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Teachers' Professional Identities and Attitudes towards Students' Educational Disadvantages

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Abstract

Teachers have always been the most influential institutional professionals involved in the educational trajectories of students. However, in the knowledge society, the teaching profession is increasingly confronted with social and emotional dilemmas in educating pupils for an individualised life course, which implies a lifelong learning approach. The goal of this paper is to analyse whether and to what extent teachers perceive the growing importance of these new challenges and whether they pay attention to the disadvantages that affect some groups of students. The paper is based on the qualitative analysis of 38 teachers' in-depth interviews and 12 focus groups with 45 teachers in total. The interviews were carried out in Finland, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands as these countries are representative of different school systems (comprehensive vs. selective) and transition regimes. This international sample contributed to addressing the purpose of this paper, which is to contribute to a greater understanding of the complex nature of educational disadvantages and the role teachers play in mitigating or reproducing them.

Key words: *knowledge society, teacher identity, disadvantaged students, educational system, discourses on education*

1. Introduction

In knowledge societies, the educational trajectories of young people have become longer and much more complex due to increasing societal expectations connected to skills and knowledge creation in general and school education in particular. Therefore, more and more students from diverse cultural, social and ethnic backgrounds try to stay longer at school. These developments have produced a situation of students' heterogeneity and diversity of needs and learning. According to a new OECD report, the academic performance gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children develops from as early as 10 years old and widens throughout students' lives (OECD, 2018).

Children from more disadvantaged economic backgrounds are more likely to leave education early despite high educational aspirations. Furthermore, in contemporary European societies, education alone does not guarantee stable career possibilities or safe and secure employment. This means that students' wishes, plans and aspirations are subject to external fluctuations of capital in society (current economic, cultural and social prospects) and demands in the labour market. In order to enable, assist and encourage all students to cope with the challenges they encounter in school, multiple types of support are needed: learning and subject – related, psychosocial and, above all, counselling with regard to decision-making at transition points. This complexity has resulted in new challenges in education, leading to new tasks for schools and an ethic duty to provide all children and young people with *equitable* opportunities to participate in our society (OECD, 2012). The OECD defines two dimensions of equity in education:

1. *Fairness*, which means ensuring that personal and social circumstances do not prevent students from achieving their academic potential.

2. *Inclusion*, which means setting a basic minimum standard for education that is shared by all students regardless of background, personal characteristics, or location.

More and more actors are nowadays involved in education within and outside the school; however, in this changed framework teachers remain the most influential institutional representatives and professionals

involved in the educational trajectories of students. They prepare students for transitions; they assess their achievements and eventually compensate for their failures. While (individual) teachers can potentially become “significant others” for (individual) students, they above all represent the school system, that is, the standardized curriculum as well as the meritocratic function of school. However, this function of “gate-keepers” has changed.

On the one hand, education seems to be the only way to secure life chances in knowledge societies. This functional meaning of education creates a growing pressure on teachers, who are expected by families and the society as a whole to transmit the right knowledge and competences (Cuconato et al., 2016). On the other hand, compared to the Fordist era when schools had to produce future workers who were proficient in basic reading, writing, and arithmetics for the labor market (Cuconato and Walther, 2015), contemporary schools and teachers do not know any more what kind of knowledge and skills are relevant for students' subsequent entry to the labour market (Walther et al., 2002; Beck, 1992; Mayer and Svallfors, 2005) and for their life courses.

Contemporary young people are expected to learn how to *shape* and *reshape* their biographies and adapt their educational courses to changes on the labour market, thereby looking for new opportunities and taking autonomous decisions about their skills and academic or vocational abilities (Diepstraten et al. 2006; Cuconato 2011). As the knowledge society equates to a lifelong learning society, in which knowledge and competences evolve permanently, the tools of the teaching profession are no longer limited to subject-related knowledge/skills and didactical expertise. Teachers are increasingly confronted with social and emotional dilemmas while educating pupils for an individualized life course that is empowering them to learn throughout their whole lives and in all aspects of learning: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live with others, learning to be.

