

Parental Identity, Lifelong Learning and School

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Abstract: This text presents the thoughts derived from empirical, qualitative research carried out in a small group of parents of school-age children. Although the research terrain was Poland, the problems here considered revolve around the broad issue of parental identity, especially in a context of the concept of Lifelong Learning. Conclusions are built upon an exploratory description of parental identity, which gives support to the assumption that it is the identity of a lifelong learner, shaped more or less independently of the LLL's political context, largely dominated by economic interests. In the light of this, the following intriguing question needs to be answered: what is the significance of this context for the parents—school relationship? By becoming part of a new educational order under the banner of LLL, this relationship may be molded into a better shape. Final reflections refer to the research results, including the multi-dimensional structure – *a hologram parental identity*, which, together with a set of more detailed categories, made it possible to formulate prospective proposals focusing on the concept of the school as a *chora* (*khôra*, Derrida, 1993), a place craving for new meanings. Located in the perspective of spatialised thought, they direct our attention to the methods of critical analysis regarding the space of school – parents relationships, a space of formative importance in parental self-creation. Solutions built on such methods fall outside the traditional binarism that favours the ossification of order based on teacher's authority, and allow for the creation of new ways of representations, new school policies, etc.

Keywords: parental identity, lifelong learning, school, space, place

Parental Identity, Lifelong Learning and the Space of Becoming a Parent

The notion of identity should be seen in context, which is why I follow Gee (2000), for whom identity “is being recognized as a certain ‘kind of person’, in a given context” (p.99). In my understanding, parental identity stretches between past and present experiences. Its shaping is marked with changes in the world surrounding the parents. They learn from their lives how *to be a parent* and what *being a parent* could mean for themselves and for the society

in which they act (each biography is educational – cf. Dominicé, 2000). Therefore, parents seem to create themselves within lifelong, educational experiences; through lifelong learning. This is the assumption, and the reason why this article presents a vision of LLL which is intrinsically motivated by a will to serve, nurture, protect and develop, the four features that inform parenthood^[1]. Thus parental identity is meant here as a category close to Aristotelian *phronesis*, a practical wisdom; an achievement of a *good life* construed by practical experiences (1999, pp.86-99). Parental identity, when conceived from this perspective, becomes a personal achievement of *good parenthood*, one acquired through hands-on, lifelong experiences in various relationships. These relationships are social, spatial and educational due to different configurations of actors involved (family and local community members, colleagues at work, Internet forums' participants, etc.); due to the various places – websites included – where they are established and developed throughout one's life (home, kindergarten, school, Internet, etc.); and due to their educational character^[2]. This space is composed of the places co-created in on-going educational relationships that shape a parent (Mendel, 2003a,b; 2006). I call it a space of becoming a parent through his/her lifelong learning; a working space of parental identity.

The specificity of society in which this space is created is an important context. It is my view that whether the members of today's society do and will make good parents depends largely on society itself. The dominant condition of today's *knowledge-based* or *credential society* generates certain pressures. Such condition is maintained by particular policies and economic interests that institutionally shape social life (Borg and Mayo, 2004, pp.15-23).

Research assumptions, questions, and thesis

The main concern of this paper is to reflect on whether school is responding to the demands set by the credential and lifelong learning society and, if so, in what way does it become a place of parental self-creation while still being an educational institution for parents. In the empirical research described below, I place these issues alongside some more general questions about becoming a parent, a process understood as a lifelong educational experience happening in space to which parents contribute and of which schools are elements – What are these experiences like? In what way is a school significant? In addition, I also ask questions about the working space of parental identity – What is this space like? What places is it made up of? in other words, where does one become a parent?.

To many researchers focused on parental issues (e.g.: Epstein, 1995; Macbeth, 1995), a school is a learning place for parents as well as a space for self-creation. For a long time they have drawn our attention to this fact, calling for schools' activity based on reciprocity; calling for schools in which teachers and parents are curious about each other and learn from each other, but at the

same time remain, albeit in different ways and having different powers, child-oriented, since they are united in a common goal - the child's education. In this context, Epstein's six types of parental involvement may be understood as hints about detailed content and forms of learning described in this text (Epstein, 1995). For example, in relation to parenting, suggestions are made as to how schools and teachers can learn about student's home culture and, on the other hand, how parents and other close family members can learn about school culture (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, Simon, 1997).

The study explores these issues and supplements them with a current description of parental *self*, forged under conditions of change, as the *Lifelong Learning Perspective* is being implemented in Poland. In addition to the questions mentioned above, the idea that *self* is put in the context of schools' activities, as they are just now becoming a part (even if *authoritatively*) of the policies pervaded with the LLL principles. According to (among others) J. Mezirow, lifelong learning is emancipating in its character, and by reflecting upon it (as an important biographical experience in itself) one can develop one's personal autonomy (1990). If we accept that becoming a parent is a process of lifelong learning, then parental identity becomes subjective through critical reflection and some kind of distancing oneself, perhaps also from the political aspect of LLL. This research thesis raises a number of interesting aspects concerning the issue of parental self-creation, to be followed in further studies.

Theoretical Framework

In connection with the questions that inform my empirical study, I have adopted a three-phase concept which allows me to build a framework of parental identity working through space and time. Similarly to the concept used in the *Journeymen* project which explores students' identities in the process of turning into employees and professionals (*Students as Journeymen ...* 2007)^[3], I see the work of parental identity in three perspectives, as three spatio-temporal identity categories: 1) projected, 2) educated, 3) confronted. The first one is tied to relationships and places (such as family and home) that are conducive to forging prospective visions of being a parent; the second is related to various *teachers of parenthood*, situations and places where this education takes place; the third is linked to relationships with other parents, teachers in their children's schools, and, in broadest terms, to the world where one's way of *being a parent* is subject to evaluation. It is important to note that this world also provides feedback which is important to learning dynamics and generates certain predispositions to changes in parental identity. Based on the importance of self-reflection (as described above), it can be assumed that in the confrontational perspective, critical self-reflection on being a parent and lifelong learning may become more apparent. Various ways in which self-reflection is manifested are identified in the study and will be

analysed as key issues in describing how one becomes a parent – a problem which, in turn, is the aim of the research.

