



Aneta Kamińska

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4612-6464>

Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow

Faculty of Education

Institute of Educational Science

Department of Christian Pedagogy

e-mail: aneta.kaminska@ignatianum.edu.pl

The Competent Teacher of a Gifted Pupil in Early Primary School Education: Expectations versus Reality – The Author’s Own Study

Abstract

The aim of the article is to present the results of a study on early primary school teachers' preparedness for working with gifted pupils. The study was conducted among 697 primary school teachers teaching in grades 1, 2, and 3 in Krakow and nearby towns. The theoretical aim of the article is to demonstrate, on the basis of literature on the subject, the most important predispositions these teachers should possess. The study has revealed that teachers are not adequately prepared to provide effective and engaging education for gifted pupils at an early school age. In the last part of the article solutions are listed which aim to improve the situation, e.g., by enriching the range of university study programs for teachers in the area of educating gifted students, creating a position of a "teacher of gifted students," creating separate centers which would support the educational development of gifted students, and extending cooperation between all educational units.

Keywords: teachers of gifted pupils at an early school age, teacher competencies, teacher attitudes

Introduction

In Poland, as in other European countries apart from the United Kingdom, there is no separate position of a teacher of gifted students. Polish law does not provide any specific requirements for the professional qualifications of teachers working with gifted students, including the first stage of compulsory education, i.e. primary school. In the Polish educational space, the identification of gifted students and the diagnosis of their abilities and development are covered by two documents: the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of August 9, 2017 on the principles of organizing and providing psychological and pedagogical assistance in public kindergartens, schools, and institutions (Journal of Laws 2017, item 1591) and the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of August 9, 2017 on the conditions for the provision of education and care to children and young people who are disabled, socially maladjusted, or at risk of social maladjustment in kindergartens, schools, and mainstream or integrated classes (Journal of Laws 2017, No. 228, item 1578, as amended). These regulations treat working with gifted students in a very general manner, so it is the teachers who are solely responsible for working with such students. The teaching process and its results depend mainly on their competence, but also on their commitment, passion, and many other factors. Several researchers, in Poland and abroad, have investigated competencies of teachers, including early primary school teachers, who work with gifted students (Sternberg, 1999; Renzulli, 2002; Tannenbaum, 2003; Sękowski, 2001, 2004; Giza, 2006; Uszyńska-Jarmoc, 2005, 2009; Wróblewska, 2009; Limont, 2008, 2010; Żłobił, 2010; Dyrda, 2012; Szmidt, 2017; Gierczyk, 2019). The article discusses the most relevant issues selected by the author which illustrate the scope and essence of teachers' duties, competences, attitudes towards and initiatives undertaken for the benefit of gifted students, and approach to such students and their abilities.

The duties of an early primary school teacher working with gifted pupils

The education of gifted students entails a number of duties resting with the teacher, such as diagnosing their abilities (in early primary school education, it is not the abilities themselves but the signs of the pupils' giftedness), developing individual educational plans, cooperating with parents, preparing and correcting additional tasks, preparing additional teaching materials, accompanying gifted students to meetings with the academic community, etc. The teacher should support the development of gifted students by adapting the educational process to their needs, predispositions, and abilities, mainly by differentiating tasks within compulsory and optional education, and encouraging students to participate in extracurricular activities. The teacher's role is to motivate students to engage in educational efforts on their own, which includes participating in courses and other projects for their benefit. Examples of other activities a teacher can undertake to support gifted students include inviting experts from various fields to their classes in order to stimulate such students; encouraging students' self-directed learning; extending their own knowledge regarding gifted students by, e.g., sharing experiences with other teachers or implementing good educational practices; creating support networks; and raising funds for various projects, programs, and activities (Machalek, 2013, p. 25). Due to the number and range of possible activities, the teacher should possess an unceasing willingness to act, comprehensive knowledge, specific skills and competences, an extraordinary personality, and appropriate attitudes. According to Joseph Renzulli, the creator of the Three Ring Conception of Giftedness, a teacher of gifted students should be characterized by above-average abilities, creative skills, and a great commitment to working with such students (Cieřlikowska, 2008, p. 27).

