

Authoritative and Class-Sensitive Parents: Parental Identities Shaped through Personal and Political Transitions

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Memories that support our identity usually appear in narratives that we produce. This article presents research findings based on the analysis of biographical narratives of parents involved in the project entitled *Parents, school and educational transition in Poland: 1989–2009* (University of Gdansk, 2006–2009). The parents told stories about their childhood (and school education in the former system) and about their parenthood by which they experienced the new social order (and their children's school education). Being interested in identity work in the light of memory processes, the author analysed parts of interviews that reflect a specific type of influential memory. It resulted in a descriptive reconstruction of the parental identity, strongly informed by the parents' recollections of their own school experience. On the one hand, memories seem to shape parents' approaches to the teaching staff and the school. On the other hand, they show what parents learned throughout their transition from childhood to parenthood. Some aspects of identity remain the same, regardless of changing social and political contexts and regardless of personal educational transition. Still, parental identity, based solidly in the past, may determine the future of school education, particularly in terms of family – school partnerships.

Keywords: Parental identity, biography, political transition, Poland.

Introduction

In 2005, I was asked to produce a briefing paper for the European Science Foundation Exploratory Workshop organised by the Oxford University (cf. Mendel, 2005). The inspiring experience of working on the presentation and attending discussions resulted in a research concept that I have shared with my students. From 2006 to 2009, 12 of them formed a research team and followed my lead within *Parents, school and educational transition in Poland: 1989–2009* project, focused on parents' participation in their children's school education. We were interested in how the participation reflects parents' experience shaped in the People's Republic of Poland. Each student posed its own specific research questions (e.g. How parents' knowledge about their child's school education is constructed? Was the political transformation also a transformation of parental attitudes? Does consumerism matter?), but all questions stayed in line with the main research problem – changes to adults' thinking about school education caused by the lapse of years that turned school children into school parents. An interview-based biographical method gave us a research material of 41 transcripts and enabled to confront parents' recollections of their education with their present impressions of schools.

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Methodological remarks

Authorised by interviewers, I used the material to conduct my own qualitative research of interpretative nature (cf. Geertz, 2005). As the name suggests, it was not designed to produce a statistical diagnosis but to reach a contextualised description that would outline a country-specific correlation.

The study focused on the relationship between parents' recollections of their compulsory education, significant for the integrity of identity, and their attitudes towards the child's school observable in their narratives. Research questions boiled down to the one about the identity of people who, by sending their children to school, turned into school parents. I assumed that both memories and attitudes mirror their identity and speak volumes about it. I treated parental identity both as an analytical category and a theoretical notion. Applying psychological (memory and identity) and sociological (orientation, social roles) concepts and using a biographical structure of narratives helped me to grasp the importance of a transition experienced by learners who finished schools and created themselves anew to act as parents.

The research problem required sieving materials and ultimately 15 narratives (11 – female, 4 – male) were selected as containing excerpts that emphasised the importance of a particular memory in shaping parental identity (following the concept of like-it was yesterday memories proposed by Niedźwieńska;

Niedźwieńska, 2012). Formational memories were expressed with a longer or shorter version of statements that indicate their strength and clarity, such as *I remember it like it was yesterday*¹.

The research method applied at the stage of interviewing resembled an education biography method described by Dominicé (2000). The approach emphasises empowerment that occurs during analysing one's own learning history and positioning oneself within institutionalised environment. My analysis was not limited to semantics, but moved towards semiotics – signs and meanings. Inspired by Gee's Discourse² approach (1999), I observed the contexts of meanings and production to place the text in the surrounding of extra linguistic social practices.

Like it was yesterday (or parents' complaisant memory)

Psychological studies prove that "identity is shaped through recalling", as well as by contents and quality of our memories (Niedźwieńska, 2012, p. 167). Niedźwieńska believes that memory is selective and complaisant towards identity. People elicit memories in three ways. Firstly, they select from an unlimited memory repository anything to support some statements about them: "The identity may orientate recalling towards those elements of the past that support it and discourage from looking for events that fail to comply" (Niedźwieńska, 2012, p. 167). Secondly, influenced by subjective memories, people construct biased autobiographies and create stories focused on episodes confirming their identity. The third way consists in treating false events as elements of autobiography due to taking advantage of unclear boundaries between what is actually remembered and what is guessed (Niedźwieńska, 2012, p.175–178).