The goal of this paper is to analyse whether and to what extent teachers perceive the growing importance of these new challenges and whether they pay attention to the disadvantages that affect some groups of students. Educational sociology has been concerned about the fact that education has proved to be a key factor in reproducing structures of social

inequality (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). While up the 1970s this meant that working - class children 'inherited' the working-class jobs of their parents (Willis, 1977), nowadays low education implies risks of social exclusion (Castel, 2000; Field, 2002). Being an indispensable prerequisite of social inclusion, education can however no longer predict the entry to specific careers. Labour markets are more flexible and, consequently, life courses become de-standardised (Walther et al., 2002; Beck, 1992; Mayer and Svallfors, 2005). Neither access to education and an ability to successfully cope with it, nor the relevance of education can be taken for granted (Young, 1998, 2007). The following diminish students' possibilities to cope with educational requirements and put them at a higher risk of dropping out: coming from families with low education, negative attitudes towards the relevance of education, inability to be financially supported and coming from poverty-stricken single-parents' families. Evidence indicates that family environments have deteriorated over the past decades (Heckman, 2008). The number of children living in households earning less than 50% of a country's median income increased in the decade up to the mid-2000s in most countries (OECD, 2012). Today a greater proportion of children are being born into disadvantaged families, many of them coming from minorities and immigrant backgrounds (Heckman, 2008).

The research questions leading our research were the following: Are teachers aware of the inequalities that exist within the educational contexts of which they are a part and of the challenges and barriers faced by individual students or by diverse populations of students? Do they try to mitigate or move around the structural meritocratic rigidity of the system they represent or do they simply reproduce it? The questions derive from the interactionist assumption that the role a teacher plays in the reproduction or transformation of inequality is, on the one side, determined by the education system he/she functions in (external factors). On the other side, it derives from his/her perception of students' (individual) disadvantages and his/her professional commitment in supporting students' educational transitions in a life - course perspective.

The paper is structured as follows: After a short explanation of the methodology (section 2), it presents the findings related to the professional teachers' identities emerging from the interviews (section 3),

trying to detect whether there is a connection between these and the education system, which frames teachers' attitude towards disadvantaged students. Section 4 presents some theoretical remarks on educational disadvantages before introducing the emerging results on teachers' interpretation of them, complying with or diverging from the different discourses emerging in the knowledge society. The findings will then be interpreted in section 5.

2. Methodology

This paper draws on findings deriving from a wider EU-funded research project: *Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe* (GOETE), which concerned the mechanisms of decision-making underlying the educational trajectories of young people (10-16 years old) in different European educational systems. Starting from the interactionist assumption that students' educational trajectories are the result of complex interactions between societal asset (structure) and individual-subjective action (agency), a special focus was set on the transitions of the students classified as "disadvantaged" in their respective contexts, from lower secondary to general/vocational upper secondary education, and on labor-market oriented schemes and courses.

The GOETE project has collected data from eight EU member states: Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia and the UK, representing selective vs. comprehensive education system and different transition regimes (Walther, 2006). Hypothesizing that institutional arrangements influence the access to further general or vocational educational paths (Tikkanen et al., 2015), this paper is based on empirical (qualitative) data collected in four out of the eight GOETE countries (Finland, Germany, Italy and Netherlands) as these four countries are representative of the larger group, both in the context of school systems - differentiated/selective (Germany and Netherlands), and comprehensive (Finland and Italy) - and the transition regimes (Tikkanen et al. 2015), which offer different support to students in transition.

In the framework of qualitative case studies, taking place in 12 schools (3 in each city of the 4 countries) we conducted 38 teachers' in-depth interviews and 12 focus groups with 45 teachers in total. According

to what is stated by the Ethical Committee of the University of Bologna, before deciding to participate in the study, teachers had been informed about their rights, the purpose of the study, the procedures to be undertaken, and the potential risks and benefits of their participation. Teachers who chose to participate had signed an informant consent.

The interview' procedure was based on a common interview protocol, asking teachers about the obligations they feel they have in supporting students, especially those they recognize as disadvantaged and about their perception of the meaning of "educationally disadvantaged". Individual interviews and focus groups are not homogenous in length: they last from 45 mm to 2 hours, depending on the speaking attitudes of the participants. They were audio recorded and fully transcribed.

