

THE SYSTEM OF TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL ADVANCEMENT AND POTENTIAL THREATS TO BUILDING THEIR IDENTITY WITHIN ITS FRAMEWORK

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Abstract. Professional identity combines some elements of personal and social identity in the area of goals, values, principles and measures. The paper focuses on the reflection of ambiguity of creating teachers' professional identity during educational reform. The new system of teachers' professional advancement has been in place in Poland for more than ten years. We have conducted complex empirical research aimed at comprehensive evaluation of that system (teachers, heads of schools and local authorities were surveyed). The theoretical framework is constructed on the concepts of the contemporary narrative theories of Ch. Taylor, A. Giddens, P. Ricoeur. There is a yawning gap between the path of improvement of quality imposed by the formal requirements of the system and the needs and educational aims formulated by teachers themselves, stemming from their everyday practice. The research provided important implication for educational policy, such as: a necessity for combining statutory requirements with particular school needs and teachers' individual development.

Keywords: teacher, identity, development, change, gap

There is no doubt that the necessity for professional development is crucial in the teaching profession. The driving forces for this development should come from teachers' self-evaluation of everyday practice as well as from the assessment of school work. The rapid rate of change in the world, especially social (for example, migration processes) and technological, as well as all changes relating to globalization processes, create a necessity to continually refresh professional knowledge. On the other hand, competition pressure, international comparison of school achievements, rankings of schools, and greater social expectancy from schools encourage governments to implement control procedures for teachers' professional development. This control is often established under the banner of work quality, and individual advancement with financial incentives. Such

a development occurred in Poland when in 2000 the Ministry of Education introduced a new system of professional advancement for teachers. The main purpose was to create rules and conditions for the professional development of teachers, leading to continuous improvement of their professional competencies. It was hoped that the result would be an improvement in work quality, both of individual teachers and whole schools. This is a significant combination of the social goal (better education) with actions favouring teachers as a professional group. The Polish system for evaluating and promoting teachers is set out in detail in the relevant provisions of the law (the Teacher's Charter Act and the related executive provisions) and comprises four degrees of promotion. At the beginning, a teacher starts as a trainee teacher. Next, upon fulfilment of specific requirements and a positive evaluation after an interview conducted by a school qualification committee, he/she can become a contract teacher. The next degrees are the appointed teacher and certified teacher. The committee bases the achievement of each subsequent stage upon the fulfilment of predefined requirements and positive evaluation.

It has become clear that the drafters and legislators of the new system did not give sufficient thought to the possible negative consequences of strict, external rules established to enforce professional development. Omitted, for instance, were considerations on such "soft" factors of successful work like professional identity.

Teacher's identity

In contemporary humanities and social sciences, identity is recognized as one of the important categories used to describe the condition and functioning of human beings. At the same time, as with many other terms in these research fields, identity is variously described. Various types of identity are cited, such as individual, social or professional. The term itself, which appeared as a consequence of the development of psychology and the Western ideology of individualism in the early 20th century, has also clearly evolved (Giddens, 1991).

This paper focuses primarily on those contemporary concepts of identity in which not only its situational conditioning is important (e.g. the interaction theory of G.H. Mead), or the variability of identity over time (e.g. narrativists such as P. Ricoeur), but also the category of social change. Among the approaches

to identity stemming from symbolic interactionism, it is worth mentioning the dynamic approach represented by R. H. Turner and H. Becker. According to these, the identity of an individual is formed in the process of performing various social roles, leading to a change in self-image (Piotrowski, 1985). Social changes condition the structure of the roles performed and the related system of expectations, which are the sources of identity changes.

When considering the identity of teachers, it is worth taking into account the approach of Charles Taylor, who stresses that we live in a specific time and within a specific society. A person creates his/her identity through his/her history, personal development, various events, successes and failures. Taylor traces how rising demands for social egalitarianism made it possible for an individual to create his/her own unique identity. He stresses the point that personal identity requires dialogue and social recognition. Shaping his/her identity, an individual “negotiates it with their surroundings” (Taylor, 1995, p. 13). This inevitably leads to conflicts between the standards of an individual and the standards of people or groups from which such recognition is expected or required, for instance while performing a given social or professional role (e.g. being a teacher). The givers of recognition, the ‘significant others’, may nowadays vary, from people one regards as authority figures, through supervisors, such as school headteachers (who personify both the law and the standards) to the media and the Internet. These latter are increasingly becoming the source of dominant models. During a period of significant and rapid social change and advancing globalization, both the givers of recognition and the standards change. The creation of identity becomes a dynamic and conflict-based process, leading to uncertainty with a shrinking number of relatively stable elements of identity that one needs; for instance moral values or ethnicity. Eliot Mischler (1999) considers professional identity as a complex structure which consists of many various subidentities that can be in a dynamic relationship with each other (in conflict or in harmony).

