

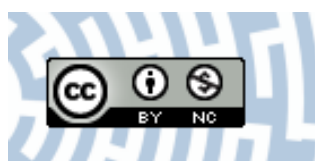


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Title: Primary School Teachers' Professional Performance in the Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Poland. Comparative Analysis

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Primary School Teachers' Professional Performance in the Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Poland. Comparative Analysis

Abstract

The paper discusses research referring to a primary school teachers' professional performance diagnosis in the Czech Republic, Poland and Bulgaria. The comparison of the research findings indicates similarities and differences which emerged due to the research between different groups of teachers from the three countries with an attempt to justify the results.

Keywords: *teachers, teachers' professional performance, comparative study in the Czech Republic, Poland and Bulgaria*

Introduction

The Act on the Education System of 7 September 1991 and the Teachers' Charter Act of 26 January 1982 and the so-called detailed regulations on planning and implementing educational processes in public kindergartens, schools as well as education and care institutions define the field of teachers' professional performance. On this basis, the main areas of the teacher's professional activities can be distinguished, which include:

- education, teaching, care;
- cooperation and collaboration in the school/institution;
- activities for the benefit of the environment and within it;
- further professional training/professional development.

Within the scope of each item the tasks, the implementation of which is *sine qua non* for the performance of the professional role of the teacher, were specified. Proper implementation of educational, teaching and care functions makes the teacher obliged to:

- create and optimize the conditions for the comprehensive development of students/alumni;
- properly and effectively plan and organize the implementation of the educational process;
- conduct a systematic diagnosis and evaluation of the student's/alumnus's school and life situation;
- prepare students for self-study and self-education;
- develop the student's/alumnus's social skills constituting a basis for making proper educational and professional choices, and readiness to take on responsibility and manage their own development as well as to cooperate and collaborate with others.

The tasks included in the organizational function involve:

- co-determination and co-responsibility for the management/governance of the school/institution;
- creation of a proper atmosphere in the school/institution.

The implementation of the social function of the teacher resolves into:

- stimulation of the environment to take action for the benefit of the school/institutions;
- systematic cooperation with institutions, organizations, associations, etc. in the field of supporting the students'/alumni's development;
- the teacher's actions taken for the benefit of the integration and animation of the educational potential of the local environment.

The requirements for self-creation demand from the teacher:

- permanent self-education;
- systematic self-reflection on themselves and their own actions;
- current documentation of their activities (Goźlińska, 2005).

Even this, due to the necessity, quite a generally outlined list of tasks, allows for concluding that the professional performance of the teacher is of complex, multifaceted, and multicontextual nature, and what is more, often inconsistent, vague and burdened with extensive psychological costs (Kwiatkowska, 2008; see Białkowski, Grusiewicz, Michalak, 2010). Hence, any attempt to analyze and valorize the process of the teacher's professional performance needs to look at this professional role through the prism of three, in our opinion, most essential skills that determine the quality of the implementation of the teacher's professional tasks

(Kwiatkowska, 2005, pp.155–164). They include communication skills, empathy and decision-making skills, and therefore these characteristics have been made a particular subject of our attention and research inquiry.

The didactic and educational process is, and must be by nature, the process of communication. Thus, communication competence is considered to be crucial in the implementation of teachers' activities and functions. Their quality determines the level of educational attainment of students, an integral component of which is a high level of motivation for a long-term, continuous, and systematic intellectual effort. A high level of the student's motivation for learning is equally conditioned by material motivators (the use of different types of rewards), as well as the symbolic ones (a good word, a nice gesture) (Brophy, 2002, p. 174). Hence, it is important that the teacher should not only have the knowledge about them and possess the skills to use them, but first and foremost be able to apply them properly and systematically in contact with the student.

