

Nowak J.: *Preprimary teacher's competences for effective education*, W: Kosacova B. (red.) *Teachers in theory practice and research*, Banska Bystrica 2010, s. 163-170, ISBN 978-80-557-0036-6.

dr Jolanta Nowak

UKW Bydgoszcz

PREPRIMARY TEACHER'S COMPETENCES FOR EFFECTIVE EDUCATION

Abstract

Modern thinking about education creates a different image of a teacher as far as his/her relations with pupils are concerned. The role of a teacher is to support a child and create an environment in which a child's personal potential can be fully developed in accordance with his/her needs and abilities. Being a significant person in a child's life a teacher should be creative, reflective and competent. Competence is the basis for fulfilling educational duties, i.e. supporting a child in the accomplishment of developmental activities. In 2009 research including a questionnaire was done. Its purpose was to find out what teachers working at a kindergarten, students of pedagogics majoring in kindergarten education and parents of children attending a kindergarten think about the competence of a contemporary kindergarten teacher.

Key words: *kindergarten teacher, competence.*

1. A teacher – a person aided by knowledge and experience

Terms of concern for a child and its childhood are manifested through education, i.e. creating conditions that will support a child in its development through equipping the child in instruments meant for coming to know and understanding oneself and the world, as well as a creative adaptation within the changing reality. The above terms of concern also include providing a child with a material in the form of a physical and social environment that is rich in stimuli. A place especially designed for this purpose and for educating a young child is a kindergarten - a peculiar micro world created for and by children, situated in the macro world of everyday social-cultural matters. The task of this institution is not only to provide children with a sense of safety, acceptance and constancy, but also to create an environment in which personal developmental tasks may be performed freely and in accordance with an individual potential, needs and abilities. The guides in the public environment of a kindergarten are adults who were prepared for this role in an appropriate way – teachers. Their pass to working with young children consists of adequate qualifications, including technical and educational knowledge, skills expressed by an ability to transform pedagogical theory into action and, above all, characteristic individual predispositions that form a cohesive system of values and

principles. It is a teacher's system of individual features that forms a catalyst for pedagogical thinking and actions. Preferring some values over others, the way a teacher perceives her-/himself, as well as the attitude towards pupils and the society show a teacher's predisposition to perform this profession.

The profession of a kindergarten teacher may be defined in the most comprehensive way through a set of functions and tasks it involves, i.e.: (1) taking up guardian-, diagnostic-, socialising- and rehabilitation-related actions; (2) organising forms of education as well as supporting the individual development and social activities; (3) teaching children and organising the process of learning through various cognitive and practical activities; (4) supporting the pupils as far as forming plans, and educational as well as life plans is concerned; (5) cooperating with the pupils' families, the local environment and parallel education institutions, entering into conversations about the child along with its rights and obligations, determining a common manner of a didactic-educational influence; (6) supervising and evaluating the changes taking place in children's behaviour not only in the instrumental, but also in the guiding sphere, analysing failures and difficulties in the didactic and educational sphere, cooperating with all subjects of education in order to overcome them; (7) organising one's own work and undertaking activity that is to improve one's qualifications, planning one's own occupational development (see Banach, 2001: 51-52).

The great number, diversity and a peculiar character of tasks a teacher working with young children is faced with often make us refer to this profession in terms of 'a mission'. Without a doubt a pedagogue's professionalism is more than just knowledge and skills aided by a set of desired psychophysical traits because every task named above requires integrated qualifications. As S.M. Kwiatkowski (2008: 28) notes, competences are qualifications enriched with vocational and life experiences that enable being effective as far as fulfilling the tasks one has been entrusted with is concerned. Unlike vocational qualifications obtained by a teacher at a school of higher education, competences are obtained while performing everyday activities, through creating a good-quality educational micro system. They are complex skills of a higher level (Denek, 2005: 219) the confirmation of which are subsequent levels of promotion. Therefore, unlike qualifications, competences cannot be presented through statistics. Their inner dynamics is a derivative of a perpetual evolution a teacher undergoes as a person and as a pedagogue - an evolution that takes place due to open and unique educational situations that are subject to changes - and entering into interpersonal relations that differ as far as their form, content and extent are concerned.

