

Teachers-problems-teachers' problems: What is considered as a problem, among the main teacher activities, by Hungarian teachers

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Abstract: This paper is about a research focusing on recent problems of Hungarian teachers. The aim of the study is to reveal the real troubles of Hungarian pedagogues, on the basis of their answers to a questionnaire, the nature of these problems and how they affect the role of the teacher. Supposedly, the nucleus of the problems of the teachers is connected with existence, skills and material or professional uncertainty. The study based on the related professional literature and its main statements. The conclusions could be applied mostly to the intellectual and existential preparation of would-be teachers. The aim of the research is to reveal the real problems of the high school teachers after the turn of the century, what these problems are, how stressful they are and how they impact the changing teacher role as, "Teachers are central to any consideration of schools, and majority of education policy discussions focus directly or indirectly on the role of teachers" (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006). Ever since the pedagogical researches had started many monitors, surveys and reports have there appeared about the actual matters, issues and problems of the teachers. However, these previous examinations were structured or set up on the base of assumptions of researchers. The possible problem-framing was quite hypothetical and suggested the presuppositions of the inventors of questions, not that of the involved teachers. The methodological mean of the research was the questionnaire. The research has supposed that problems that are in the forefront of teacher thinking include skills, lack of conformity to practical demands, and material and financial uncertainty. We have focused the survey on finding the problematic activities that are primary for the educators. The results could be applied mainly in the field of the teacher training, especially in the mental and existential preparation of the would-be-teachers. It has also an actuality, since the teacher training stands before a changeover from the traditional structure to the two-level structure (transition between the former traditional and the BA and MA levels of higher education), so these remarks can also add somewhat to the reform program and—at the collective level—to the identification of issues important to the community of teachers, would-be-teachers and both in-service teachers and educators.

Key words: teachers' training; practice; main activities; problems; ISCED; gender; age

1. Introduction

The inquiring on teacher thinking and views and the examination of teachers' activities are not without antecedents. These examinations mean one, that this view contexts are researched. The present research analyses the foci of the teacher problem eyesight, and the similarities of the problem eyesight between the educators. The primary viewpoint of the present research is to characterize by a questionnaire examination, how the world of the

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pedagogy and its reality are represented in the teacher thinking, through the main teacher activities—in consideration of the problems to be solved.

2. Research questions

One of the starting points of the research is the statement, that “in teaching generally, and in the teacher education particularly, there has been the long history of research that has had little influence on practice” (Elijah, R., 2004). It would be important to reveal the actual acts at which the teachers themselves look as problems. Based on this, the undermentioned research questions can be formulated:

- (1) What do the teachers consider as a problem regarding the main teacher activities?
- (2) Is there a demonstrable similarity between the teachers' problem perception?

3. Propositions

The fundamental suggestion of the examination was that professional difficulties (insecurity, qualification, being equal to the practical expectations) can stand in the background of the educators' problems. It has to be clear and simultaneous since the reflection of the pedagogic practice has great importance already today, it is also essential, what an educator has to comment on and how the reflection can execute or carry out this process. All of this is impossible, if these intentions do not speak to the teacher in his language, they do not sound in teachers' voice. It is fundamental to conceptualize the establishments, the solution proposals, novelties and the results which can be utilized well in the practice, in the teachers' specific language (too).

4. Participants

The examination marks the ones taking a part in the research as domestic educators' set. This set covers the second semester of the 2006/2007 and 2007/2008 academic years in schools in Hungarian public education. There were 100 teachers questioned in the 39 settlements and 141 schools. The rate of the high-school teachers was considerable in the examined population.

5. Methods

The methodology of the research was the questionnaire cross-examination. 98 educators filled the questionnaires. The Saphier's teacher activity list took it as a starting point of the close questions in the questionnaire. The research focuses on this enumeration because—among the many diverse standards—this list is registering not only the abilities of a teacher, but also it catalogues the characteristics which can be expected and have to be expected from the teacher. Whereas this enumeration of the capital teacher activities is considered one after the other not as the efficient teacher's features, as the ideal teacher picture, standards, competences are unfolded, but parameters. “Parameters, which are constants that change together with the circumstances of the application” (Jon Saphier & Robert Gower, 1987). There lies a hidden opportunity of changing these parameters, so the good teacher's instant, ready “recipe” is not offered, forced here, but there is offered the capable and trainable practitioners' image: the “skillful teacher”, who knows the practice and is able to run it. All of these intentions are conceptualized in the questions of this list. These questions are suitable for demonstration of what questions should be answered to become, for instance, a reflective teacher. In addition, these kinds of

standardisation, lists of competencies have not been implemented yet in Hungary till now.

