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## **‘Me, in my class’: Teacher candidates (self-)portraits of their presence in the classroom**

### **Summary**

Drawing on the international research program ‘*Teacher presence. A Multicultural Comparison*’, this paper tackles the issue of Polish teacher candidates’ representations of *teacher presence* in the classroom. The basis for the current study consists of drawings made by the participants in response to the task ‘*Me, in my class*’ and its accompanying question: *What does this drawing tell me about you as an early childhood education teacher?* Drawings done by the participants show not only the way in which the respondents perceive themselves and their roles as teachers but also the way in which they conceive the relationship with students in the classroom. The analysis of the collected material indicates strong institutional features embedded in the physical space of the school, where both the teacher and the students appear as typical products of the institution and where the relationship of power and subordination is still maintained. The classroom as an organized, didactic space and teacher-students relationships emerge as the two main components defining future teachers’ representation of teacher presence in the classroom.

**Keywords:** interpersonal relations, teacher presence, classroom, projective drawings

**Słowa kluczowe:** relacje międzyosobowe, teacher presence, klasa, rysunki projekcyjne

### **Introduction**

In order to have impact, teachers need to be present to their pupils (Noddings 2003). Training teacher candidates (TC) to be present to their future students comprises, among others, teaching them to meet students’ needs, create climates facilitative of learning, providing clear explanations, doing effective classroom management, provoking and maintaining interest and motivation, establishing constructive relationships with their students, etc. However, TC often enter their teacher teaching program (TTP) holding naive and stereotyped beliefs about children (Schultz, Neyhart, & Reck 1996: 1–7). These preconceived

ideas can interfere with TTP' objectives and consequently hinder TC's professional development and training. Hence the importance of TTP to know more about their TC' representations, including their representation of teacher presence.

Knowing that conceptions of teaching are context dependent (e.g. Marton & Booth, 1997; Stigler & Hiebert 1999; Watkins 1997; Watkins & Biggs 2001) and vary across nations (Haley & Ferro 2011; Kissau, Rodgers, & Haudeck 2014), the current study draws from an international scientific project entitled '*Teacher presence. A Multicultural Comparison*' (see, for e.g. Gazaille et al. 2017) to tackle the question "How do Polish pre-service teachers conceive their *presence* within the reality of the classroom?"

*Teacher presence* refers to "a state of alert awareness, receptivity and connectedness to the mental, emotional and physical workings of both the individual and the group in the context of their learning environments and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step" (Rodgers & Raider-Roth 2006). *To be present* means to be "here and now" (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), to devote one's full attention to one's learners and to "perceive" what is going on, what is happening (or not) in the classroom as one teaches (Rogers & Raider-Roth 2006). Teacher presence can be related to the teacher's profile (understood as a profile rooted in a given culture), his/her approach to the students and the role assigned to him/her. Teacher presence illustrates the teacher's professional commitment and passion, and presence/co-presence in relations with their students as well as their virtues and pattern of conduct in the context of the classroom.

## Methodology

*Participants.* A total of 14 present and future teachers participated in this study (registered in Early Childhood Education program at a public university in Poland). The tool administered consisted of two related sections: 1) the drawing section, in which they had to draw a picture of themselves in their classroom; and 2) the explanation section, in which the participants had to answer the question, "*What does this drawing tell me about you as an early childhood education<sup>1</sup> teacher?*"

*Tool.* Drawings as projective techniques constitute a powerful, evocative tool for translating concrete experiences into visual discourse and, therefore, eliciting meaning (Porr, Mayan, & Graffigna 2011: 30–41). Compared to traditional tools, projection techniques are minimally structured and require less guidance when administered. Due to these intrinsic qualities, projective techniques facilitate the disclosure of the content of experiences that would – otherwise or with the use of traditional tools<sup>2</sup> – remain outside and beyond the verbal and conscious control of the person (Stasiakiewicz 2000: 491–503). The high value of drawings as projection techniques can be attributed to the fact that they enable people

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<sup>1</sup> The original question mentioned English-as-a-second-language teachers, as they were the targeted participants in the wider, international study carried out by Gazaille et al. (2017). The question is here rephrased in order to better reflect the focus of the current study and avoid confusion for the reader.

