

The following text was originally published in
Prospects: the quarterly review of comparative education
(Paris, UNESCO: International Bureau of Education), vol. XXIII, no. 3/4, 1993, p. 625-637.
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MARIA GRZEGORZEWSKA

(1888-1967)

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Maria Grzegorzewska was born on 18 April 1888 in the village of Woluczka (near Rawa Mazowiecka, Poland), the daughter of Adolf and Felicja (née Bogdanowicz). She was the last—sixth—child in a very close-knit family. Her parents held the lease of a farming estate and considered themselves to be deeply rooted in their surroundings, which made them feel responsible for the people they provided work for and led them to the acceptance of their workers' needs as a factor controlling their own and their children's existence. This characteristic was shared by all their children.

In 1907 Maria Grzegorzewska, having completed a seven-form school for girls, enrolled for a year-long university entrance course run by the Department of Mathematics and Natural Sciences in Warsaw. At that time she also began providing education for the workers. Her activities were sufficiently significant to arouse the interest of the Russian military police, who forced her to leave Warsaw. She went to Lithuania, where she worked as a private tutor in order to earn enough money to pay for university.

In 1909, in spite of financial difficulties, Maria left for Cracow and entered the Department of Natural Sciences at the Jagiellonian University. A period of hard study and of difficult survival began. Private teaching and odd jobs hardly provided enough money to cover her basic needs, even more so as she always found someone whose condition was even worse than her own and whom she felt obliged to help. What was left of her money was eked out on meals at the poor people's canteen. However, these difficulties in her everyday life seemed insignificant, for it was the time when her youthful dreams were coming true. She gave herself wholeheartedly to her studies and to the student life. Fellow students were fascinated by the beauty of this charming girl—joyful, warm, goodwilled and helpful, as she was described by those who knew her then. They called her a 'pagan angel'.²

However, her changing fortunes meant that she did not graduate from the natural science faculty. Instead, disease of the lungs led her to interrupt her studies and go to Zakopane for treatment. There she learned that a Polish scientist, Professor Józefa Joteyko, had created an international faculty of pedology in Brussels. In October 1913, she became a student at the faculty. The studies acquainted Grzegorzewska with the achievements of psychology, sociology and pedagogics, and enabled her to meet personally such eminent educators as Bovet, Claparède, Dalcroze, Decroly, Ferrière and, most importantly, the creator of the faculty, Professor Joteyko herself, whose friend and co-worker Maria soon became. It was here that Maria Grzegorzewska formed the basis of her educational thought and acquired her scientific tools.

After a year of studies in Brussels, she went back to her parents for a vacation. She was there when the First World War broke out. The Pedology Faculty ceased to exist as an international establishment. Maria Grzegorzewska travelled to London on a warship via the mined North Sea. From there she went to Paris, together with Professor Joteyko. She enrolled in the department of literature at the Sorbonne.

During her studies at the Sorbonne she took part in an excursion to Bicetre Hospital for the profoundly mentally retarded. That visit determined her future life. She decided to become a social worker, helping those who were most helpless and in need of care—disabled children. The decision to give up everything she had herself aspired to in order to help others could be undertaken only by someone for whom another person constituted the highest value. In spite of the fact that since her early childhood the sight of physical impairment had induced in her feelings of fear and rejection, the need to compensate for the unfairness suffered by the handicapped became the guiding force in her life. Her first intention had been to devote her life to experiencing and popularizing beauty. Her doctoral dissertation on aesthetics, defended in 1916 at the Sorbonne, was devoted to a genetic and psychological analysis of children's and young people's aesthetic experiences.

Maria Grzegorzewska decided to bring her love of beauty to the world of human anomaly, disfigurement and handicap. In May 1919, she returned to Poland with the intention of pursuing her dream in the newly formed Polish Republic. Several months later, she became an assistant in the special education section at the Ministry of Denominations and Public Enlightenment. The social aim of bringing help to the handicapped required extensive organizational work in which Grzegorzewska could apply her educational knowledge.