The close questions of the questionnaire were formulated on the base of these considerations. The open question of the questionnaire was inquiring about the reflections of the teachers on their own answers, which ones they did judge problematic—among pedagogically relevant teacher activities—in the course of their practice. Submitting data to a statistical analysis, it was possible to examine averages and correlations. The statement of the additional cross-examinations is the one of the feasible additional directions of the research.

6. Discussion

This study summarizes the conclusions of the answers to the questionnaires filled by teachers. The educators, taking a part in the questionnaire cross-examination, had to be regarded the above mentioned activities according to importance, and to rank them (from one until five) upon the opinion about what measures these activities have meant a problem for them within their teaching practice. The scale of the assessment was the following: (1) not problematic; (2) problematic; (3) quite problematic; (4) always problematic; (5) very problematic.

(1) Attention: How do I get students to pay attention and stay on task?

(2) Expectations: How do I communicate to students what I expect of them, and are my expectations appropriate?

(3) Personal relationship building: How do I build good personal relationships with students?

(4) Discipline: How do I deal with very resistant students?

(5) Clarity: What does it take to explain things clearly?

(6) Principles of learning: How do I make lessons more efficient and effective?

(7) Space: How do I get the most out of my space, time and furniture?

(8) Procedural routines: What procedural routines are important, and how do I get maximum mileage out of them?

(9) Models of teaching: How can I vary my teaching style?

(10) Learning experiences: How can I adjust for students' learning styles?

(11) Objectives: What should I teach, and how should I frame my objectives?

(12) Dimensionality: What is my hidden curriculum?

(13) Evaluation: How do I know what students have really learned?

(14) Collaboration with other colleagues (Jon Saphier & Robert Gower, 1987).

Finally, the pedagogues have been asked whether they evaluated the above mentioned main teacher activities as either problematic or as very problematic, from point of view of their own practice.

6.1 Analysis of important teacher activities considered as problems

The teachers had to answer how they had thought about the above listed activities: in what kind of measure these activities are important, and how much these are considered as problematic ones, within their pedagogical practice. It has become clear that none of the important teacher activities has been considered as a very problematic one. The least problematic question was the question No. 12 (on hidden curriculum, David Gordon, 1982; Dimensionality: What is my hidden curriculum?). This was followed by the question No. 11 (Objectives: What should I teach, and how should I frame my objectives), and question No. 5 (Clarity: What does it take to explain things clearly?). Other 8 person evaluated the question (Learning experiences: How can I adjust for students' learning styles) as an important one. Teacher judged question No. 13 (Evaluation: How do I know what

students have really learned?) as the most important, for several times. Other 8 educators evaluated the question on “learning experiences: How can I adjust for students’ learning styles’ as an important activity”.

6.2 Relation between the age and problems

At the time of the analysis of the teacher profession—with the background examinations concerning the experts’ and novices’ (Berliner, 2004) routine—the context connected to the age is hardly avoidable. Examining the importance of hierarchy of the activities upon the answers in connection with the respondents’ age, it is verifiable, that the question (Attention: How do I get students to pay attention and stay on task?) as a task to be solved is regarded less problematic, with the elevation of the age, continually.

Almost half of the fifty-year-aged group did not consider problematic the listed teachers’ tasks in the questionnaire. The 38-41 year old participants judge the question No. 12 (hidden curriculum) as a not problematic one, equally. Question No. 10 caused always a problem for the age group between 37-38 (Learning experiences: How can I adjust for students learning styles?). This age group awarded the questions mostly as ‘problematic’ ones. The answer “not problematic”, then the answer “quite problematic” as the second and the third follows. Thirty people think this (activity) as a problematic question (see Figure 1).

