

PEDAGOGICAL EXCELLENCE IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TEACHER – RESEARCH SUMMARY

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ABSTRACT

In the given article I deal with the problem strictly connected to depicting a master in an occupation of an early stage teacher. The fundamental assumption here is that gaining and developing certain professional teaching competences is equal to the prospective occupational development of a teacher, who, on the other hand, is depicted by his career. And this is the way to their pedagogical mastery. The matter I deal with became the starting point to the empirical researches run in both rural and urban environments. 529 teachers, whose professionalism was evaluated on the basis of their self-esteem, and assessed by 101 school directors and also the assessment run by methodological advisors with the reports on evaluation, took part in this research. The results of this empirical documentation constitute the basis for the quantity and quality analysis of the index determining the level of the given pedagogical competences and their factors, on the basis of which it was possible to formulate the picture of an early stage teacher- the master in their occupation.

Key words: pedagogical mastery, the early childhood education teachers, pedagogical competences, pedagogics, education

INTRODUCTION

Mastering the skills of an early childhood education teacher represents the core of my scientific interest expressed in the following questions: At which point in the teaching career can we talk about the teacher's pedagogical excellence? What is its essence and character? What path leads towards the teacher's professional excellence?

Sketching the portrait of the master- teacher of early education has thus become the objective of my research. Reflections based on common sense and life in the world, always somehow limited and incidental, may be supported by professional reflection and research. Reflections on the teacher's excellence and conditions related thereto have always accompanied the academic research in the field of the teaching profession. However, relatively recently some field

research has been conducted within the discipline of pedeutology. Such research addresses the question of what the perfect teacher should be like, also in the opinion of others who belong to the teaching environment. It focuses on the skills and abilities of the master teacher, who is always looked up to with admiration and whom teachers starting their career want to follow so much.

The readers of the present article are encouraged to refer to the book entitled *Mistrzostwo zawodowe nauczycieli wczesnej edukacji. Istota, treść, uwarunkowania*, in which the comprehensive theoretical and empirical considerations on this subject are presented (Szkolak, 2013).

PEDAGOGICAL EXCELLENCE –THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Excellence is a praxeological and ethical value. In the teaching profession, both values manifest themselves in educational activities directed towards what is most precious and delicate in the world, namely towards the child. This kind of excellence is similar to the one aimed at by artists and craftsmen from Antwerp grinding diamonds. Professional excellence, or at least the desire for it and perseverance to move towards it, is an indispensable aspect of professional ethics of teachers, while ignorance and mediocrity are the key features which exclude potential teachers from this profession.

Excellence is an aesthetic value since education since time immemorial has been referred to as an art rather than craft or science. Thus the person who educates others creates beauty and good. The one who consciously and skillfully seeks a designated and accepted objective is also a master in the creation of beauty.

Excellence is also a humanistic value. If work understood as a conscious and purposeful activity is the sole attribute of the man and an element that constitutes his humanity, then work excellence is its affirmation and helps to reach the heights of humanism. Work excellence is a source of human dignity and a determinant of freedom. The freedom which is founded on professional competence defines a particularly wide area of human skills and abilities associated with taking conscious, good and responsible decisions.

The teacher's excellence has, of course, its didactic aspect in that it optimizes the chances of development of students in the areas of the teacher's competence and responsibility. Additionally, it also has an educational aspect being in itself the best inspiration and the best model of excellence in general. It is the model of integrity, responsibility and commitment to the work frequently awarded with good results, recognition of others and teacher's own satisfaction. Competence, reliability and joyful seriousness in the teacher's approach to their professional duties seem to be in the process of modeling something irresistibly suggestive, particularly in relation to students in younger school age, who form their relations with the teacher based on unique fascination with and unconditional recognition of the teacher's authority.

Life-long learning as an integral part of the teaching profession is a key element in the process of reaching professional excellence – starting from the beginner teacher who has a limited pedagogical competence through the efficient teacher who has developed his or her pedagogical skills and uses them daily in the educational process and to the master teacher. Who is the master teacher?

The word master has had different meanings including a craftsman with a diploma, a foreman, a teacher - master in the ancient times, an academic degree in medieval Poland, higher than the degree of bachelor, and also a person with serious artistic achievements, a world record holder in some sports discipline, a man of great authority, and an outstanding teacher.

Kazimierz Czarnecki (1985, p. 193) draws attention to the fact that the master in a given profession holds not only a certain level of general education and professional qualification but mostly the highest level of professional knowledge and skills. A master in the profession means “the quality of the man and his work”.

