

# In-Service Training and Professional Development of Polish Teachers

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## Introduction

The latest reform of educational system in Poland that started in 1999 has brought about extensive changes in all aspects of our system of education. These included structural changes in the school system, transferring the obligation to finance schools to local governments and a thoroughly modified system of assessment. All these changes, the most influential in the post-war history of Poland, aimed at improving the quality of education.

The reformers also provided for a change in teacher advancement procedures. They wanted the system to motivate teachers to permanently improve their professional qualifications and, as a consequence, to raise the prestige and attractiveness of the profession, accordingly to new standards of teachers' education.

Teachers reacted to the reformers' proposals with hope for improvement of their working conditions, but also with distrust towards the new procedures. The new standards of teachers' education in general did not raise controversies among teachers. But one of the widely discussed issues was the newly introduced obligation to document one's professional development that was part of the new professional advancement procedures. Previously, only teachers at the beginning of their career were obliged to collect their detailed lesson plans.

The reform introduced four stages of the professional advancement: probationary teacher, contract teacher, appointed teacher, certified teacher. When starting to work in a school, a teacher enters the path of professional advancement and starts with a traineeship period in order to obtain the degree of contract teacher. However, only after obtaining an appointed teacher level, teachers have guaranteed professional position; they are then employed for an unlimited period of time and some posts in the education system (e.g. headmaster, inspector, teaching consultant) become accessible to them. A higher step on the ladder of professional advancement is

accompanied by a pay rise. Nowadays the minimal monthly salary of a probationary teacher is about 1100 PLN (about 282 €); a contract teacher earns 120% of a probationary teacher's salary; an appointed teacher earns 150% of a probationary teacher's salary and for a certified teacher earns 180% of a probationary teacher's salary.

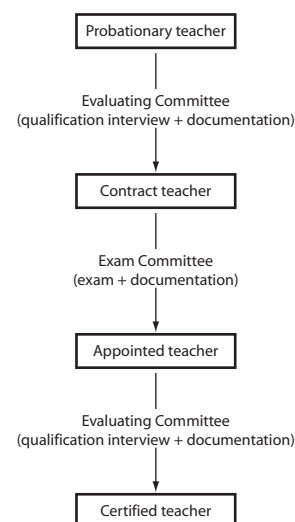


Figure 1 System of teacher advancement procedures

During the traineeship for each level, teachers have to perform various tasks which are characteristic to a particular stage in the development process. The degree of contract teacher is obtained after one-year, while the other degrees are obtained after two years and after nine months. At the beginning of the traineeship, a teacher prepares a plan for professional development and after that, during the traineeship

period, he or she collects documents which prove that the plan has been carried out. After the traineeship the teacher submits a written report to his/her headmaster. The headmaster evaluates the teacher's achievements in consultation with the Parents Council. Subsequently, at the teacher's request, an administrative procedure is initiated.

The teacher's achievements are evaluated by special committees that consist of specialists in a given school subject, teacher's employers (local authorities) and representatives of the supervising bodies. The final result is based on the evaluation of the documentation submitted by the teacher and on an interview (or exam) with the teacher.

The documents, gathered in a file, have to meet the criteria specified in the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Sport. The file has to contain:

- the plan of professional development,
- a progress report,
- an evaluation by the headmaster,
- documents which confirm that the tasks mentioned in the plan of development have been performed (in a written, graphic or audio-video form),
- certificates which confirm that the teacher performed functions in the system of education,
- Certificates which confirm that the teacher attended courses and training sessions.

The file of the teachers, who apply for the degree of certified teacher, also consists:

- written reports of completing selected tasks,
- descriptions and analyses of diagnosed and solved educational problems with students,
- documentation which confirms the participation in the tasks mentioned in the Regulation (e.g. preparing and implementing an educational programme, conducting open lessons, collaboration with the local community, preparing at least two publications or reports, performing the task of an examiner, etc.)

