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Entrepreneurship as the Key Competence of Early Education Teachers in the Context of Employers' Expectations – Research Report

DOI: 10.15804/tner.2017.49.3.19

Abstract

The issue undertaken in this article concentrates on entrepreneurship as the key competence of the teachers of preschool and early school children in Poland. A hypothesis was made that developing this competence in the course of professional teacher training is the condition of effective children education. For this purpose, an online survey was conducted with a sample of 232 head teachers of schools and kindergartens (public and private ones). The presented results of the research tackle expectations of employers towards recruited teachers with regards to this competence. Accomplishment of the research project allowed for formulating recommendations for teacher training within the framework of education for entrepreneurship by indicating directions and areas of implementing necessary changes.

Keywords: *key competences, entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial, teacher training*

Introduction

In the literature on the subject, the dominant, empirically proven approach implies that in terms of teacher training there is a lack of appropriate preparation to become entrepreneurial, and to develop this feature among pupils (Birdthistle, Hynes, Fleming 2007; Frank, 2007; Hytti, O'Gorman, 2004). As far as Poland is concerned, no such research project has been conducted so far, hence the research

perspective adopted by the authors seems to constitute a vital supplement of the issue of teacher training in Poland. The development of this competence in the course of professional teacher training is the condition of effective children education.

The latter factors can be examined with reference to a few planes. The disposition plane comprises of relatively permanent features of an individual (knowledge, skills), the actualization plane embraces the ability to apply skills possessed by a given individual, the plane of one's own competence is a subjective conviction of an individual concerning their own properties and confirming a given competence, whereas the granted competences are expressed through the language of description of the qualities and functionalities of a given individual, entailing the assessment of the level of their own adjustment to social expectations (Stasiakiewicz, 1999). The research assumptions make reference to the last plane, tightly linked to education and acquisition of features in the course of learning, hence implying preparation of the teacher to professional activities corresponding to social expectations.

Within the framework of this article, a broad definition of the competence of entrepreneurship is adopted¹, stressing its social, psychological and economic aspects (Morris, Web, Fu, Singhal, 2013). Thus, entrepreneurship as the key competence is expressed through the human ability to transform ideas into practice, and as the ability to react dynamically to the phenomena occurring within the surrounding. To such a degree, it embodies a set of skills, features and abilities.

The conducted research project aimed at finding out whether there were any expectations, and if so – what kind, formulated by potential employers of early childhood teachers (primary school and preschool head teachers, i.e., the first

¹ Apparently the *entrepreneurship* notion was used for the first time by R. Cantillon in 1755, with reference to the persons noticing differences in prices on various markets, able to use this fact for their own purposes (cf., Drozdowski, 2006). It is also worthwhile to recall the concept of J. Schumpeter (1962), who developed the classic theory of entrepreneurship, perceiving the entrepreneur as a person characterised by creative activities involving the implementation of new concepts and being change-oriented. Contemporary advocates of entrepreneurship stress the importance of innovativeness, undertaking new tasks with the concurrent awareness of the potential risk, art of calculation and competing (Griffin, 1999). According to P. Drucker (1992), entrepreneurship is a feature of a given person or an institution, hence it cannot be limited to the economic sphere, as it also embraces the social area. From such angle in view of W.G. Nickels (2000), a well-selected set of an entrepreneurial person entails self-discipline, self-awareness, faith in one's own resources, being action-oriented, physical and mental strength, being able to face the probability of risk. An interesting and holistic perspective concerning various theories of entrepreneurship as well as its types and models has been presented by Teresa Piecuch (2013).

stage of education) with reference to entrepreneurship as the key competence. For this purpose, skills, features and resources of an entrepreneurial individual (i.e., recognition and assessment of opportunities, risk management, transferring one's own vision, perseverance, creativity, mainly linked to problem solving, acquiring resources, establishing values, accomplishing goals, adaptation, resistance, trusting one's own potential, skills, establishing social networking, etc. (358)) were made a point of reference with regards to the specificity of the teacher's work and his/her professional activities. The latter was characterised within the four following areas:

- Didactic and upbringing activity,
- Cooperation with the environment,
- Organizational activities,
- Professional growth.

The teacher's didactic and upbringing tasks have been precisely defined in the school curricula for preschools and early school institutions (elementary education), as well as in the Teacher's Charter (2006) and other internal documents of a given institution (such as regulations or statutes: MEN, 2014).