Methodology

The method used in the study is an in-depth interview, conducted individually in both written and oral forms, coupled with some elements of autobiographical, contextualised narrative interview. Similar methodological approaches were described, among others, by Pierre Dominicé (2000), the investigator of lifelong learning of adults, and by Ference Marton (1981), the creator of phenomenographic research, which, as a means to test different ways of thinking and experiencing, is of particular interest to this study. That is because it focuses on parental identity as a lifelong experience as well as biographical reflection on learning to be a parent. These approaches constitute a reference for the method designed for the purpose of my research, and the method of data acquisition in particular – autobiographical, written statements on subjects presented as a combination of interconnected issues. Against such a methodological backdrop I ask questions like: Who do you consider a parent? When and in what circumstances did you realise that a parent was a person of such qualities? This approach, close to the phenomenographic one, allows one to describe both one's personal experience and individual way of thinking. The role of Kaufmann's approach to the analysis of the institutions in his *understanding interview* (2010) adopted in this method is to add greater depth to descriptive data provided directly by the parents examined. This can be observed in the *portraits* that follow, as well as in my comments outlining the socio-political background for the statements.

Sample

The parents I examined were accessed through a non-random method of obtaining subjects known as *snowball sampling*, in which previous participants find the next ones, using whatever means at their disposal. In this case, there was only one prerequisite to the recruitment process (which involved circulating the electronic version of the questionnaire and then e-mail corresponding including deeper interview): to be a parent of a school-age child. The sampling began with two persons I knew: mothers, 40- and 41-year-old, having school-age children aged 9 to 14 respectively. Such recruitment method provided for a relatively homogeneous group.

A small number of surveyed persons is consistent with the objective and approach adopted in this qualitative study. Focusing on individual, personal experiences of parenting, the study does not require a large sample. Therefore, after receiving the sixth questionnaire form, I decided the number of subjects was sufficient for the purposes of the study; a glimpse into six

parental microcosms; six spaces for thinking and action, each constituting a one-and-only parenting experience.

Inquiry tool

The tool, *Parent's statement*, specially designed for this research study, is a questionnaire sent to parents via e-mail. Blank boxes were provided for written descriptions (answers of the open questions) under each of the three parts of the interview, corresponding to three categories rooted in the theoretical research framework. They were presented in an inquiry tool together with the questions aimed at directing parents' statements. *Visions* were expected to serve as the basis for expressing biographical information related to projected identity; *Qualifications* correspond to educated identity, and *Relationships* – to confronted identity.

In addition to the questionnaire forms, e-mails were also used as a research tool adding to the personalisation of the research process. There were two cases where parents' written statements were supplemented by a face-to-face follow-up conversation, pre-arranged by e-mail.

Proceedings

The study was conducted in the first half of 2015, and it began by e-mailing the *Parent's statement* questionnaire to two persons, who later forwarded it to other parents they knew. After exchanging e-mails and conducting conversations, the phase of data gathering was complete. Eventually, the raw material was coded.

The analyses were of qualitative nature and the focus was on categories of description derived from parents' statements and how to embrace them within the postulated framework of three proposed categories of identity (projected, educated, and confronted). The primary analysis led to a collection of excerpts of parents' statements systematised into three categories. Secondary analysis of a meta-nature, allowed me to cluster all of the data into individual images, and so generalised descriptions of parents – their *portraits* – were created. In order to conduct tertiary analysis, the findings obtained thus far were contextualised, with a focus on the results of studies described in literature, analysing legal acts, institutional aspects, etc. Interpreting the results and drawing conclusions (prospective in their character) was the last stage of this research project.

Results and Interpretations

Categories of Parental Identity

Analysis of data obtained in the *Parent's statement* questionnaire, correspondence and conversations, allowed me to create the following set of

categories, describing the process of becoming/learning to be a parent. The analysis is presented within the postulated framework of identity categories (the left column of Table 1), and also grouped by the categories of description, that is by the interpretations of the results (the right column of Table 1).

| Categories of identity | Excerpts from <i>Parent's statements</i> within distinguished subcategories | Categories of description |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| PROJECTED (thinking prospectively) | <p>Understanding the notion of a parent</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents are the people closest to me, my <u>life</u> depends on them [K-5]. A parent is my prop, someone I can always rely on, no matter what I do in my <u>life</u> [K-4]. Most of all, a parent embodies safety and support [K-3]. A parent is the source of our <u>life</u>, someone we love, our first authority, and then a friend [K-2]. A parent is a caretaker, the first and most important teacher for the child. Parents introduce a small human being to <u>life</u>, they teach him what <u>life</u> is. The role and perception of parenthood changes as the child progresses through successive <u>life</u> stages, but in my opinion a parent must continue to be a tower of strength and support [K-1]. | parent as a notion organised around life |
| | <p>Understanding of being a parent in view of one's own learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> After giving birth to my first child I realized the responsibility, I knew who a parent was [K-6]. It was when I became a parent myself that I learned most of how to be one [K-5]. Who are parents... I keep realizing this over and over... A lot is happening in my life, and my parents are still there for me and I can count on them [K-4]. I am a parent – I came to realize this fact when my daughter began to grow up [K-3]. I've been learning how to be a parent since I remember, that is since when I was about 8 years old, and in particular later, when I was 13 and my father died, and then at the age of 24 when my mum passed away (...) I'm still learning how to be a parent [K-2]. | Learning to be a parent as a lifelong process of a growing awareness of parenting |
| | <p>Understanding of being a parent in view social perception</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A parent is seen mainly as a caretaker: you check whether the child is well-groomed, fed, neat and polite – is the child „well brought up“ [K-6]. In this day and age a parent is not entirely responsible for the | Social perception of parents – perspective of responsibility |