This was the beginning of her future scientific, social and organizational career devoted to the people most in need of help—the handicapped—an activity which took up the whole of her life. She died in 1967.

Social and organizational work

Maria Grzegorzewska had learned to involve herself with altruistic social work in her childhood. It was in her parents' house that she acquired an awareness for the moral responsibility for her deeds, the necessity of taking the good of others as her guideline and of helping those in need. The family home taught Maria deep patriotism and gave her moral direction so as to place her personal life at the service of the country. Patriotic traditions in the Grzegorzewski family, as in the majority of Polish families, were extremely strong.

In the year of Maria's birth, it had been 116 years since the first partition of Poland. The Polish State did not then exist, but the Polish nation had preserved its identity and its traditions, and had never ceased to believe in regaining its independence in spite of the many set-backs to nationalist uprisings. The memory of ancestors killed in the combat for independence and the constant struggle to get back their fatherland, even at the price of one's life, were basic educational truths to everybody at that time.

Maria proved that these notions were very real for her. In her early youth she was involved in underground movements during the period of partition, as well as later during the nazi occupation and in the Warsaw Uprising. Equally early, Maria became involved in social activities. In 1907 she established contacts with the Polish Socialist Youth Association and began her social service mainly in the form of clandestine and educational work among the workers. She co-operated with such distinguished scientists and social workers as Ludwik Krzywicki, Helena Radlińska and Marian Falski. All her future was subservient to the realization of this social call. Towards the end of her life, she wrote:

What can I say about my social work? First of all, I cannot differentiate among the social, the economic, the scientific, etc. I was simply interested in an important though neglected social problem—social rehabilitation of the handicapped, caring for their lives and understanding this important social phenomenon; this became my goal. From whatever perspective I looked at it—humanistic, social, economic, scientific or educational—it remained equally important.³

When Grzegorzewska returned to Poland—a nation reborn after more than a century of bondage—there was no national system of institutions for the handicapped. The whole problem was set aside while the national education system was being set up.

In Poland, practical educational activity among the handicapped (initially the deaf, then the blind and the delinquent) had already started in the nineteenth century; in 1917 education for the mentally retarded was provided. These were, however, piecemeal actions, concentrating on the care of children with one type of impairment. This was the situation when Grzegorzewska began her struggle to restore to the handicapped a socially useful role, to give them back their place in life and among humanity. As a result, the Department of Special Education was created at the ministry.

This opened up the possibility for Grzegorzewska to put into practice the ideas she had presented in the article *On the Necessity of Organizing Special Education for Handicapped Children*, which had been publicly discussed at a meeting of the Polish Teaching League in Paris in 1918.

For the majority of European countries, special teacher education consisted of different courses organized in various ways and for various durations. In four European cities, there were established institutions preparing teachers for special education (Budapest, Warsaw, Moscow, Zürich). In Zürich and Moscow there were also scientific research institutions (the Chair of Curative Pedagogics and the Defectological Department of Moscow University). Various universities and teacher-training schools also carried out higher education in this area. However, it was only in Hungary that the supply of staff for special schools was linked to the demand.

Polish special education and pedagogics developed later and in a different way from those in the majority of European countries. At the time of regaining independence, there were only a few institutions for handicapped children, mostly set up on a haphazard basis on the initiative of private persons or charitable institutions.⁴

According to Grzegorzewska's approach, the struggle to improve the fate of handicapped children had to be accompanied by training for teachers in special education. That is why she organized a Special Education Course that, after several reorganizations, became the State Institute for Special Education three years later. The institute was an innovatory centre whose organization was based on an original concept of educational methods, not previously encountered in any foreign centre.

There were two key factors that made the Polish system of training special education teachers different from the systems used in other countries at that time. Firstly, this type of activity was undertaken simultaneously with the development of a network of special education institutions. In the majority of other countries, the officially planned training of staff began only when educational provision for the handicapped was already relatively well developed. However, in Poland—practically from the very beginning—a continuous system of training for teachers working in regular special education institutions was introduced. While, elsewhere in Europe, this training was carried out in a variety of courses, it must be added that there were similarities in conception and programmes.⁵ Maria Grzegorzewska based herself on foreign experience in organizing the special education system and staff training, but she managed to avoid the pitfalls encountered by others.

