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Images of the Educational Dialogue of Meanings Occurring in the Portfolio of Early Education Students
Oblicza edukacyjnego dialogu znaczeń występującego w portfolio studentek wczesnej edukacji

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The aim of this paper is to identify and characterise the specifics of the dialogue of meanings occurring in the portfolio of early education students, considered in the context of the possibilities of educating teachers.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The considerations focus on two research problems: What content of the portfolio of early education students demonstrates that they engage the dialogue of meanings with educational issues and their own school experience? What shape does the knowledge about the world as reconstructed by teacher entrants take? To analyse the portfolio, which I treat as legacy data, I use the method of qualitative analysis of text.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: In the first part, I reconstruct the relationship between the dialogue of meanings as a component of learning strategies, and the educational portfolio as a tool for monitoring achievements. In the empirical part, I characterise the categories that emerged in the content analysis and show their interconnections with the dialogic assignment of meanings to educational reality.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The results of the analysis show that the learning strategy which makes use of the dialogue of meanings and the portfolio enables students to discover the possibility of assigning individual sense to educational reality, not excluding the existence of different perspectives and respecting them. By undertaking a dialogue with personal knowledge and their own experiences, the students gradually went beyond the framework of obviousness and expanded their perspective of thinking about the world of school.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS: Thinking about teacher professionalism is changing, with the presented analysis providing a view on this matter. It shows the premises

and effects of a certain possibility of educating teachers who are open to the complexity of educational reality and to the dialogue preventing its reduction.

→ **KEYWORDS:** DIALOGUE OF MEANINGS, EDUCATIONAL PORTFOLIO, PARADIGMS OF DIDACTICS, TEACHER EDUCATION, EARLY EDUCATION STUDENTS

STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Celem artykułu jest zidentyfikowanie obszarów i scharakteryzowanie specyfiki dialogu znaczeń występującego w portfolio studentek wczesnej edukacji, rozpatrywane w kontekście możliwości kształcenia nauczycieli.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: Rozważaniami kierują dwa problemy badawcze: Jakie treści portfolio studentek pedagogiki wczesnoszkolnej wskazują na podjęcie przez nie dialogu znaczeń z zagadnieniami edukacyjnymi i własnymi doświadczeniami szkolnymi? Jaki kształt przybiera zrekonstruowana przez adeptki zawodu nauczyciela wiedza o świecie szkoły? Do analizy portfolio, które traktuję jak dane zastane, wykorzystuję metodę jakościowej analizy tekstu.

PROCES WYWODU: W pierwszej części rekonstruuję relacje między dialogiem znaczeń, jako składnikiem strategii uczenia się, a portfolio edukacyjnym jako narzędziem monitorowania osiągnięć. W części empirycznej charakteryzuję kategorie wyłonione w analizie treści i wykazuję ich powiązania z dialogicznym nadawaniem znaczeń rzeczywistości edukacyjnej.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Wyniki analiz wskazują, że strategia uczenia się, wykorzystująca dialog znaczeń i portfolio, pozwala na odkrywanie przez studentki możliwości nadawania rzeczywistości edukacyjnej indywidualnych sensów niewykluczających istnienia odmiennych perspektyw i ich poszanowania. Podejmując dialog z wiedzą osobistą i własnymi doświadczeniami, studentki stopniowo wykraczały poza ramy oczywistości i poszerzały perspektywę myślenia o świecie szkoły.

WNIOSKI, INNOWACJE, REKOMENDACJE: Zmienia się myślenie o profesjonalizmie nauczyciela, a przedstawiona analiza jest głosem w tej kwestii. Pokazuję założenia i efekty pewnej możliwości kształcenia nauczycieli otwartych na złożoność realiów edukacyjnych i na dialog zapobiegający ich redukowaniu.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** DIALOG ZNACZEŃ, PORTFOLIO EDUKACYJNE, PARADYGMATY DYDAKTYKI, KSZTAŁCENIE NAUCZYCIELI, STUDENCI WCZESNEJ EDUKACJI

