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The professional status of teachers in three countries: Italy, the USA and Poland

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Education plays a very important role in the social, economical and moral development of society, especially in the process of democratisation. This process is given particular significance by teachers, whose professional preparation, awareness, wisdom (Feldman 1997) and social status are important factors in their professional identity. Teachers are a valuable workforce, whose level of qualifications and openness to democratic values gives them a significant opportunity to play a meaningful role in society. They can become 'transformative intellectuals', persons thinking critically and understanding education as a sphere of equality, democracy, social justice (Giroux 1993). They can inspire and lead young generation to achieve their potential, to become autonomous agents and productive citizens, active not only in undertaking their personal and professional goals, but also ready to participate in social life. Teachers are competent classroom practitioners (reflective practitioners) with many competences necessary to practice their profession. Among these competences the most important are communicative, emotional, auto-creative ones. Teaching becomes – through many rapid changes and changing social demands and expectations – a difficult intellectual activity, an art rather than just a job, because the specificity of pedagogical situations demands teachers' creativity, spontaneity and openness.

Teachers' professional responsibility is linked to the ethical and psychological principles they present to students and discuss with them (Kohlberg, Mayer, 1993). Contemporary teachers are aware of their cultural and social mission in preparing young people to play active and critical roles in society. Today's teachers are professionals, widely focused on students' psychological development (cognitive, emotional, moral), and appreciative of youngsters' individual ways of constructing their personal knowledge, meanings, thoughts. They can work autonomously using their competences to make professional decisions, creating curricula and programmes of personal development for the students and for themselves. Teachers' education (according to Kohlberg, Habermas, Dewey, Vygotsky) is oriented not only on professional and pedagogical knowledge and abilities but also on shaping awareness, attitudes, responsibility, autonomy, and understanding of social roles. These aspects of teachers' occupation are advanced in Italian and American education, where there has been a long tradition of democracy. In Poland, they are very important elements of the reform of the system of education related to political and social changes (Golebniak 1998).

Teachers' professional status encompasses many elements, such as their professional preparation and personal development, teaching experience, their attitude toward the profession, their economic status, and participation in civic community life in school the and local environment. This paper presents the results of research into the professional status of three groups of teachers in three countries: Italy, Poland and the United States of America. These groups are teachers from kindergarten, elementary schools, gymnasium and secondary schools. The survey was through a 42-point questionnaire related to many aspects of teachers' professional and social status.

Characteristic of the sample groups

The sample consisted of 1,265 Italian teachers, 147 Polish and 180 American teachers. The teachers were mostly women. Table 1 illustrates this.

Table 1. Gender of teachers

Gender	USA %	Italy %	Poland %
Men	24	18	21
Women	76	82	79

In Italy, the majority of teachers are university graduates (60%), whereas in the U.S., 79% have a secondary teaching certificate (teachers college). In both countries, 35-year old teachers tend to attend post-university, training courses. Polish teachers are mostly graduates. A reform in the educational system of Poland means that teachers must have had a university education to be employed in school. Only 3.4% of the Polish sample were educated in Teachers College. They also mostly continue postgraduate studies, courses and training (53.7%).

The American teachers were from 24 schools in New Jersey: 12 elementary, 6 middle, 6 secondary (high school). Their average age was 35 and all had approximately 8 years of teaching experience, i.e. slightly less experience than the national average. As regards their living status, 44% lived with their spouses, 32% with friends or colleagues, 12% alone and another 12% with relatives. This is basically a woman's world, divided between the family nuclear model and the open community model; the number of singles is also important and more substantial than in Italy. Polish teachers were from kindergarten, elementary schools, gymnasium, secondary schools and 6.1% from university. The average age of Polish teachers was 37, and they had on average 11 years professional experience. The Italian teachers worked mostly in secondary, middle, and elementary schools. Data on workplace is presented in table 2.

Table 2. Types of schools

	USA %	Italy %	Poland %
Infant	00	8	31
Elementary	14	24	18
Middle	43	24	24
Secondary	43	28	21
University	00	00	6
No answer	00	16	00

Our questionnaire began with the question *Why do you teach?* as a way of understanding teachers' professionalism. In Italy there is concern about teacher training, and efforts are being made to strongly motivate future teachers about the cultural and social value of the profession. On the other hand, in the United States teachers are discussing how they can

develop within the profession, not only the teaching aspects, but also the scholastic success of pupils.