According to the principles of "grounded theory" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), we analysed the interviews directly after having conducted them, writing down first impressions in memos and discussing newly-emerging topics firstly within the national research group and secondly between the national teams. A specialized software (NVivo) was used to code all interview transcriptions. We developed a joint code tree and used it to re-read and analyse the materials, methodically confronting differences and similarities (Cuconato and Walther, 2015).

3. Teachers' reflection on their professional identities

National education systems and institutions are the result of long historical processes of institutionalisation of cultural, social and political assumptions, values and norms of a particular society. In European countries, different education systems provide students with different 'opportunity structures' (Roberts, 1984) in terms of levels of access to and accessibility of education, of varying degrees of support of coping with its requirements and of different ways of balancing the societal and individual relevance of education throughout educational trajectories. In the context of trajectories of students, it has been noted that Germany and the Netherlands start tracking pupils after primary school at the ages of 10 and 12 respectively. In Finland and Italy, all students go through the same basic education until the ages of 15 and 14 respectively. Such institutional

arrangements influence the relationship between students (and their parents) and teachers, especially at transition points.

Considering these different institutional frameworks, the two questions we tried to answer were: 1) Whether and to what extent do structural possibilities influence the teachers' attitudes to reproduce or to mitigate inequality in the transition of their students in schools located in disadvantaged city areas or at the lower end of the educational scale? Is there a connection between their perceived professional identities and the way in which they interpret their task to the disadvantages of students?

Teacher identity represents a complex notion that is still insufficiently researched and defined (Beijard et al., 2000). Akkerman and Meijer (2011) provide a review of the existing literature on the topic, from which three main characteristics of teacher identity emerged: 1) multiplicity that refers to multiple sub-components of it (subject, didactic and pedagogical expertise), 2) discontinuity that highlights the ongoing process of identity building, and 3) social nature that suggest its development according to the social context and relationships.

In defining teachers' identity, we refer to the above – mentioned characteristics, and found out that all three emerged in teachers' interviews. In fact, when asked to reflect on the main orientation characterising their understanding of their professional identity, teachers expressed three main polarized attitudes:

Topic orientation, teachers perceive themselves mainly as disciplinary experts:

"I am a knowledge producer. We are not trained to deal with all these mad kids. I did not study special needs education and I don't get their pay" (German teacher).

Didactic orientation, teachers aim to activate students' learning process through an inspiring educational setting:

"I make use of several games and strategies and I've seen I can better catch them" [student, authors] (Italian teacher).

Socio-Educational (Pedagogical) orientation, with teachers feeling committed to supporting pupils while taking into account the students' out - of - school living conditions and problems:

“Here (at lower vocational school) we pamper them... Most teachers are very dedicated to the students and repeat and repeat tests, come on, try again” (Dutch teacher).

Independent of selective or comprehensive school systems, in each school team there are teachers of all three types and, naturally, in most cases traits of all three ideal types mix in an individual teacher (multiplicity). However, from our interviews it emerges that teachers who work in lower secondary schools have a more general pedagogical attitude towards their students (who are at the beginning of lower secondary still children), while in higher grades teachers approach their students with a more neutral and subject-oriented professional attitude. At vocational schools, and definitely in schools with many different groups of disadvantaged students, the classic subject teacher is in minority. Better represented are the teachers who accept to deal with a multitude of not strictly subject or curriculum - related problems and who are trained to deal with specific disadvantages, like language insufficiencies or students' psychological or behavioral problems.

This finding confirmed, in an international dimension, the results of the research on 80 Dutch teachers conducted by Beijaard et al. (2000), assuming that “teachers derive their professional identity from (mostly combinations of) the way they see themselves as subject matter experts, pedagogical experts and didactical experts” (Beijaard et al., 2000, p. 751).