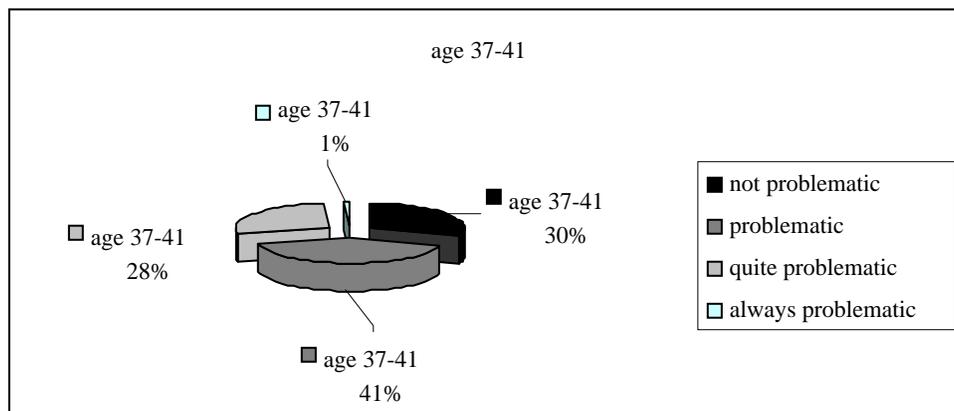


Figure 1 The ages between 37-41 and problems

The 20% of the respondents above fifty years assessed the questions No. 2, 5 and 11 as not problematic, unanimously (Figure 2). No. 2: Expectations: How do I communicate to students and what I expect of them, and are my expectations appropriate? No. 5: Clarity: What does it take to explain things clearly? No. 11: Objective: What should I teach, and how should I frame my objectives?

This age group qualified none of the questions as quite problematic or always problematic, and also any of activities were found as very problematic.

If we see the hierarchy, it can be declared generally, that the activities, pedagogical tasks constitute fewer difficulties for the participants, along with the aging. This could be the presence of routine, expertise and practice, on the one hand, and on the other hand it can be an existence of a certain inflexible scheme (Nahalka, et al., 2001). However, real activities are at a standstill behind the answers, indeed. These real activities are meaning the essence of the pedagogic practice and thus these affect it. On the one hand, the expertise is desirable, and is an expected attribute, and sometimes the expertise, routine can affect the self-reflection, on the other hand. The more practiced the teacher is (he or she feels him or herself more experienced), the teacher less expects the activity as a problem, so he or she would not interpret it as a task waiting for a solution. All this outcome urges the teacher slightly to look for newer solutions and answers, simultaneously, so he or she does not perceive tasks as a problem

situation, but as a regular procedure. It follows that they do not reflect on tasks as something waiting for a solution, but they see them as a repetitive occupation. There is not a considerable difference based on the age among the teachers opinion about problems.

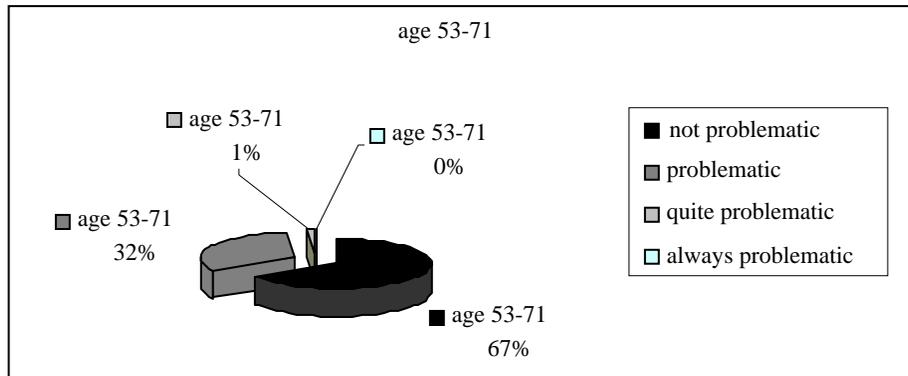


Figure 2 The age 53-71 and problematic activities

6.3 The levels of education (ISCED) and problematic activities

6.3.1 ISCED level 2

In case of examining the respondents' consideration on the teacher activities from point of view of those problematic character, and being linked to the school grades, it is clear that ISCED 2 (the primary school's upper school, the 10-14 years age group) schoolmasters have not had an accordant answer to any of the questions, so they formed a judgement about the difficulties of the teacher activities in different ways. 48% of participants awarded the teacher activities as not a heavy task, 30% of pedagogues go through tasks as problematic ones, and 18% of the respondents judge the activities as quite problematic ones (see Figure 3).

