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Instability of Teachers' Working Conditions in Poland. Findings from the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP)

*Niepewność warunków pracy nauczycieli w Polsce. Wyniki badań
z Międzynarodowego Projektu International Successful School
Principalship Project (ISSPP)*

Abstract: This study is a part of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP). It addresses the issue of successful school principals' leadership as seen through the prism of the successes achieved and maintained by schools. In this paper the selected results of the research, which was conducted in Polish schools, are presented. The paper focuses on the issue of the challenges faced by school principals in ensuring the quality of education and building school capacity in the face of the demands of the changing school environment. The research used a case study method with a range of data collection techniques, including one-to-one interviews with individual selected staff (deputy principals and teachers), and semi-structured in-depth interviews with school principals. The data collection techniques were designed according to the guidelines of the protocols of ISSPP project. The challenges faced by school principals have been identified and described. Among the challenges referred to as "unstable working conditions for teachers" the following were identified: the legal basis governing teacher's work and school operations, the core curriculum, demographics, teacher salaries, professional promotions and teacher performance evaluation. The conditions that were identified by the school principals may impinge on the phenomenon of teachers leaving the profession or teacher turnover, which in turn affects the quality of education offered to students in Polish schools.

Keywords: changing school environment; instability of teachers' working conditions; successful leadership of school principals; Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP); quality of education and school capacity building

Abstrakt: Prezentowane badanie jest częścią międzynarodowego projektu Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP), który podejmuje problem skuteczności przywództwa dyrektorów szkół widzianego przez pryzmat osiągniętych i utrzymywanych przez szkoły sukcesów. W artykule omówiono wybrane wyniki badań, które zostały przeprowadzone w polskich szkołach. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono problematyce wyzwania, z jakimi mierzą się

dyrektorzy szkół w zapewnianiu jakości edukacji i budowaniu potencjału szkoły w obliczu wymagań zmieniającego się otoczenia szkoły. W badaniach zastosowano metodę studium przypadków z wykorzystaniem szeregu technik służących zbieraniu danych. Badania pozwoliły na rozpoznanie i opisanie wyzwań, z którymi mierzą się dyrektorzy szkół. Wśród wyzwań określonych jako „niestabilne warunki pracy nauczyciela” znalazły się m.in. podstawy prawne regulujące pracę nauczyciela i funkcjonowanie szkoły, podstawy programowe, demografia, wynagrodzenia nauczycieli, awanse zawodowe i ocena pracy nauczyciela. Analiza wypowiedzi dyrektorów szkół pokazuje, że wskazane przez nich warunki mogą rzutować na zjawisko, jakim jest odchodzenie nauczycieli z zawodu czy rotacja nauczycieli, co ma wpływ na jakość edukacji oferowanej uczniom w polskich szkołach.

Słowa kluczowe: zmieniające się otoczenie szkoły; niestabilność warunków pracy nauczycieli; skuteczne przywództwo dyrektorów szkół; projekt Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP); jakość edukacji i budowanie potencjału szkoły

INTRODUCTION

The research presented here is part of the international Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP), which addresses the issue of successful school principals' leadership. This issue is seen through the prism of the successes achieved and maintained by schools (Day, 2022). At the core of the ISSPP study is the assumption that among the main challenges faced by school leaders are: attracting the best teachers to schools; ensuring school and teacher development; ensuring school quality and teacher engagement are maintained; ensuring school leadership development; and taking a strategic short- and long-term approach. For the ISSPP, it is assumed that school principals may perceive their role differently in different contexts, and their ability to influence is likely to vary according to their level of autonomy and responsibility. It may also depend on their leadership capacity to create the right conditions and build cultures that promote learning and development in their schools.

