

CRITICAL INCIDENTS IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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Abstract. *This paper focuses on teacher as the person responsible for preparing pupils to a life in the world of changes. To enable this process, teachers themselves must possess the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Biographical research (using diaries) conducted in the school year 2014/2015 in a group of teachers reveals that they do not cope well with disciplinary challenges in the class. Such an ability may be acquired not only by extending their knowledge, but also through referring to the knowledge already possessed, reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. Acquisition of this ability is possible because of the analysis of critical incidents.*

Keywords: *critical incidents, education, teacher.*

Introduction

Functioning in the world requires an individual to possess knowledge, insight, reflectivity, and critical thinking. Teachers are especially familiar with the changing world, because they experience daily changes in didactic and disciplinary situations, they witness uniqueness and variation - in a sense also unpredictability - in their own professional space, but they also initiate and promote changes. Therefore teachers' activity cannot favour stability and no-mistakes attitude over reflectivity and pedagogical value of hesitation and premeditation in educational decisions. It would be wrong to assume that possessing scientific and didactic knowledge is a sufficient condition for teaching in the world of changes. A changing situation calls for a teacher who is open to modifications, one who can apply critical analysis to and reflect upon transformation, and one who, at the same time, prepares pupils to be conscious participants of changes. In such a world, the adaptive teacher model does not cope with the requirements and challenges. Thus a new concept of a teacher emerged: a reflective practitioner, who analyses his/her action and has the ability to find a suitable solution to the existing problem when faced with insecure, exceptional situations.

A teacher can become a reflective individual, ready to function in the world of changes. It is possible owing to, among others, education through critical incidents, using David Tripp' concept. Tripp's ideas will be explained later in this article, preceded by a presentation of results of my own research on

teachers' experiencing critical situations. Their experience was described by themselves in the diaries submitted to diary contests announced for the sake of that research.

The aim of the article is to present an innovative concept of teacher education through critical events. Research method which was used for this study was biographical method and a secondary analysis of existing data.

Research assumptions

According to B. Smolińska Theiss and W. Theiss (2010, 84-85), a biography is a fundamental method of qualitative research in pedagogy; it is historically rooted in this field and is also supported by sufficient modern documentation. Despite clear-cut boundaries, the genre definition of 'biography' is ambiguous, as "it refers to a multi-aspectual and structuralized thematic area, in which the internal relations and numerous links may lead to misunderstanding and controversy" (Lalak 2010, 259). To prevent this, and to specify the definition adopted in the research presented, in the following paragraphs I shall focus on biography understood as a method and a tool.

Biography as a method. Biography is a description of life and activity of a person. It may be defined as all forms of first-person reports of individual experience, which are a representation of human actions in the individual and social spheres. A biographer's point of interest is always someone's life, and any description of this life is a biography.

The biographical method is, in the broadest understanding, an analysis of the course of an individual's life, from a particular individual, social, professional, etc. perspective. Thus it presents the experiences and definitions of a person, group, or organization, as they are interpreted by themselves. Therefore such research must be conducted from the point of view of the persons in question.

Biography as a tool of examining the social world. Biography understood as a report of life is the carrier of a certain message, usually in the form of a narrative. As a story, it has "its author, its subject, and the motivation, or objective, which justifies the need to tell the story. If it refers to the narrator's own experiences, it is a self-narration" (Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2011, 39). H. Kędzierska specifies that in a biographical story the narration concerns oneself or one's own life story, and is a tool and component of self-understanding. She states that narration is "a way in which we understand or even create the world, while self-narration is its form, which could be viewed as a set of procedures for creating life, giving sense to events, and organizing experience; otherwise, without that form, it would remain shapeless and meaningless" (Kędzierska,

2012, 132). Thus the function of narration is interpretation of the world and oneself inside the world (self-narration) through narrative schemas; they enable ordering experience “into categories of human intentions and the problems that emerge from the complications in realizing those intentions” (Trzebiński, 2002, 22).

To sum up, it may be stated that the biographical method, in which biography is treated not only as the research material, but also as a method of obtaining and collecting data, is the fullest form of biographical research.

