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Methods of Educational Support Used by Teachers of Classes I-III – Research Report

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

The quality of the educational system functioning depends on many factors among which the person of the teacher, his accrual education, and preparation for working with children are the most important. The teacher's "equipment" should not only be based on the colloquial experience, but, first of all, it should be well rooted in the contemporary theoretical pedagogical thought. While preparing for the classes, the teacher should unconditionally know the principles of the didactic-educational work with children, the methods of teaching and learning, organisational forms of working with students, as well as didactic tools that are to support his/her work.

This work aimed at learning the opinion of teachers of classes I-III on the use of methods supporting the students' educational activity. The main research method was a diagnostic survey with the technique of a questionnaire. The research made it possible to obtain the answers to the research problems formulated in the work. According to the research results, teachers see the need to focus on the process of learning, and not teaching. The student becomes a subject with his/her own interests and individual needs, and he/she has the right to intelligent development in different aspects of his/her life. It is the most im-

portant objective of integrated education which we are now trying to achieve through, inter alia, the use of various methods of the students' educational support. Such a way of acting, based on creative activity, determines the maximization of the child's developmental chances. In his personal actions, the student, using the experience gained during the classes when activating, problem, analytical and verbal methods are applied, becomes a competent, creative unit who can take up all challenges, and then deal with them in everyday life.

Introduction

Early education in the structure of the school system is a foundation on which the man's further education and upbringing is based. A child at the early school age is very flexible, prone to personality changes and curious of the world. Such a child intensely develops their various spheres and has a great potential for ordering and activating knowledge. The experiences that a student obtains at this time become reinforced and generalized for the whole life (Karbowiczek, Klim-Klimaszewska 2016: 9). It is the reason why this constitutive "chapter" in the child's life requires a high quality of education, which includes: competent teachers, optimum organisational, methodical and programme solutions, as well as systematic preparation of the student for further active participation in the real world.

Today, didactics not only offers the teachers classical methods of teaching, but also a broad range of modern methods, adjusted to the new educational situation. According to Eugeniusz Kameduła (1998: 130-133), the fact that particular methods are used more often than others results from a "particular fashion." He provides some arguments that support the opinion that effectiveness and efficiency of various methods requires from the teacher personal involvement, taking into account the objectives, educational contents and rules governing the educational process, as well as considering the proper basis of didactic tools. This article was to learn the opinion of teachers of classes I-III concerning the methods of teaching early school children. Are they methods that truly facilitate the children's activity and general development, or perhaps they are just lecturing methods that have been used for ages?

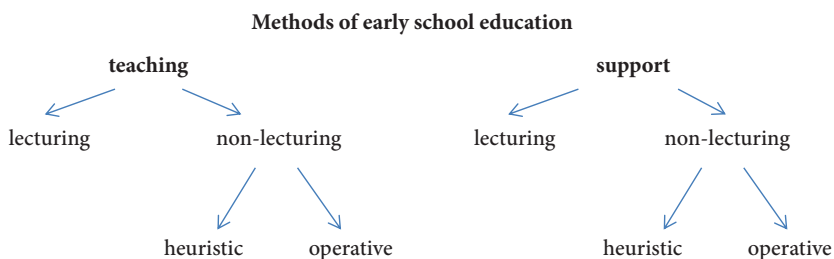
Methods supporting the activity of the students in classes I-III

While organising integrated classes, contemporary teachers use a lot of methods of teaching/learning, as – in compliance with what Czesław Kupisiewicz (1995: 136)

emphasizes: “(...) irrespective of the role that was assigned to different educational methods in different ages of schooling (...), good effects of didactic work may only be achieved due to the application of various methods, and not one, seemingly good, universal method.”