Another finding confirms that teachers' identity emerges as a dynamic process (discontinuity), which evolves due to different teaching trajectories and the biographical reinterpretation of these. It derives from the interplay between their assessment action, functional in a specific teaching context, and the ongoing process of individual decision-making and choice related to the experiences and relationships they experience in it (social nature):

“To me the teaching profession at this school has been transformed. I would say it is 60, 70% about social work. This is to me something which I have learned now, these social-pedagogical aspects. And this is in my opinion much, much more important in a school like this, to have good relationships with students, to empower them, so that they get strong not only in regard to their marks but also as persons” (German Teacher).

4. Teachers' perception of educational disadvantage

The concept of disadvantaged youth is used as an umbrella category, comprising those young people, who have fewer chances than their peers do to acquire education or societal positions. Definitions of disadvantage vary widely between countries. The EU has chosen the concept of early school leaving as a benchmark for policy making in supporting disadvantaged youth, with the EU countries adopting other terms like *youth-at-risk*, *vulnerable youth*, *disconnected youth* or *socially excluded youth* to describe the social inequality existing among young people (Bendit & Stokes, 2003). In different countries, the issue connected to social inequality is addressed according to the emphasis put on *structural* or *individual* factors in explaining disadvantage. In the field of education, young people are either considered as disadvantaged because their educational transitions are affected by a segmented education system or their education and transition problems are explained in terms of education and socialization deficits. Empirically, access to education and transitions in the life course are structured by categories of social inequality such as socio-economic and cultural background, gender and ethnicity. These affect the educational and career options available to a young person in an inter-sectional way and lead to different forms of social inclusion and exclusion. Overcoming a disadvantage in this context means the elimination or mitigation of the given obstacle (Mayer, 2003). Educational disadvantage comprises *inequalities* of three dimensions:

- *Opportunities*: this refers to the access students have to resources and facilities available to them, as well as to effective teachers.
- *Experiences*: this includes students' relationships and interactions with teachers and fellow students, their sense of belonging to their school, and their experience of classroom discipline.
- *Outcomes*: how the students turn out in terms of individual development, as well as the skills and knowledge they gain.

Differences in educational outcomes between individual students are natural as all children and young people have different abilities, motivations, interests and aspirations. However, these differences become

inequalities when they are consistent between groups of students or between particular types of schools. In the following text we present the findings related to teachers' analysis of the obstacles students have to face in coping with school requirements. We try to highlight the societal discourses underpinning their definition, as the OECD (2012) reminds that the focus of "disadvantage" is always set on a value judgement based upon a particular set or system of values.

4.1 Teacher interpretation of disadvantage in the framework of societal discourses

Asked to specify what they regard as "disadvantage", many teachers seem to be aware that disadvantage does not derive from only one or few causes, but from many. In addition, it emerges a large agreement among teachers with the kind of students they define as disadvantaged. The first groups of students they refer to are *children with special needs* and certified disabilities regarding mental and/or physical deficiencies. Teachers compare them to the rest of students and define them in terms of *deficiencies*, in comparison to *normal* student-behaviour and cognitive potential.

The guidelines for teachers' judgements for this group of students is implicit in the *discourse of normalcy* that come to the fore - albeit with different moral underlying values - in other teachers' definitions of disadvantage regarding *misbehaving students*, who do not comply with the educational norms governing schools and teaching. Regardless of country or education system (i.e. comprehensive vs. selective systems), most teachers retain *disrespect* of students most hurtful personally, as it questions their professional identity. Only in rare cases do teachers look for other reasons which might explain students' disrespect, such as schematic school rules and sanctions, which students regard as unjust.

Another category of disadvantage comprises students with a *low aspiration*. Many teachers assume that their students could do better or that they are too lazy to move to another neighbourhood or city in order to get a better training place or job (German teachers). Such judgements find ideological expression in the contemporary *discourse of individualization*, used to analyse social changes in modern society (Giddens, 1984; Beck, 1992; Baumann, 2001). In education, that discourse warns students that

they themselves are responsible for their school career and success in further life. If they fail, it is their own fault. This new discourse transfers systemic risks to the individual learner, absolving the education system from the task of closing students' educational gaps at school entrance, which is inherent to the *discourse of educational equality*. The discourse of individualization clashes also with the *discourse of lifelong learning* and the exploitation of human talent needed in European knowledge societies (EC 2012). Teachers, in defining and dealing with low achievers, have to reconcile these two discourses. As they work in lower vocational schools, they have by definition more low-achievers in their classes than the teachers in general education. Therefore, they are expected to instill learning motivation in their students, convincing them of the relevance of education.

