

A MONTH IN THE LIFE OF A TEACHER. HOME AND SCHOOL AS THE PLACE OF EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS IN MIDLIFE TRANSITION PERIOD

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Abstract. In this paper we present in what way the teachers that are in the turn of mid-life exist in the space of your own home (here household responsibilities, relationships with children, with the husband, etc.) and as functioning it is being transferred to their career, the commitment to it and relationships with students and teachers.

Keywords: teacher, daily life, interpersonal space, the turn of mid-life

Introduction to the Theoretical Context of Reflections

The discussion concerning the space of human life was originated by Florian Znaniecki. He distinguished physical, geometrical, and social space (Znaniecki, 1938: 89 et seq.). To differentiate the last one in a sociological sense, he proposed the term ‘spatial values’, defining them as “occupied or empty places, spacious or small interiors, and, in counterpoint to those, their ‘exteriors’; sites and surrounding areas, facilities and boundaries, measured areas and immeasurable expanses, ‘sides’ (back and front, left and right, up and down), ‘cardinal directions’, remoteness, closeness, perspective, tracks and wilderness, etc.” (*ibid.*, p.91). In his view, a man can never experience “a universal, objective, non-qualitative, unchanging, unlimited and infinitely divisible space” (*ibid.* 90 – 91), because in his experiences he is faced with “infinite spaces, varied in terms of quality, limited, indivisible, changing, and, in addition, evaluated as positive or negative” (*ibid.*).

Space, therefore, is closely intertwined with the experience of a particular place and at a particular place. This concept is related to Gaston Bachelard’s poetics of space. It can be further clarified by reference to his phenomenological thought. He believes that people think in space: in physical space, with reference to certain localization and location. Space can be both the starting point and the destination. It can be related to stories, woven into memories, surrounded by an aura; all this contributes to it being perceived as unique and impossible to grasp in typical categories. There are public spaces, such as school, and personal spaces, such as home. Each of them is located somewhere (Bachelard, 1976).

Space is not merely “a piece of geography”. According to J. Bruner, spaces “allow” some things, they “occur”, creating a dimension for taking action (Bruner, 1990: 12 – 16). Therefore, spaces can be considered directly, as a life space, an autobiography, but also, as M. Mendel points out, as “the story of life, in which education plays a significant role” (Mendel, 2006: 30).

According to Yi-Fu Tuan: “Space and place are ordinary words, defining common experience (...) Place means safety, space – freedom: we are attached to the former and miss the latter” (1987, p. 13). Thus, to quote M. Mendel, “space is open and associated with freedom, whereas place is its closure; it is our own space, our light, touched and marked with our presence, it is the home we love” (2006, p.10). We could say that space is all that surrounds us, while place is the meaning that we give to “domesticated” space, understood as our own. Yi-Fu Tuan emphasizes that space and place are intertwined with each other. Things happen in particular space. Space is where those events occur, yet it remains abstract and flexible. When we get acquainted with space and tame it, it turns into a place: something familiar and close to us (Tuan, 1987). Space, therefore, is impersonal; it is a neutral complex of events, objects and dimensions. Once it is given a meaning by a man, it becomes a place, a dimension of human existence filled with a content.

Places have impact on people who occupy them. They are “a specific territory which is like a boundary and, at the same time, a specific focal point”. They provide various sensory experiences and a dimension in which to recognize one’s capabilities; they are “a place where a basic spatial organization of social life occurs” (Wentzel-Winther, 2006: 138 – 139).

The subject of our consideration, i.e. home space (private sphere) and school space (public sphere), understood as meaningful places to people who give them their own meanings, should be situated in the sociological category of everyday life.

Dividing social life into private and public spheres allows the operationalization of both by indicating various aspects of social life present in each (Zwiernik, 2006: 171). Physical space of private life includes a house or a flat; as for public life, this would be a country and its institutions, including school. As J. Zwiernik points out, “In their private life, people are entitled to autonomous activity, which is not subject to external control; public life, by contrast, is highly institutionalized and, potentially, everyone can have insight into it” (ibid.). This dichotomy between the private and public life helps illustrate the differences between the two spheres as well as the problems/profits that may arise once they interpenetrate in the context of a teaching profession.