Introduction

Dialogue is a category that is as important to education as it is ambiguous. It eludes being enclosed in a clear definitional framework, although there have been numerous in-depth analyses of it and attempts to organize its semantic field (e.g. Rutkowiak, 1992; Kwaśnica, 1995; Gadacz, 2015; Śliwerski, 2019). The educational port-folio is similarly flexible in terms of definition. Although it has been evolving since the 1980s, a one-size--fits-all concept of it has not yet been formulated, and its role in learning and assessment is defined in different ways (e.g., Koretz, 1998; Brown, 2001; Davis & Ponnamperuma, 2005; Frey, 2014; Gołębniak, 2019).

Reconstructing the considerations of both of these categories is beyond the scope of this article, which seeks to identify areas and to charactetize the specifics of the dialogue of meanings that occurs in the portfolios of female students early childhood education. This issue is part of the new understanding of teacher professionalism (Gołębniak and Zamorska, 2014; Gołębniak 2020). It takes the view that 'becoming a teacher is a con-stant re-/de-/construction of the micro-processes of culture, the subjects of which, most importantly each student and teacher, define themselves' (Gołębniak, 2020, p. 39). Pre-paring to adopt such an attitude requires embedding the learning of future teachers in a socio-cultural context, i.e. it involves a shift from knowledge acquisition to knowledge construction and meta-knowledge building, and 'forces the grounding of educational con-tent in the local conditions of individual growth' (Gołębniak, 2020, p. 39). On the other hand, the adoption of a dialogic attitude which leads to a new understanding of oneself and the world is an integral part of such learning.

The research problems that surround this issue are as follows: What content of the portfolios of female students of early childhood pedagogy indicates that they have en-tered into a dialogue of meanings with educational issues and their own school experi-ences? What is the shape of the knowledge about the world of school as reconstructed by female students of the teaching profession?

I have not found studies on the occurrence of the dialogue of meanings in portfolios in the available literature. Researchers mostly deal with the relationship of portfolios with learning strategies and student self-assessment (McDonald, 2012), as well as the ho-listic development of students' professional competencies (Brown, 2001; Davis & Pon-namperuma, 2005; Wach-Kąkolewicz & Kąkolewicz, 2015), including the personalistic view of teachers' professional identity construction (Szymańska, 2019).

Research methods

My research is a qualitative study that can be located in the interpretative paradigm, which recognises the social nature of constructing reality and the possibility of ar-riving at what meanings people assign to the world around them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2009, p. 23).

I regard the student portfolios under study as foundational data (Rapley, 2013). In examining these texts, I use the method of qualitative text analysis, which includes coding, sense condensation and categorization (Flick, 2010).

The data I used in the research comes from classes in the theoretical foundations of education, taught to students of preschool and early childhood pedagogy. The is used in this course of the concept of a paradigmatic view of educational theory (Klus-Stańska, 2018), which creates the possibility of a multifaceted view of the same educational situations and opens up a dialogue of meanings.

1. I selected the passages containing reconstructions of the students' personal knowledge from the portfolios and replaced the data of the authors of the essays with symbols.
2. I excluded general statements, which were devoid of argumentation from the selected data. The validity of this step is confirmed by the results of portfolio studies (Davis & Ponnamperuma, 2005; Frey, 2014).

Theoretical background of the analysis

The dialogue of meanings is a type of educational dialogue. D. Klus-Stańska (2005) derived this concept from the theory of dialogue, and embedded it in constructivist didactics. This paradigm is also referred to in other didactic texts (e.g. Sajdak, 2013; Klus-Stańska, 2018; Gołębniak, 2019), although dialogue itself is sometimes defined in them according to the context.

In the approach proposed by D. Klus-Stańska (2005), similarly to R. Kwaśnica, the dialogue of meanings grows out of 'respect for difference, out of curiosity about otherness and readiness to contemplate it' (Kwaśnica, 1995, p. 82). The prerequisite for it to occur is admitting different points of view and ways of understanding the world, so the sense of meanings should be linked to one's personal knowledge and experience of reality. In this sense, dialogue becomes an integral part of a specific learning strategy, and its purpose is to activate the individual's cognitive independence and involve him or her in the negotiation of meanings.

