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Conference paper**BEING A TEACHER IS MORE THAN A PROFESSION:
REFLECTIONS ON THE TEACHING VOCATION IN THE XXI
CENTURY****Abstract:**

This paper analyzes the position of the teaching profession within the broader social reality in the 21st century, with particular reference to the contemporary Macedonian pedagogical and social context. The paper first gives a summary presentation of several central points related to the teaching profession in modern society: 1. Interpretation of this year's UNESCO theme: "The Transformation of Education Begins with Teachers"; 2. Consulting several theories that give a broader perspective to the teaching profession in general (Konrad Liessmann, George Steiner, John Dewey and Jerome Brunner); 3. Criticism of the negative tendency to interpret the teaching profession from the point of view of information transmission, and not within the broader educational process, as the theory and history of pedagogy dictates. The rest of the paper deals with the application of general pedagogical and philosophical theories to the contemporary Macedonian context in dialogue with the specific Macedonian pedagogical tradition. The paper pays particular attention to the "Conception of Primary Education" (2021), which is interpreted as an attempt to reinterpret and rehabilitate the position of the teacher in contemporary Macedonian education.

Keywords: *education, teacher, competencies.*

The main provocation for the writing of this text was the theme of this year's celebration of the teacher's day - an event that has been held for twenty-nine years, since 1994, when UNESCO established this festive day. The theme was "The Transformation of Education Begins with Teachers". This polysemic syntagm can be understood in many ways, and most of those interpretations can not only be wrong, but also very harmful to the status of teachers in this XXI century.

The first naive and wrong interpretation of this year's theme can be understood as if the entire burden of the educational system depends on the teachers themselves - on their work, agency, and approach to their own profession. On the one hand, this is certainly true: each of us is responsible for our role in society and has a duty to fulfill that role to the best of our ability. But can we really consistently and fully responsibly claim that the entire burden of education rests on the shoulders of the numerous teaching staff who daily struggle with low salaries, poor conditions and - most of all - the low respect they undeservedly get in modern society and culture? Can we - if we continue with the naive interpretation of this year's theme - attribute it all to the frivolous, unprofessional and insufficient efforts of teachers in the world? This way of looking at things is naive and incorrect, and is a striking example of the so-called "substantialist thinking", which according to Cassirer is a hallmark of any pre-theoretical thinking about reality (Cassirer, 1953). Instead of this direct and naive interpretation, a far more subtle and comprehensive interpretation of this year's theme - "The transformation of education begins with teachers" is needed. I will dedicate the rest of this text to exactly that, at the same time offering a brief review of the contemporary function of the teacher, both in Macedonia and in the rest of the world.

Our attention should not be directed exclusively to the teacher - to his competences, effectiveness and efficiency - but to rethinking our own relationship to teachers and to education in general. Only in this way can we understand the deep importance of this day and the full meaning of what UNESCO wants to convey to us with the chosen phrase. From this point of view, "Transformation of education begins with teachers" means, with a slight modification and clarification in the formulation of the words, that the only way in which education can be improved and advanced is through a fundamental and in-depth transformation of our attitude towards the teaching profession. Only through the application of "relational thinking" (as opposed to the already mentioned "substantial") - for which the teacher represents only one of the many elements in the complex structure of society - will we be able to properly understand and improve the position of the teacher in the XXI century.

We all know that the teaching profession is not a job like any other in society. Unlike other professions, teachers produce neither objects nor new knowledge; least of all, they offer services. I am not saying this to underestimate and belittle other professions, but to emphasize the exceptional and special role of teachers and what they do every day. Namely, no matter how pretentious

it sounds, teachers “create” people in the broadest sense of the word. Every person in the XXI century, regardless of his future calling or profession, in one way or another, passed through educational institutions and was under the mentorship of one or more teachers.

This at first glance obvious and even banal truth has much wider implications. I will illustrate what I mean through an example. Today, due to many different factors – economic, political, cultural – the domain of education is often limited exclusively to the transmission of information and facts. From a certain pragmatic point of view, the role of education - and by implication also of the teacher - can be experienced as a simple transmission or transfer of knowledge from one figure (the teacher) who knows more, to another figure (the student) who either knows almost nothing, or he possesses significantly less knowledge than his superior. In this way, all education is reduced to the transmission of information: the teacher is there to transmit the body of knowledge as best he can, and after doing so, to check, in an appropriate and practical way, mainly the factual knowledge of his students. As the provocative Austrian philosopher Konrad Lisman points out in his well-known book *Theorie der unbildung: die Irrtümer der Wissensgesellschaft* (Lissmann, 2012), classroom work turns into a particularly banal variant of a “knowledge quiz”, very similar to the “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” television show. In this paradigm, education becomes subordinated to various types of testing (knowledge tests, graduation exams, rounding tests, etc.), and the teacher – a combination of an instructor and a policeman. Of course, more and more scientists, pedagogues, philosophers and psychologists – not to mention teachers – notice that this is not the right way to approach the problem of upbringing and education.