According to teachers, a new group of students at risk has entered European schools with the arrival of *immigrants*. There are two groups of students with migrant backgrounds; one group is not so new anymore but has lived with their families in their host countries for two or even three generations. The other group is comprised of recent immigrants such as war-refugees or other endangered groups. Teachers refer to them as the main group of real or potential students at risk because of many problems with integration, with language deficiencies being the most urgent one.

Dutch, Italian and German teachers complain that their national school systems have not been able to respond to these "newcomers" with adequate and successful adaptations of the curriculum and teaching methods. Individual and flexible approaches like those reported by Finnish teachers have not been implemented in other countries and migrant educational transitions are generally very difficult. However, this is not only due to language deficiencies: teachers report that some groups of migrant students demonstrate *alienation* from school. This finding requires further investigation aiming at detailed studies of the migration history of different migrant groups, which is different in each country.

Dutch teachers complain about the effect of the growing *discourses of segregation/integration* following the rise of right-wing parties and an increasing turn to market liberalism. The effects of such political changes do not affect educational institutions immediately, however teachers highlight indirect effects: "white" parents would, if they

could, send their children to private or other schools with low or no percentage of immigrant students; and they do if they can.

All teachers mention failing or *insufficient communication* between school and home as the result of students' disadvantage. However, what emerged from their narratives is that *teachers* know relatively little about their students. They are better informed about their (occupational) aspirations, which they often consider as being unrealistic (and which go along with their support and motivation for realistic vocational training for socially disadvantaged students). On the one hand, this may seem as the reason for teachers' attitudes in guiding students' transition towards vocational schools. On the other hand, this reveals their interpretation of the meaning of education for further life of disadvantaged students: according to them, these ones should "use" education in order to maintain their current social status, avoiding future deviant behaviour and social exclusion. Here again, one important issue comes into play: the knowledge teachers have about their students' lives is much too general. They think they know that they are from difficult and socially disadvantaged family backgrounds, that they have language deficits and/or are migrants, that they are displaying behavioral problems and that they are not getting enough support at home. They think they are familiar with these circumstances because they often ascribe them in a stereotyped manner to many students from these socially disadvantaged districts and schools that are labelled as disadvantaged. At the same time, teachers do not know these districts in depth as they usually do not live there and have to refer to general assumptions or even prejudices.

5. Discussion

Having detected the same three basic teachers' identities in four different European countries, the analysis does not confirm the starting hypothesis that teachers' identities are dependent on national education system (differentiated vs. selective), school type (vocational vs. academic), school culture and students' population. From the narratives of teachers, it emerges how difficult the work of a teacher of lower secondary (general as well as vocational) is. He/she does not only develop a professional identity according to own pedagogical convictions (and training), but has to

reconcile it with the individual wishes and visions of their students as well as the school's policies and labour market demands.

Nevertheless, some differences emerge in the four countries, which need to be interpreted. Italian lower secondary school teachers in particular show high levels of care and protection for their students, also looking for partnerships with other local socio-educational institutions to help students make appropriate decisions.

“Students are aware of living in a protected context here (...) they are afraid of just crossing the ring-road bridge: there is a weird world over there, a world which they feel they are not admitted to” (Italian teacher).

This can be due to the young age of their pupils (13 years) although Dutch pupils are even younger (12 years) and so are German children (10 years). That Italian teachers are so particularly committed to their pupils (not representative though) may have to do with the lack of social-pedagogical schools' infrastructure in Italy as opposed to Germany, the Netherlands and Finland. Italian teachers try to compensate for that lack.

It is Italian teachers again who underline the importance of having a sincere dialogue with students and therefore especially regret the enormous turnover in staff every year, which has negative effects not only on the cognitive development of students but also, and perhaps even more so, on the relational one. They are focused on the transmission of tools and skills aimed at social integration and thematize more than teachers from other countries that relational and life skills are the very basis for acquiring academic knowledge.