D. Klus-Stańska (2005) points out that the dialogue of meanings is encouraged by borderlines, ambivalence or conscious experimentation with interpretations. This corresponds with L. Witkowski's (2013) belief that educators should accept ambivalence as a permanent feature of the culture in which education is immersed. Such an attitude requires openness to dialogue and a refusal to impose a ready-made blueprint for understanding the world on others. The goal is to prevent the complexity of thinking about people and society from being reduced to what is conventionally valid (Witkowski, 2013, p. 58). In this context, L. Witkowski references Bakhtin's dialogue, which involves creating an opportunity to 'explore the ambivalence of the world by discovering the multi-facetedness of its view' (Witkowski, 2007, p. 107). As a result, as B.D. Gołębniak points out, in such a dialogue one does not seek to reach an agreement and obtain cognitive

certainty, but 'develops new ways of understanding the world and oneself' (Gołębniak and Zamorska, 2014, p. 69).

Together with L.S. Vygotsky's concepts and American pragmatism, Bakhtin's dialogism makes up the foundations of dialogic pedagogy. Among its defining features is the assumption that 'interactions between people and artifacts are critical to an individual's learning' (Gołębniak and Zamorska, 2014, p. 23). This confirms once again that dialogue does not just boil down to communication, but also includes the exchange of meanings with the products of the human mind and activity, thus creating opportunities for the individual to go beyond his or her singular view of reality.

The condition for a dialogue of meanings to occur is creating educational situations in which the teacher gives up guiding students' reasoning, and instead:

- uses such a language of description of educational reality as to show its internal diversity (see Witkowski, 2007);
- opens the space for students to make a conscious choice from a multiplicity of concepts (see Bruner, 2006);
- maintains intellectual discipline, which is 'determined by the structure of the problem, the competition of theories, and openness to counter-argumentation' (Klus-Stańska, 2005, p. 120).

The course and effects of such lessons are difficult to clearly define *a priori* and must be treated in terms of pedagogical intentions. This is because they can be achieved only in the process of construction of knowledge by individuals, which is possible only if learners:

- maintain cognitive activity, defined as an openness to a dialogue of meanings, and demonstrate a willingness to accept differences as a substitute for agreements that guarantee a lasting order (Rutkowiak, 1995, p. 24);
- recognise the risk of error as a part of learning, take responsibility for their own actions, and make an effort to formulate hypotheses and verify them (Klus-Stańska, 2005, pp. 122-126).

The concept of classes that are governed by the logic of the dialogue of meanings requires the use of a certain type of assessment and an appropriate tool for monitoring the achievements of learners (Szyling, 2015). For the purposes of this discussion, I assume that this role can be played by the sort of portfolio that is referred to by constructivist and transformative didactics (Brown, 2001; Filipiak, 2012; Sajdak, 2013; Klus-Stańska 2018; Gołębniak, 2019), as well as by neurodidactics (Jensen, 2008) and by the concept of understanding by design (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005). Academics stress that the portfolio promotes the integration of assessment into the learning process and supports the development of an individual's cognitive structures. However, they do not pay attention to the issues of its objectification (cf. Koretz, 1998) on the assumption that it is not subject to standardisation because it focuses on the individual and his or her learning. They also recognise that the subjectivity of such an assessment is limited by the arrangements made between the teacher and the student, in which student self-assessment plays a considerable role (Frey, 2014, p. 165).

The portfolio is connected to the educational curriculum through actual work in class, including collaborative work, which constitutes a kind of 'input' (Gołębniak, 2019, p. 920), that is, it provides material and inspiration for further thinking on a particular issue. Thanks to this, the student can go beyond official interpretations of syllabus topics in the portfolio, connect new knowledge with his/her pre-knowledge and educational experiences, or undertake reflection on his/her own cognitive development.

