

Marta Zahorska*

NOT WILLING TO OR NOT ABLE TO? TEACHERS ON THEIR ROLE IN ADDRESSING SOCIAL INEQUALITIES IN EDUCATION

Abstract. Sociologists of education are often divided into those who are interested in ‘macro’ and those interested in ‘micro’ theories. This paper is an attempt to show how it is difficult to explain what is taking place in schools by concentrating only on the micro (school) level. Explanation should be sought in school system, educational politics, *etc.* My paper presents the initial conclusions of my research on educational inequalities, which is being conducted at primary and middle schools in several towns and villages in Poland. It is not an article on educational inequalities *per se*; the purpose of this paper is much more limited.

The aim of the project is to present the opinions of teachers with regard to the possibilities of schools to reduce inequalities. The statements made by teachers of various classes and schools, located in both small and big towns, will be compared. The particular feature of this research lies in its methodology. We used qualitative and not quantitative methods, the latter of which are the most popular in analyzing educational inequalities. We were interested in the mechanisms involved in the categorization of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ students. Our study is based on the observation of selected classes, interviews (IDI) with teachers, school principals and school counsellors. We also talked with representatives of local governments, who were responsible for education, and representatives of social care institutions, but this paper focuses only on the interviews conducted in the schools.

Keywords: teachers, school, educational inequalities.

1. Introduction

Social inequality in education can be defined in various ways, and the term is operationalised differently in different research projects. For the purpose of this analysis, I assume that social inequality in education is indicated by correlation between the status of the parents and the school results of the child, meaning that better grades are more often earned by students from well-educated, wealthy

* Ph.D., Associate Professor, Institute of Sociology, Warsaw University, 18 Karowa St., 00-927 Warszawa; martazahorska@wp.pl.

families, and poor grades – by less educated and poor families¹. The division of students into ‘better’ and ‘worse’ depending on the local environment exerts an obvious impact upon their school careers, and consequently on their future positions on the labour market. This type of inequality is very common. In every country, every class, and every school there are better and worse students, and their achievements are often determined by the level of cultural and material capital of their parents. It is difficult to determine whether the ‘worse’ students get poorer grades because of lesser capabilities, i.e. a lower intelligence level, or because of their comparatively poorer conditions of development. Biological and social factors intertwine, forming a knot that can hardly be disentangled.

However, there are countries, schools and classes in which these inequalities are less visible². On the “macro” scale, i.e. at the national and regional levels, two factors are usually put forth as exerting a strong impact on students’ school careers. These are: 1) social inequalities, in particular income differences, and 2) the schooling system in a given country. At the classroom level, which is the ‘micro’ scale, apart from the social background of students a very significant role is played by interpersonal relations between the students and the teachers, as well as between the students themselves³. In Poland, an examination of educational inequalities on the ‘macro’ scale yields particularly interesting results. The two key factors – income differences and the schooling system – act in opposite directions. The large – and increasing – income inequality obviously contributes to an unequal start for children, exerting an impact upon their school careers, and creating more favourable conditions for children from families with a higher social status. On the other hand, low enrolment requirements for subsequent education stages and a more open, i.e. less rigorous, promotion process allow for educational advancement of a broad group of young people, including those from families with low social status. The result, however, is diversification and segmentation of the education system, which results in horizontal inequality (Zahorska 2007; Zawistowska 2012). Better and worse schools have emerged, which, in turn, has led to the recognition of ‘better’ and ‘worse’ school diplomas, depending on the school and program completed. The consequences include new divisions in education: it is no longer important how many people have obtained secondary

¹ Apart from differences rooted in the social status of the parents, there are other reasons for the diversification in the school careers of children. These include: health condition, disability, level of intelligence, gender and race. Their impact, however, is strengthened substantially by the social origin of the student. I am of opinion that – at least in Poland – the social component is the most significant factor influencing the inequalities in education.

² Cf. Conditions that must be established by the school to equalize the chances in education, in: Mortimore 1997.

³ For more on the externalist (external to the education system) and internalist (internal) theories explaining the functioning of the school, cf. Moore 2006.

or university education, but which secondary school or university they have completed. Thus, research at the school level becomes all the more important, as it allows us to see “on the micro level” the divisions between students, and the factors which determine the school’s level and culture.

2. Research characteristics

In the research project⁴, which was carried out in the years 2012 and 2013 in selected schools of the Mazowieckie province (voivodeship in Polish), it turned out that the ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ levels were strongly correlated. Despite the fact that our research was focused on relations between students and teachers and the attitudes of teachers, it would not have been possible to explain what was taking place in schools without a broader social context, in particular the effects of education policy or the impact of the dominant ideology. Thus, the two levels are intertwined and it is difficult to focus only on the ‘macro’ level while ignoring the ‘micro’ perspective, and vice versa.