A method of teaching (Greek – *methodos*) means the way of reaching the truth, the manner of behaviour and research (Okoń 1996: 246). The modern concept of the method of teaching is presented by Jolanta Karbowniczek and Anna Klim-Klimaszewska (2016: 370) who write that such a method is a purposeful, planned and focused way of the teacher’s work with the child that gives the child knowledge, skills and abilities, and that takes into account the child’s developmental predispositions and makes it possible for them to function during the integrated classes at school in a multi-intelligent manner. Jerzy Kujawiński (1998: 38) separates a new category of educational methods which he calls the methods of educational support. He specifies them as a systematically applied partnership of the teacher with students, and students with other students, in which mutual educational support is provided, depending on the needs and expectations of the partners of educational interaction of which each one can be both a support giver and receiver. The comparison of both categories of educational methods shows that if a teacher, in the process of early school education, performs the role of a manager, he/she uses educational methods as the methods of teaching that enable him/her to manage the students’ work. If the teacher performs the role of a partner, he/she uses educational methods as the methods of mutual educational support that enable him/her to carry out partnership with themselves and the students, which is shown in the attached diagram (Kujawiński 1997: 16).

Table 1. The division of early school education methods according to J. Kujawiński



Source: Kujawiński 1997: 16.

The author notices that the student’s development is not only carried out in the process of education, but also in the process of self-education. The criterion of dividing the methods into educational and self-educational ones was the role the student

performs in his/her activity at school and at home, which – if teaching methods were applied by the teacher – was based on the submission to the teacher’s management, and – if support methods were applied – was based on the cooperation (with the teacher, student, other students) in partnership, and – if self-educational methods were applied – was based on managing one’s own activity through the use of methods of independent learning (Kujawiński 1997: 17).

Another classification of educational methods existing in the Polish methodical-didactic literature is the division of methods of supporting educational activity introduced by R. Więckowski.

Table 2. Methods of supporting the child’s educational activity described by R. Więckowski

Methods of knowledge assimilation (lecturing)	Methods of independent learning (problem methods)	Valorizing (exposing) methods	Practical methods
– talk; – discussion; – lecture; – work with a handbook.	– classical problem method; – method of cases; – situational method; – market of ideas; – micro-teaching; – didactic games; – simulation games.	– impression methods; – expression methods.	– exercises; – methods of the fulfilment of productive tasks.

Source: Karbowniczek, Klim-Klimaszewska 2016: 373.

In the history of schooling, the methods of teaching were modified depending on the role people assigned to them. The first methods that appeared due to the appearance of schools in the Middle Ages were verbal methods. Their aim was to give ready pieces of information to the students through spoken and written words of a teacher. Such information was to be learnt by the student (Bereźnicki 2008: 244). After some time, such a way of transferring knowledge was questioned. At first, Juan Luis Vives and Michel de Montaigne called for the observation of natural phenomena adding that children “should search for wisdom in themselves and not in books” (Kupisiewicz 1995: 135). Also, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi wrote that the child can derive operational knowledge from “learning things and not someone’s reflections and testimonies of such things” (Kupisiewicz 1995: 135). However, it was not until the 19th century when verbal methods started to lose the status of the main way of transferring knowledge. Experimental methods appeared, which – according to the rule presented by Jan Amos Komeński – assumed that what we learn from the most are not books, but

“heaven, earth, oaks and beeches” (Okoń 1996: 247). Such methods included the observation of things, phenomena and processes, which were to be organized by the teacher, and the children’s task was to gain knowledge and skills through supervised observation. However, those two groups of methods were not enough. Thus, at the turn of the 19th/20th century, especially in the activity and theoretical works of John Dewey, a new way of teaching appeared: making children familiar with knowledge was combined with developing their talents and interests. Such a method was based on the practical activity, which is why it was called a practical method. In such a method, the teacher organises and directs the activity of the student who carries out practical tasks, this way gaining knowledge and particular skills (Bereźnicki 2008: 244).

This way, three groups of methods appeared: verbal, experimental and practical ones, based on three different ways of working with the students. Due to the creation of such methods, the source of knowledge was a word, an object that was analysed and actions aimed at changing the object. Experts in didactics have different opinions on the issue of frequent modifications and attempts to divide the educational methods. Also, they adopt different criteria as the basis for separating particular methods (Duraj-Nowakowa 1998: 265). W. Okoń emphasizes that nobody has managed to create a perfect classification yet, but if such a classification was created, it would certainly take into account the following aspects: the educational content, the style of teacher’s and students’ work, as well as social conditions of the students’ work (Okoń 1996: 252-253).

