

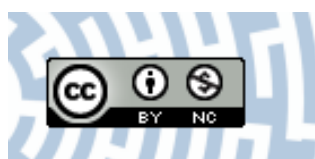


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Title: Teachers' perception of their competences and professional education – empirical study

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Citation style: Dyrda Beata, Przybylska Irena. (2008). Teachers' perception of their competences and professional education – empirical study. "The New Educational Review" (Vol. 15, No 2 (2008), s. 103-113)



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Teachers' perception of their competences and professional education – empirical study

Abstract

In the article the authors intend to refer to the empirical study concerning teachers' perception of their education and needed competences. The surveyed group consisted of 72 teachers from different educational institutions (mostly primary and secondary schools). The first part of the article deals with the latest standards of teachers' professional preparation based on legal regulations. The subsequent part is the analysis of the obtained data which contributed to important conclusions and practical indications.

Key words: *pedeutology, teacher education, competences*

Introduction

The reform of teachers' professional education in Poland started as a result of the political changes of the 1990's. The reform was necessary, first of all due to the reform of the entire educational system in Poland, which was accelerated by the accession to the EU. The new laws of 1991 laid the foundation for the latest educational reform which have led to changes in the teaching profession. The existing standards for the qualifications of teachers were criticized as obsolete. Countermeasures were proposed to stop the decline of the teaching profession and increase the quality of education. In short, these countermeasures were aimed at boosting the professional development of the teacher and improvement of school organization and school management. In order to support teachers' professionalism and to attract and retain the best in the profession, new standards for teachers' competences and a more dynamic qualification process were

introduced. For almost ten years the new standards have been worked out and up till now they have been regularly updated. The real turning point for the teaching profession was in 1999 when the new professional grades were established (Teachers' Charter).

Although many viewpoints assert what a good teacher should be like, there is a rough consensus on what, in fact, a good teacher education is. In this article we will describe teachers' opinions on their professional education.

The standards of teachers' education

Striving for good quality education we must find ways to educate teachers well. Although there are many theories of teachers' education, hardly any can be fully put into practice. Poland is at the point of seeking a binding strategy of professional preparation for teachers. Different academic lobbies try to force their vision of teacher studies but they have not reached an agreement yet. More and more often we turn to the European Union standards. Following the adoption of the detailed standards enclosed in the Lisbon Strategy, expert groups have been established in the Ministry of Education to work out teachers' education standards. These groups consist of experts from the Ministry of Education, Universities and other Academic Centres. The standards of 2004 which establish the ways of teachers' professional education are still in force.

In accordance with the act signed by the Minister of National Education and Sport of 7 September 2004 on teacher training standards, teacher education must involve:

- specialization training in at least two teaching subjects (main and additional specialization);
- pedagogical training embracing psychology, pedagogy, didactics and additional subjects (for example, voice training) ;
- practical placement in school which enables teachers to become acquainted with the organization and functioning of schools and other educational institutions, planning, organizing and preparing the documentation of the teaching process and evaluating pupils' achievement ;
- ICT training;
- language training.

Teachers' competences should be embedded in a professional continuum of lifelong learning as they should be equipped to respond to the evolving challenges of the knowledge society.

Having analyzed teachers' academic education, it can be noticed that implementing innovative models faces obstacles for a few reasons:

- lack of funds for establishing schools and institutions for practical placement and gaining professional competences
- too many theoretical subjects, not enough methodological subjects
- lack of links between the contents of subjects
- lack of educated and experienced staff prepared to run practical classes (Włoch, 2006)

The system of higher education, to the greatest extent, is responsible for completing the European vision of teacher education. To execute policies in line with European principles Polish secondary schools and universities are revising the curriculums and providing new studies and development programmes to ensure that Polish teachers-to-be meet the European standards.

Students who want to be teachers must complete the following subjects during 3 years of bachelor education:

- Specialization training subjects – about 630 hours depending on the specialization
- Additional specialization subjects – at least 400 hours,
- Pedagogical subjects – at least 360 hours,
 - Psychology – at least 60 hours
 - Pedagogy – at least 60 hours
 - Didactics of two subjects – 150 hours
 - Additional subjects – at least 60 hours (with obligatory 30 hours of voice emission)
- Practical placement in school – at least 180 hours
- ITC – the number of hours depends on specialization and students' skills
- Foreign language – to the number of hours enabling fluency.