Radenko Krulj notes that the priority task of pedagogical science is to discover the rules in the field of upbringing, education, teaching and management of the system of upbringing and education (Krulj et al., 2003). Thus, in this expanded perspective, pedagogy is not only a science of education, but also a science that investigates the laws, regularities and principles of education. In short, any education – even when it thinks and does differently – is always much more than the transfer of information: it is also inculturation, socialization, upbringing, and transmission (or rather) construction of values and value systems. The school is, as the versatile American intellectual John Dewey was able to observe, “a mini-society” – not a place where students prepare for the life that is yet to come, but a space where they learn, acquire knowledge and values by living in a separate and controlled environment. In his famous *Pedagogical Credo*, the American philosopher and pedagogue decisively notes that “education must be seen as a continuous reconstruction of experiences; and that the process and the purpose of education are the same thing” (Dewey, 1972). Experience, in Dewey’s note, is much more than acquired knowledge and memorized facts – it is a complete reconfiguration of what students learn and experience, perceived not only in terms of various knowledge checks, but also

in terms of values, emotions and the stories they construct about themselves and others.

From this point of view, the function of the teacher looks significantly different, and the stakes become much higher. Jerome Bruner writes that “the teacher is an immediate and personal symbol of the educational process, a figure with whom students can identify and compare themselves” (Bruner, 1979). As a pedagogue in the original ancient Greek meaning of this word - a person who guides a child - the teacher has the duty and responsibility not only to teach his students a series of facts, information and data with the help of which they will then be able to pass the countless tests and checks of knowledge, but a “symbol” who, with his behavior and speech, will be a model of behavior and thinking for countless young generations. George Steiner, on the other hand, in a series of important presentations held as part of the famous Charles Elliot Norton Lectures at Harvard held between 2000 and 2001 (Steiner, 2003), where he explores the complex relationship between teachers and students, from the time of the pre-Socratics until to this day, he thinks in a similar way as Dewey and Brunner. The whole story of Western systems of education and upbringing, according to Steiner, begins with the ancient philosopher Pythagoras and the group of students gathered around him. It represents an explicit model on which Plato’s famous Academy and Aristotle’s Peripatetic School were later formed – a series of ideals that govern our ideas about education, images about the teacher and the structure of institutions. Steiner emphasizes two things about the early beginnings of organized education: first, that the Pythagorean principle was based on the teacher’s spoken word and the discussions he had with the students; and secondly, that the ancient philosopher was not only a philosopher and scientist - that is, a transmitter of important knowledge and information - but also a central influence in the ethical and political development of his students.¹ These things – especially speech and ethical development – are, as we all know, very difficult to measure, and even more difficult to verify. For them to have any influence at all, society must first have confidence in the teacher, to believe that he does his job diligently and correctly, and to have faith in his capacities (intellectual and moral) that he is good and stable enough to have an influence on character and moral development of students.

We can point to many more such examples: they span all the classics of pedagogical literature: from Cicero’s speeches, Michel de Montaigne’s essays on education, the legendary book *Emile* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the numerous texts of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, treatises and textbooks of John Amos Comenius, etc. What all these works have in common is that they consider the teaching vocation to be more than a profession. If it is similar to anyone, at least in the words of John Dewey, the teacher is an artist, who works on the still raw materials of young individuals (Simpson, et al. 2005). Therefore, he must be

¹ More on this issue in the chapter *Eternal Origins* in the book *Teachings of the Masters* by George Steiner (Steiner, 2003).

free, spontaneous, intuitive, creative and above all, satisfied and happy with his work. Being a teacher is not just a profession – it's a way of life, which starts early in the morning, with the sound of the school bell, but doesn't end with the last class in the afternoon – or sometimes even when the sun goes down. There are the additional and extracurricular activities, the numerous unnoticed conversations and counseling with the students and parents, the trainings, the excursions and what not.

Here, in short, through these few short excursions from the theory and history of pedagogy, we convey at the same time the theoretical and historical truth about the teaching profession. But we will ask ourselves: how does this relate to this year's UNICEF theme for World Teacher's Day - "Transformation of education begins with teachers"? And more importantly, how is all this related to Macedonia?

We are witnessing the bad status that teachers have not only in a large part of the world - with a few exceptions - but also in Macedonia, starting from low salaries, the limitation of their functions, and in a series of intertwined labyrinths of administrative obligations and redundant documents. To this can be added the numerous pressures that come from all sides: society's expectations, economic cuts, political pressures, parental pressures, etc. - all of which, in different ways, accumulate on the backs of the teaching staff. ²How then can we create an "immediate and personal symbol of the educational process" from this tortured figure, as Brunner advised us? The answer to this question is complex, but I will emphasize only one thing, which I already started at the beginning. One central thing we can do is for all of us to start thinking hard about our relationship with teachers, and try to create an atmosphere of respect and understanding that will give many teachers the respect and dignity that not only which they deserve, but also without which they cannot perform their work as models of identification.

However, the future is not painted exclusively in dark colors and there is a way out of these administrative and theoretical impasses. In the last few years, Macedonian education has been making structural and institutional strides that are more and more similar to the ideas about education and the ideals for the teacher written on the pages of the great pedagogical classics. "The concept for primary education" (2021) made certain decisive and necessary reforms in the already questionable, outdated and congested educational process, which for years seemed to offer no way out.