It is vital to create favorable external conditions for gifted pupils at an early school age that would allow them to develop a positive attitude towards learning and developing their abilities and to discover their own individual learning style. Teachers should take care of their pupils'

intensive cognitive development in the form of daily short classes, during which they can share their knowledge with pupils and guide their further development. It is advisable to use the early years of school education to stimulate the development of gifted students in the long run. What might be particularly valuable in this endeavor are the exceptional instructional skills possessed by some teachers with outstanding minds and thorough educations, who are aware of the need to apply diverse teaching methods, with an emphasis on direct contact between teachers and students (Piotrowski, 2019, p. 100).

Competences of teachers working with gifted pupils at an early school age

Early primary school teachers who work with gifted pupils should possess relevant competences. Competence can be defined as a whole range of knowledge and skills together with relevant experience that a person possesses in order to be effective in a particular area. It has an internal dimension—all the resources mentioned above that an individual possesses—and an external dimension, the ability to use them appropriately in specific situations that require it. This external dimension involves the ability to be innovative and flexible in order to act effectively. Competences are the result of innate dispositions and professional training, but also certain attitudes, emotions, and evaluations of particular events (Kamińska, 2014, p. 54).

The teacher of a gifted student should possess not only the “standard” teacher competencies, which include those of diagnosing, planning, teaching techniques, knowledge of the subject matter, media, and communication, but also highly developed creative skills and relevant psychological and pedagogical competence.

Effective work with gifted students requires, above all, knowledge of the essence and diversity of talents and abilities and knowledge of indicators that will guide the teacher to appropriately identify them. The definition of gifted students assumed by teachers directly translates into how

they will work with them, which includes fulfilling their emotional and cognitive needs at school. An incorrect understanding of the essence of talent may result in a failure to identify it properly, thus reducing the effectiveness of the teacher's work (Gierczyk, 2019, p. 113; Gierczyk, 2018, p. 137).

As far as creative competence is concerned, it is manifested in the teacher's unconventional, innovative, and creative activities. Creative teachers want to and are able to act in a non-standard way in order to trigger their students' independent thinking and original behavior in the educational process (Adamek & Bachałowicz, 2013, p. 16). They are able to think critically themselves and to develop critical thinking skills in their students; they do not expect ready-made solutions, patterns, etc., but are able to apply their knowledge and experience in developing theoretical assumptions and organizational and methodological solutions in their work, to efficiently and creatively solve educational problems, and to "think on their feet". (Bielski, 2017, p. 49). Creative competences can be called "meta-competences" because they "link" together all other competences that a teacher working with gifted students must possess.

The question is to what extent will teachers be able to use the competences connected with diagnosing giftedness and planning the teaching process for gifted students if they themselves are inflexible, unimaginative, and unable to create a unique and distinctive environment for teaching such students (Szmids, 2017, p. 19). Therefore, creative competences can be placed at the very top of the list of skills necessary for working with gifted students.

As far as planning, teaching, and knowledge of the subject matter are concerned, teachers should be familiar with strategies for teaching gifted students. Two strategies are common in Europe, including Poland: speeding up the teaching process and increasing the amount of knowledge. A third option would be mixing them in the right proportions. Teachers should be able to choose the strategy that would work best for their students, depending on their individual needs and abilities. It is also crucial to be familiar with and be able to apply those teaching concepts and giftedness models that will make the education of gifted students, including pupils at an early school age, more informed, relevant, and

effective for both students and teachers. In addition, a teacher should not shy away from using activating methods, practical methods, and expressive methods, which are probably the least frequently used in Polish schools.