The objective of the research project was to gain familiarity with the opinions of teachers on the significance of equal education opportunities, as well as possibilities of providing students with such opportunities. The project was implemented at four primary and four middle schools in one of the districts of Mazowieckie province. Two primary and two lower secondary schools were located in rural areas, and the remaining four schools in a city with county rights. Two of the schools in the city – one primary and one lower secondary school – were “integration” schools, accepting children with various disabilities, e.g. impaired vision or hearing, on wheelchairs, autistic children, students with ADHD or slightly reduced intellectual skills. There were about five students with such disabilities in every class; the rest were regular students. In these classes, apart from regular teachers there were also guardians who took care of the disabled children. Each of these schools is also obliged to register children from the district. Within the district of each of the integration schools examined, there are many streets where unemployment and poverty prevails, and many of the inhabitants tend to commit legal offences. There is also a high level of alcoholism. These are the so-called “bad areas”, inhabited by students who create many problems, both in terms of discipline and learning. The remaining two schools in the city – a primary and lower second-

⁴ Research financed by the NCN grant No. N N116 639240. The research project co-authors were doctoral students of the Institute of Sociology – Magda Smak-Wójcicka, M.Sc., of the Institute of Sociology of Warsaw University, and Ilona Matysiak, M.Sc., of the Institute of Social Studies of Warsaw University. Some of the field research was carried out by the SMG-KRC company, some by students of sociology of the Institute of Sociology of Warsaw University, and the remaining interviews were conducted by the authors of the research project.

ary school – reflected a slightly better environment, although they still had many students from “bad families”. The schools themselves were assessed as being very good at preparing students for further education. The rural schools differed somewhat in terms of size and type of the local community. Two of the schools were larger: the primary school and the lower secondary school in the village in which the commune offices were located, and the other two were smaller – in a small village. In both schools some of the results achieved were good and some were poor, which depended mostly on the social profile of the students. In classes attended by children with a slightly higher social status, the results were better; where no such child ‘leaders’ were present, the education level tended to be lower.

Our research was aimed at answering two questions: the importance attached by teachers to equal educational opportunities as one of their objectives for working with the students; and the problems encountered and the teachers’ perceptions of ways to achieve the best results. By examining schools located in both rural areas and cities, we sought to learn the extent to which the answers to these questions differ between regions, as well as whether the attitudes of teachers towards the problem examined would be different among teachers of younger and of older children.

The basic research tool consisted of interviews in the schools. These were conducted with school principals, school counsellors and the supervisors of selected classes. We decided to meet the teachers who supervise the classes in the crucial moments of pupils’ school careers, which meant the teachers of the first, fourth and sixth classes/grades at the primary schools, and of the first and third classes/years in the lower secondary schools⁵. Our conversations were recorded and transcribed.

The interviews were conducted as non-structured conversations on the work of the teachers. We wanted to recreate their way of thinking and evaluating, to make sure that the issues we found interesting would appear in the context of the weight assigned to them by the respondents. Despite the differences between schools, many similarities were observed in the interviews with the teachers⁶. Most of the answers of the examined staff fit into a single pattern, hence I felt empowered to construct a model of sorts which reflected their way of thinking. Having said that, of course there were some differences as well, depending on the characteristics of the school, position of the respondent in the school, or age of the students, and these differences will be discussed in a later part of this paper.

⁵ Except for two principals, all the school employees encountered by us in this research were females.

⁶ Interviews were conducted not only with teachers, but also with principals and school counsellors; however, the principals and sometimes also the counsellors had lessons with the students. While their perspective of various problems obviously differed somewhat from that of “ordinary” teachers, nevertheless their basic set of views was similar and thus, in general, these can be referred to jointly.

3. The teachers' most frequent teachers answers on educational inequalities in their schools

Our first, very general question to the teachers was about their work objectives. It's obvious that in interviews about their work, the teachers want to make a good impression and emphasize their strengths as both good persons and competent professionals. They underlined their concern for the welfare of the children, indicating they aimed at the children's overall development, wanted to prepare their pupils for adult life, and raise them to become good and honest citizens. They also often mentioned the importance of grades and the educational level of the students⁷. On the other hand, these noble causes failed to include the concept of equal opportunities and helping the poor students. It would appear that this kind of activity is not something about which a teacher flatters oneself. Nor was it mentioned in the school documents specifying the objectives and modes of activities of the schools. At the level of "ideology" and the values promoted, the concept of providing equal opportunities and the elimination of inequalities did not appear to exist.

The teachers spoke of their classes (mostly the ones in which they were supervisors – it should be noted that in Poland 'supervisors' are assigned a class to supervise for three years) and shared with us their successes with their students, as well as the problems encountered. These descriptions included characteristics of behaviour of 'good' and 'poor' students. Asked about the causes of poor grades, they usually gave two answers: either that the student was unable to catch up with others due to limited intellectual capabilities, or unwilling to do so. The teachers' opinions of the "unwilling" students were mostly negative. Usually, these students also caused the most significant problems, missed classes, quarrelled, and tended to be aggressive towards other students and teachers⁸.