Cooperation with the local community is an activity resulting from the legal regulations concerning the system of education (school legislation). This sphere also embraces institutional forms of collaboration with the units of the regional, local authorities that are in charge of managing schools and kindergartens, involving bodies of pedagogical supervision (schools inspectorate), and advisory institutions (e.g., the Lower Silesian Centre of Teacher Development). Likewise, such cooperation results from the concordat (with the church authorities), and tasks related to children's security (cooperation with the police, municipal police, etc.). Teachers conjointly cooperate with institutions responsible for social support and children's development support (psychological and pedagogical counselling centres). Collaboration with various educational units is also undertaken, i.e., with other schools or preschool institutions.

On the other hand, organizational activity takes less formal shape and refers to interpersonal relationships. It is usually of a local range, and is theme-related. It also relies on applying proposals from various institutions that might serve as an interesting supplement of the educational offer of a school or a kindergarten (picnics, science festivals and other cultural and educational forms of activities), or acts as partners in organizing outdoor activities or school trips. Such a form of activity also entails informal cooperation with the local community authorities within the range of joint celebrations and participation of teachers and local community in the life of school/preschool institutions. Such a broad understanding of cooperation encompasses elements of non-formal and informal education.

The last of the analysed areas, i.e., personal growth, is connected to the improvement and streamlining of the career track, as reflected in the successive teaching posts through a merit-oriented promotion structure.

The determined areas of activities are not separate, as in practice there are many relations and dependencies entailed within. The teacher's professional development contributes to improvements in the effectiveness of the didactic-upbringing activities, as well as empowering cooperation and organizational tasks. It must be stressed that the adopted model of cooperation with the local environment and practical solutions in this regard influence organizational activity. Teachers' engagement, abilities to overcome difficulties and entrepreneurial approach (related to acquiring sponsors, partners and resources under grants, tenders and competitions), initiative and activity, i.e., indicators of entrepreneurship, undoubtedly, influence the quality of the teacher's work in terms of all the outlined areas of activities. Moreover, they support, or quite the contrary, disable functioning of a given institution in the local environment, equally affecting its growth and perception. Taking into consideration the specificity of the tasks undertaken by the teacher within the framework of these areas of activities, the set of features of the teacher displaying the competence of entrepreneurship consequently embraces:

- adaptiveness – adjusting the behaviour to the requirements of the situation or the environment,
- activity – ability to operate actively,
- initiative – offering new activities to others,
- independence – ability to make autonomous decisions,
- decisiveness – analysis of factors and dynamic pace of making appropriate decisions,
- sharing knowledge with others,
- ability to take risk – the skill of analysing threats, opportunities, limitations, advantages

and disadvantages, opportunities and limitations, followed by setting up a scheme of activities on such grounds,

- responsibility for the undertaken tasks,
- planning – establishing goals and designing achievable plans of implementation,
- overcoming difficulties and solving complex problems,
- ability and willingness to cooperate with others,
- regularity,
- being aware of one's own assets and weaknesses.

Analysis of the expectations on the local job market embraced both the distinguished features, as well as the areas of the teacher's activities as the criteria for reference.

Research Methodology

Employers' expectations within the range of the competence of entrepreneurship of preschool institutions and primary school (elementary education) teachers were defined with regard to the method of the diagnostic survey. The questionnaire research was being conducted from June to September 2016 in two regions, i.e., Lower Silesia and Wielkopolska. Within the research, the volunteer recruitment method was applied as one of the acknowledged manners of the online survey sampling method (Batorski, Olcoń-Kubicka 2006, pp. 110–112). The target group embraced the head teachers of schools and kindergartens (public and private ones), which in turn conditioned the selection of the Internet domains, i.e., forums, social networks (groups, fan pages), where invitations to participate in the research were posted. The above-mentioned institutions also received invitations with a link to the questionnaire via email.

The questionnaire form was completed by 232 persons. 81% of the respondents were women. The majority of them (85%) were employers from the Wielkopolska region. The mean age of the head teachers was over 51 (48%). Many respondents had completed the specialty of preschool and early school education (75%). The head teachers who had held their position for less than 5, or 5 to 10 years were the majority (25% / 25%). The overwhelming majority were the head teachers of public schools, out of whom 62% worked at schools and 30% in kindergartens. Most of the respondents from this group managed rural education institutions (almost 39%).

Research Results

The research analysis objective was to recognise employers' expectations towards the candidates for teachers concerning entrepreneurship as the key competence related to the four areas of teacher activity. The aim was also to define the range of accomplishment of the guidelines for enterprise education in didactic and upbringing activities addressed to early school pupils.