The article focuses on the challenges school principals face in providing quality school education in a rapidly changing world, a world that is increasingly perceived as risky and unstable. Analysis of the data collected has enabled to identify the challenges faced by school principals. Due to the limited scope of this article, I will only highlight some of them further below. These have been defined for the purposes of this discussion as “unstable working conditions for teachers”. Among the group of these conditions/challenges, I will outline and discuss the following: the legal basis governing the teacher's work and the functioning of the school, the core curriculum, demographics, teacher salaries, professional promotions and teacher performance appraisal. These challenges are part of the demands of the changing school environment.

RESEARCH APPROACH, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS METHODS

The research conducted used the case study method (Yin, 2017) and the interview protocol developed within the ISSPP project (Day, 2022), which was adapted

to the educational context in Poland. The cases involved in the research project were selected according to the selection criteria proposed in the ISSPP protocol document (Day, 2022, p. 11). The study involved five school principals, including three primary school principals and two secondary school principals, who are successful and recognized in the community as effective leaders.

The study was conducted between February 2021 and November 2022 and consisted of three phases of data collection. The first stage (February–March 2021) focused on document analysis, which is a form of qualitative research (Bowen, 2009; O'Leary, 2014). The following types of documents were considered here: 1) school documents, e.g. newsletters, annual reports, etc.; 2) strategic school development plans; and 3) electronic copies of a questionnaire on the activities that schools initiated, developed and implemented in response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Thematic analysis was applied to strategic documents and the questionnaire collected from schools. In the second stage (February–June 2021), two semi-structured individual online interviews with successful school principals were conducted and also online focus group interviews with parents, school council representatives and students. The decision to organize online interviews was dictated by the circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the third stage (June–November 2022), individual interviews with selected school staff (deputy principal and support staff) and semi-structured in-depth interviews with school principals were conducted using pre-prepared interview protocols. At this stage, the interviews conducted helped to deepen some aspects of the study.

Data analysis followed an iterative process of inductive and deductive coding. The data collected during the interviews were analyzed using a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2003; Denscombe, 2007). The phenomenological approach enabled to focus on how successful school leaders interpreted situations, experiences and constructed their meanings in the context of their activity as leaders. The analytical work focused on reconstructing the research participants' experiences of their successful school leadership. The analysis of the data allowed dominant categories and themes to emerge (Braun, Clarke, 2006).

FINDINGS

The analysis of the obtained material showed that the surveyed school principals, when indicating the challenges they face in providing high quality education and building school potential, focused largely on the requirements of the changing school environment.

The themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews consequently direct our attention towards requirements that can be described as external factors affecting school leadership and school quality. Taken together, these factors were identified as unstable working conditions for teachers. They consisted, among other things, of topics such as:

- Legal basis – fundamental change,
- Core curriculum,
- Demography,
- Remuneration,
- Professional promotions and teacher performance appraisal.

I will discuss these themes below, illustrating them with quotes from study participants.

LEGAL BASIS – FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE

The participants of the study in their interviews devoted a lot of attention to the issue of the legal basis regulating the work of a teacher and the functioning of a school. Analysis of the data indicates that it would be difficult to present in one sentence the situation of Polish education in this respect, because much depends on the interviewee. Nevertheless, the statements of the respondents showed that no matter what benefits the changes in the educational system bring, there is no doubt that radical changes are a significant source of stress for teachers. Moreover, frequent changes in the position of the Minister of Education do not serve the Polish school system.

To introduce this problem, it is worth noting that since 12 September 1989, the Ministry of Education in Poland has been headed by 22 ministers, which gives statistically 18 months of rule for each of them. This raises the question: is it possible to build a clear vision for the development of education and implement it in 1.5 years? The answer is all too obvious.

It is not an easy challenge, which was mentioned very emotionally by the interviewed school principals. This is evidenced, for example, by the following rather extensive statement by the headmistress of a primary school:

Please note that the Ministry of Education has been headed by four ministers over the past eight years. During this time, they managed to prepare, pass through Parliament and implement two new acts, which were the Education Act and the Introductory Act. They were able to amend these acts many times. But it did not stop there. They were so determined that they also amended also those acts stagnant in the system, namely the Education System Act, the Teachers' Charter, the Act on Financing Educational Tasks. They issued dozens of regulations that sometimes reversed the existing solutions by 180°. However, the key change was the liquidation of middle school, after only a dozen years of operation, restoring the previous system from the early 1960s.