<sup>2</sup> For example, interviews or questionnaires.

to overcome their inhibitions and defense mechanisms and alleviate the sense of psychological discomfort that usually accompanies research designs based on verbal interaction. Drawings can be conceptualized as tools conducive to communication and broadening the framework of human expression (Oster, Gould 2005: 11–16, 19). Thus, drawings are useful and non-invasive tools that can help reveal one's subjective world and illustrate their individual way of perceiving and constructing their reality (Şek 1984: 5). As our primary source of data, participants' drawings were treated not only as a way of creative expression, but also as a means for the respectful communication exchange of thoughts and of emotions. Hence, participants' drawings were contemplated as very personal statements, giving way to both conscious and unconscious content through both concrete and symbolic visual language. In line with literature on teacher presence, drawings will be studied more closely along the dimensions of teacher role and teacher-students relationships in the classroom.

## Results and discussion

Globally, results show two axes along which TC picture their presence in the classroom and their concept of the *class*. The first axis portrays the *class* as a functional, didactic classroom; the second relates it to the interpersonal relationships occurring between the teacher and the students. Most drawings have actually been organized and thought out to emphasize this dual meaning (see, for example, drawings 1 and 2). The following sections report more precisely on how TC perceive themselves in their classroom.

### Seizing the '*class*' as a functionally arranged physical space and a specific, functional purpose

Drawings that fall in that category primarily refer to the *class* as a properly arranged classroom, with specific equipment and purposes. To this effect, Drawing 3 highlights the model of a standard classroom typically organized for younger children and equipped with *the traditional toy box, a board, arranged desks and chairs arranged in rows, a rug for playing on the floor, etc.* It is emphasized by the following statements: '*Class is a teacher's workplace that should be properly adapted for children*', '*First of all, it is the work environment, adequately equipped (desks, chairs, and others)*' (see Drawing 3).

The next drawing (see Drawing 4) emphasizes the functional character of the *class*, associated primarily with a room with didactic purpose. The *class* is the place where students learn, where each area of the room performs a specific function (e.g. computer and media corner, corner for group games and even an area for reflection or relaxation). Such an organization of the classroom reveals a postulative, wishful character detached from everyday Polish reality (e.g.: not all classes are equipped with modern tools). Respondents in this group often emphasize that they '*want their classroom to be creative*' and that they '*will use modern tools during the lesson*', etc.

From one angle, the physical space of the class is usually presented as an orderly organized and traditionally furnished space. As a matter of fact, many respondents often refer to traditional representations and props that the school classroom is usually associated with (for example, *a teacher, students, a blackboard, desks, teaching aids, bookshelves, a chalk, pens, a class register, etc.*). Following Goffman and Giddens, it can be said that such a physical – and at the same time social – space is not only a significant environment that shapes and organizes the educational and didactic process itself, but that it is also an environment that organizes and defines mutual interpersonal and social relations in specific ways (Goffman 2000: 47–60; Giddens 2003, 2004: 51).

From another angle, many drawings reflect the image of the physical *class* as the social space, revealing a strong relation of power and subordination in the classroom and in the school. *De facto*, the classroom appears as a space in which conventions and rituals specific to a given society are in force, a space where a specific social order is maintained, where specific behavioral rules are imposed on individual participants as social actors and where specific interaction patterns are set out. The *class* emerges as a space that defines the situation: it imposes the framework of behavioral interpretation (defines desirable or undesirable behavior of all the actors of the school stage) and indicates how people should fulfill and maintain the social rules. For example, the classroom becomes the place where and how students should show respect and recognition to teachers as social actors with a higher status, a place where pupils learn how they should respect mutual territorial and physical boundaries (Goffman 2000: 47–60; Goffman 2006: 57–77; Giddens 2003, 2004: 51, 734–735).

