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The Importance of Teacher Competences in Early School Education

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Abstract

The competences of an early school education teacher play an important role in the process of teaching and upbringing a child at this stage of education. In order to properly develop children's skills, special attention should be paid to the role played by a competent teacher who guides pupils' development, gives them knowledge about the world and prepares them for further learning. The aim of the article is to explain the importance of teacher competences in the work with children in early school education. The article has been written on the basis of a bachelor's thesis, and the presented research results have been based on the responses obtained from the questionnaires addressed to early school education teachers and children's parents. The research has shown that teacher competences at this stage of education play an important role in the teaching process. According to the respondents, the required competences include psychological, pedagogical, didactic, methodological, and substantive competences. Taking up this issue resulted from the experience gained during the internships, when it was observed that a competent teacher has greater opportunities to carry out educational tasks.

Keywords: early school education teacher, competences, parents' opinion

The article presents the results of the research that was carried out in the Royal Free City of Sanok in 2020 on a group of teachers and parents of children from grades 1–3. The subject of analyses was to determine *the role of teacher competences in the education of early school age children, according to parents'*

and teachers' opinions. At the beginning, some basic concepts necessary for the implementation of the project will be defined, i.e. competences, teacher, education of early school age children. Next, the attention will be paid to the key competences of early school education teachers and their importance for the contemporary roles of these educators in light of the literature on the subject.

The verb *competare* means to be fit, to take a certain position, to compete (Pilch, 2003, p. 693–696). Competences can develop when a child is provided with the conditions for their shaping and expanding (Uszyńska-Jarmoc, Nadachewicz, 2015). On the one hand, these opportunities are naturally provided by parents or minor's main guardians, and, on the other hand, by educators, tutors and teachers.

So, who is *the teacher*? First of all, he or she is a pedagogue who seeks to meet the student's needs, from elementary ones to those of a higher order. His or her task is to instill values and shape a child's personality, and show him or her world. Depending on the age and the group of students, the teacher should adapt the transfer of knowledge to the developmental level of the pupils (Łysakowska-Wencel, Wencel, 1998, p. 326–327). The teacher accompanies a child in education and in life, showing how to overcome difficulties, developing social competences and self-esteem of a child (Kwieciński, Śliwerski, 2004, p. 294). Due to the educational role played by the teacher, E. Petlak (2008, p. 152) believes that he or she is obliged to possess up-to-date substantive and methodological knowledge, that is, to be a professional in his or her activities with a rich educational repertoire. Moreover, he or she should be a reasonable person, characterized by cleverness and prudence, which are manifested in a constant search for new ways of working with children. His or her actions should also be original and inventive.

The term *education* refers to activities aimed at introducing a person into a life of value through education and upbringing based on the patterns and goals of a given society. It is increasing a child's self-reliance and raising his or her awareness on the way to become a good citizen, and developing his or her potential (Marcinek, 2006, p. 250). It is a time when continuous development is aimed at leading to the pupil's perfection. *Early school education* is the process in which the learner acquires fundamental knowledge that gives him or her a basis for developing new skills. Therefore, it is a key moment in education, which creates the starting point for further development and learning (Pujer, 2016, p. 49–50).

Next, an *early school age child's* characteristics should be described. It is a period of development that falls between the ages of 6 and 9. This time is distinguished by developing a child's personality, improving psychomotor skills, shaping oneself as the subject of one's experiences and acquiring new cognitive skills (Kowalik, 2002, p. 81–87). If this period is to bring desired results, the

teacher, as a guide and a competent person, should properly design educational and learning activities. In order for his or her work to be effective, the teacher should have some key competences, which are described below.

Competences are extremely important for the teaching profession. They are of a subjective nature and are, therefore, owned by a given person. They form a set of skills, knowledge, experience and psychophysical features, including personality and creative abilities. These elements combined together are what we mean by teacher competences. The uniqueness of this combination is the reason why the teaching profession is often compared to a mission (Cywińska, 2013, p. 17–18). Taraszkiewicz (2001, p. 171–173) distinguishes three types of teacher competences:

- 1) substantive – concerning the subject taught,
- 2) didactic and methodological – referring to the teacher's repertoire, the selection of methods and techniques
- 3) and educational – concerning the impact on the student, e.g. communication and problem-solving skills.

