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The work engagement among kindergarten teachers

ABSTRACT

The article presents the basic assumptions regarding the role of the teacher in preschool education. We focus on the condition of preschool education in Poland, which over the years, like the entire education system, has experienced positive and negative effects of the education policy. The consequences of subsequent education reforms in Poland are visible in many contexts of professional activity of kindergarten teachers, one of which is the teachers' involvement in their work. The aim of the article is to draw attention to the sources of choosing either the adaptive or emancipatory approach, serving as a basis for understanding the conditions of teachers' work engagement and justifying the practices they adopt towards their students.

KEYWORDS: Adaptive approach, Emancipatory approach, Preschool education, Personal theory of teaching, Teachers' critical reflections.

ABSTRACT

L'articolo presenta le ipotesi di base relative al ruolo dell'insegnante nell'educazione prescolare. Ci concentriamo sulla condizione dell'educazione prescolare in Polonia, che nel corso degli anni, come l'intero sistema educativo, ha sperimentato effetti positivi e negativi delle politiche educative. Le conseguenze delle progressive riforme dell'istruzione in Polonia sono visibili in molti contesti dell'attività professionale degli insegnanti di scuola materna, uno dei quali è il coinvolgimento degli insegnanti nel loro lavoro. Lo scopo dell'articolo è quello di richiamare l'attenzione sulle fonti della scelta dell'approccio adattivo o per l'emancipazione, che serve come base per comprendere le condizioni dell'impegno lavorativo degli insegnanti e giustificare le pratiche che adottano nei confronti dei loro studenti.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Approccio adattivo, Approccio per l'emancipazione, Educazione prescolare, Riflessioni critiche degli insegnanti

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1. Introduction

When looking at the ways of defining the category of involvement in social sciences, it can be noted that it is constructed around human behaviour towards various aspects of everyday life. Manifestations of commitment are seen in people's attitudes towards significant others and in identity construction processes². Work-related commitment is analysed in perspectives of employee engagement and work engagement.

Wilmar Schaufeli noted that work engagement «is easy to recognize in practice yet difficult to define»³. For this reason, it is often analysed in opposition to the phenomenon of 'job burnout'. The definition of engagement adopted in this article has its source in the analysis of the concept of Jean-Marie Barbier⁴. We were inspired by the reflection of the author, who draws attention to the importance of commitment to the 'recognition of the self' of an active person, and at the same time to the dilemmas associated with commitment. Following the words of the author, who writes that «engagement sometimes requires making a choice between many possible activities», we apply this reflection to the preschool teacher's choice of either an adaptive or emancipatory perspective in educational and teaching work.

We share the conviction that commitment, understood as a person's intentional activity, is characterized by specific features. These include the belief in the righteousness of one's doings, as well as investing substantial effort, emotion and time into the undertaken activity. Reflecting on the kindergarten teachers' work engagement, we note – following the thoughts of Christopher Day⁵ – that it consists of many factors. These include a clear and enduring set of values and ideals that determine action regardless of social circumstances, an understanding of teaching more broadly than merely fulfilling duties, motivation to constantly analyse one's own experiences and the work context, a strong sense of identity, and the ability to cope with the stress that arises from implementing changes imposed from the outside. Teacher commitment is difficult to enforce, because it is not regulated by any legal act, and different facets of commitment are identifiable in teachers' work. It can be viewed contextually, from the perspective of the social, educational and teaching tasks that the teachers have to perform, and from the perspective of the meanings that they themselves give to their professional work.

² A. KANAFA-CHMIELEWSKA, *Zaangażowanie społeczne z perspektywy psychologicznej*, in «Psychologia Społeczna», XI, 38, 2016, pp. 310-320.

³ W.B. SCHAUFELI, *What is engagement?*, in C. TRUSS, K. ALFES, R. DELBRIDGE, A. SHANTZ, E. SOANE (eds.), *Employee Engagement in Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London, 2013, p. 15. <https://www.wilmarschaufeli.nl/publications/Schaufeli/414.pdf> (last access 27.10.2023).

⁴ J.M. BARBIER, *Leksykon analizy aktywności (Vocabulaire d'analyse des activités)*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź, 2016, p. 249.

⁵ CH. DAY, *Nauczyciel z pasją. Jak zachować entuzjazm i zaangażowanie w pracy (A passion for teaching)*, Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Pedagogiczne, Gdańsk, 2008, p. 94.

