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The Professional Competences of a Contemporary Early-School Teacher

Vocational Competences and Authority of a Contemporary Teacher

As far as the ongoing process of educational changes is taking place, a lot of attention is devoted to the problem of a teacher's competences. The ability to perceive and evaluate one's own pedagogical activities from various perspectives is one of the most significant competences of a contemporary teacher. According to E. Kobyłecka, a pedagogue "should not only be a teacher and an educator, but also a guide, translator, practitioner, research worker as well as a wise, critical, sensitive, reliable, honest, persistent, responsible, caring and tactful person."¹

With reference to vocational education of teachers, a draft of a list of standards of vocational competences was adopted as the basis of preparing them for educational and tutelary functions. A teacher's competences can be described as an individual and taught ability of developmental character, which is a resultant of, for instances, education, personal characteristics, motivation, skills and experience. It is shaped as a result of socialization and adjustment to particular situations, typical for a given environment or institution, while maintaining certain autonomy of an individual. Competences are acquired through continuous education. It is a constant and long-term process. Through one's actions a person influences his/her personality, which is always shaped with respect to given social conditions. It is a complicated process consisting of several stages.

As stated by M. Kazimierowicz, it is necessary for each and every teacher to have:

- diagnostic competences connected with getting to know students and their circle;

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¹ E. Kobyłecka, *Nauczyciel wobec współczesnych zadań edukacyjnych*, Kraków 2005, p. 54.

- competences in the scope of planning and designing as far as drawing up curricula, didactic and educational actions-related plans and programmes as well as planning lessons is concerned;
- communication competences described as knowledge of the process of communication as well as an ability to give and receive communications;
- media-related and technical competences referring to the use of the media in a didactic-educational process;
- competences within the scope of control and evaluation of students' achievements – referred to as competences within the scope of an educational diagnosis;
- competences connected with designing and evaluating curricula and school books;
- interpretation competences in order to give a meaning to everything happening in his/her surroundings;
- realization (performance) competences connected with knowing the rules, methods and means of action, an ability to use them and a readiness to perform tasks;
- innovative competences connected with creative implementation of changes with respect to oneself as well as the processes and effects of work.²

Schools nowadays force teachers to continuously improve their skills and tools. An early-school teacher should be “a creative and an ingenious seeker and researcher. Such teacher should be characterised by sense, diligence and thoroughness.”³ Teachers themselves are the main source of knowledge and skills; yet, regardless of their education, they improve their knowledge systematically and have a variety of competences at their disposal.

As J. Chojnacki notes “a teacher’s individual development, improvement of qualifications, professional training, and, consequently, better effectiveness of teaching are all a significant goal of promotion. Through individual development a teacher changes the entire system of education.”⁴ A change in the system of education is possible if a teacher possesses:

- an ability to organize and improve his/her skills and tools and to evaluate his/her own actions and change them;
- an ability to take into consideration developmental needs of students;
- an ability to use information and communication technology in his/her work.

A teacher’s functions are constantly changing along with educational tasks required from the education system. Changes that took place require us to consider educational and tutelary functions as the most important ones. The basic tasks of first grade teachers should be: helping to discover the purpose and to understand what

² M. Kazimierowicz, *Nauczyciel współczesnej szkoły*, “Nowa Szkoła” 2007, No. 6, p. 11.

³ M. Pleniewicz, A. Jakubowicz-Bryx, *Kompetencje dydaktyczne nauczycieli wczesnej edukacji*, [in:] A. Jakubowicz-Bryx (ed.), *Edukacja wczesnoszkolna i przedszkolna w warunkach przemian początku XXI wieku*, Bydgoszcz 2004, p. 25.

