

Analysis of Professional Needs of Teachers

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The study problem

The study presented here is an attempt of joining the discussion on professional development of teachers. This problem appears every time when we speak about the improvement of the quality of education offered by educational institutions.

Professional needs are understood as problems appearing in the teacher's work, which he or she is unable to handle himself/herself and awaits some assistance.

The vital questions we were seeking answers to where:

- What is the level and the hierarchy of professional needs of teachers?
- What is the level of professional support that teachers feel they obtain from different kinds of supporting bodies?
- Is there a difference in the professional support the teachers feel they obtain between the analysed systems/provinces?

The study method

The study concerned two populations: teachers of integrated education, teachers of Polish, mathematics and a foreign language, teaching in public primary schools and junior high schools in the Lower Silesia and a similar group of teachers in the Podlaskie provinces.

Schools were drawn at random based on official authorised estimates received from MENiS (Polish Ministry of National Education and Sport). The sample covered public schools, excluding special schools. The sample was divided into two layers: country and city/town schools.

The study comprised 689 respondents: 340 teachers from the Lower Silesia province and 349 from the Podlaskie province. All the participants completed a questionnaire concerning vocational needs, while 68 persons participated in an in-depth interview.

The study covered 105 integrated education teachers, 122 teachers of Polish at primary schools, 95 teachers of Polish at junior high schools, 106 teachers of mathematics at primary schools, 85 teachers of mathematics at junior high schools, 98 teachers of a foreign language at primary schools and 78 teachers of a foreign language at junior high schools.

The questionnaire introduced 25 problems to the respondents for their consideration, including:

- issues: from the choice of the curriculum and schoolbooks to the organisation of out-of-class activities;
- educational issues: from school aggression to the school self-government;
- cooperation with parents;
- professional improvement and the rules of teachers' promotion;
- conflicts between school staff members.

The respondents were to answer the following question: what is the degree of assistance that they need to handle a specific problem. If a respondent declared that with respect to a specific issue he or she *definitely needed assistance* or that *he or she needed assistance to some minor extent*, he/she was to estimate the extent to which he/she could count on support of the following bodies:

- the school head,
- colleagues from my school,
- methodical counsellors,
- professional association of teachers,
- trade unions,
- professional literature.

The evaluation was carried out using a simple, three-point scale:

1. I cannot count on any assistance at all,
2. to a minor extent,
3. to a major extent.

Level and hierarchy of professional needs of teachers

First, we should point out to the fact that the teachers would very rarely choose the answer *I definitely need assistance* in the specific area. It was only three times that this rate accounted for ca. 20%, and only six times that it exceeded 10%. For the absolute majority of problems, the express declaration of the assistance requirement was rare. As much as 45% of

teachers did not make that declaration even once! The same rate level was recorded in both provinces. Does this mean that the teachers feel entirely competent and rarely need help? Admitting that one needs assistance might be felt as threatening since it might potentially spoil the image of a professionalist. When this assumption is true, we would have a serious psychological problem. Such defensive demeanour can constitute an essential barrier to the participation and fruitful utilisation of the professional development supporting system. What can we do to mitigate this defensive attitude? It is an important issue in the process of building an effective support system for the professional development of teachers.

The declarations of the teachers were used as grounds for building a hierarchy of their professional needs. The problems

