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University preparation of graduates of pedagogy to act as an early childhood education teacher. Self-assessment of Polish, Czech, Slovak and Ukrainian students

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ABSTRACT

In the survey conducted among graduates of pedagogical faculties of four universities: in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine, differences were found in the self-assessment of professional competence acquired in the course of studies. This study contributes to future deliberations, emphasising the importance of curricular and systemic changes, i.e. moving away from the system of teacher education in the 3 + 2 model (3 years of undergraduate studies /BA/ + 2 years of graduate studies /MA/). The right to exercise the teaching profession should be vested in a person with a uniform master's degree programme.

The findings point to the need to develop tools to assess the professional competence of future teachers. The interview or the job interview itself does not fully reflect the real skills for the profession. For example, pedagogical talent and personality predispositions of candidates for teachers are not examined.

This survey is of great importance for educational authorities, as well as for the design of teacher education programmes and for school teachers across Europe. It concludes by calling for greater control and selection in the recruitment of students of pedagogy, in particular pre-school and early school education.

KEYWORDS

Preparation for the profession; teacher; professional competence; models of teacher education

Introduction

The choice of a profession is not always well-considered by young people, sometimes it is accidental, and the motives may also vary. The teaching profession is a specific job, which requires appropriate predispositions, character traits and many competencies and skills (see: Campbell 2003; see: Banach 2014; Day 2004). The education of the youngest people should be a concern of every state school system. It should be important for educational authorities and parents who will teach our children (Chambers 2006). In general, there is a consensus among practitioners and theorists that the better teachers we employ in schools, the better results their pupils achieve (see: Eurydice 2013; see: Kruszewska 2018).

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Teachers play an important role in the lives of pupils, pointing out goals and shaping their perception of the world. That is why 'Education and Training 2020', the European strategy for education and training, places particular emphasis on the role of teachers, from the recruitment stage, education and training to opportunities of career advancement (see: Eurydice 2018).

Teachers also play a key role in the teaching process at school. The need to optimise their contribution to teaching has been confirmed at European level as a policy priority. Both the European Commission and the Council of the European Union have stressed the need to improve the education and training of teachers (Saracho and Spodek 2007) and to make the profession more attractive (see: Mazińska 2005).

Only one-third of European countries have special methods for the selection of teachers, including interviews, in which the level of a candidate's motivation to practise the teaching profession is assessed (Fazlagić 2017, 6).

Teachers' entrance exams are not a good predictor. It is considered that the best way to 'select the right candidate' is through interview. During the interview, information on language skills, attitudes and interpersonal skills can be assessed. The interview is necessary to assess moral and ethical attitudes. However, even the results of in-depth interviews with teacher candidates are not an excellent selection tool.

In 15 European countries, the required minimum level of teachers' qualifications is a Bachelor's degree, while in 17 countries at least a Master's degree is required (Eurydice 2015). The minimum duration of teacher education is usually between four and six years. In addition to knowledge of the subject they teach, future teachers must acquire professional skills. Pedagogical preparation includes both theoretical studies (including psychology and pedagogy) and school practice, which may include observation by experienced teachers and classroom teaching. In most countries there is a minimum duration of pedagogical preparation, which on average equals sixty ECTS credits, which corresponds to one-year full-time studies (ECTS 2006, 12). In nine countries, mainly under the phased model of teacher education, the minimum duration of pedagogical preparation is the responsibility of the educational institutions. According to the regulations at central level, the school practices that form part of pedagogical preparation correspond on average to 25 ECTS credits, although also in this respect institutions may have some freedom to choose their pedagogical preparation courses (see: Eurydice 2015).

Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia are countries that are members of the European Union, while Ukraine is still trying to join the community. However, the higher education systems (see: EACEA National Policies Platform 2020a, 2020b, 2020c) for teacher training in pre-school and early school education are very similar in all these countries (see: Vashulenko 2011; Prekopová 2014; Syslová 2015; Gołębniak and Krzychała 2015; Kasáčová 2011). There is a two-phased model of teacher education (Poland has already introduced a uniform five-year master's degree course, Slovakia and the Czech Republic are preparing for such a change).