The requirements for the next degrees of professional advancement stipulate the increase of the teachers' professional competence while they climb the ladder of advancement:

- contract teachers can correctly perform the educational tasks, taking into account the specificity of a given school,
- appointed teachers can organize their own work, analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of their actions and correct them accordingly; they apply the latest knowledge in their work; they can apply the provisions of the law of education,
- certified teachers take actions aimed at improving the quality of school work and share their knowledge and experience with other school employees and they publish and collaborate with the local community.

The reform of the system of education has also made it possible for horizontal advancement of teachers. These are realized by performing various functions in a school, e.g. head of class tutors' group, head of a group of teachers of one subject, leader of in-school teacher training improvement. A new phenomenon in Poland is the introduction of mentoring: a teacher who starts work in a school gets support from his or her mentor.

Directly after the implementation of the reform it was made possible for the most active teachers to achieve the highest degree after seven years of work in a school. Currently, the Ministry of Education has introduced compulsory breaks between achieving a degree and beginning a traineeship

period for the next one. The complete advancement route can now be covered in ten years. It is still an open question whether this has silenced the criticism that pointed out that the possibilities of professional advancement for teachers were exhausted too soon.

Currently, the largest part of the Polish teachers is appointed teachers (60%); by virtue of the law, all the teachers who worked in a school long enough obtained this title in 2000. However, their number is constantly decreasing while the number of certified teacher and contract teachers is increasing.

Considering the fact that the quality of education and the success of changes that are being implemented depend on the quality of the teaching staff. It is now time, six years after the reform was implemented – to ask what the teachers' opinion is about the new procedures of professional advancement. The research conducted so far on the subject in Poland is still scarce.

## Methodology of Research and the Study Sample

The study was conducted as a diagnostic survey. The questionnaire was distributed proportionally among teachers working in villages, in small towns and in big cities. Eighty-six teachers responded, including eighteen school headmasters (21%). Most of the respondents were women (94%)<sup>1</sup> and teachers with master degree (67%). Most of them were 31-40 years old, with 11-20 years long work experience. More than half of the respondents worked in a primary school (in Poland these are for students from 7 to 12 years old), in a preschool (28%), junior high school (23%) and high (secondary) school (3,5%)<sup>2</sup>. Among the respondents, the largest group was appointed (60%) and certified teachers (27%); the group of school headmasters comprised only representatives of these two groups. About 44% (nearly half) teachers were following the procedures for professional advancement.

## Results

### Opinions and Attitudes Towards the Procedure

The first part of the survey contained questions about the opinions and attitudes of teachers towards the procedures of advancement which were implemented by the reform and about the personal attitudes towards the necessity to follow these procedures. The respondents were asked to state, retrospectively, their attitude towards the new procedures.

We can see that the largest number of the respondents hoped for an improvement of their financial situation, increasing the professional status of teachers and their professional qualifications. The attitude of many teachers was negative – they were afraid that they would fail to fulfill the requirements and expectations and were anxious about the future.

The current opinions about the professional advancement procedures and the result of the implementation show which of the teachers' hopes were fulfilled or not and which of their fears and negative opinions were confirmed. The trends in the responses are not uniform, which is partly the result of the diversity of school environments and their specific circumstances and of the respondents' experiences. The largest number of the respondents said that the new regulations introduced unnecessary bureaucracy and burdened teachers with unnecessary work. Among the most frequently mentioned advantages, improvement of their professional qualifications and financial situations were commonly mentioned.