Adopting such an approach finds its justification first and foremost in the theory of the reality of everyday life, proposed by P.L. Berger and T. Luckmann. They believe that “among the multiple realities there is one that presents itself as the reality *par excellence*. This is the reality of everyday life. Its privileged position entitles it to the designation of paramount reality” (2010, p. 34): a self-evident reality. Thus perceived, it in fact does not require “additional verification over and beyond its simple presence. It is simply *there*, as self-evident and compelling facility” (ibid. p. 37). This reality is further perceived as

“an intersubjective world, a world that I share with others” (ibid., p. 37), which clearly distinguishes everyday life from other realities. Thus understood, everyday life allows to take into consideration a direct experience of social life, its spatial and temporal dimensions, its routine and repetition, its focus on details and situations that elude automatic and habitual responses (Tarkowska, 2009: 95). Its characteristic feature is that it is continuous and subject to personal emotional experience of individuals.

According to Piotr Sztompka, several important attributes can be distinguished in everyday reality. One such attribute refers to our relations with others and space (“the area of everyday life”). It means that everyday life is invariably a life with others, in other people’s presence, and, as such, located in space. Therefore it happens in specific places: home, work, or church, which in turn determines its content and character (Sztompka, 200: 24 – 25).

“The area of everyday life” implies a spatial character of the concept it denotes, thus encompassing also a certain social, interpersonal space that is the subject of our considerations. Consequently, we perceive home space and school space in terms of specific relations existing within it. This view of space follows from a specific perception of a man as a social being. It means that a man always lives and functions among other people, being in some kind of relationship with them (whether real, imagined, or even virtual). P. Sztompka stresses that “since birth till death we are surrounded by others: we are with them, against them, or alongside them; in cooperation or in competition, in conflict or at war; in love, friendship, trust, solidarity, envy and hate; we identify with those of whom we think as ‘us’ and shut out those of whom we think as ‘them’ (Sztompka, 2009: 33). Therefore, interpersonal space consists of various personal relations. Even if one is alone, when the space surrounding them is a void in a material sense, the reference to others still constitutes the content of their life. Furthermore, the characteristic feature of thus understood interpersonal space is its constantly changing nature, based on shifting configurations of interpersonal relations (ibid., p. 33).

Everyday life takes place in a number of contexts, for which we can indicate typical places, the most frequent localizations. Therefore, every day a man leaves the family-related context and its localization (home) to enter the work-related context and its localization (for teachers, this would be a school). Those contexts force people to assume specific roles and ways of functioning, also in terms of their relations with others.

The current stage of one’s development has a significant impact on their functioning in the home and work space in the context of interpersonal relations. For the purpose of this analysis the term in question is the midlife transition period (Oleś, 2000). Middle age involves a new perspective on life’s tasks and problems. *Transition* implies an important change in terms of quality, a new view on life and the future based on past experiences and the awareness of life’s finality. The time frames of middle life vary; however, for the purpose of this analysis the period perceived as transitional should be the years from 35 to 55 (Oleś, 2000).

People at this life stage can be characterized by several shared developmental activities (Brzezińska, 236):

- Developing and fostering relations and bonds with one's life partner;
- Taking care of family development, developing house-keeping skills;
- Generativity (productivity or creativity) – according to E.H. Erikson (p. 278) it means taking responsibility for, and getting engaged in, forming a new generation, caring for a younger generation, taking care of and meeting the needs of young people, helping adolescents become happy and responsible people, the need to be useful in professional career and all other areas and to create something that will serve others;
- Establishing and maintaining an adequate material standard of living, making continuous efforts in terms of professional career;
- Developing a responsible civic and social attitude;
- Changing relations (adapting to changes) with aging parents;
- Learning a way of spending leisure time typical of adults in a given culture;
- Accepting and adapting to physiological changes characteristic of middle age; establishing and accepting a sense of identification with one's age category.

Midlife period is determined by changing psycho-social situation of a person. Among the common problems related to an early midlife period we could distinguish changes within family, especially in terms of relations with children and with parents. Also work situation changes, with new responsibilities and functions occurring; and even if there are no changes in this regard, the confrontation of one's career aspirations with actual achievements becomes more difficult.

Methodological Premises of Research

According to B. Smolińska Theiss and W. Theiss, a biography is a basic method of qualitative research in pedagogy, presenting both a historically established position and a contemporary output (2010, pp. 84 – 85). Despite its clear-cut contours, the concept of a biography is ambiguous and it "refers to multifaceted and structuralized thematic area, in which the various internal relations and interconnections may give rise to confusion and controversy" (Lalak, 2010: 259). In order to avoid this and to specify the approach assumed in the relation to the research presented in the article, the focus will be placed on a biography understood as a method and a tool.

A biography as a method. A biography is a narrative of one's life and activity. In broad terms it encompasses all forms of first-person narratives "referring to individual experiences which reveal the activities of a person as an active and social individual" (Bruner, 1990: 197). The biographer's focus is always on someone's life, and an account of this life constitutes a biography.