Another of my interviewees, talking about the change in the basis of the law governing schools, pointed out that the change in the school system entailed the second major change in the school network in this century, which caused quite a stir in schools in Poland. This principal stated:

Again, well-equipped facilities from the point of view of a municipal secondary school became redundant, again there began to be a shortage of teaching hours for science teachers, but also for humanities teachers, again small, ineffective eight-class schools had to be created from six-year primary schools, and the act allowed classes to be conducted in combined classes, as had been the case several decades earlier in communist Poland. Meanwhile, teachers of physics, chemistry, biology, geography or history switched to a combined teaching post system and began to roam between schools, often travelling many kilometres. These are not good changes to ensure a stable environment for education.

The recalled principal further emphasised in the interview that “in the current situation, many teachers do not see the point of continuing to fulfil themselves in the school classroom. They are considering leaving the teaching profession in favour of other, more stable professions”.

CORE CURRICULUM

During the interviews, school principals addressed the topic of core curricula. One of the school principal pointed out:

It seemed that the minister in charge of education, who also manages the teacher training universities, would finally lead to a more synergistic understanding of the education and upbringing system in Poland. I am afraid that these expectations were exaggerated. Especially since the minister in charge of education requires a teacher to be familiar with issues that were not taught in a university personally supervised by the same minister. This can also be seen in the core curriculum of subjects and subject blocks.

The Regulation on the core curriculum for pre-school education and the core curriculum for general education for primary school, including for pupils with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities, general education for level 1 trade school, general education for special needs school and general education for post-secondary school (Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 14 February 2017) is, as one of the interviewed principals emphasised, “an A4-sized book of more than three hundred pages. The very title of this act catches one’s attention with its baroque-like character”.

Principals, referring to their role and the challenges they face in building the quality of school education and developing the school’s potential, emphasised that an analysis of the core curricula gives the impression that “teachers are treated objectively in them – as if they have not had many years of specialised studies and are

completely ignorant about their subject. The detail of the content contained therein is overpowering”, as one principal stated. Another one pointed out that “the minister approves textbooks for individual subjects, which also guide and prompt, which in a certain way limits the freedom and inventiveness of the teacher himself”.

Meanwhile, according to the study participants, if we think about quality education, the teachers should develop their own, or use a ready-made curriculum. And this is what the study participants encourage their teachers to do. Nevertheless, sometimes such a programme is, as one school principal interestingly said, “a compilation of necessity and possibility. And some teachers, when talking about curriculum execution, often mean »reworking« the textbook, which not all ambitious teachers are comfortable with”.

DEMOGRAPHY

When addressing the topic of changes in education law, respondents said that a serious problem for modern schools is demographic changes affecting the organisation of school work. It is worth noting that, according to the estimates of Statistics Poland (*Główny Urząd Statystyczny*, GUS), between 2015 and 2025, there will be 316,000 more children and young people in the population potentially covered by compulsory schooling and compulsory education (12 grade levels aged seven to 18) (GUS, 2022). However, by 2035, this number will decrease by more than 700,000 compared to 2025.

The study participants indicated that the demographic change is very much felt by them at school, as the issue concerns, as one respondent stated, “duplicating middle and high school grade levels”. In addition, the respondents have to cope with a problem that is now strongly felt at the junction of primary and secondary school, namely the duplication of grade levels, which has its origin in a reform initiated a few years ago connected with the implementation of a law stating that six-year-old children start compulsory education instead of seven-year-old children.