In the second place, from the very beginning the State Institute for Special Education pursued not only didactic but also research goals. Obviously, the latter would not yield results through short-term, randomly organized projects, for systematic, long-lasting observation and experiments were required.

Maria Grzegorzewska was the head of the institute from its creation until the end of her life. At the same time, she founded the Teacher's Institute—a centre for professionally active teachers who were attempting not only to raise their qualifications but also to perfect

their teaching technique. This approach reflected Grzegorzewska's assumption that the main aim of studies at an educational university was to develop the students' inquisitiveness and desire for self-development. A special school is, according to her, a magnificent workshop that imposes no limits; it discourages inactivity and passivity, but encourages constant observation, inquisitiveness, mental development and resistance to routine.⁶

During her directorship of both institutes, Grzegorzewska visited many schools scattered over the country in order to acquaint herself with the living and working conditions of Polish teachers.

Teacher education and training did not stop when trainees graduated from the institute. Grzegorzewska organized a School Centre within the Special Education Section, which grouped together all those involved with care for the handicapped. The centre organized vocational courses and seminars, thus enabling the exchange of ideas and experiences, together with direct contact between its members and Maria Grzegorzewska, and hence ensuring her influence upon them.

The other field of Grzegorzewska's activity in the between-war period was her work with organizations for the handicapped—the Deaf and Their Friends' Association, the Polish Association of the Blind—and social groups whose aim was to help the socially maladjusted, the mentally retarded and the physically handicapped.

The Second World War and the occupation of Poland interrupted this activity. The institute was closed and Maria Grzegorzewska's struggle turned against the Nazis. Already, in September 1939, she became a nurse in an army hospital. Later she was active in underground movements, distributing printed materials and arms, and participating in clandestine education. She was a member of the Main Committee for Helping the Jews; she helped to hide some of them and thus to save their lives.

After the liberation, she reopened the State Institute for Special Education, destroyed during the war, and once more became its head. The Special Education Section renewed its activity and so did the Polish Teachers' Union. Grzegorzewska was the Chairperson of the Pedagogics Section on the Main Board of the Union, which enabled her to stress the necessity for continuous teacher training. The loss of life among teachers during the war (30 per cent of them were killed) made it necessary to make up the numbers quickly. The section headed by Grzegorzewska initiated many forms of teacher training, both for serving and prospective teachers. She also launched wide-ranging research on the social status of teachers, on educational programmes, the role of school in its local community, and the question of aesthetic education. Such a wide range of subjects points to the richness of Grzegorzewska's interests.

In 1958, she was appointed to the first Polish Chair in Special Education in the Education Department of Warsaw University. She received the title of full professor. Thus, the institute's activities became connected with university work, and the graduates of the institute could continue their studies and broaden their knowledge within the field of their specialty.

Scientific activity

Maria Grzegorzewska often stressed that her creative scientific work, though closely connected with her work, was somehow marginal when compared with her social and organizational activities: 'My scientific work is like tiny scraps in the social activity filling my life', she wrote in 1961 in *Letters to a Young Teacher*.⁷ Those 'tiny scraps' made a valuable and rich contribution to Polish and international educational thought. It is thanks to Grzegorzewska that a new sub-branch of education was created in Poland—special education. The name was popularized by Grzegorzewska herself.