It is worth quoting the definition provided by Tadeusz Kotarbinski according to which “a master of some skills is the one who has reached the efficiency higher than the overall efficiency achieved by that time by anyone else. A grandmaster is a person who at the same time works creatively at a great, extraordinary, and crucial scale” (Szewczyk, 1995, p. 208).

On the other hand, Julian Radziewicz (1996, p. 28) states: “... a person who leads others is a guide. Anyone who is a model is first of all an authority. Anyone who cooperates may become a partner. Anyone who teaches effectively is simply a master. And the one who loves, likes and respects others is primarily a real and ordinary person – a person who is a guide, authority, partner, master”. Thus a master is firstly a man and his activity is referred to as excellence, the highest degree of proficiency in the performance of an activity.

According to the Dictionary of the Polish Language a master (from Czech mistr) is “an excellent person, surpassing others with his skills, ability, and proficiency” but also “a person worthy of following, considered by others as a model, a guide in any field; a teacher” (Dubisz, 2008, p. 677).

And last but not least, the term excellence in Polish (*mistrzostwo*) originates from the German word *meister*, which in turn comes from the Latin *magister*. As a professional title, in a formal sense, it was closely associated with teachers for several decades. It is high time that this increasingly banal title added to the teacher’s surname restored its original meaning, former glory and dignity for the benefit of each teacher, pupil and the public. *Noblesse oblige!*

The fact that excellence in the teaching profession cannot be clearly defined was discussed as early as in the 1930s by Stefan Szuman (1959, p. 89) who wrote that “true teaching talents must have and maintain their own style (...) each person has a certain character, a specific quality, not only of a distinct structure and constitution but also of a peculiar style, expression, and relationship with the world. Each person has their own microcosm, other than all the other selves”.

Nevertheless, many educators have long been trying to define the concept of pedagogical excellence. Jan Legowicz (1975, p. 65) claims that a teacher wishing to be called perfect should have above all excellent theoretical and practical preparation for work, but also broad knowledge, skills other than those related to his profession as well as scientific, social and cultural interests.

In an interesting work on the proper upbringing and education, Jarosław Rudniański (1978, pp. 16-17) writes about specific qualifications required for the efficient performance of an extremely difficult teaching profession and qualifications that cannot be obtained either in school or in higher education institutions or during any specialist courses. The teacher has to obtain them himself. These do not refer to the qualifications concerning teaching skills or a given intellectual level concerning knowledge in various fields. They are not also connected with a certain cultural level. Rather "it is one's own deeply sensed faith in man, in the existence of good in oneself and in others. Only a man with such faith can properly educate children entrusted to his care so as they are not hurt and broken and they become human in the full sense of the word. Only such a person can be called a teacher" (Rudniański, 1978, pp. 16-17). The above-mentioned qualification is the defining characteristic of teaching masters.

The views of teachers-practitioners on pedagogical excellence should also be presented as it is them who in their work strive for achieving the state of excellence. Józef Galant (1993, p. 200) claims that teaching excellence is "a distinctive, high-level, outstanding work in the field of teaching or education (...) the process of coming closer to something perfect". It follows that one cannot be a master in its entirety, in all aspects of human activity, as excellence relates to a certain field, skills or several related fields. Understanding excellence as a process of reaching perfection, not as something finite which can no longer be improved, promotes the teacher's self-development and life-long learning thus stimulating progress in pedagogical work. The author believes that "understanding excellence as the process of approaching perfection prevents vanity and promotes modesty. A true master is always modest, sees and understands shortcomings in his work or educational activities. A true master often has doubts (...). The better master one is the less convinced one is of being a master because he understands that he has not seized all his opportunities. In ancient times Socrates was such a master who doubted his perfection and would say »I know that I know nothing«". J. Galant presents an interesting theory about pedagogical excellence, highlighting its three types. The first one is the so-called lower-level excellence, imitative excellence. It depends on the activities based on the existing patterns and attempts to become a master, for instance by implementing excellent ideas and methods of the pedagogy of heart applied by Janusz Korczak in his orphanages. The second type is the excellence based on introducing recognized, proven measures to the teacher's own work, at the same time modifying and enriching them with the teacher's own ideas. Some recognized methods may include those introduced by Czesław Kupisiewicz and Władysław Okoń which focus on problem solving techniques in combina-

tion with teacher's own original ways of introducing students to an independent perception and formulation of problems. An original notion of perfection was presented Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. He stated that perfection was the measure of heaven whereas the pursuit of excellence was the measure of the man. The man is therefore left with a desire to achieve perfection. However, he not only desires it but also works towards it. His theoretical and practical activities aim at changing and transforming the reality. In these activities, he generates better forms and methods, uses master patterns, implements his own creative ideas and gets closer to perfection. Excellence of the highest level takes place when the teacher uses his own innovative ideas and through them achieves outstanding teaching and educating results through, for instance, the creation of his own computer program and using it successfully in the classroom (Galant, 1993, pp. 200- 201).