The interviewed principals claim that the ministry is well aware of the ongoing demographic changes affecting education in Poland. That is why, probably due to the expected decrease in the number of pupils in schools after 2025, the current Minister of Education has returned to the issue of, as one of the respondents mentioned, “early retirement for teachers, which, in addition to continuous changes in the educational law, does not have an encouraging effect on the teaching staff”. Another principal, raising this theme, said, “the ministerial message reinforces the negative mood among teachers. The minister is talking about the need for layoffs among teachers, and I am supposed to provide my teachers with a sense of stable working conditions. This is a really difficult task”.

REMUNERATION

The surveyed principals showed their concern about teachers' sense of material stability (balance). According to them, teachers find it difficult to strike a balance between the needs of, for example, their families and the ability to meet these needs with the remuneration they receive for their work at the school. It is worth noting that achieving this balance is not too easy, because, as we know, expectations can fall short of possibilities and not at all because possibilities are too limited, but because expectations sometimes outstrip life. Principals highlighted that teachers, when faced with this kind of dilemma, consider whether to change profession or stay in it.

According to school principals, the level of teachers' salaries in Poland is one of the lowest in Europe and does not make working in the teaching profession attractive. School principals try to contribute to the professional satisfaction of teachers in their daily work, as they are aware that teachers who are fulfilled at work will show more professional commitment. Nevertheless, the observed decline in the prestige of the teaching profession, the deterioration of teachers' working conditions and their relatively low salaries compared to other intellectual professions require, according to principals, action at the state level. The issue is further compounded by the image of the teacher in the media, which was aptly put by one respondent when he said, "the image of the teacher in the media does not promote the profession. The teachers working in my school are very committed and dedicated to their work. The thing that hurts them is how Polish teachers are portrayed in the media. The image of a teacher who works little and expects exorbitant remuneration is hurtful".

PROFESSIONAL PROMOTIONS AND TEACHER PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

At the beginning of the 2022/23 school year, two ministerial regulations that are important for teachers came into force: a change in the system of teachers' professional promotions (Regulation of the Minister of Education and Science of 6 September 2022 on the attainment of professional promotion grades by teachers) and a change in the way teachers' work evaluation is carried out (Regulation of the Minister of Education and Science of 25 August 2022 on teachers' work evaluation). The surveyed school principals referred to the changes with some distance. One of them said:

As far as the professional promotions of teachers are concerned, the introduction of a new degree for senior teachers, which has been advocated for several years, in order to bring

them closer again to the necessity of self-education has resulted in... the replacement of the four existing degrees with two new degrees, or rather old ones. In place of the trainee and contract teacher, a teacher without a degree, i.e. a novice teacher, entered the school for four years. The other two degrees, those of appointed teacher and certified teacher, remained unchanged. I, like all principals, have a lot more work to do with the new teacher evaluation system, and as far as teacher quality is concerned, I have misgivings as to whether these new measures are capable of actually changing anything in schools in Poland.

Another principal took up the issue of teachers' remuneration in the context of the new regulations. He said:

What non-legislative presumptions can be deduced from this change? Firstly, two starting salary groups have been abolished, so it can be announced to the world that novice teachers earn decently. Secondly – in my view – it is a vote of no confidence in school principals who have been leading promotion proceedings beyond the initial two placements. And at these points, the option of removing a weak teacher from his or her job was extremely rarely exercised. Such school solidarity, or perhaps necessity, when there was a lack of applicants in the labour market. This left only two bodies in the procedures: the chairperson and the pedagogical supervision. But after all, they are the ones who have led to the situation where we have a majority of certified teachers in school, i.e. those who have achieved everything.

In the context of the quoted statements of the interviewed principals, it is worth adding that during the placement, which currently lasts for almost four years, the teacher, among other things learns the organisation, tasks and principles of functioning of the school, conducts classes assigned to him/her and participates in works related to the realisation of didactic, educational, custodial and other statutory tasks resulting from the needs of the school and the local environment, observes classes conducted by a mentor or another teacher, improves competences in particular with regard to the education of students with special educational needs, including particularly gifted students, evaluates his/her own work and uses its results to improve further work, and shares knowledge with other teachers.