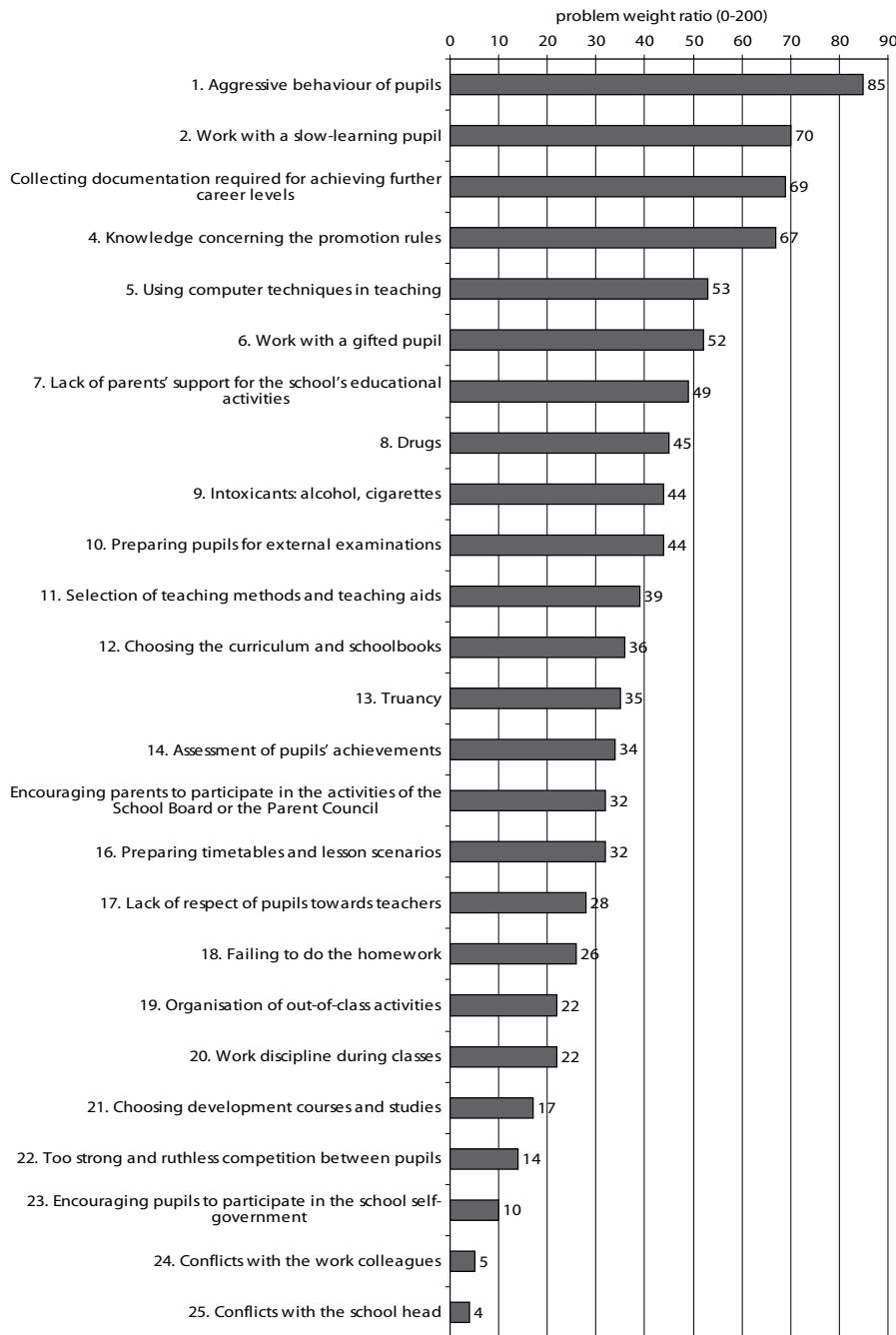


Fig1. The hierarchy of the teacher's professional needs

were put into order according to the rate of their indication frequency in the questionnaire when answering *I definitely need assistance* or *I need assistance to some minor extent*. The problem weight ratio was a sum of the percentage points for the above choices, and the rate of replies *I definitely need assistance* was multiplied by 2.

The hierarchy of the needs for the entire teachers' group is shown in the table 1 on the left.

The top ten problems include 4 general educational problems (1,7,8,9), 2 related to the promotion system (3,4) and 4 related to classroom related teaching (2,5,6,10). Notably, none of the traditional methodical problems, such as selection of teaching methods or preparing lesson scenarios, was included among the top ten problems.

The level of professional support that teachers feel they obtain from different kinds of the supporting bodies in the analysed counselling systems

Let us analyse the level of support provided with respect to the educational problems which were listed among the top ten.

Ranked first and a clear leader of the ranking was the aggressive behaviour of pupils. Let us point out that only 6% of teachers declared no such problem existed in their work.

Who can the teachers count on when attempting to solve this problem? The teachers' opinions are presented in the table below.

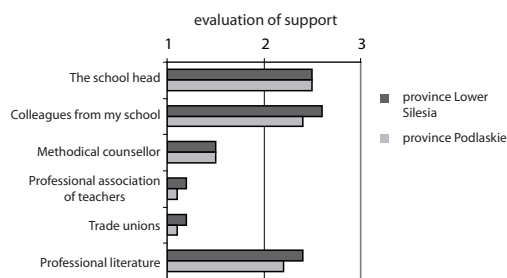


Fig 2. Professional support the teachers feel - Aggressive behaviour of pupils

Among the evaluated support-providing bodies, the most helpful are those from the immediate environment: the school heads and colleagues from the same school. The support received from the professional literature received a high score, too – the mean result of ca. 2.3 shows the average opinion to be oscillating between the two indications: *helpful to a minor extent* and *helpful to a major extent*. Here, we observe one statistically significant difference between the analysed provinces: the Lower-Silesian teachers tend to give higher marks to this type of support ($t_{411} = 2.4, p < 0.05$).