The development of competences takes place along with achieving further stages of vocational development: starting from copying ready-made methodological patterns, through consideration and critical reflection on the presented solutions, and then interpreting and evaluating one's own actions in the context of existing abilities and possessed methodological knowledge, intellectual autonomy, building one's own idea of the educational reality while taking into consideration not only personal, but also material and organisational matters. The direction and pace of changes both set out theoretical and praxiological questions faced by a kindergarten teacher during everyday contacts with pupils and the questions that are formed by other participants of the educational dialogue. Looking for an answer in the scope of theory and pedagogical practice is a way towards creating one's competences. With regard to a complementary character of both spheres one may distinguish theoretical and practical competences of a school teacher. The first one is expressed through 'building tolerance/intolerance, acquiring critical knowledge and making critical opinions about one's own experiences with respect to statements created by pedagogics'. The second one emerges 'in providing actions with general meanings, placing them at a level of generality and reflections' (Waloszek, 2006: 81). Consequently, according to the above, such competences are not an acquired skill. Instead, they have to be obtained through learning which continues throughout a teacher's educational activity. What is important is that due to their subjectless character it is possible to transfer the competences a person has onto other fields of pedagogical penetration. This allows new challenges to be taken up and hope for a success to emerge (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2006: 129). One may say then that developing and shaping competences has fallen to the lot of theoretically and practically oriented teachers, and that it takes place during a subjective process of experiencing the educational future and its creative reorganisation.

At this point it is worth posing a question concerning the competences that are required from a contemporary kindergarten teacher. It only seems to be an easy question. However, it is difficult to give an ambiguous and comprehensive answer. An analysis of pedagogical papers indicates that the typology of a teacher's competences is highly diversified. It depends on the adopted description perspective. When looking at competences from the psychological point of view our attention focuses on a teacher's individual features, his/her cognitive style or an attitude towards his/her pupils because, as H. Kwiatkowska (2005: 72) notes, 'with reference to the profession of a teacher, unlike any other profession as far as the extent is concerned, it is difficult to separate individual features that present a teacher as a human from the vocational matters that present a teacher as a representative of

this profession. It happens that the way a teacher is, as far as his/her profession is concerned, 'feeds' on the kind of person the teacher is'. Rich personality is without a doubt a significant attribute of a pedagogue, yet it does not settle about his/her pedagogic talent. It requires knowledge and an ability to share the knowledge with others, an easiness to enter into close and authentic relations, as well as efficiency in organising a space suitable for performing guardian, educational and didactic tasks. The above aspects constitute a pedagogic context for determining a teacher's competences. The most frequently mentioned competences are as follows: instrumental (didactic, communication, organisation), autonomous (interpretative) competences and competences strengthening a student's potential (autocreative, transpositional) (Dylak, 1995); technical and psychological competences (Puślecki, 1998); praxiological, cooperation, creative and IT-related competences (Denek, 1998); historical-epistemological, methodological and philosophical competences (Waloszek, 2006). In the end, speaking of competences that are required from a teacher, one should bear in mind that the competences are a derivative of a philosophical orientation that was adopted and a specified educational ideology.

With respect to a kindergarten teacher, competences establish the area of an adult's responsibility towards a child and determine the quality of a child's childhood. They are 'a characteristic feature of a human being which is expressed through demonstrating, at a level of skills set out by standards, an adequate behaviour, an awareness connected with the need and consequences of such behaviour, as well as taking responsibility for one's own actions' (Dudzikowa, 1994: 206). Examined in terms of abilities and skills they are the basis for fulfilling the educational duty, i.e. supporting the natural line of a child's development.

