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Prospects of professional development of teachers in light of current changes in the education system

This article is an attempt at a more profound reflection upon the conditions of professional development of teachers in Poland in the context of the currently ongoing education reforms. It discusses both the opportunities and threats concerning professional development that result from formal changes and the so-called by-products of professional activity/being an educator.

Keywords: teacher, professional development

Perspektywy rozwoju zawodowego nauczyciela w świetle współczesnych zmian oświatowych

Artykuł jest próbą pogłębionej refleksji nad uwarunkowaniami rozwoju zawodowego nauczyciela w kontekście toczących się reform oświatowych. Wskazano w nim zarówno szanse, jak i zagrożenia rozwoju wynikające ze zmian formalnych i tzw. ubocznych skutków funkcjonowania zawodowego/pelnienia roli nauczyciela.

Słowa kluczowe: nauczyciel, rozwój zawodowy

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Introduction

The changing reality of the contemporary Polish education system poses many questions concerning the tasks and roles of teachers today. Unfortunately, the nature of the profession, which is predominantly framed as “public service”, “mission” or “vocation”, cannot be the major criterion for regulating the remuneration due for teachers or the support in carrying out their basic professional duties. As regards the system transformations directed at teachers’ professional development, we wish to note that they are not favourable, as they lack not only stability, but also autonomy, which is sought so urgently in this profession.

Moreover, looking through the lens of the recent education system related incidents – meaning, above all, the strikes – one will notice a number of problems faced by teachers in their everyday work. It is beyond dispute that providing support for teachers cannot be reduced to merely a compression of social expectations; it must be an open proposal of changes, the implementation of which should be founded first and foremost in the opinions and suggestions coming from the members of the teaching community.

It must be emphasised, however, that the profession of a teacher, and especially its particular internal aspects, such as the stages of teacher promotion, extracurricular work or teacher remuneration, require more profound consideration, as they have been an asymptotic issue for years, frequently becoming an impulse for inevitable conflict, including social friction, instead of serving to fill the gaps in teachers’ professional development.

Thus, in outlining the subject matter of this article, we would like to emphasise the current problems concerning professional development of teachers while taking into consideration the selected criteria of verification-oriented interpretation of the severity and scale of problems they are faced with.

Prospects of professional development of teachers in literature – general approach

The issue of professional development, including professional development of teachers, despite many attempts at defining it, is still not understood in a unified way in social sciences, nor in pedagogy (Gerlach, 2014, pp. 3–6; qtd. in: Kwiatkowski, 2016, pp. 13–24). However, referring to the definitional plane, E. Podolska-Filipowicz states that “professional development may be considered, in a way, a foundation of a person’s professional career” (2006, p. 1). In the view of Z. Wołk, professional development might be understood as personal improvement on the professional as well as personal level, perceived as continuously acquiring new professional skills, which enables the solving of gradually more complex issues arising during the course of professional work (2005, p. 40). It is therefore justified that B. Strupczewska and K. Doroszevska define professional development of teachers in the context of progressive change oriented towards optimisation of the ways of fulfilling one’s professional role (1980, p. 62; qtd. in: Waliński, 1993, p. 28), i.e.

obtaining further stages of teacher promotion. Viewing the issue from this perspective, it might be stated that we are also discussing the professional career, which A. Gawroński subjects to broader analysis, distinguishing between these two significant and distinct terms (2015, p. 88). The author points out that "Polish labour pedagogy specialists strongly urge the distinction between 'professional development' and 'professional career'. Assuming the legitimacy of this claim, it might be asserted that:

1) professional development is a gradual and life-long process, which initially serves as preparation for the professional role, in the context of selecting a profession and further education in this direction, and later (i.e. during professional activity) is a result of serving such a professional role;

2) professional career is a process occurring in the course of professional activity, comprising one of the stages of professional development" (Wiatrowski, 2009; qtd. in: Gawroński, 2015, p. 88).

Considering the terminology introduced above in the context of the work of a teacher, one might notice a certain connectivity, for professional development, as a systematic activity grounded in teacher training, is closely interconnected with professional career. What is more, it constitutes a response to achieving successive stages of teacher promotion, acquiring prestige and professionalism. A thus constructed image of a teacher calls for a presentation of the contemporary reality of the matter, materialised in the form of a number of qualifications which are not always achievable in the course of professional studies.