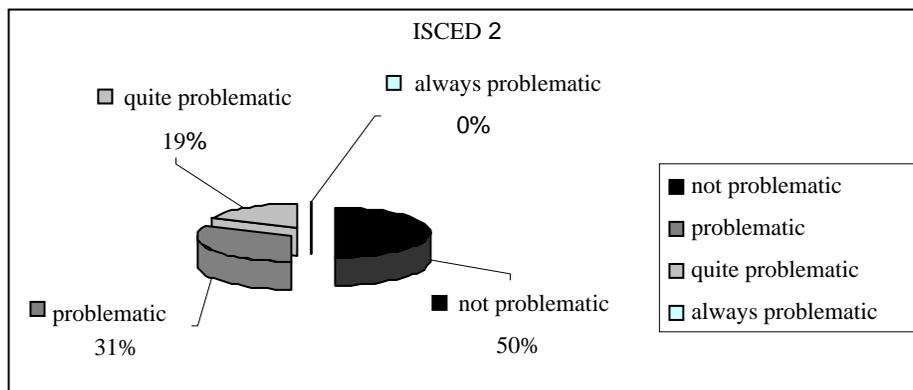


Figure 3 The ISCED level 3 and problematic activities

6.3.2 ISCED level 3

The respondents rated the question related to the task of the maintenance of the students' attention and focusing him on the task as a problematic one, uniformly, on the ISCED level 3 (Figure 4). For the schoolmasters, the question No. 3: the development of the personal, good contacts with students, is not a problem, unanimously, on this school grade. This answer is equal to the question related to the "defining the tutorial aims": it also does not constitute a problem for these teachers. Otherwise, this coincides with the ISCED 2 category respondents' answers to the same question. 55% of the respondents judge the listed activities as a problem on this grade, 36%

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of them rated the activities as problematic ones, and 1% of teachers thought that it is quite problematic for them. There have been no activities awarded by teachers as *very* problematic or quite problematic.

The pedagogical activities considered quite problematic reduced with the half on this level of education. The higher the level of education, the fewer difficult tasks are occurring for the pedagogues. The amount of the not problematic activities has increased with 14%—in comparison with the ISCED2 level—in the same question. The number of the problematic activities has increased by 20%. To summarize the result, the quantity of negative judgements of the pedagogical activities is decreasing with the higher level of education.