Already, through the use and emphasis put on the term 'special education', the essence of her views on the subject and the goals of this field of science were expressed. Special education, in her view, covered the whole area of facts and situations, together with their theory, which went beyond the biological and social norms. Thus, it concerned all educational situations connected with organic impairment and defect, as well as with social maladjustment. Consequently, she drew people's attention to the significant differences between special education and other sciences. The differences consist in: the goal itself, the applied methods, the scientific equipment and the necessity of special training for the tutor before conducting his/her work with the handicapped child. The term 'curative pedagogics' points to the character of treatment; 'defectology' does not include the pedagogic influence; 'special education' indicates the uniqueness of the whole working scheme.⁸

According to Grzegorzewska, the object of the study of special education covered not only defects in the general somatic, psychic and sociological structure of the handicapped child, but also the healthy elements, which must be developed and exploited to compensate for the shortcomings. This holistic view of problems connected with the handicapped child's life is typical of Polish special education up till now.

The main goal of special education was, according to Maria Grzegorzewska, social rehabilitation for the maladjusted, disabled or otherwise abnormal children. Her scientific novelty was not limited exclusively to introducing the above-mentioned problems to education. The shift occurred from focusing on the type of handicap to concentrating on the type of rehabilitation required. This resulted from Grzegorzewska's original approach to rehabilitation. In its literal sense, the term 'rehabilitation' may be applied only in the case of children in special care, for example the chronically ill or the socially maladjusted. 'In the case of other such children, this notion must be understood metaphorically—the aim of special education to bring them back to *health* within the limits attainable by them, and—in other cases—to find means of compensation'.⁹ Thus, 'the ultimate goal of special education is to give the handicapped the feeling of *being normal* [as far as it is] possible for them to achieve, training them and providing them with knowledge and skills allowing for socially useful work, that is, adapting them to social life, which should improve their self-image.'¹⁰

The aim of special education expressed in this way indicates an evolution compared to earlier views expressed, for example, by Decroly or Hessen. They believed that the only aim of special education was to overcome and compensate for inborn or acquired organic deficiencies. Consequently, educational work concentrated almost exclusively on means and methods to compensate for shortcomings. Thanks to Maria Grzegorzewska, the goals of special education became broader; they became part of general education.

Accepting the basic assumption that all abnormalities stem from a common cortical and sub-cortical somatic source, she believed that various rehabilitation mechanisms should operate in the same way. Her laws of compensation and adaptation played the main role in this process. Her studies and observations led her to the conclusion that any sensual impairment results in the creation of specific structures in the other senses to compensate for the original deficiency. Thus, for instance, the so-called 'sense of obstacle' is a compensating dynamic structure in the blind. Consequently, education of children with sensual deficiencies should consist of controlling the creation of such structures. In all cases, compensation follows the same pattern and results in the creation of substitute behaviours. The adaptation mechanism is also common for all types of impairment. Compensation and adaptation allow us to prepare a child to lead a life as full as is attainable by him/her. Grzegorzewska's views on the phenomenon of sense compensation underwent evolution: from the theory of simple sense replacement (theory of *wikariat*, 1930) to dynamic structural patterns of a complex structure (1959). The theory of *wikariat* was described in a work unique at that time—*Psychology of the Blind*¹¹—an extensive monograph in which she explains the phenomena of a blind person's

psychological life not previously understood, basing herself on the recently launched Gestalt psychology.

In 1959, in the article *The Phenomenon of Compensation in the Blind and Deaf*, she presented a theory of dynamic structural patterns. In her justification of the theory, she used Pavlov's terminology, explaining the relations between the primary and secondary signal systems and the patterns that appear in the functioning of sensual analysers. This theory is still the basis for understanding the patterns in the sensual compensation processes and for rehabilitation of the blind, the deaf and deaf-mutes. In this article she wrote:

The ability to perfect the cortical components of the analysers is the ability to form dynamic structural patterns based on the data which were provided by many analysers simultaneously which—together with the perfection of these systems—makes the mechanism of sense reception of stimuli covered by the structure richer and more diversified, which in turn makes the structural patterns themselves richer and more diversified, the relations between them becoming also more detailed and diversified (for they become inter-analysers). In the cases of sight or hearing deficiencies, the arising structures in the blind or the deaf will differ from those in people who can see and hear, for different sense organs will contribute their part to replace the absent visual or acoustic factors. Hence, different senses are important for the blind and the deaf—such cortical functions as attention or association become more important for them. According to earlier terminology, sense perception is interrelated, which means it is part of the same structural system. Thus, it is the whole structural system that performs the compensating substitutive role and not its parts. Responsiveness is not formed while whole sets of structural systems are. Therefore, the elements constituting their parts acquire new significance and, because of their ultimate function, become more complex by adding new components. [...] The formation of dynamic structural systems in the blind and the deaf does not principally differ from the same process taking place in those who see and hear. They are formed by simple differentiation in the primary signal system and in the transformations of higher analysis/synthesis in the secondary signal system.¹²