In stimulating these processes, the questions to which the student independently seeks answers in the portfolio are important. They can focus learners' attention on the multidimensional self-evaluation of their own performance (Filipiak, 2012) or on the way they interpret their own experiences and their accompanying contexts, which helps to follow the processes of personal understanding and how it differs from other interpretations (Krzychała & Zamorska, 2008), and thus opens up the dialogue of meanings.

Results of the analysis

By analysing the data, I identified several categories, which organize he area of meanings discovered or assigned by female students to educational issues through the dialogue they undertook with the familiar meanings of their own experiences and the well-known reality of schooling. In this article, I will present only a selection of these categories, which were formed by data from most of the analysed portfolios, and which partially recur. We can tell that these categories are saturated because subsequent data no longer enriched the senses that emerged (see Glaser & Strauss, 2009, p. 53).

1. School known 'since childhood'

This category is crucial as it provides a starting point for the dialogue that the female students enter into with the realities they are familiar with. In their statements, they view school as a kind of generalised educational experience, which they try to understand and incorporate into the world of their own values. The studies and the knowledge which the students acquire in college play a major role in initiating this dialogue and defining its direction.

1.1. 'Until now, I thought it was simply the way it was'

As remembered by the students, the school appears in the portfolio mainly as a world made up of teachers and students and the formal relationships that occur between them and that are founded on the hierarchical principles of objectivist education:

> Until now, it was perfectly natural for me that the teacher steers where the conversation will go in the classroom. The teacher asks questions, the student answers them. Students' questions were often troublesome, so they also sometimes got suppressed by teachers (1.22).

What the students consider a distinctive feature of this world is its universality and permanence, which reinforced their conviction that the only right and sensible thing to do was to have adopted an attitude of acceptance of the universally binding school rules

> […] the way the teacher conducted the lesson was something as obvious to me as the fact that 2 + 2 = 4. I thought that this was the most effective way of learning, that you had to be a well-behaved student and do the tasks you were told to do, and you would become smart (2.30).

What draws our attention in the statements included in this subcategory is the past time narrative, which suggests that the image of school and the only known concept of learning, reproduced from memory, has already lost some of its self-evident character for the respondents. The students associate the first cracks in the monolith of meanings with learning about alternatives during their university courses, whereby they also discover some of the mechanisms that govern the educational system and obstruct change within it:

> I realised something that I hadn't even paid attention to before. Namely, in order for a given system to continue to work, you need people who are 'trained' in it. That way they will pass it on to the next generation […]. This creates a vicious circle, because if we don't experience something different, we will be like fish that swim in water without even being aware that they are in that water (1.3).

The effects of these individual discoveries and surprised reactions form another subcategory, the core of which is seeing personal school experiences from a new perspective.

1.2. 'These two types of thinking are still at war with each other in my head'

Statements in this subcategory are deeply emotional. One student writes bluntly, 'I have always felt that school is bad (2.29).' However, not all comments are so extreme, although many of them reveal some bitterness:

> On the other hand, it wasn't until college that I realised that learning could be fun, that it wasn't necessary to repeat the same thing over and over again, […] and that group work wasn't about one person doing all the work for the rest (2.4).
> I felt that this was unfair, and in retrospect, I think it may have inhibited my creative thinking and motivation to explore and learn new things. This experience influenced how I wanted to do the assignment in the first class (1.45).

The subject of students feeling emotionally and cognitively 'burdened' by their school experiences comes up repeatedly in this subcategory

> […] this kind of attitude, unfortunately, has stayed with me until now, it's hard for me to overcome it and talk about my insights, because 'somewhere, in the back of my head' I still have the belief that it will simply be frowned upon (1.9).

Only occasionally does a kind of ambivalence emerge in the statements. Female students recognise the cognitive limitations of the learning strategies that they acquired at school, but also believe that the experiences of that period are not only a burden thanks to the teachers who were able to trust the students :

> You could say that I was 'lucky' […], because I remember from my experience that for many teachers it was important what we already knew what we could share during the lesson, even though the teacher was in charge of the whole process (1.22).