Learning various interpretative perspectives, which describe the work engagement among the teachers and the position of a child in education differently, results in concluding conditions and dependencies in childhood. Considering the essence of education in childhood means seeking an answer to the question what conditions a teacher must meet so that their educational practice has a pro-development dimension for a child. The answer to this question depends greatly on the knowledge and the value of a teacher's mindset that as a whole influence its operation. A choice of a certain rationality, adaptive or emancipatory⁶, enables teachers to comprehend the conditions of their own actions as well as substantiate practices they adopt towards their pupils.

Dorota Klus-Stańska⁷ highlights that despite the educational reforms made in Poland after 1989, the adaptive approach is still the dominant approach in the practice of early education. Preschool education in the adaptive approach is an intentional, directive process the objective of which has been established normatively. Actions marked by formalism can be found in education. They are rooted in recommendations of educational authorities and normative teaching programmes that specify which requirements are necessary to prepare a child for the subsequent stage of education. If the teacher chooses an adaptive approach to the role of education⁸ they focus on providing children with knowledge about the world, the properties of things and phenomena, and the relationships between them. Whereas preschool children mainly gain knowledge about the reality in an independent manner, during individual experiences. An adult plays a significant role in creating the world image together with a child as far as the adult is able to arrange situations that are conducive to exploring the world and gaining adequate experiences and offers help organising information gathered. As results from research on factors of cognitive development, the condition particularly promotes successful development within the scope of applying the learnt knowledge and manifesting independent thinking⁹. The world image is actively created by an individual and not given to them from outside. It is not a copy of the world image by others. The perception of reality results both from external information and from the properties of the cognitive apparatus and knowledge gained. Creating a vision of reality, a child determines that what may then be learnt, and thus in a sense creates an experienced reality.

Assuming that the diversity of information reaching a child as a result of

⁶ R. KWAŚNICA, *Wprowadzenie do myślenia o nauczycielu*, in Z. Kwieciński, B. Śliwerski (eds.), *Pedagogika: podręcznik akademicki*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa, 2003, pp. 291-319.

⁷ D. KLUS-STAŃSKA, *Dyskursy pedagogiki wczesnoszkolnej*, in „Pedagogika wczesnoszkolna : dyskursy, problemy, rozwiązania”, D. KLUS-STAŃSKA, M. SZCZEPKA-PUSTKOWSKA (eds.), *Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne*, Warszawa, 2009, p. 57.

⁸ M. KARWOWSKA-STRUCZYK, *Edukacja przedszkolna. W poszukiwaniu innych rozwiązań*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa, 2012, p. 49-52.

⁹ K. STEMPLEWSKA-ŻAKOWICZ, *Osobiste doświadczenie a przekaz społeczny. O dwóch czynnikach rozwoju poznawczego*, Fundacja na Rzecz Nauki Polskiej, Wrocław, 1996, p. 56.

their own and didactic activities is significant for the child's further activities, a teacher's choice of emancipatory approach to the role of education accents the cognitive independence, learning responsibility and independent problem solving. Assuming that knowledge is private, unclear and ambivalent, a teacher stops using stereotypes, myths, autocracy as well as does not impose a uniform way of thinking, behaving and feeling. A teacher stimulates the ability to reflect what will become the foundation of constructive criticism in the future. Iwona Czaja-Chudyba¹⁰ mentions some of the conditions that may support the process of emancipation: «leaving space for independent decision, enabling the search for and realisation of their own life paths, consent for experimenting, allowing risky conduct free from domination and examples from the adult world, giving a sense of safety».

Therefore, it is desirable to consider the possibility to change the adaptive approach into the emancipatory approach, in which teachers apply their personal theory of teaching on the base of critical reflection. A teacher's critical attitude towards their own practice may constitute a 'job resource' in the work engagement described by Jari J. Hakanen at all in *Job Demands-Resources JD-R*¹¹, which is related to the ability of employees to self-monitor their own work, as well as participate in decision-making and maintain their professional autonomy.

2. Significance of standardisation for teachers' work

Both preschool education and the system of training teachers face challenges related to applying standards in reforming education. Firstly, it was established what a child should know and be able to do at the end of its preschool education. The Polish preschool core *Curriculum*¹² is a document defining teachers' work. It may be helpful for a beginning teacher to standardize their educational practice as it provides a direction for their work with children. At the same time, it may, however, limit a teacher in establishing goals which are formulated only after educational needs of a particular child are recognized. Creating conditions for their own activities and every child's development may not be compatible with teaching standards. If a teacher focuses both on the *Curriculum* and on that what results from the diagnosis of development needs and possibilities of a child, they may face a difficult dilemma. Choosing con-

¹⁰ I. CZAJA-CHUDYBA, *Myslenie krytyczne w kontekstach edukacji wczesnoszkolnej—uwarunkowania nieobecności*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UP, Kraków, 2013, p. 38.