⁴ M. Kazimierowicz, *Nauczyciel...*, op. cit., p. 10.

it means “to be” and “to study” at school, getting to know a child and finding such “area” in which a child feels best with respect to school requirements.⁵

School has not been the only place of acquiring knowledge for a long time. There is no place for teachers to fulfill their traditional role that would guarantee them a central and dominant position during the teaching process, i.e. passing on knowledge and controlling students. Teachers do not have to know everything. Their task is to provide students with basic skills that would let them handle the changing reality. From the perspective of a person being the main source of knowledge and a controller, they should take the position of a learning process and activity organizer. In a student-friendly school teachers are persons supporting educational activity of pupils. They should support students’ development and not relieve them of tasks or always give ready answers and solutions to problems. Far-fetched help is actually directed against a student as his/her ingeniousness and belief in himself/herself is limited. Consequently, a student is taught helplessness and lack of self-dependence.

As far as a contemporary and reorganized school is concerned, a teacher assumes the role of a person:

- organizing the process of learning as well as recognizing and examining the needs, expectations, interests and potential of his/her students;
- combining students’ needs with requirements of a curriculum chosen or written by the teacher;
- creating conditions for learning, searching, discovering, thinking, communicating as well as working and cooperating in a group;
- participating in an emotional exchange between a student, a teacher and a class;
- being a guardian with whose help students can learn in an active and independent way.⁶

The advantage of integrated education should be taking into consideration childrens’ individual needs and interests, encouraging them to think independently and integrate knowledge acquired at school and outside it on their own. According to research, teachers, to a great extent, implement the assumptions of integrated education in a correct way. They understand the idea of such education and design integrated education by using various methodical sources. A student’s work, as well as the results, interest in passed on knowledge and being active within the process of acquiring it become the measure for effectiveness and correctness of the teaching and learning process organized by a teacher. Therefore, one of the primary responsibilities of teachers is to develop, improve and extend their work as well as develop students’ activity. As the research shows, a contemporary early-school teacher can handle this dilemma to a great extent. However, there is always a possibility to aim at more effective actions through self-development, additional training as well as intro-

⁵ A. Gajdzica, *Reforma oświaty a praktyka edukacji wczesnoszkolnej*, Katowice 2006, p. 71-72.

⁶ K. Rau, E. Ziętkiewicz, *Jak aktywizować uczniów*, Poznań 2000, p. 7-8.

ducing new skills acquired through the above mentioned means as far as an everyday didactic-educational process in one's school circle is concerned.⁷

Pedagogical literature comprises various classifications or lists of characteristics a teacher, in particular a teacher teaching and educating children at the start of their school education, should possess. "It is not about what we do with children. It is about who we are. No method of teaching, even the most perfect one, will be sufficient if we are not in peace with ourselves. We are all students and we all learn. Teachers can teach only when they are able to question themselves. The solution to a problem is not better adapted or better equipped classrooms, group division system or new methods and techniques – although they are also of importance. The solution lies in you."⁸ Teachers should be self-aware as well as aware of their imperfections; yet, they should accept themselves. Unfortunately, not every teacher is willing to make the effort to get to know himself/herself: what he/she thinks, feels, needs, what kind of classes he/she organizes and what goals he/she has when it comes to working with children.⁹

Teachers "work with their personality" because when they teach and educate children they base their actions on values, beliefs, strategies of perceiving and solving problems. These are, according to M. Taraszkiewicz, elements of their meta-ability to work with different persons. Apart from these, there are also specific abilities, including technical ones, which constitute particular knowledge and methodological abilities.¹⁰

E. Smak assumes that a teacher's competence is "an ability (readiness) to perform tasks on a suggested level consistent with educational requirements (standards)."¹¹ This leads to a simple conclusion that a teacher should be a qualified person in order to perform the tasks he/she is faced with in a correct way. Apart from key (universal) competences, which are common for all teachers, there are also those that an early-school teacher should have. One should highlight the fact that a 1st-3rd grade teacher-form tutor is a person who plays a special part as he/she is an undisputed authority, not only in school-related matters, for a child.¹² A. Szkolak mentions that lower grade children identify themselves with a teacher and trust him/her unconditionally.¹³ Moreover, he states that the resourceful personality of a teacher is an unforgettable educational role model for a child.¹⁴ This is one of the reasons why a teacher, as an authority for children, should have vast knowledge, i.e. knowledge a person has about the world in general. According to Pearson, as far as teachers working with younger students are concerned, the above mentioned knowledge will be used to

⁷ A. Jakubowicz-Bryx, *Nauczyciel jako organizator procesu edukacyjnego uczniów w kształceniu zintegrowanym – refleksje po 10 latach od wprowadzenia reformy oświaty*, [in:] E. Jaszczyszyn, J. Szada-Borzyszowska (ed.), *Edukacja dziecka. Mity i fakty*, Białystok 2010, p. 138.