Most often, the parents were blamed for the poor behaviour of the students. The profiles presented of the parents of "difficult students" consisted of them often being poorly educated, blue collar workers, who used to cause problems at school themselves⁹. As parents who do not appreciate or understand the significance of learning, they are unable to help their children with their homework and often their attitude towards their children lacks consistency. Some cases were also mentioned in which one or both of the parents left the country to look for jobs, leaving the children under the care of their older siblings, relatives, or simply

⁷ Only one teacher told us she would "speak frankly" and confessed that she cared most about her students passing their exams with good grades.

⁸ Teachers in primary schools, particularly in the city, underlined that most problems were caused nowadays by girls, and not – like previously – by boys. This confirms suggestions that have emerged in other research projects.

⁹ Of course, other reasons for bad behaviour and poor grades were also cited. For instance, the teachers referred to the trauma experienced by children due to divorce of their parents or the illness or death of one parent, which was reflected in their attitude towards learning.

neighbours. Thus, the teachers recognized the problem of children whose parents were unable to help them, or at least encourage them to study.

When asked how these students could be helped, the teacher referred to the existing procedures. There is a system in place to support children having trouble with learning at the schools. In the first place, the children are directed to free additional classes. Every teacher is obliged to provide two additional teaching hours in form of either 'remedial classes' or 'special interest groups' i.e. thematically based. Students are directed to remedial classes by teachers, while they choose to participate voluntarily in the special interest groups if they are interested in the theme of such an activity. If the students are problematic or show some traits that may be a cause of concern, they are sent to the school counsellor and/or psychologist. Every school has a counsellor¹⁰ and in many schools, particularly the large ones in larger towns and cities, there is a psychologist as well. If the remarks communicated to the student do not lead to changes in their behaviour, the parents are informed of the child's problems and the corrective actions that need to be undertaken. They are asked to come to the school together with the child and a so-called "contract" is signed with them, often in the presence of the principal, in which the student undertakes to improve their behaviour, and the parents to control their progress. In the most dramatic cases, for example if the student has been truant for long periods or committed an offence at school – there is a court hearing. On the other hand, if the opinions of the teachers and the counsellor/psychologist indicate developmental or personality disorders, the parents are directed to a Counselling and Psychological Consulting Clinic, which can be found in every city with county rights. If any dysfunctions are found, the child is referred to a specialist (e.g. a speech therapist), and the teachers receive recommendations on how to deal with the student. In many cases, such recommendations include lowering of the school requirements.

Is this system effective? Most respondents declared it was not! First of all, the students who do not like to learn and do not care about their grades treat remedial classes as an additional waste of time. It's very difficult to motivate or force these students to participate in such lessons. Most often, such classes are attended by hard-working pupils who failed to understand something during the regular lessons or missed classes due to an illness and are willing to do some extra work to catch up with the others. Secondly, students who are referred to counselling do not always attend the sessions recommended. For the parents, particularly in the rural areas, the necessity to go to the clinic means having to travel to the city, which consumes time and money. Even greater problems are encountered when they have to get to a psychologist. Reluctance to visit the counselling centre is

¹⁰ Although, unfortunately, sometimes in the rural, poorer schools, the counsellor is only employed part-time and combines this job with the function of the common room supervisor or teacher, or works in several schools.

also associated with their concern that the child might be diagnosed with a mental illness, which in some communities – particularly in the rural areas – results in social stigmatization. Hence the parents, fearful of such a diagnosis, tend to avoid psychological assessments of their child. Sometimes, even after they have obtained the official opinion and recommendations on how to treat the child – they fail to deliver such documentation to the school. In such a case the teacher, even if aware of the problems encountered by the child, is unable to lower the requirements without the appropriate documentation.

Thus it may be said that although the support system exists, its effectiveness is low. The teachers emphasize that the basic cause of these difficulties is a lack of willingness of the parents to cooperate with the school. They fail to follow the recommendations of the teachers and the school counsellor. In addition in some cases they accuse the teachers of groundless criticism, and/or repeatedly justify the absence of their children or tend to speak of the teachers in a disrespectful manner to their children, thus undermining their authority. Even after signing a ‘contract’, the parents often fail to follow through with its provisions. Lack of appreciation of the significance of learning and the parents’ inconsistent approach are the main causes of the inefficiency of the support provided to children.

What do the teachers propose? In this regard, their attitudes were to some extent diversified, although the differences were mainly due to the weight assigned to the various proposals, and not visible differences of opinions. Hence most of the views quoted below were repeated by many teachers, although the order of their significance varied, which can be taken as a reflection of existing differences.