The contrast between the students' own experiences and the recently discovered non-objectivist paradigms of didactics (see Klus-Stańska, 2018) or some aspects of university education prompts them to reevaluate the meanings they assign to school learning. J. Bruner (2006, p. 205) associates the awakening of cognitive alertness and the opening to a fuller reading of the meaning of one's own actions with such a strategy of thinking. An example of this kind of dialogue of meanings can be found in the following statements:

> I'm afraid that a constructivist lesson, which seems to be the most attractive one, could be out of my depth, because I'm used to receiving instruction and help from the teacher. […] even if I think the interpretive-constructivist paradigm speaks more to me when it comes to education, I myself would prefer to be given an example, a ready-made model (1.40).
> My university studies have helped me see that school can be a place you like, where you go to gain knowledge and that you don't have to be afraid of. However, these two types of thinking are still 'at war with each other in my head,' and I have the feeling that no matter how much I learn in college, some part of me will always think about my school experience (2.1).

The tone of these statements is far from naïve optimism, not least because they reveal an awareness of the tensions between values that students find to be important and those that exclude each other at the same time. This dialogue with the world of their own educational expectations is difficult and does not lead to consensus. It rather heralds an opening to an axiologically ambivalent reality in which students of education will have to manoeuvre between Scylla and Charybdis (Witkowski, 2007).

2. We need to look more broadly

This category consists of statements in which students focus on the meanings of phenomena and experiences that are limited semantically or spatially, but considered in diverse contexts. The impulses to engage in a dialogue of meanings came from the texts

analysed in class, but the decisions to select personally important elements from them were made on an individual basis.

2.1. Discovering the sources of familiar problems

A question that students asked about the source of the problems in distance education was the starting point for a dialogue with the meanings that are socially assigned to remote learning. The search for answers led to the discovery of the role that is commonly attributed to teacher control in instruction:

> I had not connected the problems of distance learning with the tenets of the objectivist paradigm. Now it is obvious to me that if the lessons […] take place over the Internet, then the teacher has no way of controlling the students, thoroughly checking their knowledge, influencing their systematic learning, self-discipline or willingness to learn (2.9).

When looking at the realities of online teaching through the lens of educational theory, the students also commented on the attitudes of students freed from direct teacher control. In their statements, however, they were unable to fully distance themselves from their personal experiences:

> When we study only to get good grades, if you can get them easily, namely without teacher control, by cheating, then the 'why learn' approach is somehow understandable to me (2.7).

This lack of distance made it difficult to engage in a dialogue of meanings with an ethically reprehensible, though often socially acceptable, situation. However, it did not obscure a much broader problem, which the students framed as questions about why students are unable to learn on their own, doesn't subjecting a student to external discipline make 'self-discipline seem extremely difficult (1.41)', 'does learning have to involve a desire to receive a good grade (1.9)?' The very verbalisation of these doubts indicates that the students are ready to re-evaluate their thinking about the role of motivation in learning, and are beginning to understand more fully the limiting nature of external stimulation, based on the behavioural mechanism of rewards and punishments and teacher domination.

This broadening of perspective, or rather deepening of insight, leads some students to identify the apparent reason paralysing remote learning:

> Remote learning was a massive change for students and teachers. So why hasn't anything changed in their approach? Why do they 'pretend', as it were, that they are still in the school classroom? Of course, it's not only the role of teachers, but also of a mandated curriculum, or final exams (2.9)

The quote shows that the students discover another dimension of ambivalence in the valuation of educational phenomena, which M. Dudzikowa (2013) locates in the

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alternation of perpetrators and victims of pretend actions that hinders a dualistic view of the social world, so that it opens us to its ambiguity.

2.2. Beyond the mirror image

In many parts of the portfolio, the respondents point out that the meanings given to educational realities are linked to their anchoring in particular theoretical concepts, and therefore should not be absolutised. The students recognised this property of the dialogue of meanings especially when they were analysing the advertisements and anti-advertisements they had previously written for the same school:

> The biggest surprise was how radically different ways of looking at the same issue can be. It seems to me that this assignment allowed me to somehow understand 'how paradigms work': one text […] and, additionally, completely different interpretations and perceptions of what was written (1.29).