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| | <p>child's upbringing [K-5]. I have never considered who society thinks parents are and I'm not interested in it – I have my own beliefs [K-3]. The prevailing opinion is that parents are the most important people in their child's life [K-2]. People think that a parent is above all a caretaker, a person legally responsible for a child [K-1].</p> | |
| | <p>Understanding schools as places for parents' education / for parents to be educated</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A school is absolutely no learning place for the child's parents or caretakers (...) A school could be a place for parents' education from early on, when the child is first "adopted" by the educational system. This could happen through cyclic meetings regarding relations with the child, such as based on schools for parents [K-6]. I don't know if a school is a place of parents' education... it is hard for me to say [K-4]. A school being a place of parents' education... it all depends on the teacher's engagement and the parent's willingness. It should be based on mutual willingness to cooperate. In the present circumstances, all it takes is the right person in the [right] place [K-3]. A school is a place of education for those parents who cooperate with it – by attending meetings with class tutors or individual office hours (which, according to the law enacted some years ago, must take place at least once every two months in every school), by participating in events or trainings for parents [K-2]. A school should be a place for parents' education, and in many cases it actually is. Schools organise seminars with experts, workshops, support groups. For me, the most valuable are those classes, workshops and projects where both parents and children participate in [K-1, I-1]. | Schools as potential places for parent education |
| EDUCATED (thinking educationally) | <p>Becoming a parent: teachers of parenthood</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I felt that I was learning to be a parent when I was talking about it with my <u>mum</u> (...). Every time I recall conversations with my <u>dad</u>, I know that was the time when I learned to be a parent [K-2]. We think back to how other people (my mother, <u>grandmother</u>, <u>aunt</u>, <u>friend</u>, <u>teacher</u>... etc.) used to cope with similar situations [K-1]. During conversations with other <u>parents</u> (...) | Family and school as circles of teachers of parenting |

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| | <p>with an <u>educator</u> or a <u>psychologist</u> [K-2]. During an individual meeting with a <u>school psychologist</u> [K-3]. I read texts recommended by <u>pedagogues</u> [K-2].</p> | |
| | <p>Becoming a parent: learning places</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> For me that place was where I took <u>prenatal classes</u> and the lecturing midwife, herself a mother of four, did not only discuss childbirth, but also talked about a child's first years, about establishing a bond through feeding, caring, gestures, touch and words [K-6]. In my case it was the post-secondary <u>Training School for Childminders</u> and numerous professional practices that had a large impact on my preparation to the role of a parent. The value of this experience I appreciate even today [K-1]. <u>At school</u> (...) in the first class of primary school, during an individual session with a school psychologist [K-3]. During each <u>piano lesson</u> (for the first six months I was there with my daughter), during <u>musical workshops</u> which I went to with my daughter during the holidays (...) <u>at my son's school</u> (K-2). | <p>Places of parents' education: formal and non-formal institutions</p> |
| | <p>Becoming a parent: learning situations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have not deliberately prepared myself for the role of a mother. I think it's in our DNA, that maternal instinct, and we try not to repeat our parents' mistakes. I'm learning to be a mother every single day by trying to play my role the best I can when I face problems of everyday life (K-5). I guess I'm learning to be a mother all the time, as my child develops. It's a different matter to be a mother of a toddler, then a preschooler, and now a pupil [K-4]. It takes your whole life to learn how to be a parent. When we actually become parents, a little human being is born, helpless, entirely relying on us – then we are suddenly awakened to this fact. We think back to how other people (my mother, grandmother, aunt, friend, teacher... etc.) used to cope with similar situations [K-1]. The truth is that I learn to be parent every day, especially when I interact with my children, when I am with them on a day-to-day basis, after every success and failure (...) I felt I was learning to be a parent when I was talking about it with my mum – knowing that she was dying, she would give | <p>Everyday life as a generalised situation of learning to be a parent</p> |

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| | <p>me specific instructions on how to care for the child and how to raise him. Every time I recall conversations with my dad, I know that was the time when I learned to be a parent. I learned to be a parent when I admired by mum for the fact that she loved her children more than anything, that she would always hear me out, would always think about my happiness and the happiness of my brothers (...). During conversations with other parents, at my son's school during classroom events, during talks with an educator or a psychologist, during parents-teacher meetings and teacher's office hours (...); (w)hen I read texts recommended by pedagogues [K-2].</p> | |
| CONFRONTED (thinking critically) | <p>Being a parent as a process of learning in confrontation with the child's school</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The fact I've been sending my child to school has taught me <u>not to trust</u> people who work there, because for them it is only their work and nobody cares about my child, only statistics matter [K-6]. By sending my child to school I learned to participate in the course of education, to be interested in what happens at school, to inquire and question things, to suggest solutions other than the stereotypical ones used by teachers. That I am <u>my child's advocate and nobody else at school is going to defend him</u> [K-6]. Sending a child to school has taught me how important it was <u>to have prepared them better for the confrontation with aggression, violence and other negative emotions manifested by others</u>. People don't always behave amicably, difficult situations occur, too. The school teaches me to be close to the child, to be with the child and to display interest in him, sometimes in a subtle, and sometimes in a more direct way. I learned that you can even win a struggle with a ticket control agency, when a teacher is willing to cooperate with you [K-2]. For a parent, sending a child to school is like a <u>test</u> in organisational skills and time planning management. The parent must plan out all the activities – his duties and those of the child – so that they don't clash with each other. This is a big challenge... [K-1]. | <p>Increasing distrust as a result of parents' learning in confrontation with the child's school</p> |
| | Being a parent as a process of everyday learning | A sense of |