Such organization of the physical space of the *class* also draws attention to the existence of hidden curricula (e.g.: the placement of furniture in a classroom determines the roles to be filled out by the teacher and student)<sup>3</sup>. The space of the *class* understood in such a way becomes the carrier of meanings that shape the students' and the teacher's behaviors as well as in terms of communication and relation patterns and ways of treating one another. Therefore, it designs certain social behaviors and attitudes and obliges its users to use this space in a strictly defined way (see: Goffman 2000: 47–60; Barker 2005: 401–408).

What also stands out in the drawings from this category are the specific equipment of the class and the school props used (*students' and teacher's desk and their arrangement, props used by individual actors of the school stage (in this case, the teacher and students), the status assigned to tools such as the register used to enter students' grades or to students' records*). Such props are an important carrier of meanings created by the dominant culture of the institution. They reflect their mark on interpersonal relationships created

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<sup>3</sup> The case in question is primarily about curricula hidden in the school space, which was noticed, among others, by Roland Meighan. However, hidden curricula are also manifested in school curricula, timetables, content of teaching subjects, teacher assessment methods, etc. They are instilled in the actors of the school scene, through which they create specific educational relationships. This is both about intentional and planned curricula – resorting to creating false facts (based on manipulation, as well as unintentional curricula that arise involuntarily (Meighan 1993: 85–99).

in the school space as mentioned by some of the respondents who report that *'Teachers should keep an eye on their students, because they are responsible for their safety and the teaching program'*, and that *'the desk should be situated in such a way that the teacher can see the whole class'*.

Finally, even though most of the participants' statements are of kind nature and full of good intentions, their confrontation with the drawings reveals to be quite problematically. Indeed, the juxtaposition of the drawings and their explanations discloses not only the functional, normative character of the arranged class space, but also the normative nature of the relationships occurring in it; this is especially shown by the results that fall in the category below.

### **Seizing the 'class' as a space for interpersonal relations between the teacher and the students**

Concerning the normative character of the arranged physical class space presented above, we observe that it is of great importance for the interpersonal relations between the teacher and students. Indeed, its organization creates specific conditions for mutual contact, supporting or blocking the relationship of power and subordination.

The respondents' drawings and comments indicate that the normative nature of the class space makes the teacher play a leading yet authoritarian role *vis-à-vis* the students. We can see this, among others, in Drawing 5, whose author stresses that *the teacher should be children's friend, not just a master* while clearly portraying a hierarchical class structure with normative interpersonal relations. This leading-yet-authoritarian role is also clearly seen in Drawing 6, in which the teacher stands in the center of the classroom *speaks, teaches, points out, gives orders, while the students sit obediently at their desks and they listen, learn, answer questions, raise hands to answer*, etc. These drawings reflect the inequality of mutual, formalized relationships and their asymmetry; they stress that the central figure is always the teacher while the students seem to only be elements in or of the background (see, for example, the small points that represent students in Drawing 8). Representative features of such unbalanced, normative relations and teacher authoritative attitude are also identified in Drawing 7, which shows a teacher standing astride, with hands resting on the hips and a stern expression, seemingly supervising, controlling, and ruling over students. Particular attention is drawn to Drawing 9 that says: *'Keep calm and learn English'*; this clearly defines the school culture as being based on an obligatory *'culture of silence'* for students and clearly imposing an authoritarian framework for behavior and communication (Nowotniak 2002: 77–78).

As seen above, these results show an organization of the class space and of its social relations based on teachers' power and students' subordination. Such an asymmetry of roles lies in the institutional logic, allowing the teacher to effectively manage the class community, maintain order and have a better control over his/her students. It reveals the familiar practice of constant observation, control, applicable not only in schools but also

in many other institutions (e.g. Foucault 2009). However, this kind of disproportionate relationship between the teacher and his/her students is not without significance in the perspective of constructing students' autonomy and identity. On the one hand, setting specific requirements for students in terms of obedience, discipline, subordination to specific authorities teaches them to follow rules and norms, which is an important aspect of individual and social development. On the other hand, an authoritarian posture can block student creativity and independence, promoting in the end conformism, inertia, blind obedience and passive subordination to others (Goffman 2006: 48–57).