While studying for a master's degree, the above subjects are expanded. Moreover, it is possible to achieve the teacher specialization during postgraduate studies. The curriculum of the studies is similar to the master's course and must consist of at least 330 hours plus 150 hours of practical placement.

Research results

To check teachers' perception of the necessary competences we prepared and carried out a survey on a group of 72 workers from different educational institu-

tions. All the respondents were participants in postgraduate studies at Silesian University. All of them were employed in different educational institutions:

Nursery school (3–6)	4 people
Primary school (7–13)	35 people
Middle school (13–16)	12 people
Others (eg. special schools, “socio-therapy schools”)	21 people

Apart from two, all the respondents were women. Diagram 1 shows the experience of the respondents and Diagram 2 their age.

As can be seen, approximately half of the respondents (46%) has quite long experience – over 16 years. A similar number (44%) are teachers who have worked shorter than 10 years.

A questionnaire was prepared to check the individual opinion on teachers’ contemporary competences and professional education. Beneath we present an elaboration on the successive questions.

The first question was: How do you define the term competences?

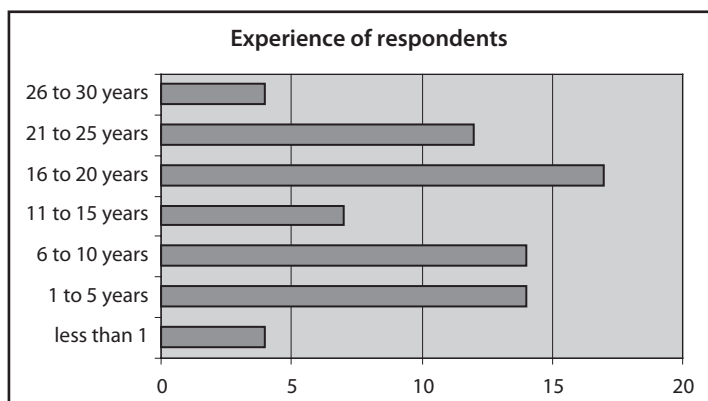
- Knowledge, skills, attitudes, education 34 indications
- Experience and abilities to teach the subjects 15 indications
- Approach and methodology 7 indications
- Teacher’s character 7 indications
- Ability to pass on information 6 indications
- Psychological predispositions for working with children 6 indications

Taking into consideration the figures, almost half of the questioned teachers classified competences quite traditionally as knowledge, skills and qualifications to teach the subject. It is worth mentioning that a lot of respondents defined the term vaguely and they pointed out the features and characteristics of teachers who are, in their opinion, competent.

The second question considered the most important competences of contemporary teachers. The respondents indicated 39 features which constitute substantial competences. To make our argument clearer we decided to rank them and present only the first 10 which were chosen more often.

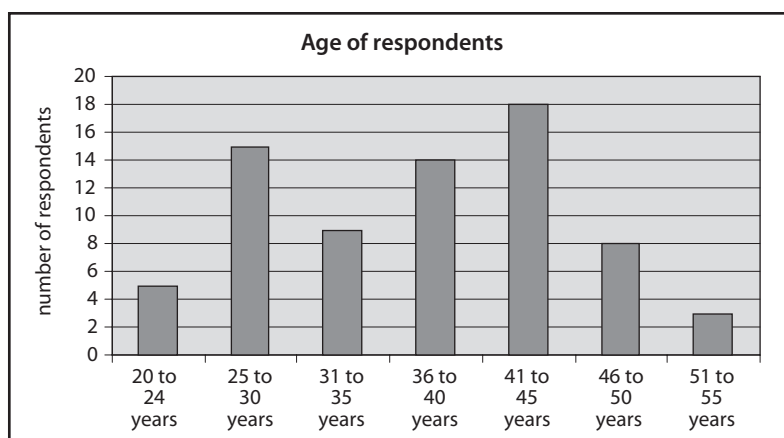
29 respondents described subject knowledge as an important factor in being a competent teacher. Slightly fewer stated that approach as a philosophy of teaching is the most important dimension of competence. Almost a quarter indicated psychological qualities. The remainder, as seen in the diagram, were enumerated less often. What is significant is that only 4 of the surveyed teachers noticed ITC

Diagram 1.



