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Teacher as an Informal Educational Leader. Leadership and Class Management Styles Preferred by Early Childhood Education Teachers in Mainstream and Inclusive Schools – Research Report

Nauczyciel – nieformalny przywódca edukacyjny. Style przywódcze a style kierowania zespołem klasowym preferowane przez nauczycieli edukacji wczesnoszkolnej szkół ogólnodostępnych i integracyjnych – komunikat z badań

KEYWORDS

educational leadership, leadership styles, classroom management styles, informal educational leadership

ABSTRACT

The teacher is an informal educational leader because his/her role is determined by the characteristics and effectiveness of actions. As leaders, teachers plan the learning process to unleash students' potential. Teachers also influence the shaping of peer relationships in the class. The aim of the research was to identify the leadership styles preferred by the surveyed early childhood education teachers and their determinants, as well as to examine the correlation between leadership and class management styles preferred by the surveyed teachers of mainstream and inclusive schools.

The research results indicate that the surveyed early childhood education teachers strongly preferred the autocratic leadership style in which the teacher – the informal leader focuses primarily on the task and its verification, while the needs of students seem not important. Also, teachers of mainstream schools preferred a persuasive style of

leading the class group, while teachers of inclusive schools preferred a directing and participating style.

What is significant is that the surveyed teachers, regardless of seniority, level of professional advancement and type of school (mainstream and inclusive), focused on the task, while the pupils' needs were not considered in the process. Also, it is rather interesting to reflect on the results indicating the fact that teachers who had not completed postgraduate studies, courses, workshops and training, preferred an integrated leadership style that was equally focused on tasks and on students, which was typical of teachers of inclusive schools. In both groups of teachers, a statistically significant relationship was found between preferred leadership styles and the styles of managing a class.

SŁOWA KLUCZE

przywództwo edukacyjne, style przywódcze, style kierowania zespołem klasowym, nieformalne przywództwo edukacyjne

ABSTRAKT

Nauczyciel jest nieformalnym przywódcą edukacyjnym, o jego roli decydują bowiem właściwości i efektywność działania. Jako lider planuje proces uczenia się i wyzwala w uczniach ich potencjał oraz wywiera wpływ i uczestniczy w kształtowaniu relacji rówieśniczych. Celem badań było wskazanie stylów przywódczych preferowanych przez badanych nauczycieli edukacji wczesnoszkolnej oraz ich uwarunkowań, a także zbadanie korelacji pomiędzy stylami przywódczymi a stylami kierowania zespołem klasowym preferowanymi przez badanych nauczycieli szkół ogólnodostępnych i integracyjnych.

Przeprowadzone badania wskazują, że nauczyciele edukacji wczesnoszkolnej zdecydowanie preferowali styl przywództwa autokratycznego, w którym lider – nauczyciel, nieformalny przywódca – skupia się przede wszystkim na zadaniu wykonywanym podczas zajęć i jego weryfikacji. Z kolei jeśli chodzi o style kierowania zespołem klasowym, to nauczyciele szkół ogólnodostępnych preferowali perswadujący styl kierowania zespołem, a nauczyciele szkół integracyjnych styl kierujący oraz uczestniczący.

Z przeprowadzonych badań wynika, że badani nauczyciele edukacji wczesnoszkolnej bez względu na staż pracy, stopnień awansu zawodowego oraz rodzaj szkoły (ogólnodostępnej czy integracyjnej) przede wszystkim skupiali się na zadaniu, natomiast potrzeby uczniów nie były istotne w tym procesie. Zastanawia również pewna prawidłowość, że nauczyciele edukacji wczesnoszkolnej, którzy nie ukończyli studiów podyplomowych oraz kursów, warsztatów i szkoleń, preferowali zintegrowany styl przywództwa, który w równym stopniu nastawiony jest na zadanie i ucznia, co było charakterystyczne dla nauczycieli szkół integracyjnych.

W obu grupach badanych nauczycieli stwierdzono występowanie istotnej statystycznie zależności pomiędzy preferowanymi stylami przywództwa a stylami kierowania zespołem klasowym.

Introduction

While talking about leadership in the educational space, we primarily mean the school principal. However, since leadership is the ability to release in people the ability to perform a task as effectively as possible, with a sense of meaningfulness, respect and satisfaction (Blanchard, 2007), we should also take into account teachers as educational leaders. They are responsible for the development of students, unleashing their strengths and motivating them to make efforts aimed at acquiring knowledge and skills. The perception of the teacher as a leader also stems from the approach to educational leadership as a process that uses the potential of individuals to create a cooperative team to achieve desired goals (Reinhartz & Beach, 2004). With that said, it should be noted here that the school principal is the highest level formal leader, while teacher leadership has the hallmarks of informal leadership (Kwiatkowski, 2010).