Antonina Gurycka (1996, p. 3) in her article entitled *Idea szkoły mistrzów i uczniów* claimsthat an essential feature of schools is expressed in the fact that "there is always the master and the student in a school. Sometimes there are many masters and many students, sometimes there is one master and many students". According to the author, the master is a teacher who can see, listen, understand, and discreetly help the student. It is a teacher who can be a model and a bearer of truth, who can help students become open-minded, motivate them to develop themselves, understand and explore the world. The author believes that all teachers in a school can be masters in the field of knowledge covered by the individual subjects across the curriculum, however, a special role is played by class teachers whom she calls Masters of Life (Gurycka, 1996, pp. 3-5).

The teacher is also a master artist because excellence is characterized with artistry. "Just like an artist who shapes, in a creative manner, a specific material, overcoming its resistance, the teacher proceeds with his own material, a single student or a group of students or a school class, overcoming resistance from pupils" (Okoń, 2003, p. 412).

In one of the local newspapers in the Świętokrzyskie Province (the area where the present study was conducted) an interview with a teacher - practitioner working for more than 20 years in a Youth Socioterapy Centre, father of four children, was published. The man was a successful pedagogue. Every year, thanks to his hard work, a detention order is lifted by the court for some residents of the Centre. Former residents express their appreciation for their teacher thanks to whom they could return to normal life, making him aware that for them he is a great and only authority. The teacher claims that the key to success is the rule of thumb which he formulates as follows: "the word persistence should be written on the school's building. That's the key word". He is a perfect example of the Master of Life (Szkolak, 2011, p. 267).

Numerous English works also deal with the issue of excellency in the teaching profession. In 1991, the foundation called the English National Commission on Education was founded by Paul Hamlyn. The aim of the commission was to identify and examine major problems that education and training would face

in the next 25 years. The final report of the National Commission on Education presents a vision of the teacher - master of the 21st century: "In our vision for the twenty-first century the teacher will be an authority and an enthusiast of knowledge, ideas, skills, understanding and values to be presented to students. The teacher will be an expert in the field of effective learning, with the knowledge of many classroom teaching methods, which can be used in an intelligent way and showing understanding of the respective styles of the organization and management of existing conditions and available resources. The teacher will be there to motivate and encourage each student, jointly and separately, to evaluate their progress and learning needs in the broadest sense of the word, even when it requires entering into the realm outside the field of formal education. The teacher will be primarily an educator, not only teaching a given subject, but also striving to expand the ability of students related to their intellect, imagination, ability to inquire and to be critical and to encourage them to examine their personal and social values" (Learning to Succeed: Report of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 1993, p. 197).

Geert Kelchtermans (1993, pp. 443-456) discovered six components of professional essence of being a teacher among primary school teachers in Belgium, namely: self-image, self-esteem, professional motivation, job satisfaction, perception of professional tasks and prospects for the future.

In contrast, American studies have identified seven issues defining the professionalism of teachers: willingness to work voluntarily, effective communication, personal satisfaction from teaching, relationships with colleagues, satisfaction from the success of individual students, understanding their perspective and learning through reflection on practice teaching (Nelson, 1993).

In foreign literature, the notion of professionalism appears as a counterpart of excellence in the profession. Christopher Day (2004) notes that the changes that have taken place over the last twenty-five years have undermined the professional autonomy of teachers and highlighted the problem of their professionalism. The author focuses on the analysis of the concept of professionalism in the context of new responsibility of the teachers and the relationship between this new situation and moral goals of teaching. According to Ch. Day, teachers usually claim to be professionals. This statement includes the conviction that the process of vocational education of teachers leads to gaining professional knowledge of an expert in the field of the subject taught as well as the belief that their position gives them a certain degree of autonomy.

Excellence finally results in an effective resolution of a variety of pedagogical tasks and in a well-organized educational process, but above all in the teacher's personality which facilitates effective pedagogical activity. In order to reflectively direct the development of the students the teacher must learn how to lead himself.

Summing up the ideas of many well-known educators around the world researching the issue of excellence in the teaching profession, a master in the teaching profession is a person who has all the required professional competence at the highest level of professional development.