For this research, the second option was of paramount importance. "Memories that are as clear as if they were re-acted are more convincing and affect our thoughts and feelings more than other memories. Fixed beliefs about who we are make supportive memories more vivid"(Niedźwieńska, 2012, p.171). Therefore, I assumed that clearly signalled like-it-was-yesterday memories reflect parents' fixed beliefs. Although narratives referred to the past, they were produced here and now and they were affected by events that happened after school years.

¹ Respondents often used equivalent expressions such as *I remember best, I can still see as..., I will never forget...*

² As understood by J.P. Gee: *Discourse with a capital „D“*, (Gee, 1999).

Parental orientation

Orientations are defined by Ziółkowski as "generalised tendencies to perceive, evaluate, feel and react on social reality"(Koralewicz and Ziółkowski, 1990, p.14). Social sciences usually use the term to present contradictory dimensions of human action, based on partially ambiguous, subconscious convictions, opinions and feelings, but Ziółkowski uses the notion of "individual orientation", understood as an overall attitude of an individual towards the social world, made of values (subjective ideals used as evaluation criteria), everyday knowledge (cognitive component), assessment (emotional component) and disposition to certain behaviours (behavioural component).

While analysing individual orientations in the parent's narratives, I referred to parental orientations to revoke the category that I have already used in my previous research on parents' involvement (Mendel 1998, 2001, 2002)³. This time I followed in Ziółkowski's footsteps to frame attitudes of parents towards the education of their children, embodied by:

- convictions (often subconscious feelings or presentiments)
- values (ideas of what the school education should [not] look like?)
- common knowledge about the universe of education (description and diagnosis of the actual situation, background, outlook)
- assessment (school education juxtaposed with values)
- dispositions to certain behaviours (e.g. willingness to cooperate) (cf. Mendel, 2001a, p. 90).

Since it was not my objective to describe an overall structure of parental orientations, I only focused on clearly recognisable elements. Led by the aim of describing parental identity, I analysed some realisations of individual parental orientations and contrasted them with like-it-was-yesterday memories.

Parental identity

In my understanding, the notion of identity should be seen through the lenses of context, which is why I followed Gee, for whom identity "is being recognised as a certain 'kind of person,' in a given context..." (2000, p. 99). Parental identity stretches between memories about the past experience (being a learner) and elements of present orientation (being a parent). The process of identity shaping is marked with

³ Relationships between parents, schools and teachers were subject of my research conducted in Poland in 1993–1994 (Mendel, 1998), in Poland and the United States in 1999–2001 (Mendel, 2001a; Mendel, 2001b) and in the Netherlands (Mendel, 2002).

changes that surround us (we learn from the past, each biography is educational – cf. Dominicé 2000). Therefore, parents seem to create themselves within an educational transition.

It is essential that personal transitions experienced by respondents happened simultaneously to the political transition from a

totalitarian to a democratic system. The turning point of 1989, the end of communism, overlapped with such a “caesura” in the parenthood of narrators, who attended schools in the old reality and send their children to schools in the new one. That context could not have been irrelevant (cf.: Table 1).

Table 1: Educational transition from being a learner to being a parent combined with the political transformation in Poland

PARENTAL IDENTITY	
BEING A LEARNER	BEING A PARENT
Identity-shaping memories: Reminiscences of own education <i>Like-it-was-yesterday memories</i>	←→ Elements of individual orientation towards child’s education <i>Parental orientation</i>
Socialism, centrally-planned economy ←1989 → Democracy, free market	

Source: The author’s material

Therefore, the description of parental identity is a conceptualisation mediated by the context. The discussed identity is an identity under way, shaped by a personal transition accompanied by the political, social and educational transition of Poland.