Source: research results

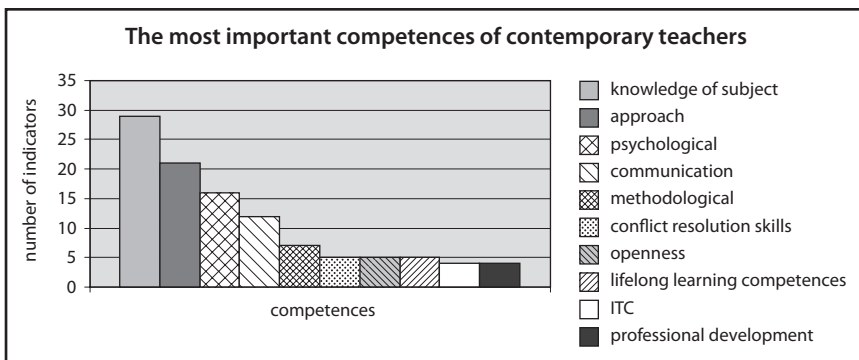
Diagram 2.



Source: research results

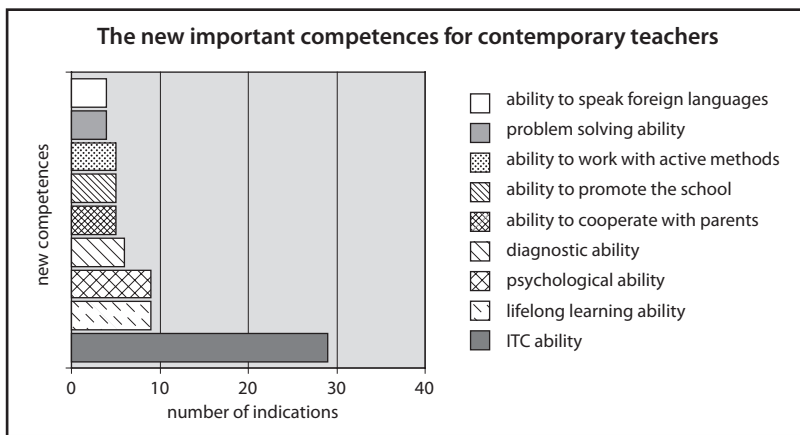
competences and professional development as important – which is not in coherence with the latest theory of competences. Other competences chosen by one or two respondents are not included in the diagram and they are for example: social competences, partnership, foreign language abilities, cooperation with parents, adaptation to changes, abilities to motivate students. It would be a mistake to blame teachers for lack of consciousness of the most important and useful competences as, in fact, the features mentioned above are constituents of psychological, methodological and communication competences.

Diagram 3.



Source: research results

Diagram 4.



Source: research results

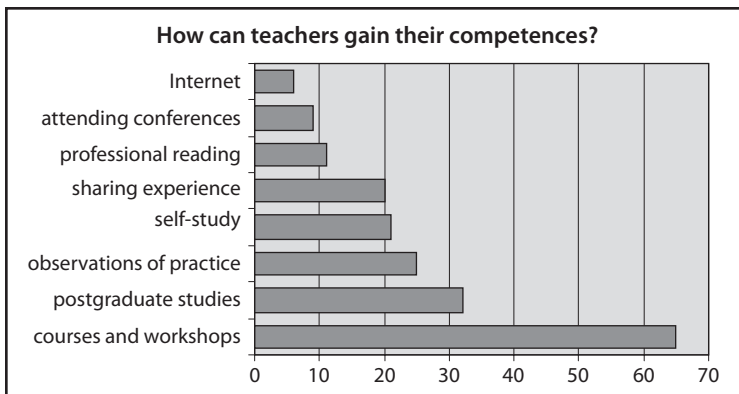
The following question concerns teachers’ perception of the new dimensions of competences which are crucial nowadays. Only 1 person answered that nothing has changed in the understanding of teachers’ competences. 72 respondents referred to 18 new sorts of competence. In the diagram we present only the first 9 which appeared most frequently. Teachers tend to notice (29 indications) the meaning of competences connected with new technologies, which confirms our assumption and is in coherence with the European standards. Other competences also crucial and up-to-date were applied much less: 9 indications for both lifelong learning and psychological abilities, 6 – diagnostic, followed by the ability to cooperate