The majority of those taking part in the research (almost 89%) claimed that entrepreneurship was a competence that a contemporary early school teacher should possess. Justification for such an approach entails three main categories of arguments:

- Reference to the future and functioning of children in the world that requires such a competence,
- Pointing to the universal value of distinct features that are related to this competence, including creativity, imagination, flexibility and communicativeness,
- Stressing the fact that it is easier for an entrepreneurial teacher to function in their own profession.

It is worthwhile to highlight the fact that the participants consider entrepreneurship as an indispensable factor within all the four areas of the teacher's functioning. Nonetheless, in their opinion, it is of greatest importance for the quality of cooperation with the environment (ca 88%), and for the organizational activity (ca 87%), followed by didactic and upbringing tasks (ca 77%). In relation to professional growth, this competence was indicated by the respondents to a lesser degree (ca 65%).

As far as cooperation with the local community is concerned, the tasks related to organization of festivities and out-of-school celebrations (day of a given city, charity actions) are predominant². Such a perspective involves, according to the respondents, writing projects, acquiring sponsors, taking advantage of the possibilities and initiatives of the local community, enriching the didactic resources capital, arranging open days, building a positive image of an institution, and organizing inter-school competitions. Some single statements also made reference to the institutionalised form of cooperation with the police, cultural centres, fire brigade units, libraries and other schools and kindergartens. Undeniably, this area is composed of these elements. Cooperation related to social welfare and concordat was omitted, as well as the bodies of school supervision and advisory institutions. Yet, interestingly, the mentioned key features of entrepreneurial teachers with respect to this area encompassed skills and the will to cooperate with others.

As far as organizational activities are concerned, the respondents acknowledged the following forms: organizing school trips and cultural events, school celebrations, outdoor school days, meeting with parents and some local persons of

² Although considered by the respondents as a part of this area, they belong to the range of the organizational activities of teachers.

public interest, working in self-governing bodies, or cooperating with the friends (associations) of a given school/kindergarten. The respondents rarely pointed to the activities related to acquiring resources for the needs of a given school/kindergarten. Hereof, and for such a pattern of activities, the ability to take risks, independence and active approach are highly desired.

Analysis of the tasks assigned to the area of didactic and upbringing activity reveals a rather traditional approach to the perception of the teacher's role. Thus, the majority of respondents mentioned tasks linked to transferring knowledge, designing didactic work schemes, accomplishing the curricula requirements or/and activities in compliance with external expectations (pedagogical supervision). The necessity of being familiar with pupils and with working patterns was also marked as of great importance. The respondents sporadically mentioned tasks entailing activities beyond the traditionally understood professional role of the teacher in terms of the didactic and upbringing agenda, to enumerate the following:

- applying, in the course of lessons, resources and materials tackling the issue of entrepreneurship,
- introducing pedagogical innovations and educational projects,
- acquiring equipment and didactic aid,
- critical approach to textbooks,
- shaping the attitude of entrepreneurship among children.

According to the employers, the paramount importance for appropriate fulfilment of the tasks within this sphere is assigned to initiative, independence, decisiveness, sharing knowledge, responsibility for the undertaken activities, planning, regularity, and – last but not least – the awareness of one's own assets and drawbacks.

Professional growth is understood both as personal development, and as acquiring further, successive teaching posts through a merit-oriented promotion structure. In this area, the teacher's activity should, according to the respondents, entail the awareness of one's own strengths and drawbacks, as well as the skill of sharing knowledge.

On top of that, the questionnaire survey included the assumptions of education for entrepreneurship as indicated in the legal documents (MEN 20014; European Parliament and Council 2006): The participants were asked to say which of those were realised in a given school/kindergarten, followed by a specific example. The two most frequently mentioned possibilities included giving children the opportunity to get familiar with various sources of information and providing a chance to use it, as well as establishing opportunities for team work and cooperation. In very

few of the questionnaires examples of such activities that might provide evidence for the declarative approach to the accomplishment of the indicated assumptions were mentioned. According to the respondents, the most infrequent occurrence takes place in relation to establishing opportunities for children to develop their self-efficacy, sense of impact on events, and learning to put theory into practice. It comes across as rather discouraging, as regardless of the necessity to develop the competence of entrepreneurship, the two latter skills are of paramount importance as for the subjective standards of evaluation and adequate functioning under the rapidly changing circumstances.