STRIVING FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE

Striving for reaching excellence is another issue worth analyzing. Jan Legowicz (1975) points to the importance of the process of teachers self-development and refers to it as the process of making oneself a master. The author argues that the teacher's desire to achieve excellence is transformed into one's own "style of human and teaching presence, the style devoid of manners and at the same time strengthened by the harmony of thoughts and actions; some kind of agreeableness, something that constantly grows in our identity. It is by taking care of this style that we become not only guards but friends, concealing nothing from ourselves, though sometimes hiding from strangers. All this, however, requires a certain method and supposedly personal demands to review oneself. The methods of maintaining the habit of analyzing one's actions and methodology for creating a certain hierarchy of such actions, their assessment and evaluation" (Legowicz, 1975, p. 65).

According to Jarosław Jagieła (1996) the experience of excellence is a result of the intricate process of structuring. It is believed that the excellence in the teaching profession cannot be achieved thanks to some experiences and thought-over facts and the way to perfectionism in this area is both complex and complicated. The process of accumulating pedagogical experience, according to J. Jagieła, is a sequence of continuously successive stages: initial experience - reflection - reconstructed experience. The first stage, the initial experience, refers to a huge number of facts, events and experiences that the teacher brings with himself at the beginning of his work. The starting point here is memories connected with the role of the student, then the assessment of the work of teachers from that period, the decision concerning the selection of the teaching profession and the experience acquired during studies up to the idealized model of playing a professional role or a heuristic problem-solving based on the analysis and research of literature. "This experience is defined as initial as its scope and significance are quite limited and resemble a gemstone which requires some treatment. However, it remains in the initial, somewhat primitive and naive form for a relatively short time" (Jagieła, 1996, p. 11). The start of the career leads to the inevitable confrontation of initial experience with the school reality, the reality of pedagogical work and its requirements. Therefore, some questions to be answered begin to appear. This means that the process of achieving excellence moves to the next level, which is called reflection. This stage is the most important link in improving the teacher's skills and abilities. A number of typical thought processes, including analysis and comparison, classifying, extracting significant features, summarizing, recognizing problems, asking questions, creating a hypothesis, observation and experimentation, or formulating certain patterns and regularities is a characteristic feature of this stage. Thanks to this very critical reflection on his work, the teacher transforms the previous initial teaching experience and transfers it to the next level, called the reconstructed experience. The teacher, improving his work and activities, creating innovative

and original pedagogical solutions, enriches his own achievements, thus earning a greater professional awareness. This stage is more valuable and effective than the initial experience. However, the author points to the fact that if the process of professional development continues, this reconstructed experience will lose its original value. The teacher by constantly thinking, comparing, analyzing, drawing conclusions and improving his proficiency transforms the current situation into the one that requires modifications. We can speak about a certain process of making this experience primary. Thus, "the process of acquiring skill and pedagogical excellence develops through ever higher, structured stages of transition from the phase of integration into the moments of disintegration (critical thinking always causes disintegration), often leading to tension and creative anxiety" (Jagiela, p. 13).

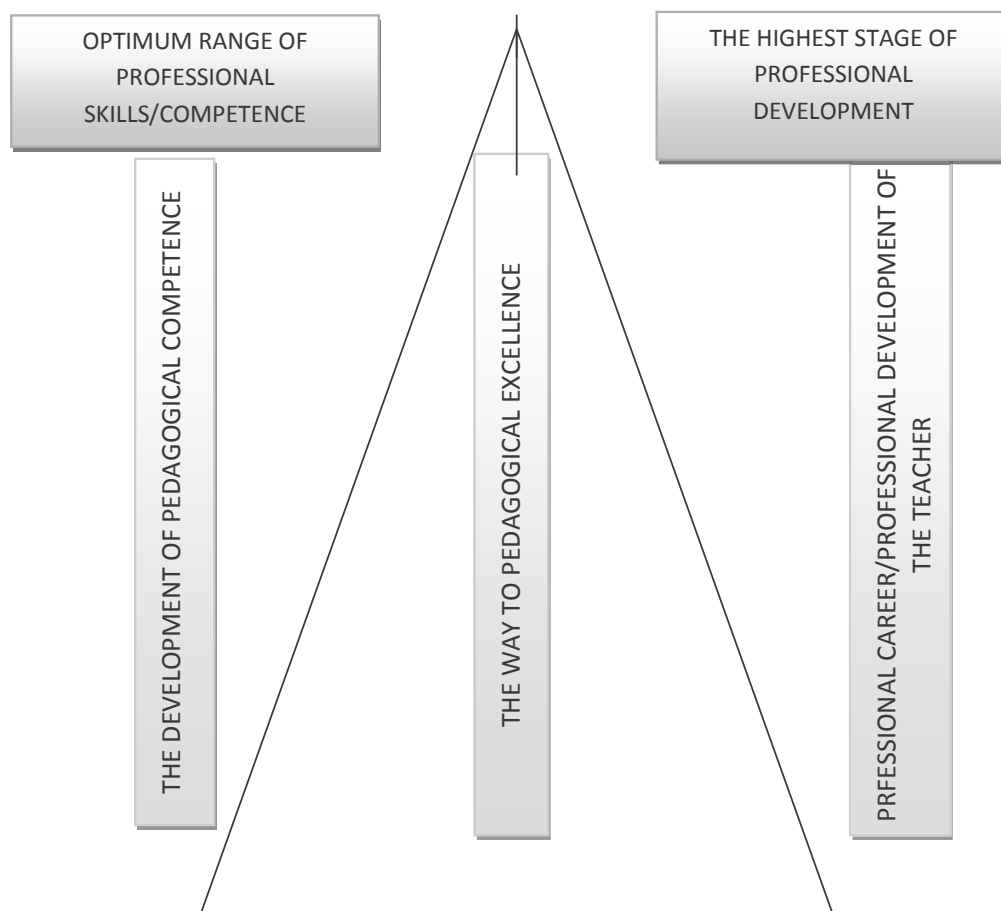
Iwan Andrejewicz Zjaziun (2005, p. 44) also refers to the levels which the teacher has to pass through on the way to reaching pedagogical excellence. These are:

- Elementary level - the teacher uses a few teaching skills, i.e. uses knowledge in order to perform a pedagogical activity and handles the content of his subject with relative ease. The efficiency of teaching is low because it lacks the orientation towards the student's development.
- Basic level - the teacher understands the priority criteria of pedagogical excellence: his or her relationship with students and colleagues is developing positively, the teaching material is well-handled in terms of content and methodology. The teacher organizes the teaching process independently. This level may be achieved at the end of the teacher's university education.
- Level of excellence - the teacher plans and organizes his or her activities for a longer period of time without assistance, primarily with a view to developing the student's personality. His or her activity is focused, characterized by high quality, cooperation and dialogue with students.
- Level of creativity - the teacher independently develops original teaching methods. His or her performance is characterized by initiative and creativity.

The pedeutological analysis of literature presented above concerning the pedagogical excellence of the early childhood education teacher allows to formulate a general statement, which will constitute the foundation of the present work. The acquisition and enhancement of individual professional competence balances the perspective professional development of the teacher reflected in his professional career, thus forming the way to pedagogical excellence. This assumption is represented in the following chart:

Fig. 1: Pedagogical excellence of the early childhood teacher.

PEDAGOGICAL EXCELLENCE



Source: own chart.

It can be concluded that the teacher's professional qualifications are evidence of his or her pedagogical excellence. The master is a teacher of rich personality, open in dealing with the student, eager to listen to him/her, to understand him/her and to help him recognize his needs. The perfect teacher is someone who is full of involvement, caring and sensitive. The master should motivate the students to develop themselves but above all it is the teacher who should develop himself or herself. Perfection is a challenge and a task for every teacher. It is like climbing to the top when with every meter more and more beautiful and extensive views unfold. The teacher-master also shows how small the lands that we know are and how extensive the lands that we want to know are. True excellence teaches us so to be humble, and unique knowledge and skills make us realize the scope of our own ignorance. So we are all students, fundamentally equal before excellence. The only difference is that some of us desire and persistently strive for excellence whereas for others it is a naive and unnecessary myth. However, both those who are at the beginning of their way and those who are have already moved forward take part in the never-ending journey towards the top.

THE CONDITION OF PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TEACHERS – STUDY REPORT

The need for a debate about the condition of the Polish early childhood education teacher in the reformed school of the 21st century has become the main motive for undertaking some pedagogical research shedding light on the condition of the teacher implementing integrated teaching in the school environment. The aim of this study was to create a portrait of the early childhood education teacher - master. Excellence in the teaching profession is treated here as the highest level of professional development which equals achieving a wide range of professional competence. In order to recognize the nature of the teacher-master competence the study was carried out among 529 early childhood education teachers and principals working in 101 urban and rural primary schools in the Świętokrzyskie Province in Poland. The teachers self-evaluated their professional competence whereas the principals assessed their teachers according to the same criteria.

The basic research question (the main problem tackled in the study) has been formulated as follows.

Research Question: What should be the pedagogical competence of a contemporary early childhood education teacher and what are the factors determining his or her pedagogical excellence? The following detailed problems have been identified:

- Problem 1: At what point of pedagogical training, starting from the completion of university studies to the stage of withdrawal from professional life, do early childhood education teachers achieve the highest level of professional development?
- Problem 2: To what extent is the process of becoming a good teacher of early education dependent on the professional and individual characteristics and features, i.e. age, length of employment, professional promotion, or education?
- Problem 3: To what extent do external factors related to the working environment determine the pedagogical excellence?
- Problem 4: To what extent does a formal system of motivating teachers to develop and update their skills affect professional competence of early childhood education teachers?