Apart from the above mentioned methods, activating methods are more and more popular. In case of such methods, the teacher’s task includes stimulating, inspiring and encouraging students to independent learning. Their importance in early school education is emphasized by D. Klus-Stańska and M. Nowicka (2005: 204), who write: “as long as we ‘discuss a topic’ at school, instead of analysing and exploring it, we shall only integrate contents, but not knowledge.” Only activating methods of teaching make it possible to provide the children with such educational opportunities (Krzyżewska 1998: 23). Activating methods include “such way of teaching in which the teacher does not give the students ready knowledge, but creates the conditions in which they can learn on their own” (Dzierzgowska 2009: 9). It means that, due to the properly organized actions, the child has the opportunity to explore the world through different activities. What teacher does is creating didactic opportunities, preparing materials and supporting the students. This way, educational contents become available for the student and possible to “transfer into a personal experience.” Such methods make it possible to make the students actions dynamic, to stimulate their intellect and development of imagination. They help them develop independence, cooperation, commitment, and the sense of responsibility for themselves and the group (Dmitruk-Sierocińska 2015: 32). The application of activating methods is

the main principle of the teaching-learning programme. It is emphasized by A. Klim-Klimaszewska (2010: 201) who writes that integrated education should constantly reinforce and develop initiative, activeness and independence of the child.

It is difficult to find one universal method that would warrant the possibility to take up all the varied tasks which are assigned to activating methods. That is why, it is important for the teacher to apply different methods while working with children. J. Krzyżewska (1998: 102) writes that “an effective teacher has a broad range of different methods and techniques of teaching, and he/she follows the common principle of ‘safety in diversity.’” It means that, in order to achieve complex objectives in a diversified group of students, we need many different methods of work – a wide selection of different methods from which we can choose the one that is most suitable in a given time, situation and circumstances.

Methodological assumptions of the author's own research

Taking up scientific research, including pedagogical one, is related to planning and fulfilment of many different actions, according to a specific order. Respecting this requirement proves the reliability of the research and the fact that a given piece of reality was analysed in a real and honest manner. The research we have carried out is briefly described below.

It was a quantitative research and its subject included the opinions of teachers of classes I-III related to the methods of educational support. The objective was to learn the opinions of teachers of classes I-III on the methods of educational support applied in the work with early school children. The main problem took the form of the following question:

What are the opinions of early education teachers on the methods of educational support applied during integrated classes?

The following detailed issues were formulated on the basis of such main question:

What methods of educational support are indicated by the teachers as the methods used most frequently?

What do teachers think about activating methods used in the course of integrated classes?

The basic research method was a diagnostic survey; the technique – a questionnaire; and the research tool – the questionnaire of the survey. The questions included in the questionnaire referred to the research problems. Most questions were open-ended and they made it possible for the teachers to express their opinion on the applied methods of teaching. The closed-ended questions were characterized by a conjunctive

scale. The questionnaire also included a table that made it possible to provide the characteristic features of a given group.

The research was carried out in Kraków, in eight primary schools, two educational institutions and one boarding school. The research group consisted of 102 teachers, most of whom were women (101 people). There was only one man among them. The analysed group was diversified in terms of

- the class in which they teach – almost a half of the teachers (48%) declared class I as the basic place of their work. Teachers of class II were the smallest group of the respondents (19%), and almost one in three analysed people (33%) taught in class III;
- the level of education – MA education with pedagogical preparation dominated among the analysed teachers: 70% respondents declared such qualifications. 28% of the teachers had a BA degree with pedagogical preparation – most of those teachers are probably young, creating and improving their professional competences. Only two people indicated a different kind of education: BA in teaching German and a postgraduate degree with pedagogical preparation;
- the degree of professional career – the teachers in the analysed group represented all levels of teaching career. Most of them were certified teachers (36%). Almost a third of them (29%) were trainee teachers. Contract teachers were almost 25% of the respondents. Only one in ten of the teachers in the group (10%) declared that his competences are at the level of a nominated teacher;
- work experience – more than a half of the analysed teachers (53%) started work not so long ago (up to 5 years). The longest work experience – “26 years and more” was declared by 22% people. Other respondents declared medium values – 14% worked for “16-20 years;” 7% – “21-25 years;” only three teachers worked for “11-15 years,” and two – for “6-10 lat.”