According to the most radical teachers, the poor, problematic students should be disregarded. Too much is being said about the poor ones and too little about the talented ones. The time dedicated to the poor students is often lost, and it should be dedicated to those who want to learn and who will achieve good results. It is necessary to perform an early selection process: those who do not want to learn and/or who lack the necessary intellectual abilities should be sent to vocational schools already after the sixth grade. Forcing all students to graduate from a lower secondary school is perceived as a nuisance by both students and by teachers.

There is another group of teachers whose views are less radical – they rather tend to propose various adjustments, particularly in the curricula. They believe the curricula are overloaded, overly theoretical and abstract, and far from useful in everyday practical life. The students often fail to perceive such learning as reasonable or necessary. What is needed are practical activities, offered outside the schools as frequently as possible. Some of the official requirements do not make sense at all – for instance, learning two foreign languages, even though the majority of students are not able to master even one. Only children attending paid language courses are able to cope with the requirements.

Another group was of the opinion that, above all, what is most needed at schools is greater discipline. At present, the teachers have no power over the students.

They cannot even throw out of class those students who prevent the teachers from performing their duties. It is not possible to have the students removed from the school, even if they pose a threat to other children or even the teachers. The only means of discipline at the disposal of teachers, such as reprimands or lowering of marks, are only effective in the case of those students who care about their evaluations and grades, who of course are not the problem students. For a significant group of pupils, however, punishment of this kind at all has no influence or effect on their behaviour. The present practice, enforced by the Ministry and the education authorities and providing the students with plenty of opportunities to improve their grades, forces the teachers to promote poor students, which weakens their motivation even more. The students are convinced (and they are often right) that they will get promoted regardless of their efforts, and thus they do not have to make any effort¹¹. As a corollary result, they serve as a negative example for other students. Even the poorest students are able to graduate from the lower secondary schools and continue their education at secondary schools. Thus, the schools do not prevent such students from graduation, which fails to motivate them to make any effort to get a better education. Therefore, it is necessary to impose stricter discipline and selectivity in the process of promotion to subsequent classes or schools.

A large group of teachers indicated that the source of failure in their work with “difficult” students was the negative attitude of the parents, which was both inconsistent and demanding. They thus proposed that the children should stay for longer at the school or in the common room to make sure they spend more time in a proper environment. This would help them prepare better for their lessons.

When asked for any tried and tested methods for motivating the reluctant students to learn, some positive examples of projects financed by the Ministry of Education were provided. One of the rural schools, which received such financing, provided additional lessons on Saturdays for poor students from low-income families. These followed special scenarios, combining learning and recreation. Moreover, one Saturday per month was dedicated to swimming pool activity. The teachers received additional remuneration for their work. They assessed the project as being very effective; the children were eager to attend. Unfortunately, after the project was ended, the activity was discontinued. Another school used the financing to make sure the students attended theatre performances, movies, and museums. They indicated that this type of exposure, particularly in the case of students who had never visited a large city, art theatre or museum, had great educational advantages.

Why can such lessons not be continued or expanded? The emphasis upon strict implementation of the curriculum and preparing the children for tests pre-

¹¹ An important feature of our system is low selectivity (in terms of promotion). Only those students who have missed more than half of all class hours without justification are not promoted. Those who have poor grades are allowed to improve their grades during the summer vacation, and most of them are promoted.

vents activities of any kind other than the typical, classroom–conducted activities. Trips cost money and can be attended only by those students who can afford them; for whom, in fact, they are not particularly attractive.

In summarizing the opinions of teachers, it may be said that:

1. There is the problem of students who often “inherit” poor school grades following the footsteps of their older generations. They often come from communities characterized by low education levels, which are usually rather poor.

2. Activities on behalf of these students are of limited effectiveness due to their lack of motivation to study and the lack of control by the parents. The students do not want to learn because they lack the appropriate role models at home and their parents fail to cooperate with the school. In this way, a vicious circle is created: schools are attended by students not prepared to study because they come from families in which their parents are unable or unwilling to help them; the existing methods of supporting such students are not efficient as they require cooperation with the parents; and the parents are unwilling or unable to help them.

3. Is it possible to work more effectively? Yes, but subject to fulfilling several conditions:

- 1) the schools need to receive better financing, for the following reasons:
 - a) for additional classes. The present system, in which these activities are included in the teacher’s salary, does not motivate the teachers to put in any extra effort;
 - b) for trips, to make sure that financial barriers do not prevent the children from attendance;
 - c) For better school equipment, such as interactive boards – to make the class activities more interesting;
 - d) for reducing of the number of children in classes (this is especially demanded by the teachers in the cities – in the rural areas the classes are usually much smaller);
- 2) changes in the teaching methods and exam forms are required, including the following:
 - a) reform of the curricula and textbooks, so less “learning by heart” is required;
 - b) decreasing the role of tests. The demands associated with tests require the teachers to dedicate a lot of time to resolving test exercises during lessons, which prevents teachers from organizing classes in a more interesting manner and motivating the students more effectively. Instead of this, the teachers are pressured to keep concentrating on the tests;
- 3) the teachers should have more tools for disciplining the students and their parents. At present, they feel helpless.

