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Drowned in Contempt, Entitlement, and Intimidation. The Preschool Education Teacher in Poland. An Online Discourse on Professional Position Through the Lens of Lived Citizenship

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Abstract

The starting point for the issues addressed in this article is the feminist critique of citizenship universalism, along with one of the responses to this critique – namely, the concept of lived citizenship. The aim of the analyses presented in this article is to reconstruct the position of preschool teachers as it appears in discourse concerning the unfair treatment and positioning of this profession. The focus is therefore on the position of female teachers as citizens who, in their everyday lives, experience the consequences of state policy, as well as the consequences of social treatment and public opinion concerning their profession. The discourse examined emerged around a reader's letter published on 3 October 2024 in the nationwide daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, titled “We Have Drowned the Profession

of Preschool Education Teacher in Contempt, Entitlement, and Intimidation.” The letter itself and the surrounding discourse were treated as material that enables insight into state policy, as it permeates the daily experiences of preschool teachers, while also revealing mechanisms of power. The material analysed consisted of the aforementioned letter and 370 comments written in response. The study employed Critical Discourse Analysis, with particular attention paid to the application of discursive strategies described by Reisigl and Wodak. The analyses show, among other things, that in the context of state policy, the discourse in question is primarily a discourse by and about female citizens who are discriminated against compared to other groups of teachers and who are also undervalued by state policy. In relation to the positioning of the profession in public opinion, including that of parents, what is particularly visible are the lack of respect, the shifting of parental responsibilities onto teachers, the deprecation of the profession, and the infantilisation of female teachers.

Keywords: Polish female teacher, preschool education, discourse, lived citizenship.

Introduction

The inspiration for the analyses presented in this article is a reader’s letter published on 3 October 2024 in the nationwide daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, titled “We Have Drowned the Profession of Preschool Education Teacher in Contempt, Entitlement, and Intimidation” (in Polish: “Utopiliśmy zawód Nauczyciel Wychowania Przedszkolnego w pogardzie, roszczeniach, zastraszaniu”) (Kate, 2024). This letter is treated as an act of citizenship engagement, consisting in the public expression of a critical assessment of how the professional position of preschool education teachers is constructed in the context of state policy and, more broadly, in public opinion. It is the discourse constructed around this letter that constitutes the subject of scholarly interest in this article. The materials analysed here represent only a sample of a broader discourse – one that expresses opposition and a sense of injustice concerning the treatment and positioning of the preschool teacher profession in Poland. This discourse is present in the public sphere, especially through social media and the press.

The moments that have intensified the discourse of teachers’ opposition in Poland, as well as the discourse about teachers in the public sphere, were:

the teachers' strikes¹, the state of the COVID-19 pandemic², and the war in Ukraine³. The form of the strike proved to be misguided, as it only reinforced stereotypes suggesting that teachers do not overwork themselves in their jobs (Ziółkowski, 2020). During the pandemic, preschool teachers – despite the risks – were the first to return to in-person work. On the other hand, remote teaching could doom some teachers to failure or even shame, despite their willingness and efforts (Nowicka, 2021). Female teachers shared videos for children featuring themselves, often without paying attention to their appearance or the content being presented. Lessons broadcast by Telewizja Polska (Polish public television) sparked a wave of criticism regarding factual errors made by the teachers (Nowak, 2020). Meanwhile, one of the consequences of the war in Ukraine was, among others, the increase in the number of children in Polish preschool groups due to the arrival of children from Ukraine, as well as various language and other difficulties that teachers (not only those in preschools) in Poland had to deal with on their own – despite earlier government assurances of support in this area.

The aim of our analyses is to reconstruct the position of preschool education teachers as reflected in the discourse concerning the unfair treatment and positioning of this profession. This refers to the position of female teachers as citizens who, in their daily functioning, experience the effects of state policy as well as the effects of social treatment and public opinion regarding the profession they perform.

The presented qualitative study, based on a specific example, is a data-grounded contribution to knowledge about the position of the female citizen – preschool education teacher – from a feminist perspective. It combines

¹ The teachers' strike in Poland from 8 to 27 April 2019 aimed at pressuring the government to increase teachers' salaries and expressing opposition to the changes in the education system introduced after 2015 by the PiS government.

² The state of epidemic related to the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (March 2020–July 2023).

³ Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022, led to the arrival of over 2 million people in Poland within a short period of time, primarily women with children.

research on citizenship with the socio-occupational status of this profession. Citizenship is understood here in terms of a turn towards a concept that is expressed through everyday practices and experiences, which on the one hand are the result of specific political decisions and solutions, and on the other hand are claims for fair treatment. Citizenship understood in this way also concerns the professional sphere, that is, the citizen-as-worker. However, this is not about legal and institutional protection, as in the concept of the industrial citizen (Lister, 2007). Of particular interest are those types of work that are service-oriented, have lower prestige, and consequently are more often performed by young people and women. Although a number of studies have already been conducted on the work of young people performing precarious jobs (e.g. Simms et al., 2018), analyses adopting the citizen-as-worker perspective that go beyond legal and institutional protection are still relatively scarce (Farrugia, 2024). A particularly significant role in this area is played by the profession of the preschool education teacher. It is not a precarious profession. However, there is no doubt that, at least in Poland, it is a low-status profession. Although teachers occupy fairly high positions in public opinion rankings of professions, they themselves rate it very poorly (Prachnio, 2024). This also applies to preschool teachers (Suska, 2023, as cited in: Prachnio, 2024). In addition to, among other things, low pay, excessive duties, and lack of social recognition, which are identified by all teachers as professional burdens (Dobkowska et al., 2024), what is characteristic for preschool and early childhood teachers are also: deprecation, undervaluing of competences, and infantilisation (Nowak-Łojewska, 2023; Prachnio, 2024; Suska, 2023). This results, among other things, from the nature of the work performed by people in this profession. The upbringing and education of the youngest children is socially identified with the domestic sphere, regarded as not requiring special preparation, and carried out mainly by women, in whose “nature” – as it is claimed – lies care for children. As a result, the profession, despite being carried out in specialised institutions and by qualified personnel⁴, holds a low social status. For this reason, the number of people practising this profession

⁴ In Poland, completing higher education in the field of preschool and early childhood education, which is based on state-defined standards, provides qualifications to work both in preschools and at the first stage of school education (grades I–III).

is insufficient in relation to demand. The profession of preschool education teacher is forecasted to be in deficit in all voivodeships in Poland in 2025, including 69% (217) of the country's counties (Occupational Barometer. Forecast of the Demand for Employees, n.d.). The number of young people entering this profession is declining. According to OECD data, although in 2022 individuals under the age of 30 made up 15.53% of the workforce in this profession, slightly above the European average of 14.58%, since 2013, Poland has experienced, contrary to the European trend, a significant decrease of more than 7.5 percentage points (OECD, n.d.).

At the same time, the profession of preschool education teacher in Poland serves as an example that makes it possible to capture the consequences of state policy as they permeate the everyday functioning of preschool teachers and to reveal the mechanisms of power that are discernible in this context.

Theoretical Assumptions

The theoretical starting point for the issues addressed in this article is the feminist critique of citizenship universalism. In the context of the analyses undertaken, two threads of this critique seem particularly important. First, there is the division between what is public and what is private (Pate-man, 1989, p. 183), which lies at the foundation of the traditional meaning of citizenship itself (Lister, 1997, p. 42). Controlling the meaning and positioning of this division is crucial for the project of creating citizenship and excluding women from it (bearing in mind that the category of women itself is not unitary). As Lister writes: "We cannot, for instance, understand the gendered patterns of entry to citizenship in the public sphere without taking into account the sexual division of labour within the private" (Lister, 1997). Second, what is criticised is the traditional republican understanding of the idea of active citizenship as acting for the common good. Both active citizenship and the common good are here related to the public sphere, in which the citizen is a political actor (Lister, 1997, p. 32) and it is to him or her, and only to him or her, that agency is ascribed. A narrow concept of politicality and a rigid division between the public and private spheres exclude not only women but also a number of social groups that are not able to meet the demanding nature of such an understanding of citizenship. Moreover,

traditionally understood active citizenship overlooks and/or downplays the importance of actions falling within the scope of informal politics, oppositional actions, disruptive actions, local actions that are important to specific groups or communities, which do not have to declare impartiality (sometimes reinforcing exclusion) (Lister, 1997).