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| | <p>in relation with the child's school</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recently the school has taught me that it is not a learning place for parents (...) The message it sends is: we're doing our job, please do not interfere [K-6]. I can say with confidence that when my daughter was in grades 1 to 3, I learned a lot about her thanks to the class tutor's commitment. But unfortunately now a PE teacher who knows nothing about our children has become a tutor. Parents-teacher meetings last about 10 minutes, as there is simply nothing to discuss. The school my daughter attends has nothing to do with teaching parents [K-3]. A school is a friendly place for educating parents, and it tells them that a collaborative parent can help his child very much [K-2]. My daughter's school teaches me to gain more self-control and sense of responsibility. The school staff puts emphasis on obeying rules and deadlines [K-1]. | <p>subordination as a result of parents' learning in everyday relations with the school</p> |
| | <p>Being a parent as a learning process through activities for parents organized by the child's school</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A school is absolutely no learning place for a child's parents or caretakers (...). The catechist, a priest, organized a "<u>School for Parents</u>". I attended these classes, the course was a huge success, it was what I needed to improve my relationships with my children. I would recommend it to everyone who cares for their children [K-6, I-6]. In recent years some offers for parents became available (<u>workshops</u>, <u>trainings</u>), but I have not taken advantage of them. The school proposes trainings in "answering challenging questions", as has been in the past. The problem is, whether parents are going to be willing to participate, whether they are going to find the time [K-5, I-5]. The school organizes (generally before the parents-teacher meetings) <u>talks</u> on a variety of topics, such as nutrition, speech-therapy issues and other problems. Unfortunately, I do not participate in these talks. I do attend <u>open classes</u>, though. Then I have the opportunity to see how my son is doing in school, during lessons, how he fares in relation to the rest of the class, what progress has been made. Such lessons are held once | <p>Traditional pedagogization of parents as formal education addressed at them by the school</p> |

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| | <p>every semester [K-4]. The school invites us to <u>theatre performances</u> staged by children, to <u>open classes, trips, fairs</u> or to <u>go to the theater</u> or opera together. I participate in all forms of activities apart from class trips. I want to integrate with the community and I'm still learning how to be a parent [K-2, I-2]. My child's school is a place parents can derive many good things from. There are numerous <u>meetings with experts organized for parents</u> on social and educational problems. Frequent (monthly) <u>meetings of parents with the class tutor</u> foster exchanging experiences between parents. Discussions and collaborative seeking solutions to educational and organizational problems arising in the class are of considerable value to me [K-1].</p> | |
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Table 1 *Parent's statements in terms of identity categories (three posited perspectives of parental identity) and categories of description (interpretations of the working space of parental identity among interviewed parents)*

Given the parents' statements, the projected identity was described in the following categories: a parent as a notion organised around life (all statements expressed the understanding of parents in the context of thinking about life); learning to be a parent as a lifelong-growing awareness of parenthood (also situations, dependencies and the like that result from it); social reception of parents in the perspective of responsibility (lifelong development of sense of social expectations in this regard); a school as a potential place for educating parents (in all statements a strong emphasis was put on the fact that parents feel the need for a school to be such a place, and at the same time the majority of statements revealed this need was not satisfied).

The educated identity was described in the following categories: the family and school as circles of teachers of parenthood (parents mentioned and described persons who were important to them in their lifelong learning of becoming a parent, who helped them to feel the process of becoming a parent); institutions of formal education as places of learning how to be a parent (it would seem that – contrary to the previous category where parents chose teachers from among parents, relatives and school professionals – they described various schools and formal education institutions as places for educating parents; hospital antenatal classes is one of the examples); everyday life as a generalised situation of learning how to be a parent (the emphasis is on the lifelong shaping of parental identity through everyday educational experiences in the form of interactions with various teachers of parenthood, and occurring in different places when parents' lives happen: in one's parents' home, in one's own home and in the homes of one's relatives

and friends. This is inconsistent with the previously mentioned places of institutional education). In one case [K-2] *reading texts recommended by pedagogues* falls into two categories: “teachers of parenthood” as well as “places and situations where one learns to be a parent”.

The confronted identity was described in these categories: increasing distrust as a result of parents' learning in confrontation with the child's school (parents, as if they were in the role of students, described here, with apparent underlying distrust, how they treat schools on the basis of mutual interactions and assessing the impact schools have on one's child); a sense of subordination as a result of parents' learning in everyday relations with the school (description of repulsive school practices, of the school's lack of interest in parents, or of parents performing activities authoritatively determined by a school, within its expectations of cooperation for the child's wellbeing); traditional pedagogization of parents as formal education addressed at them by the school (descriptions of learning at the child's school most often contain typical activities of pedagogization of parents, such as talks and workshops on upbringing issues held by experts). Parents are happy with them, even though they may be hungry for more. On the one hand, this may support the notions (as described within the projected identity) of the school's potentiality to educate parents and the already indicated failure to fulfill this educational role. On the other, it is food for thought as it may point to a lack of vision of the school that could offer parents some education extending beyond schematic pedagogization which treats a parent as someone who does not have a clue and needs to be taught how to actually be a parent. In these circumstances the school does not present itself as a LLL institution that would understand the idea of parents' learning in it and through it, learning that consists in creating conditions for exchanging personal experiences and mutual learning, troubleshooting, etc. The three interviewed parents told me about such needs much more than the others (K-1, K-2, K-5).