The concept of reflective identity, elucidated by Anthony Giddens, is also important for the contemporary understanding of the complexity of identity problems. According to authors of narrative approaches, the development of modernity has uprooted the individual from traditional social structures which had long been the basis for building one's identity. At the same time, the rationalism and scientific nature of modernity have weakened normative reflection in societies, leading to disorders in the creation of identity and depriving people of

ontological safety (a sense of trust and permanence). Here, individuals become dependent upon 'expert systems'. In late modernity, states Giddens, individuals build their identity on the basis of their own reflective life project. This identity can be relatively stable if a person finds justification and public acceptance for his/her reasons. The individual however faces the need to reconstruct his/her identity as a consequence of the various experiences of everyday life. Modern institutions also require the individual to fragment his/her identity, according to conflicts between various roles and the diverse expectations and values in areas where people function.

These various factors in identity, mentioned briefly above due to limited space, indicate issues which are important for contemporary considerations on identity:

1. Identity has a dynamic nature. It arises as a result of self-creation, but is entangled in and dependent on the social context.
2. Modern and post-modern processes of unsettling ontological safety lead to dependency upon external sources of standards.
3. The tension between individual and social identity grows due to a reduction in moral reflection and the conflict of one's own standards with those of groups or institutions.

These issues apply to all kinds of identity. Individual identity is usually defined as a set of self-definitions and self-identifications, built by a person, which enable differentiation from others. Social and professional identity is an extra-individual set of social identifications, based on group awareness and on differentiating one group from others. An important aspect here is the sense of being similar to, or different from, the rest of the group. It is also worth mentioning a certain variety of social identity, namely cultural identity, which can be described as the set of factors identifying individuals and social groups with the basic elements of culture, such as the normative symbolic systems, customs and rituals, history, and material products.

Professional identity can be defined as knowledge based on experience – one's own and that of other people - derived from the membership of a group which performs specific social tasks. One's position within the professional group influences the process of creating professional identity, as indeed does one's attitude to the group. Professional identity combines elements of personal and social identity in the areas of goals, values, rules and actions. The importance of

individual and social identity for the creation of professional identity probably depends on the nature of the given profession. Does the identity of the teaching profession have its own specific character? It is possible to indicate a few characteristic features:

1. a high level of cohesion within the professional practitioner's self-understanding, and especially with regard to such aspects as moral and intellectual self-assessment, positive attitude towards other people, the ability to co-operate, and a sense of social responsibility;
2. a heuristic model of action;
3. a high level of social expectations, securing recognition by others and embodying convincing models for self-presentation;
4. a narrative-reflexive character – the need for constant reflection on one's work, the readiness to question and modify knowledge, and continually develop oneself.

A person who commences work as teacher, when his/her identity is beginning to form, engages in experiences where each of the above four features comes into play, and influences the negotiation of identity in one way or another. How will those starting beliefs change? What set of knowledge about colleagues and about oneself, as member of that group, would be developed over the years at school? We shall answer these questions in the context of the changes wrought in Polish teaching by the introduction of the teachers' professional advancement system. Our research focuses on the social conditions in which teachers' professional identity is shaped, on the conflict between personal identity and the need for expert recognition, and on obstacles to the teachers' professional development.

Description of the research

The results come from the study *Evaluation of Polish Teachers' advancement system* which was conducted in the years 2010-2012 among school head teachers and teachers from a national sample survey of randomly chosen schools (600 people altogether from 100 schools). We examined a head and 6 teachers in different stages of professional advancement from every chosen school. We also identified 4 focus groups. These were formed from in-service training teachers, students of a Post-graduate course for future heads of school: *The Organization and Management in Education*. In addition 20 experts in teacher advancement from

the Ministry of Education, and 20 responsible employees from the local authorities running schools were interviewed, as were employees from randomly chosen Supervisory Offices. To complete the survey, 10 school case studies were carried out, including analysis of documents concerning the professional advancement of teachers.