As mentioned above, the teacher's task is to create new or elaborate ready-made programs for a gifted student (Kuźma & Morbitzer, 2005, p. 347)—thus, project competences will definitely prove helpful. This task requires a creative attitude, which can be manifested in knowledge of a given area or areas of education, psychological and pedagogical knowledge, or the ability to predict which activities will be beneficial for a particular gifted pupil at an early school age. The teachers' ability to use their own imagination and analytical skills, and the ability to anticipate the results of given activities, are highly beneficial in working with gifted students.

Moreover, communication skills enable the teacher to communicate with students and their parents. Good contact with students determines the effectiveness of the education, especially early primary school education, because it is only thanks to a properly built relationship that students will be able to trust their teachers and show them their own abilities and talents. This will enable the teacher to gain an in-depth understanding of the students' abilities, interests, and preferred learning style. On the other hand, talking to parents can provide the teacher with information about the students' behavior at home and their extracurricular interests, which may also reveal some talents (Kuźma & Morbitzer, 2005, p. 170). Positive relationships with parents and guardians allow the teacher to engage them in the development of their children's abilities, even during early school education. These competencies will also facilitate cooperation with specialists from institutions other than the school, where gifted students can develop their abilities. Communication is one of the facets of social competences that is important in building a good relationship with gifted students, including those at an early school age, if it is accompanied by tolerance and sensitivity to the specific nature of their functioning (Limont, 2010, p. 227).

The reflection on teachers of gifted students should not miss their self-awareness and readiness to continuously work on themselves. They

should strive for self-development and set ambitious but achievable goals, which involves continuous discovery of one's own strengths and weaknesses, as well as an awareness of one's feelings, emotions, and current needs and the ability to confront them with reality. Understanding oneself as an "agent of change" allows the teacher to function as a person who is acquiring new skills. The teacher's self-awareness shows students how to consciously "become" and obtain an objective picture of themselves. Flexibility is a feature that is the result of conscious experience, and becoming flexible results from working on oneself, combining one's knowledge and previous experience under systematic reflection with activity in the "here and now," when teachers overcome the existing pedagogical reality and stereotypes which are firmly grounded in their consciousness (Borkowka, 2015, p. 27).

It should also be emphasized that teachers of gifted students should possess knowledge and skills in the field of individual evaluation and assessment of such students' performance. As is done in Finnish schools, they could encourage gifted children to evaluate their own work and its results, their feelings and discoveries, as well as their meaning. Having a chance to do so can trigger self-criticism in these pupils, but can also equip them with a sense of achievement which will motivate them to persevere in their efforts. Such reflection undertaken by the teacher and student together leads to working on imperfections and finding areas needing improvement. It also facilitates the work of teachers who, being open and sensitive to their students, are able to notice mistakes in their work, and thus constantly improve themselves in the art of teaching and upbringing (Woltman, 2009, p. 62).

Skillful and effective work with gifted students is a daunting challenge. Much is required from a teacher of such exceptional students, including adequate knowledge and skills, being interested in talent and gifted students, and initiating activities and using personal resources appropriately for their benefit.

Methodology

The most appropriate method for research in this area of study was the quantitative method. The author used a diagnostic survey method and a questionnaire as the research tool. The main research problem was formulated in the following way:

How do early primary school teachers work with gifted pupils?

The following specific research problems were derived from the main research problem:

1. How do the respondents recognize gifted pupils at an early school age?
2. How do they organize classes for gifted pupils?
3. What problems do they most frequently encounter when working with gifted pupils?
4. What are the respondents' competences for working with gifted pupils?

The study was conducted among 697 teachers of early primary school education working in state schools in the Małopolska region of Poland, mostly in Krakow and in selected small towns in the vicinity; all of the respondents were women. The respondents were selected randomly. Some of them agreed to answer the questions, but other teachers declined to participate. The researcher had planned to survey at least 800 teachers.

The results

The respondents answered a set of questions related to working with gifted pupils. However, due to publication restrictions, the analysis presented herein is based on four multiple-choice questions which were connected to the research questions.