Activities carried out in the course of the teacher's work primarily revolve around leading and managing individuals. Their effective implementation requires from the teacher their empathetic competence, especially considering the fact that children and adolescents are persons of labile and immature emotional structure, vacillating and plastic. The animation of the student's creative activity cannot be effective without reflecting on the positive emotions by the teacher. The process of educating responsible, internally integrated individuals is not possible without genuine joy, concern, acceptance and trust, which are not possible without understanding and consent to otherness. Therefore, the primary condition for the teacher's pedagogical success is an empathetic contact of the teacher with the student.

Currently, the attention of the educational environment is focused on the so-called teaching and educating/bringing up organized in cooperation which makes the teacher obliged to grant/expand the capacities to all the members of the group, and implies the necessity to adopt the democratic class management style (which has been promoted for many years, not only in pedagogy) by the teacher. In light of the above remarks, it should be noted that although all of these decisions are laid upon the teacher, the burden of their weight shifts from the decisions taken by the teacher only to the advantage of the decisions taken together with students (Arends, 1994). Therefore, organizing and managing the process of educating, teaching and students' learning requires the teacher to possess decision-making skills (the division according to the criterion of management):

- in the selection and ways of the teaching material presentation, the weight and the order of the presented content, etc.;

- with reference to the organization securing the proper use of both the time and the teaching space;
- in terms of coordination, stimulation and motivation for work accompanied by guidance and information;
- with regard to order-giving, which reflects the so-called teacher formal authority, legitimizing their necessary decisions of the authoritarian nature;
- with respect to control in terms of checking and verifying the knowledge, gained skills, and attitudes presented by the students (*ibid.*, pp. 59–95).

The above, briefly discussed skills conditioning the level of the professional performance of teachers have been the subject of research investigations concerning groups of teachers from three countries, i.e. Poland, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria. Based on the analysis of the records of the educational law in force in these countries, it can be assumed that expectations and requirements directed towards the Czech and Bulgarian teachers are similar to the Polish requirements or even considerably close to them. It is also expected from them to acquire the skills described above. Thus, the comparative studies of these professional groups from the three countries are possible, and to some extent may indicate a broader comparative path embracing all the European countries.

The research procedure

The undertaken study was of diagnostic and comparative nature. It involved groups of teachers from the three countries, where the working conditions, schools curricula assumptions as well as the external conditions, including the cultural ones, are indeed not very different, but they are not identical, either. We accepted that the cultural unification compensates, to some extent, for the significant differences between the levels of the teachers' professional performance, but the specificity of the regional cultures and the organization of work and teaching in primary schools in these countries may generate quite unexpected differences.

The aim of our study was to describe the levels of the professional performance of the Polish, Czech and Bulgarian primary school teachers and their comparison. The diagnosis of the teachers' professional competence levels includes examining their communication, empathetic and decision-making skills, which are a necessary condition for the realization of professional tasks and imply the quality of their performance (Pituła, 2010).

The research issues included a number of questions to circumscribe the area of the exploration:

- What levels of professional performance do primary school teachers in Poland, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria present?
- What level of communicative competence do the surveyed teachers present?
- What level of empathetic competence do the surveyed teachers present?
- What level of decision-making competence do the surveyed teachers present?
- Does the term of professional career determine the level of teachers' professional performance in these countries?
- Are there any differences in the levels of the professional performance of the Polish, Czech and Bulgarian teachers, and if so, of what kind?

By taking the effort to provide answers to the given research questions we did not include formulating hypotheses because on the basis of both the literature and the formal documents governing the performance of teachers in the three countries we could not accept the initial assumptions with reference to the expected results of our study (Rubacha, 2008).

However, the applied research tool (Pituła, 2010, pp. 121–140) as well as the procedure of data collection need to be described. We used a questionnaire on the professional tasks implementation addressed to the surveyed teachers, which was developed on the basis of the necessary skills areas (communication, empathy, and decision-making) related to their professional performance (ibid.). It should be emphasized that although the results obtained by self-assessment of the surveyed teachers are considered to be controversial, psychologists are convinced that an individual knows best their own personal experiences and thereby their statements about themselves (*self-reports*) are accurate (Kozielecki, 1998, p. 245). There have been many studies that compared personal judgments with the use of very sophisticated techniques, such as projective tests or opinions of experienced clinicians and experts. It turned out that in many cases people's own judgments about their personal emotional states, probable successes or failures are consistent with psychometric tests (ibid.). In this context, the choice of the tools for our research can be regarded as well founded.