The result of this is that nowadays the essence of professional development is thought to be the pursuit of professionalism in teaching, satisfaction of needs and the sense of one's life. The development is therefore directed, long-term and divided into stages. In its course, quantitative and qualitative changes occur. It is conditioned by various factors: biological, psychological, social, cultural, historical, technical, educational and economic (Giebułtowska, 2017, pp. 58–59), all of which are closely interconnected. However, all of these interdependencies, although they may be listed, defined or merely determined, require a different approach to the teachers being subject to all these changes. Here we are also referring to the teachers' responsibility for their professionalism, the so-called 'investing in oneself', one's development and qualifications, which are frequently inseparable from the economic factor, which is so strongly highlighted by the teacher community.

Current meditations on professional development of teachers – a contemporary view on selected aspects

Assuming that a teacher is a person duly educated in his or her profession, what may be increasingly frequently observed as compared to previous years is "a high degree of contradiction between the expectations and the reality of professional life; between the requirements and conditions of work; between the level of idealism and the actual competence" (Sęk, 1994, pp. 238–239; qtd. in: Komar, 2015, p. 43). If one were to examine these factors, as suggested by H. Sęk, one would see that they vary depending on the place of work (on which the teacher has no influence) and the level of idealism, founded already in the course of higher education (Krzysztofkiak, 1996, p. 18). This means that the three most critical attributes of an educator become highly significant: knowledge, skills and attitudes, comprising the unified notion of competence. It

might be added that today they constitute a significant basis for contemplative and continuous professional development, but also set a decidedly different, modern direction for pedagogical activity, the roots of which J. Szempruch sees in the development of social processes (2006, p. 224). The scholar emphasises that “the change of the society’s expectations towards education and teachers is a consequence of social processes, as well as changes and transformations in the world. The contemporary world determines the content taught and direction of teaching, new tasks and priorities of education, a new outlook on the process of teaching and learning and the resulting implications for the methods and strategies of educating, as well as teachers’ new roles and aspects of competence” (ibid.). In these circumstances, it is worth asking what exactly is included in the expected professional competence of teachers. We wish to underline, however, that we do not intend to define the notion of “competence”, as it has been sufficiently discussed in specialist literature. In this paper, we will refer to the practical side of teachers’ activity, because defining them solely from the theoretical angle has – and will always have – “a dynamic nature, both with regard to one’s current capabilities and to the social expectations of people interested in education” (Żeber-Dzikowska, Wysocka-Kunisz & Szydłowska, 2016, p. 95). This assumption is of the essence for us, since it orients the observations towards teachers’ everyday work.

It is currently a popular conviction that teaching and educating students is not enough to build the image of a highly qualified teacher. Both E. Lisowska (2018, p. 17) and W. Strykowski (2005, pp. 15–28), referring back to studies by other scholars (cf. Poraj, 2009, pp. 27–28; Taraszkiewicz, 2001, p. 175; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 1999, pp. 30–31, and others), point out that the list of what should be included in a teacher’s competence is only getting longer, just as with the list of modernised and updated professional requirements imposed on this group (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Teacher’s competence according to selected authors

Aspects of teacher’s professional competence	
Study by E. Lisowska (Poraj, 2009; Madlińska-Michalak & Góralaska, 2012)	Study by W. Strykowski (Siemak-Tyliłkowska, 1985; Koziński, 1995; Gardner, 2002; Armstrong, 1997; Król & Pielachowski, 1995; Sysło 2003; Niemierko, 2002; Sołtyś & Szmigel, 1997; Pielachowski, 1989; Schulz, 1989)
– Related to substantive knowledge of the subject	– Related to substantive knowledge of the subject
– Didactic, psychological and pedagogical	– Psychological and pedagogical
– Communicative	– Diagnostic
– Educational and diagnostic	– Work planning and management related
– Related to work planning and management	– Didactic and methodological

– Media and technology related	– Communicative
– Moral	– Media-related
– Self-educational	– Control and evaluation related
– Emotional	– Related to evaluating syllabi and handbooks
– Leadership-related	– Self-educational

Source: Authors' own work, derived from: E. Lisowska (2018), *Kondycja zawodowa nauczycieli. W poszukiwaniu skutecznej profilaktyki wypalenia zawodowego*. Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls, pp. 15–16; W. Strykowski (2005), *Kompetencje współczesnego nauczyciela. Neodidagmata 27/28*, pp. 15–28.