In order to conduct the diagnostic-design research it was necessary to apply appropriate research methods and techniques, with the diagnostic survey being the primary tool. When making a decision to use this method, the author understood that in this way it would be possible to obtain reliable information concerning beliefs, opinions and motives of the teachers' behavior in situations related to the performance of their duties as well as data about their family background, cultural and local communities. The main aim of pedagogy is to define individual parties of social processes and to provide their general description. Each diagnostic survey is in itself a static description of the phenomena but their comparison gives the opportunity to observe the dynamics of change. Therefore, in

order to diagnose the nature and growth of pedagogical competence of teachers and to determine the moment of reaching the peak of their development as well as the factors determining changes in their competence, the respondents were advised as to the credibility of the information provided. At the same time, however, the information was verified by comparing the teachers and school principals' answers and analyzing them with the help of a teaching consultant.

In the study presented in the present paper, a class survey was carried out in the workplace of the respondents, i.e. in primary schools, without the presence of the interviewer. Two types of research tools were used, namely self-assessment questionnaire for teachers and teacher evaluation questionnaire for principals.

The study conducted with the help of survey techniques made it possible to gather ample material in order to resolve the problems posed in the research questions. A careful selection of teachers for the study took account of the differences in the length of employment. For these reasons, it was possible to assess the teachers' professional competence at different levels of their professional development and to identify the moment in which the highest level of teaching excellence is achieved. In contrast, the selection of teachers on the basis of local environment, urban and rural, made it possible to estimate the extent to which external factors related to the working environment determine the success of training. In order to achieve greater comparability of results, the questions included in the questionnaire for teachers were formulated in the same way as in the questionnaire for school principals.

Given the assumption that the use of survey does not allow for a broad description of the understanding of the responses given by respondents according to a suggested scale, and that relying only on declarations of teachers and principals may be unreliable, the use was made of the remarks and observations of a teaching consultant. This technique of indirect observation, which in this case can be treated as a competent judges' technique, allows us to present the correct picture of reality. This is consistent with the trends of modern pedagogy, which advocate the use of more than one technique in order to obtain more accurate knowledge of the studied phenomena. The assumption of complementarity of the techniques, questionnaires and observation allows us to accept the idea that it is possible to explore the social reality in different ways. Both techniques have contributed to raising pedagogical awareness of the paper's author.

The study complemented by research carried out by a teaching consultant allowed to gather ample material in order to solve the research problems.

THE PROFILE OF THE TEACHER-MASTER – RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

Taking into account the assumption which became the foundation of the study, namely that the acquisition and enhancement of professional competence of teachers balances the perspective professional development of the teacher reflected in his career development, some conclusions can be drawn.

The analysis of the results allows us to form a general statement that the early childhood education teachers who participated in the survey have mastered pragmatic competence, communication and interpretive competence and co-operation competence to a high level. The level of creative competence is slightly lower while the poorest performance has been observed in the category of media and information technology competence.

Tab. 1. The observed qualitative indicators for the evaluation of teacher's competences basing on the teachers and principals' opinions in the light of methodological assumptions

Respondents	Competence type	Observed		Mo
		X min (lower limit)	X max (maximum limit)	
Teachers	Pragmatic	13.000	39.000	39
Principals		13.000	39.000	39
Teachers	Communication - interpretive	7.000	21.000	21
Principals		8.000	21.000	21
Teachers	Cooperation	8.000	18.000	18
Principals		6.000	18.000	18
Teachers	Creative	8.000	21.000	19
Principals		8.000	21.000	18
Teachers	Media - informa- tion technology	4.000	12.000	7
Principals		4.000	12.000	7

Xmin - lower limit

Xmax - maximum limit

Mo - trend (most frequent or most likely response)

Source: own chart.

Analyzing the data on the diversity of the evaluation of the surveyed competence categories in the light of socio-demographic data it was concluded that the persons with the highest self-esteem in all groups of pedagogical competence are the teachers working in the urban environment who have some additional qualifications to work as a teacher. The rural teachers with no additional qualification report the lowest self-esteem. Chartered teachers who define their stage of professional development as the one of excellence highly assess their pragmatic, communication, cooperation and creativity competences. They are between 41 and 50 years of age and their length of employment is more than 16 but less than 25 years. In contrast, trainee teachers aged 30 with the length of employment of not more than 5 years are least likely to report high self-esteem.