A teacher-pedagogue who is working with a young child should, above all, be able to look through a child's eyes at the surrounding reality. Trying to understand the way a child thinks and how it forms its beliefs allows the process of teaching-learning to be attributed a character of an intersubjective exchange. Due to reconstructing a child's point of view an adult may in a conscious and systematic way support a child's intellectual effort and exploring activity. A condition for the above cooperation and exchange of thoughts is good communication, understood not only as verbal communication, but also as an ability to pass and receive extra-verbal messages, as well as listening and understanding the content of a message and the addressee's intentions. Entering into an educational dialogue requires a teacher to be tactful and understanding with respect to his/her less experienced partners in conversation.

Concern for a social-cultural context of a discourse implies that the way of perceiving the environment, which is favourable as far as gaining social experience is concerned, is different. Creating 'a community of learners', where a teacher gives up on the role of a mentor in favour of the role of a guide, a facilitator and an advisor, where children stop being pure statistics and actively take part in the teaching-learning process, constitutes a considerable challenge for a pedagogue. It requires an adequate educational area being arranged, various materials and didactic facilities being rendered, as well as different planning and organisation of the educational process being done. Good technical and methodological preparation will allow a teacher to choose the right methods and forms of work that will release children's cognitive curiosity, stimulate versatile activity, provoke them to think and act creatively. What is more, a teacher will consciously generate educational situations in which pupils will be able to solve problematic tasks in pairs or in teams by entering into relations with each other – relations based on cooperation. The knowledge of procedures and psychological predispositions connected with building structures of knowledge will allow a teacher to look at the process of learning in a different way and use the relations between children to initiate peer tutoring. Creating conditions that are favourable to mutual teaching will let children develop an understanding of the world and of themselves and form relations with others in an active way.

One of the factors determining such interactive exchange is a feeling of strong connection in a group which is based on respect, mutual help and a sense of belonging to a given community. It is a teacher's responsibility to provide students with a sense of safety, to trust them and support them on their way to independence as well as discover their strong and weak points. Planning support requires skilful usage of monitoring and diagnostic methods and techniques. Determining the current level of children's knowledge, skills and social-emotional behaviours presented by them will enable setting new horizons of cognition comprised in a sphere of the closest development and prepare an educational offer in an adequate way.

Introduction into the world of socially accepted rules and norms of behaviour requires a pedagogue to possess the ability of carrying out democratic negotiations with other participants of the educational process in respect of rights, obligations and rules of functioning within the public sphere of a kindergarten. The only limitation is respecting freedom of other persons. Restraining oneself from violating one's freedom means that a young person is accepted as an autonomous individual who has his/her own identity, a right to decide about oneself, take responsibility for undertaken actions and self-control. A subjective

approach towards a young child's education is characterised through taking into consideration autogenous objectives resulting from individual needs and interests of pupils, gradual process of passing on responsibility onto children for planning their own work, giving them freedom to decide about the time, place and pace of task completion, as well as choosing persons who will participate in activities.

As it appears from the above mentioned considerations, being a kindergarten teacher involves complex individual predispositions, practical wisdom and experience indispensable when meeting another person. However, as R.I. Arends (1994: 36) notes, 'a friendly attitude towards children or fondness of them is not enough for a tomorrow's teacher. Teachers of the twenty first century will be required to possess extensive knowledge: objective, pedagogical, social and cultural knowledge. They will be forced to become reflective and creative professionals'.

2. Competences of a kindergarten teacher in the light of empirical research

A survey was carried out in 2009 in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Province. The purpose of the survey was to determine which competences a contemporary kindergarten teacher should possess. The persons whose opinion was sought after included teachers/pedagogues working with young children, students of pedagogy majoring in kindergarten education and parents of children attending kindergartens. The analysis was based on empirical data collected through survey forms filled out by 142 respondents including 40 teachers, 60 students and 42 parents. The diagnostic tool, constructed specifically for the research, comprised 5 categories of competences. They were as follows: praxiological, communication, cooperation, creative and IT-related competences. Each and every of the above competences was described in detail by presenting some skills a kindergarten teacher should possess. The respondents' task was to describe, on a scale from 1 to 5, the usefulness of a given skill in fulfilling teacher-related duties.

