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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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Inequality and teachers' beliefs: the reality of equal opportunities in Polish schools

Grzegorz Mazurkiewicz
Jagiellonian University (Poland)

Context

School is an important element in the social success of both well-established and emerging democracies. Schools in democratic systems promise to bring up responsible and active citizens possessing skills which enable them to function in the contemporary world. Among various principles of democratic schools, the most important are the democratic organisation of schoolwork and equal access to education.

One of the priorities for the Polish educational system, which faces difficulties of low levels of investment in education, some teacher resistance to reform initiatives and demographic changes (Kaczara, 1997), is closing the gap between the richest and the poorest and providing equal opportunities for all. Civil society needs an open discourse about all critical issues; ignoring inequality threatens the young democracy. It is impossible to build a healthy political system in which some groups are educated in a way that prevents them from speaking for themselves (Bourdieu, 2004). The aim of this study was to enquire into teachers' attitudes towards controversial behaviour noticeable in schools in various areas, such as relations with students, the educational process, extra-curricular activities and equal educational opportunities for all. The issue of gender as a criterion for differentiating students, although also analysed, will not be discussed here because of space constraints.

Method

The research focused on the question: do schools prepare future citizens differentially, depending on superficial labels such as 'talent' or 'income'? This question comes from the expectation that critical actors in the educational system harbour strong and often hidden stereotypes about particular groups of students. Over 600 teachers were asked for opinions about their profession and school practice. The questionnaire was constructed following conversations with experienced teachers, and included many questions concerning the reality of school practices.

The working hypothesis was based on the statements:

- teachers treat individual students differently and
- they are unaware of the critical effect of this behaviour on students' learning processes.

Study results – the role of the teachers

Educators should base the school – its program, mission, educational values and the teacher's role – in the social context. The teacher should understand the evolution of school and school procedures as a part of a historical dynamic, in which different forms of knowledge, social structures and beliefs are seen as the clear-cut outcome of specific class or group demands (Giroux, 1998). Nevertheless, it is essential teachers place their beliefs and values in a wide-ranging context. A teacher is simultaneously a value, an aim

and a tool of educational policy. His or her task is not only to pass on knowledge and values, but also to organise and inspire young people. Teachers' activities aim at the future of societies (Banach, 2000). Unfortunately, most teachers focus on present and everyday situations in school, concentrating on meeting high demands and surviving in a jungle of regulations and expectations from the educational authorities, students and their parents: this results in a lack of a broader perspective in their view of school and often causes situations that are difficult for both groups, students and teachers.

Teachers in the classroom

We asked teachers to define their level of acceptance of various behaviour described in the questionnaire. The questions can be divided into groups related to different problems in teacher's work. This paper concentrates on the equality of students, the learning climate and the motivation of students.

The group of questions concerning equality include such typical problems of putting less effort into working with a class assumed to be less capable than another class in the school, concentrating mainly on gifted or good students. The questionnaire asked whether putting less effort into a class regarded poor would be acceptable. Most teachers did not accept this (90%), though some tried to justify the circumstance, one pointing to an example 'when a whole class has no ambitions and interests, they do not want to study and going to school is only a sad obligation'. Some teachers said that it was a challenge to work with poor students, but not everyone wants to be a *Don Quixote*, especially when 'the effort engaged appears to be a never-ending job and there seems to be no more energy left'. It was often pointed out that 'teachers are not wonder-workers, and if a student does not wish to learn, he cannot be taught'. However, most teachers expressed strong disapproval of such behaviour, quoting principles of equality and ethics.

Comparing these results with teachers' opinion on working with gifted students, there is a polarisation of opinion: more than half (55%) consider extra work with gifted students inappropriate, though 34% claimed that it was nevertheless acceptable as a norm. A small group were undecided (8%): the situation is unclear for teachers and students (Figures 1 and 2).

Respondents explained their acceptance of this by quoting the principle of ensuring a 'proper level of education' for the less gifted, and emphasised that to work with gifted students was a duty teachers must fulfil. One said it was acceptable provided that the extra attention was given after school. Some teachers called this 'individualised teaching'. Those who were uncertain or unwilling to accept it blamed educational authorities, whom they said encouraged teachers to do this by praising those who taught 'school contest winners', and headteachers who concentrated on such outcomes of pedagogical work.