The two-stage teachers' training model in Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia was in line with European trends and the introduction of the Bologna Convention (see: Kraśniewski 2006; Eurydice 2012; Buchner-Jeziorska 2004; Stachowiak-Kudła 2012). Also in Ukraine, the system of initial class teacher education and pre-school teachers has been reformed (Zavalevsky 2008, 2010. In classical and pedagogical universities, the teacher training within the general 'education' course includes the

specialties: pre-school education and elementary education. Since the congress in Bergen in 2005 Ukraine has also become a full member of the Bologna process (Wołoskiuk 2014). This has forced the universities to reorganise, as well as has brought about some changes in the work of the universities (a division of single degree courses into bachelor and master's degrees, introduction of ECTS credits). Ukraine became one of the countries co-creating the European Higher Education Area.

In each of the countries concerned, there are programmes based on modules that facilitate the development of individual student interests and the introduction of new educational content where necessary. Teachers' qualifications are described in the form of educational results, which are verified within the framework of individual modules. Students' knowledge and skills are verified in classes on particular subjects according to the rules adopted and described in subject syllabuses. Continuous internships are assessed on the basis of a portfolio (containing, among others, lesson scenarios, lesson observation protocols) compatible with the teaching practice journal.

Methodology of the research

The diagnostic survey was conducted by means of a questionnaire addressed (Zieliński 2019) to students of the final year of master studies. At the turn of January and February 2020, some information packages (data from the surveys systematised in percentages) were collected that concerned four universities providing early childhood teacher training: Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa, Poland, Palacký University in Olomouc, Czech Republic, University of Prešov in Prešov, Slovakia and Mukachevo State University, Ukraine. These universities have bilateral agreements signed and cooperate with one another in the framework of Erasmus+, staff exchange, scientific conferences, etc. The data were collected from a self-assessment questionnaire filled by 120 candidates for the teaching profession (30 students from each university centre).

The survey questionnaire, which was a study tool, contained questions related to knowledge, ability to work with children and professional competences acquired during studies and student internships. The aim of the survey was to determine how students, future teachers of pre-school and early childhood education, evaluate their preparation for the job. The research problem was defined by the question: What is the student's self-assessment of the range of skills and those competences that may indicate an awareness of the social role, the need for improvement and the search for new, innovative and alternative solutions in education? The answers were marked on a continuum of 1–10, assuming that 1 is the lowest mark and 10 the highest.

The research sample adopted for analysis was systematised and subjected to quantitative and qualitative analysis, presenting the collected empirical material in the form of charts with some comments.

Results of research

Assessment of one's own skills and competences is particularly important for young people who are about to take on an important social function: caring for, bringing up and teaching children. The awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of graduating

students is a sign of maturity for the role of teacher and a readiness for further self-improvement and self-development.

Before the survey, the research and teaching staff of all university centres were asked to conduct a series of classes with students – lectures, workshops and exercises – in pedeutology, which is not compulsory in all universities.

The first question was to find out which of the given competences are in their opinion the most important for their professional development. A list of soft and hard skills, which were considered important in the work of an early education teacher, was presented. The following set of diagrams, under the common title, is presented in [Figure 1](#).

The analysis of the data allows us to conclude that for the students from Ukraine this type of knowledge is very important in the work of a teacher. It is surprising that the candidates from other centres do not notice it.

The acquisition of further knowledge was also considered by Ukrainian students as an important element in their professional development. Opinions of others, although higher than the previous ones, reveal their approach to education of a young child.

This category of answers indicates that most of the respondents felt that creativity is important in the teaching profession. A small percentage of the respondents were of a different opinion.

The data show great awareness of the abovementioned type of competences among Ukrainian students. Only a quarter of the others see such needs in early childhood education, although in this group there are also such students who do not think that this type of competence is particularly important in the profession.

As the above data indicate, the respondents had very divergent opinions about the discussed skill. However, it can be noted that the students from Ukraine again showed great awareness of the problem.

Not for all the respondents, the organisation of classes is important as far as teacher's work is concerned. The vast majority of Ukrainians were aware that the effectiveness of teacher's work depends largely on the proper organisation of the educational process.

The data presented above indicate that Polish, Czech and Slovak students do not understand this important pedagogical skill. The Ukrainians once again noticed the need for high competences in the subjective treatment of children in the professional work of a teacher.