The research was performed once, during a diploma seminar. It was of pilot nature, which is why it does not make us authorized to draw general conclusions, but it inspires us to reflect on it and continue further, deepened exploration of the analysed issue.

Presentation and description of the research results

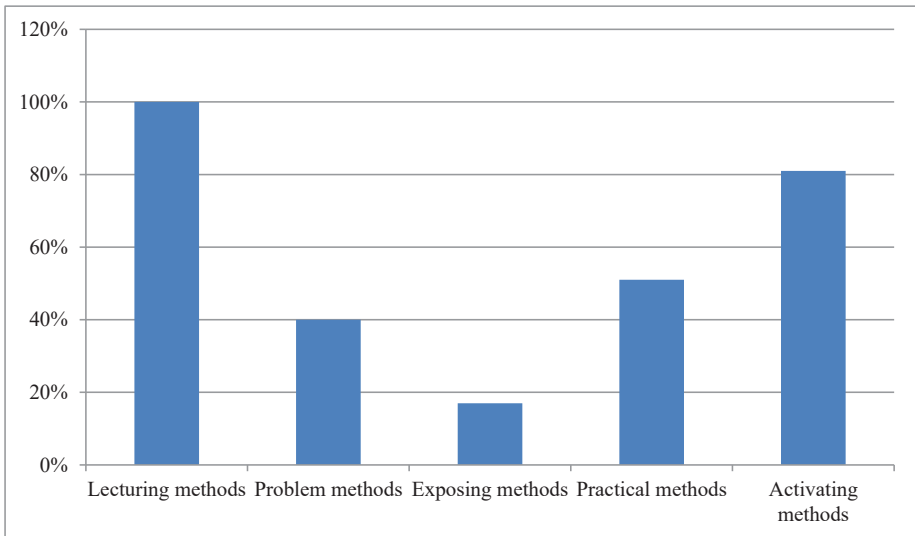
1. Opinions of early school education teachers on the methods of educational support applied in their work with children.

The way an early school education teacher works with the students during integrated classes is crucial in the development of the child's creative activity. The presentation

of new contents, as well as revising and reinforcing what has already been learnt, may take different forms.

It is the teacher who chooses the methods of working with the students. The teacher decides if such methods will be attractive, leading to problem-solving, encouraging to independent thinking and discovering things, or rather traditional, transmission methods in which the most active person is the educator. The analysed teachers intuitively feel which way (as for the choice of methods) they should follow. Nevertheless, the traditional, Herbart's didactics (still) influences the way of fulfilment of the classes with children so strongly that it is difficult for teachers of classes I-III to get rid of it. This thesis is partially confirmed in Diagram 1

Diagram 1. The methods of educational support that are the most frequently used by teachers



Source: author's own work.

The research analysis shows that all early education teachers used lecturing methods while carrying out integrated classes. Their frequency was high, and the most popular among them were: talk, work with handbook, story-telling, as well as discussion. Especially the latter method is doubtful as for its classification to lecturing methods. Depending on the way of leading the discussion and its kind, it may activate all participants and focus on a problem, which is not really characteristic of lecturing methods.

However, the next most frequently used set of methods included activating methods. 4/5 of the respondents confirmed using them. Nevertheless, the main activating

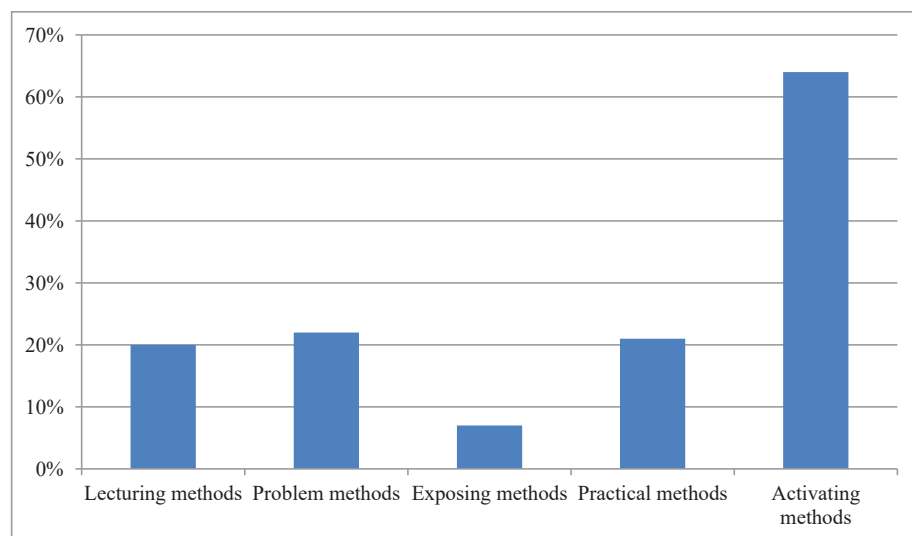
method used by most of the analysed teachers was brainstorming. The method of project or mind map has been use much less frequently.