In Germany and the Netherlands with selective school systems, teachers refer to the labour market and the chances it provides or withholds for school leavers. They know very well that general education pays off better than (lower) vocational education on the long run, however in different countries they encourage or “cool out” (Goffmann, 1952) students to enroll to upper secondary education according to the nature of the labour market and the education and training requirements needed to enter it (occupational versus organizational labour market).

A teacher from a school in Amsterdam during a focus group discussion:

“Many parents expect that their children will continue with higher professional education... children must become lawyers or something with medicine. But that is certainly not for everybody.”

On the other side there are Finland and Italy, both with comprehensive systems: Italian teachers might be more ‘pedagogically minded’ than their Finnish colleagues, who, although showing a very high level of teacher professionalism, do not need to be so ‘caring’ due to a better labour market and to the presence of school professionals appointed to support pupils needing particular attention. Thinking about the precarious condition of the labour market, an Italian teacher remarks:

“If they [students] feel frustrated in their working ambitions from the very beginning, they will disengage as soon as they meet the first learning difficulties. Pupils should have more self-esteem; actually, they seem to be very severe on themselves. We should try to teach them to be more open-minded and to stay curious”.

Summing up, teachers of lower secondary schools oscillate in their professional self-perception between preparing their students for the labour market in an instrumental way, and giving way to the students’ present wishes and inclinations, thereby supporting their self-confidence and learning motivation. We have proof of both attitudes in all our country cases. We quote *pars pro toto* a Finnish teacher who is in favour of the latter attitude:

“I always tell the students to go and get a profession or a vocation that makes them happy (...). If they go to places where they don’t want to be and don’t feel comfortable, they will get frustrated with their lives” (Finnish teacher).

All teachers are aware that the educational system alone cannot solve the problem of disadvantaged students. Teachers admit to feeling powerless as their possibilities of paying specific attention and coaching to disadvantaged students are restricted. They do not have either financial or extra human resources allocated to organize individual learning activities and do not usually get extra time to work individually with disadvantaged students.

Cross-sector politics are needed to develop an integral governance structure to solve the complex problems of city development, demographic changes, (local) labour market needs, migration integration, and everything

related to education policies and practices. Many teachers complain about a lack of consideration of policy makers, who tend to avoid confrontation with their educational expertise and ideas about the governance of education. If all actors do not share a common vision on the relevance of education, it becomes difficult to cope with educational challenges in a complex society.

The responsibility for our future generations' education cannot be placed only on the individual school professionals, while the socialization of youth cannot be placed only on their families: there must be a basic societal change at every level. Moreover, we can assume a gap in terms of explicit European (and in some cases even local) legislation to involve local authorities and child protection agencies more effectively in order to provide support to young people staying in education after its compulsory stage in order to prepare them for better working careers.

6. Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper was to analyse *how* teachers deal within their respective school contexts with the reality and problems of (disadvantaged) students, who need to be prepared for coping with the (educational) challenges of advanced knowledge societies. In earlier times, the destiny of students later in their lives seemed to be determined very early and clearly thanks to the qualifications achieved in their (much shorter) school trajectories. Today, they face a much more open situation, which is rich in transitions and decision-making moments due to the prolonging of students' educational trajectories and the uncertainty of the labor market requirements. The support (or lack of support) of teachers is therefore of high relevance for students. This paper reveals how teachers define their work as professionals and how they interpret students' disadvantage. This analysis does not pretend to draw any representative or even systematically comparative conclusion; however, it highlights some general topics and problems which are significant for the work of teachers in knowledge societies and might be valuable for teacher trainers as well.

In view of the EU discourse about high quality teaching and lifelong and life-broad learning, it is conspicuous how much European teachers are focused on the inside of school and to what extent they

disregard the surrounding conditions and life situations of their students, disregarding in this way the other EU discourse on *equity* of education. Most importantly: teachers feel, without (country) exception, not sufficiently prepared and trained for dealing with new learning demands emerging in heterogeneous school environment.