The teachers were also questioned about the

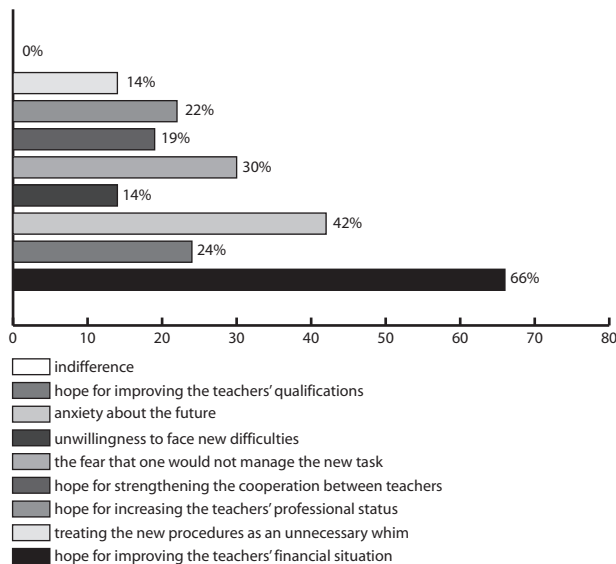


Figure 2 The initial attitude towards the new procedures of professional advancement

comprehensibility of the procedures of professional advancement at the moment when they began the traineeship period. Although more than half of the respondents said they had been able to understand the procedures, as many as 41% of the respondents said that the procedures were not clear. The survey also contained questions about the problems that – in the respondents' opinion – teachers meet during the period of traineeship. The most frequently mentioned answers concerned collecting the documents (37%), describing one's work (30%) and preparing a plan for development (24%). It is clear, that the respondents make a connection between the problems of teachers with the documents rather than with pedagogical practice. Consequently, this may discourage teachers from making efforts to obtain consecutive degrees on the advancement path. The main reason was that they had to collect a huge amount of documents (84%). Fewer respondents, which does not mean that those were incidental choices, feared that they would not find a job, being more "expensive" for an employer (1/4 of the respondents), or they indicated that the traineeship period was too long (nearly 1/5 of the respondents). Some respondents indicated a feeling of competition between teachers as a factor that might discourage teachers to start with the advancement procedure.

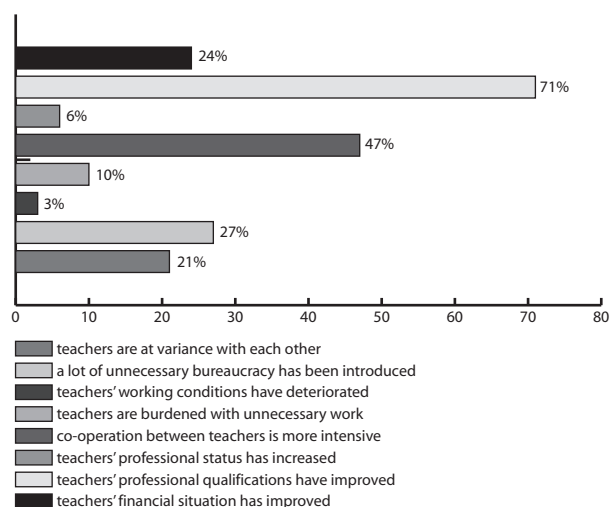


Figure 3 The current assessment of the implementation of the degrees of professional advancement

As the major reason for initiating the professional advancement procedure teachers mentioned the increase in salary (nearly 2/3 of the respondents). A lower number indicated the self-fulfillment, professional ambitions and

hopes for job stability (about 1/3 in each case). Interestingly, it became apparent that the group of headmasters was somewhat different in this respect as they, more than the others, mentioned their ambitions as their motive; none of them mentioned fear of losing a job, while 16% of ordinary teachers mentioned that they feared to lose their job.

Teachers were also asked about their opinion concerning the effect of advancement on the possibility of finding a job. According to 49% of the respondents it is more difficult to find a job for those who have completed the advancement procedure. Some added comments, such as: "The school governing bodies expect the headmasters to employ or give extra hours of teaching to the teachers with the lowest professional status". Only 14% felt that a teacher with a higher degree of advancement would get a job in a school more easily.