More than a half of the teachers used practical methods, especially exercises. Unfortunately, problem methods are not popular among the teachers of classes I-III – less than a half of the respondents use them. Even less popular are exposing methods. Only one in five teachers found them useful – mainly the drama technique.

The data collected during the research indicates that the main ways of didactic-educational work of teachers in classes I-III are lecturing methods. Also, activat-ing methods are important in the organisation of classes for young schoolchildren. However, other methods, especially problem ones, are underestimated by the teachers although pedagogical books describe such methods, include the guidelines for their methodical use, and enumerate their advantages (e.g. Okoń 1978; Galant 1987; Michalak 2004: 32).

Not only were the teachers asked to list the educational methods used while working with children, but they were also asked to evaluate their effectiveness. Their opinions are presented in Diagram 2 which, to a large degree, fails to correlate with the data from the previous diagram.

Diagram 2. Effective methods of educational support in the opinion of teachers of Young schoolchildren



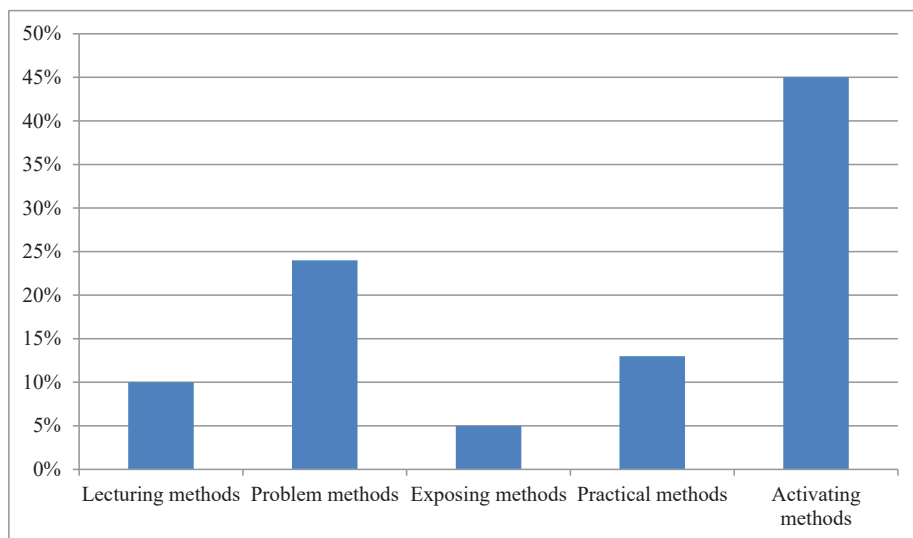
Source: author's own work.

According to the analysed teachers, activating methods are the most efficient. More than a half of the respondents believe that. The most popular activating methods include brainstorming, but also Total Physical Response and mind map. Lecturing methods occupied the fourth (last but one) place in the ranking of effectiveness. One in 5 respondents noticed their effectiveness, and problem and practical methods obtained similar results. Thus, we may ask: why do early education teachers use lecturing methods so frequently? Why – although they know that activating methods are so efficient – do they still prefer the “word” while teaching children in classes I-III?

Less than 1 in 15 teachers confirmed the reliability of exposing methods. Such data is very disturbing because it may indicate the teacher’s disregard for art. Ignoring such an important area in the child’s development may block their ability to receive and create the products being the carriers of tangible and intangible culture.

