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Preschool teacher assistants and the quality of preschool education – prolegomena for research in Poland

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Abstract

A lion's share of research into preschool education is constituted by studies relevant to the qualifications and competences of teachers. The research in question is connected with improving the quality of the work performed by the institutions of preschool education. In this context, the problem of preschool teacher assistants, constituting an observable and important element of the life of nursery school, is disregarded. In the literature of the subject, these people are referred to as invisible employees. Ascertaining that there has been no research into this subject-matter in Poland, the authoress concentrated her attention upon presenting the results of research into this subject-matter conducted in foreign countries. What the research in question renders clear is that it is essential to look more closely at the subject-matter being described and to implement an appropriate research.

Keywords: the qualifications of the teachers of preschool education, the quality of education, looking after a child, preschool teacher assistants.

Introduction

Let us commence with explaining relevant terminology. In this article, the term 'preschool teacher assistants' is applied to refer to individuals employed in

nursery school in order to maintain peace and quiet in a preschool classroom, to assist children in everyday activities, for instance, washing up, consuming meals or using a toilet, and also providing them with care and safety in nursery school. This term is in common application in the institutions of preschool education in Poland, even though it is not found in *The Polish Standard Classification of Occupations and Specialisations for the Purpose of Serving the Needs of the Labour Market of 7th August, 2014* (*Journal of Laws* of 2018, item 227, and also of 2021, item 2285). In the above-mentioned document, under the number 53120, there is an entry referring to the profession of 'a nursery school teacher assistant', the description of which is identical to the scope of responsibilities of a preschool teacher assistant. For that very reason, I treat these two names as referring to the same notion. As well as them, I use the abbreviation 'ECEC', standing for the following name: Early Childhood Education and Care, which is applied in Western literature.

A succinct profile of the capacity of 'a preschool teacher assistant' contained in the monograph of Anna Klim-Klimaszewska (2005) gives rise to the conclusion that the tasks encompassed within the scope of assisting a teacher of preschool education are not restricted to care and assistance activities. The authoress writes that 'both a teacher and assistant' [...] 'are responsible, to an identical degree, for managing the process of teaching and learning, but also that the leading role is that of a teacher, and the role of the other person consists in serving in an auxiliary capacity (Klim-Klimaszewska, 2005, p. 127). Further on, she states precisely that part of the tasks with which a preschool teacher assistant is charged involves physical work, for instance, cleaning up a room, preparing a room for classes, having an afternoon nap *etc.*, but adds that a teacher assistant is also responsible for 'educational tasks. [...] standing by the teacher's side, a teacher assistant participates in conducting classes, and also in all the important stages of a day' (Klim-Klimaszewska, 2005, p. 128). A teacher assistant talks to children, instructs them in the field of correct pronunciation and appropriate behaviours towards other individuals in a group the classes of which are conducted by the teacher in question. A teacher assistant spends time when a teacher is absent (and the working day of a teacher counts 5 hours daily) with the children entrusted to the assistant care abroad. Together with the teacher, a teacher assistant looks after the equipment of a room and the interior design of it. A teacher assistant prepares decorations, space for special interest groups' activities *etc.* A teacher assistant assists a teacher in preparing teaching aids, conducting games *etc.* 'A teacher and a preschool teacher assistant ought to make a very precise arrangement relevant to their activities so as to make sure that their teaching work be integrated and consistent. The reason for that fact is that the entire work done with a group of preschool attendees is determined by both of these individuals, and they are responsible for that to an identical

degree. It is upon their abilities and friendly collaboration that the ambience in a group, the well-being of children and also learning outcomes of them are dependent' (Klim-Klimaszewska, 2005, p. 128).

The description presented hereinabove gives rise to the conclusion that individuals employed in the capacity of a preschool teacher assistant ought to possess pedagogical qualifications and competences. Nevertheless, the legal regulations fail to determine the requirements applicable in the case of a candidate applying for a position of a preschool teacher assistant (care personnel member in crèche, 2021). Virtually everyone can become a member of this profession in Poland. In the context of the above-mentioned responsibilities of this group of employees, it is, therefore, justifiable to ask a question whether preschool teacher assistants ought not to be expected to have acquired appropriate professional competences? From the point of view of contemporary discourse on the qualifications and the competences of contemporary teachers, this question appears to be important. The review of the most recent research within the scope of preschool pedagogics in Poland indicates that this problem is virtually never taken under consideration. An auxiliary personnel of nursery school is not observed, either, by those who attempt to reflect upon pedeutology. In the Western literature of the subject, a term 'invisible workers' was even coined, nevertheless, unlike in Poland, the state of research in the West shows that the problem of a preschool teacher assistant is observed and researched more frequently, for instance, in the context of the so-called 'competent system' (vide: Ordon, 2011, pp. 79–96). It is the objective of this article to render a reader more acquainted with the state, and the directions, of an international research into the problem of a preschool teacher assistant with the intention to initiate this kind of research in Poland. The empirical material in this article was collected through a literature study, observations, and interviews with preschool teacher assistants in Poland.