The juxtaposition of the obverse and reverse of the same situation turned out to be a kind of empirical validation that engaging in a dialogue with one's own beliefs and ingrained judgments about education can be a valuable, cognitively enriching experience:

> one can find and flesh out both pluses and minuses in everything (school, school system, didactics). I also learned to point out advantages, positives in something I don't fully agree with (2.3).

The portfolio also includes opinions that the mirror image 'strips away first impressions (1.4),' protects against 'falling for the lure of appearances (1.45),' and makes one 'challenge accepted undisputed beliefs (2.1.),' but at the same time is not easily reduced to simple oppositions. This is most evident in the dialogue of meanings with the perennial issue of homework. The reactions to one group's opinion that absence of homework is not educationally beneficial were marked by unpleasant surprise. However, they were also accompanied by thoughts on the well-established and potential meanings of homework:

> My rather unpleasant school experience made me automatically view any homework as something unnecessary or sometimes even harmful, and I was not able to notice its beneficial qualities at all. […] Now I think I need to reflect on my preferences or beliefs, because a lot of them come only from my school experience, and I still think little about theory or other aspects (2.3).

J. Bruner (2006, p. 206) links the view of the social world through the prism of theory that the student mentions to metacognition and regards it as one of the conditions for broadening one's horizon of perception of reality and self-knowledge. The following statement is an example of such openness to the dialogue of meanings:

> Most of us considered the absence of homework to be a positive aspect of this school, failing to notice that it stems from the assumption that learning should not take place where there is no teacher control. And here I had some questions for myself: why do we think homework is a good or bad thing? Why are we happy that there is homework or not? First, I think it's about our bad experiences at school […]. Secondly, I know that it depends on the didactic paradigm what its role is and what it concerns, and whether it is compulsory and whether there will be consequences for it (2.19).

What also draws attention in this quote is the logic – already mentioned, and characteristic of the dialogue of meanings – of posing questions that open up thinking to new tropes and new interpretations of the world of education and of ourselves.

Conclusions

One of the statements that I want to use as a summary of the findings is a fitting conclusion to the analysis:

> It has occurred to me that the point here is not to judge whether a particular paradigm is bad or good, but to learn about it and find out what it is, and to decide whether it suits me and whether I want to put it into practice in the future (2.39).

This student indicates an important value of a learning strategy that uses the dialogue of meanings and the portfolio as a tool for monitoring performance. It is the discovery that the educational reality can be assigned individual meanings, which do not exclude the existence of different perspectives or respect for them.

The analysis of the data reveals a clear connection between the issues discussed in class and the educational issues with whose meanings the students entered into dialogue, which is largely due to the specifics of the portfolio. What is more significant for the results we obtained, however, is that this relationship – initially linear – became spiral and in-depth, while the dialogue itself became more and more multidimensional. The mirroring strategy, which can lead to the absolutisation of selected educational meanings, was used less frequently (Rutkowiak, 1995; Bruner, 2006).

When engaging in a dialogue with personal knowledge and their own experiences, the students not only gradually went beyond the obvious and natural world of the school they were familiar with, but also broadened their perspective of thinking about it. Consequently, they gave it new meanings, by discovering the cognitive ballast that school learning habits proved to be; the tensions between personally important values and those that guaranteed a sense of comfort; the invisible laws that govern the education system and perpetuate certain learning mechanisms; the areas of educational illusions and their ambivalence. They also learned to ask themselves questions in order to understand not only school and learning, but also the world of their own, tamed meanings and beliefs, using a paradigmatically structured theory of education (Klus-Stańska, 2018).

This dialogue of meanings present in the portfolio revealed great potential for the students to build their identity and their vision of what it means to be a teacher, which is close to thinking about creating a new professionalism for teachers (Gołębniak, 2020).

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