Dylak (1995, p. 36–43) writes about *basic competences*, which help to build understanding with colleagues and pupils, and about *necessary competences* for the effective implementation of educational tasks. *Desired competences*, i.e. interests, passions, skills related to art, sport or social life, are also extremely important; they help to perform the teacher's function.

As we read in the work of W. Strykowski (2005, p. 18–21), the most important competences for a modern teacher are: substantive, psychological, pedagogical, diagnostic, planning and design competences, didactic, methodological, communication, media, control and evaluation competences, school curricula and textbooks assessment as well as self-creation competences. Substantive competences, also known as factual competences, concern the knowledge acquired by a teacher during his or her studies and self-education. They allow the teacher to freely take up subject issues and methodological solutions including the proper structure of classes, teaching efficiency, the ability of the learners to acquire the material, supplementing knowledge with the latest discoveries, as well as referring to other scientific fields, which allows for integral learning about the world by pupils. Psychological and pedagogical competences include knowledge in the field of educational, didactic and diagnostic activities. They have a decisive impact on getting to know pupils, the organization of the educational process, as well as upbringing in the school reality. Diagnostic competences allow the teacher to recognize the developmental features of a pupil as well as the social and educational environment, including pupils' families and their peer groups. Diagnosing includes the description of a phenomenon and the causes and sources of problems. Planning and design competences are necessary for purposeful and well-organized educational and teaching activities. They help

to develop school curricula, projects and action plans. They include creating long-term and ad hoc activities, i.e. particular lessons. In addition, they are useful in planning development paths, original curricula, lesson plans, exams, and in professional development. Apart from designing, they also refer to the assessment of school curricula and textbooks (Mróz, Kaleta, 2012, p. 43). Didactic and methodological competences cover the essence, the principles and the methods of implementing the education process. They constitute basic skills in the work of the teacher, as they enable him or her to create conditions for students to acquire knowledge, undertake various activities, as well as adjust the teaching process to the abilities and interests of pupils. The social nature of work requires constant communication at a level that is understandable to the interlocutor. Therefore, communication skills are essential, including knowledge of communication, the ability to effectively send and carefully receive messages (Mróz, Kaleta, 2012, p. 21–23). Both verbal and non-verbal communication can become the tools of building understanding and cooperation with other school employees, parents and, above all, with pupils. As a result of progress in technology, media competences are necessary today and they are gaining in value. They concern both the use of multimedia devices available in the workplace and teaching resources offered by media and information technologies. Acquiring skills to use the above-mentioned resources fits squarely into the idea of lifelong learning, and also allows teachers to transmit knowledge through the channels which are natural to contemporary students. This extends the possibilities of making the classes more attractive by presenting issues in an unusual way that facilitates remembering (Cichocki, 2008, p. 161–162). Another types of competences are control and evaluation competences, which concern the assessment and controlling the teaching process (Strykowski, 2005, p. 23–25). The assessment is often perceived as unfair, unconstructive and causing agitation among students and parents. However, it is an inherent element of system schools; therefore teachers are required to be objective and professional, as well as to justify substantively their decisions. The last on the long list of teacher competences are the ones referring to the evaluation of school curricula and textbooks. They apply not only to the selection of resources considered by a given teacher to be the most valuable and functional, but also to creating their own curricula and aids. This is an opportunity for ambitious and talented educators distinguished by creativity and innovativeness. It is also important to be able to evaluate and critically assess some proposed solutions, e.g. in terms of their content, form or construction. Self-educational competences are a consequence of lifelong learning and self-education, which are the mainstream of modern education. Currently, teachers are required to constantly improve their qualifications, acquire new skills, and take up new challenges. It is also connected with the grades in the teacher promotion system. There are two types of the competences

discussed: normative, i.e. setting values and goals, and directive ones, related to the manner of implementing selected values (Strykowski, 2005, p. 23–27).

The theoretical aim of this research was to gain knowledge on the role of teacher competences in the education of children of early school age. The practical goal was to indicate directives for teachers regarding skills that benefit the education of children of early school age.

The subjects of the research are teachers of early school education and parents of younger grades pupils as well as their opinions on the role of teacher competences in early school education.