These people are at the stage of profession development called adaptation. The analysis of the distribution of responses referring to the competence category shows that the least developed competence type is the media and information technology one. In this case, the teachers with the highest ratings are trainee teachers under the age of 30 and with the shortest employment period (up to 5 years). Chartered teachers (more than 50 years of age and withdrawing from the profession) are the least likely to report high self-esteem in this category. The fact that the highest ability to use information technology is related to the youngest teachers is optimistic because every year there are more and more young teachers who are familiar with the developments in information technology. Both issues provide an opportunity for the development of the idea of modern teaching with the use of modern information technology at the first level of education.

While making a summary of data analysis on the diversity of surveyed categories of competences in the light of socio-demographic data in the group of principals the conclusion drawn is that supervisors evaluate chartered teachers working in urban environments and having additional qualifications to work as a teacher higher than the remaining groups. The teachers with the lowest evaluation are trainee teachers with no additional qualifications working in rural schools.

In terms of pragmatic, communication-interpretive and cooperation competence as well as creativity competence principals value most highly the teachers who have worked in their profession for more than 16 years, are over 41 years of age and define their stage of professional development as one of excellence. The least frequent evaluations are provided by principals with respect to their youngest subordinates (up to the age of 30) who are in the first stage of their professional development called adaptation and whose length of employment does not exceed 5 years.

In the case of media and information technology competence the conclusions drawn are different from those related to the previous types of competence. The group most highly valued by the principals are masters, working at schools for 6 to 15 years, between the ages of 41 and 50. The group of the lowest evaluation are the teachers ending their career, working for more than 25 years and over 50 years of age.

On the basis of the opinions provided by the teaching consultant regarding the so-called integrated teaching chartered teachers prove to have the best-developed pedagogical competence. Since the observations made by the teaching consultant were conducted in urban schools and all opinions issued on the basis of these observations were evaluated positively, it can be assumed that teachers working in schools in large cities have a high level of professional competence.

A detailed summary of the relationship between selected features and environmental considerations of early childhood education teachers and their level of pedagogical competence is presented in Table 2.

Tab. 2: Pedagogical excellence of early childhood teachers and its conditions – comparison of the survey results conducted among teachers and principals.

Competence type	Selected professional, social and demographic features	Categories of the highest evaluation		
		Teachers	Principals	
Pragmatic	Employment environment	Urban	Urban	
	Length of employment (in years)	16-25 years	More than 25 years	
	Age	41-50 years	41-50 years	
	Teacher's professional degree	Chartered teacher	Chartered teacher	
	Professional development's stage	Excellence	Excellence	
	Additional qualifications	yes	yes	
	Communication - interpretive	Employment environment	Urban	Urban
Communication - interpretive	Length of employment (in years)	16-25 years	More than 25 years	
	Age	41-50 years	More than 50 years	
	Teacher's professional degree	Chartered teacher	Chartered teacher	
	Professional development's stage	Excellence	Excellence	
	Additional qualifications	yes	yes	
	Cooperation	Employment environment	Urban	Urban
	Cooperation	Length of employment (in years)	16-25 years	16-25 years
Age		41-50 years	41-50 years	
Teacher's professional degree		Chartered teacher	Chartered teacher	
Professional development's stage		Excellence	Excellence	
Additional qualifications		yes	yes	
Creative		Employment environment	Urban	Urban
Creative		Length of employment (in years)	16-25 years	16-25 years
	Age	41-50 years	41-50 years	
	Teacher's professional degree	Chartered teacher	Chartered teacher	
	Professional development's stage	Excellence	Excellence	
	Additional qualifications	yes	yes	

Media – information technology	Employment environment	Urban	Urban
	Length of employment (in years)	0-5 years	6-15 years
	Age	Up to 30 years	41-50 years
	Teacher's professional degree	trainee	Chareterd teacher
	Professional develop- ment's stage	adaptation	excellence
	Additional qualifications	yes	yes

Legend: red: differences in teachers and principals' responses

Source: own chart.

The culmination of the study was an attempt to create a portrait of the teacher - master who reached the top of professional development.

Teaching has always been a matter of free and conscious decision. So it can be concluded that the one who aspires to become a teacher, knowing its essence, wants to be the best teacher he can. The student of teaching is equipped with a certain number of professional competencies, which are subject to further development. The range of pedagogical competence undergoes various changes. Thanks to gained experience the teaching independence and innovation are modified, enhanced and taken to a higher level. Changes in the physical condition of the teacher lead to his gradual withdrawal from working life. This process in relation to the teachers of early childhood education is fraught with characteristic conditions: first, there are social and professional external factors and secondly, internal conditions and characteristics.

Every early childhood education teacher starting his professional career is faced with the need to develop the skills that require constant updating. The continuous evolution of knowledge, skills and attitudes of teacher paves the way to pedagogical excellence.