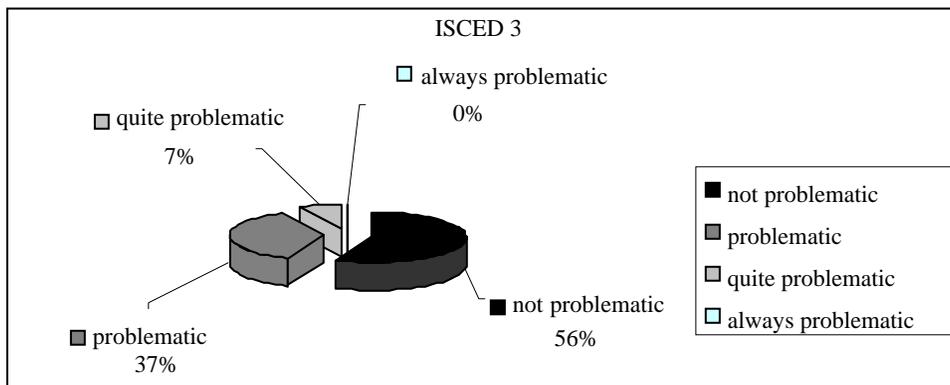


Figure 4 The ISCED level 3 and the problematic activities

6.3.3 ISCED level 4

On the ISCED level 4 (the 5 year of the technical colleges, the technician training, the secondary qualifications wishing OKJ (National Qualifications Register) trainings) the participants have the questions No. 1, 7, 8 and 9 answered in the same way (Figure 5). It is very problematic for them, No. 1: Attention : How do I get students to pay attention and stay on task? and they considered as quite problematic tasks. No.7: Space : How do I get the most out of my space, time and furniture? No. 8: Procedural routines: What procedural routines are important, and how do I get maximum mileage out of them? No. 9: Models of teaching: How can I vary my teaching style? 43% of teachers conducting on this level of education think the pedagogical activities quite problematic, 38% of them evaluate those of problematic and 16% judge the tasks as not problematic ones. 2% of teachers think of “learning experiences: How can I adjust for students’ learning styles?” as a problem which have always meant a problem for him/her.

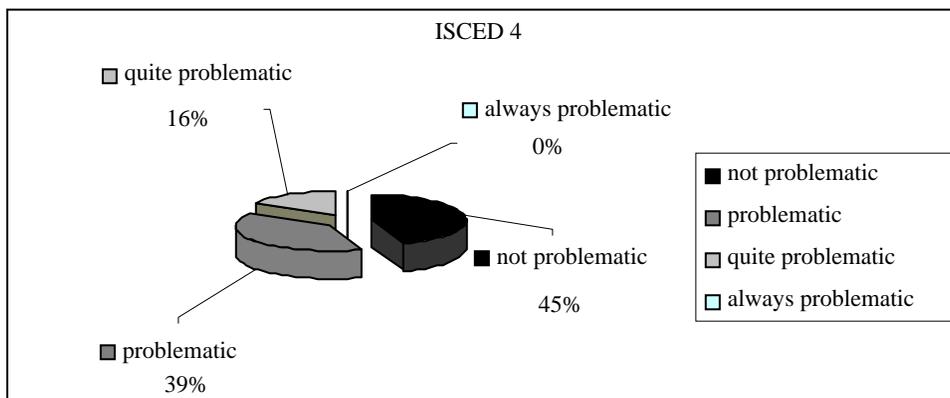


Figure 5 The ISCED level 4 and the problematic activities

6.4 The gender and the problematic activities

6.4.1 Men

During the analysis of the data on the base of the gender, it has become visible that the men-teachers gave the same answers the following questions: No. 2: Expectations: How do I communicate to students what I expect of them, and are my expectations appropriate; No.5: Clarity: What does it take to explain things clearly? No. 11: Objectives: What should I teach, and how should I frame my objectives. The male teachers judge the main pedagogical professional activities as not problematic ones in their practice. 60% of them think that, 38.5% evaluates the teacher profession as a problematic scope. Question—Evaluation: How do I know what students have really learned?—was quite problematical for only one person (Figure 6).

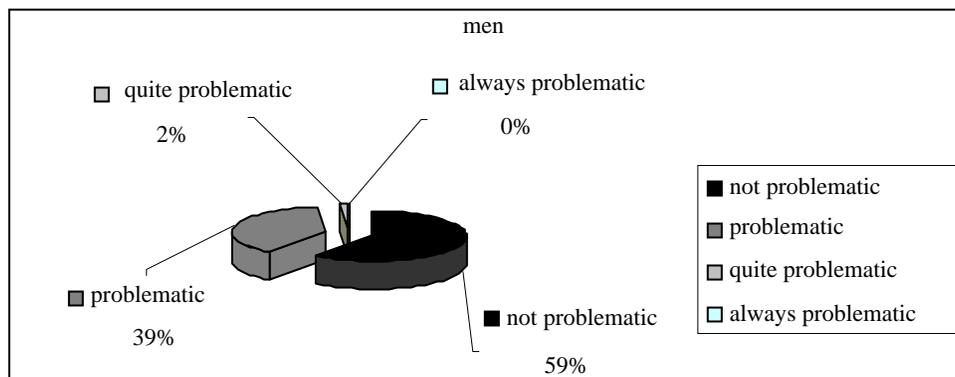


Figure 6 The men-teachers and problematic activities

6.4.2 Women

The female teachers (number of them is twice bigger than the male teachers') awarded the teacher activities quite problematic (28%). 34% of them think that the pedagogical activities are problematic and 35% of them consider the profession as a not problematic one. It can be said that the teacher practice is rather problematic than not, for the women-teachers. The question—Learning experiences: How can I adjust for students' learning styles?—was always problematic for one woman, within the teacher career (Figure 7).