One of the responses to the feminist critique of universal citizenship is the concept of lived citizenship, developed in recent years (Kallio et al., 2020). Lived citizenship focuses on identity and belonging, as well as on the rights and responsibilities experienced in everyday life (Lister, 2007). In its spatial dimension, this concept challenges territoriality as the sole context of citizenship, recognising that citizenship is also a set of relationships built beyond territorial boundaries (Häkli & Kallio, 2016). It draws attention to less formal ways of participating in political life, allowing for the identification of a broad spectrum of political realities and forms of agency (Kallio et al., 2020). In its intersubjective dimension, lived citizenship does not arise in isolation but in relationships with others, at the intersection of the formal political sphere and relational experiences (Kallio et al., 2020).

In this article, we assume that lived citizenship offers a lens through which to capture the “politics” directed at a specific occupational group – in the case of our analysis, female preschool teachers. This is a profession situated at the intersection of the public and private spheres. On the one hand, it is an institutionalised, formalised profession with defined rights and obligations; on the other, because it involves the care and education of young children, it encroaches upon the domestic sphere and is therefore predominantly performed by women and perceived as either a non-teaching role or an incomplete version of a teacher. As a result, the professional identity of preschool teachers, their experiences of the consequences of state policy, and the practices shaped by public opinion inform their everyday functioning. The research presented in this article is an analysis of voices expressing criticism both of state policy and of informal practices that contribute to constructing a particular professional position. These are the voices of female citizens and about female citizens, which within the framework of lived citizenship are treated as political acts. This is an act of citizenship that expresses both the spatial and intersubjective dimensions of lived citizenship (Kallio et al., 2020).

Research Methodology

As indicated in the Introduction, the aim of the research presented in this article is to reconstruct the position of preschool education teachers as reflected in the discourse that emerged in response to the letter titled “We Have Drowned the Profession of Preschool Education Teacher in Contempt, Entitlement, and Intimidation” published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. We analyse the teacher’s position in the context of lived citizenship, focusing on two key contexts: the state and the social. Accordingly, we pose the following research questions:

- 1) How is the position of the preschool education teacher constructed in the analysed material in the context of state policy?
- 2) How is the position of the preschool education teacher constructed in the institutional and social context?

The context of state policy is understood as the effects of specific legal regulations or decisions made at the state level, as identified by the authors of the statements, which consequently shape a particular position of the profession in question. In turn, the institutional and social context is defined in our analysis as the effects on the position of preschool education teachers resulting from actions and decisions taken at the institutional level. This context also includes public opinion, including the views of parents, which undeniably influence the everyday functioning of these teachers.

The material analysed included the letter mentioned in the introduction, as well as comments on the letter. The comments came from the *Gazeta Wyborcza* website (hereafter: GW – 31 comments), the GW Facebook page (35 comments), the *Nauczycielka Przedszkola* [Preschool Teacher] Facebook page (hereafter: NP – 168 comments), and the *Protest z Wykrzyknikiem* [Protest with an Exclamation Mark] Facebook page (hereafter: P! – 136 comments). The analysis covered all the comments available on the aforementioned publication sites in December 2024. In total, there were 370 comments on the letter. GW and its pages were chosen because of the publication location of the letter. The selection of the other two portals was based on thematic criteria.

NP is a Facebook community created in 2013, bringing together preschool education teachers from across the country. It is a professional page where one can find inspiration for activities with children, announcements, and re-

flections related to education and work. As the group administrator writes: “This is a page for a woman, a preschool teacher, and children all in one.”

As for P!, it was established in 2019 during the teachers’ strike in Poland (<https://protestzwykrzyknikiem.pl/>). It is a teachers’ movement that expresses a lack of trust in state authority. It focuses on labour-related issues, aiming to care for education and promote a vision of a modern school that responds to students’ needs. The exclamation mark in the title is a symbol of the teachers’ demands made during the aforementioned strike, which to this day have not been fulfilled.

Critical Discourse Analysis was used in the study, specifically focusing on the application of discursive strategies described by Reisigl and Wodak (2016). For each of the research questions mentioned above, detailed questions were formulated to help identify the use of particular strategies: How are preschool education teachers named? (nomination strategy); How are they evaluated? What positive/negative traits are attributed to them? (predication strategy) Are acts of naming/predicting supported by arguments? If so, what kind of arguments? (argumentation strategy); From whose perspective are any evaluations or arguments made? (perspectivation strategy); Are the statements intensified or mitigated? If so, how? (intensification/mitigation strategy) (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). The first step involved thematic coding, distinguishing two basic descriptive codes: 1) statements criticising state policy towards the profession; 2) statements referring to criticism in the institutional and social context. Then, the texts belonging to each of these groups were coded using the above-mentioned discourse strategies. In the following steps, intertextual analysis and discourse reconstruction were carried out. The entire material was analysed in the context of the adopted theoretical assumptions.