The juxtaposition of like-it-was-yesterday memories and excerpts revealing parents’ attitudes towards today’s school education became a departing point for contextualisation (e.g. what happened in Poland? what models of upbringing were preferred?etc.). Staying within Geertz’s interpretative frame, where “culture is a context, something within which all the things[social events, behaviours, institutions, processes etc. – MM] can be intelligibly – thickly – described”(Geertz, 2005/1973, p. 29/14), I searched after a legible thick description of parental identities.

Thick description

The narratives-based description of parental identities is represented graphically by a table of like-it-was-yesterday memories juxtaposed with orientations (symptoms are excerpts of utterances recognised by the researcher as representing elements of orientations). Table 2 serves as a sample; narratives are accompanied by notes (age, number of children and their age, time gap: 1989 – school time) and the interview code, where the last letter stands for sex (K –

female; M – male), first two letters – for the interviewer and the digit represents a reference number.

A set of similar tables revealed the existence of two categories, capacious enough to hold several narratives and simultaneously restrictive enough to push minor differences beyond the scope. Entangled in numerous contexts, the categories seem essential for describing identities of parents whose educational transitions were affected by political and social changes. In some cases one narrative fits both categories, which shows conventionality of taxonomies and ambiguity of divisions as the identity is often a matter of in-between.

Category 1: School discipline and state discipline: authoritative parent

The excerpt above reveals more or less marked relationships between disciplining pupils, teachers and parents in school, and disciplining citizens in the country. Parental narratives are surprising registers of journey from the memory of school time within the system which destroyed subjectivity to critical orientations realised through negative assessment of school reality after 1989, disposition to authoritative actions, and limited participation.

Many memories refer to the matura exam. Taking the exam was not necessary to graduate from high school, but positive results of the exam gave the green light to apply for university.

Table 2: List of parents' memories juxtaposed with excerpts revealing their orientation towards the education of their children

Interview code	<i>Like-it-was-yesterday: memories</i>	<i>Parental orientations: symptoms</i>	Notes
ZM-1-K	<i>I remember that and even today I <u>don't know why</u> I wasn't allowed to take the matura exam (...) I passed all necessary exams, even maths, I got a passing mark and for some reason that I don't know, I was not allowed to write (...) <u>They gave no reason</u> (...) = (And haven't you tried learning why?) = <u>No</u>, because a learner had no such rights in that system, a learner did not ask. <u>A learner was submissive</u> and I, or my parents... <u>we</u> wouldn't even think about it. They were right and we have just accepted it...</i>	<i>In my school education everything was imposed. [Now] lack of discipline scares me the most. Now a pupil is not afraid of a teacher, but the other way round and it is wrong, because a teacher should be respected (...) There is chaos in the classroom (...) There are many <u>aggressive</u> students (...) In the past, <u>it was certain</u> that this book and nothing else, I mean it wasn't good, because it is not sure that the book tells the truth, but now the choice is too big and you don't know (...) We learned that <u>some event took place there</u> and then. And now (...) one historian thinks one way, and the other thinks different (...) one believes that this was what happened and the other questions that and <u>it is acceptable</u>, and in the past it was unthinkable to have one challenging the other...</i>	50 Two children – twins, 23. Education started: 1992 (3 years after 1989)

Source: The author's own study

Schools, acting as possessors of power and knowledge, created obstacles, while teachers developed an informal practice of giving a positive final mark provided that a learner would not take the exam⁴. Many high school graduates were deprived of higher education opportunities, often for a lifetime. Limited and exclusive, the matura exam was one of the main tools and expressions of power. As illustrated by examples, subjectivity-undermining experience, contrasted with post-transformation reality, may result in an anti-school orientation and may make parents as authoritative as the system in which they grew up.

Interestingly, introducing *order* was not postulated by natural grumblers but by parents dissatisfied and confused with the new reality, who failed to find their place in new circumstances brought, not necessarily by democracy, which they accept, but by a free market with its competition and overwhelming multitude of options.