Based on the parents' statements it can be said that, in general, parental identity is one of a *lifelong* and *lifewide learner*. The prevailing category of description, in all biographically examined identity categories (assessed in relation to time and space), was lifelong learning, in various places and situations which have proved to be significant for parental self-creation. School is a place they see as potentially useful in the perspective of their lifelong learning, but currently it only fulfills this role through typical activities and distinctive pedagogization. Just like in the past, they ossify the relations of dominance in which parents are the subordinated party.

Portraits

In keeping with the adopted research objectives, parental characteristics, although certainly incomplete, personalised descriptions of generalised educational experience, as it shaped individual parents. As such, they took the form of sketchy portraits, like the three of six presented below:

Portrait 1.

A parent is a source of our life - including the life we lead among others [K-2, I-2].

THE COMMUNITY DIMENSION OF PARENTAL IDENTITY: SELF-CREATION IN COMMUNITIES OF LEARNERS.

The examined person has a higher education degree and lives on the poverty threshold (*experiences financial struggles*); she is a mother of two children, one of them attends a primary school, the other one is a student. In her long meditative statement she puts emphasis on education “in general” and, in particular, education towards parenting. The mother focuses, on the one hand, on education and, on the other, on the community, and that clearly determines not only her way of being a parent, but also being a part of the world around her (*I want to integrate with the community and I'm still learning how to be a parent*). She believes it is not only better to learn together, but also to overcome many of life's difficulties together (we can speculate that she also means the problems resulting from tight economic conditions mentioned earlier). From this perspective, she argues that if one cooperates with the school closely and willingly, it will be easier for every parent to actually be a parent, and to be more effective in supporting one's own child. She actively participates in her younger child's school's life and is committed to taking part in literally all forms of activities the school offers parents (excluding class trips, as participating in such activities would clash with her idea that children should build their own autonomy themselves).

Portrait 2.

A parent embodies safety and support. The school educates parents of younger pupils, and has nothing to do with teaching parents afterwards [K-3].

THE INDIVIDUALISTIC DIMENSION OF PARENTAL IDENTITY: SELF-CREATION IN AUTONOMY.

The person examined has a secondary education and no financial struggles. She is a mother of an 11-year-old who currently attends her fourth grade. In her statement she highly ranks parental support and one's own autonomy as a parent in relation to society and one's surrounding environment (*I have my own beliefs*). She stresses the *personal aspect* of her experiences, for example by describing how differently she feels about schools as learning places for parents. Until the end of her daughter's third grade the school truly was such a place, particularly given the educative influence of the class tutor. Later, the same institution turned out to be a repulsive place and there was no point in coming into contact with it – most importantly the mother disapproves of how the class tutor and other teachers work (*they know nothing about our children*).

Portrait 3.

A parent is a tower of strength – also for those children who are parents themselves. One learns by looking both at the child and one's own parents [K-4].

THE GENERATIONAL DIMENSION OF PARENTAL IDENTITY: SELF-CREATION IN INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS

The examined parent has a higher education degree and experiences no financial struggles. She is a mother of a 9-year-old, who attends one of the initial grades of primary school. In her statement the intergenerational dimension of parenthood comes to the fore and, what follows, the intergenerational character of education in parenting. Closely tied to her parents, she regards them as the most important and still the best teachers of her own parenting (*they are still there and I can rely on them*). To paraphrase this statement: we learn from our own parents as well as from our children, and the children similarly learn from us as well as from their grandparents. Hence she blames herself for not responding actively enough when school invites parents to participate in activities intended for them. She attends, however, open classes, taking the opportunity to *observe her child and learn from him, not merely how to be a parent of a child, but also of a pupil who attends this particular class and this particular school* [from the correspondence].

From Portraits to Holograms of Parental Identity

Every one of the portraits points out that to become a parent is to learn, and that the process lasts for a lifetime. There are some stronger features visible in individual portraits and allowing for theoretical categorization, which would be context-sensitive in terms of biographical aspects such as the time, places and spaces of individual learning. It is possible to take them and piece together a multidimensional representation - a kind of a detailed hologram - of parental identity. A hologram is understood here as a structure in which the whole can be seen in every element of the structure; every element is “a record of interference”. We can now try to simplify it by categorizing all dimensions provided by individual portraits (Table 2).

| PARENTAL IDENTITY [A parent's – a lifelong learner's – self-creation] | |
|--|---|
| INDIVIDUALISTIC [Self-creation focused on individual learning (parent's autonomy)] | COLLECTIVISTIC [Self-creation focused on collective (communal, intergenerational) learning] |
| ADAPTIVE [Self-creation focused on functional adaptiveness (in the face of child's needs / school's requirements)] | CRITICAL [Self-creation focused on criticality (in the face of reality / the school)] |

Table 2. *The general hologram of parental identity (a generalized representation of dimensions of parental self-creation plotted on two axes: individualistic-collective, adaptive-critical)*

This multidimensional structure is placed on two axes: one for individualistic-collective, the second for the adaptive-critical aspects. On one hand, we can identify the identity formations as self-creation that emphasises independence and individual learning (the individualistic option), or as the collective learning in community, stressing the importance of intergenerational transmission (the collectivist option). On the other hand, the identities are either adaptive or critical in their nature, or anything in between. Adaptive, because it is dominated by the functional attitude to serve the child's needs, the school's needs and other requirements. Critical, when forged in constant confrontations with problems of daily life, and through distance towards the reality and the school (which is one of its elements).