Many of the remarks expressed by the teachers during interviews can be justified by their professional experience. It is striking, however, that they tend to shift the responsibility to ‘others’. The ones to blame are the parents, the bad legislative framework for education, and the lack of funds. Of course it is difficult to disagree that some parents tend to disregard their children and that the schooling system in our country is far from perfect, or to deny that the schools could benefit from better

financing. Nevertheless, given the great extent to which these reasons were cited, they seem to serve as a justification for the teachers for their own helplessness and a proof of their frustration. In some interviews, the school is depicted as a ‘last bastion’, attacked by demanding parents, aggressive students and the media, while the work of the teachers is undermined by the absurdities of bureaucracy.

4. Three types of schools examined. Different attitudes of the teachers

Among the schools examined, three groups can be distinguished, each containing primary and lower secondary schools. One group consists of urban schools, another consists of urban schools of a specific type, i.e. integration schools, and the third group encompasses rural schools – two in a larger village and two in a small village in the same commune¹². In these three groups of schools, the working conditions for teachers and their views on the issue germane to this paper were somewhat different. Any standardization of the attitudes of teachers in the distinguished groups of school was largely due to the fact that they made up complexes, i.e. under a single management. Only the integration schools were independent units. At all schools, the attitudes of the teachers reflected the patterns depicted above; however, the conditions in which they functioned resulted in a diversification in the emphasis put on issues.

Integration schools: primary and lower secondary. The class supervisors interviewed by us put great emphasis on integration of the student team to make sure no students are rejected or mistreated. They did their best to develop principles of cooperation and mutual support among the students. However, at the schools examined, commitment to the protection of disabled children was most visible, while children diagnosed as “threatened with marginalization” or from families with low cultural – and often material – capital, were rather perceived as a “burden” on the school. The school equipment and personnel, including the specialists (psychologists, speech therapists, rehabilitation specialist, re-educators, *etc.*), are aimed mainly at the needs of the disabled children. On the other hand, in relation to the so-called “difficult students” – not encouraged to study at home – the modes of action employed by schools are rather typical, consisting mainly of remedial classes. Primary school teachers, however, stated that attendance is not a problem in these classes. At the school there are many children who need support, and the activities offered by specialists are so numerous that attendance does not cause stigmatization, disqualifying the children in the eyes of their peers. Due to

¹² Designations next to quotations from interviews with teachers indicate the school type: primary or lower secondary; the integration lower secondary school was marked as LS, school complexes – as SC, grade: I, III, IV or VI, type of community: T – town; V – village, Vad – village serving as the administrative center of the commune.

the small number of students in each class (no more than 20) and the care provided by the additional teacher/guardian, integration schools provide more favourable conditions also for children from families unable to support children in the learning process.

Teachers at integration schools, more often than teachers from other schools, expressed their understanding of the difficult situations of the parents, whether due to the disability of the child or their difficult financial situation. At the integration lower secondary school, attempts were made to organize meetings for the parents to help them establish better communication with their children.

Both integration schools have an impressive number of free additional activities and long working hours of the common rooms. It is also significant that it was assumed that no students would leave the school hungry. Therefore, the school kitchen offers at least soup to everyone willing to take advantage of a free meal.

Another integration-oriented activity is comprised of frequent trips. In order to enable more children to participate, the teachers at both schools established associations and they organize trips without resorting to the offers of travel bureaus, which are associated with high prices. While usually only about half of the children are able to attend such trips, nevertheless this is still interpreted as a success. The teachers do their best to make sure the maximum number of children participate in the trips, go to the movies, *etc.* The poorer students receive additional financing from the school, and some of the costs are even often covered by the teachers themselves. According to one of the lower secondary school teachers we interviewed:

It is our custom that we enter the teachers' office with, e.g., a cap, and everyone puts a small amount of money in it [LS, III, T].

At the lower secondary school, those students who find it difficult to implement the program and tend to avoid lessons are still often willing to help in many works outside the school. According to the principal, the teachers are obliged to search for the strengths of their students, even if these are not associated with learning demands. The school is supposed to be a safe place, where the students like to be and where they feel accepted.

The problems encountered by children at this school result in frequent conflicts with the teachers. The students are unable to control their emotions and behaviours, and they find it difficult to focus. In such situations, the class supervisors do their best to mediate between the students and the teachers, attempting not to accuse the students, which results in tensions between the two groups of teachers:

[...] to make sure the child is not humiliated, to find some positive traits about the children, to rely upon these positive traits, because every child has the potential that should be developed [LS, III, T]. First of all, we should analyze the emotional problems of the students, find out what makes them suffer and then we can start teaching them [LS, III, T].