The problem of multitude may be illustrated with an example of school handbooks. The Educational System Legislation in Poland of 1991 broke the state's monopoly of handbook publishing. A principle of one handbook per one subject has been replaced by diversity of options

(Levitas and Herczynski, 2001). In 1991, private publishing houses started to edit educational packages to dwarf the old potentate, Wydawnictwa Szkolnei Pedagogiczne (until then it was the only educational publishing house). Flooded with new proposals, teachers had difficulties in keeping up with the market, while parents not only faced a challenge of affording new attractive materials, but also could no longer refer to their own experience when helping their children with their homework, as their own parents had done (several generations had the same reading primer). Overwhelming plenitude, typical of so-called Western Civilisation and postmodernism in its *hyper-form* (Augé 2010), must have been confusing, particularly in the context of strong contrasts between a monolith of the People's Republic of Poland and a colourful mosaic of Poland after 1989. Another concern that transpires from several narratives is lost integrity of educational messages. The past was characterised by a stabilised duality (*we listened Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty at home (...) when the official news programme was on air, my father used to say 'sure, sure, sure, you know best.'* (...) so I was aware that citizenship education at school or what was on TV (...) – all of that was rubbish (...) [SB-1-K]; *We didn't know what to ask about. Everything was set in stone. But at home, there was a lot of talking about the past* [SB-2-K]).

⁴Practices of using knowledge as a weapon are described by Foucault (1977). The situations in question represent repartition, systemic management and manipulation related to assigning people specific places within the social space.

Table 3: MATURA EXAM motive

Interview code	Like it was yesterday	Parental orientations	Interpretation – identification
ZM-1-K	I remember that and even today I <u>don't know</u> why I wasn't allowed to take the matura exam.	In my school education everything was imposed (...) [Now] lack of discipline scares me the most, now a pupil is not afraid of a teacher but the other way round	A sense of harm caused by the system coexists with authoritative parenting and dispositions towards discipline.
ZM-2-K	(...) it really shocked me when our friend got pregnant (...) Today it is <u>common</u> that from time to time a student is pregnant (...) at that time, they had problems and were expelled... in fact that friend decided to leave (...) I felt similar when I wasn't <u>allowed to take the matura exam</u> and there was that condition that I would only get a passing mark if I give up my right to take the matura exam.	Teachers are not respected, students <u>do what they want</u> . Education is better, because students gain knowledge and have more opportunities, but a teacher's position is exactly the opposite of what it was in the communism (...) in the past, a teacher was a cause of fear and students were afraid, they behaved well, today everybody does what one wants, wears what one wants.	Authoritative parenting. The mother, strongly affected by disempowerment (authorities granted or took privileges away without any explanation), as a parent criticises freedom and lack of respect towards teachers and schools.
WE-1-K	I <u>cannot say</u> a bad word about the school... Believe me that there was <u>more</u> discipline than today (...) When we were started, there were 42 people, 27 took the matura exam and only 14 passed.	Honestly, when you don't pose problems, you behave well and you are always prepared then <u>life couldn't be any better</u> , teachers are glad to have you (laugh). I was like that and I have never had any troubles with teachers.	The matura exam was a privilege for being submissive. The parent was oriented towards adaptation and became as authoritative as the previous system. Discipline and preparation are considered essential.

Source: The author's own study

In-between

There are, however, some exceptions. For example, a parent may be able to close that chapter of absolute submission and turn over a new leaf to participate actively in children's education, especially if a tradition of being involved (as a niche of autonomy) occurred before in the family: *I take after my mother... when I attended school she liked coming and checking if we were doing all right* (KLK-2-K). For that respondent, a memory about discipline

(There was no talking back, everybody kept mouth shut. Nobody would dare to oppose; KLK-2-K) has not generated a critical, passive orientation. The family heritage won: when my children attended the primary school, we organised some events that we attended together. Everybody was involved. Parents baked cakes and cooked meals, we bought prizes. Children prepared performances, decorations. Teachers organised games and contest (KLK-2-K). Similar signals of active attitude appear in the narratives of parents who eagerly talk about their

vision of a better school system and new models of relationships among parents – school – local community – local authorities – education authorities (e.g. KLK-3-K, WE-2-M, WE-3-M, SB-1-K). Past and plural forms are used to discuss performed actions, revealing more than just disposition to cooperation.

