Teacher

Introduction

The figure of the teacher is extremely relevant in psychology, as far as it is committed with the process of acculturation, education and socialization of individuals. The teacher accompanies the person during a long part of his life contributing to his/her process of becoming member of the cultural community. It is not trivial to say that the teacher is a person everybody spent a lot of time with during one's own life. At the same time, the teacher plays a key role in the process of transmission and maintenance of the cultural continuity taking place in educational institutions. He/she mediates the relationship between students and knowledge, values, norms and representations of the cultural community, guiding and supporting students in the elaboration of more or less critical or acquiescent conceptual tools. It is worth to discriminate between "teaching" as an activity that can be carried out in a number of different contexts (e.g. formal and informal, school, workplace, leisure, etc.) by different people (e.g. parents, kinship, etc.) and "teacher" as a specific profession framed in a institutionalized educational system.

Definition

A teacher is a person with a specific professional qualification responsible to provide education for learners of different age within an educational institution, namely school. Thought cultural communities assign different roles to the teacher, with respect to the activities, the objectives and the people to be educated, it is possible to identify some constant dimensions related to the figure of the teacher. First, the teacher must manage at least two basic expertise dimensions: he/she must be a pedagogical expert and a subject matter expert. The teacher is supposed to be able to plan and deliver a learning unit in one or more subjects. Besides, a teacher must be able to take care of the intellectual development and wellbeing of learners, to recognize learners needs and problems. The role of teacher in contemporary societies has been defined after the introduction of mass education systems. The social status of the teacher is correlated to the relevance of education in the different cultural communities, that nevertheless constantly establish a formal procedure to access the profession. In general, to become a teacher is required to follow a specific course of studies, often university or college, and to spend an amount of time in supervised school apprenticeship. Teacher education includes pedagogy, teaching methods and the study of the disciplines to be taught in school curricula. Finally, the different cultural communities share the idea of teaching as an asymmetry relationship between teacher and learner, implying in a variable degree the issue of power and control in education.

Traditional debates

A traditional idea of teaching used to conceive the teacher as an agent transferring knowledge to students based on his/her expertise in subject matter, while effective teaching involves much more than a simple transmission of knowledge (Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996). Teaching cannot be reduced to a set of instrumental actions to help students achieve learning objectives. Teaching profession implies pedagogical and ethical dimensions, like the development of learners' social skills and emotional management. Teacher's educational expertise is not only conceived as the capability to plan, execute, and assess lessons, it includes helping students to develop their own learning and collaboration methods, with a greater emphasis on learning and less on teaching. Since Vygotsky, the teacher is understood as the main person responsible for the actualization of learner's potentialities of intellectual development (Daniels, Cole & Wertsch, 2007). The teachers is required to be a mediator, a facilitator and a scaffold for learners (Wood,

Bruner & Ross, 1976). The teacher's scaffolding function is related to a radical revision of the triadic psychological and power relationship between teacher, learner and the object of knowledge.

Teacher is often considered a "caring profession", thought this aspect is mainly involved in primary and junior secondary education. Caring consists of those emotions, actions and reflections that result from teacher's desire to motivate, help or inspire pupils and young students. Caring is primarily connected to teachers' pedagogical and classroom management strategies. However, it also exists within the different social contexts of teacher–student interactions, inside and outside the classroom situation. As a care professional, the teacher is subject to burnout risk. The concept of teacher's burnout has been more recently replaced by the idea of teachers' professional vulnerability (Kelchtermans, 2005) which is related to experiences of feeling threatened and questioned by principal, parents, politicians and being unable to face the growing demand for change and innovation. In the knowledge society, vulnerability seems to become a structural condition of teachers and educators in general (Kelchtermans, 2005)

A second perspective considers teachers as "intellectual workers", whose job is to create, elaborate and disseminate knowledge. This approach, developed by critical pedagogy, implies an active political and social role of the teacher, also underlying the role of school in producing change rather than simply re-producing the social order. Teachers should be "transformative intellectuals" (Giroux 1988), able to be agents of change and to educate learners in being future citizens. This approach denounces a social pressure to consider the teacher as an organic intellectual, a passive recipient of social and political imperatives, whose objectives and activities are decided by technocratic experts far from the everyday realities of classroom life.

Critical debates

Critical psychology raised the issue whether the teacher is an agent of a school system that perpetuates social inequalities by systematic, inequitable different distribution of resources based on class, race, and ethnicity. These workers have to deal every day with professional and societal changes and growing social pressure that define teachers as technicians with testable content knowledge and shortening higher education curricula. The advent of so-called knowledge society and the wider societal changes (migrations, new educational practices, new technologies, laws, etc.) trigger change in educational conditions, through several educational reforms related, some say, to devolution and neoliberalism. Teacher's role has been thus affected by two decades of policy reforms at a national level, especially in Western countries. These initiatives and changing conditions have placed increased social, performance and workload pressure upon teachers. Changes in society are leading to new expectations about the role of education, which, in return, is leading to new demands on teachers' quality and competences. The unproblematized economizing view of education as instrumental good to achieve individual goals on the job market being at stake, the emphasys shifts to the academic productivity. Education becomes the mean to acquire specific skills, namely work-based literacy, useful for individual achievements on job market. To measure the effectiveness of this process, a system of standardized accountabilty is set up turning to competence-centred and test-based curricula (Kaščák & Pupala, 2012), teachers being deprofessionalized as civil servants charged to deliver and assess market oriented knowledge (Wong, 2006). In the framework of knowledge economy ideology, also the evaluation of teacher quality shifts to predominantly quantitative indicators, leading to a very one-sided perspective on the quality of teachers and teacher education. Beyond meritocratic ideology, several studies problematize the correlation between class differences and teaching quality, showing for instance that working-class children are more likely to be taught by less credentialed educators (Fine, Burns, Torre & Payne, 2008).

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Online resources

Teaching and teacher education
Teacher tube
The public science project

Provide a list of keywords and a list with all the names mentioned
Keywords:
Critical pedagogy, Zone of proximal development, Educational reform, Scaffolding, Knowledge society, Teacher professional identity, Caring profession, Transformative intellectual, Cultural community, Change, Vulnerability, Continuity,
Names:
Bruner J. S. , Vygotsky L. S., Wood D., Ross G., Wong J. L. N., Vandenberghe R., Huberman A. M., Shore B., Rogoff B., Matusov E., White C., O'Connor K.E., Kelchtermans G., Kaščák O., Pupala B.