### **Attempts to go beyond the institutional patterns of the organized physical and social space**

Sometimes the respondents make visible efforts to go beyond the established institutional frameworks and patterns. These TC try to organize both the physical space of the class and the relations with the students in their own proper way, thus negotiating the meanings fixed in the school. In these participants' drawings, the class usually appears as a social structure in which people are treated equally and mutually interact with one another. Relations are usually depicted by signs of proximity between the teacher and his/her students. This can be seen in a series of drawings where the teacher and the students sit in a circle and seem to form a homogeneous social group (see Drawings 1, 2, and 9). The symbolism of the circle emphasizing the equivalence and breaking the tradition of the obedient students sitting at the desks is important. Such a presentation indicates not only the tendency to blur the physical distance zone between teachers and student, but also the psychological one. This can be interpreted as an attempt to break the usual rules of proxemics, assuming that people with a higher social status usually have a larger zone of physical distance (Hall 1997: 169–183). Consequently, these TC reveal through their drawings of themselves in their classroom their desire to go beyond the established institutional order. They manifest their ideology to blur the distance between them and their students, by creating an atmosphere of fun, relaxation, and trust in the classroom. Accompanying statements emphasize that: *'the teacher and students should be equal partners'*, *'everyone should be treated equally'*. One of the respondents insists, *'I don't want to be such a teacher as I once had myself: inaccessible, unfair, mean, favoring some students.'* Another one adds that *'There should be no barriers between the teacher and students. I try to get the students out from behind the desks and we often sit on the floor'*. Such an aspiration towards symmetrical mutual relations freed from the existing barriers imposed by obedient sitting plans can be seen in Drawings 10, 11, and 12.

Much bolder and unconventional attempts to go beyond the established school practices and the importance assigned to the teacher's role are also evident in Drawings 13 and 14. These drawings allow to observe that, although the TC attempt to blur the distance between the teacher and students, they seem to be ineffective and unconvincing. Instead, these drawings evoke a sense of cognitive dissonance caused by the inconsistency of the

content conveyed in them. For instance, see Drawing 13, where cohabitating beside the institutional order and discipline (found in the layout of desks in regular rows, correct arrangements of notebooks, and the well-behaving students sitting in the designated places), appears the incompatible picture of the teacher sitting on an empty desk. The fact that the teacher is not sitting on her desk may be interpreted as a sign of breaking the conventions fixed in a rigid and formal school. Interestingly, the author of the aforementioned drawing seems to explain this unconventional behavior by writing: *'I rarely sit on the desk in such a way. Sometimes we put the desks together and sit on them with the students.'*

In Drawing 14, however, we see a teacher who renounces the teacher's attributes of power and turns them into insignia appropriate for the magus or the sorcerer. The author of this drawing argues that *'she is looking for new solutions' and that she wants to have 'some magic during her lessons'*. The symbol of the magician reflects a non-stereotypical model of relationships, seemingly freed from hierarchical conditions. Putting aside its symbolic nature, the metaphor of the magician does not seem fully realistic and convincing. In fact, as teaching occurs in a properly organized space, where institutional rituals such as observing, evaluating, checking, classifying, etc., are in force, even the most determined and dedicated teacher cannot overcome these rituals if the school and the institutional system do not abound in that direction, and they determine the teacher's and students' autonomy.

## Conclusion

Overall, drawings allowed to reveal not only how TC perceive themselves and the role of the teacher they fulfill, but also the way in which they understand the relationship with students in the school institution. Participants' drawings reveal the dual character of the term *class*, understood as a room/place versus a relationship established with students. The analysis of the drawings revealed a clear distinction between the *class* as a specific social structure and community and the *class* as a suitably organized and arranged didactic room, as suggested by the following quote: *'The drawing shows that I am with my class, i.e. with my students and that I'm in my classroom'* (Drawings 1, 2). The analysis of the drawings also points to strongly established institutional features visible in the Polish school, against which both the teacher and students appear as typical products of the institution. As institutional creations, TC usually depict their roles and those of their students as very similar to those traditionally imposed on teachers and pupils.