We found that Polish teachers perceived themselves as qualified professionals by social expectation, but without high social status, because of their low salaries. Italian teachers were more concerned about their social credibility; while American teachers aimed at strengthening their teaching role. Italians were well aware of their social function, and are seeking to improve their weak social. Americans were sure of their social status, and were working to better articulate their social function. Social recognition and institutional confirmation are constant in a much-discussed profession that is constantly shaping and reorganising, improving and re-proposing its troubled identity. Public perceptions of respect and collaboration are developing, but not yet achieved.

Motivation to teaching

Most of the teachers in the three groups like teaching. American and Polish teachers are more likely than Italian teachers to choose the profession again. Americans are more likely to advise a friend to become a teacher than Italians and Polish: the later are the least likely to do this (table 3).

Table 3. Perceptions of the profession

	USA %	Italy%	Poland %
I like teaching	97	86	69
I would choose the profession again	87	65	77
I would advise friends to be teachers	73	39	14

What were these teachers' motives for teaching? Table 4 offers some suggestions.

Table 4. Teachers' motives of teaching

agreement with ...	USA %	Italy %	Poland %
Enjoy working with children	76	30	20
Personal improvement	24	16	14
Belief in the profession	62	28	8
Good opportunities	24	5	28
The social value of the profession	33	21	7
More free time	8	3	10

There were significant differences in the interviewed teachers' opinions. Americans and Italians mostly gave motives such as: 'I like working with children'; 'I believed in teaching'; 'I was convinced about the social value of the profession'. For Polish teachers the teaching profession is firstly a good opportunity, and this is probably linked to the high levels of unemployment in Poland and a feeling of achieving some professional stability within the public workforce. Polish teachers also showed lower levels of belief in the profession and its social value.

Italian, American and Polish teachers were asked about the competences necessary for the profession. All suggested pedagogical knowledge, methods of teaching and knowledge of the subject. The competence to build a positive relations with students and professional deontology (te ethics of the occupation) were seen as less important.

They were also asked about their level of satisfaction in their work relations. American teachers were clearly much happier about their relationships with their school principals (61%), their personal (50%) and professional (48%) relations with their colleagues, and with pupils (who, however, came last on the list (10%)). This range of preferences was completely reversed in Italy, where pupils ranked first on the list, giving most satisfaction, and school executives last, with school colleagues in between. This data appears to reflect the differences between how schools are run in the two countries: in the USA the school principal works closely with the teachers and avoids delegating duties, while in Italy, the principal tends to be a manager, more attentive to running the structure than to human relations. Polish teachers, on the other hand, rated most highly their personal and professional relations with their colleagues and with the principal of the school. In the next position was the 'child study-team', followed by team work at school, both with co-workers and students. Least satisfaction came from their relationships with parents.

Teachers' philosophy of teaching

Most of the teachers interviewed in the USA suggested that 'good teaching' meant teachers who were capable of keeping classroom order; this was followed by the ability to keep students interested, obtaining high scholastic results and those who recognised students' potential. The Italian's perceptions of 'good teaching' were different: the most frequently cited characteristic was keeping the students interested, followed by professional duty, recognition of students' potential and subject preparation; also of particular importance is organisational and managerial capacities. Polish teacher's most frequent responses were about the organisational competences of the 'good teacher': 'effective classroom management' and 'ability to organize and manage the work'. They also appreciated teachers' 'ability to recognise each students' potential' as an important feature of a good teaching. Classroom management and the ability to discover and inspire a development of students' potential were indicated by each group of investigated samples as necessary elements of good teachers' competences.

In the USA discipline is correlated with scholastic success, while in Italy conduct is also of major importance and expressed through professional duty and disciplinary preparation, as well as a firm belief in a professional code of ethics for teachers. Polish teachers saw classroom discipline as an instrument of students' socialisation, connected with norms and the values of school and social life (team work, students' and teachers' subjectivity).

Psycho-pedagogical aspects of relating to pupils prevail in the USA, whereas didactic-pedagogic disciplinary, professional and ethical aspects are more pronounced in the Italian sample. There is an Italian triad of involvement-responsibility-competency, an American triad of discipline-interest-evaluation, and a Polish triad of management-responsibility-reflectivity.

In the American sample, the ethics of teaching seemed invisible, teachers taking on a social duty that was already structured and left little space for individual responsibility: the mission completely absorbs the vocation. The social task coincides with taking on the

teaching role. For Polish teachers, the ethics of the profession are connected with a high level of professional qualifications and responsibility for their duties according to social expectations.