Context

The context for self-creation, which is a parents' educational experience. It includes, among others, the school their children attend, which is informed by social and educational policies. Today, these policies are permeated by the ideas of lifelong learning (LLL). Following such a policy framework is now seen as a way to overcome the financial crisis and to succeed in the competition against other economies. For a long time LLL has been a basis for numerous strategies of social development in the European Union^[4]. Significant in this context is the Polish policy from 2013 entitled the *Lifelong Learning Perspective*^[5]. The document is a product of work done by the Inter-Departmental Task Group for Lifelong Learning launched by the Prime Minister's Directive in 2010^[6]. The Directive calls for the strategy of LLL development, most evidently social investment in Poland (*investing in people via education*). The LLL Perspective sets the directions for the policy which includes: learning in diverse formal, informal and non-formal contexts; learning through all stages of life, from early childhood to late life learning; identification, assessment and validation of learning outcomes, etc.

The Polish *Perspective* obliges all departments to cooperate in the interest of LLL. The department responsible for education in Poland is the Ministry of National Education, at least as far as compulsory education is concerned. So far, in implementing these policies the Ministry has been concentrating on disseminating knowledge about the value of LLL through conferences and other events promoting LLL among schools directors and teachers. These have been organised chiefly by the Educational Research Institute reporting to the Ministry. It is emphasised that adults, parents included, need to be taken into account when schools create their educational offers, and it is stressed that adults need to learn instead of merely being educated^[7]. This last notion contains an implicit evaluation, as of now parents traditionally undergo a process of pegagogization at school, and this chiefly means educating them with regard to their parental duties and obligations, power

relations, authority based on the idea of educating the uneducated (or, to refer to the tradition of the Age of Reason, enlightening the ignorant) and so forth. Polish researchers analyzing parents in education arrived at similar conclusions (e.g. Radziewicz, 1979; Rogala, 1989). It is interesting that these conditions persist regardless the change of the political system (e.g. Segiet, 1999; Mendel, 2001). The process of parents' pedagogization at school seems to transcend political orders and can thrive also in democratic states.

Conceptualizing parental identity in an LLL-at-school perspective

On the basis of this study one can describe parental identity as a **lifelong learner's identity** – in keeping with the assumptions derived from the literature of the subject. Lifelong learning, a part of how the interviewed parents self-created themselves, describes: their prospective visions concerning parenthood (the projected identity); educational experiences associated with *teachers of parenthood* as well as places and situations in which they were educated towards parenthood (the educated identity); finally, their relations with the environment, through which they clarify their own thinking about parenthood and the manner of parenting (the confronted identity).

The representation of parental identity, as described within the scope of the study, is of parenthood as a lifelong learning process. It forms a multidimensional structure, hereby called *a hologram of parental identity*. The whole – parental identity – can be seen in every element of this structure placed on the individualistic-collective and the adaptive-critical axes. Parental identity formations can be perceived as self-creation that emphasises independence and individual learning, or as the collective learning in community; and also as adaptive (with the urge to serve the child and the school), or as critical (in constant confrontations and through distance towards the reality and the school).

Categories of description that emerged from the research material will allow us a closer look at these identities, as they contain the ways in which being a parent is experienced and thought about. So what we have learned is that **the notion of a parent** is constructed in a network of meanings related to life. And the word *life* also turned out to be most often used when one's thoughts about parents were being expressed. To conclude, we can say that for those interviewed a parent is life. Life as in giving life to children, making decision and plans about life, introducing children to life and teaching them what life is.

As for **learning to be a parent**, the interviewees understand it as a lifelong process of growing realization of parenthood. This realization is most often equated with responsibility. The key moment in its development occurs when

one's first child is born, but other moments are important as well: the growing-up of children (every single one being unique), the death of one's mother and father (as the statements indicate, the two are differently experienced and distinguished). One can see them as crises acting as junctions of parental life, or as milestones on the way to form parental identity (to self-create a parent), analogously to the concept of trajectory as process structures of one's biography (Schütze, 1997), or Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which emphasises the role of critical moments (1984). In this light, education towards parenthood appears to be a process of learning, and part of a trajectory of happiness and suffering intertwined.

The perspective of responsibility also determines what the **social reception** of parenthood is like and, consequently, what society expects of parents. The interviewees felt that although *individual approaches to responsibility tend to vary considerably* [K-5], it is the most strongly expressed social expectation and it even has a legal foundation. To experience being a parent among others and to think about how others perceive us and what they expect of us, is for some parents an opportunity to manifest their independence, their autonomy [*I'm not interested in it – I have my own beliefs* (K-3)].

The understanding of the school, in view of the parents's learning process, comes down to the concept of *a place that gives space for something*; a place for something to happen; a potential place. Referring to the *chora*, a concept expressing pure potentiality^[8], we can say that the school, as it is understood by the parents, is a *chora* only to a certain degree. This is because parents already have their own well-working reference systems that restrict the range of this potentiality (Mendel, 2013). These are references to parents' own observations, experiences, knowledge about schools' possible forms of activity. They are then coalesced into a design of school – in it parents express their understanding of the need for relations with teachers to be based on partnership and mutuality [*mutual willingness to cooperate is important* (K-3)]. The way parents understand the school when they describe it in terms of duty [*a school should be a place of parent's education* (K-1)], matches the meaning of the *chora* developed by Jacques Derrida and emphasizing that a happening is necessary to occur. The *chora*, a place that reveals itself, promises a happening, constitutes a space that demands to be filled (Derrida, 1993). The school is for parents such a *chora*, a place where change is necessary. Among other things, they wish for a school they could rely on and that they would no longer be forced to play a role of their children's advocates for fear that *nobody else at school is going to defend him* (K-6).