⁸ M. Taraszkiewicz, *Jak uczyć lepiej? Czyli refleksyjny praktyk w działaniu*, Warszawa 2002, p. 20.

⁹ E. Misiorna, E. Ziętkiewicz (ed.), *Zintegrowana edukacja w klasach I-III*, Poznań 1999, p. 36.

¹⁰ M. Taraszkiewicz, *Jak uczyć...*, op. cit., p. 21.

¹¹ E. Smak, *Nauczyciele klas początkowych wobec zmian w systemie polskiej oświaty*, [in:] W. Puślecki, S. Włoch, T. Lewowicki (ed.), *Transformacja w polskiej edukacji wczesnoszkolnej*, Kraków 2004, p. 40.

¹² K. Kochan, *Świadomość nauczycielek – wychowawczyń kształcenia zintegrowanego a podejmowane przez nie działania wychowawcze*, [in:] R. Fudali, M. Kowalski (ed.), *Kobieta i mężczyzna w zawodzie nauczycielskim*, Kraków 2006, p. 136.

¹³ A. Szkolak, *Osobowość nauczyciela klas początkowych jako wartość w procesie edukacji*, "Nauczanie Początkowe" 2005/2006, No. 1, p. 62.

¹⁴ A.T. Pearson, *Nauczyciel. Teoria i praktyka w kształceniu nauczycieli*, Warszawa 1994, p. 118.

a smaller extent as compared with working with adults. Nevertheless, this does not release teachers from the obligation to improve it.¹⁵

Optimal teaching should involve the common effort of the teacher and of the pupil directed at the increasingly complex and multi-sided view of the world. The teacher's task, particularly in the Polish lessons, is to make the pupils become active participants in choosing what and how they are going to learn. The tasks confronting academic teachers and further teaching education instructors include providing the teacher candidates with adequate knowledge that will enable them to effectively implement the above-mentioned educational tasks.¹⁶

The Sources of Didactic Competences of Early-School Teachers as Compared with Own Research¹⁷

Out of all the various factors deciding about the quality and effectiveness of any school's operations, a teacher is undoubtedly the most significant one. A teacher plays a special part in the process of education as his/her commitment, skills and competences influence the general level characterising children's readiness for the functioning and ever-changing reality. Apart from methodological preparation for this profession, a teacher is required to have valuable personality and special competences. Working with children requires sensitiveness, feeling and generating empathy with respect to other persons as well as giving attention to each and every pupil. The tasks of integrated education teachers have changed significantly. Apart from teaching they are required to create most favourable conditions for learning and students' development at school. A form tutor should consider all biological, mental and social needs of pupils.

One should highlight the fact that "the process of a child's development is primarily conditioned by its own activities as well as support from family, peer circle and the institutional circle. A child is an active entity getting to know oneself and one's own potential starting from the youngest years. It is characterised by a causative power and a feeling of causation understood as the ability to act efficiently and feel pleased about one's actions in the natural conditions of everyday life, as well as relations with adults and peers. The effectiveness of supporting a child's development is mostly influenced by the persons who matter the most for the child, i.e. persons who participate in its life, provide for its needs, have a strong emotional bond with the child based on intimacy and trust, are a role model and an authority respected by the child when it makes decisions and handles difficult situations. People who matter fill in a child's social space and

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 162.

¹⁶ T. Klośnińska, *Goals Behind Shaping Creative Attitudes in Polish Studies Teacher Training*, [in:] B. Kasacova, K. Luptakova (ed.), *School - Education - Teacher's Education*, Banská Bystrica 2004, p. 65.