Our investigation of issues of professional identity was carried out using the following categories of analysis:

- (1) leading one's own development, achieving mastery, achieving a sense of professional agency; the sense of agency
- (2) developing the need for creative action;
- (3) building the bond with the professional group and obtaining the approval of the group.

We shall try to answer these questions in the remainder of this essay. In doing so we shall bear in mind issues such as the following: whether the requirements associated with the advancement process and the school practice support teachers' sense of agency; whether the requirements encourage creativity, build group bonds, community spirit and the pride of belonging to a professional group.

1. Leading one's own development, achieving mastery, the sense of causality

We asked head teachers of schools covered by the research, who on a daily basis watch the teachers during the process of professional advancement, about the motives of teachers who engage in the process. Factors such as the need for professional development and achieving mastery in the profession were rarely cited by the head teachers. Only 6.5% of them said that the improvement of professional and educational qualifications was very important for the teachers engaging in the professional advancement process. Indeed one in three respondents believed this was rather or definitely unimportant. The most important motivation reported was the desire to obtain higher salary and achieve professional stability.

Thus, in the opinion of head teachers, a significant group of teachers did not consider the official advancement system as a chance to become a better teacher.

Teachers themselves, in their responses, rarely believed that the advancement system supports the building of their skills and professional development in ways that could become a source of professional satisfaction.

Table 1. Selected criteria for the assessment of the professional advancement process by the teachers (teacher responses - percentages)

Criteria of advancement system evaluation	Definitely yes	Rather yes	Rather not	Definitely not
to strengthen motivation professional development	9	44	38	3
to bring professional satisfaction	14	53	27	4
to encourage one to become better and better teacher	3	35	50	11

It is worth paying attention to the rather pessimistic evaluation of the advancement system as a chance to improve the quality of teachers' work. As many as 61% of teachers believed that the structure of the advancement process does not enable them to achieve mastery of their profession, to become better teachers.

Do the rules for advancement, and the route to achieve it, enable teachers to strengthen their sense of agency, their belief that they are the authors of change; their capacity to deal with problems and perform better quality work at their schools? Drawbacks of the system indicated by the teachers rather preclude such possibility (bureaucratic – 82% of responses, time-consuming – 59%, fictional – 35%).

The head teachers were asked whether the advancement process supports the development of skills tied to dealing with problems and issues faced by the teachers. They had a mostly positive opinion on the system's importance for improving cooperation among teachers. The head teachers also reported that the system enhanced teachers' ability to create teaching materials and to apply active methods in the teaching process, thus allowing students play an important role in teaching-learning process. But the head teachers also reported that many competencies which support a sense of professional ownership of professional development among teachers were developed either insufficiently or not or not at all by the official system. This view referred primarily to the educational and social competencies of teachers that would allow them to actively cope with problems in interpersonal relations and to deal with stress. According to the head teachers' opinion, the teachers did not improve their competencies in those areas.

Table 2. Assessment of the requirements of the advancement process as regards dealing with selected tasks and problems (Head teachers' responses - percentages)

Tasks and problems	to a large degree	to a rather large degree	to a rather small degree	to a very small degree	Not at all
Cooperating with other teachers	16.1	51.6	21.5	6.5	-
Preparing teaching materials by themselves	15.1	55.9	18.3	6.5	-
Using active methods	7.5	64.5	18.3	7.5	-
Overcoming stress at the work place	2.2	17.2	51.6	16.1	9.7
Students' arrogance towards teachers	2.2	10.8	43.0	28.0	10.8
Students' aversion to learning	1.1	18.3	53.8	14.0	8.6
Coping with emotional problems of students	-	17.2	50.5	20.4	6.5

In the context of the issues analyzed, the results of focus group interviews conducted among the most active teachers – participants in post-graduate studies – are very interesting. A prevalent view from these interviews was that the advancement system does not support the improvement of teachers' work quality, nor does it offer them a sense of ownership of their actions. This stems from the interviewees' view that the system's requirements are not matched to the day-to-day, core tasks of the school. The teachers regarded many of the requirements of the advancement system to be divorced from the daily priorities of teaching and learning in the schools, particularly the development of students' abilities. As one interviewee's comment put it: "Where is that development? And where is the student in all of that?"