Preschool teacher assistants in an international research into the qualifications of preschool personnel

The profession of preschool education teacher is one of the regulated professions in Poland and the European Union. As Gruza and Hordyjewicz (2014) write, in our country, "Regulated professions are professions whose access is restricted by legal regulations. They specify the necessity of having the appropriate education, meeting qualification requirements or other additional requirements in order to be allowed to practice such a profession" (Gruza, Hordyjewicz, 2014, 54). According to *Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications* the

regulated profession is “a professional activity or group of professional activities, access to which, the pursuit of which, or one of the modes of pursuit of which is subject, directly or indirectly, by virtue of legislative, regulatory or administrative provisions to the possession of specific professional qualifications: in particular, the use of a professional title limited by legislative, regulatory or administrative provisions to holders of a given professional qualification shall constitute a mode of pursuit” (Directive, 2005, 6).

The professional qualifications of a preschool education teacher in Poland are defined by the Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z 1 sierpnia 2017 r. w sprawie szczegółowych kwalifikacji wymaganych od nauczycieli (2017). A person practicing this profession must have:

— second-cycle studies or a single master’s degree, in a field (specialty) consistent with the classes taught, and has a pedagogical preparation

or

— second-cycle studies or single master’s studies, in a field of study whose learning outcomes referred to in the Law of December 22, 2015 on the Integrated Qualification System, in terms of knowledge and skills, include the content of the classes taught, as indicated in the core curriculum for this educational stage, and has a pedagogical preparation,

or

— a second degree or a single master’s degree, in a field (specialty) other than those listed, and postgraduate studies in the field of the classes taught, and has a pedagogical preparation.

— a teacher training institution in a specialty corresponding to the classes taught,

or

— a teacher training institution in a specialty other than those listed, and a qualification course in the scope of the classes taught

or

— first-cycle studies, second-cycle studies or a single master’s degree, in the field of pedagogy in a specialization that prepares you to work with children of preschool or early school age

or

— teacher training institution in the specialty preparing to work with children at preschool or early school age (Rozporządzenie, 2017).

As mentioned in the introduction, preschool teacher assistants is not a legally regulated profession either in Poland or in the European Union.

The contemporary researchers of the educational systems ascertain the existence of numerous differences in the aspect of the level of the professional preparation of teachers employed in preschool and early-school education. An extreme case is that of the United States, in which each and every one of 50

states has different standards within the scope of child care and nursing. These standards may be confined to a basic preparation to nursing a child, but also encompass holding a certificate of completing the first-degree studies, or even holding a certificate of the second-degree studies in the same major as well (Whitebook M. *et al*, 2009).

A comparative research into solutions applied in different countries is rendered more difficult by differences in organising care and teaching in the case of children at the preschool age. In the literature of the subject, it is possible to come across differentiating between split systems (in which care is provided in a separate crèche) and unitary systems (in which care in the case of a child at the age of no more than 3 years is provided in the same institution at which the child's nursery school is situated). In Europe, it is customary to differentiate between requirements within the scope of qualifications, and, generally lower, requirements which are applicable in the case of teachers working with younger children (at the age of no more than 3 years) whereas the higher requirements are applicable in the case of teachers working with older children. It is usually sufficient to hold a certificate of completing a course in the field of infant and young children care, and it is not always required to possess pedagogical competences. Nevertheless, actions the objective of which is achieving an improvement in the general level of education amongst the personnel of the institutions of preschool education are undertaken all the time. For instance, in England, the government has introduced a position of a specialist within the scope of early childhood (Early Years Professional), encompassing into this group teachers and other specialists, providing them with the possibilities of pursuing professional careers and improving their qualifications. The intended result of that was to raise the status of individuals working with young children. In practice, nevertheless, emphasis has been placed upon the in-service education of those teachers who were already employed whereas the junior personnel benefitted from the new possibilities to a smaller degree.