¹⁷ Some of these studies are discussed in the article: A. Jakubowicz-Bryx, *The Sources of Didactic Competences of Early-school Teachers*, [in:] S. Bendl, M. Zvířovský (ed.), *Místo vzdělávání v současné společnosti: paradigmatata - ideje - realizace*, Brno 2011, p. 41-46, 1 optical disc (CD-ROM).

include, in most cases, parents, teachers, siblings, other adults, grandparents, cousins, friends, acquaintances. An adult who accompanies a child in its development:

- significantly influences the child's feeling of safety;
- faces the child with challenges relevant to its stage of development;
- encourages the child to undertake actions which, according to the child, are beyond its powers;
- discreetly helps the child to achieve goals which, according to the child, are un-reachable;
- encourages the child to seek/create non-standard means of action;
- is happy with the child about achieved success;
- accompanies the child in moments of small mistakes and big failures;
- takes back his/her help as soon as a child manages on its own and, consequently, strengthens the child's feeling of causation.¹⁸

The advantage of integrated education should be taking into consideration children's individual needs and interests. Can one be sure about practicability of this task in accordance with the foundations of early-school pedagogy? There are ongoing discussions concerning integration, encouraging children to think independently as well integrate knowledge acquired at school and outside it on their own. In order to perform the assumed functions, a teacher should have vast theoretical knowledge which he/she is able to use in practice.

That is why it is of importance to determine the sources teachers use when preparing lessons. The above mentioned issue became the reason for carrying out questionnaire research among early-school teachers which concerned determining materials early-school teachers use. The research concerned early-school teachers working in primary schools in Bydgoszcz, in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Province. It comprised 219 teachers whose length of service varied. The scope of the researched group is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Length of service of researched teachers

Length of service in years	Researched teachers	
	Y	%
1 – 10 years	47	21.5
10 – 20 years	75	34.2
20-30	96	43.8
More than 30 years	1	0.5
Total	219	100

Source: Study of author

Teachers answered questions included in the questionnaire. The answers to these questions were arranged according to the Likert scale, i.e. there were five possible an-

¹⁸ J. Andrzejewska, J. Wierucka, *Razem w przedszkolu. Program wychowania przedszkolnego*, Warszawa 2009, p. 5.

swers to choose from, each of which had a different level of agreement for calculating collective approval rating. The way the answers were classified is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Answering scheme for the questionnaire

Answers	Say	Symbol	Points
a	strongly disagree	--	-2
b	disagree	-	-1
c	neither agree nor disagree	0	0
d	agree	+	1
e	strongly agree	++	2

Source: Study of author

The approval rating (L) for every question is calculated according to the following formula:

$$L = \frac{2n_e + n_d - n_b - 2n_a}{n}$$

where L stands for the approval rating, $n_a \dots n_e$ stand for the number of answers, and n stands for the number of researched persons.

While answering the questions, teachers presented their views to the body of teachers working with 1st-3rd grade. The results of questionnaire research carried out among early-school teachers are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The sources of didactic competences of lower grade teachers

	Sources of competences	Approval rating
1.	What is the source of your current didactic competences?	
	- books on general didactics	0,8
	- books on early-school pedagogy	1,2
	- texts from pedagogy journals	1,0
	- training courses teaching and improving various pedagogical skills, pedagogical and psychological workshops	1,5
	- methodological guidebooks, collections comprising suggested educational works, suggested lesson plans	1,6
	- own teaching experience	2,0
	- lesson observations and exchange of experience with other teachers	1,8
	- working out educational solutions within teacher groups	1,1

2.	Do you use the following publications when preparing lessons?	
	- academic books for a given subject	1,0
	- student's books	1,6
	- books on general didactics	0,7
	- subject didactics materials	1,3
	- I prepare lessons based on my experience and good knowledge of my students	1,9
	- I use compilations of integrated lessons offered by various publishing houses and authors	1,6
	- I prepare projects of integrated subject-oriented units, projects of worksheets for students and school-specific series of instructions myself	1,0

Source: Study of author

Teachers' knowledge and didactic skills are of significant importance as far as early-school education is concerned. As Table 3 above presents, knowledge used by teachers originates from various sources. Persons who filled in the questionnaire indicated that their most frequently used source of didactic competences is their own teaching experience, lesson observations, exchange of experience with other teachers and participating in training courses that teach and improve their pedagogical and psychological skills. The least popular source of knowledge includes books on general didactics. It turns out that few teachers use professional books. Most knowledge is acquired by exchanging experience with fellow teachers.