These contrasting opinions suggest that the mission of a public school, and the role and duties of teachers, create an area of specific value chaos and require serious debate in Poland. An important problem is unequal access to education caused by some teachers behaviour, which influences the distribution of knowledge: this has important implications for ethics and corruption. Typical behaviour is obstructing and hampering certain students' access, or only supporting some students. In practice, this means not getting involved in work with weaker, poorer students or students without family support. Teachers, sometimes unwittingly and sometimes in good faith, lower the requirements or ask easier questions and give simple problems to those considered less gifted. Similar

Figure 1: Acceptability of making less effort teaching a class with students of lesser ability

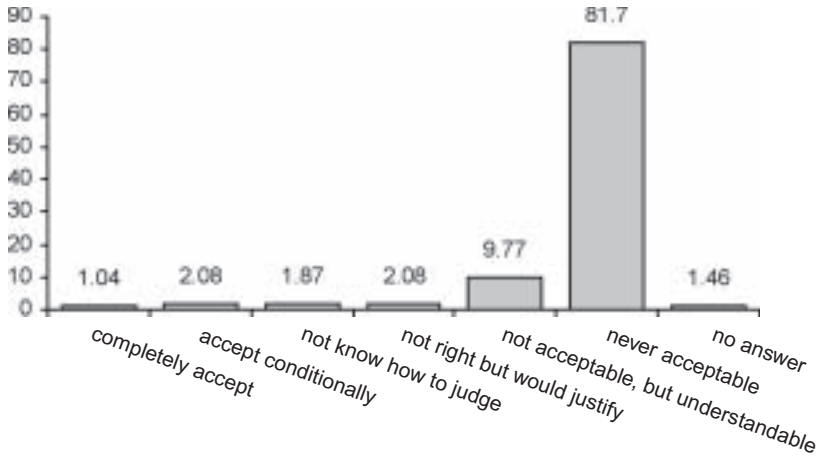
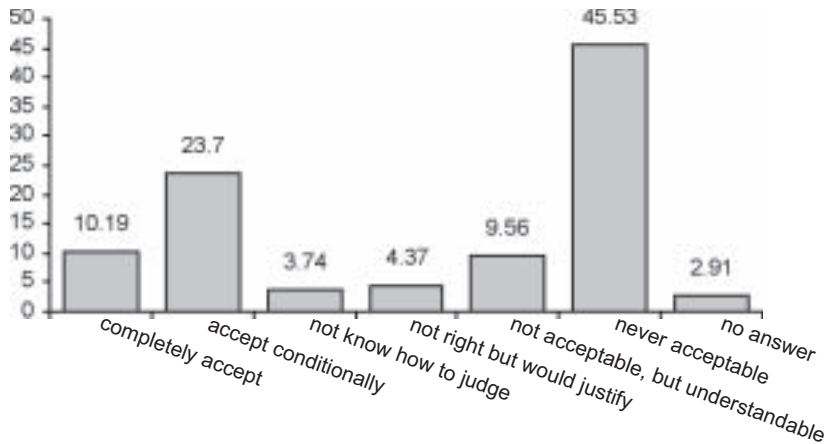


Figure 2: Acceptability of concentrating one's efforts on working with gifted or able students



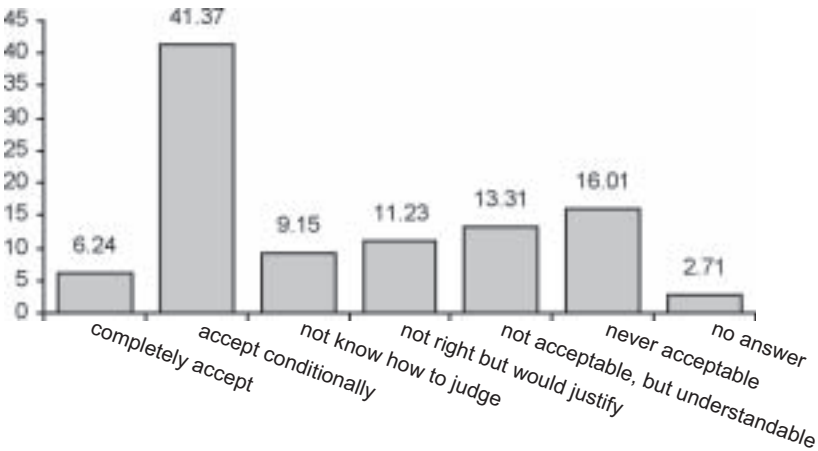
behaviour is introducing more ambitious educational routes for more able students, offering extra classes and teaching in a more attractive way to very good students (such as participating in school science competitions). Some teachers assume a class to be less gifted on the basis of intuition or suggestions.