Another exception within the first category of narratives transpires from a response of a mother (SB-2-K) who recalls: *It was the martial law period so nothing could have been done or organised (...) I had no graduation party because at that time everything was somehow worse.* The fact of being deprived of the party by the system was not an obstacle to expose positive values of that reality embodied by state interventionism and central management (praised in many narratives, e.g. WE-1-K, ZM-1-K, ZM-2-K, ZM-3-M). To provide an example: *I remember how surprised I was when I passed the exam and I didn't know what to do next. And then I received a note about a job opportunity* (SB-2-K). The

memory about the communism did not result in a critical passivity or glorification of discipline. For the contrary, the parent described the education of her child by emphasising teachers' creativity enhanced in her opinion by a new grading system ('excellent' mark was added). Cultivating memories about the social state and communism co-occur with enjoying creativity and competition, flagship slogans of neoliberalism. Accommodation strategies enable parents to survive in the new system as they did in the old one.

Category 2: Social inequalities continued: class-sensitive parent.

The motive of social inequalities, present in several narratives, was particularly marked in four of them, quoted in the table below. Some traces of the motive were also present in other responses, but in those gathered in Table 4, it was of strictly formational nature.

Table 4: Inequalitiesmotive

Interview code	Like it was yesterday	Parental Orientations	Interpretation – identification
KK-1-K	I remember exactly that among ordinary working-class people, it was important to finish at least a primary school, but doing more or studying at universities were whims, unpopular in our environment (...)	Today you can develop yourself for your own pleasure, take extra classes; it is somehow fashionable or popular (...) [as parents] we decided to choose (...) a private school for our children. It was our choice.	The parent who experienced inequalities related to blue-collar background (ordinary environment), aware of class differences and consequent limitations of educational opportunities, sends her child to a private, 'exclusive' school. She compensates for her own deficits and aspires to the privileged class. Parenting is affected by thinking about social status and a compulsion to draw the child's path.
SB-3-M	I WAS AFRAID of the school (...) Teachers ignored those who knew something and favoured those who had something (...) It was harmful that ME was always ME (...) I was like 'OOH, you again', no matter what... and that one with a sailing father was a champion. I hate it even today (...) I am a leftist; I think that the state should provide for citizens. We	Biased teachers exist today as well. Frustrated women in school are the worst evil.	Being sensitive to inequalities (recognised both in the old system and after 1989) appears together with negative assessment of the school staff (gender-based misogynist resentment and/or perception of teacher profession feminisation as pathology). The parent, a declared doer, who actively shapes reality, displays an extreme orientation towards social divisions and sees

	pay taxes.		everything through social and economic status.
DW-1-K	I attended the class of teachers' children and we always had the highest scores, because there were some social networks and we were all together, and those weaker and poorer were in other classes (...) It was the first league of Skepno children, there were nobody from the outside. In Skepno there was also a building known as the teacher's house and there lived teachers and children from my class and it was irritating (...) that favouring, higher grades etc. (...)	It's OK in the high school, but not in the high junior school, to send children to distant places, (...) today in Skepno children have what is available in bigger towns, there is the Internet in schools, or if a new film is on, they have a trip to the cinema, so either here or there, it is an equal start.	The parent, who experienced educational segregation and privileges based on social background, criticises segregation practices and, aware of opportunities for urban and rural areas, she is positively oriented towards school education (and willing to cooperate with teachers).
DW-8-K	(...) I applied for a school in Toruń, but I wasn't accepted as there were no places – first in the queue were children of the Polish Armed Forces, teachers or state farm workers (laugh), or children of doctors, or orphans, half-orphans... and me... my mother didn't work and my father worked in a private enterprise so I was the last in the queue, and I got a notice that I passed the exam, but there are no places left.	I didn't like his school (...) it was shabby and there were too many children (...) once, my son told me he had been running around the corridors with the other child (...) and accidentally bumped into a teacher... instead of reprimanding him and asking him to apologise, she started yanking him and caught his neck and he couldn't breathe; I didn't like that... I understand reprimanding, but not something like that, so I took him away from that school.	Experience of selection and limited access is combined with a critical orientation towards the child's school and a sense of educational empowerment (decision to take the child away). Parenting is empowered and affected by sensitivity to power/violence and social inequalities.