The respondents also assessed the effect that the newly implemented procedures had on the relations between teachers. The respondents gave 112 answers: 55% were negative ("they set teachers at variance"; "as a result, the teachers with the higher degrees of advancement become isolated"; "as a result, the teachers who do not make any efforts to advance become isolated"), and 38% positive ("strengthening the cooperation between teachers"; "integration of the teachers' teams"); according to 13% of the respondents, there is no effect.

### Experiences of the Teachers with their Own Advancement Procedures

The second part of the questionnaire contained questions about the experiences of the teachers with their own advancement procedures. Most of the questions were about the effect of the efforts made in order to advance, on various areas of the teachers' lives.<sup>3</sup> Firstly, the teachers assessed the effect, if any, that the advancement procedures had on their educational work during the traineeship period. According to 58% of the respondents, the traineeship period did not affect their work in any way. 38% of the teachers said that the effect was positive, and 3 teachers (not headmasters) said that their work had deteriorated.

A question was also asked about any positive changes in their work as a result of a successful outcome of the advancement procedures and of the new experiences. As many as 43% of the respondents reported that their work has not changed at all. Most of the respondents who indicate that the professional advancement brought about some changes say that they cope better with the educational documentation. Among other less frequently mentioned results we found answers like: better cooperation with parents and with the local communities, conducting interesting lessons and a better understanding of students' problems as well as more frequent use of computers in teaching.

It is clear that when the effect of the advancement procedures on the teachers' development is evaluated by the teachers themselves, 68% noticed an effect, while the remaining group of 29% thought that no such development was observed, including 1/3 of the teachers who strongly denied any effect.

The teachers were most critical about the effect of the advancement procedures on their private lives. As many as 46% indicated that the traineeship period had a negative effect on their private lives, especially on the care of small children. Here is an example statement: "I found a job when I was pregnant. My husband is looking after my small child during my traineeship period because otherwise I could lose my job and might not find another".

### The Quality of Work of the Teachers who Follow the Advancement Procedures

The third part of the questionnaire was about the quality of work of the teachers who follow the advancement procedures. Worrying replies were obtained from the question about the relevance of the documentation collected during the advancement procedure. As many as 56% of the respondents

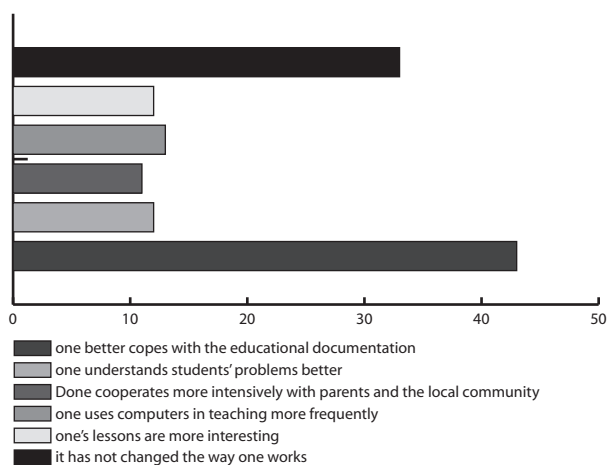


Figure 4 The effect of the professional advancement on the self-evaluation of one's work

answered that part of the documents is absolutely based on fiction. Although the others deny that the documents are not based on reality, only two teachers said "absolutely not". Again, the headmasters' responses stand out; 2/3 of the ordinary teachers say that the documents are fictitious; the headmasters usually suppose that they are based on facts.

The activities that teachers undertake as part of the advancement procedure are said to be "only for show" by most respondents (74%); in the next question, concerning the quality of the documents, the most frequently chosen answer was "they are spectacular, but of average quality" (72%). A high educational value was attributed to the documents by only 23% of the respondents, while according to 8% they do not have any value at all. And again, the headmasters are more optimistic in the evaluation of teachers' activities than the ordinary teachers.