Both integration schools (particularly the lower secondary school) are “unconventional” in terms of their atmosphere, as well as their activity-oriented approach to the students. It also seems that those teachers who are willing to treat students individually and respond to the need for ensuring equal chances can be found mainly at the integration schools.

It would appear that these differences in attitudes, particularly among the class supervisors, can be explained by different attitudes of those teachers responsible for children with developmental deficits, and it is also worth underlining that they are not evaluated on the basis of test results. One could say that they “can afford to be caring”.

Teachers at rural schools did not depart much from the pattern earlier described. Perhaps they are a bit more critical about most of the parents of their pupils in comparison to teachers in the city. They describe them as being not interested in studying and school, and doing little to control their children’s lessons, and note with concern that:

The school is not able to motivate as effectively as the family [P, VI, SC, Vad].

Due to the poor results of the students, one of the school principals planned monthly meetings to analyze the progress of the children, together with the parents, students and teachers. Since the parents were reluctant, the plan failed. One of the parents supposedly said that “my son will become a farmer anyway, so why does he need any of this?”.

In most classes, however, there are small groups of ambitious children who are willing to learn and supported by their parents. It was underlined that these were mainly children of doctors, teachers and officials. In the classes, they contrasted with the children from extremely poor families, who often come to school uncared-for and dirty. The teachers listed the numerous developmental deficits of this latter group of students: very limited vocabulary, inability to use a pencil, crayon or scissors. In some cases, these children were unable to communicate with strangers and were sometimes very much afraid of the new surroundings. Typically, this group was mentioned more often by class supervisors of the youngest children, as these were the students with the most such problems¹³.

Another issue sharply criticized by these teachers was the curricula – too theoretical and abstract, not perceived of as reasonable by the children. The teachers explained their inability to raise the education level, particularly among the poorest students, as arising from the lack of support from the parents and the ill-con-

¹³ Teachers from rural schools most strongly opposed the concept of sending 6-year-olds to school. The children they had encountered of such age were completely unable to cope with the first grade. They emphasized that, before going to school, these children should definitely attend a kindergarten – and there are no kindergartens in the rural areas.

ceived requirements of the curricula. Like in other schools, these schools have remedial classes, however these are not popular among the students:

The problem is that the students have to be willing to do it [P, VI, SC, V].

I organized an interest group to repeat the curriculum, and it is attended by the best students; the rest, they don't even make the effort [P, IV, SC, Vad].

Students who are not doing well are not just those who are extremely neglected or with special educational needs. This group also includes children from "average" families, who simply are not willing to study. In classes, in particular those dominated by boys, hard-working students are mocked and abused, which makes the work of teachers all the more difficult.

A distinguishing feature of the rural schools is the necessity to provide children with transport. The buses determine the school's functioning schedules, which hinders, and sometimes even prevents, the organization of extracurricular activities. In reality, a normal day at a rural school usually ends around 2.00 p.m.

In one of the schools examined, it was noted that classes marked as A usually earned better grades in comparison with the classes marked as B. It turned out that classes marked as A were attended by children transported from villages north of the town in which the school was located, and classes marked as B – by children from the south. Villages in the south were poorer, and the ones in the north – more wealthy. In the "southern" classes, the children encountered more educational and behavioural, as well as social, problems. Yet this division of classes was perceived as unavoidable due to the necessity to coordinate bus transport.

At the rural schools, the social problems of students were more emphasized. The local rural communities are small, and their inhabitants know each other well – information on random events reaches the school quickly, and the class supervisors and school counsellors do their best to help the victims. If it is not possible to provide assistance due to legal provisions implemented by the Commune Social Assistance Centre, the schools attempt to provide support on their own – the children receive meals from the "principal funds", food and clothes are gathered, and Christmas gifts are provided. As was emphasized, an illness, accident or family tragedy usually mobilizes the local community to help. On the other hand, in the case of mental illness not only the parents but also the children are ostracized, particularly if they display any behavioural disorders or their appearance is perceived as "different" in any way.

The work of the teachers at rural schools has its advantages (small classes, less behavioural problems in comparison with the cities) and disadvantages (poor equipment, failure of the local community to appreciate the role of learning, transport problems, *etc.*). The teachers more often focused on the disadvantages of their work, underscoring how little they could do and how much they were expected to do. According to one of the teachers, "we are not wizards". The school

is not able to force the students to learn in any way. Mainly they blamed the educational failures on the parents, who were described as “unwilling to follow our recommendations” or “coming, listening and doing nothing”.

Teachers from the urban schools best fit the pattern depicted above of ‘typical teachers’ views’. The examined school complex enjoyed a very good reputation in the city. The school was attended by many “children from good families”. The positive opinion of the school, as safe and able to prepare its students well to sit for exams, attracted students from other areas as well. In addition, only those students from these other areas who achieved very good results were enrolled.