¹¹ J. HAKANEN, A.B. BAKKER, W.B. SCHAUFELI, *Burnout and work engagement among teachers*, «Journal of School Psychology», 43, 2006, p. 495-513.

¹² *Podstawa programowa wychowania przedszkolnego dla przedszkoli, oddziałów przedszkolnych w szkołach podstawowych oraz innych form wychowania przedszkolnego* in Załącznik do rozporządzenia Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 14 lutego 2017 r. (poz. 356). <<https://www.dziennikustaw.gov.pl/DU/2017/356>> (last access 30.10.2023).

scious creative conduct, continuous reflexive thinking about one's practice and in consequence reducing the number of situations in which standards are simply copied are extremely difficult tasks for a person who is only just learning to teach others¹³.

Another challenge for a teacher is working with the curriculum. Educational and didactic curricula as developed according to an applicable standard are supposed to guarantee that the adopted educational goals are met. Nevertheless, teachers beginning work in a certain professional environment more often than not find themselves in a situation where the curriculum has already been chosen by others.

Teachers' experience, fixed social position, selected personality traits make them accustomed to known patterns, conditions of playing a professional role, create a sense of safety. Therefore, Gunilla Dahlberg at all¹⁴ indicate that the changes introduced in preschool education that do not result from the initiative of teachers are not approved, but they provoke conformity, reluctance, and withdrawal. The conduct results from the fear of losing stability or from losing faith in one's own competencies.

Teachers do not find a rational explanation for the unwillingness to change and wish to accept changes introduced from outside, so they act in such a manner so as not to change anything. Used to complying with standards, meeting requirements, complying with provisions of law, thoughtless realisation of methodological guidance, they start to act with excessive meticulousness or superficiality. The formalism as understood above is opposed to flexibility, openness, intuition, lack of strict principles of conduct determined by external rules, and consent to certain informality of educational practise which according to Zygmunt Bauman¹⁵ is a fundamental characteristic of open and cooperation-based interactions. Within that meaning, the profession of teachers is considered not easy to formalise. The algorithmic structure of actions performed in a certain order is useless, since the actual sequence of actions is created in everyday work.

The adaptive approach to education is solidified by viewing the professional role as an obligation¹⁶. Recognising the professional role as a priority result in a dominating sense of obligation. Normative requirements lead to the role of identity being formed and conduct is determined within the role by requirements of the external world rather than their own needs. A teacher may not

¹³ M. GROCHOWALSKA, *Dylematy nowicjusza. Konteksty stawania się nauczycielem edukacji przedszkolnej*, in «Edukacja Elementarna w Teorii i Praktyce», 1(31), 2014, p. 27-40.

¹⁴ G. DAHLBERG, P. MOSS, A. PENCE, *Poza dyskursem jakości w instytucjach wczesnej edukacji i opieki: języki oceny (Beyond quality in early childhood education and care)*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej, Wrocław, 2013.

¹⁵ Z. BAUMAN, *O edukacji. Rozmowy z Riccardo Mazzeo (On education: conversations with Riccardo Mazzeo)*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej, Wrocław, 2012. p. 119-120.

¹⁶ H. KWIATKOWSKA, *Tożsamość nauczycieli. Między anomią a autonomią*, Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Pedagogiczne, Gdańsk, 2005.

respect what they consider right and good for children's development but act according to what is valid and compliant with adopted assumptions. The identity of a professional role and the resulting obedience may cause meeting of requirements and laws to be considered a main source of professional satisfaction.

3. Critical viewing perspective of educational practise

In a critical reflection upon education, a teacher may refer to the analysis of the educational process from two perspectives: adaptive and emancipatory. D. Klus-Stańska¹⁷ indicates that the approaches differ in their definitions of knowledge and ways of locating it in social resources. According to the adaptive approach, knowledge is permanent, evident and public, and the creation thereof in the minds of others results from transmission, mainly from conveyance from teachers to children. Knowledge presented in curricula or textbooks may be effectively transmitted and verified. Whereas it is assumed in the critical and emancipatory approach that knowledge is probable, fluent, and changing according to a viewing perspective. Its personal nature results from the combination with one's own individual experiences and subjective interpretation of experiences. Knowledge is also social because it is determined during an exchange of meanings. According to Klus-Stańska, referring to both approaches, one may, in Polish early education, identify educational situations (called traps by the author) that do not promote children's development. Educational traps as referred to above relate to a language use, a choice of curriculum content and rituals in educational practice.