According to Grzegorzewska, the basic guidelines of rehabilitation activities comprise: stimulating the inner dynamism of an individual; activating him/her and making him/her independent; introducing him/her to life going on around; combining mental and physical work; and introducing him/her to community activities.

Apart from rehabilitation, the field of special education also covers preventive and adaptive activities. According to Grzegorzewska, preventive actions should stem from respect for man and profound knowledge about an individual.

Preventive actions should be undertaken and developed not only in relation to an individual endangered by impairment, but also in relation to his environment, that is, one should constantly control the development of all conditions favourable to the proper development of a person, and avoiding the development of those conditions which in any way can hinder this development.¹³

Similarly, the social adaptation of a handicapped child should concern both the child and his/her family. According to Grzegorzewska, this process consists not only in adapting to existing conditions, but also in introducing changes to these very conditions. The subject of special education—the handicapped child—is a child who, because of organic deficiencies or functional problems, has difficulties in getting to know the world and making contact with his/her environment, thus being prevented from spontaneous social adaptation. In her classification of handicapped children, Grzegorzewska distinguished the following groups: the blind and the partially sighted; the deaf and the hard-of-hearing; the mentally retarded; the chronically ill and the handicapped; and the socially maladjusted.

Maria Grzegorzewska, though interested in the whole of special educational theory, that is of all its sub-branches—education, oligophrenopedagogy, surdopedagogy, therapeutic education and resocialization education—pursued in them to varying degrees. She was mostly interested in the problems of the blind, then of the deaf—mainly because of her long-term

research on the phenomenon of compensation in these two types of handicap. This does not mean that she considered the other branches less important. She considered the problems of re-educating the mentally retarded, the socially maladjusted or the chronically ill to be equally valid. She spoke about those problems in numerous articles which were frequently published in the journal *Special School*.

The theory of dynamic structural patterns formed the foundation of Grzegorzewska's method of teaching in special education institutions. This method has found wide application in the activities of Polish special education schools. According to Grzegorzewska:

The method teaches us how to look, observe, examine, and understand natural and social phenomena, how to draw conclusions, connect causes with effects, and systematize one's observations, how to think and thus develop the capacity of adapting phenomena and conditions to the needs of man and society. The method provides a valuable and rich reflection and experience in the process of shaping the patient's outlooks.¹⁴

Her method consisted of organizing work centres. It was based on Decroly's interest-centre method. However, while in the latter the core of the activity was work undertaken by students pursuing their own interests, the former stressed the process of children's socialization—the outcomes of their own work should be socially useful. In this way, a child acquires personal experience, and develops substitute images facilitating his/her adaptation to life through individual activity and practice of living. The basic didactic unit in the work-centre method starts with the introduction of classes stimulating or toning up a child as part of the process of preparation for work. Then, the teacher should describe an interesting goal to be achieved through the work and present the different stages for reaching it, obviously adapted to the child's cognitive potential. The children's proper cognition follows. This is a way to experience rich and diversified activities.

The next stage of connecting theory with practice consists of a variety of creative and reproductive expressions. The unit is concluded with external and subjective evaluations of the activities conducted. Grzegorzewska pointed out that each unit should be accompanied by broad and thorough cognition, an understanding of social and natural environments, a dialectical approach to the ideas presented, team work, and the linking of physical and mental activities. The power and beauty of work to bring one's intentions to fruition was stressed; so were active attitudes to life and the feeling of responsibility. Grzegorzewska's deep faith in the possibility and effectiveness of education was always the foundation of her pedagogical ideology. It was supplemented, however, with a realistic view of the problems and aims of education, and its limits in individual cases. A thorough analysis of every patient and his/her educational situation should be a starting point for individual preventive treatment. The analysis should concern not only deficiencies, symptoms or sociological behaviour found in the patient, but also notes the healthy points, which should be particularly protected, developed and exploited.