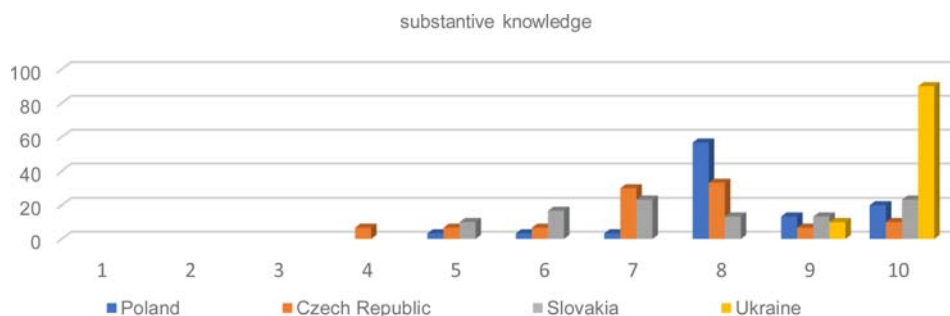


Figure 1. Key competences in professional development according to graduates of pre-school and early childhood pedagogy/data as a percentage/.

Respondents were divided on this issue too. However, apart from Polish students, others saw a great value in the creative attitude of the teacher.

The opinions presented above are surprising. All students from Ukraine were of the opinion that empathy is of marginal importance in the profession of early childhood education teacher.

The above data indicate that the respondents were not sure that teachers should have theoretical knowledge. Here again, all Ukrainians considered this competence as an asset in the profession.

To sum up, the opinions of students from Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia show much more similarities than differences in the assessment of the role of a teacher. Their opinions give a picture of how the work of a pre-school and early childhood education teacher is imagined. They conclude that they imagine the work of a teacher mainly as the care of a child. As far as pre-school education is concerned, one can partially agree with their ideas. However, it should be remembered that this period of children's development is also subject to education (see: Couchenour and Chrisman 2016). It is a period of great curiosity about the world, questions and constant exploration of the environment. The teacher must be prepared for such situations and be able to meet the requirements of the pupils. The respondents are not yet aware of the fact that especially pre-school education teachers have one of the most important roles to play – they shape and develop the core of a young person's future personality.

In the education of primary school classes I – III the situation does not change radically. Children are moving to a higher level of development and require the same attention from teachers, only with extended horizons. Polish, Czech and Slovak students still lack this awareness. Maybe it is a result of insufficient number of hours of internship? Maybe it is culturally determined? Or maybe such an image of a teacher of younger children has been reinforced in these societies for ages?

Teacher status has never been high in Eastern European countries (see: Simões, Lour-enço, and Costa 2018). For a long time now, there has been a saying in Poland: *I hope you'll be teaching strangers' kids*. It sounds like a curse, but it means that *there is nothing worse than a teacher's work*. It is not absolutely true, because it is a profession that brings a lot of satisfaction and contentment. However, it cannot be performed by everyone, because it is not easy and requires predispositions, especially mental ones. It is important that future teachers become those who are 'called to this profession'.

The answers given by students from Ukraine are worth mentioning. They chose the highest values in most of the answers (at levels 9–10), which means that they perceived the presented skills and competences as very important. The exceptions were answers to questions about empathy. The relations of guidance teacher with pre-school and early school children should be based mainly on empathy. Apart from emotional empathy, they should first of all notice the importance of cognitive empathy, based on the ability to adopt children's way of thinking, looking at reality from their perspective.

The results, although similar have some differences. This may be due to the state of knowledge or practice of some students. Observing often appearing average results (at levels 4–6), it can be concluded that such a vision can only be achieved by people who during their studies did not understand the teacher's function as a teacher of pre-school and early school children and the social mission of the teacher.

The next group of questions was a self-evaluation. The answers were also placed on a continuum from 1 to 10. The answers to the following questions were aimed at determining possible discrepancies between those skills and competencies which the students considered necessary in their teacher's work and those which they possess at the end of their university preparation for the profession (Figure 2).