The approaches to teachers' professional competence discussed by the authors may be said to be overlapping, although an analysis of the use of terminology shows certain differences in their precise classification, which is represented in the table above. It could be added that D. Pankowska, who ought to be mentioned here, deems competence a vital aspect of pedeutology, distinguishing within it three main categories of teachers' activity:

- in terms of practice – this kind of competence determines the methods and effectiveness of a teacher's work;
- in terms of theory – determining the normative aspect of a teacher's role and setting a teacher's education standards;
- in terms of content and its presentation – reflecting both a particular education philosophy and the evolution of a teacher's role. These categories constitute a kind of a "gauge" measuring changes in the broadly defined education system (Pankowska, 2016, pp. 187–188).

The author additionally draws attention to the issue of "variety of approaches to and typologies of competence", which "results from the multiplicity of theoretical approaches not only in pedeutology itself, but also in the sphere of education-related ideologies and is a response to the changes in contemporary reality. On the other hand, however, the multiplicity of teacher's competence typologies may produce a sense of chaos, especially when these typologies are based on criteria that are virtually incomparable" (*ibid.*, p. 188).

With the proposed approach to professional competence in mind, we find it impossible to overlook the matters that surface in discussions and disputes – not only academic – concerning a teacher's professional performance today and, above all, the additional extra duties, frequently not in any way subject to remuneration. It might be added that professional performance is, among others, the product of acquired competencies, but also, as noted by E. Buchcic, of factors relating to personality, environment and interpersonal teacher-student relations (2014, p. 119). Another crucial issue is the teacher's continued education and further training, as well as the severely undervalued social work for the school, the parents and the children (Table 2).

Table 2.
Teacher's activity with limited funding – outside of teaching load

<p>Continued education and training</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • post-graduate studies • training courses • workshops • certified courses • etc. • Some schools co-fund their teachers' continued education and training. • Teacher's activity outside of teaching load
<p>Supplying stationary and other necessary materials</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • preparing student assessment and evaluation documents • developing work plans, syllabi (theoretical material distribution plans etc.) • preparing other documents necessary for didactic work • etc. • Some schools provide stationary and other necessary materials to teachers. • Teacher's activity outside of teaching load
<p>Parent-teacher-related work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • parent-teacher conferences • individual parent meetings • extraordinary meetings devoted to solving class/group problems • providing support and aid • etc. • Teacher's activity outside of teaching load
<p>Obtaining sponsorship</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some schools include this category in teacher evaluation, included in the area of different, statutory activity of the school. • Teacher's activity outside of teaching load
<p>Supporting students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • grading tests, quizzes and other types of student assessment • organising: • school trips • contests • competitions • exhibitions • clubs and after-school activities • etc. • Teacher's activity outside of teaching load

Source: Authors' own work

One can clearly notice that the activity of teachers today substantially exceeds the mandatory teaching load that is so extensively discussed. It is indisputable that the above activities classified in five categories require devoting extra-load time, and a considerable proportion of them is financed privately by the teachers. Considering all the areas of work given above, however, one cannot agree with the claim of the Ministry of Education that increasing the teaching load would render the teachers' work significantly more effective. From our perspective, this would have the consequence of limiting all social activity, for which there would be no time any more. Moreover, most of the teachers use their own supplies (computers, printers, ink, paper, etc.) to prepare the necessary schedules, plans, evaluations and other documentation. Going further, the next activity that consumes teachers' own time is seeking sponsorship, which not only requires writing applications and letters, but also frequently involves arranging meetings. Another concern – and one that is crucial – is the perpetual continued education and training of teachers, which takes place after working hours. This activity, including supplementing one's education, improving competence and skills and extending knowledge, enhances not only the quality of teaching, but also the operations of the entire school. Activity in the interest and on behalf of students and parents is also fairly common, and the duties we listed above are no novelty, but rather they are frequently a part of the everyday work of teachers outside the statutory teaching load. It should be noted here, following D. Pankowska, that teacher-specific competence is comprised, to the most significant extent, of acquired skills (executive competence), which are classifiable as proficiency-related factors, ideologically neutral and relatively independent from personality-related factors, yet exceeding the scope of the narrowly defined instrumentalism (2016, p. 191).