with parents, ability to promote the school and ability to work with active methods appeared in 5 questionnaires. In the hierarchy suggested by the European standards, the ability to speak foreign languages is quite important, but among our respondents these competences are rather neglected – they were mentioned by barely 5% of the questioned teachers. It is alarming that such indispensable competences as creativity, stress management and time management competences were mentioned only once.

Summing up our deliberation we decided to quote the statement of one of the respondents: “The contemporary teacher must be simultaneously a good researcher, educator and manager of the pupils’ development”.

In the next question, we asked about ways for teachers to gain these competences. The most valued practice for improving competences are courses and workshops (90% of indications), postgraduate studies (45% indications) and 1/3 of the respondents pointed to observation of practice. The least popular among Polish teachers are the Internet (8%), conferences (12.5%) and professional reading (15.7%). Sharing experience and self-study are fundamental in the knowledge-driven society, thus it is astonishing that fewer than 30% of the teachers pay attention and take advantage of them. Yet, it can be assumed that the more popular and available the Internet is in Poland, the more often teachers will use it.

Diagram 5.



Source: research results

Proceeding further, we inquired about differences in teachers’ competences at different levels of education. We assumed that as teachers are working with different age groups they need different competences respectively. Looking at Table 1, no significant differences are perceived and they appear to be consistent with

existing tacit knowledge. Traditionally there was a general understanding that the teacher of younger children works with less knowledge and competences, instead she is expected to be motherly. However, at a higher level of education teachers are attributed more “sophisticated” skills and abilities. Unfortunately, to some extent a similar assumption is visible in the chart below.

Table 1: Teachers’ specific competences at different levels of education

Nursery school	Primary school	Middle school	Secondary school
Psychological	Psychological	Psychological	Psychological
Methodological	Approach and methodology	Approach and methodology	Approach and methodology
Caring	Interpersonal	Organisational	Organisational
Artistic	Organisational	Creative	Creative
	Creative	Motivate pupils	Motivate pupils
		Interpersonal	Interpersonal

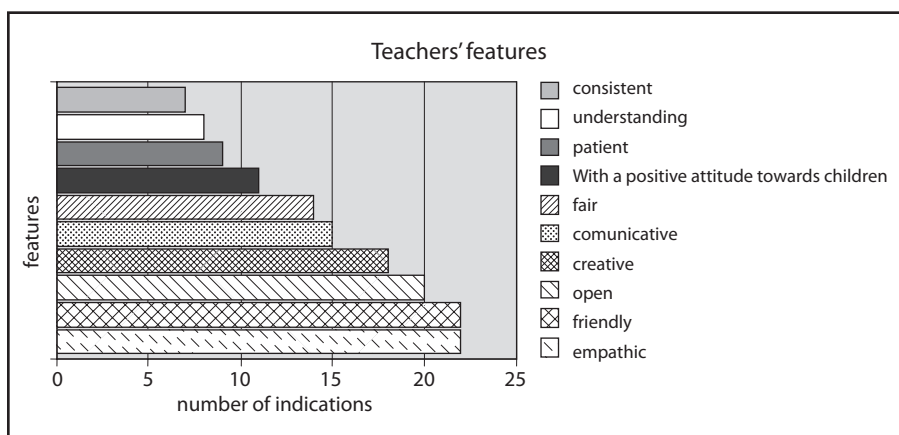
Source: research results

Theoreticians used to identify teachers’ competences with their personality. At the beginning of the 20th century, one of the first Polish pedagogues who dealt with the teaching profession, Jan. W. Dawid, ascribed quality teaching to “teachers who are devoted like missionaries, are moral, show their commitment in social matters and first and foremost love their pupils.” Some decades later, at the time of the socialist ideology, an excellent teacher was fluent in his/her subject and ready to extract pupils’ knowledge, not to mention pass on obligatory ideology.