The support of counsellors scored significantly lower. The mean result of 1.5 shows that the average mark falls right between *I cannot count on any assistance at all* and *to a minor extent*. Why is it so? Perhaps a counsellor is "too distant" and thus unable to rush with help whenever needed. Why in this case was the support of professional literature evaluated quite high? It seems that the counsellor fails to support the teacher with regard to this very important problem.

Professional associations and trade unions found themselves at the „bottom“ of the supporting bodies' ladder. Such a result is sad, yet, considering the Polish reality - not so surprising. The associations are scarce and weak, and the trade unions - rather reluctant to get involved in building professional competencies of teachers.

Another problem concerning the pupils' education listed

among the top ten was the lack of parents' support for the school's educational activities. In this case the support the teachers feel they can receive from all kinds of different supporting bodies looks pretty much the same as above. The only difference lies in a somewhat lower score of the professional literature and – unfortunately – also a lower score of the counsellor's support.

Further two problems related to the pupils' education were associated widely speaking with intoxicants. In the case of drugs, counsellors have a stronger influence as far as their position in the professional support hierarchy is concerned. The professional literature raised its position there, too. Unfortunately, if we talk about "traditional" intoxicants such as alcohol or cigarettes – the situation goes back to "normal".

In conclusion to the analysis of support for the educational problems, we can say that teachers expecting assistance in this field declare they can count primarily on the assistance of the "on site" supporting bodies – the school head office staff and the school colleagues. The support provided by the professional literature scored slightly lower, while a definitely lower mark was recorded in the case of counsellors. The trade unions and the professional association of teachers turned out to be absolute outsiders here.

No significant differences between the analysed professional counselling systems were recorded.

Let us go over to the group of teaching problems. Work with a slow-learning pupil was found at the top of the list in this group. It is notable that none of the teachers declared the problem did not exist in his or her work.

Who can the teachers count on? In this case the lead was awarded *ex quo* to the colleagues from my school and the professional literature. A slightly lower score comparing to the educational problems was recorded by the school head while counsellors took a notably better place.

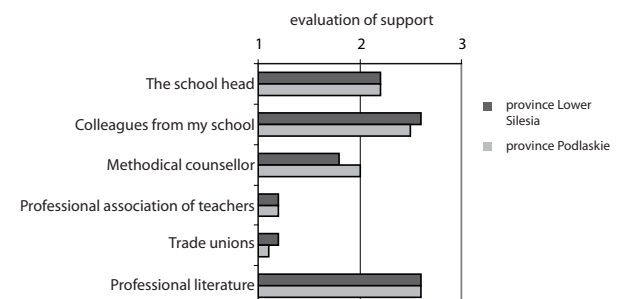


Fig 3. Professional support the teachers feel - Work with a slow-learning pupil

Work with a gifted pupil is an equally common problem as the work with low achievers: 95% of the teachers admitted that the problem existed. However, as much as 52% claimed they could handle it entirely independently, with only 9% having declared a definite need of assistance. Those who know the Polish school even only a little, and realise the difficulty of selecting and providing an effective development support to such children (cf. Eby, Smutny 1998) must feel surprised. It seems that one of the major problems faced by the mass school is being clearly underestimated by the teachers (although we should remember this problem was ranked sixth in the relative scale of the problems hierarchy). The hierarchy of the supporting bodies corresponds to the one built for the 'work-with-slow-learners' problem.

External examinations have been a new element of our educational system. Seventeen percent of the teachers claimed this problem did not exist in their work, yet, those were predominantly integrated education and foreign language

teachers. Nearly 50% of the respondents indicated they could handle the preparation of pupils to such examinations entirely independently. The supporting bodies' hierarchy was the same as in the case of the teaching problems mentioned above.

Similarly as for the educational problems, no significant differences between the compared counselling systems were found in the levels of professional support the teachers felt they could obtain.

Two other problems presented here relate to another element that was introduced under the reform scheme: the new promotion rules. Those problems took places three and four in the ranking. The promotion system is important, however, if the knowledge of the rules and documentation collection – which are purely bureaucratic matters – take such a high position in the list of professional needs, it puts the system itself in a very bad light. This problem can be defined as the system “parasite” - turning the teachers' attention away from what is really important in their work. If we were talking about a “fresh” innovation – being one or two years in place – one could associate this high position with the excitement accompanying a novelty that is vital for one's career. Yet, if after over four years this matter is continuously considered as requiring assistance than this seems a sign of a system pathology.