Pragmatic competences are of crucial importance. Every teacher with a basic psychological, pedagogical and methodological knowledge of early childhood education in the fields of Polish language, mathematics, social education, biology, and physical education has well-developed pragmatic competence. The teacher-master skillfully selects a method of working with students and organizational forms of the educational process. He or she plans integrated teaching methods, prepares and uses attractive and diverse educational materials bearing in mind the priority of psychological and physical abilities of children and operating conditions. He or she develops and uses various techniques of controlling student's achievement with ease and determines the causes of educational failures without any problems. A good teacher is able to properly keep records in accordance with the requirements of the school is, plans his/her own way of self-improvement and professional development.

The master in the teaching profession does not lack communication and interpretation competence, which is used by a teacher who accepts all students

equally and treats both the most vulnerable and the most able in the same way. Additionally, he or she easily establishes and maintains contact with students and shows them his or her interest. Such a teacher is committed to be a friend for his/her students, and to understand their problems or temporary indispositions. Every day at work he or she remembers to control his emotions. He or she does not inhibit self-expression of children, knows and applies the rules of proper non-verbal communication.

An important part of the pedagogical excellence are competences of cooperation observed in a pro-social behavior of the teacher and skillful integration of student groups with other educational entities. The teacher - master has the necessary knowledge of the regularities of interaction and social development of students and the ability to modify his/her own style of leading a group of students, depending on their stage of development and socio-moral maturity. Such a teacher makes sure that favorable atmosphere prevails in a given group of students, effectively resolves interpersonal conflicts in a class by negotiation and compromise, and develops these skills in his/her students. He or she does not forget about regular meetings with parents, helping them solve educational problems. He or she understands the need for cooperation with non-school participants in the educational process with the aid of institutions supporting school work, for example psychological-pedagogical clinics.

The master teacher is the one who understands that his/her job also involves the creation of problematic situations and stimulation of creative educational attitudes among students. He or she has indispensable powers of creativity. The creative teacher is a teacher open to the ideas of others, constantly enriching his/her substantive knowledge and developing his/her professional qualifications. It is the teacher who often creates educational projects – lesson scenarios, articles, or original curricula, constantly searching, investigating, and experimenting. He or she is involved in what he or she is doing, being responsible, flexible, and persevering in the pursuit of the objective he or she has in mind.

The master in the teaching profession can boast about his/her information technology and media competencies. He or she displays an excellent computer literacy and knows how to use the Internet (searching for information on Google search engine, sending e-mails, publishing articles on web pages, compressing graphic files, etc.) and above all has the knowledge on how to apply modern information technology in the educational process.

In favorable conditions, most teachers achieve professional success more or less in the middle of their career, i.e. in their middle age with about 20 years of work experience. Why? It seems that a young teacher has limited professional competence. It is only during climbing the career ladder and gaining successive degrees of professional advancement that the professional competence of the teachers develop significantly. However, among the teachers approaching retirement age, the stage of withdrawal from working life may weaken their activity, which is often tantamount to stopping the activities aimed at professional development.

The teacher –master is usually an employee of a school in a large city. It can be assumed that schools in cities generally provide better conditions for development and that teachers have easier access to all sorts of forms of training and the opportunity to participate in the cultural life of pedagogical community. Such a situation is certainly conducive to the creative professional development of teachers.

The master continually improves his/her qualifications. It is well known that the participation in one's own development during professional career has become the basic requirement for anyone who wants to be recognized as a professional in today's world. Life-long learning leads to achieving a progressively higher state of professional competence.

The best conclusion to the above-presented portrait of the teacher-master is the idea of R. Łukaszewicz (1994, p. 24), through which the author expresses the yearning of students, parents, and the school for the teacher - master: "We have the right to expect that today, and in the future, because the master gives the student part of his strength – both intellectual and moral – on the way to the unknown and uncertain horizons. In this meeting there is something of a symbol of drawing from the source, where the teacher builds a semblance of certainty of knowledge, the master teaches the art of doubt and wandering, but always together – with his light he serves the student so long and so patiently until he ignites the flame of his own hopes and the abilities of the student. However, one who thinks that one can be the master without being the teacher is mistaken, although the teaching profession itself does not make anyone a master. The teacher is always available - the master can be selected".

Just as in the pursuit of holiness, in the desire for the excellence we need models that show us that this quality can be achieved. Moreover, such models show us how to achieve them. This gives us the opportunity to be wise with the wisdom of others and experienced with the experience of others which at the same time does not take away our right to freedom of choice of the career path as well as personal responsibility for the progress made on this path, pride in our own achievements and admiration of others.

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