Before analyzing the obtained results, it should be remarked that the determination of the levels of the teachers' professional performance resulted from the number of the points scored for the answers in the questionnaire. The points were obtained from the adopted response scale for questions from 3 to 37 (scaled), where the key, which in some questions changed the score by reversing it, had to be used. In contrast, the first two questions are multiple choice ones and the right choice of the teacher was attributed with 2 points, a partially correct response was given 1 point, while incorrect answers were not awarded any points. Therefore, the

surveyed person could receive a maximum of 200 points for all the questions of the questionnaire. Based on the preliminary analysis of the results, we assumed that the individual levels are within the following ranges: low 120–145, medium 146–175, high 176–200.

The study was conducted in Prague¹ in October and November, 2012, using the Internet addresses of the teachers shared by the employees of Charles University², thus, we received completed questionnaire sheets electronically. In Poland, the questionnaires were distributed on paper in the primary schools of the city of Bytom in January 2013. Unfortunately, not all the respondents correctly (completely) filled in the questionnaires. Therefore, out of the 50 questionnaires for primary school teachers distributed in Prague we received a complete study material from 40 respondents. Out of the 100 copies distributed in schools in Bytom we received only 62 questionnaires fully completed by the teachers. The study of the Bulgarian teachers³ was conducted in October and November 2013 in primary schools in Smolyan in collaboration with the academic workers of Plovdiv University (the branch in Smolyan)⁴. In this case, we received 49 fully completed questionnaires. Thus, the group of the surveyed teachers is N = 158 (cf., Table 1). Due to the differences in the sizes of the groups studied we applied percentage rates to allow the comparison of the results between the groups.

Table 1. The number of the groups studied

The studied groups	N
Primary school teachers in Bytom (Poland)	62
Primary school teachers in Prague (the Czech Republic)	40
Primary school teachers in Smolyan (Bulgaria)	49
Σ	158

Source: own research

¹ The project was accomplished within the academic internship implemented at Charles University in Prague (the grant of MNiSW, i.e. Ministry of Science and Higher Education).

² Acknowledgements to Professor Hana Vaňova for her help in conducting our research.

³ The project was accomplished within the academic internship implemented at Plovdiv University, Branch in Smolyan, Bulgaria (the grant of MNiSW) October-November 2013.

⁴ Acknowledgements to Professor Marii Petrova and Nina Gerdzhikova for their help in conducting our research.

Results

Despite the few groups of the respondents we believe that the results may be useful in assessing the differences in the levels of the professional performance among the teachers of the three countries. We made an attempt to interpret the results, but we are aware of the multiplicity and the complexity of the possible causes of these differences, hence the interpretation should rather be a subject of discussion and a source of further research and not a real statement.

From the analysis of the results it can be assumed that both the Polish and the Czech teachers have a fairly high level of professional performance, but with a certain reservation. The point is that too many individuals presenting a low level and too few teachers reaching the highest level were found. These results are close to normal distribution and thus it must be taken into account that in all of the study groups, due to the different characteristics of the performance and- if these are randomly selected groups – the distribution should be just similar to normal distribution. However, since this professional group is expected to show outstanding achievements in working with students because not only do they fulfill a professional role, but it is also, in a sense, a kind of mission which is associated with very high responsibility. Among the Bulgarian teachers the rate of the low level is slightly higher than among the Polish and the Czech teachers, which also affects the results referring to the high level. Here a three time-/ almost a three-time lower rate was recorded than in the groups of the Polish and the Czech teachers (cf. Table 2).