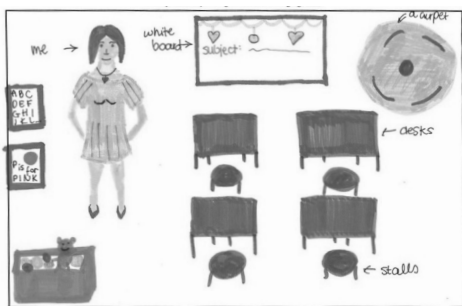
Sometimes, however, we observe some deviations from the roles programmed in this way (observed in the light of questioning/going beyond imposed institutional patterns). In their context, we note that people are not passive towards the imposed roles and want to actively participate in their creation and try to negotiate them (Giddens 2004: 51).



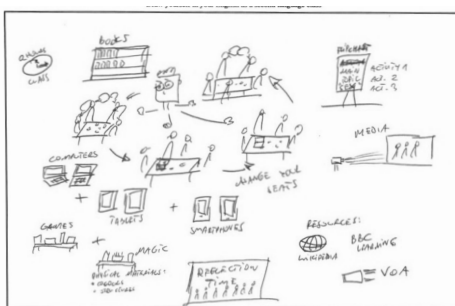
Drawing 1



Drawing 2



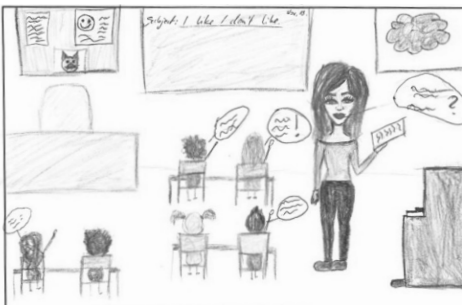
Drawing 3



Drawing 4

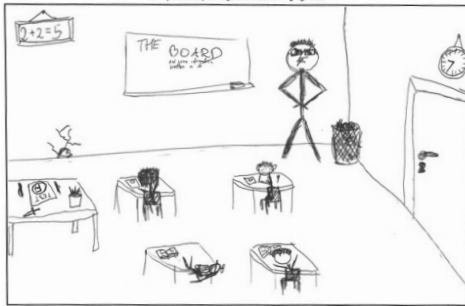


Drawing 5

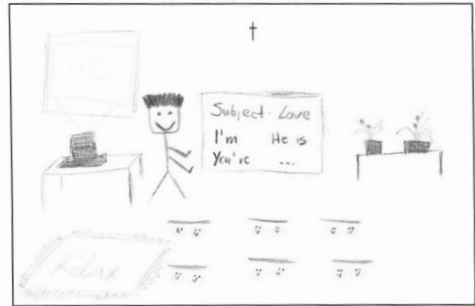


Drawing 6





Drawing 7



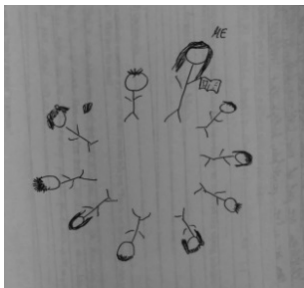
Drawing 8



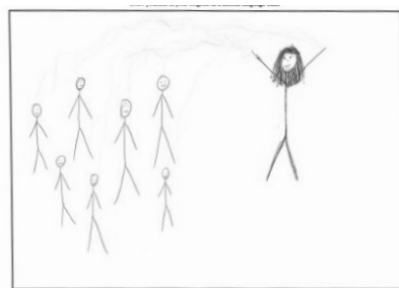
Drawing 9



Drawing 10



Drawing 11



Drawing 12



Drawing 13



Drawing 14

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