In order to achieve the above goals, the following research question was asked: What is the role of teacher competences in the education of children of early school age? In relation to the main problem, the following detailed problems have been identified:

1. What constitutes the essence of the teaching profession, according to early school education teachers and parents?
2. What is the importance of competences in early school education, according to teachers?
3. What kind of competences, according to early school education teachers and parents, are most useful while working with children?
4. How do early school education teachers improve their professional competences?
5. What makes teachers' work most difficult in early school education?
6. How do early school education teachers assess the results of their work and how is it rated by younger graders' parents?

In relation to these questions, the following hypothesis was formulated: teacher competencies play a significant role in the education of children of early school age.

In this study, the method of diagnostic survey was used, and the research tools were a questionnaire for teachers and a questionnaire for parents of children from grades 1–3. Both tools were original questionnaires designed for this research. They consisted of two parts: the introductory part, containing the respondents' data, and the main one, containing properly structured questions. In the case of teachers, there were 15 of them and they were related to the essence of the teaching profession, the importance of an early school education teacher's competences, and the most useful competences in the work of early school education teachers. The questionnaire addressed to parents of younger graders consisted of 13 questions, including the essence of the teaching profession, professional competences of the teacher, the importance of competences of the teacher of early school education, and the most useful competences in the work of early school education teachers. The closing sections of both questionnaires included questions about the assessment of the teacher's performance in grades 1–3.

The survey was conducted among 31 teachers of early school education from urban areas, 20 parents of early school age children from urban areas and 11 from rural areas. In the group of teachers, all interviewees were women. Among them, 28 (90%) had MA, and 2 (6%) had BA. One person did not answer this question. In the surveyed group, 48% of the respondents had over 20 years of work experience (15 people), 42% of teachers worked in the profession for 1–5 years (13 people), only 7% of people worked in the profession for 6–12 years (2 people), and one the respondent chose the range from 13–20 years of work experience (3%). The most numerous group (48%) turned out to be chartered teachers, 32% of the respondents were contract teachers, and 20% were trainee teachers. One person did not answer the question about qualifications.

The other group of 31 respondents were parents: 29 women (94%) and men (6%) participated in the study. The most numerous group were parents with a university degree (71%). The remaining parents (29%) had secondary education qualifications. Most of the respondents (65%) had two children. 19% of respondents had one child, 16% of the surveyed parents had three or more children. The most numerous group of parents (35%) worked in education, and 23% were office workers. 13% of respondents worked in health care, 6% in agriculture, 6% in the manufacturing sector (6%), and one person worked in the service sector. Two people did not provide information about their job profile.

The research was carried out in the Royal Free City of Sanok in 2020. The results of the survey will be analyzed below.

There are many factors that constitute the essence of the teaching profession. Therefore, teachers and parents were asked about this issue. The analysis of the responses shows that the most important in this profession, according to teachers, are personality traits (84%), competences (71%) and vocation (61%). At the same time, the respondents stated that qualifications are not the most important in the teaching profession (45%). Parents held a similar opinion: for them both personality traits and competences constitute the essence of the teaching profession to the same extent (61% of responses). In the opinion of parents, vocation (45%) and qualifications (42%) turned out to be less important. Summing up, it can be stated that the respondents' opinions on the essence of the teaching profession are similar. Both parents and teachers value competences and personality traits of a teacher the most. For teachers, vocation is also important, while qualifications are of secondary importance for both groups. This way of assessing the teaching profession will be linked to the visions of their mission.

The next question concerned the importance of the competences of early school education teachers. According to the vast majority of the interviewed teachers (81%) and parents (81%), the teacher's competences are of great im-

portance in the education of children of early school age. For the remaining respondents from both groups, they are also significant. The opinions of the respondents regarding the importance of teacher competences are similar. Both teachers and parents believe that teacher competences in the education of early school age children are important.