During the research, the teachers were asked to indicate those methods they would especially recommend to their colleagues. The data was presented in diagram 3, and they are similar to the results related to the effectiveness of methods.

Diagram 3. Methods of educational support recommended by the research team to other teachers in order to work with children in classes I-III



Source: author’s own work.

The analysed teachers believe that activating and problem methods should be the main methods used in the work the youngest schoolchildren. Only one in 10 teachers appreciated lecturing methods.

The teachers were for activating methods because they encourage students to think, to work on their own, to present their knowledge and skills, and to be active. Children like those method because they find them interesting and they can develop their individual skills and interests while taking part in such activities. Such methods are particularly useful in the use of ITC technologies, as the teacher should follow the skills of the young generation. Activating methods also develop critical thinking and teach children how they can learn.

The teachers chose problem methods because they develop the child's creativity and non-standard thinking. While performing such tasks, not only does the student watch others, but they also try to deal with the problems on their own and find a solution. The child learns from their own mistakes and remembers more while playing with a given issue. Such methods teach critical thinking, encourage the child to search for knowledge on their own, make all students involved in the work, develop independent thinking and healthy competition.

Teachers believe that practical methods are useful because children, by nature, like acting and creating, and movement is natural for them. There is a saying: "Tell me, and I shall forget. Show me, and I shall remember. Let me do and experience, and I shall understand," which is confirmed by this method. Such methods help the children learn quickly, as they activate spontaneity and freedom. They facilitate learning through playing and doing – children learn many things fast. and they are not even aware of it.

Among the advantages of lecturing methods, teachers enumerate the following: children like to speak because they feel appreciated then as the attention of others is focused on them; due to such methods one may learn what students think and help them solve their uncertainties; the methods are good for the youngest children who raise their hands often and like sharing their experience; the youngest children also like repeating after the teacher.

Exposing methods – learning through experiencing; the children can experience the educational content in a tangible manner.

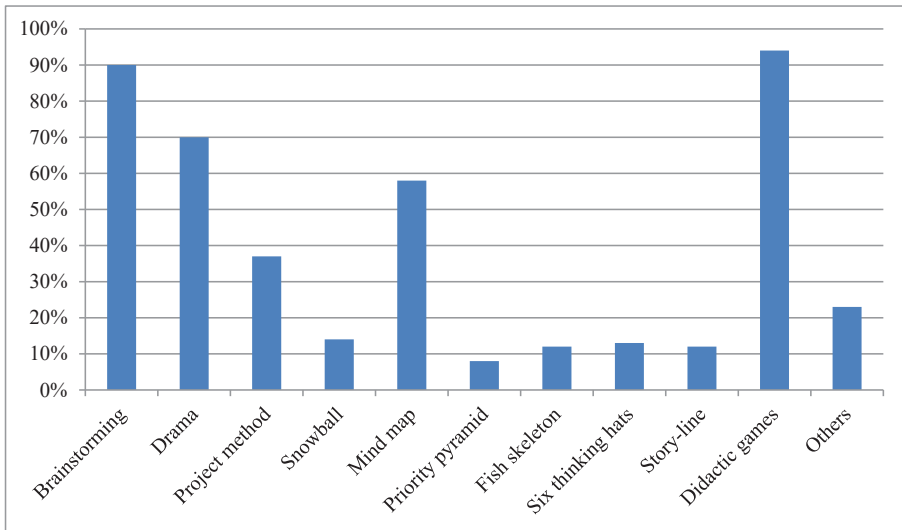
Moreover, in the respondents' replies we could find the suggestions related to combining and alternate use of different methods. The teachers said there is no one perfect method that would help to achieve all the objectives of classes, and that one has to properly select the ways of working with children. The latter includes the educational content, the objectives and tasks, the place in which classes are conducted, the availability of didactic aids, the duration of classes, the students' interests and styles of learning, as well as the teacher's personality.

2. Opinions of early education teachers on the activating methods used during integrated classes

According to Renata Michalak (Michalak 2004: 46), activating methods include the way of working with children in which the teacher organises didactic situations in which the child’s personal knowledge is treated like a “table” for entering new information, and the process of knowledge restructuring depends on the kind of activities taken up by the student. In the course of education understood this way, the teacher is the person who activates the student – it is the adult who is responsible for providing developmental stimuli, and the child collects experiences through their own activity and exploration of the surrounding world. Thus, working with children should include such actions that support their own initiative, independence and ability to solve problems.

The teachers, while answering the previous questions, have already outlined their opinion on activating methods. However, diagram 4 presents detailed data, partially corresponding with the previously obtained results.

Diagram 4. Activating methods used by the teachers during the classes



Source: author’s own work.

The most popular activating methods were didactic games and brainstorming. Games were used by 94% respondents, and almost 9 per 10 teachers appreciated the value of brainstorming. Less popular activating methods included drama (70%), mind map (58%) and project (37%). It is worth mentioning that the activating methods enumerated by the teachers are considered the most popular or even typical. Perhaps

the respondents lack knowledge on other ways of working with children, or maybe they are just reluctant to use new ideas since the old ones are good and effective. Only about 1/5 of the respondents declared occasional use of more interesting solutions, which were classified as “others.” This group of methods included: the method of unfinished sentences, half-poem, poster puzzle, spider web, talking wall, decision tree, fish tank, tale from the mug, and integrative dance. Some teachers used elements of methods of different pedagogues, e.g. the method of creative gymnastics by R. Laban, the method of active listening to music by B. Strauss, or the method of developing movement by W. Sherborne.

While evaluating the frequency of the use of activating methods, the teachers declared their systematic use in working with the youngest schoolchildren. More than 3/4 of the respondents noticed that they use them on a regular basis, but not during each lesson. Less than 1/5 of the analysed teachers believed that their way of transferring information is fully carried out through activating methods. Only 1 in 20 people admitted that active fulfilment of classes took part only a few times in a semester. The research results related to the occurrence of interesting and unconventional methods of working with children from classes I-III are satisfactory. Generally speaking, we can assume that almost all the surveyed teachers (94%) declared regular and systematic use of activating methods during their classes.

As for expressing the opinion on the effectiveness of activating methods, even more optimistic results were obtained. Most teachers, which constituted 93% of the respondents, gave them the highest mark. The arguments concerning the dynamics and effectiveness of this group of methods were as follows:

- the classes are more interesting and more attractive; they make it possible to remember particular issues easily and learning is fun for children;
- children gain knowledge in an active manner, they find solutions themselves, they make responsible decisions, they are not bored and they are involved in the process of learning; they are eager to try new things, the only thing they need is encouragement;
- they involve logical thinking, develop creative thinking, practice patience – especially among the children from class I who are still impatient; they create the opportunity to achieve didactic success, they improve self-esteem and shape personality, as the children themselves discover and explore things;
- work with the use of activating methods is relaxing; it is easier to encourage all the students to participate in the classes; the children learn proper human relations, understanding and tolerance;
- time passes quickly while using these methods, after the lesson finishes, the children are surprised – “Is it already over?”; they do not want to go home and ask for longer classes.

Conclusions

The research has shown certain discrepancies between the real ways of working with young schoolchildren and the vision of how it should look like. On the one hand, it may be disturbing that all the teachers of classes I-III use lecturing methods while working with children. On the other hand, the good news is that activating methods have also been noticed and appreciated – more than 4/5 of the surveyed teachers found them very useful. Moreover, the respondents were able to specify which methods are the most effective and which of them should be used while working with children aged 7-10. In this category, activating methods dominate, and 74% of the teachers confirmed their regular application. Nevertheless, the most popular activating methods only include typical activities, so we can assume that most teachers lack a rich methodological knowledge that would make it possible for them to carry out varied and activating classes. However, the teachers have a good knowledge, or perhaps intuition, as for the way the work with the youngest schoolchildren should look like. More than 9 per 10 respondents were convinced that activating methods are very effective, and almost a half of the surveyed teachers would recommend such methods to other teachers.

The methods that are rejected by almost all the teachers include exposing methods. Only one in 5 of the teachers declared that he/she uses them, and less than 1 per 15 surveyed people believed they are effective. Only 1 per 20 teachers would recommend the use of such methods to colleagues.

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