Students from Ukraine rated their preparation for conducting classes with children the highest. This indicates the fact of a large number of hours of pedagogical internship and the awareness of the substantive knowledge acquired from various methodological subjects. Although the hours of practical and methodical classes in the other three remaining universities were quite similar, the students had low self-esteem compared to the Ukrainians.

Further questions also concerned the range of competences that students should possess in order to be considered fit to work with children. Each specified competence contained a definition to avoid misinterpretation.

The following lists show the self-assessment of specific professional competences (Figure 3).

The comparative approach to the abovementioned competences of the students seems to confirm their perception of the teaching profession. Self-assessment of the acquired competences of the Ukrainian students practically outclasses the other students. Analysing the assessment of the competences of Polish, Czech and Slovak female students one should state that: They have low self-esteem about the efficiency and effectiveness of their work in the future profession. Therefore, either during their studies they did not improve these competences, or the students were people who do not cope with the effectiveness of their actions in everyday life. This may also indicate low self-esteem of the respondents.

The assessment of language skills was also low. Students are not yet aware of the fact that contact with children is mainly based on verbal contact and must be adapted to their level of perception. By giving such answers, they admitted, in a way, that they are not able to talk to children in their language and that they are not able to establish good contact with children. However, it should be remembered that communication is not only about conversation, it is also about non-verbal skills, efficient exchange not only of thoughts, but also about manifesting feelings. Today's e-society is not able to function face to face with another person, but only to send and receive e-messages. This was confirmed by the answers of students.

The effectiveness of pro-social behaviour (cooperation) was already assessed higher than the previous skills. It has been noticed every year that young people have fewer inhibitions and assimilate easily in every environment. This may indicate the lack of

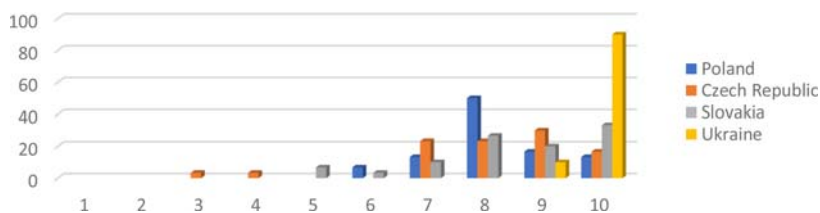


Figure 2. Students' self-assessment of acquired skills and knowledge that enable them to carry out activities with pre-school and early school age children in a competent way/data as a percentage/.

complexes in today’s youth. This is a good feature, but it would be good if the cooperation with others (children, parents and staff) were conscious and thoughtful, then it would have a positive dimension.

As for the results related to the creativity of the respondents, it should be considered that they are not optimistic. It is a pity that young people in their twenties assess themselves so low. The creativity of a teacher is closely related to the creativity of each person. Creativity is wondering, asking naive questions, it is openness, fun, a kind of return to childhood. Aren’t these the characteristics of a teacher?

It may seem that for several decades now, as mentioned earlier, we have had an e-society, that young people do not part with their mobile phones, which are like computers today. It seems that the use of new information technologies is not a problem for them. However, the respondents assessed their skills in this area very low. Once again, only Ukrainians admitted that they have no problem with it. It is surprising that the other students assessed themselves so badly. After all, during their studies, they are conducting classes in computer science, using multimedia projectors, educational programmes, etc.

The last issue was that of moral self-reflection. Once again, students from Ukraine ‘outclassed’ their colleagues from other countries. This means that their awareness of this issue increased during their studies. Every teacher should try to be a role model in the sphere of education and culture. Although this is an issue that can be evaluated, but let’s hope that something like ‘growing into a job’ will happen in others. Acquiring practice in the profession they will treat it seriously and will fulfil (to put it pathetically)