A teacher who wants to instill in a child a curiosity about the world should have appropriate competences, which include planning and carrying out teaching and educational activities. The question about competences useful in working with children was to answer this question. The research results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The usefulness of competencies in the work of an early school education teacher according to parents and teachers

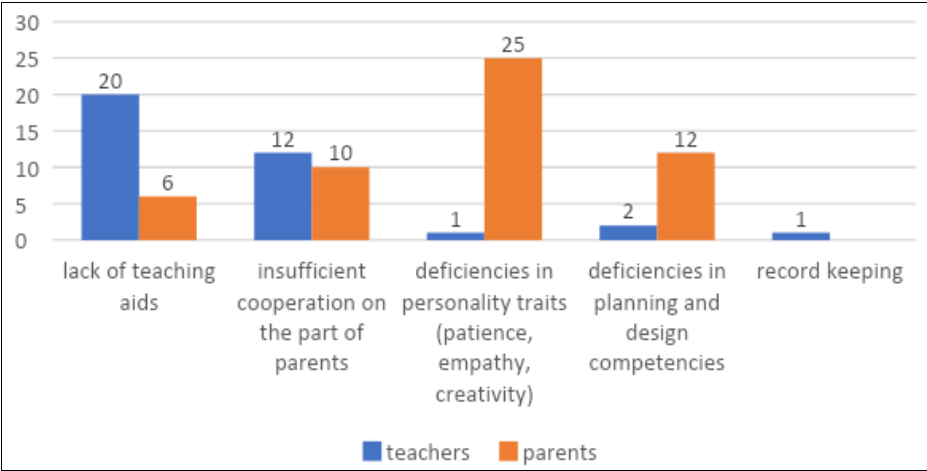
Type of competences	Teachers' responses	Parents' responses
psychological and pedagogical	87%	81%
didactic and methodological	74%	55%
substantive	68%	55%
communication	61%	55%
control and evaluation	23%	23%
planning and design	16%	32%
self-creation	13%	10%
media	10%	10%

As can be seen from the table above, psychological, pedagogical, didactic, methodological, and substantive and communication competences are, according to teachers, the most important in their work with early school age children. The second group of respondents, who were parents, considered psychological and pedagogical competences as the most important. Teaching, methodological, substantive and communication competences turned out to be of less significance to them. For both groups, self-creative and media competences seem to be the least important in this work. Both teachers and parents recognized psychological and pedagogical competences as the most essential. Importantly, planning and design competences are more significant to parents than to teachers, while self-creative ones are less important to them. So, there is a slight discrepancy between the ways parents and teachers view teachers' work.

Lifelong learning is an integral part of the teacher's work and it includes various courses, training, workshops or postgraduate studies. The obtained results show that the vast majority of the surveyed educators (94%) take part in teacher training courses aimed at improving their professional skills. The respondents often consult other teachers (84%) and participate in courses and training (81%). Also, they often cooperate with specialist clinics (65%). Cooperation with local authorities, participation in a self-education team or self-improvement based on the internet or professional literature is of little interest.

Most of the respondents (61%) attend courses that improve their competences two or three times a year. Fewer teachers (26%) attended them once a year. Very few (6%) participated in such courses four or more times a year. Only two respondents did not take part in any courses. Therefore, it can be concluded that training courses are an integral part of teachers' work. It is worth checking what kind of training teachers attend. The results show that most often these are training sessions lasting several hours (68%) or workshops (61%). Less frequently, the respondents decide to enroll in post-graduate courses (39%) or one-day training (29%). So, training's duration seems to be important to the respondents, as they prefer to participate in short training sessions lasting only a few hours.

In their work, teachers often face situations that impede their performance. This research aimed to reveal whether parents and teachers agree as to which factors cause difficulties in the pedagogue's daily work. The results are presented in Graph 1 below.



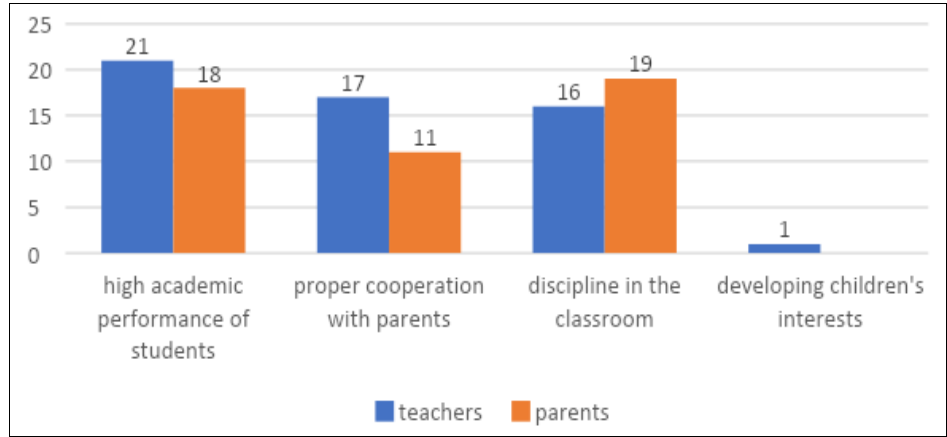
Graph 1. Factors hindering the teacher's performance in early school education according to teachers and parents