The critical view of adaptive or emancipatory practice may expose formalised actions that have no pro-development value for children. Strictly speaking, when it comes to language use, a teacher may be committed to over-correction which results in eliminating informal or slang phrases and overusing scientific language. An adult also sets the rules for language use according to which the role of a teacher dominates. If a teacher reflects from the adaptive perspective, they will notice that a chosen way of speaking does not serve the purpose of achieving educational objectives set. This is because by assigning precedence of a written language over a spoken one, they will teach incorrect phrases absent from everyday language and suppress speaking. Choosing unilateral communication, a teacher puts a child in the position of a respondent and neglects the ability to form one's thoughts into linguistic expressions. From the emancipatory perspective, we speak, however, to present meanings attributed to the world and take a stance in social discourse. The language use in educational practice may then be construed as a tool of a teacher's domina-

¹⁷ D. KLUS-STAŃSKA, *Dziecko w pułapce wczesnej edukacji - perspektywy praktyki adaptacyjnej i emancypacyjnej*, «Kwartalnik Pedagogiczny», 4 (210), 2008, p. 7-31.

tion over a pupil. This is demonstrated by such actions as: devaluing the language of children from working class environments by recognising the precedence of the literary language over the environmental language; suppressing the conditions of mutual understanding by eliminating informal language; destroying the links to their home culture that is perceived as the worse since it is the closest to children's identity.

Another educational trap is work with curriculum contents including knowledge that builds the world image which is to be adopted by pupils. The initial stage of education accounts for the low degree of pupils' cognitive development and makes the contents simplified. Children's direction of thinking is not chosen independently since only educational process managed by an adult brings educational results. In this case, adaptive reflection demonstrates a simulated value of teaching contents which do not pose a developmental challenge and children work below their capabilities and do not show their own competencies. Therefore, contests do not prove the effectiveness of educational activities, do not make it possible to achieve objectives set, i.e. adapt to the existing social order. At the same time, the figure of a teacher becomes infantilised – no high degree of education or reflexivity is required. Referring to the emancipatory criticism, one points out the political context of early education and the results of its anti-developmental assumptions. Among other things, they relate to the lack of commitment of an individual in social changes, as moralising used in education instead of interpreting does not develop a critical and intervention attitude. A content trap also relates to the enhancement of cultural exclusion of children from low status families.

The third type of traps relates to the conventionality of ritual conduct, i.e. the cyclical one that is repeated in an unaltered form. Research involving Polish teachers shows the risk of replacing engagement with routine, especially by older teachers.

The appearance of these traps is linked both to the functioning of an institution as well as pupils' actions. According to Klus-Stańska¹⁸, a conduct which was originally rational may become unreasonably ritual-like in time. An example may be frequent and thorough completion of textbook exercises which testifies to regarding the curriculum and respective textbooks as ritual books. Rituals may be desired in adaptation-oriented education – then, they manifest themselves in interpersonal, spacious relations and organise the reality. They may also lead to losing a sense of knowledge usefulness outside of school or replacing thinking by memorising. From the perspective of emancipatory reflection, rituals block the creation of identity and the sense of causing. Some educational activities at school diverge from the actual use of knowledge so much that pupils understand them as attributed only to education, hence devoid of rationality.

¹⁸ *Ibidem.*

4. *Practical implications of teachers' critical reflections*

The three types of educational traps will now be considered in relation to preschool education. When thinking about a language, curriculum contents and rituals, a sensitive, reflexive and critical teacher can identify forms of children's activities that have no developmental value. The teacher can recognise routine practical activities that are performed thoroughly and repeated indiscriminately. Irrespective of the theoretical perspective (adaptive or emancipatory), the teacher will interpret the reality and expose areas which may promote children's development in a broad sense.

At the level of language, preferring a formal developed code in everyday communication may have anti-developmental effects. Even though this way of speaking is characteristic to school education, it is not fully available to children yet¹⁹. Similarly, suggesting discussions to children on a topic selected by a teacher does not correspond to children's needs of verbal expression. At the level of content, attempts to strictly adjust educational suggestions to guidance included in curricula lead to neglecting an individual approach to a child. A teacher pursues the objective of enabling all children to acquire skills, competences, knowledge within the scope required at school, and does not notice individual needs, interests, developmental capabilities. Resorting to known conduct or situation resembling ritual activities in terms of their progress is a proof of the adaptive approach to activities planned. An example may be selecting the same structure of educational classes or the invariable arrangement of space in which a child stays. Recurrence of offered suggestions guarantees some peace and order; however, it is not always conducive to development. Nevertheless, if a ritual is viewed in a reflective way as expressing certain social relations, one can notice its symbolic function, expressing social order. Accordingly, the everyday ritual greeting between a teacher and children does not have to symbolise adult domination but may be a manifestation of the group being prepared to act jointly and of increased sense of security. On the other hand, a ritual is almost always combined with a certain type of social duress and its participants are committed, put efforts into its performance.