Love, communication and example typified the 'good teacher' in an American school, where the best teachers are chosen based on their commitment to the pupils, and their capacity to relate with teachers and pupils. This could be seen as classical behaviour, which sweeps away theories of technology replacing the human factor. Feelings and responsibilities towards the pupils compete with up-to-date discipline and teaching in the image of the American teacher: open to knowledge of social problems, sure of him/herself, relatively less critical in his/her theoretical attitude, doubtlessly concentrating more on organisation and professional development. The image of Polish teachers was based on pedagogical competences, reflectivity, self-evaluation and responsibility. They were less convinced and needed strong professional and personal support from colleagues (reflecting the lack of stability in the Polish labour market); they also were aware of their role in the society, which expected professionalism and dedication to the children.

The founding philosophies of Italy and the USA, American pragmatism and Italian idealism, are both open to late 20th century scientific approaches, which matched both together, overcoming dogma with critical thought. For the third millennium, the data collected from both samples revealed a subtle return to immobility, with an escape from critical and problematic reasoning. The Polish philosophy of education seems to be humanistic and constructivist, underlining teachers and students' autonomy, subjectivity, self-dependence, critical thinking and intellectual openness: this seems clearly connected to democratisation in the country.

Teachers' social standing in the society

American teachers have a high social standing: society recognises their capacity for practical order. Italian teachers have a low social standing, despite their conscientious work preparation. The social standing of Polish teachers is not as high as it is in America, but has increased since 1999 and the beginning of the educational reforms in Poland. Polish teachers try to perform their professional and social role within the social demands linked to the economical, technical and social changes in the country. They see largely see themselves as qualified professionals contributing to the education of young generation, realising their public function to the best of their abilities.

Teachers' social position is linked to their participation in social, political, professional organisations in society. Only the American teachers showed much interest in this: they belonged to teacher unions and professional associations much than did their Polish and Italian colleagues.

American teachers are attentive to what society thinks of them, whereas Italian and Polish teachers are more attentive to their professional responsibility. Italian teachers do not just want discipline in the classroom and for students to have high marks; they demand social appreciation of their education. To them, the teacher is the person who has the social obligation and responsibility of instructing and ensuring pupils achieve their goals, but he/she is also the person who educates beyond school marks and grades, who works with all pupils, whether good or not so good, who can guide to social values and not be dependent on them, and who imparts change to society.

American professional development is given operational time by the school, supported by teaching colleagues and the principal, and is supported by classroom research. Professional development – understood as theoretical and practical research – is still infrequent in the Italian school system, all the way through teacher training. Polish teachers perceived their professional development mostly as continuing education, and are less oriented towards investigations, although new educational demands are motivating them to become researchers.

Comparative results

The following comparative results came from the survey:

- Teaching is largely a female profession.
- Italian and Polish teachers tend to have higher levels of qualifications.
- American teachers enjoy their work and believe in the profession more than Europeans. Teachers from Northern Italy appreciate the personal improvement of teachers more; in Poland teaching tends to be seen as a good career opportunity.
- Experienced American and Italian teachers like teaching and would choose the profession again; Polish teachers would not advise friends to be teachers.
- American and Italian teachers are very dedicated to their work. Polish teachers have doubts and are less convinced.
- Teaching tends to be a vocation at the beginning of the career and to become a mission as soon as it is time to retire.
- Methods, pedagogy and teaching know-how are seen as the most important skills in all countries. Multicultural and ethnic sensitivity is not appreciated by Polish teachers.
- In Italy the highest level of satisfaction is found in teacher-student relationships; in Poland in teacher-colleague relationships; while teacher-parent relationships are more important than in the USA.
- The highest social perception of teaching was found in the USA and Poland.
- For all teachers the most important aspect of good teaching is the ability to be involved with students and to motivate learning.
- To be a good teacher in Italy also requires a serious attitude toward civic and professional duties; while in Poland, it is more connected to specific preparation in subject areas or discipline; in the USA it mainly depends on students' scores, success and scholastic results.
- A teacher in Italy and the USA is largely seen as a person who contributes to the education of new generations; in Poland he/she is seen mainly as a qualified professional who supplies a service on the basis of specialised training, according to the social perception of the role.
- Union and Association Membership is very important in USA, while in Italy and in Poland teachers are less interested in such organisations. Polish teachers have a high

feeling of social status connected with their level of education, but not with their participation in social life.

- Italian and Polish teachers belong more to religious organisations, while American teachers prefer sports and recreational associations. In Europe teachers tend to renew family values and cultural traditions, while innovation seems to be the pragmatic perspective in the USA.
- Overall, teaching is a value of human identity, which asserts the significance of the individual in society.

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