The data presented in Table 1 reveal that in order to identify gifted pupils, the respondents mostly referred to their measurable achievements. Among the most significant indicators of being a gifted pupil were academic performance (654 respondents), the fact that such pupils possess broader and more in-depth knowledge than their peers (612 respondents), and their ability to learn quickly and easily (597 respondents). Fewer respondents indicated the practical application of knowledge (261 respondents), being able to work independently (193 respondents), and being active and inquisitive (126 respondents). Very few respondents (59) pointed to creative thinking and providing innovative solutions to educational problems. Most respondents were unable to determine gifted pupils by their IQ—only 18 respondents chose this answer.

Table 1
Identifying a gifted pupil

Characteristics of a gifted pupil	Number of respondents
learns quickly and easily	597
possesses knowledge beyond the basic knowledge and skills required at this stage of education	612
shows signs of creative thinking and provides innovative solutions to educational problems	59
has a high IQ	18
is active, inquisitive, and curious about the world	126
gets good grades and has a record of other academic achievements	654
works independently	193
is able to apply acquired knowledge in educational situations	261

Almost unanimously, the respondents (690 respondents) stated that they identified pupils while observing them (Table 2). Some of them (49 respondents) confirmed their observations regarding pupils' abilities by talking to their parents and the school's pedagogical specialist (21 respondents). Only a handful of respondents (13) used professional diagnostic tools, and only 4 referred to the identification of a gifted pupil by a counselling center.

Table 2
Identifying a gifted pupil

The way a gifted pupil is identified	Number of respondents
observing the pupil's abilities during class	690
discussing the pupil's abilities with parents	21
using special diagnostic tools for teachers, such as scales, sheets, tests, etc.	13
discussing the pupil's abilities with the school's pedagogical specialist	49
referring to a recommendation issued by psychological and pedagogical counselling centers	4

The most frequently used method in working with gifted pupils in grades 1–3 indicated by the respondents was individualizing their class work, mainly through diversifying it and following the pupils' interests (681 respondents; Table 3). They also noted the importance of recommending regular participation in extracurricular activities at school and outside of school to gifted pupils (458 respondents) and verbally encouraging their development (346 respondents). Thirty-one respondents claimed to use activating methods in their work with such pupils, which is a rather small proportion. Likewise, very few respondents admitted to preparing the learning environment in such a way that gifted pupils could explore it and look for original solutions by themselves (11 respondents). Hardly anyone (2 respondents) prepared individual curricula for gifted pupils.

Table 3
Working with a gifted pupil

Ways of working with a gifted pupil	Number of respondents
individualization of teaching through additional and varied tasks for a gifted pupil in a heterogeneous group of pupils and satisfying his/her individual interests	681
preparing the learning environment so that the pupil could discover knowledge on their own	11
using activating methods	31
creating individual curricula and working individually with the gifted pupil	2
recommending extracurricular activities (extra classes, competitions, children's university, etc.) to a gifted pupil	458
open identification of the pupil's abilities in the group and increased verbal encouragement for their development	346

The problems connected with teaching gifted pupils most frequently noted by the respondents were problems with proper socialization with their peers (rejection or alienation) and their negative personality traits—impatience, perfectionism, excessive energy, and obstinacy (516 respondents; Table 4)—as well as insufficient time and large, heterogeneous classes (696 respondents). A lack of cooperation with other agents of the educational process was indicated by 571 respondents, and a lack of an adequate extracurricular activities was noted by 210 respondents.