As can be seen from the above figure, teachers (65%) indicate the lack of teaching resources as the main impediment to their work. Slightly less frequently (39%) they point to insufficient cooperation on the part of parents. At the same time, they believe that deficiencies in competences such as communication or planning (6%), the lack of personal qualities such as patience, empathy, creativity (3%) and record keeping (3%) are not the factors that prevent them from fulfilling their daily duties. The surveyed parents were of a different opinion, as they found that what hinders the work of early school education teachers the

most is the lack of such personal qualities as patience, empathy, and creativity (81%). Less frequently, they indicated insufficient communication or planning competences (39%) and the lack of sufficient cooperation on the part of parents (32%). Occasionally, the questioned parents pointed to the lack of teaching resources (19%) as a factor hindering the teacher's work, which the teachers put first. The analysis of the answers from both groups shows some significant discrepancies. For teachers, the greatest difficulty is the lack of teaching resources, while, according to parents, it is the lack of patience, empathy and creativity. On the other hand, insufficient communication and planning skills as well as deficiencies in patience, empathy and inventiveness, which are essential to parents, seem not to be serious hindrances to teachers. The parents critically assess the competences and personal traits of teachers, while the teachers point out difficulties in contact with parents. The data show serious differences between both groups, who should cooperate continuously for the sake of children.

Next, it is necessary to consider how teachers' performance is assessed by parents and educators. The analysis of the answers shows that the vast majority of teachers (77%) rate highly the outcomes of their job. Others rate them very high (16%) or average (6%). None of the surveyed teachers found the results of their work to be low. Similarly, the majority of parents rated teachers' performance as high (48%) or very high (35%). Only 16% of the surveyed parents indicate that the outcomes of teachers' job are average. None of them assessed teachers' performance as low. The opinions of the respondents from both groups are similar.

It is also necessary to consider what kinds of outcomes of teachers' work are noticed by both groups of respondents. The survey results are presented in Graph 2 below.



Graph 2. Outcomes of teachers' work according to pedagogues and parents

The teachers most often observe the high academic performance of their students as the results of their work, while the most important thing for parents is to maintain appropriate discipline in the classroom. For teachers, proper cooperation with parents comes second, whereas parents place it much lower. The parents indicate high academic results as important. In both groups, the development of children's interests was rated as the least important. Summarizing the opinions from both groups, the respondents value the outcomes of teachers' work in different ways.

Based on the above analyzes, the main hypothesis put forward at the beginning, i.e. *Teacher competences play an important role in the education of children at early school age*, has been confirmed. Summarizing the results of the conducted research, according to both groups of respondents, the teacher's competences are very important in the education of children at early school age. Psychological, pedagogical, didactic, methodological and substantive competencies are indicated as desired by the respondents. According to both groups, the competences that are most useful in the work of early education teachers are psychological and pedagogical ones; as for the remaining competences, opinions were divided. The biggest impediment for teachers' performance, according to the parents, is the lack of patience, empathy or creativity, whereas according to the teachers, it is the lack of teaching aids. Most educators take part in courses to improve their professional skills. These are short-term courses and training (several hours) in which teachers participate two or three times a year. Postgraduate programs are less popular among them. Most of the respondents rate highly the results of teachers' work. These are mainly high academic results and maintaining discipline in the classroom.

Based the collected material, three main conclusions were formulated:

1. Integration workshops or community events (fires, fairs) should be organized at the school for teachers, parents and children in order to let them get to know each other better and establish friendly relationships.
2. In order to facilitate teachers' work with pupils it would be advisable to purchase teaching aids such as: Klanza scarf, magic carpet, large didactic boards, projector and multimedia screen.
3. Workshops for teachers with psychologists on the importance of personality traits in contacts with parents should be conducted.

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