An attempt to compare requirements relevant to preschool personnel was made by Anne Lillvist, Anette Sandberg, Sonja Seridan and Pia Williams (2014) in their research. They applied the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), developed in the year 1997 in order to homogenise educational standards. The Classification encompasses 7 levels of education: ISCED 1 – primary education, ISCED 2 – middle school education, ISCED 3 – secondary education, ISCED 4 – post-secondary education, ISCED 5 – a short-cycle higher education (in Poland, the latter one is represented by the courses conducted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy). It is only ISCED 6 that is compatible with studies completed by receiving the degree of a bachelor, whereas ISCED 7 is compatible with the studies for the degree of a master. Applying the Classification renders it possible to set against in a comparative manner solutions applied

in different countries. In Table 1, information about the qualifications of the employees responsible for caring after the youngest children and preschool education in the selected countries of Europe can be found.

Table 1

Requirements within the scope of the education of personnel working with children at the age from 0 to 6 in the selected countries of Europe

No.	State	The lowest required level of education	Institution responsible for children at the age from 1 to 5 or 6 years	Guidelines or programs of looking after children
1.	Sweden	ISCED5A	Unitary system	Program for children at the age of 1 to 6 years
2.	Finland	ISCED5A	Unitary system	Program for children at the age of 0 to 6 years
3.	Norway	ISCED5A	Unitary system	Program for children at the age of 0 to 6 years
4.	Denmark	ISCED5A	Unitary system / split system	Program for children at the age of 0.5 to 6 years
5.	England	ISCED3	Split system	Program for children at the age of above between 2 to 3 years
6.	The Netherlands	ISCED3	Split system	No recommendations applicable on a nationwide scale
7.	Italy	ISCED3	Split system	Program for children at the age above between 2 and 3 years. No recommendations applicable on a nationwide scale as relevant to working with the youngest children
8.	France	ISCED5b (for managers)	Split system	Program for children at the age above between 2 and 3 years. No recommendations applicable on a nationwide scale as relevant to working with the youngest children
9.	Poland	ISCED4	Split system	Program for children at the age above between 2 and 3 years. No recommendations applicable on a nationwide scale as relevant to working with the youngest children

Source: Lillvist *et al*, 2014, p. 5.

In the case of numerous countries, it is observed that there exists a correlation between the kind of the system of the ECEC and the degree of the professionalisation of employees. Mathias Urban, Michel Vandebroek, Arianna Lazari, Katrien Van Laere and Jan Peeters have ascertained that a lower level of

professionalism is observable, in particular, in the case of care for the youngest in states in which there are separate nursery schools and crèches. Exceptions are constituted by France and the Netherlands, in which it has been proved possible to ensure the high qualifications of care personnel in private institutions, taking advantage of financial subsidies from the state or local communities. The professionalisation of daytime care personnel members remains, nevertheless, a problem in the states preferring a unitary system as well. The conditions of life and work, and the education, of them (and of their families alike), are inferior to those who work in a unitary system (Urban *et al.*, 2011, p. 22).

The results of their research indicate that the competences of personnel are one of the most important markers of the quality of the ECEC. It is recommended that 60% of personnel be professionally prepared at the level no lower than ISCED5 – equivalent to the certificate of completing the first degree studies (Urban, 2011, p. 27). For that very reason, the authors placed a lot of emphasis upon the postulate of inclusive education for child care personnel members (the auxiliary staff or assistants). Regardless of the fact that they provide a substantial support for the highly-qualified teachers of preschool education, they remain not encompassed in the course of diagnosing the needs and directions of the development of preschool education and caring about the youngest: 'Their role in contributing to high-quality ECEC services deserves more attention, as quite frequently assistants are a first and important point of contact for children and families' (Urban *et al.*, 2011, p. 30).

The scope of the expected competences of care personnel members is very low, and, in the majority of countries, there are no requirements relevant to their professional preparation. It is only in France and Slovenia that the requirements were determined in detail, and practical training is provided (Urban *et al.*, 2011, p. 30). They have a restricted access to professional development programs, restricted possibilities to participate in the meetings of the ECEC team, plan collaboration and prepare documents relevant to pedagogical work.

The authors of the research draw our attention as well to the fact that disregarding the significance of preschool care may result in dangerous consequences for pedagogics as a science: 'Assistants are frequently responsible for tasks that are considered to be practical caring tasks, as opposed to education – an understanding which, in turn, narrows down the notion of education to formalised learning and may jeopardise a holistic approach to pedagogy' (Urban *et al.*, 2011, p. 30).

In the case of numerous countries, this is a major challenge to appreciate preschool teacher assistants without depriving this occupation of the status and the importance of qualifications. There are attempts to solve this problem by means of the shared professional development and team-building meetings of personnel, investing in the paths of development and acquiring qualifications,

which preschool teacher assistants cannot acquire on their own. The research has revealed that some of preschool teachers started their careers as assistants not yet possessing pedagogical qualifications, but that, in the course of their career, they acquired an appropriate education and achieved a high level of professionalism. That was possible owing to the support of the management of the institution of preschool education, which accurately identified the competences of individuals employed in nursery school as assistants.