Results of the analysis

Before proceeding to the analysis of the comments, our attention is first directed towards the letter (Kate, 2024), around which the discourse under study emerged. It can be assumed that the author is a preschool education teacher or is closely associated with the profession. She is familiar with the problems of this occupation, both those related to daily functioning and those with a broader scope. Thus, the letter is written from a professional perspective.

Two strong metaphors related to illness and dying are used in the letter. The predication, along with intensification – “Forgotten by God, ministers and society, the profession of Preschool Education Teacher is dying” – suggests a progressing crisis and clearly visible serious problems directly affecting this professional group, both from a social perspective and in terms of state policy. The reference to God further reinforces the metaphor of a forgotten profession. The profession is personified, described as a being that is ill and dying. The reasons for this condition (illness) include: lack of recognition, underfunding, excessive workload, organisational structures inadequate to the needs (“overcrowded” preschool groups, no assistants, no possibility to take breaks – even for physiological needs), insufficient opportunities for rest, and excessive responsibility for children, which is disproportionate to the situation and additionally intensified by professional repression. The letter highlights the devaluation of preschool education teachers in two areas:

- 1) at the level of state policy – through formal decisions of the state and other actions, including those that result in unequal treatment of preschool teachers compared to other groups of teachers (“The government laptop never arrives⁵,” “There are no awards for ‘Preschool Education Teacher of the Year’. Why?” (Kate, 2024)).
- 2) at the level of public opinion:
 - low prestige of the profession, associated with the type of work, which is equated with play (“they only play” or, ironically: “Aunties will come up with something – preferably a potato trophy, because this is obviously the most creative professional group, they’ll ‘throw together’ some decoration out of nothing” (Kate, 2024));
 - referring to teachers as “aunties” – the use of this nominative diminishes their prestige. It simultaneously shifts the professional occupation into the domestic sphere, thereby reducing its significance at the discursive level.

⁵ “Laptops for Teachers” is a funding programme for the purchase of laptops for teachers. It is a voucher worth 2500 PLN gross. In 2023, the programme was aimed at teachers but excluded preschool teachers. The topic is now returning, as from January 27, 2025, applications can be submitted by teachers of grades 1–3, excluding those teaching in preschools.

The letter indicates that this devaluation results in professional burnout and leaving the profession (“The older ones, devoted to ‘Siłaczka’⁶, are still holding on – average age 50. The younger ones didn’t read it – lucky them, they burned out with passion and left. They drifted away with the first wave of strikes, the second with COVID, and the last – the war washed everything away” (Kate, 2024)). The letter takes the form of an alarming discourse. On the one hand, it is full of sorrow and pain; on the other – it expresses a sense of injustice, disproportionate to the qualifications of the staff and the importance of preschool education itself.

The position of the preschool education teacher in the analysed material

The collected comments portray the profession of the preschool education teacher from various perspectives. The statements are constructed from the position of:

- a teacher or a person connected with education, such as retired teachers or individuals who have left the profession;
- parents of children (currently or formerly attending preschool);
- heads of institutions;
- other individuals who can be described as “observers.”

The letter itself provoked short but emphatic responses from commenters (a total of 21%), which included approving intensifications of its content: “Spot on”, “True!”, “Sad but true.”

The commenters agree with the content of the letter, but also express their disappointment with the situations described. These statements are mostly based on emotions such as sadness or anger. Some express hope for better times and change, and in the case of retired individuals or those who have changed profession – also relief that this issue no longer concerns them.

The analysis showed that there were 75 comments referring to the actions of state policy, and 127 formulated in a social context. Meanwhile, 79 com-

⁶ “Siłaczka” is a short story by Stefan Żeromski, telling the tale of a young couple of enthusiasts: a doctor and a teacher, who believe in positivist ideals. The main character was a teacher who worked with the poorest, and until her (premature) death, she never abandoned her values.

ments expressed approval of the letter (e.g. the aforementioned “Spot on”, “True”), while 89 comments referred to side threads, not directly related to the subject matter of the letter.