Despite the prevailing assumption that an efficient teacher is a competent one, the problem of teachers’ features is frequently brought up. Probably for one reason: no one claims that competences are independent of personality. Teachers, asked about important characteristics, indicated dimensions quite commonly attributed to professions working with people, especially children. The respondents tended to indicate interpersonal merits which are shown in Diagram 6. Almost a quarter of the respondents claimed that teachers should be friendly and empathic. Slightly fewer chose openness and creativity. All the remaining features were indicated by fewer than 15% of the teachers.

No cognitive features, apart from creative, were mentioned, which is at variance with the tendency to treat the teaching profession as mainly an intellectual endeavour. Thus, it confirms that teachers themselves associate their work with caring and maintaining good relationship with pupils.

Diagram 6.



Source: research result

Table 2: Advantages and disadvantages of teacher education system in Poland.

Advantages	Number of indications	Disadvantages	Number of indications
Multiplicity of courses and workshops	26	Not enough practice	32
Various postgraduate studies	13	Payable courses for teachers	17
Well-educated academic teachers	11	Too much theory during the study	10
Possibility to study free of charge on full-time studies	5	Too many different subjects during the studies	8
High standard of education	2	No pre-selection of candidates for the teaching vocation	7

Source: research results

The final issue was the execution of the system of teacher education in Poland. Gathering all the indications, it can be noticed that more choices were rather negative in overtone. The surveyed teachers appreciate the offer of courses, workshops and postgraduate studies. A small group of the respondents value well-educated staff at universities. The Polish educational system is quite often criticised for isolation from everyday life and too much theory. Teacher education institutions are perceived similarly. Looking at Table 2 it can be noticed that one drawback is especially disturbing: almost half of the respondents criticise teacher studies for

not enough practice. Every fourth respondent disapproves of the necessity to pay for teacher courses, which are in fact obligatory. When we take into consideration how low teachers' salaries are, the number of 17 teachers out of 72 does not seem to be a lot. In fact, we assumed even more teachers would disapprove of having to pay for courses.

Referring to the obtained data we, as academic teachers, strongly advocate better selection of candidates for the teaching profession, as well as less historical knowledge during the studies which would be replaced with practical placements and opportunities to gain psychological competences.

Conclusion

It is a truism that teachers' professional preparation has a decisive impact on the quality of education. In order to meet the expectations and face the challenges teachers should be prepared through a versatile, interdisciplinary and multifunctional process. There are many concepts, models and ideas of teacher education but we have not yet found a single most effective way to prepare for teaching.

Nowadays a new type of teacher is needed – teachers who are open and act more as guides and “translators” than a source of information (Kwieciński, 2000). Theoreticians, politicians and probably most of all institutions educating teachers seek efficient ways to educate teachers and equip them with indispensable competences. The tendency is starting to turn from technical, one-sided preparation to a broad functional model in which reflection, creativity, emotions, communication, responsibility and autonomy play crucial roles.

Assessing their qualifications, teachers often highlight poor pragmatic preparation. On the other hand, the theoreticians indicate the opposite drawback of teachers' professional education: the difficulty to provide creative and life long learning competences which do not seem to be appreciated by teachers themselves.

The Polish educational system has been under reform for 15 years. A lot has been done although we have encountered numerous obstacles. Currently in reforming teachers' education in Poland we must overcome:

1. the demographic aspect that diminishes teachers' employment;
2. employers' tendency to pay more attention to formal qualifications than to real competences;
3. teaching is a feminine profession;
4. high responsibility and low salaries;
5. negative selection for the profession;
6. some teachers' negative attitude towards educational changes.

To diminish these drawbacks, changes in the educational law were executed. They should result in better quality of teacher education. In addition the economic conditions seem to act in favour of education and Polish pedagogy is brimming with new concepts in teacher education, which are inspiring and guiding the changes. Of course those changes cannot be introduced immediately, they need time and the cooperation of the entire society.

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Acts of law:

The Act of Higher Education of 27 July 2005

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The Teachers Charter of 26 January 1982 with later amendments