According to teachers, the main and undisputed source of their competences is their own teaching experience of many years – the approval rating for this particular option is 2.0. The next source of competences is lesson observation and exchange of experience with other teachers, with an approval rate of 1.8. Less popular answers, with a 1.6 and 1.5 approval rating, were methodological guidebooks, educational works, lesson plans as well as training courses teaching and improving various pedagogical skills along with pedagogical and psychological workshops. As stated by the respondents, the least important source of competences consists of books on general didactics (0.8 approval rate) and texts from pedagogy journals. One may draw a conclusion that teachers choose easier solutions by using ready lesson plans printed in academic books and methodological guidebooks.

The question concerning the types of teaching aids used by teachers had a wide variety of answers. According to the results, when preparing themselves for lessons, teacher do not use books on general didactics at all. A small percentage uses academic books for a given subject or subject didactics materials. The most popular answer was that teachers design lessons based on their own experience and good knowledge of their students. A slightly smaller number of respondents uses student's books and compilations of integrated lessons offered by various publishing houses and authors.

Responding teachers do not use books on general didactics and occasionally consult academic books for given subjects or subject didactics materials. They most frequently use student's books and the ability to prepare lessons based on their own experience and good knowledge of their students. Respondents also pointed to compilations of integrated lessons offered by various publishing houses and authors. A high approval rate can also be observed with regard to independent preparation of projects of integrated subject-oriented units, projects of worksheets for students and school-specific series of instructions.

Teachers' task is not only to carry out lessons, take care of children's development or friendly atmosphere, but also to improve the quality of their work. Respondents can pride themselves on very good knowledge of their students and that is why they prepare lessons based on their own experience. The main source of knowledge a teacher uses during lessons is a student's book. Teachers prepare projects of integrated subject-oriented units, projects of worksheets for students and school-specific series of instructions on their own.

Conclusions

A teacher will develop a student and a student's knowledge-oriented attitude if the teacher is a creative and unconventional person. The profession should be a challenge for him/her. However, in order to prepare themselves for such role, teachers should improve their didactic competences. In order to improve the quality of work and effectiveness of teaching, teachers have to look for more efficient solutions and forms of working with students improving the education. They enhance their skills and tools in particular by following instructions given in pedagogical books as well as observing lessons and exchanging experience with other teachers. Respondents can pride themselves on many years of practice so their own experience is the best measure of competences.

In the light of the research, contemporary early-school teachers appear to be people who understand their role in the educational process. They can create conditions favourable to generating trust and friendly atmosphere which offers development and generates activity and creativity. They are very well aware of the fact that they are not only a child's activity organizers, initiators of common activities and coordinators of various educational strategies, but also a child's guides and educators. A considerable majority of the researched group of teachers can plan organization of an educational process within various areas of student activity.

Responding teachers are aware of the role they should and actually play in creating and improving their students' active cognitive attitude. Educational transformation was placed in teachers' hands, whose vocational skills, knowledge about life, understanding of world problems, willingness to self-improve and emotional involvement in performed work play a key role. Only a teacher who guides a child through various paths, adequate to his/her personal resources, reasons and expectations, can contribute to a student's full development.

An alarming matter, quite common among teachers teaching lower grades of primary school, is a trusting attitude towards ready plans of integrated lessons offered by various publishing houses and introducing them without any changes. It is obvious that every teacher works with a different class and in a different environment. Consequently, the suggested methods and forms of activity may not always have good results, as they will not suit children's potential.