A. The position of the preschool education teacher in the context of state policy

All comments (a total of 75) assigned to this group point to the negative effects of state policy on the position of the preschool education teacher. Most of them (56%) come from the P! Facebook page. Nominations relating to the profession and the teachers are either neutral or strongly negative in terms of value judgement and depersonalising (nobody, fifth wheel, something inferior, necessary evil, ghost profession). The analysis of the predication strategy showed that negative traits are attributed to the profession, such as: being burdened with bureaucracy and requirements, while at the same time, teachers are left to cope on their own, and treated with contempt.

1 “(...) A profession without support from any side, but kicked from every direction” (FB_P!_03.10.24 r.).

2 “.....trampled by the system” (FB_P!_03.10.24 r.).

The negative assessment of state policy present in the analysed texts is well illustrated by examples 3 and 4.

3 „It’s true that the Ministry of Education is completely incapable of appreciating the work of female teachers, and the fact that children’s lives start in preschool has never been recognised. It is very difficult work, full of sacrifice, done for the sake of children.” (FB_GW_04.12.24 r.)

4 “I wonder when someone in the Ministry will finally wake up... how long will they keep sleeping? Education starts in preschool – that’s where the first developmental diagnoses are made, so important and valuable for the child. Will anyone ever listen to the voice of preschool education teachers?” (FB_NP_06.10.24 r.).

Both examples point to a sense of the profession being undervalued by the Ministry. In excerpt 3, two intensifications of negative judgement towards the Ministry of Education are visible: it has *never* recognised the essence of the profession, nor is it *in any way* capable of appreciating it. In turn, the metaphor of sleep used in example 4 highlights not so much a lack of awareness as indifference and a lack of interest on the part of the government. The

intensification “*how long*” and the final question indicate an already overly long wait and the related sense of powerlessness, lack of subjectivity, and even hopelessness among teachers (“*will anyone ever listen*”) regarding any possible change in their situation.

The argumentation concerning the low status of female teachers, formulated within the statements in this group, pertains to:

- 1) Improper allocation of financial resources by the State;
- 2) Unequal treatment and ignoring the voice of preschool education teachers (including the lack of support from the Government).

The two groups of arguments are not always mutually exclusive, i.e. the analysis identified texts indicating that unequal treatment also includes the improper allocation of financial resources.

Arguments from the first group are often formulated from the position of teachers or individuals connected with education (e.g. former teachers) and point to low salaries, high demands disproportionate to the pay, and cuts in preschool education funding.

Commenters believe that the profession is poorly paid due to the improper financial policy of the State and the distribution of funds. They directly indicate that the blame lies with those in power, especially the Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland and the Ministry of National Education.

The metaphor of “drowning” the profession refers to the content of the letter and in this case, serves to reinforce the notion of the low status of the profession. Examples 5 and 6 reflect a perspective of symbolic superiority. The profession of the preschool education teacher is classified as belonging to the clearly positively valued intelligentsia and is simultaneously contrasted with “all kinds of freeloaders” and “aggressive, entitled primitives.” The anthroponyms used here, along with negative predicates, function as both reinforcing and highlighting the difference between the two groups. In this way, the criticism of the distribution of public funds by the State is also reinforced. The aim is to emphasise that one group deserves access to these resources, while another – does not. In example 7, in turn, the government’s financial policy is accused of being driven by populist motivations.

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- 5 „We haven't just drowned this teaching profession. We're drowning the intelligentsia in general. Where does public money go? To help the intelligentsia? No, to pay all kinds of freeloaders. Scraps are left for those who really need it and can't work (PiS has a record of 'ignoring' the disabled, yet it was quick to hand out cash to those who were able to work).” (GW_03.10.24 r.).
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- 6 „I fully agree with this view. The Republic of Poland eagerly destroys educated and responsible people, but every time it backs down before aggressive, entitled primitives...” (GW_04.10.24 r.).
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- 7 „The Prime Minister blew the money on a populist 'Granny Bonus' programme, and now there's no money left for anything or anyone.” (GW_05.10.24 r.).
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Commenters also emphasise the inadequacy of the remuneration in relation to the high level of responsibility for the life and health of children in preschool institutions, as well as the lack of awareness regarding what the work of female teachers actually involves (8).