Basing rehabilitation on a thorough knowledge of the child required the application of verifiable methods and diagnostic procedures, as well as an acquaintance with the norm constituting the point of reference for a given deviation. Consequently, Grzegorzewska had to develop her methodical interests. Her theory of preventive treatment, diagnosis and pedagogical therapy was based on experience, thus ensuring its practicality and utility. In creating the Polish special education schools, she based herself on systematic empirical studies, which was a novelty in itself, and made use of the achievement of other disciplines such as psychology, biology, physiology and medicine. She never separated theory and scientific reflection from educational practice. The titles of her works alone show how much scientific and practical educational activities were interconnected.

Maria Grzegorzewska has also earned a name in the world of Polish education as an eminent specialist of the teaching profession and an innovator in the area of teacher training. She considered the model of a teacher-tutor from the perspective of the requirements imposed on the teacher by society and him/herself, and also from the perspective of concrete activities in teacher training. In her reflections on the teacher, she tried to find answers to questions about the value of the teacher as a human being, about the most important features enabling him/her to function effectively and about how these features can be drawn out in the teacher. In the simple and direct words used in her letters to her younger colleagues/teachers, she points to the significance of a teacher's work, for whom the human-being constitutes the ultimate value, and for whom the most important task is serving society. Her description of social service, based on Adam Chmielowski's definition ('the blessed brother Albert'), states that 'man should be like bread to feed everyone'. Such a function may be performed by 'an ethical, social and real human-being'.¹⁵

The ethical human being, according to Maria Grzegorzewska, is a good man or woman, motivated by concern for others, and evoking concern in fellow human-beings by his/her example. Concern and kindness, in turn, are impossible without responsibility. One is responsible for what one cares for. 'The feeling of responsibility is not only a motivation to work but also a determinant of its value'.¹⁶ These views undoubtedly reflect the echo of Jan Wladyslaw Dawid's words about 'the love of human souls'. A teacher should understand that his/her work 'constitutes in reality a great contribution, a great socio-cultural value, for it introduces a man to the world of knowledge'.¹⁷ 'The world and life of a man' may depend upon what kind of teacher one has.¹⁸ Such understanding of the dignity of the profession obliges the teacher to pursue self-education, to develop his/her personality and to acquire knowledge. In the *Letters to a Young Teacher*, Grzegorzewska presents various types of teachers in various situations—both good and bad. The play of opposites illustrates the possibilities for change—for improvement. The routine and boredom resulting from teaching are opposed to the creative teacher who undertakes research work. Education and acquired knowledge, though extremely important, are not the key values in the teacher's work. What is more important and significant is the teacher's attitude towards people, a concern for the child, and creative dynamism that could make the school into a cultural centre. These assumptions form the foundation of training at the Teacher Training Institute founded by Grzegorzewska.

It is impossible to present all the aspects of Maria Grzegorzewska's activities in this profile—she was a social worker, an organizer and a scientist. However, her portrait would be incomplete if we did not mention the way she is remembered by her students and co-workers. For them, she was first of all a good and warm human being, ready to help with a word or a deed whenever necessary. 'The open doors of her study and apartment were symbolic; they would never be closed because, as she said, if someone wanted something of me, it was easier for him just to stand in the door rather than to knock'.¹⁹ In *Letters to a Young Teacher*, directed to those who, after the difficult years of war and occupation, undertook the burden of being teachers, she wrote: '[...] to do something worthy, one has to be internally a person, one has to have one's own life, world, set of beliefs—something to be convinced of and to be of service to'.²⁰ Her life was witness to the truth of these words.

Notes

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