reinforce their socio-professional position, particularly solutions regarding teacher education, teacher promotion system, teacher motivation system, in order to improve the quality of their work and keep the best teachers in the profession.

When it comes systemic solutions, if we would like to reinforce trust in teachers, one should consider the following: what currently lies behind upbringing and education in our society? What lies behind the concept of a good teacher, good school, good teaching? What challenges does modernity pose to us? How can we consider the future of education, including teacher education? What values are vital to building trust in the teaching profession? Finally: how do teachers perceive their own professional role; what are their values, motivations, aspirations and professional pursuits; and what is their professional satisfaction and self-evaluation?

Abstract: The paper critically examines the reality of the teaching profession and teachers' working conditions in Poland and refers to the future of the teaching profession. The paper assumed that education, including teacher education, is one of the most important assets and one of the crucial tasks of the state, hence it should be given priority. The teacher has been assigned a strategic role in the functioning and effectiveness of the education system. As demonstrated, playing this role should be supported by state actions to shape the future of the teaching profession. At the core of these activities are strategies that increase the attractiveness of the teaching profession and the social recognition of the importance of teachers' work and empowering teachers. The paper presents the thesis that strengthening the socio-professional position of the teacher is indispensable in actions aimed at improving the quality of education. In many countries, including Poland, more should be invested in the development of teachers and competitive conditions of their employment and work. Striving to strengthen the profession should become a priority in the activities of both state and local authorities, as well as the work of teacher training universities.

Keywords: teaching profession, attractiveness of teaching profession, social status of teacher, teacher education policies, quality of education

Streszczenie: Artykuł odsłania realia dotyczące zawodu nauczyciela i warunków pracy nauczycieli w Polsce oraz odnosi się do przyszłości zawodu nauczyciela. W artykule przyjęto, że edukacja, w tym edukacja nauczyciela, to jedno z ważniejszych dóbr i jednym z najważniejszych zadań państwa, stąd powinno się ją traktować priorytetowo. W funkcjonowaniu i efektywności systemu edukacji przypisano strategiczną rolę nauczycielowi. Odgrywanie tej roli – jak pokazano – powinno być wspierane przez działania państwa służące kształtowaniu przyszłości zawodu nauczyciela. U podstaw tych działań leżą strategie pozwalające na podnoszenie atrakcyjności zawodu nauczyciela i społecznego uznania ważności pracy nauczycieli oraz wzmocnianiu pozycji nauczycieli. W artykule postawiono tezę mówiącą o tym, iż umocnienie pozycji społeczno-zawodowej nauczyciela jest nieodzowne w działaniach na rzecz podniesienia jakości edukacji. W wielu krajach, w tym także w Polsce, należy bardziej inwestować w rozwój nauczycieli i konkurencyjne warunki ich zatrudniania oraz ich pracy. Dążenie do wzmocnienia zawodu powinno stać się priorytetem zarówno w działaniach władz państwowych, lokalnych, jak i pracach uczelni kształcących nauczycieli.

Słowa kluczowe: zawód nauczyciela, atrakcyjność zawodu nauczyciela, pozycja społeczno-zawodowa nauczyciela, polityki w zakresie edukacji nauczycieli, jakość edukacji

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