The Italian case study teachers referred more to the subjective side of learning, where it seemed they were more engaged with their students than their colleagues in the other three countries; they approached them not only as school-learners but also as people yearning for broader experiences. This finding reminds us of a crucial feature of contemporary schools, and that is a far-reaching division of labour between teachers and other non-teaching personnel. Italian schools do not have social work related to schools and therefore do not know of that division; teachers may or must perform social-pedagogical tasks as well. In the four countries, teachers are aware of that division, evaluating it either affirmatively (a teacher is meant to teach and not to take care of family or other problems, which should be done by other professionals) or rather doubtfully and in a demanding manner (a teacher should find a balance between pure teaching and paying attention to other needs of their students). Some say that they work side by side with social and other personnel without problems, while others communicate that they suffer from over-bureaucratization and feel that their actual teaching work is endangered by too many non-teaching professionals and institutions who participate in the school organisation.

Although multicultural classroom teaching is a regular practice in many European schools and certainly in our countries (the least in Finland), teachers generally feel unprepared to adequately support and teach immigrant students and students with various migration histories and backgrounds. They orient their teaching practice to the average “native” student who is not anymore the norm in the European classrooms. Language problems are seen by all teachers as the main obstacle for the learning advancement of non - native speakers.

Teachers who teach in the lower tracks or classes of schools are in particular confronted with social and emotional needs of their (very) young students and realise more than their colleagues in higher classes that learning progress depends on good coaching and support in many respects, not only cognitive one.

Vocational teachers are heavily dependent on labour market conditions in their work. The less responsive labour markets there are for inserting students with vocational training and possibly low academic credits, the more (potential) influence economic interests have on the vocational curriculum.

According to the “agency theory” (Bandura 2001), individuals have a capacity to make positive adaptations within a context of significant adversity (Luthar et al., 2000), and an ability to adapt along appropriate developmental pathways despite their family and/or social difficulties. Young people are active in building their own human, economic and social capital and these internal factors could be emphasised by external factors (Kasearu et al., 2010). In this perspective, education represents one possible way to increase a feeling of empowerment that can help young people, if institutionally supported, to realise their potential. Teachers, together with parents and civil society organisations, can uncover underexploited capacities and actively engage young people in the process of designing a personal project of education. Certain reflections emerge from our findings about teachers' challenges within a context of educational disadvantage. First of all, there is the need to focus on its causes and implications in order to identify and support different educational needs of all students by planning and implementing appropriate courses of action. However, the most important thing is to optimise the educational experience, achievement and holistic development for all involved participants.

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Učiteljski profesionalni identiteti i stavovi prema obrazovanju učenika koji su u nepovoljnom položaju

Sažetak

Učitelji su oduvijek bili najutjecajniji profesionalci uključeni u obrazovne putove svojih učenika. Pa ipak, u društvu znanja, učiteljska profesija se sve više suočava s društvenim i emocionalnim dilemama u poučavanju učenika u svrhu kreiranja njihovog vlastitog individualiziranog životnog puta, što pretpostavlja primjenu pristupa cjeloživotnog učenja. Cilj je ovog rada analizirati ukoliko i u kojoj mjeri učitelji razumiju rastuću važnost ovakvih novih izazova i pridaju li pažnju zakidanjima koja pogađaju neke grupe učenika. Rad se zasniva na kvalitativnoj analizi dubinskih intervjua provedenih s 38 učitelja i 12 fokus grupa, sveukupno 45 učitelja. Intervjui su se provodili u Finskoj, Njemačkoj, Italiji i Nizozemskoj s obzirom da ove zemlje utjelovljuju različite školske sustave (neselektivan nasuprot selektivnom) i tranzicijske režime. Ovaj internacionalni uzorak pridonio je razradi svrhe ovog rada, tj. doprinosu boljem razumijevanju kompleksnog karaktera zakidanja u obrazovanju i uloge koji učitelji imaju u njihovom ublažavanju ili reprodukciji.

Ključne riječi: *društvo znanja, identitet učitelja, učenici u nepovoljnijem položaju, obrazovni sustav, diskursi u vezi obrazovanja*