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- 8 „The greatest pain – the lack of appreciation from the Ministry of National Education, both in the past and today... Those at the top don't know what our work looks like, what we are lacking, and above all – the pay, plus the injustice of the allowance for being a class teacher!” (FB_P!_03.10.24 r.).
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The use of the noun *pain*, further intensified by the superlative adjective (*greatest*), points to the helplessness of teachers. Despite speaking out about their demands, they are still not being heard.

The second group of arguments concerning the low status of the preschool education teacher in the context of State policy draws attention to unequal treatment in comparison to other teachers, including early years education teachers (grades I–III). Particular emphasis is placed on the fact that preschool teachers have a longer hourly workload (the so-called *pensum*), no mid-term breaks, and no summer holidays.

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- 9 „And the worst part is that we're lumped together with all teachers, even though we don't get winter breaks, holiday breaks, and we always work for one month during the summer holidays...” (FB_NP_06.10.24 r.).
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- 10 „It's also worth mentioning the longer *pensum* and the fact that during holiday breaks, winter breaks, and summer – preschool teachers still work.” (FB_NP_05.10.24 r.).
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Unequal treatment is observed in the context of the lack of differences between the level of education of preschool education teachers and that of other teachers (11). Moreover, it is pointed out that preschool teachers hold the highest number of additional qualifications (12).

11 "A preschool education teacher has the same higher education as teachers in schools, both primary and secondary. The vast majority are teachers with a master's degree." (FB_NP_05.10.24 r.).

12 "Additionally, many teachers have extra qualifications: speech therapy, therapy, early support, and, and, and. All of it to support children from the earliest years." (FB_NP_05.10.24 r.).

The absurdity of the requirement for continuous professional development and the excessive workload is also emphasised.

Another sign of unfair treatment, present in the analysed texts, is related to a specific decision under which the Government, when distributing laptops to teachers, excluded preschool education teachers. This decision is evaluated unequivocally negatively, and the reasoning refers to the lack of understanding of the work of a preschool teacher, including such aspects as preparing didactic activities or creating and completing documentation.

13 „We’ve always been treated as something inferior ☹ but it comes from the top,,, when it’s about money for laptops, it’s for school teachers,,, and don’t we prepare materials for classes (maybe even more than others), don’t we create documentation????” (FB_NP_05.10.24 r.).

The use of an extreme temporal adverb (*always*), combined with a strongly value-laden designation of preschool teachers as “something inferior,” the addition of a sad emoticon, and the intensification of the rhetorical question by using four question marks, all reflect the emotions accompanying the sense of discrimination. The analysed material also includes another theme concerning the situation in Poland several years ago. During the COVID-19 pandemic, after several months, preschools returned to operating in the traditional format. The argumentation appearing in the analysed material concerned the necessity for preschools to function during the pandemic, despite being places particularly vulnerable to infections and diseases. The

comments analysed reveal a sense of harm and unfair treatment of preschool teachers in comparison to other professional groups. Working in such difficult conditions carried the risk of the teachers themselves becoming ill (15). On the one hand, preschool teachers proved to be absolutely necessary and visible (14), but on the other hand, they still ended up without recognition for their work (15).

14 „let me just add that when COVID hit, those unnecessary preschools suddenly turned out to be indispensable!” (FB_P!_03.10.24 r.).

15 „It’s all true, we’re being left out of every form of financial support... Tell me, how is it possible that preschool teachers had to keep working in-person during the pandemic, while schools were teaching remotely, and medical workers at least received COVID bonuses — while the place where every cold in the world begins, the preschool — was forgotten? Parents, grandparents without masks, ignoring the sanitary guidelines... Bringing in sick, runny-nosed children to preschool... And we were on the front line, while at the same time a hospital worker on maternity leave, not even exposed to illness, was receiving a COVID bonus — and the preschool teacher got nothing?” (FB_P!_06.10.24 r.).

B. Position of the preschool education teacher in the institutional and social context

Out of the 127 comments coded with the descriptive code for statements *referring to criticism in the institutional and social context*, the majority 52% came from the NP Facebook page. Here, the material includes information about the position of the preschool teacher from four perspectives:

- preschool headteacher;
- parents;
- preschool teachers;
- former teachers and other individuals whose connection to the profession is difficult to determine.