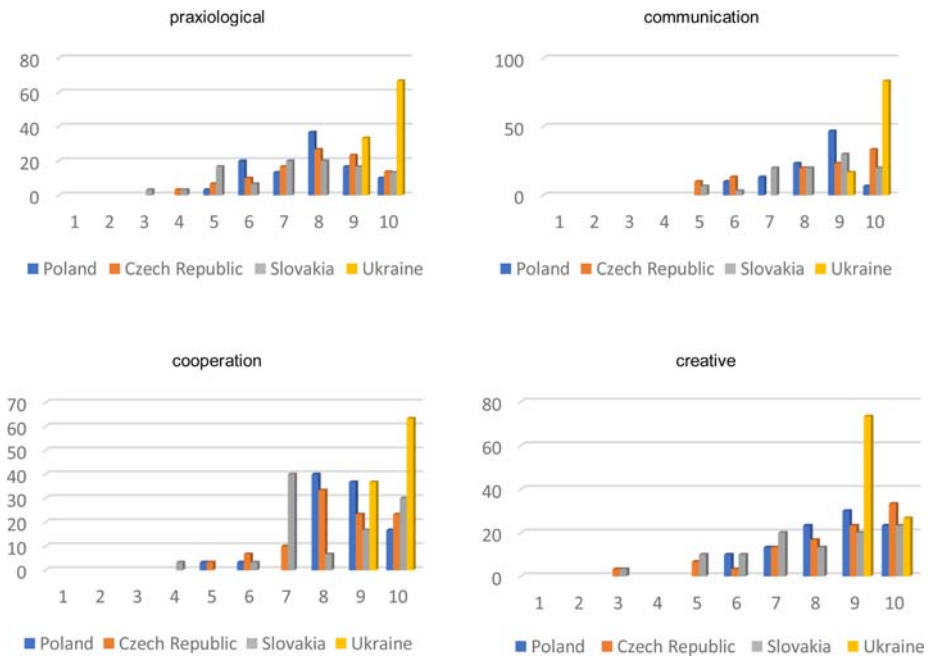


Figure 3. Necessary competences to work with children acquired in the course of studies in the assessment of students/as a percentage/.

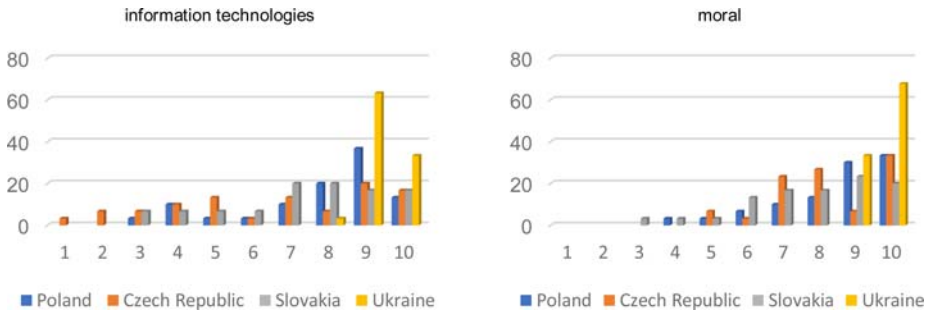


Figure 3 Continued

their moral duty towards society, they will educate young people in patriotism and develop their awareness of functioning ‘for society and within society’.

The stay in pre-schools and schools during pedagogical practices was an opportunity to observe the style and methods used by professionally active teachers to teach children. The acquired knowledge, various types of new qualifications and skills associated with the continuous development of modern educational technologies should make students aware of the need to seek attractive methods of work. The next question was to obtain knowledge whether the respondents feel the need to implement pedagogical innovations (Figure 4).

As you can see, most of them noticed the need for innovation. This is satisfactory, because today’s education and upbringing of children cannot be based on old forms and methods of work. Modernity (in every area of life) forces different approaches than even a decade earlier. Today’s children are significantly different from those of a few years ago, so teachers must follow these changes and introduce even unconventional and effective methods of working with them (Figure 5).

Unlike the Ukrainian students, Polish, Czech and Slovakian students had a low rating for the level of knowledge acquired during their studies. This is surprising, because the universities that they represented have a long tradition in educating students (the beginnings of Palacký University in the Czech Republic date back to the end of the sixteenth century, the university in Slovakia is 70 years old, in Poland 50, and in Ukraine 25 years old). And since this is the case, the curricula of the studies are adapted to the field of study