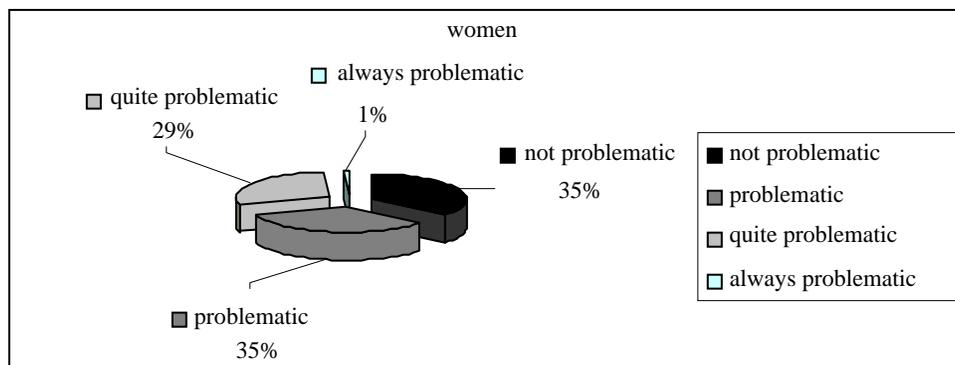


Figure 7 Women's answers and problematic activities

The study can conclude that the female teachers judge the essential pedagogical activities as more difficult in comparison with their male colleagues. It leads to extension of researches which are organized for revealing the

reasons for that why female conductors consider their own profession problematic and how could this situation be released.

It is a sociological-professional fact that the presence of women-teachers is over-represented in the teacher career (Resolution on the feminized nature of the teaching profession, 1998). This means, although, that with this there are more teachers in the practice who judge the teacher profession as a set of the problematic processes and this phenomenon has further impacts on teacher community.

7. Conclusions

7.1 Answers to the research questions

7.1.1 What do the teachers consider as a problem regarding the main teacher activities

It can be declared that the participants have not considered any of activities as very problematic. The least problematic activity, for the respondents was the "Dimensionality: What is my hidden curriculum?", and the question "Objectives: What should I teach, and how should I frame my objectives", follows and "Clarity: What does it take to explain things clearly?"

7.1.2 Is there a demonstrable similarity between the teachers' problem perception

There cannot be made a distinction between the teachers on the base of age. However, there is difference between the male and female participants related to their answers. The problematic tasks are decreasing along with the age of the teachers and the changing of the educational level.

7.2 Possible implementations of results

The results are applicable in the teacher education primarily, especially in their vocational, mental-hygienic and existential preparation, to help them in self-reflection. Secondly, these results could be useful in post-graduate and in-service teacher training, where the routine can threaten the practitioners.

Although the examination includes the teachers for public education, the conclusion could be applicable for higher education, too. The possible tasks for the teacher training appear in the next areas:

(1) There is a need for a more practice-oriented training of the would-be-teachers, that not to let them look at the teacher activity as a set of difficulties. Since "being self-reflective" is expected, so the helping collaboration is a requirement. This can be helpful in the practice-specified acquisition of pedagogical knowledge and thinking.

(2) The support if the in-service teachers: the changing of the contents of the post-graduate teacher training in direction where the creative task or problem-solving replaces routine.

An additional income of conclusions of this research could be for the changing European and Hungarian teacher training to open new ways for those researches which can serve the revealing of the necessary new contents for the new structures. Directions of the researches of this sort would be the following:

(1) Methods of becoming self-reflective;

(2) Methods of sustaining the ability of being self-reflective (with monitoring, support along the career), so let the teacher training not end by graduating from the university but start;

(3) The missing aspect of higher-educational didactics;

(4) Establishing the possibilities for teachers to build a real (positive) self-concept.

After the analysis of the differences between male and female teachers, it has revealed that the women-teachers consider the profession as a not easily solvable one. The author would be important then to make the participants in the teacher training able to reach professional means, methods and help which can ease for

them and inspire them in carrying out career in a creative way.

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