In the analysed material, 22% of the comments were identified as containing positive predication of the preschool education teacher profession, whose actions and work are essential in children’s education. These comments emphasise the importance and significance of the profession. Statements of this type are made by teachers (16), parents (17), and other individuals (18).

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- 16 „Our headteacher keeps saying at every turn that all the great results in primary school are thanks to us, because we lay the right foundation and everything really starts in preschool.” (FB_NP_05.10.24 r.).
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- 17 „Of course it’s a very important profession. Greetings to all the ladies at my daughter’s preschool.” (FB_GW_10.10.24 r.).
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- 18 „A super, super responsible profession.” (FB_NP_05.10.24 r.).
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It is worth noting here the role that such comments play in the analysed material. These are responses to the letter (Kate, 2024) mentioned earlier. As such, they form part of the discourse of disagreement with the unjust positioning of the preschool teacher profession. On the one hand, they constitute argumentation aimed at justifying that this positioning is unfair and disproportionate to the professional demands and the significance of preschool education. On the other hand, they serve as an expression of support for preschool teachers affected by this situation. The analysis of nomination strategies in relation to teachers in these types of comments showed the use of neutral terms (both masculine and feminine⁷), such as: *preschool teacher*, *preschool education teacher*, *female teacher with a master’s degree*, *Miss Teacher*, or *educator*. These are accompanied by positive predications, e.g.: *highly educated*, *creative*, *sensitive*, *empathetic*, *dedicated to their work*, and *constantly educating themselves*.

The majority of comments in this group (55%) concern, however, criticism of the position attributed to preschool teachers, related to their functioning within preschool institutions as a work environment and within public opinion. This criticism is formulated primarily from the perspective of current or former teachers. The commenters’ argumentation focuses on three issues:

1. Lack of support from preschool headteacher, a service-provider-like attitude from management, imposing numerous responsibilities, bureaucracy:

⁷ In Polish, singular nouns have masculine, feminine, and neuter genders.

19 „But if the management staff doesn’t respect us, we can’t count on the parents or society either.” (FB_NP_05.10.24 r.).

20 „I’m currently working in a school (it’s a bit better here, though still nothing great), but I still remember the enormous amount of work, effort, and paperwork I had to do just to prove I was working.” (FB_P!_03.10. 24 r.).

21 “(...) And who does the observations, assessments, consultations, meetings, and the mountain of paperwork? I’m a preschool teacher.” (FB_P!_03.10. 24 r.).

2. Deprecation of the teaching profession by parents, reducing the role of the teacher solely to childcare, treating preschool only as a place for care and play; shifting parental responsibilities onto teachers, lack of awareness of the work of preschool teachers; a stereotypical belief that working with young children does not require specialised education or competence, disregarding teachers’ recommendations.

22 „Parents think we just sit around and sip tea.” (FB_NP_05.10.24 r.).

23 „Sad but true, and I say this purely from a parent’s perspective. Parents treat preschool teachers like nannies who change nappies and wipe noses. This job is a really tough bread to earn.” (FB_GW_03.12.24 r.).

24 „In my opinion, the role of preschools has completely changed — from educational and care-based to just care-based, meaning looking after the child as a stand-in for the parents.” (GW_04.10.24 r.).

25 „when you tell a parent that their child needs help, they get all offended and do nothing — and then they’re surprised when their child has speech therapy issues or other difficulties at school that could have been worked on in preschool.” (FB_NP_05.10.24 r.).

26 „Free nannies and constant complaints.” (FB_P!_03.10. 24 r.)

3. Referring to female teachers in an unprofessional, inadequate, demeaning or infantilising manner:
 - The use of diminutives that infantilise and “domesticate” their profession, e.g. *Auntie Dorocia*, *auntie*, *kindergarten lady*.

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- 27 „When I hear someone call a preschool teacher a ‘kindergarten lady’, ‘carer’, or ‘auntie’, it drives me mad. I even read an argument that we don’t need to be called teachers, that the preschool building doesn’t require it.” (FB_P!_03.10.24 r.).
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- 28 „Aunties? Attention should be paid to the terminology. Teachers working in preschools are neither ‘kindergarten ladies’ (as they call themselves) nor, even more so, AUNTIES.” (NP).
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This group includes one comment in which the author does not criticise this way of addressing female teachers.