An analysis of the gathered research materials does not represent all integrated education teachers; yet, based on conclusions stemming from the obtained materials one may present a list of requirements and suggestions:

1. Appropriate education of candidates for teachers.
2. Additional training offered to professionally active teachers. Reminding, informing about guidelines described in the educational reform. One should pay special attention to:
 - improving competences and developing them constantly;
 - broadening the scope of teachers' practical training;
 - enriching knowledge with planning skills, taking advantage of an educational project, stimulating students, "creating a united reality";
 - shaping a teacher's/form tutor's personality;
 - introducing teachers to educational strategies presented in works written by early-school teachers;
 - encouraging them to read publications concerning general and subject didactics, relevant journals, etc.;
3. One should stimulate teacher groups to exchange experiences in a creative way and include them in practice.
4. Pedagogisation of parents is also necessary.

One should hope that this paper will lead to reflections on the introduced educational reform and teachers' opinion about it and that it will serve teachers as a self-assessment tool and a way to make them realise that the reform's success depends on them to a considerable extent.

Early-school education concerns the period when a child is on a developmental path from childhood to the beginning of growing up. Teachers are of goodwill, they increase their knowledge and put a lot of work into educating children; however, it is not them who decide about the success or failure of the reform introduced years ago. As it turns out, teachers do not have full influence on what is going on at school and, according to specifications of integrated education, it should be them who organize a child's work and activity. The times we live in are times of great changes in our country and maybe one day we will live to see that an educational reform can be considered a success, advantageous not only for students, but also for teachers. One should attach importance to teacher candidates acquiring proper education and, later on, continuing didactic development.

The primary goal of integrated education is to support a child in its comprehensive physical, mental, aesthetic, emotional and spiritual development so that it is prepared, within its own potential, to live with other persons, nature and oneself in peace. The scope of goals includes the sum of educational influences conditioning: presenting and acquiring knowledge, experiencing moments in various aspects of one's life, developing a child's imagination and creativity. Teachers fulfilling the above mentioned goals should rely on principles, i.e. making satisfying natural curiosity of the world available to children possible, organizing children's meeting with reality, providing children with opportunities to get astonished, securing children's feeling of safety and freedom as well as designing didactic situations in a daring and ingenious way.

"Our education is a garden only sometimes. Merely sometimes. There are many gardeners and each of them looks after his/her patch. There are harmonious, compact and useful patches as well as patches that ridicule their owners. The right type of garden consists of several levels of the said feature and is a sort of a whole which cannot be divided. In order to treat education like a garden one should, above all, understand the world one lives in and define one's task in this world in a specific way. One should be fully aware of sown seeds, soil on which they fall and the expected advantages. It cannot be random activity. One should have a strong feeling of one's identity, and this seems to be what current school gardeners are lacking."¹⁹

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¹⁹ A. Nalaskowski, *Niepokój o szkołę*, Kraków 1995, p. 173.

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The Professional Competences of a Contemporary Early-School Teacher

Keywords: *early-school education, didactic competences*

Abstract: *Teachers have to be able to adapt their skills and tools to the newest pedagogical tendencies, goals, assumptions and educational standards in an efficient and effective way. The article is about sources of didactic competences of early-school teachers. It presents results of empirical research in which teachers answered, through questionnaires, question concerning their current sources of theoretical knowledge and practical skills when working with students of lower grades.*

Zawodowe kompetencje współczesnego nauczyciela edukacji wczesnoszkolnej

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja wczesnoszkolna, kompetencje dydaktyczne

Streszczenie: Nauczyciele muszą umieć umiejętnie i skutecznie dostosowywać własny warsztat pracy do najnowszych tendencji pedagogicznych, celów, założeń i standardów edukacyjnych. Artykuł dotyczy źródeł kompetencji dydaktycznych nauczycieli edukacji wczesnoszkolnej. Przedstawiono w nim wyniki badań empirycznych. Nauczyciele w badaniach ankietowych wypowiedzieli się na temat tego, jakie są obecne źródła ich wiedzy teoretycznej i umiejętności praktycznych w pracy z uczniami klas niższych.