It is characteristic that at subsequent levels a teacher should demonstrate knowledge of the law on the organisation, tasks and principles of functioning of the school in which he/she prepares for the teaching profession, possess the ability to conduct classes in a manner ensuring proper implementation of the statutory tasks of the school, in particular the realisation of the core curriculum, skilfully recognise the needs of students and individualise teaching, apply knowledge of psychology, pedagogy and didactics in their work, have knowledge of the students' environment and ability to take into account problems of the local environment and contemporary social and civilisation issues in their work, as well as ability to use multimedia and IT tools at work, in particular during classes. These two quotations are only an example of the conceptualisation of expectations for teachers, which mount during the course of a teacher's work.

The regulation concerning teachers' performance evaluation introduces nine mandatory and 15 additional criteria for this evaluation. According to the surveyed principals, the teacher evaluation criteria are too "detailed and complicated" and the evaluation "has a superficial and formal character". Furthermore, the scoring systems introduced in the evaluation set by the principal are an additional mixture of qualitative (criteria) and quantitative methods (scoring system) and make the whole procedure unclear. This can lead to a situation where, as one respondent points out, "teacher evaluation is deprived of its primary purpose, which is to provide the teacher with information on the progress made by him/her and the shortcomings left to be improved".

The situation related to the teacher promotion and evaluation system does not have the effect of eliminating stress for either teachers or principals. Thus, it can contribute to the perpetuation of uncertainty in teachers' work. And this is a risk, as one surveyed principal aptly said, that "many teachers may wish to seek more secure, in the sense of: unencumbered by bureaucracy, employment".

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

A globalised, rapidly changing world is increasingly perceived as risky and unstable. War, violence, environmental disasters, political and economic crises, labour market upheavals – these are phenomena we see every day. Old certainties are being challenged, leading to uncertainty and ambiguity, as seen, for example, in relation to social cohesion, political stability and lasting peace. The geographic, political and economic model of Europe, which has been the synonym for security and stability since the Second World War, has itself become uncertain. Uncertainty also plays a role in individual lives, careers, families and social networks. Such changes have an impact on education systems around the world. Schools are responsible for supporting students' development, for developing their life competences and their ability to act in given social conditions. Considering that in the modern era it is difficult to predict these future functioning conditions of individuals, their development and learning, and that the teachers' working conditions themselves are described by principals as unstable, developing and building school potential for quality education becomes even more challenging than before, as indicated by the research findings presented here.

The conducted research shows that a group of factors that affect the leadership of school principals, referred to as unstable working conditions for teachers, is linked to a phenomenon that has been emerging in Poland for several years, namely teachers leaving the profession, which, in turn, has an impact on the quality of education offered to students in Polish schools. Therefore, the research findings

obtained direct our attention towards the leadership and teachers working conditions (OECD, 2022), and attractiveness of the teaching profession (Madalińska-Michalak, 2021). “Compensation and working conditions are important for attracting, developing and retaining skilled and high-quality teachers and school heads. It is important for policy makers to carefully consider the salaries and career prospects of teachers as they try to ensure both high-quality teaching and sustainable education budgets” (OECD, 2022, p. 329).

Continuous changes in schools resulting from changes in legal basis, along with the increasing requirements teachers have to meet, the negative image of teachers in the media, the detailed evaluation of teachers’ work, insufficient professional mobility (professional promotion system) and relatively low remuneration in relation to other professions are factors that reduce the prestige and attractiveness of the teaching profession. The results of the presented research can be a strong impulse for a serious discussion about teachers in Poland and the conditions of their work. It seems that strengthening the teaching profession by at least investing in the development of teachers and competitive conditions of their employment is now becoming a necessity (see Madalińska-Michalak, 2021, pp. 273–280).

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