A biographical method in the broadest sense is an analysis of a course of the life of an individual, approached from a specific perspective: individual, social, professional, etc. (Helling). Following N.K. Denzin, "a biography presents experiences and definitions of a specific individual, group or organization in the way in which they

are interpreted by this individual, group or organization" (Denzin, pp. 220 – 221). Accordingly, the study of human behavior should be conducted from the perspective of the people they concern, and its objective is to reveal the history of experiences of a given person or group in their dynamic development (Kędzierska, 2012: 123).

The term "biographical methods" is used "in reference to a loosely connected set of research strategies, referring to different theoretical assumptions and methods" (Helling, p. 13), which – as J. Leoński notices – results in a biography being considered in three aspects:

- As the orientation of research;
- As the subject of analysis;
- As the way of gathering data and their analysis;

even though "in research practice, specific areas may and do occur either together, or in a variety of combinations" (Gorzko, 2004: 27).

A biography as a tool for studying social world. A biography understood as a life account is the vehicle for a certain content, usually in the form of a narrative. As a story, it has "its author, its subject, and a motif or an objective justifying the need to narrate. If it concerns the experiences of the narrator, it is an autonarrative" (M. Nowak-Dziemianowicz : 39). H. Kędzierska further specifies that in a biographical story, the narrative concerns oneself, one's own life story; it is a tool and component of self-recognition. She believes that narrative is "how we comprehend, or even construe, the world, whereas autonarrative is a form of it that we can view as a set of procedures for creating life, giving meaning to specific events, and organizing events which otherwise would remain shapeless and meaningless" (Kędzierska, 2012: 132). Therefore, the function of a narrative is to interpret the world and one's place within it (autonarratives) through narrative frameworks that allow to organize experiences "in terms of people's intentions and problems which arise in the course of fulfilling these intentions" (Trzebiński, 2002: 22).

We might conclude that a biographical method, with a biography treated not only as a study subject, but also as a way of finding and gathering data and "subjecting them to humanistic analysis and an attempt to formulate theoretical generalizations, is for the representatives of social studies the most comprehensive form of biographical study" (Lalak, 2010: 265).

An inspiration to address the subject of teachers' functioning in the home and school space has been drawn from the diaries of six teachers in their midlife transition period. The diaries, including the teachers' personal accounts of everyday life, were acquired through a competition.¹⁾ The use of a biography as a method and a research tool allows us to observe how the work place (school) and private life place (home) permeate each other in the teaching profession, and how they influence teachers' functioning in both these places in their midlife transition period.

Home Space versus School Space

Domestic space of everyday life in its interpersonal dimension is formed through various personal relations, and it exists as long as there are certain relations and mutual references among its members.

Typical developmental tasks of adulthood define the boundaries, within which an individual plays specific roles. Women in their midlife transition period continue the roles which are determined by their gender (Łukasik, 2011a) as well as their marriage (Rostowska 2009, p. 139). The determinants of development, course and duration of a marriage include: communication, concern for family and each other, mutual support, intimacy and responsibility, and handling difficult situations and conflicts. What seems significant from the perspective of functioning in the home space is to recognize these factors determining the quality and intensity of the relationships of teachers in their midlife transition period.

Relationship with Husband:

Communication with husband:

- a) In the teachers' accounts of everyday life, the conversations with their husbands as partners are scarce;
 - Conversations with husbands, if taking place, are regarded by the women in terms of maintaining and reinforcing the relationship;
 - Frequently the conversations concern past and shared achievements, which deepens and strengthens marital bonds;
 - Sometimes the conversations are supported by tender gestures of spouses, which emphasizes their emotional character, shows love and deepens the bonds between spouses.
- b) In the relationships of the women under study, the following occurrences take place sporadically:
 - Arguments (e.g. about raising children);
 - Shifting responsibility for some situation or event;
 - Silence in the event of a conflict with husband (an ongoing situation in the case of one of the teachers).

Relationship crises:

- The lack of strong feelings between spouses (love, desire), their loss and inability to sustain them;
- Seeing no point in building the relationship anew;
- Only two of the teachers (out of six) describe their relationships as romantically fulfilled, happy (with one saying that her relationship has already undergone a crisis).

Difficult situations are caused by:

- Illnesses of teachers and their husbands appearing as they age;
- Inability to handle illnesses and face a new, formerly unknown life situation;
- Concern for their and their husbands' health and future;
- Fear of loneliness or the consequences of illnesses (disability, chronicity, etc.).