Changes in primary school should be directed towards teaching and learning in which analytical and critical thinking is developed, creativity is encouraged, learning how to recognize true and false information and emphasizing that its correct use is far more useful and valuable than having information. (Conception of Primary Education, 2021). Namely, with the

² More on the social, political, and economic pressures on education, but also on the humanities in general, can be read in Martha Nussbaum's important book, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Nussbaum, 2020).

Conception, new curricula were realized - created in accordance with modern pedagogical and psychological theories - and a significantly different structure of the implementation of teaching was formed.

Let me clarify: the main stake in the recent reforms in primary education was the transition from an outdated and theoretically unsustainable way of planning to a newer, fresher and more accurate way of planning and implementing teaching. According to the old planning model, which is known as “content curriculum planning”, the goal of each class, each lesson and each minute of the teaching process is to be rigidly realized according to what is written in the programs. The point of this system was the achievement of goals, and filling out numerous documents and forms, which turned the teacher into a mere follower of orders. This rigid formalism – in the most pejorative sense of the word – completely stifled the educational process and trapped the teacher in a system that almost completely dulled his creativity, took away his intuition, and trapped his knowledge. All that, fortunately, is starting to change.

The Conception defines the interests and needs of students as their primary priority, and puts them in the focus of primary education. The theoretical premises of the Conception is the scientific fact that students can more easily achieve the expected learning results if they perceive what they learn as relevant and useful, i.e. as something they can bring in relation to their everyday life. Therefore, it suggests that the curricula should be designed following this guiding principle. At the same time, the Conception envisages a wide range of optional subjects that arise from the students’ expressed interests and can help not only in developing their potential, but also in increasing their satisfaction and wellbeing while staying and learning in school (Conception for primary education, 2021).

Also, the new Conception, which is based on the “process-developmental” way of planning, slowly but surely began to free the teacher from numerous administrative and bureaucratic restraints. This system aims to relax the teacher, to allow him to do what he knows best – to teach and to educate. Namely, the process-development planning is adapted not so much to the curricula and the learning results that should be realized in each lesson, but to the needs and sensibility of the students, and to the teacher’s own preferences, knowledge and intuition. Through the planned integration and correlation, he can be individual and creative and leave his mark on the educational process. Finally, in this way he can be an artist – as Dewey suggests – and not a bureaucrat or a mere transmitter of knowledge and information.

This reform is, of course, designed primarily for students and their needs; but it is also designed for teachers, to free them from unnecessary responsibilities and create an autonomous space for them, where they can work continuously - without someone constantly challenging their authority and competences. In a word, the new Conception aims to restore give them back their freedom. However, when we analyze the Conception theoretically, we have reasons to hope that the position of teachers will be placed in the right

place. But it will take time. Namely, for a reform to be successful, several years and generations must and should pass, time which will bring us empirical indicators, which will show us the direction in which we should move forward. We still have to analyze how teachers accept the new Conception, whether their competencies are improved, whether their autonomy is restored and how all this will affect the educational process in general.

In the end, let us finish with a few positive examples from the educational tradition of our country. Namely, Macedonia has a very stable foundation and a rich tradition through which it can achieve this process of transformation. It is a well-known fact that one of the official symbols of our country are the names of Cyril and Methodius, their successors Kliment and Naum and the Ohrid School, several personalities and one institution from which we derive not only the origin of our language, but also the foundations of our education. The great figures of the early modern era and the enlightenment that took place in these areas were first and foremost teachers, and their primary activity was the literacy and education of generations of young people. Every history of teaching and pedagogy in Macedonia began with these few key figures and their institutions. In addition to them, numerous schools throughout our country proudly bear the names of key figures from the world history of pedagogy: for example, the Czech missionary and one of the founders of the modern science of education and upbringing John Amos Comenius (whose *Didactica Magna* is still read and studied), or the famous Swiss reformer, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, who advocated the education not only of the hand and the mind, but also of the heart.

The schools bearing the names of Cyril and Methodius, Kliment and Naum, Blaze Koneski and Krume Kepeski, Lazar Lichenovski and Ilija Nikolovski-Luj, Comenius and Pestalozzi clearly state to whom the schools belong. They are a symbol – and symbols are always important, especially when we forget them – of the ideal autonomy of education and the historical dignity of the teaching profession. We teachers – of all ages, subjects and institutions – know very well that education is always determined by broad cultural and political trends. But we also know that all this must go through us, through our knowledge, expertise and experience. We are that breaking point that makes education, education in the full sense of the word, and not just the transmission of useful information or untested and unreliable values. For that, we must be ready to improve, constantly learn and be in tune with modernity: always in front of everyone, in the vanguard, because our responsibility is a hundred times greater. Our goal – in the spirit of this important part and drawn from the theme of UNESCO – is to realize that schools belong to us, the teachers. When that becomes clear to us, when we are aware of our knowledge, experience and dignity, then we will pull the rest along with us. I can only emphasize that we are on the right track - it just takes more energy, a greater dynamic and courage from all of us.

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