Amongst the participants that considered the competence of entrepreneurship crucial, almost 70% declared it was vital during the recruitment process to evaluate whether a given candidate for the teaching profession possesses, or does not possess, this competence. As for the employers who, when employing a teacher, do not take into consideration this competence (30%), the predominant arguments implied that no such criteria were distinguished in educational regulations, and that in their assessment the teacher's qualifications were critical. It was also stressed that it was difficult to verify such a competence during a job interview. Moreover, many school head teachers thought that 'the school is not an enterprise', an idea followed by a distinct approach that such a skill is not useful for an early school teacher, as children of such an age do not need it either.

Discussion

The presented research results seem to be interesting from the perspective of each of the respondents taking part in the process of education and the managing staff, as the majority of the researched head teachers find the entrepreneurial competence as indispensable in the set of skills of a teacher working with children. This, in turn, instils an optimistic and hopeful attitude to this matter. Perhaps, it also stands behind the idea that in Poland entrepreneurship is losing its pejorative meaning, and is beginning to be perceived as an indispensable attribute of a future-oriented person. As the declarative statements of the researched head teachers prove, the entrepreneurial competence is to some degree present in their professional area, and within the undertaken decisions. Yet, some responses give rise to the assumption that in reality (and in the educational area) it takes a less optimistic view. Doubts emerge within the head teachers' responses which reflect a rather narrow perception of entrepreneurship. Moreover, some of the respondents pointed to the conservative features of the school system, which make

the latter react to changes with delay, and causes it to function in an unchanged shape for a prolonged period of time. It can be, therefore, assumed that in such a formula there is no place for broadly understood entrepreneurship (as the key competence). For these head teachers the key competences are confirmed in the documents, which, unfortunately, make no reference to entrepreneurship. Due to lack of tools to verify such a competence amongst the candidates for the teaching profession, the head teachers cannot – or do not want to – face this task independently, thus taking into consideration only what is imposed by the legislator.

In such a context, a question arises whether the entrepreneurial competence is important for employers and whether they, indeed, look for autonomous, independent teachers, or only those that will effectively respond to the directives and regulations. This issue should undoubtedly become a matter of further empirical investigation, as it is rather puzzling that amongst the respondents no reference to apply the entrepreneurial competence for the purpose of competing on the educational market was mentioned. They remained equally indifferent to this competence as for streamlining the educational offer, or introducing solutions that would provide evidence for innovativeness and some cutting-edge approach. It results in the image of schools and kindergartens as re-active, rather than active subjects operating on the job market, with teachers expected to perform their traditional role. Thus, an assumption can be made that employers expect teachers to be adaptive, rather than change-oriented.

Conclusions

The head teachers of educational institutions should acquire knowledge and gain awareness of what entrepreneurship is, as only in such an instance they will be able to expect and assess this competence amongst teachers, followed by establishment of conditions favouring its usage for enterprise education (Ruskovaara, Hämäläinen, Pihkala 2016). It is also of key importance for head teachers to expect from newly-employed teachers not only what is stressed in the ministerial, educational documents. Moving beyond such formalities can enhance the search for and finding of a 'perfect' teacher, who would be able to take risks and would be free from the fear of making mistakes. In such circumstances, head teachers' essential task would be to encourage teachers to undertake activities, to grow constantly and improve their own competences, which would, consequently, significantly influence the quality of the educational offer of a given institution (Ruskovaara, Hämäläinen, Pihkala 2016, 4). Concurrently, the awareness that professional

growth is possible only in a situation when high demands are accompanied by substantial support should be also raised. This is an aspect the participants seem to neglect, arguing it is an individual sphere of each teacher.

Moreover, it seems equally necessary to work out the apparatus for employers who, applying it, could define the level of the entrepreneurial competence in candidates for the teaching profession during the process of their recruitment to a given institution. Such a tool could encourage them to choose the best candidates, contributing to the change in the way of employers' thinking on the teacher's entrepreneurship, and opportunities of its application in all areas of professional activities.

The proposed list of activities is limitless, hence, within the format of this paper, only indications of the need for more complex transformations can be made. Unquestionably, there is a need to carry out in-depth research to prepare such a curriculum offer for teacher training that would correspond to the contemporary challenges. Only profound changes can contribute in a long-term perspective to a greater diversification of kindergartens and primary schools offers on the educational market.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by the University of Wrocław under Grant № 0420/1567/16

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