Intimacy and responsibility find their reflection in:

- The care for partner's wellbeing;
- Husband's interest in his wife's work (concern for her wellbeing in a relationship, confirmation of how important she is in his life);

- Mutual emotional and instrumental support (in relation to everyday life and professional work);
- A general sense of fulfillment in the relationship (two women are fulfilled and happy, three are in the process of building, redefining, reshaping and reinforcing their relationships, one does not initiate marriage reintegration activities, sees no point in it and blames her husband);
- Satisfying sexual needs. One woman writes about it in her account. Other women fail to mention it (for various reasons: middle age crisis, age-related decrease in physical attraction, other individual reasons related to a specific relationship).

Relationship with Children

Building and maintaining relationships:

- All the women stress the lack of problems in building strong and friendly relationships with their children (they have growing or grown up children as well as school age children);

Activities supporting good relationships:

- Engagement in the activities undertaken along with children (e.g. cooking, shared interests, watching TV);

- Sharing wisdom, life experience (a feature typical in midlife transition period, resulting from responsibility and concern for proper upbringing);

- Conversations on various subjects (they allow to strengthen the bonds but also are a form of support for women undergoing a crisis in their relationship).

Wellbeing in the role of a mother:

- The women are proud of their children – the children are their fulfillment, a source of joy and support in difficult moments or when the relationship with the husband is bad;

- The children are for the teachers a source of inspiration to act, work, change; they motivate them to develop, learn, pursue goals, and achieve success.

The school space provides a context for everyday experiences of subjects functioning within it, their roles, tasks and functions (teachers, students, parents, school authorities). It is the space of social interactions characterized by elements of power, affiliation, antagonisms, cooperation, co-acting, opposition, conflict, etc. It is therefore interesting to observe how the teachers function in the school space.

Relationships with Colleagues

- The women describe relationships with colleagues at school in terms of positive and negative experiences connected with the interactions with other teachers; however, it is a marginalized rather than pronounced description;
- Three of them are directors (of school or kindergarten), which results in a greater engagement in maintaining good relations at work place.

Relationships with Students

- The teachers emphasize good and very good relations with their students (both those working in a kindergarten and in secondary schools);

- Along with their students, they engage in a number of educational and cultural initiatives;
- They are consistent and demand accountability of both their students and themselves;
- They know their students' needs as well as their educational and family situation.

Work Commitment

- They are engaged in their professional work and spend a lot of time after work preparing for professional tasks;
- A number of initiatives with students are taken after their working hours, engaging not only students and their parents, but also their own families;
- They think about students and their educational situation, considering forms of help and support (they think about students and work related events when at home, that is after work);
- They initiate a lot of events, competitions, meetings etc. for and with students;
- They devote more attention to their relationships with students than work colleagues.

Conclusion

Everyday life takes place in the interpersonal space, in continuous relations with people close to us: spouses, children, colleagues, or – as in the case of teachers – students. Therefore, it could be said that every person is formed by the people they encounter and include in their interpersonal space. The space and place of work and home shape teachers' identity in midlife transition period. This manifests itself in women's dilemmas during this time concerning their marriages and relationships with their husbands, their condition and shape. This stems from the awareness of the passage of time and concern for relationship, developing it, nurturing it, or sustaining it at the highest level. Motherhood and work is their driving force in life. It is reflected in the activities they undertake with, and for, children, in their sense of responsibility for their life, concern for their upbringing, proper development and education. They do not compensate for marriage-related deficits by forging relations with colleagues.

If their fundamental needs fail to be satisfied by their husbands, the teachers compensate for it by positive thinking and by regarding themselves as capable of handling everything; alternatively, they compensate for marriage deficits by finding fulfillment in their professional life and motherhood. (Two of the teachers whose accounts of their children were rather laconic were focused mainly on their professional work and experiences).

Crises and difficulties occurring in a marital life often lead teachers to engage excessively in professional work or relations with children (their own or students).

To conclude, biographical experiences, important and significant people, the culture of social environment in which they leave, formal and informal rules governing their everyday life at home and at work, alongside with various other factors (work-related actors included) determine professional and nonprofessional life of teachers.

NOTES

1. Initiated by Joanna Łukasik in 2009, a Polish nationwide diary, journal, or report competition concerning “A Month in a Teacher’s Life” was aimed at learning more about professional and non-professional experiences of teachers, their impact on life in general and meanings derived from them. More information can be found in J. Łukasik’s book (ed.) *Z codzienności nauczyciela* [A Teacher’s Everyday Life], Jastrzębia Góra: Black Unicorn 2011.

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