Viewing the matter from a slightly different angle, it must be noted that a contemporary teacher is not free from basic domestic duties, which are frequently pushed into the background when urgent work issues come into play. In circumstances such as these, as duly noted by I. Żeber-Dzikowska et al., "lack of stability in terms of the content and methods in teaching, frequent changes and possible failures, even more than in the past, render teachers prone to occupational burnout" (Żeber-Dzikowska, Wysocka-Kunisz & Szydłowska, 2016, p. 100). Therefore, "assuming that the conflict between work and family life is a type of role conflict stressor" (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, pp. 76–88; qtd. in: Baka, 2011, p. 396), it may be expected that it will lead to a drop in self-efficacy, followed by occupational burnout (*ibid.*, p. 396), which, in the case of teachers, translates into commitment and professional development.

Teachers, as emphasised by B. Śliwerski, belong to this extraordinary category among the professions of public trust that is subject to systematic scrutiny and evaluation by both superiors and clients (the parents and the students) (2015, p. 78). With this in mind, Śliwerski offers a valid question: "[h]ow does one function as a teacher, when quite often what must be faced is the arrogance of ministerial control, including the requirement to be servile with respect to the supervisors, in spite of being aware of the numerous errors, absurdities and the enforced procedural farce? More and more frequently, an increasing number of educators feel like actors forced to play a role imposed on them by the authorities and the broadly defined general public, just to be able to feed themselves" (*ibid.*). Nowadays, as further noted by Śliwerski, everyone seems to be an

expert in education (*ibid.*). Since the issue of professional development of teachers is entangled in “ministerial control”, another question arises: what can a ‘regular’ teacher do in a situations like this one? Resistance, as one of the possible options, has been recently tested (the country-wide strike). Sadly, the result was nothing but disappointed teachers and union members with no gain other than social rejection and disregard of the demands of the majority in favour of a minority deal. In a situation such as this, does professional development of teachers stand any chance of unfolding fully and politically untainted? It is difficult to reach a consensus in these circumstances; and the subject of professional work, professional development and social activity ought to be tackled by the professionals themselves.

With reference to the opinions of the above cited scholars studying the matter in question, it might be concluded that perhaps it is time to return to autonomy in the teaching profession. The next step is for the legislators to devote attention and thought to the contemporary areas of teacher’s work that we listed above and to include them in the planned increase of the teaching load (should such a decision be made). It is possible that this might compensate the teachers for the costs they must bear and their time devoted to social activity for the benefit of the school, the children and the parents.

What are the prospects of professional development today?

Arriving at the perspective partially suggested by the title of this article, we will start by establishing the scope of the term ‘professional development’. In the view of A. Sierecka and K. Pindor, “a teacher’s professional development consists in the interwoven evolution of practical-moral and technical competence. Both technical competence, otherwise referred to as instrumental, and practical-moral competence, also called axiological, play a major role for professions focused on working with other people, but the axiological competence is of cardinal importance. Its advantage over instrumental competence lies in the fact that the latter cannot be made use of without their agreement. Its particular significance finds justification in the specificity of the teacher’s profession” (2012, p. 266). In the more general approach proposed by S. M. Kwiatkowski, “professional development in the work process is resultant of internal conditions, which depend on the employee, and external conditions, which depend on the employer” (2016, p. 16). This version points to the significance of the employer, who should support and give direction to the development of the employee, who, in this case, is the teacher. Aside from this, securing the process of professional development, together with the necessary costs, should not be merely a theory, but an established practice, which today is, in many cases, very much different from contemporary standards (Miko-Giedyk, 2015, p. 117).

However, considering the broader claims made regarding teachers’ professional development, it is impossible to overlook the issue of “new” professionalism, so distinctly signalled by U. Opłocka. This kind of professionalism does not mean the same as in the case of technical professions; it signifies meeting high standards: cognitive, action-related and ethical (Kwiatkowska, 2008, p. 167; *qtd. in:* Opłocka, 2014, p. 78). “Competence and qualifications are of fundamental significance in the process of professionalisation. These two indispensable elements meet naturally and stimulate one another in the everyday work of a teacher”

(Piasecka, 2014, p. 217). In addition to the above, this “new” professionalism, which is described in more detail by J. Elliott, refers to several components, namely:

- “the context of an advanced democratic society;
- the features of the professional role, which is a contradiction of the stance of an ‘infallible expert’;
- professional competence, which is based on emancipatory rationality and is an intelligent response to a situation;
- professional knowledge, which results from scrutiny of one’s own practice, learning from experience, studying and interpreting particular complex cases” (Elliott, 1991, pp. 309–318; qtd. in: Opłocka, 2014, p. 78).