Table 4
Problems connected with working with a gifted pupil

Problems connected with working with a gifted pupil	Number of respondents
gifted pupils' low socialization levels and emotional problems—displaying negative personality traits	516
insufficient time and large, heterogeneous groups of pupils in the classroom	696
a lack of interesting extracurricular activities at school and outside of school	210
a lack of adequate support in the development of gifted pupils from other participants of the educational process (parents, headmasters, school's pedagogy specialist, etc.)	571

Conclusions and recommendations

In conclusion, the data presented herein reveal that the respondents' diagnosis of gifted pupils is inaccurate and insufficient. Teachers should not only study the definition of a gifted pupil in the literature on the subject, but should also learn how to use professional tools to diagnose such pupils. Moreover, their planning and creative skills could be better. In fact, many of them declare that they individualize their work with gifted pupils, but this is done superficially and certainly inadequately. They only choose such methods of working with gifted pupils that do not require too much effort on their part. They do not implement the most creative and individually tailored methods, such as individual teaching programs. They also willingly send gifted students away to participate in extracurricular activities instead of working with them more during lessons. Additionally, they also lack time for classes dedicated to gifted pupils, which is understandable having to teach so many heterogeneous groups.

It would probably be beneficial for teachers to develop their communication skills in order to encourage the often reluctant parents to work together to develop the pupils' abilities. The analysis of the respondents' attitudes towards working with gifted pupils reveals that they are not particularly appreciative of the signs of giftedness among pupils at an early school age, and that they do not know how to aid in their development.

The data obtained in the study do not paint an optimistic picture of a Polish teacher of gifted pupils at an early school age. Therefore, it is worth formulating certain recommendations in this area, such as improved training for potential teachers of gifted pupils within their university studies; providing teachers with adequate substantive and organizational support at school and in the municipality by, e.g., creating expert teams in the field of talent management or encouraging cooperation between all teachers of a given gifted pupil; creating a separate position of a "teacher of gifted students," or at least a coordinator for teaching such students who would organize and support teachers in this respect; and initiating regular cooperation with other institutions, including universities, which more and more frequently offer help in the development of gifted

students. However, teachers also complain about a lack of support from parents and head teachers, as well as inadequate socialization of gifted pupils with their classmates.

At this point it is worth mentioning, by way of comparison, a study from 2019, conducted by Marcin Gierczyk among 200 teachers working with gifted students within compulsory primary and secondary education in Poland and England. The researcher found that teachers quite accurately diagnose gifted students, listing many important constitutive features of giftedness, and that they apply a whole range of forms and methods when teaching these students (Gierczyk, 2019, pp. 126–128). These results might stem from the fact that teachers who work with older gifted students, including teachers of particular subjects, treat the development of their abilities more seriously than those working in early primary school education, perhaps considering those abilities more stable and meaningful. It is all the more important to inspire and support teachers of gifted pupils in grades 1–3 to pay more attention to identifying and developing their pupils' abilities, as this is a formative period in their development. Unfortunately, neither the legal regulations of the Polish education system nor the literature on the subject—including publications devoted to methods of teaching—support the work of teachers with gifted students, including those at an early school age. Thus, matching modern methods of teaching with common knowledge and the contemporary reality forces teachers to reach deeper layers of their own experiences and reflections (Śliwerski, 2019, p. 124) in order to improve the education of gifted students.