An accurate diagnosis of the above-mentioned crucial competences for work with children is more probable in the countries in which a holistic approach to the professionalism of the personnel of nursery school is adopted. One of the leaders in this field is New Zealand, in which three indicators are taken under consideration in the aspect of the professionalism of the personnel employed in preschool education: the style of pedagogical work, expertise and experience, and also ability to collaborate (Dalli, 2010). Emphasis is placed upon the fact that it is as early as at the stage of studies that the future teachers of preschool education are required to develop specific competences within the scope of knowledge, abilities and attitudes. It is no different in Sweden, where the work and knowledge of an entire preschool personnel is considered in a holistic manner (Kusima, Sandberg 2010). In accordance with the opinion of Moore (2007), the professionalism of the employees of preschool education is developed in two ways. First and foremost, in the course of tertiary education, in connection with the conceptions of education, and also in the course of work under the influence exerted by the expectations of an inspector visiting a given nursery school and the vision of education adhered to by the inspector in question; second of all, this, to a large degree theoretical, model of professionalism is redefined in the light of personal experiences, professional development and social expectations relevant to a teacher of preschool education, which change all the time. The competences of a teacher are, therefore, the resultant of the educational politics of the state, general objectives and presumptions relevant to preschool education and social expectations relevant to a preschool teacher.

Seeing the matter in this light, Urban *et al.* (2011) recommend developing the possibilities of professional development involving preschool teacher assistants not only in tasks in terms of care, but also in such terms as are related to education:

- encompassing the development of the democratic structures of decision-making,
- collective reflection of teachers and teacher assistants, acting to attain a common objective and following the same program,
- providing opportunities for the participation of assistants in improving qualifications, and developmental programs,

- developing a close collaboration between assistants, qualified teachers, instructors and the inspectors of the ECEC,
- concentration upon practical education and providing opportunities for the development and professionalisation, in particular, for assistants from minorities, marginalised and deprived of support (Urban *et al*, 2011, pp. 30–31).

Upon the basis of research dedicated to the qualifications of a preschool teacher assistant the objective of which was to improve the quality of the ECEC in the European Union, in 2016, a special report bearing the following title: Professionalisation of Childcare Assistants in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC): Pathways towards Qualification (Professionalisation, 2016) was published. The report encompassed data from 15 countries, one of which was Poland, relevant to a preschool teacher assistant and the opportunities of professional development in the case of them. The researchers, organisations and politicians are in agreement that the quality of preschool education and care are dependent upon the qualified personnel and the further development of the ECEC. Below, the most important conclusions are presented:

1. Division into the teachers of preschool education and their assistants consolidates division into responsibilities connected with education, and also the separate ones, connected with care in preschool education. This situation is not compatible with the holistic vision of education and care, which are understood as combined in terms of cognition, emotions and socialisation. Within this scope, the recommendation for the ECEC consists in the integration of care and education at the supra-institutional, regional or national level;
2. The status of a preschool teacher assistants remains to be the one of invisible employees. The data on them in the European Union, such as relevant to their education and social background, competences and sex, are not sufficient. It is recommended that educational authorities render this group of employees observable by means of collecting data about them. The employees in question ought to be referred to in the legislation relevant to the personnel of the ECEC;
3. Preschool teacher assistants enjoy fewer opportunities of improving their qualifications. There is a demand for providing them with the opportunities of the kind in question. They are not expected to possess specific predispositions upon permitting them to join the profession in question, nevertheless, should it occur that they may face the threat of losing a job because of the lack of appropriate qualifications, they ought to be provided with the possibility of acquiring them for the purpose of not losing their job. That does not mean that each and every one of them is to improve their qualification, nevertheless, the system of the ECEC ought to encourage them to improve their qualifications and facilitate it. It is recommended that legisla-

tors investigate and identify the previous experience and competences of auxiliary personnel (assistants) already employed. It is indispensable to provide them with pedagogical counselling, and also to support those members of this profession that come from ethnic minorities and groups having a low social-economic status;