Such an extensive overview of the issue of professionalism, which, after all, results from professional development, imposes certain requirements not only on the person making the effort to meet them, but also on those brushing against society, its democracy, knowledge and practice, which is a necessary ingredient of its realisation.

What are the prospects of professional development of contemporary teachers, then? This question could be said to have a number of answers, each relating to a different aspect of a teacher’s work. The argumentation we have presented, however, does not exhaust all possible aspects, although it delineates the most identifiable ones (Table 3).

Table 3

Prospects of professional development – general approach

Positive prospects	Negative prospects
Possibility of achieving further stages of teacher promotion, with an increase in remuneration	Lack of job stability
Improving professional competence (various forms of continued education partly or wholly funded by the employer)	No stability concerning the education system
Participating in projects carried out by schools	Changing concepts of the conditions for obtaining further stages of teacher promotion
Acquiring knowledge, skills and professional competencies during guest visits in the country and abroad	Potential additional working time (increase of teaching load)
Possibility of publishing one’s professional observations in methodology and pedagogy journals	Social activity of teachers settled by the so-called ‘allowance’ (from PLN 50 to PLN 150)
Job satisfaction, etc.	Limited training, course and postgraduate studies funding options, etc.

Source: Authors’ own work

The prospects of professional development of teachers listed in the above table are fairly diverse. Nonetheless, they clearly show that in striving for a successful professional career, a teacher must take into consideration a number of tasks and duties necessary to achieve this goal. Considering the above listed positive and negative areas of development, which are all enormously important for its pursuit, one must note that they are all certain to undergo continuous, and not always positive, change. It is therefore justified for M. Piasecka to claim that "the idea of a network of positive change may bring about a chance of acquiring the (meta) competence allowing the teachers to perceive their professional development not only as a must remaining in the sphere of necessity, but also as a mission to develop the sphere of possibilities. From the perspective of an integrated approach to professional development, both constitute an organic whole. It is important for the teachers to gain this awareness and for the tip of the iceberg to be indicative of the teachers' profound conviction of the vocational character of their work" (2014, p. 223).

Instead of conclusions

The issue of teachers' professional development, a fraction of which was discussed in this article, allowed us to point to certain selected problems. Based on argumentation from the cited interesting and contemplative discourse by acknowledged scholars in the field, as well as our own observations, we may firmly claim that professional development of contemporary teachers is neither easy nor, despite its significance, are its results permanent. Viewing the issue from this perspective, although it is fairly general, what becomes most evident is the matter of teachers' professional training and education, the most significant aspect being, above all, professional competence. These professional skills, as teachers' competence could be alternatively referred to, are directly connected with the didactic and educational, as well as social activity, of teachers. It must be noted, however, that they require not only additional time, but also financial expenditures, most of which are incurred by the teachers themselves. Another issue is the critically discussed 18-hour teaching load, which, notably, includes solely a teacher's work with the students (*i.e.* the classes). These basic activities performed by each and every teacher require a specific degree of control and continuous further learning (postgraduate studies, courses, trainings etc.), as the contemporary world keeps undergoing changes, with which the education system ought to, or even has to, keep up. It is therefore duly emphasised by D. Becker-Pestka, J. Kołodziej and K. Pujer that "the increasingly demanding contemporary social reality enforces and imposes on us development in various spheres of our lives, which directly results from the varied, frequently unpredictable situations we face every day, which put forward still new demands and require engaging particular skills or finding solutions other than already known ones" (2017, p. 5).

Another matter not to be overlooked is the issue of supplying teachers with the stationery and other materials they need to perform their basic duties, such as preparation of formal assessments and evaluations, syllabi, theoretical material distribution plans and other documents. Most of Poland's educators have to make these documents at home, using funds from their own resources, which clearly indicates that it is the teacher "subsidising" the schooling system in this matter.

Our criticisms do not come out of nowhere. Another reform and the planned changes, also as seen by the so-called 'round table', do not seem to be entirely for the better. Actions such as these require an extensive, in-depth discussion, and they ought to encompass all the needs of the teacher community. Furthermore, the issue of professional development of teachers, viewed against the background of the ongoing transformations of the education system, still poses a number of questions concerning boundaries that, at this point, would be unbecoming to cross.