¹ In charts from 1 to 5 columns from left to right mean: *I would accept it completely, I would accept it under certain conditions, I would not know how to judge it, I would think it is not right, but I would justify it, I would not accept it although I would understand reasons of this behaviour, I would not accept it under any circumstances and no answer.*

Creating a learning community is the second issue analysed in this paper. School climate and working atmosphere are crucial elements in creating successful results. The essential factor influencing the school climate is the way teachers approach their students: the ability to convince students that education (teaching and learning) is a common responsibility, a creative process in which teachers and students are partners and not enemies needs to be stressed. Learning is a process in which students and teachers recognise problems together. One of the most persistent problems respondents have to tackle is who is responsible for the effectiveness of the educational process, and whether school is an all-embracing place where a learning and teaching community can be established.

To probe teachers' beliefs concerning these dilemmas, we asked the question: 'Should teachers blame students for their failure to live up to expectations (e.g. by saying: you haven't done this)'. 29.3% of the respondents dismissed such an attitude, 20.3% had some doubts, and 47.6% accepted this attitude.

Figure 3: Acceptability of blaming students for not living up to expectations (*you've not done your homework, you've made no effort, etc.*)



Teachers justified their responses by pointing out that students should also feel responsible for the quality of their knowledge, and that they should be made aware of this. Teachers said students should take the blame if they fail, and teachers are entitled to tell them so. Those who do not want to make students responsible for their lack of success often said it was the teacher who knows what and how to teach, so she or he should help the student catch up.

Creating a flourishing learning community, in which each member knows their responsibilities, is crucial for facilitating learning. Undoubtedly most of the responsibility for this rests with the teachers, even if they sometimes try to excuse this with popular statements such as their students 'don't want to learn'; 'don't care'; or 'it's beyond me'. Such an attitude might be harmless, but a few teachers feel quite comfortable adopting an 'I-don't-care-whether-they-want-to-learn-or-not' position. They seem to overestimate their students' abilities to make mature decisions, and not understand how inadequately

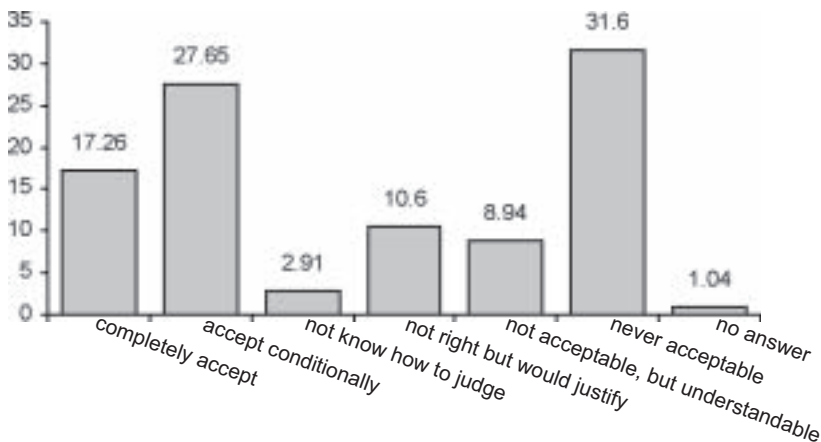
students have been equipped for this task. Clearly students without proper support from their families are in a situation of significant disadvantage compared to those who receive such support.

The third issue researched was financial inequality. State-financed schools provide only basic educational services and a limited school curriculum: if parents want more services, they are responsible for sharing the costs. We considered two aspects of the additional fees charged to parents: charging fees for extra-curriculum classes when the school is under-financed, and additional private tutorials given to students.

State schools frequently charge extra fees for extra-curricular instruction. 44.9% accepted this strategy with few reservations: 40.5% objected to it and doubted its lawfulness. The research results show clearly that although taking parents' money to provide wider educational services remains highly controversial, parents, teachers and local governments often accept this in the absence of alternative solutions. Some parents can afford to buy better education for their children while others cannot, so how much equal access there is to state-provided education is open to question.

Many respondents stressed that state-provided education should be free, no matter how broad a curriculum had been designed. Those who accepted charging extra fees agreed that they should be small. No-one accepted that everybody should be eligible for the same free education, and it is clear that, in the face of permanently inadequate financing, this ideal is unfeasible.

Figure 4: Acceptability of charging fees for extra classes (extra-curricular classes, sport activities, etc.) when the school is under-financed