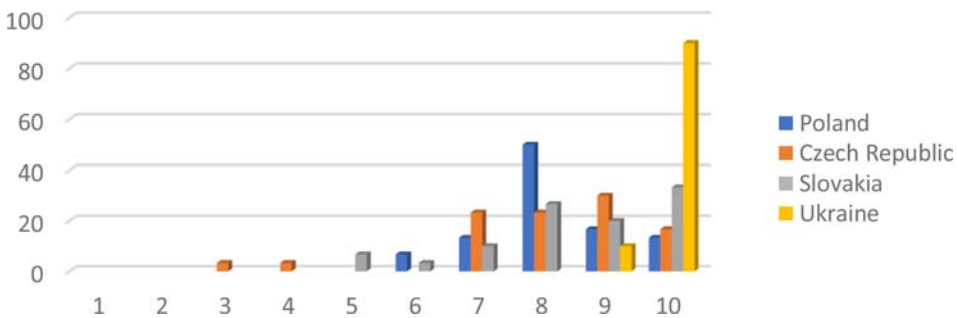


Figure 4. Perception of the need for implementation of pedagogical innovations in pre-schools and schools.

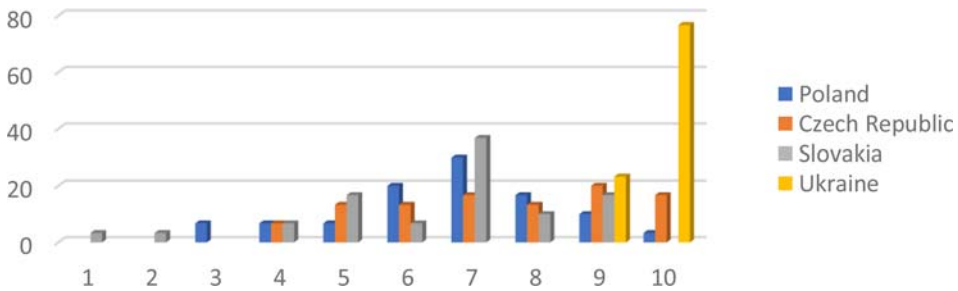


Figure 5. Evaluation of the level of knowledge acquired during the studies.

and are periodically monitored by accreditation committees. Does it mean the graduates are ‘accidental’ students or maybe they are so demanding? (Figure 6)

The willingness and perception of the need for self-improvement is a positive and promising feature of the respondents. They will find that without participation in courses, conferences and workshops, without undertaking additional post-graduate studies it will be difficult for them to function in their profession and pursue it with satisfaction (Figure 7).

The last question was to obtain information which of the given conditions of effective teaching and educational work they consider important in the teaching profession. The answers to each question were distributed very similarly. Once again, Ukrainian students pointed out the importance of all the conditions mentioned above, while their colleagues from other countries acted as if they were ‘hesitant’ or did not understand the mission and role of the guidance teacher.

Discussion

Recruitment to the teaching profession appears to be a problem and the question arises: are there anywhere in Europe any pedagogical universities where, for example, pedagogical talent and personality predispositions of candidates for teachers are examined during entrance exams? After all, during the entrance exams to academies of physical education the level of physical fitness and motor skills is examined, sometimes knowledge of biology, physics or chemistry (e.g. through certificate analysis). An acting school candidate faces the exam board to determine the talent for acting; a music school candidate is

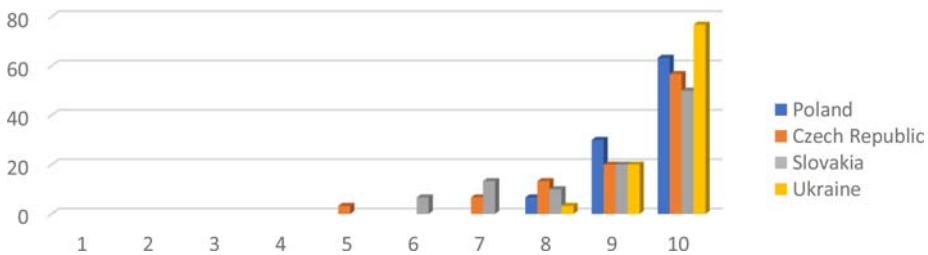


Figure 6. Assessment of the need for self-improvement, self-education and further training/as a percentage/.