Another important negative factor is, in the opinion of focus group interviewees, the extracurricular nature of tasks performed by the teacher in the course of the advancement process. The teachers are required to organize additional classes, which frequently are not related to the teaching or educational syllabus of the school, are not interesting for the students, and sometimes are, indeed, an additional, unwanted burden. Again, a representative comment from the interviews captures the point:

Of course, you can always force it. But those actions are not always necessary. We do plenty of things for which there is no demand. But we need to do them, in order to have something to account for.

The teachers also believe that there is pressure to organize particularly attractive classes, often fancy ones, while the educational or didactic potential is accorded less importance in the official scheme of things. For instance reference was made to demands for plentiful competitions, recordings, films, various festivals and so on. The pressures of the advancement process and its procedures, the teachers maintain, mean that the *content* of the performed actions becomes less valuable than the fulfilment and documentation of formal requirements. The following serious criticism also emerged from the focus group interviews. If teachers are rewarded by a system of advancement mainly for fulfilling bureaucratic requirements, regardless of the educational purpose and the quality-promoting nature of their actions, they lose the sense of meaning. They may even feel ethically compromised when they do something only for 'paper need' without a visible advantage for the students. In such a situation, it is difficult to speak of leading one's own development or of a sense of professional agency. This curtails the cultivation of the teacher's professional identity and aggravates the conflict between individual and professional identity.

2. Developing the need for creative action

The advancement system was expected to support the development of teachers' creativity. In order to respond to the challenges posed by modern, continually changing society, it was necessary to train teachers who would get out of their ruts, be able to act creatively, combine teaching competencies tied to their subject with the educational ones, be capable of providing care and education for students with varied needs, organize the social life of the classes, and skilfully react in various difficult situations. Did the system live up to these expectations? Certain of its features (already mentioned), such as bureaucracy and excessive formalism, were criticized widely, not only by the teachers and head teachers, but also by experts and representatives of the authorities participating in the process. The most common criticism was that such features do not support creativity. On the contrary, it was widely felt that they support routine and conformist behaviours. This could lead to a strong inner conflict for a teacher who is aware of the need for creativity, but who feels that strict observance of conformist requirements is called for if promotion prospects are to be realized.

Opportunities for creativity on the part of teachers are rightly associated with the developments and implementation of a teacher's professional development plan. Under the advancement system such an individual plan has to be constructed by the teacher in question (in the case of junior teachers, with the support of their coordinator). It is submitted together with the application to commence the procedure for the next degree of advancement, and the teacher is required to include tasks regarding various aspects of the school's work. The plan is next approved by the head teacher, who sometimes recommends certain changes to adapt the various tasks better to the needs of the given school. Case studies conducted at schools have shown that reality does not normally correspond to such idealistic assumptions. The case studies we examined show that teachers, preparing their professional development plans, closely followed the requirements set forth in the executive order to the Teacher's Charter, and also what had become the established practice. Frequently they were afraid of even the slightest deviations from the customs observed at their school and focused primarily on the fulfilment of formal requirements. They created their professional development plans on the basis of plans of their colleagues who had already been promoted, and they used dedicated websites and commercially-produced guidebooks which are available in the market. The development plan is expected to take into account the specific features of the school in question, and to transpose the general requirements to the needs of the local environment in a creative manner. In the teachers' opinion, the requirements were frequently ill-adjusted to the specific positions; moreover, the teachers often did not know and were thus unable to include the school's development plan in their own plans.

This element of the system was supposed to offer the teachers support for individualizing the nature of their advancement, and to develop their creativity. Unfortunately, due to errors in its structure and to conformist practices that had become established in schools, it did not often fulfill these expectations. It did not contribute to the building of the teachers' positive professional identity as an independent creator of their own skills and capabilities.

3. Building a bond with the professional group and obtaining the approval of the group

The rules and the tasks contained in the advancement system had the purpose of establishing bonds and co-operation among teachers, and of supporting

their sense of group pride and professional identity. Our research shows that the goals tied to bond-building have been achieved in part. The responses of head-teachers suggest that the rules of advancement do support cooperation among teachers (to a very large extent – 16% of responses, to a large extent – 52%). The teachers in group interviews also stressed that the advancement rules in fact enforce better cooperation among their teams. On the other hand, they do not have a sense of being supported by their colleagues and co-workers during the advancement process (only 39% of teachers stated that they can “definitely” count on such support). In their opinion, they can rely more upon support from their mentors (“definitely yes” – 62%) and from the headmaster (“definitely yes” responses – 56%).

During the group interviews, the teachers stressed that they frequently compete for tasks related to their practice. The above-mentioned requirement for organization of extracurricular classes means that the teachers have to “fight” for students who would be interested in them. As one teacher put it:

Sometimes you come after 5:00 pm and there is no-one to work with. The kids are gone because another teacher wore them out an hour earlier with some sports activities.

The analysis of interviews conducted with the various external entities – experts of the qualification committee, representatives of authorities which supervise the schools – shows that the professional advancement system offers the teachers stability of employment and gives them an opportunity for higher salaries; but it does not increase the prestige of the profession. These managerial bodies believe that achieving advancement is too easy and too fast, and does not necessarily verify and improve the practical competencies. The managerial bodies point out the superficial and excessively formal nature of advancement, and also the various associated breaches and abuses (for example, getting materials from the Internet or from colleagues). The teachers and other parties tied to this process sense that it does not improve the acceptance of their social group among teachers themselves as well as within the whole society. In that respect it appears that this is a wasted opportunity for building the professional identity of teachers (Wiłkomirska and Zielińska, 2013).

The shaping of both individual and professional identity has been known for many years to be key to the concept of a person's professional development (Super, 1957; Holland, 1993). Holland even formulates the term of the “modal

personal orientation style”, whose essence is based on the compatibility of one’s self image with professional preferences. The choice of career and its course is a transfer of one’s own personality into the work environment. According to R. Harre (1999), professional development cannot be separated from personal development – this is a process of acquiring the ability to act and to be, both in the individual and the social spheres.

Researchers of professional development usually isolate its different stages. For the analysis conducted in this paper, three of them are important: assuming the professional role (dominated by following existing models), adaptation of the role and identifying with it (competence) and the stage of creative modification of the role, saturating it increasingly with one’s own identity (approaching mastery).

The teacher who commences work full of ideals, enthusiasm and knowledge acquired during studies – aside from his/her own predispositions – needs the appropriate conditions for professional development, supporting the ambition to achieve mastery. Does the Polish system of professional advancement ensure such conditions? It appears dubious. In the beginning of the 21st century, many authors pointed out that the professional development of a teacher cannot be excessively ‘cornered’ by a network of regulations and requirements (Fullan, 2001; Gewirtz, 2002; Hoyle and Wallace 2007; Evans, 2008). This would lead to results contrary from the intended ones. Authors mentioned above even wrote of the corrosion of the teachers’ professional development. Christopher Day (2005) points out that development-supporting learning is possible only when teachers themselves want to develop. He is critical of the attempts to evaluate all teachers in a formal, unified manner. Adaptation to clerical requirements is in conflict with the subjective steering of one’s own development; it reduces creativity and the sense of purpose, and triggers adaptive actions which are far removed from the core values of teachers’ work.

In light of the quoted research results, can teachers whose work is subordinated to formal requirements for their professional advancement develop their professional identity in ways that would display the characteristics mentioned at the beginning? As a reminder, these features include strong cohesion with one’s individual identity – especially as regards moral and intellectual self-assessment, a positive attitude towards others, application of a heuristic model for action, narrative nature – the need for constant reflection on one’s work and professional improvement. Numerous doubts arise here. The discrepancies between personal knowledge and standards on the one hand, and external expectations

stemming from political and administrative decisions on the other, lead to moral and identity conflicts. They cause a certain ethical dimorphism and dissociation of personal and professional identities. In such a situation, the teachers usually employ such strategies as:

- giving up being the central persona of their professional activity – teachers themselves reduce their professional duties to the tasks imposed by external entities; they become, at best, effective executors of their role.
- escaping from ethical reflections on their own work, and subordinating themselves to institutional standards.

As shown by one of the key researchers of human identity issues – Erikson (1968) – when a person fails to notice himself/herself as the creator of his/her own actions, when he/she does not observe his/her own identity, he/she will act in the same manner as other people in his/her environment, with which he/she has melted permanently. There can be no self-creation, no personal identity, and no self in the professional role.

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