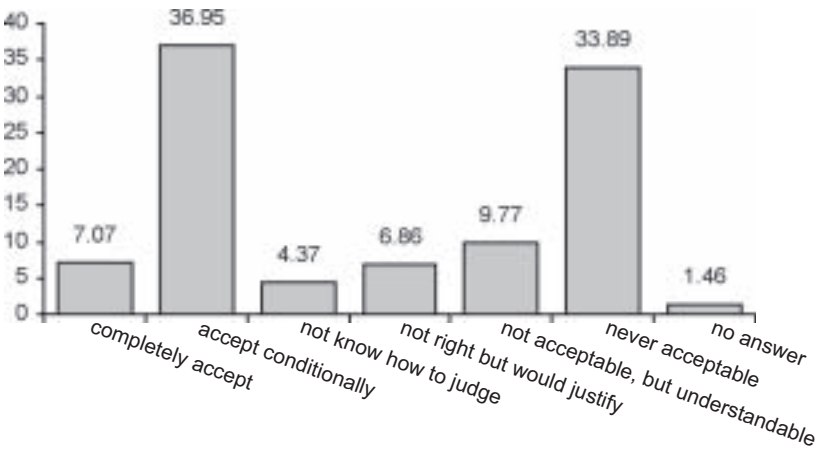


Giving private tutorials to students from the teacher's school is another controversial area, open to question on ethical and financial grounds. Only 7% of the respondents accepted it as right without reservation, but 36.6% did so with some reservations, and 9.8% did not accept tutoring students from the same school, but rationalised such behaviour. 33.4% rejected completely any form of private tutoring of their students or students from their

school. These results indicate a sharp division between teachers: almost 44% of those questioned accepted private tutoring of their students and the same number did not accept such practices.

Respondents who accepted the private tutoring of students by teachers from the student's school claimed that these tutors better understand the student's needs. If the tutor is not the student's regular teacher, such a situation is perfectly acceptable. However, those who objected to such tutoring claimed that a teacher may put a student under the pressure of negative assessment of progress or may try to conceal the ineffectiveness of their teaching performance.

Figure 5: Acceptability of giving tutorials to students from the teacher's school



Almost half of the teachers approved of private tuition given to students from their school. No matter how hard one tries to resolve the moral dilemma of private tutoring, it defies a long-term and comprehensive solution.

Conclusion

Teachers often do not consider the need to support their students equally: they may not perceive themselves as a critical part of education process. Teachers use stereotypes and have simplified visions of reality. They admit that they spare a lot of time and energy for talented students, but should be more aware that their task is to inspire all kinds of learners, not only the best.

Teachers admitted that they divide students into categories of good and weak, and do not treat them on an equal basis. They tend to label them. The student is not only faced with this superficial ranking, but also with negative motivations – the most common way of encouraging students to work harder. Teachers are aware of this, which is a good sign, but no one knows how it affects class communities.

There is no discussion on the role of public education and the role and responsibility of teachers among Polish educators. Apparent injustice (such as gifted students getting more, and the less gifted getting less) is regarded as natural. It should be emphasised that teachers alone should not be blamed: the system does not help students lacking family support. From a social point of view, school is more important for those who have problems or those who do not attend extra classes – they need to be helped more.

Teachers were ambivalent about whether schools should charge fees for extra classes, and over 40% accept giving private lessons to the students attending the school they work in. This could reflect the philosophy of a free labour market, transferred to schools, or the lack of a bond between teachers and schools. This situation also arouses the suspicion that it is in teachers' interest to make their school work badly. Some teachers, working badly, give private lessons to their students as an opportunity to increase their income.

For many years parents have been contributing substantially to the well-being of their child's school, whether directly through money or in providing different services, to help schools in a state of permanently inadequate financing. It is understandable that the local community supports and becomes involved in the issues of the local educational system. However, when this involvement leads to excluding some students from certain educational activities, then the slogans of 'equal access to education' and 'balanced educational standards' across the country are seen as inadequate.

Suggestions for further action

Educational systems have improved over recent years in almost every country. Being well-educated means having the ability to acquire knowledge, to improve, to search for and select information, and to use modern technologies and communicate in foreign languages. Teachers are very important partners wherever these attempts are made. Are teachers in Poland able to change their attitudes in order to help the society to face new challenges?

Teachers do not understand the principles of public schools. They do not manage to treat their students in the same fair way. They approve of parents paying for extra classes. They can see their limitations and shortcomings clearly, but do not want to comment on them. Drawing wide-ranging conclusions may be risky, but it seems that there are also teachers who are aware of the tasks they have to fulfil, who are full of energy and eagerness. It is difficult to estimate the proportion who do not work effectively and who have a bad influence on others.

Here is a list of suggestions to improve the situation.

- improve preparatory work with future university students who want to become teachers,
- provide a system of support for young teachers,
- encourage cooperation in small groups of teachers (work analysis),
- share ideas (lessons, evaluation, acting with students),
- invite experts and students' parents to discuss controversial school problems,
- talk about teachers' work with other teachers.

This research is an attempt to stimulate discussion about the role of attitudes and values in securing equal opportunities. A first step for this process in schools should be teachers discussing the problems described here – starting from these kinds of reflection would be the most beneficial and useful outcome of this research.

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