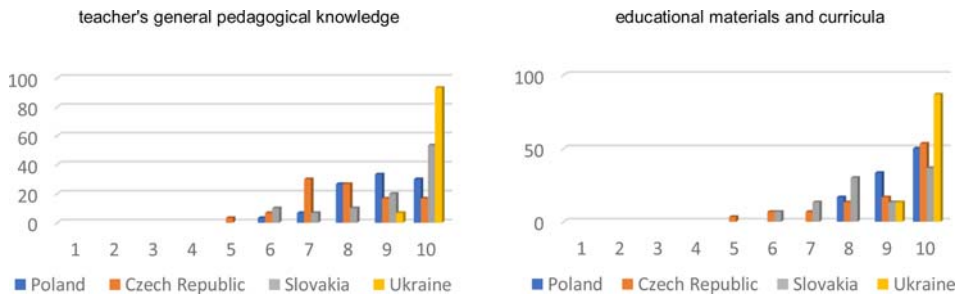


Figure 7. Important conditions for effective didactic and educational work of pre-school and early childhood education teachers/as a percentage/.

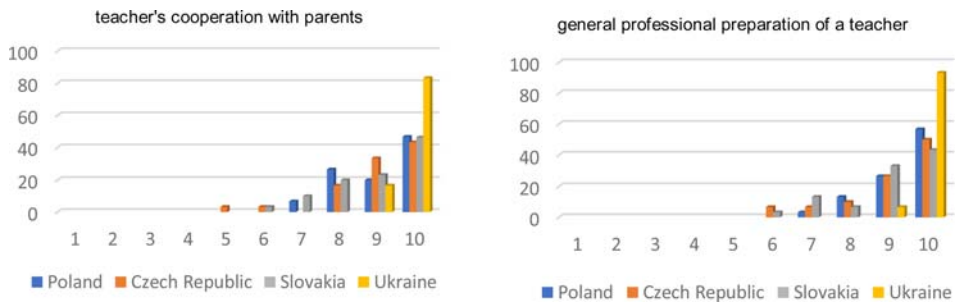


Figure 7 Continued

subject to determine musical predisposition (e.g. hearing, sense of rhythm). A future teacher, a person who has influence on shaping the attitudes of children and young people for several years, is wrongly chosen for the job already at the stage of 'selection'. Unfortunately, this will not have a positive impact on the effectiveness of school work and, in particular, on efficiency of teachers. Will such teachers be able to meet high social and educational requirements and expectations?

Shouldn't we develop common, standardised forms and methods in the EU to check the aptitudes and motives for choosing the teaching profession? They will certainly not be 100% effective, but at the outset it will be possible to make an initial selection.

Special recruitment methods for teaching studies are not universal. In all countries, admission to teacher training courses is subject to specific conditions. However, admission criteria and selection methods are different both in terms of their content and number; they can be defined at the level of particular educational establishment or at the level of the education authorities. In some countries, responsibilities are shared between the educational establishments and the education authorities, so both can participate in the decision-making process. The main necessary condition in European countries is to have a certificate of passing an examination at the end of upper secondary education. Secondary education results are taken into account in about half of the countries.

The Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning defines a common reference framework for

qualifications in EU countries. The framework acts as a translation device to make qualifications more readable and easier to understand in different countries and systems in Europe. In the EQF, qualification levels are defined in terms of learning outcomes (descriptors), which fall under the categories of knowledge, skills and social competences. According to these descriptors, it is possible to assume what skills a higher education graduate possessed. Knowledge is described as theoretical or factual, skills are described as cognitive or practical, and competences are defined in terms of responsibility and autonomy (see: Cedefop 2012, 2013, 2015).

And how to test the elementary soft and hard skills and competencies of people entering universities, which are useful in the teaching profession?

Conclusion

Despite a significant number of studies and research on teacher education models, the problem is still open and will be subject of further analysis.

Tibor Navracsics, Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, wrote in the foreword to Eurydice Report:

Investment in teachers is crucial, as reiterated in the Council Conclusions on effective teacher education in May 2014: Ministers agreed that Member States need to raise the quality of the teaching profession and make it more attractive and prestigious. This means that they have to carefully select and recruit teachers, provide them with effective education, retain them in the profession, give them early career support, and offer them regular opportunities to renew their skills and competences, including those based on new technologies. (2015, 3)

In view of the current global socio-economic and technological context, education is at the heart of the European strategy for sustainable competitiveness and development.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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