The teacher is perceived as a leader from the perspective of students, but this is a subjective choice. His/her leadership is determined not only by their personal qualities, but also by their abilities and the results of their actions (Kwiatkowski, 2010; Leithwood, 2005). A perfect leader will be a teacher who influences students in learning and in life – as a multidimensional role model (Kwiatkowski, 2010) and the most influential leader (Curtis, 2013; Muijs & Harris, 2006), because, through the precise planning of the learning and development process (individual and organizational), he/she will unleash the potential of the people with whom he/she works, i.e. the students (Mazurkiewicz, 2011).

The teacher as an educational leader performs tasks that fall into three main areas of activity (Figure 1): supporting colleagues in their development, leading change in the school, and working with students.

Figure 1. Areas of Activity of the Teachers as Educational Leaders
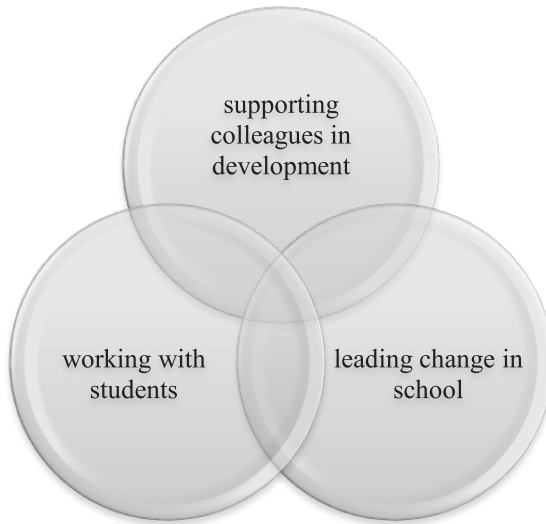
Source: Kałużyńska, 2018, p. 183.

The research presented here focused on one area of activity carried out by teachers-educational leaders, namely on working with students. Therefore, the leadership grid (Figure 2) of Robert Blake and Jane Mouton (1964) was used, which takes into account two factors: task and people. It was this focus more or less on one of the factors or both (equally) that determined the possession of certain leadership qualities and the preferred leadership style.

Figure 2. Leadership Grid According to Robert Blake and Jane Mouton

Source: Blake & Mouton, 1964.

The leadership grid consists of 81 fields, which illustrates the number of management styles that are characterised by the scale 1–9 referring to the intensity of features of the above-mentioned factors oriented at the task and/or people (Żuchowski, 2018; Fołtyn, 2006; Blake & Mouton, 1964). On this basis, Blake and Mouton (1964) distinguished five basic leadership styles:

- passive style (1.1) – characterised by the lack of interests in the task and people;
- democratic style (1.9) – the leader is mainly focused on people;
- balanced style (5.5) – there is a balance between the importance of the task and people; it is an intermediate style between democratic and autocratic style;
- autocratic style (9.1) – the leader focuses primarily on the task and verification of its fulfilment; he/she does not care about the needs of the people;
- integrated leadership style (9.9) – the task and people are extremely important; this is a perfect style of managing a team.

In turn, due to the importance of achieving the established goals of the institution and the importance of the involvement of a member of the organised community in the implementation of these goals, team leadership styles play a special role (Żukowski & Galla, 2009). For the purposes of the research presented here, we took into account styles embedded in the situational stream (Stoner et al., 2001; Blanchard et al., 1993; Hersey and Blanchard, 1988) whose foundation is an evolutionary model of leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988) conditioned by one's skills and experience, as well as one's "readiness" to take responsibility for the task.

Method

The purpose of the research undertaken was to identify the leadership styles preferred by the surveyed early childhood education teachers of mainstream and inclusive schools and their determinants, as well as to examine the correlation between the preferred leadership styles and the classroom team leadership styles manifested by the surveyed early childhood education teachers of mainstream and inclusive schools.

The following research problems have been identified:

1. What leadership styles do early childhood education teachers prefer, and to what extent do these preferences depend on the degree of professional promotion, additional qualifications, as well as the type of institution (mainstream and inclusive) in which the surveyed teachers worked?

2. Whether and to what extent do leadership styles condition the styles of managing the classroom team preferred by surveyed early childhood education teachers of mainstream and inclusive schools?