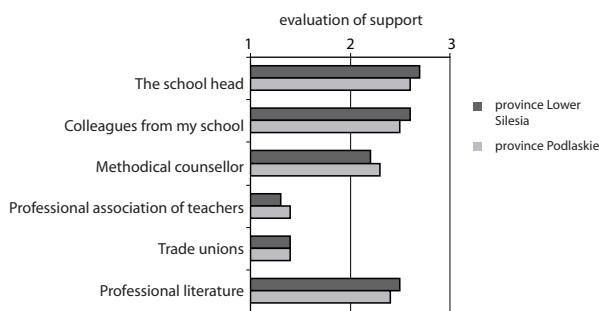


Fig 4. Professional support the teachers feel - Knowledge about the promotion rules

The bureaucratic trap set by the promotion system can be overcome with the help of counsellors. This is the first instance when counsellors came close to the results scored by the inner-school supporting bodies and the professional literature. We can get a little sarcastic and say that the counsellors are best in handling problems which were created by the system itself.

There were no differences between the analysed provinces.

The problem of professional development of teachers can be considered from two perspectives: of an individual and of an institution. If we consider a teacher as an individual, we can speak about his or her individual professional development, his or her individual professional needs, regardless the place he or she works. If we, however, take development of an institution as the starting point, then professional development of teachers and their needs should become a part of the development programme of the institution. The type and scope of such development should be in line with the institution's needs rather than with the needs of the teacher himself/herself. The study presented here is well in line with the first way of thinking.

Major conclusions and recommendations

A first general observation is connected to the defensive attitude of teachers

It is worthwhile to consider consequences of the defensive attitude manifested by a large group of the teachers as it constitutes a significant threat to the effective professional support system. Only very rarely did the teachers choose the answer *I definitely need assistance* in a given area. It seems that admitting one needs help is feared as it can spoil one's professional image. The defensive demeanour can be a substantial barrier to the participation in and a fruitful utilisation of the professional development support system.

With regard to the top 10 of teacher's professional needs, two recommendations can be made:

Expand the support offer to address the educational problems. The top ten professional needs include 4 educational problems. Ranked first in the hierarchy is the aggressive behaviour of pupils. Is this strong requirement for help in that field a result of an actual aggression plague in Polish schools? Regardless the potential doubts with respect to the actual level of school aggression, the call of assistance should not be left without reaction by the professional support system. A dramatic increase in professional needs concerning such educational problems as aggression, drugs, intoxicants or truancy could be observed in the case of junior high school teachers.

The rules concerning teachers' promotion definitely require modification. Problems associated with promotion take places three and four in the ranking. The promotion system is an important issue, yet, the knowledge of the relevant rules or documents collection – being purely bureaucratic matters – take a high position in the list of professional needs. It means an improvement of the promotion system should be seriously considered!

Next to an analysis of the top 10 of teacher's professional needs, it is interesting to look professional needs that are not identified as high priority needs.

Expand the training offer to address the problem of selecting curricula and schoolbooks. Include ethics into the training schemes. The problem of selecting curricula and schoolbooks was ranked twelfth. It is a low position. When looking at the curricula and schoolbooks market, the choice to be made there is not a simple one, and the market itself – far from any rational structure. How can we explain the fact that hardly one in three teachers declared he or she needed support in that field, while only 3% chose the answer *I definitely need assistance*? When it comes to schoolbooks, the selection mechanisms should become a subject of a separate study, since the problem itself is an essential theme for improving the professional support system. It is particularly important because we are facing a major “mix-up” of activities of counsellors and the marketing efforts of various publishing houses.

Introduce the issue of social disparity in education and the methods to counterbalance this social disparity to the training scheme. Surprisingly ‘working with slow-learning pupils’ has a lower ranking with integrated education teachers, compared to other types of teachers. This seems a paradox since the primary education cycle should follow the path of equal learning opportunities and compensating for environmental deprivation to a much wider extent than any further cycles. Simply, all that we fail to compensate for during the first years will turn into an incurable school failure in the future stages. The study seems to indicate that teachers of the primary education cycle tend to underestimate the problem of equal learning opportunities. This is an important challenge for the professional support system.

Make the teachers familiar with the possibilities of working with gifted pupils at school and in particular – in junior high schools. Another significant difference in ranking of professional needs of different tuypes of teachers can be found with the issue of 'working with gifted pupils'. Efficacy of work with extraordinarily gifted pupils does not make integrated education teachers or second education cycle teachers lose their sleep, yet, the problem comes back to life in junior high schools. It is worthwhile to address this requirement.

Introduce training schemes to enhance the educational competencies of foreign language teachers. The specific character of the needs of foreign language teachers, and those from junior high schools in particular, was clearly pictured in the study: problems with the discipline during classes and disrespect towards the teacher. This allows for a clear identification of the specific requirements the foreign language teachers' group has in terms of the professional support: keeping discipline and building authority.