Table 2. The level of the professional performance of the surveyed teachers

The level of the professional performance	Polish teachers N=62		Czech teachers N=40		Bulgarian teachers N=49	
low	15	24.2%	9	22.5%	14	28.6%
medium	41	66.2%	26	65.0%	33	67.3%
high	6	9.6%	5	12.5%	2	4.1%

Source: own research

The levels of the necessary skills for the teachers' proper professional performance estimated in the research also allow for the exhibition of some differences (cf. Table 3).

Analyzing in detail the skills necessary for the proper level of teachers' professional performance draws our attention to the score referring to empathetic

skills. The high rates of the high level refer to the teachers from all the three countries, whereas the lowest of the low level was revealed by the Polish teachers (cf. Table 3).

The levels of decision-making skills were distributed with the advantage of the Bulgarian teachers since there is the highest rate of the high level and the lowest one of the low level. The most difficult plane of teachers' work in the three countries is communication because in each group a higher rate of the low level than the high level was reported (cf. Table 3).

Table 3. The levels of the necessary skills of the surveyed teachers

Decision-making skills/levels	Polish teachers N = 62		Czech teachers N = 40		Bulgarian teachers N = 49	
low	10	16.0%	7	17.5%	6	12.3%
medium	39	62.9%	29	72.5%	27	55.1%
high	13	20.1%	4	10%	16	32.6%
Communication skills	Polish teachers N = 62		Czech teachers N = 40		Bulgarian teachers N = 49	
low	12	19.3%	7	17.5%	10	20.4%
medium	41	66.1%	30	75.0%	33	67.3%
high	9	14.6%	3	7.5%	6	12.3%
Empathetic skills	Polish teachers N = 62		Czech teachers N = 40		Bulgarian teachers N = 49	
low	3	4.8%	9	22.5%	7	14.2%
medium	44	70.9%	18	45.0%	31	63.2%
high	15	24.3%	13	32.5%	11	22.6%

The differences in the results between the groups of the teachers from Poland, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria are also noticeable after a detailed analysis of the specific questions in the questionnaire. Hence, the Polish primary school teachers admit that they do not always execute the decisions of their superiors, the Czech teachers indicate greater obedience to the school authorities. Also the majority of the Bulgarian teachers abide by the supervisors. This fact is quite puzzling as the labour market for teachers in Poland is much more difficult than that in the Czech Republic and one could expect that it would be vice versa (Pituła, Sacher, 2013). A difficult situation on the labour market is also observed among teachers in Bulgaria. They- perhaps this is the reason why- tend to make most of the decisions in their work with students according to the authorities' suggestions. We can presume that it has its origin in the differences in the mentality of the Poles, Czechs

and Bulgarians, the political legacy may also influence this situation. However, we cannot explain it with complete certainty.

Another issue is the Polish teachers' belief in the rightness of their conduct with students, whereas the Czech teachers are more modest in this respect. Most of them felt that this sense of rightness often occurs to them, but not always and not very often. This may be due to the Czech teachers' greater pedagogical awareness, or may also suggest the effect of the opposite atmosphere in the school circles in those countries, and perhaps an explanation of this fact is much more complex, which with current research does not allow for a full explanation. The Bulgarian teachers, in their opinions, suggest that their conduct with students as well as understanding their needs are at the proper level.

Conclusions and questions

Our modest research indicates that all the teachers, i.e., Polish, Czech and Bulgarian, present different levels of professional performance, and making a general comparison- the level is average. It can be assumed that in all the three countries, this professional group would need support with appropriate stimuli for increasing the level of their professional performance, as the rates of the low level of performance are too high. Also, too few teachers achieve the high level. Perhaps one could be tempted to develop a common system of solutions for improving the situation. This in turn would require some further research, the results of which would allow for determining the detailed and well- recognized reasons for this state of the matters. Thus, this paper seeks, above all, to bring forward new questions. The most essential of them is the question of whether the level of the teachers' professional performance in these countries could be higher and why it is the way it is.

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