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- 29 „I have no problem with children calling me ‘auntie’ — it doesn’t take anything away from me at all, and if it makes the child feel better, that’s fine.” (FB_NP_05.10.24 r.).
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- deprecating terms that reduce the role of teachers solely to caregiving functions, disregarding the educational and didactic ones: *nannies*, *carers* (26–27)

It is interesting that, in addition to the criticism formulated by teachers, there are also comments that confirm this way of perceiving the teaching profession (30–31).

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- 30 „let’s not exaggerate — my kids went to preschool for about 6 years in total. There were young female teachers, and women over 50 were hired as assistants. No one left during that time, one teacher even came back from maternity leave. I don’t envy them working in all that noise, but they work 5 hours a day. And honestly, I don’t really know what curriculum people are talking about, aside from the last year before school — preschool is mainly a place for care and play, it’s not school.” (GW_04.10.24 r.).
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- 31 „I’m not even sure if this profession — preschool teacher — is recognised in society, because the real teachers are in schools, and in preschools it’s just ‘kindergarten ladies’.” (FB_P!_04.10.24 r.).
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Conclusions

Lived citizenship, as reconstructed on the basis of the analysed discourse, allows us to view the voices of preschool teachers and the voices about them in terms of articulating the unjust treatment and positioning of this profession. The effects of specific state decisions, which translate into the everyday functioning of teachers, their experiences shaped through relationships with other teachers, but also with preschool management, the parents of children

attending these institutions, and other individuals, together construct the spatial and intersubjective dimensions of citizenship.

The spatial dimension is defined here by the local specificity resulting from a particular state policy towards teachers in recent years, one significant outcome of which was the teachers' strike in 2019. It is also shaped by the institutions in which female teachers work, as well as the environments in which they function on a daily basis. Finally, the spatial dimension of citizenship can be interpreted in the specificity of the preschool teacher profession, which professionalises activities that were historically carried out in the domestic sphere. Although this profession is exercised within specific institutions, according to defined educational standards, and requires formal professional qualifications acquired through higher education, it is still interpreted by many as belonging to the domestic sphere and is therefore devalued and underestimated.

The intersubjective dimension, in turn, emerges at the intersection of relationships with others. The experiences of female teachers are not lived in isolation, but rather arise within relationships; they are also discussed in relation to others and compared with others. It is precisely these experiences that lead to the evaluations constructed in the analysed texts.

Both the spatial and intersubjective dimensions are clearly visible in the analyses presented in this article. The discourse under examination is a discourse of critique. In relation to state policy, what is articulated here is a sense of lack of respect, lack of support from the state, lack of appreciation, indifference, low pay that is inadequate to the level of education, a high number of responsibilities and duties, improper allocation of public funds by the state, and unequal treatment in comparison to other teachers – including early primary school teachers (grades 1–3), who in Poland have identical qualifications. The discourse in this part is, above all, a discourse by female citizens and about female citizens who are discriminated against compared to other teaching groups, but also undervalued and overlooked by state policy. It is a discourse of sorrow, helplessness, but also anger and frustration.

As for the voices of and about female teachers concerning their functioning within institutions, the dominant articulation is the lack of support from management and excessive burden of responsibilities, including overwhelming bureaucracy. In relation to the positioning of the profession in public

opinion, including by parents, the most visible aspects are lack of respect, shifting of parental responsibilities onto teachers, deprecation of the profession, and infantilisation of female teachers. At the same time, this part contains a counter-discourse that serves two functions. The first is to argue against the unjust positioning by highlighting the importance of preschool education and the role of female teachers. The mode of argumentation simultaneously fulfils a second function – offering support to preschool teachers.

Is the profession of preschool education teacher DROWNED, as suggested by the title of the letter that sparked the discourse analyzed in this article? Have we drowned this profession? In our opinion, the answer is negative. Not because we are downplaying these voices. They reveal a significant problem. Not because we romanticise the profession – believing that preschool education in Poland will defend itself because it is IMPORTANT, or that teachers will manage. If we thought that way, it would mean that we are participating in the DROWNING, as what else could it be but downplaying, diminishing the problem, or romanticizing the profession instead of offering adequate compensation and recognition for qualifications, duties, and responsibility? As a society, we have not drowned this profession. It has not happened YET, as evidenced by the voices of criticism and opposition expressed by female teachers and about female teachers. It is everyone's task to strengthen these voices and make them more audible, even in the scientific field, to which this article may contribute, if only in a small way.

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