The material that had been gathered was subjected to a quantitative-qualitative analysis, which gave reasons for implementing generalising opinions with reference to diagnostics and conclusions bearing a message for educational theory and practice. The division of obtained results is presented in figure 1.

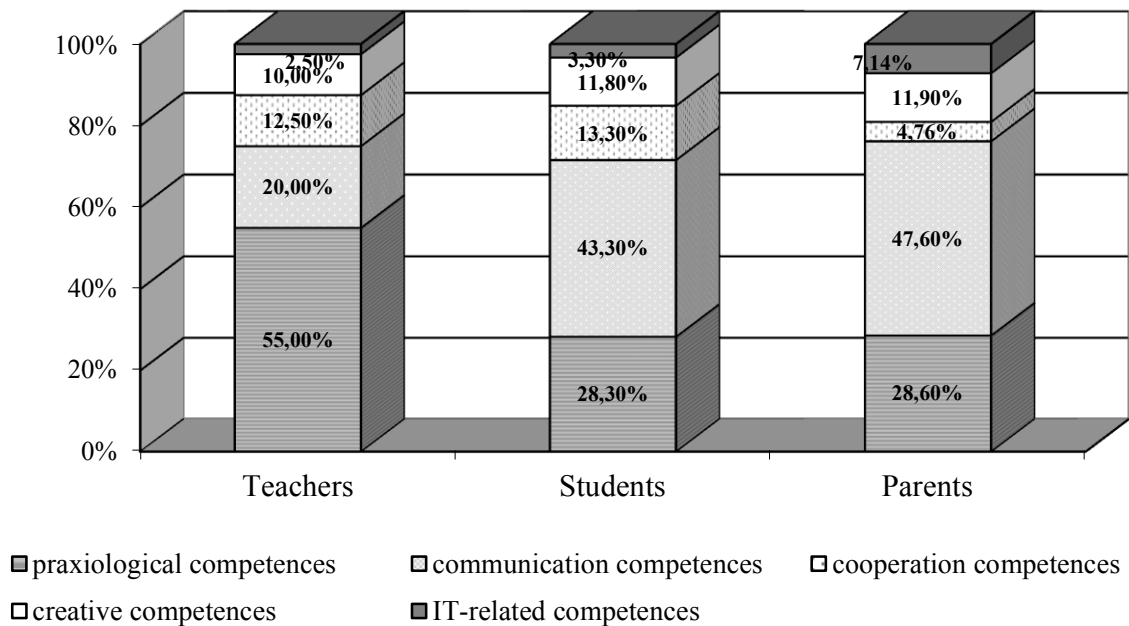


Figure 1. Competences of a contemporary kindergarten teacher as perceived by teachers, students and parents

According to calculations, the competences most valued by teachers (55 percent of respondents) are praxiological competences defined by effectiveness in planning, organising, implementing and evaluating an educational process. Among skills particularly desired when working with a young child teachers pointed to the following ones: differentiating methods and forms of work, adjusting tasks to a child's abilities and needs, evaluating a child's achievements in context of an individual plan of development, an analysis of one's own work effectiveness and an auto-evaluation. A similar opinion was expressed by 28.30 percent of students of pedagogy and 28.60 percent of parents of children subject to kindergarten education. Apart from the skills that were mentioned above they also chose: planning work with children on the basis of curriculum and effective use of lesson time. What is interesting, every respondent placed the ability of constructing one's own educational program at one of the last spots.