The respondents were also asked to evaluate the quality of the courses they had to take in order to improve their qualifications, and which appeared in great numbers with the new requirements. Apart from the general opinion, the question was concerned with the possibility to get new and relevant information, the presentation of new material in the courses and the lack of useless content or their infantile character. The answers were different, but not too diverse, as a result of limited choice (60%). The most detailed evaluations were positive, but according to 57% of respondents, the courses offer little or very little new or important material; nearly half of the respondents say that most courses present material that the participants knew from their university studies or from earlier courses; 22% of the respondents accused the course organizers of presenting infantile material and material that was more entertaining than educational relevant.

The last question of the questionnaire was: "Are the new procedures of teacher professional advancement an important achievement of the reform of education?" Only 26% of the respondents had a high esteem of the procedures, but only one person very high. On the other hand, 73% gave a negative answer to the question, with 17% choosing the "absolutely not" option.

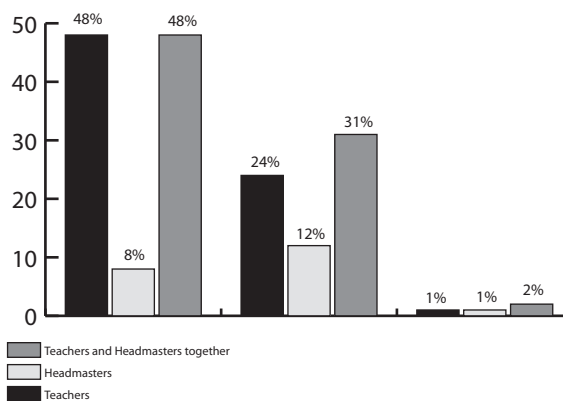


Figure 5 The fictitious nature of part of the documentation

### Conclusions

Most teachers who took part in the survey welcomed the new standards on teachers' education and the new procedures of professional advancement, that were implemented as part of the reform of the education system in Poland and hoped that they would improve their situation. A majority of the teachers started the advancement procedure, meeting the requirements which were an inherent part, and presented their documentation before the committee. However, the teachers are less enthusiastic about the effect of the activities undertaken as part of the advance procedure, although those activities were supposed to motivate teachers to develop professionally. Generally, the advancement procedure is described as existing only in documents which have to be collected by a trainee ("teachers' development on paper"); it is said that the procedure is completely unnecessary in terms of a teacher's everyday work in a school. This is what the teachers wrote about this part of the reform: "More paper, less time to be devoted to students," "A teacher devotes less time to a student because he has to 'produce' documents," "The reform has destroyed the joy of work with students," "Because of the bureaucracy, teachers do not have time to teach," "This is a way to get teachers to work for free."

The respondents had the feeling that the procedure does a lot of damage to their private and professional lives ("I neglected my home and family, I neglected my professional duties," "No time for the family, nervousness, unnecessary expenses," "Because of having to collect the documentation, I neglected my own child," "The reform produced unhealthy competition, working just for show, it has promoted those who speak a lot but do little"). Many of the teachers developed and gained new experiences during the traineeship period, but most of them claim that the benefits do not offset the costs (in terms of money, time and effort). The reasons are

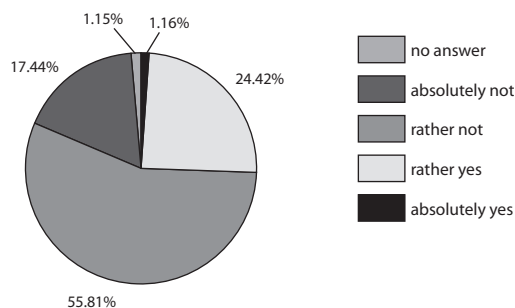


Figure 6 Are the new procedures of teacher professional advancement an important achievement of the reform of education?

the ostensible and superficial character of the activities they had to undertake. This is what they wrote: "From the current

perspective, I have a feeling that teachers make clowns of themselves; "Falseness, fiction, no authority in the evaluating committee; "The traineeship period is a nervous period, it is a burden to feel forced to do something 'only for show'; it did not have anything to do with doing something for one's development; "A mediocre teacher can produce the best of files with documents. The file does not reflect the teacher's skills and abilities".