References

- Adamek, I., & Bachalowicz, J. (2013). *Kompetencje kreatywne nauczyciela wczesnej edukacji dziecka* [The creative competences of the teachers of early education]. Krakow: Impuls.
- Bielski, J. (2017). *Nauczyciel doskonały, Kształtowanie się nauczycielskiego zawodu, Warunki, Kryteria i Mierniki Efektywności Pracy Nauczyciela* [The perfect teacher, formation of the teaching profession, conditions, criteria, and measures of the effectiveness of the teacher's work]. Krakow: Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls.
- Borkowka, A. (2015). *Zmotywowany nauczyciel w świetle orientacji humanistycznej* [A motivated teacher in the light of humanistic orientation]. Krakow: Wydawnictwo LIBRON.
- Cieślukowska, J. (2008). Miejsce nauczyciela w systemie edukacji uczniów zdolnych – na podstawie koncepcji i praktycznych rozwiązań Josepha Renzulliego [The teacher's place in the education of gifted students: On the basis of the concepts and practical solutions of Joseph Renzulli]. In W. Limont, J. Cieślukowska & J. Dreszer (Eds.), *Zdolności, Talent, Twórczość* Vol. 1, (27–38). Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika.
- Gierczyk, M. (2018). Segregacja uczniów w perspektywie uzdolnień [Student segregation in the perspective of talent]. In A. Gromkowska-Melosik, E. Grzesiak, J. Drozdowicz & M. Gierczyk (Eds.), *Edukacja i społeczeństwo, Dynamika socjopedagogicznych konstrukcji* (139–149). Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM.
- Gierczyk, M. (2019). *Uczeń zdolny w polskiej i angielskiej przestrzeni szkolnej* [A gifted student in the Polish and English school environment]. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.
- Kamińska, A. (2014). Nabywanie kompetencji kluczowych przez nauczycieli edukacji wczesnoszkolnej w zmieniającym się świecie edukacyjnym i społecznym [Acquiring key competences by early school teachers in the changing educational and social world]. *Edukacja Elementarna w Teorii i Praktyce*, 31, 53–67.
- Kuźma, J., & Morbitzer, J. (2005). *Edukacja – szkoła – nauczyciele. Promowanie rozwoju dziecka* [Education – school – teachers: Promoting the child's development]. Krakow: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Pedagogicznej.
- Limont, W. (2010). *Uczeń zdolny, Jak go rozpoznać i jak z nim pracować* [A gifted student, how to recognize him and how to work with him] (1st ed.). Sopot: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne.

- Machalek, M. (2013). *Jak pracować z uczniem zdolnym. Poradnik dla nauczycieli historii* [How to work with a gifted student: A guide for history teachers]. Warsaw: Ośrodek Rozwoju Edukacji.
- Piotrowski, E. (2019), Środowiskowo-szkolne aspekty rozwoju uczniów zdolnych [Environmental and school aspects of the development of gifted students]. In E. Piotrowski & M. Porzucek-Miśkiewicz (Eds.), *Edukacja osób zdolnych* (93–121). Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM.
- Minister of National Education. *Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 9 sierpnia 2017 roku w sprawie zasad udzielania i organizacji pomocy psychologiczno-pedagogicznej w publicznych przedszkolach, szkołach i placówkach* [Regulation of August 9, 2017 on the principles of organizing and providing psychological and pedagogical assistance in public kindergartens, schools, and institutions]. Journal of Laws 2017, item 1591.
- Minister of National Education. *Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 9 sierpnia 2017 roku w sprawie warunków organizowania kształcenia, wychowania i opieki dla dzieci i młodzieży niepełnosprawnych oraz niedostosowanych społecznie w przedszkolach, szkołach i oddziałach ogólnodostępnych lub integracyjnych* [Regulation of 9 August 2017 on the conditions for the provision of education and care to children and young people who are disabled, socially maladjusted, or at risk of social maladjustment in kindergartens, schools, and mainstream or integrated classes]. Journal of Laws 2017, No. 228, item 1578, as amended.
- Śliwerski, B. (2019). Makropolityczne i społeczne uwarunkowania strat w kształceniu uczniów zdolnych [Macropolitical and social conditions of losses in educating gifted students]. In E. Piotrowski & M. Porzucek-Miśkiewicz (Eds.), *Edukacja osób zdolnych* (123–141). Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM.
- Szmidt, K. J. (2017). *Edukacyjne uwarunkowania rozwoju kreatywności* [Educational conditions for the development of creativity]. Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego.
- Woltman, L. (2009). Kreatywność jako działanie edukacyjne w serii „Nauczyciele – Nauczycielom” [Creativity as an educational activity in the series “From Teachers to Teachers”]. In W. Korzeniowska, U. Szuścik & A. Murzyn (Eds.), *Sztuka bycia uczniem i nauczycielem*, Krakow: Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls.