Teachers' strategies for professional activities in the conditions of neoliberal educational reality

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Abstract

Similarly to many other countries, what has been spreading in Poland for about two decades is the global ideology of market neoliberalism. This takes place alongside the aiming at bigger effectiveness of education with the use of some procedures typical of the business sphere. Simultaneously, an excessive focus appears at school on the implementation of such top-down imposed directives and the constantly changing legal regulations. This article is aimed at presenting, on the basis of teachers' narrations in qualitative interviews, the strategies for their professional activities which they create in compliance with their perception of the rules and duties ruling the educational space and subordinated to the indicated ideology. Apart from highlighting these strategies, the analysis of the obtained data has made it possible to show certain important consequences, triggered by the respondents' yielding to the dominating forces and by reaching for these strategies.

Keywords: *teacher, teachers' strategies, standardization, neoliberalism, work pressure*

Introduction

With due concern, the researchers exploring Polish school observe the implanting of economic rationality to the educational sphere. This process intensified with the dissemination of neoliberal culture in Poland (Potulicka and

Rutkowiak 2010). Among other things, this brings about the tendency to financial economizing with the simultaneous increasing of the quality of outcomes. Following this, there is a tendency that dehumanizes educational institutions – they are treated as enterprises which provide services, follow the rules of thinking and managing typical of the business sphere and give consent to treat a human only through the lens of the capital (Szkudlarek 2001). Schools are treated in an instrumentalized way – as a territory where the deals of various agents of the social and individual life are fulfilled. This has consequences for the individuals functioning there and is particularly fateful to learners and to the professional practice of teachers.

Under the claim of increasing the quality of education and objectivized evaluation of learners' results, neoliberalism brings into the school reality some developed standards of teaching. The tools for implementing them are the imposed teaching contents and standardized tests, which make it possible to compare the results of particular schools or school districts. The policy of intense control and the accountability of schools appears as well, in which the ongoing discussion and expert opinions are omitted (Heertum, Torres and Olmos 2011, Rudd and Goodson 2017) and the pedagogical costs of standardization (among others explored by Linda McNeil 2000 or Amanda Datnow et al. 2006)[1] are ignored. The growth of neoliberal influences significantly reduces the possibilities of democratic school management (Potulicka and Rutkowiak 2010) – the teachers embedded in it are subjected to the pressure generated in the process of educational economizing. They face such threats as: excessive concentration of their professional efforts on the parameterization of the quality of schoolwork and paying attention to the effects of education, unreflective efforts to achieve the indicated and desired learning outcomes, etc. This is shown e.g. in Beata Zamorska's studies, in which she discovered that the ways of handling problems at work, chosen by her

respondents, are often compliant with the model of an efficient office clerk and are associated with reducing one's role to the institutional framework (Zamorska 2008).

A lot can be said about the manifestations and effects of the imprinting (on education) of the neoliberal order, however – this is not the fundamental object of discussion here. In the context of what is signalled above, it seems crucial to undertake studies concerning teachers' place in the educational reality created in this way – how they understand this reality and their position in it, as well as what strategic activities they undertake. This is important due to the need for recognizing and understanding how particular teachers (who are members of larger educational communities) function within reality, across different neoliberal educational spaces. As the architects of school undertakings of learners, teachers have substantial influence on their learning process and on their educational fate. There are many studies on teachers' strategies for work with learners (e.g.Nyborg et al. 2020). Yet, my research shows the strategies undertaken by the surveyed teachers as related to the external conditions of their professional functioning (which are created and transformed along with the spread of neoliberal influences and which trigger e.g. the introduction of standard curricula or the assessment of teachers and schools with the use of standardized indicators)[2].

Therefore, my goal in this article is to show the strategies (identified in interviews) for their professional activities, which they create on the basis both of calculating the externally generated (neoliberally inclined) rules that are binding in the educational space and of their own position in it. The notion of strategy is understood here in Pierre Bourdieu's sense – as an effect of some dispositions shaped by social necessities typical of a particular space, as some

combinations of activities which spontaneously aim at adapting to its requirements (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001).

Before discussing the teachers' strategies, the methodological foundations will be characterized of the research analyses, which are presented here only in segments[3].

Methodological foundations of the research

The respondents' professional strategies, which are reflected upon in this study, constitute just a small section of the analyses of the collected data within the aforementioned research project. It was generally aimed at reaching for teachers' everyday experiences alongside with an attempt to understand their subjective interpretations and attributed senses. My intention was not the mirroring of the respondents' professional reality but searching for its manifestations in their closer or more distant (e.g. occurring several months earlier) experiences described by them (Gallagher and Zahavi 2015). It can be said that the goal was rather an attempt to construct an interpretative image of teachers' daily routine. Reaching for those experiences was possible owing to the qualitative interviews, called by Krzysztof Konecki in-depth interviews (Konecki 2000), with nineteen Polish teachers from schools of different (primary, lower- and upper-secondary) levels. All the teachers are female, work in urban or rural schools in Silesia and Lesser Poland voivodeships and teach various subjects or are teachers of integrated early school education. The decision to collect data in this way was associated with the belief that, owing to this, it would be possible to get to the world of daily routine experienced by the respondents (German: Lebenswelt) (Kvale 2004). The number of respondents resulted from the embedding of the conducted research in the imperative paradigm, the specificity of which is associated, among other things, with the depletion of the resultant field during exploration (Hammersley and Atkinson

2000) and with the saturation (Gibbs 2011) of the categories emerging during the analyses[4]. The respondents were selected through snowball sampling. Initially, it consisted in one's indicating the next person after the interview (Babbie 2008). In my opinion, these recommendations both encouraged the new respondents to participate and reduced their feeling that I am a stranger (not from the circle of people teaching in schools), which brought about some trust right in the beginning (Konecki 2008). Aiming at an access to teachers' various experiences and heading for the fullest saturation of categories, after a while – I asked my respondents to indicate interviewees who differ from the previous in regard to certain qualities (e.g. their professional rank, type of school in which they teach). However, these qualities did not gain explanatory power in the analyses.

The data analysis was initiated already while transcribing the conducted interviews. I started with creating some ordered computer text files (Lofland et. al. 2006). Being aware of the necessity of avoiding freedom in analysing the collected qualitative material and the need of applying particular principles (Stemplewska-Żakowicz 2005), the analytical tools recommended by Graham Gibbs – i.a. descriptive coding, categorization, creating more analytical and theoretical codes (Gibbs 2011)[5].

Teachers' strategies for professional activities

One of the superior categories (Gibbs 2011) emerging in the analysis of the conducted interviews is the pressure of top-down regulations and imperatives. This category (among some others, such as e.g. the motives for taking up the teaching profession by the respondents or their applied model of "being a teacher") is clearly visible in all the conducted interviews and the surveyed teachers' strategies discussed later in this study seem to be some kind of

concepts of adaptive activities in the face of the demands and pressures imposed on them. The indicated sources of the pressure could be classified as: (1) supreme forces dominating in the educational sphere, (2) the policy of the central educational authorities and the influences of the school supervision organs (in Poland, these are mostly boards of education), (3) local organs which manage school education, and (4) school head-teachers, who are mostly viewed as the guards in the system of calling teachers to account.

As regards the supreme forces in the educational sphere, the forms of exerting pressure which were indicated in the interviews were the following:

- the necessity to adjust the work of schools as public institutions centrally managed by the state to the specificity of an enterprise in the private sector;
- the comparison of schools based on the exam results achieved by learners (school rankings).

The following forms of pressure from the central educational authorities and the organs supervising schools and teachers emerge from the analysed interviews:

- centralized standardization;
- imposing a rigid curricular regime;
- growing duties associated with the increasing documentation.

In the light of the analysed narrations, the practices which trigger pressure from the local administration organs are the following:

- money-saving practices at the cost of education;
- creating unfavourable work conditions in schools – e.g. too large classes;
- measuring the quality of school and teachers' work with standardized tools and the pressure on learning results.

Finally, school head-teachers, viewed as those who exert pressure and supervise teachers' professional functioning, use such forms as:

- authoritarian management of schools and domination over teachers;
- permanent control over teachers' work.

While recognizing the ruling forces in the educational sphere and the resulting necessities and maintaining the willingness to stick to the teaching profession, the examined teachers reach for their own ways of adjusting to its requirements – their strategies for activities. The analyses of the respondents' narrations made it possible to distinguish several strategies. In the further part of this article, these strategies will be characterized, which will be supported by some fragments of the respondents' utterances that, in my opinion, best illustrate particular strategies.

The strategy of "teaching through tests and for tests"

By applying this strategy, teachers indicate their submission to the imposed standards[6] and the autocratic orders of the powers that dominate and rule the educational sphere. As subjects located within it, they cannot see any other possibility than to submit to focusing their own professional activity on learners' achieving good results in the imposed tests. The respondents' narrations are rich with the descriptions that illustrate this, for instance:

> Well, in technical secondary school […] we are already burdened with the matriculation exam […]. And here you need to do, um, strictly for exams, simply. You have to do strictly for exams what is later required at exams (Melania).

What seems to be the foundation for the need to focus on preparing learners for external tests (largely intensified in the final classes of particular educational stages) and for such an orientation in viewing respondents' professional duties is the teachers' fear, revealed in the interviews, which mostly concerns losing

their job or the their learners' results in outer exams. In other words, the fear identified as a person's specific reaction to the environment and classified as a basic emotion primarily aimed at protection (Turner and Stets 2009), in this case, becomes the foundation for the respondents' activity:

> This is one huge nightmare. […] And stress, stress – whether there will be this job or not (Beata).

In the light of the interviews, it can be said that sometimes teachers' fears are fuelled with the interpretations of some cases of harassing teachers who are unable to adjust their work to the requirements of the control system – those whose learners do not achieve satisfactory outcomes in outer exams. In this field, the respondents noticed such practices as the head-teacher's oral reprimand in the presence of the whole teaching staff or moving teachers away from teaching a particular subject.

Regardless of the school in which the interviewees work, the use of the discussed strategy is wide-spread – there was only one narration in which this way of taking care of one's professional location was not mentioned. The activities focused on dealing with the knowledge tested in external examinations for learners and on improving the skills verified in these exams is compliant with this strategy. This takes place alongside the directive obliging the learners to acquire (learn) the knowledge and skills selected in this way. This can be seen in the descriptions of some conducted lessons. The respondents also reveal a common practice of excessively high requirements for the learners (especially those who are subjected to external exams in a particular school year) in solving test tasks and examination sheets. The lessons conducted by the examined teachers largely involve the group or individual solving of examination tasks. Learners then do not work with coursebooks or other didactic means but with test sheets, which are later checked and discussed. One of the respondents (a

teacher of early school education) showed this clearly while talking about how – for several months every Thursday and Friday – she used this "method" to properly prepare her learners for the examination, which resulted in success (her learners achieved good results in the competence tests, carried out in the third class of primary school). This was appreciated, among others, by the head-teacher.

In the other teachers' narrations, some descriptions of classroom work with the use of this new "method" also appear. Although it is not present in expert methodological works, it has found its place at school through being used by the respondents within the discussed strategy. The method is also transferred to home learning, because the respondents admit that they assign solving exam sheets as homework. Quite frequently, the respondents admit to making learners stay at school after classes to practise examination skills (solving tests):

> […] all the time the prospect of the matriculation exam is hanging somewhere above my head, so I work a lot with exam sheets from previous years […]. At first, we do this together in classroom and I show them how it more or less works, and then I still give them homework or a class test consists in filling such a matriculation sheet (Melania).

Quite often, teachers conduct additional unpaid classes with single learners or in a small group of learners who have problems with the acquisition of the contents which are subjected to testing. There are teachers among the respondents who admit that they prepare learners for tests at some extracurricular classes (interest clubs) which they run. There are also some respondents who confess that they substitute homerooms with lessons of the subject that is verified in examinations.

The strategy of "achievements and proving oneself"

The strategy which I term the strategy of "achievements and proving oneself" is

also the respondents' specific reaction to the pressure of achieving high test scores by learners and of the system of evaluation of school and teachers.

What seems worth noticing is that the teachers talk about learners' achievements as of their own successes. They feel the authors of these achievements and identify with them, paying a lot of attention to learners high positions in subject olympiads and competitions (sometimes just to the participation in them) and their very good scores in external examinations:

> A lot of joy comes with such different successes of my kids. That I can master something with them, they can do something more. For instance, at the mathematical olympiad […], last year I had two positions in "The Mathematical Kangaroo", […] so I had two such achievements […] (Katarzyna).

It is very rare in teachers' narrations that they treat as such successes the progress made by students with learning difficulties or some successfully solved problems concerning moral education.

The analysis of the respondents' statements allows for confirming that their identification with learners' success becomes the drive that motivates teachers to a lot of effort , for instance, to preparing learners for competitions. Teachers widely describe this in their narrations, simultaneously emphasizing their own contribution and showing the personal costs they bear because of this (e.g. work at home with the use of private appliances at the cost of leisure time or time for family). In many cases, their reward comes with the feeling of professional satisfaction and joy due to learners' high positions in competitions, as well as with the praise of their efforts from the head-teacher of their school. This motivates the respondents to intensify their professional activity aimed at organizing such didactic situations (often within extracurricular classes) which might contribute to further success of learners and their own success.

Frequently, this requires from teachers the use of various approaches for encouraging and stimulating learners so that they want to prove themselves and to compete with others in competitions and olympiads. Yet, in the light of the teachers' narratives, it turns out that only individual students show a spontaneous willingness to undertake such activity.

However, the analyses of the respondents' statements show that the perceived chances for teachers' success in the implementation of the strategy of "achievement and performance" are not equal. In their opinions, this is due to the environmental location of schools (some institutions are located in more economically or socially privileged areas, and others in less privileged ones) and students' potentialities (their social, economic or cultural capital) often related to it.

Apart from aiming at learners' achievements, some teachers revealed in the interviews their pursuit of proving themselves in intensive work involving the engagement in various school enterprises, such as preparing the so called open days (for prospective learners, their parents, representatives of local authorities which administer schools, etc.).This often takes place at the cost of learners' education when the teacher has to take care of something during lessons and learners spend that time, for instance, in the school common room. One respondent even said that "There is no time for learning at school". She is one of the six respondents who unwillingly use this strategy. However, although they notice and talk about the negative aspects of proving oneself and of engaging in a variety of activities not strictly related to the educational process, they do not withdraw from using this strategy. This results from these teachers' awareness of the necessity to use it in order to avoid negative consequences associated with its abandoning – from their point of view, head-teachers do not

treat with favour those who "do little additional things at school", who do not prove themselves. Such interpretations are brought about by the respondents' negative experience or such experience of their colleagues who have turned out to be less willing or reluctant to prove themselves by "hard work" and engagement in the activities welcomed by the head-teacher.

The willingness to prove oneself by intensive work (not necessarily associated with supporting learners' cognitive processes) and high achievements co-occurs with the rivalry among teachers, which the respondents describe. This appears in their narrations which directly specify the relations among the teaching staff:

> […] we've faced such, not other, times, when there is this competition, this rat race, this struggle, so that I could be, could exist, could be seen, […] often, if only possible, even at the cost of someone, a colleague, so that he does not sack me, so that I had lessons, a full time job. […] There is envy, undermining and secret reporting […] (Ewa).

The respondents' narrations are rich with similar descriptions of rivalry in the teaching staff, of mutual animosity and antagonism.

The "with parents' hands" strategy

Another strategy used by the respondents has been symbolically called "with parents' hands". It overlaps with the two previous strategies and is used by the respondents to keep their professional location.

While undertaking the motifs of learners' parents, the examined teachers revealed, among other things, their expectations from parents. Generally, it can be said that they mostly consist in a large parental participation in children's learning:

> […] I demand from parents that they should devote time for the child as regards learning (Dominika).

This participation is not to be limited only to the general formula of supporting children in education, but is supposed to grow in the field of parents' learning together with the child at home and motivating the child to learn. In the light of the narrations, this should take the form of rewards and punishments with the stimuli available to parents – in general, rewards and punishments. In the respondents' opinion, teachers have limited possibilities in this field as they can manage only with marks as a form of motivating students to learn. Thus, according to the respondents, parents should check and supervise their children, control not only their knowledge but also homework and their widely understood preparation for lessons. It is also their duty to take active part in preparing the child for competitions and examinations. These obligations are viewed as naturally written into being a parent and are – in the respondents' opinion – particularly required today, when learners have no inner motivation to learn or, due to their age, are unable to fulfil school demands (e.g. they forget about homework or do not take appropriate school accessories from home). Therefore, parents should see to all this and – in the case of older learners (whose truancy is more frequent than of younger children) – take special care of their children's school attendance. Reaching for the strategy "with parents' hands" does not go together with the teachers' reflection upon their own activity aimed at stimulating students' interests in getting to know the surrounding world. Oriented towards the transmission of knowledge and promoting expository methods in their work with learners, the respondents do not show care for increasing young people's cognitive curiosity and getting them interested in teaching contents – or, as Jerome Bruner (1965) says, making the contents worth learning. In the narrations, they do not reveal any activity that would suggest their care for creating such situations for learners in which they could make discoveries, be amazed or doubt. The teachers do not reflect much on whether the teaching process and requirements for learners are adjusted to

their intellectual abilities and personal aspirations. In the situation when young individuals are not able or do not want to fulfil these demands, the respondents turn to parents, from whom they expect the stimulation of their child to learn as well as their personal engagement in it. This orientation of the respondents co-occurs with ignoring the fact of excessive parental participation or parents' doing things instead of their children (mostly younger ones) in homework.

The examined teachers expect that parents will substantially participate in achieving (by teachers and school) the top-down imposed goals (especially those associated with learners' acquisition of particular knowledge or skills) without sparing the family capital – e.g. by organizing private tuition for a child if needed. This is positively recognized by the respondents in the context of the possibilities of parents' support not only offered to their own children but also to school:

> Everything is sponsored by parents. […] I've already told them to buy multibooks (Zofia).

The strategy of "doing things instead of the learner"

Willing to prove their active engagement and high quality of their implementation of the imposed (and accountable) obligations, the respondents not only expect active support from parents and their taking over children's education at home, but are also ready to substitute learners' activity with their own action. This tendency is particularly seen in the case of early school education teachers. One of them describes this in the following way:

> Every idea and its implementation means our and possibly parental engagement, but not of children. If any project was to be made, a chronicle or album, it was obvious most of the work would fall on me, not the children. Whether any celebration or other things – they will not prepare a plan, nor search anything out, I do everything. […] I have to be with these kids all the time as they won't work

without this. One needs to guide them, see to them, do many things instead of them (Mariola).

This quotation aptly reflects the obvious need (shared by the examined teachers of initial classes – age 7-9) for doing things instead of children in the activities which should be undertaken to a possible extent by learners. This obviousness is associated with the respondents' belief that their learners, due to their age, are not able – to an extent that will satisfy them and their school – to engage in such activities as e.g. preparing an artistic event, to make decorations or at least a poster. In the narrations of teachers in classes I-III of primary school, many activities of that kind have to be done by the teacher. Learners can only become the performers of teachers' creations, especially of those concepts the implementation of which will be presented for a larger audience than the class community.

The respondents' descriptions reveal their various activities related to the implementation of the strategy of "doing things instead of the learner". For instance, one of them tells how she makes wall newsletters herself and hangs them at the school entrance and, therefore, earns the head-teacher's praise. It can be said that the teachers who want to present their work at school and outside it do not include learners into conceptual work and even do certain tasks instead of them. Those teachers are also unwilling to engage into some activities the children who – in their opinion – might not be able to handle a task or can make problems while implementing a particular undertaking. The words of one primary school teacher (of classes I-III) can serve as an illustration of this:

> There was a situation where I didn't want to involve her in this EU performance, because I found that it was hard to collaborate with her (Beata).

The conducted analyses have shown that doing things instead of learners takes place not only at the stage of early school education but also in the next classes of primary school (classes IV-VI) and even later – in lower-secondary schools, which ceased to exist in Poland not long ago. The respondents' descriptions of their daily work reveal an image of the learner's school work steered by teachers.

Another form of the respondents' doing things for learners are the teachers' attempts to substitute learners' inner motivation with external stimulation. However, teachers often find out that their activities in this field bring no effects. They notice that by substituting learners' self-inspiration to learn, they are unable to fill the gap brought about by inner motivation. In a feeling of their helplessness, they roll out "heavy cannons" in the form of exerting pressure through the permanent control of results (including negative marks) or interventions of other people (the head-teacher, pedagogical advisor and parents):

> A small boy who was always tired. […] That was the way – a phone call to his mum. This was motivation for him: "Karol, I'll pick up the phone if you don't work" (Maria).

The strategy of "doing what is ordered"

The teachers' narrations are rich with the descriptions of numerous top-down imposed obligations, the sense of which they cannot understand. One respondent's words illustrate this very well: "We are doing something the sense of which we can't see". To a large extent, this refers to fulfilling the excessive documentation, which – in the respondents' opinion – is still growing and consuming more time at the cost of the time devoted to learners:

> A big problem for me are these papers, more and more of them, not necessarily
> sensible ones (Maria).
> Papers, they take away time and willingness to the right work, as once school
> used to exist without that whole paperwork and it existed. […] I had more time,
> willingness […] to prepare lessons. […] Where is the learner among all this?
> Bureaucracy, a show (Katarzyna).

In the teachers' opinions, the duty to fill the excessive and unnecessary documents causes that the learner disappears from the central place which they should occupy, because instead of teachers' intensified activity aimed at teaching their learners, the care for largely developed bureaucracy appears. What is present in the narrations, apart from the frustration triggered by this situation, is teachers' tiredness with the necessity of paper work beyond the settled limits.

Some qualities of strategic activities associated with "doing what is ordered" are manifested in what teachers view as their superior professional duty – the strict and inconsiderate implementation of the core curriculum and mastering the skills which it indicates. The respondents expose their feeling of embarrassment and professional limitation caused by this obligation. They express their negative opinions about the curricular framework and point to its weaknesses. In spite of this, in their everyday work, the teachers (whose fulfilment of this obligation is controlled) in fact focus on implementing the syllabuses based on the ministry core curriculum of general education:

> It means, you know, for us – the core curriculum is sacred, yes. The core
> curriculum is sacred as we are checked by principals […] (Agnieszka).

In addition to the surveyed teachers' focus on implementing the core curriculum, they all revealed their preferences related to working with expository methods (knowledge assimilation) in the classroom, which generally

reduce students' activity to acquiring a particular area of knowledge or developing specific skills (Okoń 2003). These preferences are illustrated by the following examples of interviewees' statements:

> Most often, as I said, I usually give a lecture, most often I talk […] (Ewa).
> […] of course, each lesson is based on a certain framework that I create, that is, certain contents must be given and must be acquired by them […] (Dominika).

From my respondents' point of view, actual transmission of knowledge is enhanced by classroom discipline. They express this in the following way:

> […] I have to as if drill these kids, discipline them slightly, yes […] (Zofia).

The strategy of "caring for the attractiveness of school"

The respondents recognize as their another professional necessity the need for bringing their work and the work of their schools (as educational state institutions) closer to the specificity of the way in which institutions work in the private sector. A symptom, which the teachers revealed in the interviews, of this adjustment is their engagement in schools' care for competitiveness and promotion in order to attract learners to school (in the times of a demographic decline) and keep their own professional functioning.

What can be treated as a symptom of activities associated with presenting a particular school as an attractive place worth considering while undertaking or continuing education is the organization of the so called events. In the case of primary school teachers, these are mostly celebrations, to which e.g. parents are invited. It turned out that events organized in lower- and upper-secondary schools were slightly different, as the representatives of local authorities are more frequently invited so that the school can be presented in the best way. In the light of comparative analyses, it can be noticed that some of the surveyed teachers show reluctance to this way of "taking care of the attractiveness of their school". This results from the difficulty of undertaking such activities to

promote schools outside and those related simultaneously to the transfer of top-down knowledge and shaping learners' skills (needed and controlled in external exams):

> I can understand that it is necessary to promote, present, but within certain limits, certain norms, not that there is a huge event every second day, as such events should be prepared and obviously these are teachers who sit up at night and prepare everything, not the children (Agnieszka).

However, the respondents cannot see any chance to give up the implementation of this strategy of due to some outer determinants and some stimulators that encourage to use it:

> […] something is going on here at school and causes that, unfortunately, lessons are forfeited […] this is something for something. School aims at promotion as well. It is known that there are fewer and fewer young people, there is this demographic decline and to attract youth, you need to make efforts to promote your school (Anna).

In the opinion of many respondents, the attractiveness of a school is enhanced by establishing profiled classes (e.g. with the sport profile) or integrated classes. This also increases its competitiveness in comparison to other schools and provides more chances for keeping jobs.

One teacher of integrated early education differs in her reflections from other respondents, who despite their use of the strategy of "caring for the attractiveness of school", also express their unwillingness to apply it. She verbalizes her standpoint firmly and enthusiastically and is sure that all the efforts aimed at the promotion and good presentation of school are justified. Quite convinced of the right use of the discussed strategy, she talks about the

need for using "publicity stunts" by schools. Her words reveal the awareness of the educational market, on which a learner becomes a desired economic good[7]:

> [School – M.Z.-B.] needs [publicity stunts – M.Z.-B.] in the sense of getting into the educational market to gain learners in school, because if there are learners, there is a chance for a job and school will, simply, survive. The bigger the promotion, the bigger such a background associated with different forms of educational activity, the more, I think, it attracts […] (Beata).

This respondent is not an exception, as other respondents talk about school in the language of economy as well:

> […] the principals wanted to make the presentation of these projects at the same time, to make a huge event, to sell the school well again, to show it well […] (Ewelina).

Although there are differences in the respondents' willingness to reach for the strategy of "caring for the attractiveness of school", this heterogeneity disappears in the case of another strategy – "of striving for the learner", which overlaps with the one discussed here.

The strategy of "striving for the learner"

The analyses of respondents' narrations allow for stating that another activity which they recognize as their duty is the undertaking of strategic activities aimed at "struggling" for a learner. It appears in the context of the constantly decreasing number of school learners. The respondents commonly decide to strive for recruitment – in order to keep their jobs, teachers make efforts to attract learners to the schools where they work:

> Now, a learner is a customer, we haven't got… this is not obvious that they will come to our place. We have to fight for this client – in such a way that marketing should be used at school at the present moment (Ewelina).

In primary school, the most frequent form of implementing the discussed strategy are the so called open days, prepared by teachers, or some similar initiatives to which children's parents are invited. This is to show that a particular school can fulfil the expectations of both them and the future learners. In their narrations, the respondents show that they are ready to devote, and they in fact devote, to this their time after work. With the full approval and encouragement of the head-teacher, most of them do their best to convince not only learners but, first of all, parents of their worth:

> And it is so: for example schools, well money follows every learner so now head-teachers strive for each year. We have a population decline and they fight for every learner, even every parent. They do everything to satisfy parents […] (Agnieszka).

They do this so that parents could want to send the child to their school and so that any teacher's employment will not be reduced – as one of early school education teachers says – "to rescue ourselves".

Another teacher of early school education says that, apart from the open days, she and some other teachers use a different way to "strive for the learner" – they introduce their educational offer in kindergartens in order to present there the best image of their school in various ways:

> One or two teachers have three kindergartens in charge and take care of them, which means: we invite them to our school's open days, we organize tours around our school for them, […] I send some invitations and then these kindergarten kids also come to us for some games and playing or for shows. So […], how to say it, we pave the way, […] and I think this must have… has an effect (Beata).

The same respondent admits that, with this "struggle" for learners in the background, misunderstandings among teachers take place – even within the

same school (it happens that teachers, competing in this field and wanting to win over learners, discredit each other in the eyes of parents of their potential students).

In secondary schools, the implementation of the strategy of "striving for the learner" is aimed mostly at learners themselves. Various initiatives associated with it intentionally address young people – possible learners – not their parents. Therefore, it can be said that the specificity of the prepared and implemented forms of attracting learners to school is slightly different here:

> Now the head master made a plan already in March – we're going to have a happening in the market square […], when we're also promoting ourselves, as this is such a time when youth […] get ready for, for secondary schools, choose these schools, so it is also through an interesting form that we try to encourage them to come to us […] (Anna).

Conclusion and discussion

It should be emphasized that although the analyses presented here cannot be generalized (due to the applied qualitative research strategy), they contribute to the international discourse concerning the impact of neoliberal influences on education and the individuals situated in it. In the interpretation presented here, it is revealed how these influences shape the way in which the respondents view the teacher's profession (e.g. professional tasks and duties or even its essence) and how these influences provide orientation to teachers' activities. Apart from teachers' strategies for these activities, which are revealed and characterized in this study, an attempt might be made to notice some of their effects or consequences – not only for teachers but also for learners and the quality of their educational process.

The descriptions of teachers' daily routine to which I have listened reveal the sense of increasing limitation of autonomy[8] in many dimensions of the

respondents' professional life. In the light of their narrations, they appear to be externally steered individuals, dominated and deprived of chances for self-determination executors of what is imposed by various powers which manage education (e.g. educational or local authorities). However, according to Christopher Day (who refers to the theoretical findings, among others, of Joan Talbert and Milbrey McLaughlin), autonomy is an inherent quality of every professional, co-occurring with expert knowledge, ethics of service and engagement (Day 2008). Thus, it can be said that the phenomenon of teachers' deprofessionalization takes place here. This conclusion seems to be confirmed by their verbalized feeling of permanent control and supervision over their work, which not only strips them off professionalism but also infringes their dignity. Deprofessionalization is facilitated by the respondents' acceptance of the fact that learners' results in external tests[9] are a measure of their teaching work[10]. As the presented research shows, to a large extent, this makes teachers focus on preparing learners for solving these tests, which in turn makes the efforts of both teachers and learners acquire technological rather than humanistic features.

What seems to be a common reaction of the respondents to the pressure concerning learners outcomes and achievements, as well as to the system of evaluation of schools and teachers created in this field, is the declared necessity to intensify their work. This is particularly evident in the case of growing bureaucratic duties. While talking about them, the respondents reveal their tiredness and reluctance[11] (seven of them admits to the thoughts about changing their professional career), associated with work beyond the worktime limits, especially as – from their point of view – paperwork does not bring significant value to practices strictly connected with didactics and education. It should be noticed that an excessive intensification of work may – according to Michael

Apple and Susan Jungck – trigger other consequences that strike at professionalism, such as lowered creativity and a false feeling of the uselessness of professional training (Apple and Jungck 1992). The revealed feeling of unwillingness or professional exhaustion might be related to the described fact of the disappearing feeling of commonality and solidarity among the closest colleagues and to its replacement with e.g. unhealthy competition, lack of possibilities of changing teachers' subordinated position in the relations with head-teachers and of undertaking any protest against their commands and expectations, which the respondents evaluate negatively.

In the interpretation provided here and in the light of the presented research results, some consequences (affecting learners) of teachers' yielding to the outer pressures of neoliberal nature can be identified. It turns out that, apart from teachers' deprofessionalization, the analysed narrations reveal a decreased status of the learner and of learners' developmental needs (teachers seem to pay more attention to e.g. implementing the core curriculum and less to the interests and cognitive needs of students). This is substantially lower in comparison to the rank attributed today to the outcomes of the educational process, measured with the use of standardized tools. What also appears is the disturbed balance between equipping learners with knowledge and skills, or rather shaping their ability to use them automatically at tests, and the education full of care for learners' socialization, with preserving their individuality and right to self-determination. Teachers focused on preparing learners for solving tests also neglect the activity aimed at developing learners' individual passions and interests at school.

The analyses of the empirical material also show the respondents' predominant use of expository methods. This results in neglecting other intellectual processes than memorization and reproduction of the acquired contents. What also occurs

is restricting the possibilities of the birth of a different (from the traditional) educational order, which would break away from transmission-based and monologue education, in which school is to transmit the valid knowledge and teachers should guard it and take care of its acquisition by learners pursuant to their privileged position[12]. Moreover, basing the respondents' work mostly on expository methods arguably generates learners' lack of interest in school education, which the majority of respondents complain about. For the examined teachers, the solution is reaching for the strategy "with parents' hands", which is manifested here by the expectation that parents should be an external but efficient catalyst of the birth of their children's willingness to school education. By using this strategy, I argue the respondents also restrict the development of learners' independence and their taking responsibility for guiding their own cognitive processes. Parents who do things instead of children, among other things, reduce their feeling of self-effectiveness, which is important as regards shaping their culture of learning. In J. Bruner's approach (Bruner 2006), this is associated with the acquired skill of managing one's own intellectual ability, with the feeling of the efficiency of one's own actions and the related readiness to take the responsibility for implementing them. Both parents and teachers should enable learners to experience self-effectiveness, as owing to it children acquire skills associated with time management, planning, and self-control over one's own learning. When either parents or teachers take over the initiative in this field instead of learners, they impair children's will and development of learning due to depriving them of the indicated element. They also impair the feeling of a sense of what and why children do this, as well as their awareness of the goals of the tasks and activities they perform. In this way, children's motivation to learn and their proactive attitude to familiarize with the world are weakened as well. The true nature of this process gets lost – being wrong, making mistakes, the experience of failure or dissatisfaction after

doing a task, and then improving and perfecting it, and – first of all – the possibility of active work and making changes in the surroundings according to learners' abilities. Students are also deprived of an important component in the learning process – an illumination related to independent breaking through human ignorance in a certain field of reality, to overcoming a theoretical or practical difficulty by a person studying a certain field of knowledge. A *sine qua non* of such an illumination, of unveiling the solution to a problem, is the learner's authentic engagement and individual effort aimed at this. Satisfaction from such an illumination is not experienced by learners who do not make efforts from the youngest years by acquiring the knowledge on their own. Such an illumination will not be experienced by those who are given the knowledge transmitted in various ways. Teachers focused on the transmission of knowledge, mostly using expository methods, deprive learners of such sensations – they do not make the learning process attractive and do not provide intellectual stimulation and satisfaction. They seem to forget what Paul Freire pointed out, that true knowledge of reality is achieved by means of acts of invention and owing to praxis. Therefore, such education of learners should not have the form of banking education described by the respondents, related to the distribution (by teachers) of certain deposits in the form of knowledge, and in the case of learners – with its accepting or storing. It is supposed to be an education that poses problems[13] related to the real world of learners.

Moreover, while subjecting learners to "artificial feeding"[14]
without making efforts to educate them how they should "feed themselves", they feel helpless in the situation when the crammed information chase away and the memorized schemata fail or flow away from the learner's memory.

To sum up, it should be said that the strategies of teachers' activities, revealed in the analyses of the collected data, confirm that the examined teachers are not

able to oppose the influences of neoliberally tinted forces which govern the educational space. They are unable to avoid such negatively evaluated symptoms of yielding to their pressure as: excessive focus on the parametrization of the quality of schoolwork, too much significance attributed to the learning effects measured with the use of standardized tools, and the instrumental treatment of other educational agents.

Notes

[1] Linda McNeil has found that curricula designed without taking into account the theory of learning, child development theory, or understanding the epistemology of the subject matter limit students' creativity. Moreover, centralized standardization increases inequality, the gap between education for middle-class children and education for poor and minority children. Amanda Datnow et al. came to the conclusion that standardization lowers the level of education, because students, among other things, do not have the opportunity to carry out ambitious educational projects, but are obliged to work with materials that prepare them for tests.

[2] In my opinion, the research results presented here broaden the existing research reports on the activities of teachers focused on preparing students for tests (Cooper 2009), also showing other strategies of teachers who bend under pressure – by e.g. "doing things instead of the learner".

[3] This has been done within a more extensive project implemented by me, the whole of which is presented in my work "Nauczyciel w polu szkolnym – w świetle teorii Pierre'a Bourdieu i nauczycielskich narracji [The teacher in a school field – in the light of Pierre Bourdieu's theory and teachers' narrations]" (Zalewska-Bujak 2017).

[4] This results in finishing the data collection when the respondents no longer raise new topics, so subsequent interviews do not provide new knowledge about the subject (Kvale 2004). Thus, there are no new categories that require different directions of analysis in the distinguished research areas or new explanations.

[5] The use of these tools is compliant with the stages of analysis proposed by Steinar Kvale, namely: the coding of senses, their condensation and interpretation (Kvale 2004).

[6] It should be emphasized that, while the research was conducted, there was a more highly developed system of external examinations. Currently, there are examinations at the end of primary school (after the eighth class) and the end of secondary school – matriculation exams and vocational exams (in technical schools).

[7] The distribution of the educational subsidy by the state depends on the number of learners in a particular school. It is granted each year and is calculated per one learner.

[8] The depriving teachers of autonomy is focused on by Guy Standing (Standing 2015).

[9] What should be stressed here is the existence of some research results which overthrow the myth that the introduction of standardization in the measurement of strictly specified knowledge and skills improves education (McNeil 2000). The studies also question the validity and reliability of the evaluation of educational achievements with the use of tests (Datnow et al. 2006).

[10] The respondents' internalized belief in this fact was also confirmed by Grażyna Szyling's studies. She found out that the lower-secondary school teachers whom she examined recognized learners' results in external examinations as a measure of their work. They attribute less significance to learners' achievements e.g. on the classroom forum (Szyling 2008).

[11] Such a loss of enthusiasm is associated by them with e.g. unfavourable emotional states, which often result in teachers' burnout and distorting the work of both teachers and their schools (Sęk 2012, Tucholska 2009). Teachers affected by burnout manifest unfavourable behaviour and attitudes to learners, which undermines the process of their education. Christopher Day mentions e.g. reduced effectiveness in passing knowledge to learners, a low level of collaboration with them and of establishing positive relationships with them. This results

in the rise of learners' behaviour problems and increases teachers' stress, which is increasingly getting more similar to the self-winding cause-and-effect spiral (Day 2004).

[12] Dealing with professional careers and examining another group of teachers, Hanna Kędzierska reached the same type of conclusions (Kędzierska 2012).

[13] It is worth to point out the existence of many studies that show the high educational effectiveness of methods that activate students and promote these methods. One of them is the article by Daphne D. Minner, Abigail Jurist Levy and Jeanne Century, in which the researchers show i.a. that the use of methods (by teachers) with greater saturation of seeking activities (of students) increases their level of understanding the scientific content. Inquiry-based learning (problem formulation, experiment design, data collection and analysis, and concluding) that emphasizes students' thinking and taking responsibility for their own learning is correlated with the acquisition of scientific concepts. (Minner et al. 2010).

[14] This notion was coined by Charlesa Handy to express the filling of young minds with possibly the biggest amount of information (Handy 1999).

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