There are numerous important persons encountered on one's path of becoming a parent (**teachers of parenthood**): closest family members, above all mothers and fathers, but also aunts; friends, close and those more distant ones; significant others from the school environment: mainly other parents, but also teachers and other school professionals, such as educators and

psychologists. The interviewees read the literature recommended by pedagogues, which means that widely-read authors of relevant publications can also be called *teachers of parenthood*.

Places of learning parenthood described by the interviewees (who were asked explicitly about them), are mainly educational institutions offering formal education, certified and organised by the educational system. Among them, their own children's schools were mentioned in the first place. Others were: hospital antenatal classes, and the Training School for Childminders which one interviewee attended. Apart from that, other non-formal institutions were mentioned as important to parents' places of learning, places where parents, as they stress themselves, learn to be ones by being with the child, together with him where he spends his time, for example, pursuing their hobbies, in musical or artistic workshops, etc. The process of parental self-creation is relational by nature. A relation is the basis of parental identity, which simply ceases to exist when devoid of relations with one's child. It seems that the more this relation is filled with *doing things together* (I-1), the better both for the parent and the child.

The question about places of learning to be a parent seems to have steered the answers towards educational institutions. However, the fact that parents came up with a list of formal education institutions can be viewed as a symptom of **the LLL trend** present in today's society, which values learning when credentials follow. As claimed by Beck, Giddens and Scott (1994), society is now undergoing progressive individualization of life, which triggers reflexive modernity and the reconstruction of educational system. In these conditions pressure is exerted on educational institutions, and consequently system transformations take place, for example informal education is made equal with formal. People continuously seek to gain and prove qualifications, since they live in conditions of uncertainty. For example, on the one hand, they are pressurised into constant employability, on the other they always dread losing their jobs. Literally, everything we know and can do starts to matter, acquiring causal power when validated by educational institutions, which are now open and ready to do this as a result of the pressures mentioned above. Field (2006) calls these dependencies a *new educational order* in which the lifelong learning directive is key. The LLL trend stems from these conditionings and, perhaps, manifested itself in the interviewees' impulse to recite a list of institutions which could potentially confirm their parental qualifications. Irrespective of how we interpret that impulse, we should state that all interpretations and conclusions derived from this study are aware of the meaning of LLL and a new educational order, of which it is a sign. Doubtlessly, parental self-creation and one of the places where it happens – the school – are both parts of this order.

But other places should be mentioned, as parents described them too, apart from the list of institutions prompted by the question. Numerous places related to situations of learning came up in various parts of the questionnaire, interviews and correspondence, such as home, place of work or social events. Therefore it was possible to combine these places and situations of learning and experiencing parenthood to form a **working space of parental identity**. As the statements emphasise, it is above all made up of daily life with all its different places. In the research analyses *everyday life* was separated as a generalised situation and at the same time a wide space of learning how to be a parent – a working space of parental identity.

In this context, when we describe parental self-creation more specifically, in the process of continuous education, we can single out **lifelong** and **lifewide** learning and then discuss parental identity of a lifelong and lifewide learner. This is because in all these categories of identity, located in time and space due to biographical nature of parents' statements^[9], learning was described as taking place throughout one's life [*ever since I remember*, as one person says (K-2)], and in various places and situations which proved to be significant for the interviewees as parents.

Parental identity is shaped through confrontations with the world around, mainly the school, and from individual descriptions the following categories emerge: growing distrust as a result of parents' learning when they are confronted with the school; a sense of subordination as a result of parents' learning in everyday relations with the school, and traditional pedagogization as formal education offered to parents by the school. **The school ossifies traditional relations** based on authority of teachers and other professionals, who mainly employ various ways of knowledge transfer (parents-teacher meetings, office hours talks). And, although parents state that for them a school is a place of learning – and often a friendly one, too – the content and forms of described activities express neither partnership nor cooperation extending beyond routine practices.

Conclusions

What is not expressed in research material is any sign of implementing ideas of lifelong learning. Polish schools are not LLL institutions, though the opposite is called for, among others, in the Polish social development strategy: the *Lifelong Learning Perspective* is supposed to be supervised by the department for education (The Ministry of National Education, which currently is only occupied with promoting ideas of LLL in schools and propagating schools' activity as LLL institutions by training directors and teachers). As an institution striving to achieve this status, the school should move from educating parents (pedagogization) to fostering their learning with the school actively participating in this educational relationship with

parents developed, for example, through new forms of contact with them. The school is a chora, a place demanding to be filled with meanings. What I have in mind are new meanings that would transform the way schools approach parents, after all the interviewed parents point out that schools can have a lot to offer (*it is a place parents can derive many good things from* (K-1, I-1)]. The school can create fertile ground for parental learning in many ways, for example in different forms of mutual learning; both parts could organise and profitably realise these forms of learning, secure in the knowledge that they are rightful co-hosts of the shared space (Mendel, 2003a,b). Thus the school cannot only reasonably act towards achieving important socio-political goals, but, above all, smartly respond to parents' needs. Parents are not schools' clients but co-originators, they are a part of the school community, and schools take care of children's education *with parents*, not *for parents*.

When we fit these conclusions within spatialised thought, we can create promising perspectives for changes towards directions expected in this paradigm. One of these is surely the theory and method designed by Edward Soja (1996), the author of *Thirdspace*, a book proclaiming spatial turn and stating the need to go beyond traditional binarism in order to create the *third space*; the need to spatialise ideas, ways of thinking and experiencing the world. When the closed logic of binarism is opened, the resulting perspective *either-or* is transformed into a more flexible and fluid one: *both/and also*. It may be practised as space undivided, with no purely social or physical (material) zones isolated, and a foundation for critical distance one keeps to maintain permanent openness to third solutions, third players in relationships, third places, and new, even the most surprising dimensions or reality. Soja proposes, among others, a method called *Critical Thirling-as-Othering*, which allows us to spatialise social relations as well as concepts (such as social justice). To paraphrase what Soja wrote about this method, we can say that thanks to thirling one can always keep one's being sensitive for other dimensions of reality in which one acts. It is also a chance to notice other versions of reality, in which meetings or reflections occur. Therefore, *Critical Thirling-as-Othering* is generally a method which lets us to create new types of representations, new policies, and so on. To use it means to make a better world possible.