The most unsettling conclusion concerns the picture of the new advancement procedures as pretending to work. It is not satisfying that, according to the respondents, they have learnt to cope with official documents, as some of the documents are based on fiction. The data confirm the opinion presented in periodicals for teachers that "A lot of young teachers copy the files from their older colleagues, everyone borrows 'case studies' from others; when in need, one can accept an offer from the press or the Internet advertisement from people who 'can prepare a file of documentation in three weeks'".<sup>4</sup> It means that the fulfillment of the new standards of teachers' qualifications is pretence.

The most worrying information about the situation of the system of education in Poland is that although part of the teachers' hopes associated with the reform were fulfilled, this is not translated into improvement of the quality of teaching. As many as 43% of the respondents claim that obtaining the next degree of advancement did not have any effect on their work, while only 12% felt that their lessons have become more interesting and that they understand their students' problems better – these are the areas of a teacher's work which are of interest to the society at large.

The results of the survey also reveal some interesting information about the specific character of the group of headmasters. It is difficult to draw conclusions as the sample was too small. However, the answers given by the headmasters suggest a different perception of the reform by the headmasters compared to that of the ordinary teachers. Generally, the headmasters have a more positive attitude to the reform and to the procedures. It was easier for them to initiate the advancement procedures, they did not have so many problems to follow the procedures; they have more trust in the quality of the teachers' activities and the documentation presented by the teachers. One has to be very cautious not to jump to conclusions, but one cannot help remembering the "propaganda of success" from the previous stage in our history, when problems and difficulties were not much talked about by officials.

At the end of this paper we want to quote another two comments from the teachers: "The advancement procedure does not show the true work of a teacher. First of all, according to the Regulation, a teacher has to document successes and their effect on improvement the work of a school and a teacher. In my opinion, it is not success that affects the quality of a school work, but failures, where everyone has to draw the relevant conclusions. Therefore, the documentation collected in the files is distorted, fragmentary, often based on fiction" and the other – shorter, but emphatic: "We are well educated, badly paid, absolutely dissatisfied!"

The new procedures of teachers' professional advancement, implemented as part of the reform of the system of education in Poland were intended to fulfill the requirements of new standards and help the teachers, whose situation in terms of their salaries and social prestige was not too good, and to students (and, in consequence, to the whole society) by improving the teachers' qualifications and the quality of teaching in schools. The results of the survey show that the reform started to produce disillusionment on both sides. The opinions expressed by teachers were far from enthusiastic and – though balanced – often very critical. Considering the

efforts of implementing the new system and the high financial costs which are the result of carrying out the procedures, the question has to be asked whether such a gigantic social undertaking was worthwhile. Especially as it seems to have produced such poor results.

The survey was carried out among Polish teachers, but the political context and bureaucratic mechanisms are similar to those in other Eastern European countries. Therefore the survey shows certain phenomena which can to some extent explain more general mechanisms referring to the teacher's education standards in other countries. Our results show very clearly the risk of pretending changes in the area of teachers' professionalism when detailed procedures are imposed by order of government without considering the specific activities of the teachers which is not easy to "translate" into the language of documents and reports. Teachers as a professional group were treated in the instrumental and bureaucratic way and, in answer, they behaved in superficial and bureaucratic manner.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In two cases no data.
- <sup>2</sup> Some of the teachers are employed in several schools. Hence, the percentage is higher than 100.
- <sup>3</sup> In this group, calculations were made for the group of 76 teachers, as 10 of them have not started their advancement procedure yet or they are at its very beginning.
- <sup>4</sup> Zieba A. (2004), 'Pragmatyka fistaszka' in: *Nowa Szkoła*, No. 8, 50.