Candidates for future teachers and parents stated that among pedagogical competences the most important ones are communication competences. Such answer was given by 43.30 percent of students and 47.60 percent of parents. According to parents, teachers should be able to identify the emotional state their pupils are in, as well as communicate their feelings and sensations in a clear way, at the same time encouraging children to express their emotions. Next, both parents and students pointed out an ability to enter into a conversation with a child, using correct vocabulary, understandable for the young receiver, as well as being able to listen to pupils and understand their intentions. It is striking why only 20 percent of

questioned teachers considered verbal and nonverbal behaviours in educational situations of primary importance. Could it be that implementing schemes of pedagogical actions dominated the sphere of personal relations in a kindergarten? The opinions that were collected clearly show that education is perceived by teachers-practitioners and parents from a different perspective. While teachers relate to the process of teaching in terms of a set of procedures that are followed in order to meet the kindergarten requirements described in the core curriculum, and lose a child from their range of vision, parents expect their children to be partners with full rights in the educational dialogue. It is worth noticing that pedagogy students also appreciate the value of communication during the process of teaching. It would be good if they did not change their opinion about it even when their role of a student changes into a role of a teacher.

The next position on the list of competences a kindergarten teacher should possess is an ability to cooperate with all entities involved in the process of education of a young child. The above skill was chosen by 13.30 percent of students, 12.50 percent of questioned teachers and only 4.76 percent of parents. All three groups emphasised skilful cooperation with parents in order to draft mutual actions that will support a child in completing developmental tasks. Additionally, teachers paid attention to an ability of creating the right atmosphere and favourable conditions to pursue social learning and educating through participation in a community. It was vital for them to encourage children to cooperation, and not only competition. According to students, a teacher possessing cooperation competences is able to solve conflict situations that take place in a kindergarten group through negotiations and a compromise, not compulsion.

As it appears from an analysis of collected empirical data, a small number of respondents appreciated the importance and meaning of creative competences of a teacher. Such opinion was expressed by only 10 percent of members of groups included in the survey. Yet, freeing oneself from a process of thinking that follows a scheme and from standard procedures for the benefit of creating potential possibilities and alternative solutions is the challenge these days offer – a challenge directed not only towards teachers, but also towards a child. It is the respondents' point of view that in everyday education creative behaviour should be manifested through an ability to currently adjust methods and forms of work to the changing pedagogic situation resulting from the dynamics of a functioning community of children and a number of conditions influencing the organisation and course of teaching. Only a small number of persons who filled out the survey paid attention to an ability of coming up with one's own ideas meant to create and enrich an educational offer. When it comes to

parents an ability of solving education problems in an effective and non-standard way is of great importance to them. Consequently, a question emerges: how should 'a non-standard way of solving problems' be understood in this context? Unfortunately, a limited scope of the research did not allow this question to be answered. It is inspiring that each and every respondent looks for signs of creativity not only when it comes to a teacher, but also with reference to a child's behaviour. Hence, it is highly desirable that a teacher is able to provoke pupils to be independent in taking up initiatives, responsible as well as creative and critical when it comes to thinking.

IT-related competences were the least frequently chosen competences of all. Only single persons from each group pointed out that efficient use of information technology is useful when working with a young child. This is even more surprising as the contemporary world is 'media-oriented', i.e. information-communication media dominate in the social-cultural environment. A natural requirement of current times is preparing a young child for existence in this new reality where information technology is the main source of self-development.

The direction of changes in the field of education, as well as results of the survey research that was carried out, indicate that it is difficult to describe competences of a contemporary teacher of a young child in an explicit and precise way. It is worth consideration whether it is necessary at all to describe a teacher's competences in a detailed way as the great number of requirements may lead to the imagine of a teacher-pedagogue being unreal. For this reason let the measure of a teacher's competences be tact and understanding of a young person because, as Z. Kwieciński (1998: 65) points out, 'a pedagogue protects a child's space through tact. The pedagogue protects what is endangered, prevents pain, unites what is divided, strengthens what is good, emphasizes what is unique, supports a development of a person and a child's ability to learn'. Unconditional acceptance of a young person and emphatic understanding, on the other hand, enable creating a space of freedom, indispensable for creating personal and social identity, which is in agreement with the world and one-self.

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Dr Jolanta Nowak

Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz

Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology

Poland

e-mail: nowakjolanta@wp.pl