Applying this method to relations between parents and *school personnel* (teachers, directors, school educators and psychologists, administrators etc.) can significantly change realities and promote the creation of new approaches and new meanings of a chora, which the school is. One of the basic tools recommended in this method is to ask, often in different places and situations, and with a critical distance – questions about *the third one*, about the presence or absence of someone or something. Simple matters, such as: *Who else should be here? Why is this happening there?* and in consequence: *Why is this, that and that as well not here? Why not here, there and there as well?* These

questions can open our eyes to the need to redesign the space of our co-existence and ways in which we function as parents, teachers, principals; solutions that are needed are different from, for example, hour-long trainings that are organised by the Polish Ministry of National Education in accordance with a new order and current LLL policies (they only push the school towards a top-down mode of LLL).

By acting differently **schools can become real, and not merely *politically correct*, LLL institutions**. By being truly open to children and adults (parents, teachers, members of local communities) and by being co-created by all of them, it may really become their place of learning and personal self-creation. It is possible because it can effectively increase parental agency, and doing so opens up an easy way to shape the subjective nature of parental identity on the one hand, and on the other to develop the school culture together with a set of its subcultures, among others student subculture, teacher subculture and parental subculture. Unfortunately, in Polish conditions this last one is only beginning to emerge, deficient in traditions of everyday co-existence on equal term with students and teachers (even though the law on education system in Poland guarantees that at schools they are the rightful co-hosts). It is still very uncommon for parents to feel *at home* in Polish schools (in fact, in many places this idea is beyond anyone's imagination). It rarely happens, for instance, that parents invite teachers to a meeting which they have organised themselves at school. The latest report, a result of nationwide research exploring all types of schools, primary, lower and higher secondary schools, states that *parents see the space for their activity in organizing school ceremonies, school and classroom events* - only (Kołodziejczyk, 2014, p. 187). In the light of this, the weakness of parental culture may paradoxically manifest itself in the fact that parents massively participate in movements that consolidate them against various risks (Mendel, 2012; 2013). The most threatening one today is the one of starting compulsory education one year earlier, the movement called *Ratuj maluchy* ("Spare the Six-Year-Olds") against this law coming into force gathered several hundred thousand parents^[10]. This is enormous social energy and great political power. What is worth striving for is that collective parental identity should develop its subjective character not only in one-off undertakings and not only against something, but particularly also toward better solutions which, in this case, by affecting parents, affect schools and society as well. A way to do this is to increase school's sensitivity to the fact that **school is a place of parental self-creation** and that it participates in developing individual parental identities.

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Endnotes

- [1] I owe this observation to the anonymous reviewer of the paper.
- [2] A lot of studies have developed in the perspective of a *spatial turn* that could be mentioned here as another instance of understanding space in a similar manner. The most significant ones are those proposed by Edward Soja (1997) and – regarding educational spaces – by Susan Robertson (2010). *Pedagogy of place* is also based on this perspective (Mendel, 2006).
- [3] The 5th Framework Programme project conducted in Poland, at the University of Gdańsk, by prof. Tomasz Szkudlarek (the author was a project member). The project's full reference: EU RESEARCH ON SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES – Students as Journeymen Between Communities of Higher

Education and Work – Journeymen; Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities 2007; ISBN 978-92-79-07750-0.

- [4] Fulfilling the ideas of lifelong learning and educational mobility is the strategic goal no. 1 of the European Cooperation in Education and Training 2020. Education and Training 2020, Brussels, 12.05.2009 COM(2009). Other EU's LLL-based strategies currently include: EUROPE 2020. A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Brussels, 3.3.2010 COM(2010)]; Towards Social Investment for Growth and Cohesion – including implementing the European Social Fund 2014-2020. Brussels, 20.2.2013 COM(2013) – “Social Investment Package”; Policy Roadmap for the 2014 Implementation of the Social Investment Package, September 2014).
- [5] The Lifelong Learning Perspective – an annex to the resolution no. 160/2013 by the Councils of Ministers from 10th September 2013.
- [6] The Prime Minister's Directive no. 13 of 17th Feb 2010
- [7] <http://men.gov.pl/pl/jakosc-edukacji/planowanie-strategiczne-i-uczenie-sie-przez--cale-zycie> (1.08.2015). There is a significant context described by Carmel Borg and Peter Mayo (2004, pp.15-23). They noticed how *lifelong education* turned into *lifelong learning* in the neoliberal paradigm of the contemporary world, and they defined this turn as a shift in responsibility for education, from education as a common good to training as a private good.
- [8] Chora, in Greek χώρος or χώρα. Jacques Derrida develops this concept in his book entitled *Khôra*, inspired by a Homeric text in which a chora was described as a place where a duel was going to be fought (1993).
- [9] As J. Bruner rightly noted, it is not possible to tell a story of one's life without referring to times and places when and where this life was happening (1990, p. 12).
- [10] The petition for the referendum to defer compulsory education has been signed by 300,000 people, mostly parents (http://wyborcza.pl/1,75478,17490418,Szesciolatki_i_Elbanowscy_znow_w_Sejmie__A_za_nimi.html , 2.08.2015).