The inspiration to tackle the subject of teachers’ functioning in their workspace was reading 98 diaries written by teachers at various levels of personal and professional (respondents aged 25-60). The diaries, in which the respondents described their personal everyday experiences over one month, were obtained as submissions to a contest¹. For the purpose of this article, biography is used as a research method and a research tool. This approach enables a) the realization of the research objective, namely identification and description of critical incidents experienced in the workplace, manners of dealing with them, and manners of drawing conclusions for the educational practice, and b) finding answers to the research question, i.e. what critical incidents are most frequently experienced by teachers in didactic and disciplinary situations in the school space. The research covered works of all participants of the diary contest “A month in a teacher’s life” - I edition 2009, II edition 2014, i.e. the total of 98 teachers. The content of the diaries was analysed according to the adopted research assumptions.

Fulfilling their professional role in teachers’ reflection: didactic and disciplinary contexts

Pedological research reveals an image of a teacher as a passive, yielding, unreflective person. It is visible e.g. in the fact that teachers believe changes to be of great importance and necessary, yet they do not strive to be the authors of changes, or even distance themselves from changes (Kwiatkowska, 2005). Teachers feel much more comfortable in situations when their duties are clearly defined, i.e. in situations of external work management (Kwiatkowska, 2005, Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2001). This translates into a rather uncritical view of the reality, of the changes occurring in the world, of oneself and one’s pupils in such a reality, and the reflection on the world, oneself in the world, one’s own

¹Initiated by Joanna M. Łukasik in 2009 and 2014 the national diary/memoire/reportage contests “A month in a teacher’s life” were aimed at discovering everyday professional and non-professional experiences of school teachers, the influence these experiences have on the general quality of teachers’ life, and the senses and meanings assigned to them by the teachers. For more information on the subject cf. J. Łukasik (ed.) *Z codzienności nauczyciela*, Jastrzębia Góra: Black Unicorn 2011, and *Doświadczanie życia codziennego - narracje nauczycielek na przełomie życia*. Kraków: Impuls 2013, and others.

development, and the possibility of making a choice or introducing changes. Teachers of subjective, adaptive standards perceive reality through the prism of hierarchical dependencies and tend to feel comfortable in such a system, subordinating themselves and others to superiors' decisions without own reflection. Thus their interpretation of the world and understanding reality translates to their functioning in the professional role. Most teachers are ones who function adaptively, subjectively, and without reflection (cf. Kwiatkowska, 2005, Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2001; Łukasik, 2009, 2010), and the least numerous are those who function autonomously. The latter are persons with internal locus of control, reflective, for whom professional experience is a source and opportunity of development and change, and who carry out changes with the sense of responsibility (Michalak 2012; Drózka 2008, 2014; Kędzierska 2012).

As pedological research reveals (Kwiatkowska, 1997, 2005; Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2001, 2011, 2012; Pyżalski, 2010; Kędzierska, 2012), teachers appreciate transformations and understand their value, yet do not aspire to be the authors of changes. They cannot critically evaluate the reality and the observed changes (including themselves and their pupils as elements of the world), they feel safe in the system of strictly assigned tasks and duties, and cannot confront their knowledge and skills with the school reality, which makes them prone to stress and professional burnout. The causes of this situation lie in the recruitment process for teaching positions, teacher education and training, and educational policy (cf. Łukasik, 2015).

With regard to the above, it is worth considering what actions should be taken for a change to occur in teachers' thinking of the world, of themselves, and of their work, and also in their understanding of and functioning in the ever-changing social and educational reality.

Education through critical incidents

The existing system of teacher training includes multi-aspectual education, with special attention paid to and special emphasis put on the development of pragmatic skills acquired in the course of module-based education. It is assumed that such a system prepares teachers for a life-long development. One of the methods that contribute to it, and whose effects are listed in the ministerial regulation on teacher education standards, is the analysis of critical incidents (Minister of Science and Higher Education, Regulation on Standards of Teacher Education from 17th Jan. 2012). The value of training teachers for reflectivity is shown in the learning outcomes of the above-mentioned regulation and in the modules (in the knowledge, skills, and competences components) (cf. Łukasik, 2012, 2015).

Teachers who work in modern schools, at all levels, observe many new, repeated difficult situations. Thus it is a common claim that it becomes more and more difficult to work at school nowadays. The disturbing changes in the population (community) of pupils are among the three main sources of teacher's stress. In the search for teachers' descriptions of difficult situations, referring to didactic and disciplinary challenges in relation with pupils, the content of 98 diaries were analysed. In this paper, the analysis is limited to the emergence of difficulties, without their detailed description, so that solutions can be found through the analysis of critical incidents, following the ideas of D. Tripp.

