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The condition of teachers in a comparative perspective

Abstract: The article presents the situation of lower secondary education teachers in Europe on the basis of international comparative analyses. The main symptoms of the crisis in the teaching profession were outlined. The professional burnout among Polish teachers was indicated emphasising the growing social requirements for this professional group. The diagnosis of the condition of teachers was made on the basis of data contained in the report of the European Commission *Teachers in Europe* (2021). Several significant aspects of the work life of lower secondary school teachers were highlighted, such as the shortage of teachers in schools, the ageing of this professional group, the outflow of teachers from the profession, as well as working conditions. The conclusions of the analyses highlight the need to increase the attractiveness of the teaching profession to young people.

Keywords: teachers, crisis in the teaching profession, the situation of teachers in Europe, teachers' working conditions.

Introduction

The situation of teachers in the third decade of the 21st century appears as extremely difficult and complex. The demands on the person of the teacher are changing, the tasks facing them are evolving, social expectations of their role are increasing. The teacher is seen today as a counsellor, a guide, a mentor, an interpreter of the world, a consultant, a creator of a community of learners, and the scope of his or her responsibilities is constantly expanding. These new tasks are the result of not only societal changes, but also of actions taken by educational administrations in European Union countries (European Commission, 2009). A teacher is therefore obliged to

continuously broaden and deepen their professional competence, understood as a cognitive structure consisting of skills, knowledge, dispositions and attitudes necessary for the effective implementation of tasks resulting from a specific educational vision. Becoming a teacher is a lifelong, continuous and creative process (Szempruch, 2013). The teacher must be close to the community of students, must give them sufficient time to tackle problems, discuss, experiment, explore and evaluate.

The crisis of the teaching profession

The teacher's responsibilities described in the pedeutological literature (e.g. Banach, 2005; Kwiatkowska, 2008; Průcha, 2006; Szempruch, 2013; Madalińska-Michalak, 2021), the new challenges ahead and the social expectations inspire us to ask about the real condition of contemporary teacher, about the possibilities of coping with the tasks posed to him or her by the modern society. The analysis of the results of research conducted for many years on the professional situation of teachers in Poland shows they experience stress and professional burnout (Kwieciński, 1992; Krawulska-Ptaszyńska, 1996; Nalaskowski, 1997; Golińska and Świętochowski, 1998; Kliś and Kossewska, 1998; Sęk, 2000; Sekułowicz, 2002; Palak, 2007; Tucholska, 2009; Kocór, 2010; Kirenko and Zubrzycka-Maciąg, 2011; Błaszczak and Rowicka, 2019). It manifests itself in emotional exhaustion, a sense of depersonalisation, lack of motivation to act, disbelief in one's own professional competence and a decrease in professional activity. The professional burnout syndrome is determined by a number of factors, including the attribution of the feeling of control, personality type, level of self esteem, beliefs about one's own profession, or certain traits of character.

Professional burnout and stress are most often experienced by extrinsic teachers (Krawulska-Ptaszyńska, 1996), neurotic and introverted teachers, experiencing a sense of loneliness, isolating themselves from society and convinced of being misunderstood by other people (Kliś and Kossewska, 1998), highly reactive teachers (Golińska and Świętochowski, 1998), and those with low self-esteem (Sekułowicz, 2002). Teachers who manifest unrealistic and irrational professional beliefs, who idealise the profession (Tucholska, 2009), and who are dissatisfied with their jobs (Palak, 2007) are vulnerable to this syndrome. The results of the study of teachers' preferences for creative life orientations versus conservative ones also confirm some of the indicated tendencies. Indeed, preferences for creative life orientations of the surveyed teachers coexist with a sense of job satisfaction and job commitment, while

preferences for the conservative type of orientation are fostering professional burnout (Cudowska, 2009).

However, the crisis in the teaching profession does not only affect our country; in recent years, the problem has been growing wider and wider and calls for looking on the condition of the contemporary teacher in the light of international comparative studies. Teachers play a fundamental role in the learning process. The pandemic, the rapid shift from face-to-face to distance learning, has further accentuated their vital contribution to society. It is the responsibility of teachers to facilitate learners' acquisition of key competences, strengthen their civic engagement, transmit human values and support their personal development. Based on data from the European Commission's international report, *Teachers in Europe* (2021), the results of an analysis of several significant aspects of the working life of lower secondary education teachers (ISCED 2 in the levels and fields of International Standard Classification of Education) are presented, including teacher shortages in schools, ageing of this professional group, outflow of teachers from the profession, and working conditions, including hiring methods, responsibilities, working hours, salaries and career opportunities.

Shortages of teachers

The quality of the teachers' work is one of the vital factors determining the success of the education system, although obviously not the only one. This makes the crisis in this profession, which has been observed for several years, all the more worrying. There are fewer and fewer people willing to train for the profession and an increasing number of graduates of teaching courses who fail to take up jobs in schools. In many European countries, staff shortages in schools are hampering the curriculum. One of the many reasons for the decreasing attractiveness of the teaching profession is the decline of its status in the society. At the same time, social, demographic, cultural, economic, scientific, environmental and technological changes are constantly raising the demands, responsibilities and expectations of teachers (European Commission, 2019; Council conclusions of 26 May 2020). In some countries, the shortage of professionals is compounded by their uneven distribution across subjects and geographical areas, ageing population of teachers, as well as low enrolment rates in initial teacher education (ITE Initial Teacher Education), as well as high outflow rates of teachers from the profession (Eurydice, 2021, p. 29-30).

Teacher shortages have persisted for many years, but the problem has recently worsened in Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, the

Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, as well as Iceland, Lithuania and Latvia. In many education systems, there are shortages of teaching staff in specific disciplines, such as, for example, mathematics, foreign languages, technical education, engineering, as well as in specific geographical areas due to their remoteness, the socio-economic disadvantages of certain rural areas, high cost of living in cities or the conflicting nature of the social environment (Eurydice, 2021, p. 30).

In some countries, such as Cyprus, Northern Ireland and Turkey, the problem contrary to shortage is on the rise, meaning an oversupply of teachers, more qualified teachers compared than available jobs (Eurydice 2021, p. 31). Although teacher shortage and teacher oversupply seem to be contradictory, they do coexist in Greece, Spain, Liechtenstein, Montenegro and Serbia, in Portugal, as well as in Lithuania and Italy. Only Bosnia and Herzegovina, Finland, Malta, Slovenia and Slovakia report no problems in this area (p. 31). In Finland, teacher education is held in high regard, there is a belief in its high quality and teaching is perceived as a job valuable for society. However, even there, the attractiveness of teacher education has been declining in recent years due to deteriorating working conditions for teachers (Eurydice 2021, p. 32).

Ageing and outflow of teachers from the profession

Another problem with which most European Union countries are confronted is the ageing of the teaching workforce. Almost 40% of lower secondary education teachers are at least 50 years old, and only less than 20% are under the age of 35. In Estonia, Greece, Italy, and Lithuania and Latvia, more than half of secondary school teachers will retire within the next 15 years. Similarly, in Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Portugal and Hungary, between 40% and 50% of teachers will retire in the next dozen or so years. The shortage and ageing population of teachers is a particular challenge for the recruitment of candidates to the profession and, combined with the oversupply, points to inadequacies in staff renewal mechanisms. Some countries are taking measures to allow teachers to take early retirement, as for example in Northern Ireland. In Greece, Spain, Liechtenstein, Portugal, Italy and Lithuania, the problem of an ageing teacher population coexists with the issue of teacher shortage and oversupply in this professional group.

With the exception of Liechtenstein, all these countries are also characterised by a low percentage of young teachers, less than 12% (Eurydice, 2021, p. 32).

A significant challenge for the education policy of most European Union countries is the teachers leaving the profession, particularly in the case of beginners. Often working in disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances, in difficult environments, in institutions with a high proportion of immigrants, turns out to exceed their capabilities. The problem of teacher outflow is particularly acute in the education systems of Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, England, Estonia, Hungary, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Sweden, especially as it is combined with teacher shortages and/or ageing (Eurydice, 2021, p. 34).

Recruitment to the profession, i.e. recruitment to initial teacher education (ITE), is also a growing concern. In Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Serbia, Sweden, the United Kingdom (England and Scotland), and Iceland, Lithuania, Latvia, Malta, there occur shortages of candidates for teacher education courses. This is often linked to the ageing of teachers and shortages in the given population, therefore, in some countries alternative routes to obtain a teaching qualification are being developed, and flexible ITE courses are also offered. Among all the education systems analysed in the report, only Finland and Bosnia and Herzegovina do not have any problems recruiting people willing to study to become teachers and retaining in-service teachers in school (Eurydice, 2021, p. 34).

Methods of employing teachers

International analyses suggest the problems identified may be the result of the low status of the teaching profession and unsatisfactory working conditions related to contracts, working hours, salaries and retirement age. Qualified teachers in Europe have three types of employment contracts, with varying degrees of security and employment status. Teachers can be employees subject to general labour law, as is the case in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands, Ireland, Romania, Serbia, Sweden and the UK, as well as in Lithuania and Latvia. Another form is the employment of teachers under public sector labour laws, but not as civil servants, as is the case in Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Switzerland, Italy, as well as Iceland and Slovakia. Finally, teachers may have the status of civil servants, in which case they are employed in accordance with separate legislation related to public administration and this usually entails greater job security. This is the case in Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary,

Liechtenstein, Portugal, Slovenia and Turkey, as well as in Cyprus, Malta and Spain. A slightly different solution has been adopted in Luxembourg, where the employment status varies according to the type of school or the nationality of the teacher, making it possible to employ non-EU teachers in international public schools.

Typically, teachers are employed on contracts for an indefinite period, but in some countries new teachers are employed on temporary contracts during their trial period or for several years while beginning their career, as is the case, for example, in Austria (Eurydice, 2021, p. 35). In the EU Member States, more than 80 % of teachers are employed on a contract for an indefinite period. However, across Europe, almost one in five teachers is employed on a short-term contract. In Austria, Spain, Portugal, Romania, as well as in the French Community of Belgium and in Italy, more than 25% of lower secondary education teachers work on short-term contracts for a specified period (Eurydice, 2021, p. 36). Mostly young teachers, under the age of 35, are employed on contracts for a specified period. In Italy and Portugal, as well as in Spain and Austria, around 80% of teachers under 35 are employed on contracts for a specified period. In Finland, Romania, Cyprus and the French Community of Belgium, more than 50% of young teachers are on short-term contracts. Although the share of contracts for specified period tends to decrease with the age of teachers, in some countries it is high even in the 35-49 age group, which is the case in Spain (39%), Portugal (41%) and Italy (32%) (Eurydice, 2021, p. 37).

Responsibilities and working hours of teachers

The deteriorating professional situation of teachers is also the result of being burdened with numerous responsibilities related to administration, organisation, planning, student assessment, extra-curricular activities, continuous professional development courses, relations with parents and other concerned individuals. These leave little room for proper teaching and concern for its quality. The Teaching and Learning International Survey TALIS 2018 and data from Eurydice show that teachers in EU countries spend up to 47% of their working time on teaching, while 25% is spent on planning, preparing lessons and correcting students' work. The remaining 25% is devoted to other activities, such as student counselling, professional development and communication with parents and carers. There are, of course, differences in the distribution of time between tasks in different countries, but the trend indicated here is nevertheless rather common (Eurydice, 2021, p. 40).

Authorities at the highest level regulate teachers' total workload in most education systems in Europe, but there are differences between countries in defining teachers' working time. In Belgium, Ireland, Turkey and Italy, education authorities only regulate teaching load, while in Albania, Denmark and Estonia, teaching time is not defined at all and teachers' working hours are only included in terms of total working time. On the other hand, in the UK, teachers' working time is the time they are available at school, while in Latvia and Sweden, both forms are combined and it is both the total working time of the teacher and the time they are available at school. However, in most education systems, namely Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Czech Republic, France, the Netherlands, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Germany, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Switzerland, the workload of lower secondary education teachers is defined in terms of both teaching time and total working time. Meanwhile, in Bulgaria, Finland, Cyprus and Malta, the workload includes both teaching time and hours of availability at school (Eurydice 2021, p. 40). In Montenegro, Greece, Spain, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Scotland, Iceland and Hungary, the teacher's workload comprises the three elements, i.e. teaching load, total working time, and teacher availability at school (Eurydice 2021, p. 41). In most of the countries surveyed, the total working time for teachers is 40 hours per week (Eurydice, 2021, p. 42).

Salary and retirement age for teachers

The authorities of the European Union assign great importance to support for teachers in coping with increasing demands at work, administrative tasks, participation in institutional leadership, learning assistance, planning, peer collaboration and professional development. In this context, the need to invest in teachers is emphasised, including adequate salaries, which are considered essential for improving the quality of teaching staff and by extension the quality of education (European Commission, 2019, p. 40). However, teachers often earn less than other workers with a university degree. Overall at EU level, only 37.8% of teachers are satisfied with their salary. With large discrepancies between countries: only less than one teacher in ten expresses satisfaction with their salary in Iceland and Portugal, while in Austria and the Flemish Community of Belgium almost 70% of teachers declare satisfaction with their salary (Eurydice, 2021, p. 45).

There are also significant differences in teacher salaries between Eastern European countries and the rest of Europe. Teachers in Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Hungary earn the least. In

contrast, teachers in Austria, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Ireland, Germany, Norway and Iceland receive the highest salaries in Europe. Comparing teachers' salaries with gross domestic product per inhabitant (GDP per capita) provides an even more accurate diagnosis of teachers' earnings. The percentage variation between the average annual effective gross income of teachers and GDP per capita varies considerably between countries. In the Netherlands, for example, the average salary is almost 25% higher than GDP per capita, while in the Czech Republic it is almost 25% lower. With the exception of Slovenia and Romania, in all Eastern European countries teachers' salaries are below GDP per capita (Eurydice, 2021, p. 46). In almost all countries in which average effective incomes are below GDP per capita, teachers express less satisfaction with their salaries. This is the case in the Czech Republic, Iceland, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, Sweden and Hungary. The exception is Norway, as the average effective income of teachers is below GDP per capita, while the percentage of teachers satisfied with their income is higher than the figure for the European Union. The high revenues of oil companies probably overstate GDP per capita thus providing explanation of the negative gap between salaries and GDP. Indeed, in Norway, teachers' salaries are among the highest in Europe and have continued to increase over the past decade, especially for teachers with higher qualifications and/or longer experience (Eurydice, 2021, p. 47).

With earnings being undoubtedly one of the strongest motivators of job satisfaction, other factors are nevertheless still relevant, for example, retirement age, which is a part of teachers' working conditions. Currently, in the majority of European education systems (16), namely Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Spain, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden, Scotland and Turkey, the official retirement age of 65 years old is the same for men and women. In the next 13 systems, in Montenegro, Denmark, Greece, the Netherlands, Ireland, Iceland, Norway, Germany, Portugal, Italy, and the United Kingdom (England, North Wales, Ireland), the official retirement age is higher, ranging between 66 and 70 years of age. In contrast, in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, France, Lithuania, Latvia, Malta, North Macedonia, Slovakia and Hungary, the official retirement age is lower for both men and women, placing between 60 and 64. Meanwhile, in 9 education systems, in Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Poland, Serbia, Switzerland, women retire earlier than men, although sometimes the difference does not exceed one year, as is the case in the Czech Republic, Lithuania and Switzerland (Eurydice, 2021, p. 48). In a number of countries, the retirement age is

planned to be raised within the next few years or so, most commonly to 65 in Austria, the Czech Republic, Malta, Serbia, and to 68 in Ireland. There will also be a gradual reduction of the gender gap in the Czech Republic and Serbia, from five years to just one and two years, while in Romania and Slovenia it will disappear completely (Eurydice, 2021, p. 50).

Career opportunities

Career opportunities in the teaching profession constitute a significant motivating factor for choosing it and not quitting. A dynamic career path may contribute to making the profession more attractive to young people. Therefore, the Council of Europe and the European Commission encourage Member States to develop national career frameworks for teachers (Eurydice, 2021, p. 50). In the international analyses, only career paths involving the maintenance of teaching responsibilities were included, and promotion to a managerial or administrative position that does not include teaching hours was excluded. Career structure is defined as a recognised path of progression within a job or profession and can be multi-level in nature, defined by a set of competencies, responsibilities, roles and/or hierarchical relationships. The different stages of a career are then structured in terms of increasing complexity and greater responsibility, to which the salary scale may be linked, but it does not constitute its defining feature. In contrast, single-level career structures allow teachers to broaden their experience or take on additional tasks, but are not structured into specific career stages and do not usually involve a change in formal hierarchical relationships between teachers (Eurydice, 2021, p. 51).

24 European education systems have multi-level career structures, while 18 have single-level structures. In multi-level career structures, progression means promotion to the next career level, while in single-level systems progression is tied to increases of salaries. Various education systems differ in the criteria considered for teachers' career progression, but seniority, professional development and teacher evaluation are usually of key importance (Eurydice, 2021, p. 51). These three elements are collectively taken into account in Croatia, Cyprus, France, Hungary, Lithuania, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia. However, in most countries, either seniority or professional development is being considered. In education systems with single-level career structures, years of service are the basis for promotion, with the exception of Liechtenstein, where the age of teachers is accounted for. Continuing professional development is a condition for salary increases only in Spain, Luxembourg and Portugal; in addition, in Liechtenstein and Portugal,

teacher performance evaluation is also factored in (Eurydice, 2021, p. 52). Career development within a multi-level career system mostly translates to higher salaries and increased personal prestige as well as, in many cases, the opportunity to serve in different roles within the school. In some countries, career development is expressed with teachers taking on leadership roles, as in Cyprus, Malta, Ireland and the United Kingdom (Scotland). In other countries, as a part of career development, it is possible for teachers to step into the role of teacher mentors and pedagogical advisors, which involves responsibility for curriculum and coordination of pedagogical knowledge. Teachers can progress through the career ladder and become master teachers, certified teachers, experts or senior teachers. In France, for example, one career step is *professeur formateur academique* with specific responsibilities for training other teachers. The possibility to take on leadership roles, mentor and pedagogical advisor roles, to obtain successive degrees of promotion and also the title of school professor also characterises the multi-level structure of teachers' careers in Poland (Eurydice, 2021, p. 54). Promotion to a higher level in the career structure is associated with an increase in remuneration in all countries with a multi-level career structure (Eurydice, 2021, p. 55).

Teachers work can also vary at school in systems with a single-level career structure. These refer to three areas: teacher and student support (i.e. mentor, teacher trainer and coach); school support (i.e. roles coordinating professional development, subject or curriculum), and leadership roles. Different countries with a single-level career structure provide for different forms of compensated time and/or money for these additional roles. In some countries this is regulated by government decision, in others – schools are autonomous in this regard. A detailed analysis of career options in the teaching profession shows that even in single-level career structures, teachers have many opportunities to diversify their work, take on additional roles and new tasks (Eurydice, 2021, p. 60).

Conclusions

International comparative analyses emphasise the need to enhance the attractiveness of the teaching profession to young people, as the increasing demands on the representatives of this profession are not matched by satisfactory remuneration, career opportunities and general working conditions. It seems that the crisis of the teaching profession which we have been facing for some time is the result of many years of neglect, underinvestment in this sphere of budgetary activity and lack of support for this professional group. Socio-cultural changes have also contributed to the depreciation of

humanistic values and the axiological-moral sphere of life, as well as the diminished role of teaching in favour of learning. The spread of the Internet seems to have given rise to the essentially illusory belief that anyone can obtain information, which is often, wrongly, equated with knowledge. The crisis in the teaching profession, reflected in the negative selection for the profession, the insufficient number of young people willing to study to become teachers, the abandonment of jobs at school and the shortage of teachers, is affecting individual countries to varying degrees, but all European countries are facing it to a greater or lesser extent. Definite actions on the part of the authorities and new educational policy solutions are therefore needed to improve the situation and minimise the effects of the crisis, which could have very serious consequences for the public sphere and the functioning of European societies in the next decades of the 21st century.

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