A specific trait of this school was the visible division into “good” and “poor” classes, although the teachers would not admit the students were selected intentionally. First grades of primary schools are divided on the basis of whether the children attended the kindergarten or only the reception class. According to the teachers, such a division is enforced by the parents. Kindergartens are attended mostly by children of working parents, who most often have at least a secondary, or even university education. Children who only attended the reception class came mainly from the nearby housing settlement and from the city suburbs, from the poorer and less-educated families. At primary school, the children study Russian or German. Students from the Russian language class usually earn poorer grades in most subjects. At the lower secondary school, the first year is attended by children from other primary schools; those with better diplomas usually select classes with the German language, while the poorer students join those with the Russian language. Most financial, educational and behavioural problems are encountered among the children from the “Russian classes”.

A class supervisor from a lower secondary school compared his present class – consisting of very good students from wealthy families – with the one he had supervised two years earlier. Today, his pupils come from “intelligentsia and doctor families”, which attach great importance to the development of their children. On the other hand, the previous class consisted of children from lower status social groups. The students lacked the basic skills, such as using a knife and fork. The two classes – according to the teacher – represented two different worlds. These worlds, in fact, existed in the same school, but they were separated. Students from the “Russian” classes usually go to vocational schools, while those from “German” classes attend good secondary schools.

The teachers’ statements demonstrated a great concern for talented students. Already in the first year, one of the teachers proudly declared that she spent extra time with the best students. The school organizes trips, which cannot be attended by some students for financial reasons. They are quite costly, organized by a travel

bureau. When describing the situation of neglected children, often missing classes and earning poor grades, the class supervisors underlined their helplessness. There were similar stories such as the one about a mother of one student who failed to come when called, and also failed to follow the teachers' recommendations. According to the teachers, nothing else could be done. The only way to support poorer students are remedial classes. At the same time, as indicated above all the teachers uniformly indicated that these were ineffective in assisting poorer students. First of all, the students failed to attend these classes; secondly, the classes were forced upon the teachers, who received no additional remuneration for them. It would be difficult to get more commitment in such a situation, our respondents stated.

Most teachers emphasized that the behaviours of the children were determined by the attitudes of their parents. In the case of "problematic" and/or neglected children, the teachers stated that "schools for the parents" should be established to make sure they start caring about their child. Development is also limited in some cases by the intellectual capabilities of the children, which are inherited from the parents. According to one first year supervisor, she recognized the level of intelligence by looking into the eyes of the children; after only two months she was able to guess their grades at graduation. Factors determining the abilities of the child, rooted in the family and biological aspects, are beyond the control of the school.

When the children of our former students come, sometimes they are like "copies". They have or lack the same abilities... To me, it all starts in the brain. I don't know if these are only the genes or the structure of the brain... As a teacher, I should say that every child is a diamond that will shine one day. But it's not like that. The talented ones – I don't know why – but there are few of those [P, I, SC, T].

I can see that, in some cases, it's like a vicious circle. Talking to the parents, I get the impression the child will be exactly the same [LS, I, SC, T].

The teachers are not able to do anything about this. The school does its best, but the students "either do not want to or cannot" work harder.

What can you do about a fifteen-year-old who has different priorities, a different concept of life? [LS, III, SC, T].

In general, it seems that although the task of providing equal opportunities was undertaken by the school through remedial classes or the activity of school counsellors, nevertheless the objective of the facility was mainly to get recognition for the high grades of the students of the local middle class, and not caring much about the poorest ones.

5. Conclusions

The starting point for the research was the assumption that the teacher's views and actions were of great weight and importance for the education and learning process. Regardless of how wonderful or how poor a school is, the teachers' attitude is of decisive importance for the delivery of the school material. Of course it is easier to teach in a nice, well-equipped school; however, in such schools we also encountered frustrated, discouraged teachers. And vice-versa, in a poor school, the teachers can be committed to their work. Regardless of the reforms proposed by the Ministry, if these are not accepted by the teachers, they will either not be implemented or they will be implemented only superficially¹⁴. Thus, the main task of our research is to shape the way of thinking and evaluation of the issues associated with the provision of equal education opportunities by teachers.

The research conducted leads to the following observations and conclusions.

The concept of providing of equal educational opportunities is not popular. It does not serve as a basis of motivation for the teachers. The model of a teacher making sacrifices for the poorer students is no longer applicable, despite the fact that it was very important for many decades and popularized by both the positivist and neo-romantic literature, as well as by the communist ideology.

This way of thinking became obsolete in Poland at the end of the 20th century, when communism fell and capitalism emerged. The concepts enforced in the communist years (albeit not always implemented) were harshly criticized, even when they had some social value. The issues of poverty and its consequences, as well as the inequality of opportunities for children from lower class families, has disappeared from the literature and sociological research. The dominant ideology puts emphasis on individual responsibility for one's fate, the limitations of social assistance, and acceptance of social and income inequalities. Nevertheless in the official documents, theoretically aimed at providing everyone with an equal start, opportunities are still emphasized.

Poor results of students were not treated by the teachers as a serious problem, and the fact that the children of parents who had been poor students follow in their footsteps was not seen as a reason to reflect upon the effectiveness of the impact made by the school. It is taken as a fact that there have always been better and poorer students, i.e. those willing to study and those who are reluctant. The social consequences of marginalization, exclusion and inheritance of low social positions were not mentioned, neither by the teachers, principals or school counsellors. The problem was perceived from the perspective of the guilt and the responsibility of individuals. But other issues, as for example patriotic feel-

¹⁴ Having worked in a school for five years, I had the opportunity to observe the avoidance strategies of teachers who were forced to introduce various changes by the administrative authorities. This phenomenon is universal and it has been referred to in various studies on education. However, it has not been subjected to a separate research project, although undoubtedly it is deserving of one.

ings, were perceived from a different dimension. Lack of a proper attitude towards these led to a serious reflection on the part of the school. Similarly, the emergence of youth cultures was perceived as a big social problem, while the “inheritance of poor school results” was not.

The mission to help poor students is not a momentous one for teachers. Remedial classes require remuneration; otherwise they are conducted without great commitment. It is much more “profitable” to be engaged in working with good students than with poor students. A teacher is assessed on the basis of exam and test results, and it is much more difficult to obtain good grades from those students who do not care, than from those who hope to continue their education at high-quality schools. More attention to poor students was paid by teachers of early grades in the primary schools and those working at integration schools, neither of whom are assessed on the basis of test results.

Another component which weakens the commitment of teachers is the formalization and growing recourse to legal interventions at schools. Educational and social problems have been “handed over” to school counsellors. Some class supervisors are not even familiar with the family problems of their pupils. The teachers are no longer informed of the professions of the parents of their students (in order to make sure they do not favour the children of parents enjoying a higher social status). While they can make assumptions on the basis of clothes, equipment and behaviours of the children, they are not entitled to visit their students at home. If a student poses serious problems, and the parent(s) fail(s) to come to the school, it is possible to intervene through the police.

It seems that the overlap of the neo-liberal concepts and solutions for the functioning of schools (curricula, standards, tests) is largely responsible for the elimination of the concept of equal opportunities from the teachers’ way of thinking. This is all the more serious due to the fact that social inequality is growing in Poland (and not only in Poland). Social divisions are becoming permanent. Yet a school which no longer offers opportunities for social promotion may become a part of the image of an unjust society, perceived with reluctance and aggression.

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Marta Zahorska

NIE CHCĄ CZY NIE MOGĄ? NAUCZYCIELE O SWOJEJ ROLI W REDUKOWANIU SPOŁECZNYCH NIERÓWNOŚCI EDUKACYJNYCH

Streszczenie. Socjologowie edukacji dzielą się na ogół na tych, których interesują zagadnienia i teorie na poziomie „makro”, i tych zainteresowanych poziomem „mikro”. Ten tekst pokazuje, jak trudno jest wyjaśnić, co dzieje się w szkole, jedynie koncentrując się na poziomie „mikro”. Wyjaśnień często trzeba szukać w systemie szkolnym, polityce itp. W opracowaniu przedstawiono wstępne wyniki badań prowadzonych nad problemem nierówności edukacyjnych w szkołach podstawowych i gimnazjach w kilku miastach i wioskach w Polsce. Nie jest to artykuł, w którym wszechstronnie omówiono nierówności edukacyjne, jego cel jest o wiele skromniejszy. Ma za zadanie przedstawienie poglądów nauczycieli na możliwości, jakie przejawia szkoła w zmniejszaniu tych nierówności. Porównywaliśmy wypowiedzi nauczycieli z różnych klas i szkół, z całkiem małych i nieco większych miejscowości. Cechą wyróżniającą te badania jest metodologia. Zastosowano jakościowe, a nie ilościowe metody badań, które są bardziej popularne w badaniu nierówności edukacyjnych. W celu zainteresowania znalazł się mechanizm pozwalający na kategoryzowanie uczniów na „dobrych” i „słabych”. W badaniach wykorzystywano obserwacje wybranych klas, indywidualne, pogłębione wywiady z nauczycielami, dyrektorami szkół i szkolnymi pedagogami. Także wyniki rozmów z przedstawicielami władz samorządowych odpowiedzialnych za edukację, urzędnikami w ośrodkach opieki społecznej. Jednak w opracowaniu tym skoncentrowano się jedynie na wnioskach z wywiadów przeprowadzonych w szkołach.

Słowa kluczowe: nauczanie, szkoła, nierówności edukacyjne.