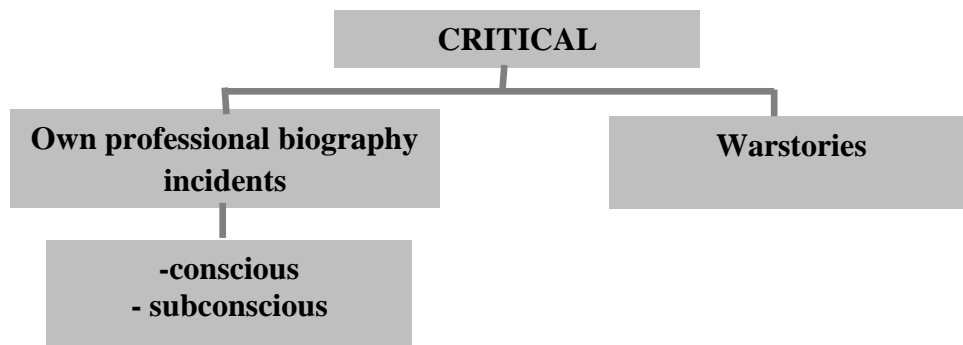
The main difficulties that become the material for reflection in teachers' diaries are connected with children's and youth's behaviour in the classroom, discipline, ignoring values and set principles, risky behaviour among the youth, threats caused by the economic situation and seasonal or permanent migration of pupils' parents, dislike for school, and lack of cooperation with parents, which means impossibility to adopt a common upbringing policy.

However, the described problems, "uncomfortable" or "disturbing" didactic and disciplinary situations, and unsatisfactory teacher-parents relations which usually generate tension and conflict, are actually evidence of helplessness which stems from the lack of real reflection on or critical analysis of the event. Writing about their problems, teachers try to analyse the incident - that is reflect upon it to some extent - yet the reflection is not deep enough for them to find an independent solution, and to prevent future difficult situations. In other words, the reflection concerns the incident, but is not supported by a deeper context rooted in one's own knowledge and practical experience; thus it does not translate into a continuous, systemic, daily improvement of one's practices.

Naturally, it must be emphasized that teachers' problems mainly stem from their care for the youth's future, not merely from their helplessness, vulnerability, or dissatisfaction. Most teachers take action, and look for the best solutions of the emerging difficulties. A frequent postulate is to obtain support from others, e.g. other teachers. It is important and often effective (though usually not for long), yet deepened self-reflection on one's practice and developing it is overlooked here. Unfortunately, despite the introduction of the new teacher training system from 2012 on, teachers are not prepared for reflective practice. Perhaps teachers trained currently will be, but it definitely is not the case with the teachers trained in the previous system. The latter could benefit from post-graduate training, during which through analysis of critical incidents, they would develop competences and skills necessary for solving difficult situations and crises.

At present, it is quite probable that the method of critical incidents analysis is used in teacher training. However, application of this method is not easy, as critical incident analysis can be taught only by those academic teachers who

know what the method consists in, use it in practice, and in their individual work with students serve as their potential “critical friend”.



Critical incident analysis:

- recording
- reshaping
- verification

CONDITION: PRESENCE OF A CRITICAL FRIEND

Figure 1 **Critical incidents according to David Tripp²**

How should a critical incident be defined? It is an event that occurs in the classroom or in the hall, in the teachers’ room, or elsewhere in the school space, which is created by the teacher – an attentive observer of himself/herself. As J. Szymczak (2009) emphasizes, it is the teacher who makes the incident critical, through interpretation, evaluative judgment, and assigning sense. Any event that for some reason draws the observer’s attention may become a critical incident.

The process of critical incident analysis itself begins when the experience of a situation attracts the teacher’s attention to such an extent that they want to discover its nature. David Tripp, the propagator of education through critical incident analysis, lists two kinds of incidents: professional biography incidents and “war stories” (Tripp, 1996, pp. 121-132).