4. Employing a preschool teacher assistant is a significant means of attracting males to teaching profession. Legislators ought to provide conditions conducive to employing males in this job; alike that, employment offices ought to encourage young males to work in nursery school and assist them with advice in the process of obtaining the qualifications of a teacher;
5. A lot of researchers have placed emphasis upon that fact that a substantial per cent of a preschool teacher assistant, in particular, in large cities, come from ethnic minorities or lower social strata. This situation is conducive to divisions in the environment of the employees of the ECEC. The member states ought to ensure that divisions due to qualification, language, sex and social-cultural background are best avoided;
6. The individual competences of the employees of the ECEC ought to be treated as a part of the system, in which the specialist preparation of teachers, and also the adapted paths of acquiring qualifications by assistants, constitute an organisational entity, ensuring the professional development for all the members of the ECEC. Amongst the recommendations connected with this remark there are the following solutions: ensuring in a job contract that there are remunerated 'child-free hours' for teachers and assistants, in the course of which they can share their reflections relevant to the job which they perform, common meetings of the personnel of the ECEC in order to organise classes, encompassing planning, observing and drawing up documents, setting up the system of counselling and pedagogical coaching to support the team of the ECEC in their practice of reflecting upon their work, system of the monitoring of CPD (Continuous Professional Development), guaranteeing assistants the possibility of taking advantage of the opportunities provided by the CPD;
7. Competences and professional experience of assistants are not frequently referred to, and evaluated, in the categories of professional preparation. A model of professional competences and professional preparation applicable to assistants, which are to a broad extent within the scope of the educational needs of a child in their holistic vision;
8. Taking under consideration the diversification of society, preliminary preparation to work, and also further professional development of all the members of the ECEC ought to encompass broadly-understood social-pedagogical competences;

9. It was ascertained that there is a need to conduct research into the role of preschool teacher assistant in the development of the sector of the ECEC, into the perception of their own role by the assistant in nursery schools, and also into the question, whether it will contribute to integrating care and education in the preschool environment (Profesjonalizacja 2016, pp. 6–8).

Final remarks

The presented state of international research gives rise to the conclusion that preschool education is a system of institutions, employees and social environment striving to achieve improvement in the quality of services provided for children within the scope of care and teaching. The need to investigate the role and qualifications of a preschool teacher assistant in Poland more profoundly is connected with that. Hitherto, this need has remained ignored, preschool teacher assistants are still invisible, and the knowledge about this job is restricted to the image of an avuncular ‘auntie’, always able to comfort a crying child, who finds it difficult to part with their parent in the morning. Sometimes, this image is shattered by reports of scandalising behaviours, such as, for instance, about the mistreatment (physical and emotional) of children (who, for instance, were tied to their beds when they did not want to sleep, forced to eat by pressing the nose shut tight so that they would have to open their mouth – the latter case concerns two care personnel members from Wrocław crèche-nursery school Zaczarowana Kraina Puchatka (gazetawroclawska, 2019). The research concerned with the perception of their own work by preschool teacher assistants, their qualifications, competences and possibilities of acquiring as well as perfecting them, relations with teachers and the head, with parents, and, last, but not least, with children, as well as the level of satisfaction with the performed profession, may provide information significant for improving the quality of the work of the institutions of preschool education. A lot of research potential is associated with questions relevant to the expectations of a head, the teachers of nursery school and parents relevant to a preschool teacher assistant.

At the beginning of 2022, pilot studies were conducted amongst the 45 heads of nursery schools in Subcarpathian voivodeship with the application of a survey questionnaire; the study gave rise to the conclusion that the heads in question find it required to integrate the personnel of the institutions of preschool education. Opinions relevant to involving teacher assistants in decision-making processes were not identical; the majority, nevertheless, supported increasing their involvement in children’s activities based on games, and also in the physical ones. In this context, the interrogated heads observe as well the need to provide preschool teacher assistants with the opportunities to acquire

pedagogical qualifications (the results of the study are possessed by the author-ess). As it has already been mentioned, the objective of the survey was to test the rationale behind undertaking similar research in Poland. The results should be found promising and the studies will be continued, whilst their scope is extended.

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Pomoc przedszkolna a jakość edukacji przedszkolnej – prolegomena do badań w Polsce

Streszczenie

Dużą część badań nad edukacją przedszkolną stanowią badania nad kwalifikacjami i kompetencjami nauczycieli. Są one związane z podnoszeniem jakości pracy placówek przedszkolnych. W tym kontekście bagatelizowane jest zagadnienie pomocy nauczyciela przedszkolnego, stanowiącego widoczny i ważny element życia przedszkola. W literaturze przedmiotu określa się ich mianem niewidzialnych pracowników. Konstatując brak badań na ten temat w Polsce, autorka skoncentrowała się na ukazaniu wyników badań na ten temat za granicą. Wyłania się z nich potrzeba bliższego przyjrzenia się opisywanemu zagadnieniu i wdrożenia odpowiednich badań.

Słowa kluczowe: kwalifikacje nauczyciela edukacji przedszkolnej, jakość edukacji, opieka nad dzieckiem, pomoc przedszkolna.