Source: *The author's own study*

Clearly, parental identities represented in Table 4 are actively oriented, contrary to authoritative identities described earlier. Parents aware of social inequalities, segregation and selection are willing to fight against them. They recognise problems linked to political systems (e.g. the communistic past, democratic reality) and pay attention to differentiation tendencies. Their parenting is defined by reproduction work undertaken in the context of understanding social meaning of differences. By focusing on climbing the social ladder, parents show their affiliation to the middle class driven by aspirational thinking

(the case of parents who chose a private school). They navigate the child's fate, but they are not "helicopter parents" who negotiate and mediate child's school success (cf. Cline and Fay 1990: 23–25). Parental identities based on sensitivity to social divisions make parents active participants. Besides, while navigating careers of their children, parents are aware of stratification issues and take into consideration what is good for others and for the society.

Conclusions

The description of parental identities gained thickness (and interpretative power) due to contextualisation made within two relatively fuzzy categories: authoritative parent and class-sensitive parent.

The most represented category is an authoritative parent who cherishes discipline and displays a critical, passive orientation towards the school. Being dissatisfied with circumstances unknown from their own childhood, such parents avoid participation. It seems that discipline typical of a totalitarian state imprinted a hankering for discipline that shapes parenting in democratic Poland. The old social order has been interiorised by individuals and generated more or less extreme identities.

The other category is a class-sensitive parent, characterised by a critical – but not passive – orientation. Awareness of educational stratification and institutional opportunities of strengthening or weakening inequalities through selection and segregation serves as a driving force. On the one hand, parents openly fight against similar practices and privileges and on the other, they actively reproduce it (e.g. through cooperation with the school) to ensure their child a high social and economic status. Still, they stay sensitive to what is good for the society.

Both categories help to understand a situation in Poland after 1989. New educational reality, with the Education Act of 1991 as a solid ground for democratisation and subjectification of parents, gave them more power, but failed to raise the level of parental autonomy (Mendel 2003). Surveys reveal that parents were still “troubles” and “petitioners” rather than “co-hosts” and “partners” (Mendel 1998, 2000, 2001a,

b, 2002). The first of two categories helps to understand relationships shaped by the transformation. Parents’ resentment to the school that is changing too fast and keeps moving into unwelcome directions complies with an authoritative identity, incompatible with democratisation. The other category includes active parents who oppose directions of changes towards more neoliberal and truly capitalistic Poland. The identity of a class-sensitive parent, aware of social inequalities, is expressed through criticising a competition-driven education system. The second category seems to be particularly worth researching in the context of socialising schools and democratising social life in Poland. Critical but active parents, with their idea of public good, are living laboratories that produce knowledge about opportunities for activating Polish school parents.

As for the relationship between personal and political transitions, the analysed narratives prove that there exist soft parental methods that can overcome a hard reality of control. The culture of parenting, cultivated through dispositions towards cooperation with the school and other parents, means empowerment (Mendel 2001a, 2002, 2003). That ensures subjectification of parents and children regardless of a system. They are recognisable and visible, they avoid exclusion and they can be citizens, instead of denizens (Vincent, 2000, p.125). By approaching teachers, pro-school parents exert influence and make a difference in the school, and in the society. Simultaneously, they immunise themselves and their children against hard conditions and practice emancipation. Discipline is external, not interiorised, or at least it is not a burden passed down to the next generation

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