In teacher training it is crucial that the analysis focuses on events that the teacher participated in, i.e. own professional biography incidents. They are divided into conscious and subconscious incidents. The former are incidents that can be easily recalled, even after a longer period of time. The easy recollection is due to the fact that those incidents are significant for the teacher, or carry such a great emotional load that they will not be forgotten. The unacknowledged incidents are those that the teacher wishes not to remember. They are frequently “incidents perceived by the teacher as difficult, uncomfortable, negative,

² The figure was originally used in: Łukasik J. M., *Edukacja nauczyciela refleksyjnego przez zdarzenia krytyczne*. In S. Kowal, M. Mądry-Kupiec (eds.), *Przygotowanie do wykonywania zawodu nauczyciela. W stronę edukacji spersonalizowanej*. Wydawnictwo e-bookowo, 2015, p. 51. Source: elaborated on the basis of D. Tripp, *Zdarzenia krytyczne w nauczaniu. Kształtowanie profesjonalnego osądu*. Warszawa WSiP 1996.

perhaps even undignified, that should not be admitted, and therefore it is better to believe they did not take place. They reveal the issue of making an error, a mistake, or choosing an inappropriate solution, which teachers often forbid themselves” (Szymczak, 2009, p. 84).

A peculiar kind of critical incidents are “war stories”. They are views and constructs of educational practice expressed through a teacher’s activities. Most frequently they are not overt, and revealing them often takes a dramatic form (cf. *ibid.*).

The critical incident analysis as proposed by Tripp is a process of three crucial stages: recording in the written form, reshaping, and verification. Therefore, in the first place, a critical incident should be thoroughly described, including as many details as possible. It is of utmost importance, as the analysis is then carried out in a wide context that extends far beyond the immediate context of the occurrence.

D. Tripp emphasizes that the incident should be constantly re-analysed, with the first analysis treated as a temporary version, because in this process the vital element is the continuity of reflection, which provokes a constant search for hypotheses and viewpoints that are subject to change, correction, and reshaping. In the process of critical incident analysis, especially at the stage of professional teacher training of a student, or experienced teachers’ practical training, another crucial element is the presence of a “critical friend”. It may be an academic teacher, the internship tutor or a teacher from the internship school, or, for working teachers – a colleague, another pedagogue. By listening attentively and leading the teacher to the discovery of truth, the critical friend helps them to visualize and name the source of tension or difficulties, and to find the best solution.

Owing to the skill of critical incident analysis and reflection, the teacher learns to formulate their own, makeshift theories, independently of the scientific theories. At the same time, they enrich their knowledge and repertoire of actions. According to the author of the Reflective Practitioner concept, D. Schön, reflection is thinking about a single activity, but also about action in general; it involves analysing experience and introducing changes in the teacher’s way of thinking and being, depending on the situation and its contexts. Reflection-in-action is thinking while performing an activity, which enables modifying it. Obviously, the immediate critical consideration of one’s own knowledge, thought, and action is available to more experienced teachers, who possess vast theoretical knowledge and excellent practical skills. In turn, reflection-on-action is significant for future activities: it involves thinking about the action from a certain distance.

Among the many advantages of applying critical incidents analysis to teacher training there are: attentive self-observation, reflectivity, multi-

contextuality of analysis, reaching to the sources of knowledge and improving teaching competences, self-discovery, self-development, but also the ability to create knowledge. This ability is exceptionally important with respect to teachers' functioning in an ever-changing world, among constant educational and disciplinary innovations in which teachers participate. For the above-mentioned situations are not only dynamic and marked by variety, but also unique and unpredictable, and there is no ready knowledge describing them. Thus it is an invaluable asset, to possess the ability of reflection, and as a result, the ability to create new cognitive values in practical activity; among others, that is the purpose of critical incident analysis.

Conclusion

The profession of a teacher is "one of complexity, responsibility, and burden. It abounds in difficult situations, for such work cannot be strictly standardized nor conducted along some fixed schemes. It requires constant modification of activity, and therefore – flexibility of mind" (Nowak, 1991, p. 81). Thus, the most desirable kind of teacher is someone who, when faced with a problematic situation, will deal with it by referring to their knowledge and experience. As a result, the teacher's views and actions are open to modification (Pearson, 1994, p. 51).

The process of transforming the education and the teacher is not easy. It requires – mainly of the teacher – to be open to changes and constant learning. High quality practical activity of teachers in the didactic process is not possible without an appropriate training in the subject and a motivation to work, which is shaped in close connection with their personal development. Education through critical incident analysis may improve the quality of teachers' work, their motivation, and self-esteem. Owing to such education, the process of acquiring teaching and upbringing skills is more conscious and enhanced. To achieve this, teacher training must indispensably include: application of education through critical incidents, courses in self-knowledge and related problems, creation of a support network, using supervision, and introducing preselection for the profession already at the stage of recruitment.

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