One contemplates one's own educational practice in order to understand it, avoid unnecessary activities that are often stereotypical and do not bring anything into children's development. By undertaking to reformulated activities that limit the development of pupils, teachers may actively participate in changes. The Teachers' undertaking of reflective and critical analysis of educational practice is essential to any change.

An ability to be reflective, open to different approaches to education and above all feeling such a need is directly related to experiences gathered by a teacher in the course of their own education. Research shows, however, that children, teenagers and teachers-to-be are not educated critically themselves.

¹⁹ B. BERSTAIN, *Odtwarzanie kultury*, PIW, Warszawa, 1990.

Whereas analysing new, coming information, searching, and most of all questioning and doubting in the validity of suggested practice require a critical attitude.

A searching attitude in teachers is equally important. In his position, Teresa Bauman²⁰ suggests looking at a teacher-researcher as a critic who reflects not only on theories and scientific works, but also on social phenomena. The author finds a social value of this type of criticism in the possibility to verify false judgements, popularisation of scientific knowledge and suggesting new solutions. A teacher-researcher may take one of three possible critical attitudes towards the social world: adaptive, emancipatory and hermeneutic, and at the same time assume that each type of criticism has all the indicated functions. The first attitude (adaptive) is taken most often. It weighs each new phenomenon or opinion from a perspective of a chosen example which leads to discovering derogations from the example. In consequence, the examined phenomenon is adopted if it is compliant with the example, or rejected if it is non-compliant. An emancipatory critic seeks what is obscure, which enables them to discover for instance interests of various social groups hidden in the guise of reality. Such criticism helps notice that what exceeds known paradigms, what is innovatory, what conceals the actual world image. The last manner of performing criticism – hermeneutic – is aimed at understanding the world better and better with the assumption that it continuously appears anew, hence requires constant interpretation. Such criticism appreciates doubting, permanent questioning, ambiguity, calling into question one standard of conduct.

5. *Conclusions*

Educational processes, as well as educational and teaching interactions are complex activities that require the involvement of many personal resources of teachers.

In the world of no fixed references, one cannot follow fixed examples or repeated rituals, act in line with determined and valid patterns of conduct. From the perspective of educational process, it seems that hermeneutic reflection is particularly promising as it reveals the multiplicity, allows distancing oneself from the external world, and makes one sensitive to that what is new. Educational practice has become variable and different examples are everyday occurrences. This is why it is worth looking for an answer to the following questions: How can a teacher find their place in a world where hitherto experiences, habitual patterns of conduct find no use? What and how should the teacher change in themselves so that they do not fall into a routine?

²⁰ T. BAUMAN, *Badacz jako krytyk*, in D. KUBINOWSKI, M. NOWAK (eds.), *Metodologia pedagogiki zorientowanej humanistycznie*, Impuls, Kraków, 2006, pp. 189-208.

Direction of further inquiries may be indicated by the view of Z. Bauman who states the following:

«Instead of looking for a hidden logic in a pile of events or obscure patterns in accidental sets of colourful spots, post-modern people should be able to quickly erase hitherto mental patterns and tear sophisticated fabrics with one flash of thought; in short – deal with their experience the way a child plays with a kaleidoscope found under a Christmas tree»²¹.

Dilemmas related to the work commitment among kindergarten teachers less often concern teachers of other educational levels. This difference is primarily related to the specific requirements and conditions of the workplace in which the teacher is responsible for a preschool child, supports their needs and capabilities, and looks for optimal educational strategies. For this reason, during teacher education, it is necessary to ensure that teachers are being prepared both for their profession and for their professional development. It is a necessary condition for the teachers to be able to engage in various educational discourses, as well as have the opportunity to develop competences crucial in the profession, while at the same time building the belief in the importance of taking actions for personal and professional development.

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²¹ Z. BAUMAN, *Edukacja: wobec, wbrew i na rzecz ponowoczesności* in M. DUDZIKOWA, M. CZEREPANIAK-WALCZAK (eds.), *Wychowanie. Pojęcia procesy konteksty*, GWP, Gdańsk, 2007, p. 141.

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