The formulated research objective and research problems constituted the basis for the selection of methods and research tools. The test method (questionnaire for assessing leadership qualities) and the estimation method (questionnaire for self-diagnosis of team leadership styles) were used. The questionnaire for assessing leadership qualities was based on the leadership grid (Figure 2). It consisted of 35 statements referring to selected leadership styles: autocratic (care about the task), democratic (care about people) and integrated (care equally about the task and people).

Figure 3. Leadership Styles Taken Into Account in the Research

Source: the author's own work.

The respondents indicated one of the answers (always, often, occasionally, hardly ever, never), which is an indication of how the person surveyed would behave in a real school situation. After counting the results, it was possible to determine the

leadership style and whether the surveyed teachers were more task- or student-oriented, or whether the task and the students are equally important to them (Figure 3).

The second tool is a questionnaire for (manager's) self-diagnosis of leadership styles. It was adapted to school situations occurring in the school classroom in teacher-student relationships. It consisted of 12 questions representing specific situations related to the function of a teacher-manager. The answers were categorised and the surveyed teachers chose one statement from among the four that best characterised their behaviour in a specific task-problem situation. The situations presented in the questionnaire referred to four types of employees according to Hersey and Blanchard (1988), which made it possible to identify teachers representing a specific leadership style (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Styles of Managing a Team by Teachers

directing style	persuasive style
	mixed style	
paricipating style	determining style
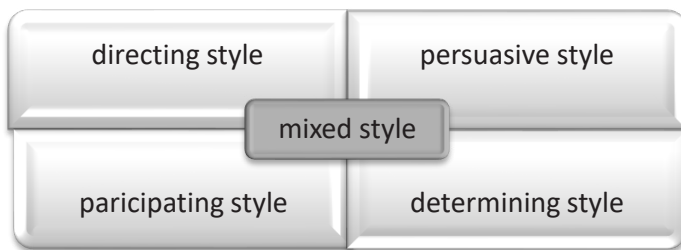
Source: the author's own work.

Taking into account different learning situations taking place in the classroom space and the class team, the following leadership styles were considered in the study:
● directing – the teacher gives detailed instructions and continuously controls the students, praising or criticizing them for the quality of the task performed;
● persuasive – the teacher gives students precise instructions, encourages them to complete tasks, in moments of discouragement motivates them to continue their efforts and helps them to perform better;
● participating – the teacher clearly defines the requirements and ways of completing the task, allows students the freedom of action and creative invention, continuously controls the quality of the completed tasks;
● determining – the teacher determines goals and, within a certain period of time, evaluates the work and draws consequences depending on the quality of the results achieved (goals);
● mixed – the teacher is a perfect leader because he/she uses all four styles of team management.

The study was conducted in schools in monocentric urban areas in 2021–2022. The selection of teachers was based on the principle of availability and dictated by their consent to participate in the study. The study included 328 early childhood education teachers (145 teachers of mainstream schools and 183 teachers of inclusive schools).

Table 1. *Characteristics of the Groups Analysed*

Teachers		School			
		Mainstream		Inclusive	
		N	%	N	%
Years of work	From 0 to 10 years	35	24.1%	51	27.9%
	From 11 to 20 years	61	42.1%	64	35.0%
	Over 20 years	49	33.8%	68	37.2%
Degree of professional seniority	Trainee/contract teacher	30	20.7%	49	26.8%
	Nominated teacher	43	29.7%	35	19.1%
	Certified teacher	72	49.7%	99	54.1%
Postgraduate studies	No	73	50.3%	47	25.7%
	Yes	72	49.7%	136	74.3%
Courses/workshops/ training sessions	No	47	32.4%	66	36.1%
	Yes	98	67.6%	117	63.9%

Source: the author's own work.

The surveyed teachers were differentiated by seniority. Among teachers of mainstream schools, 24.1% were those with up to 10 years of seniority; 42.1% – those with 11 to 20 years of seniority; and 33.8% – those with more than 20 years of seniority. Among teachers of inclusive schools, the distribution of results was similar (27.9%, 35% and 37.2%). The largest proportion of respondents were certified teachers – 49.7% of mainstream schools and 54.1% of inclusive schools. Postgraduate studies were completed by 49.7% of teachers in mainstream schools and 74.3% of inclusive schools. Additional courses and training sessions were completed by 67.6% of teachers in mainstream schools and 63.9% of inclusive schools.
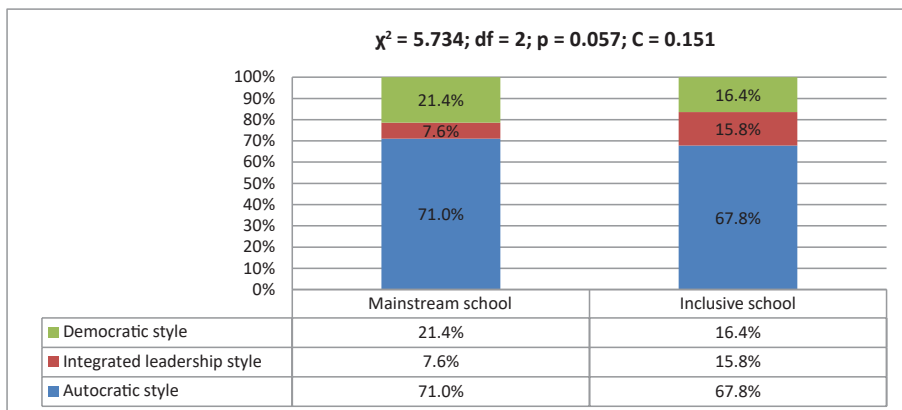
The analysis was carried out in the PQStat programme (version 1.6.8) with the adopted level of significance $p = 0.05$ (the result under this value was considered statistically important). The following tests were used in the analysis[1]:

● Mann-Whitney U test for independent pairs which makes it possible to check whether there are statistically significant differences between two groups related to the ordering variable or quantitative variable;

● Kruskal-Wallis test for independent groups with which the occurrence of differences between more than two groups were verified;

● chi-square test with which it was checked whether there is a statistically important dependence between two qualitative variables.

Results

At the outset of the research conducted, the focus was on analysing data talking about leadership styles preferred by the surveyed teachers of mainstream and inclusive schools (Figure 5).

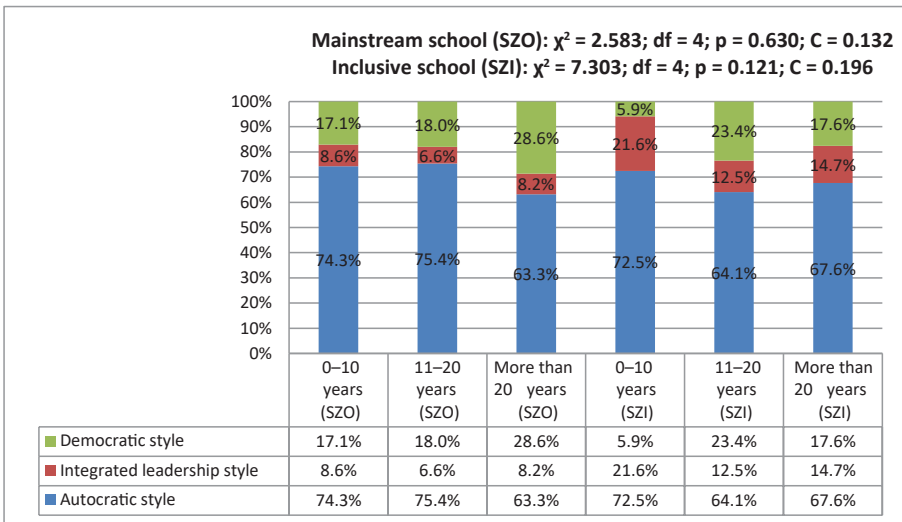Figure 5. Leadership Styles Preferred by the Analysed Early Childhood Education Teachers

$\chi^2 = 5.734$; df = 2; p = 0.057; C = 0.151

	Mainstream school	Inclusive school
Democratic style	21.4%	16.4%
Integrated leadership style	7.6%	15.8%
Autocratic style	71.0%	67.8%

Source: the author's own research.

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1   The following abbreviations were used in the analysis: N – number, M – mean, SD – standard deflection, Min – minimum value, $Q25$ – lower quartile, Me – median, $Q75$ – upper quartile, Max – maximum value, C – contingency coefficient, U – Mann-Whitney U test statistics, H – Kruskal-Wallis test statistics, χ^2 – chi/square test statistics, df – degrees of freedom, p – importance.

The leadership styles preferred by the teachers surveyed were not dependent on the type of school in which the respondents work ($p > 0.05$). Among both mainstream and inclusive school teachers, the majority (71% and 67.8%) preferred an autocratic – task-oriented leadership style. The differences in the percentage distribution of the results should be considered statistically insignificant.

Another analysis focused on assessing the relationship between the preferred leadership styles and the seniority of surveyed early childhood education teachers in mainstream and inclusive schools.

Figure 6. Leadership Styles Preferred by Surveyed Early Childhood Education Teachers and Their Length of Work

Mainstream school (SZO): $\chi^2 = 2.583$; df = 4; p = 0.630; C = 0.132
Inclusive school (SZI): $\chi^2 = 7.303$; df = 4; p = 0.121; C = 0.196

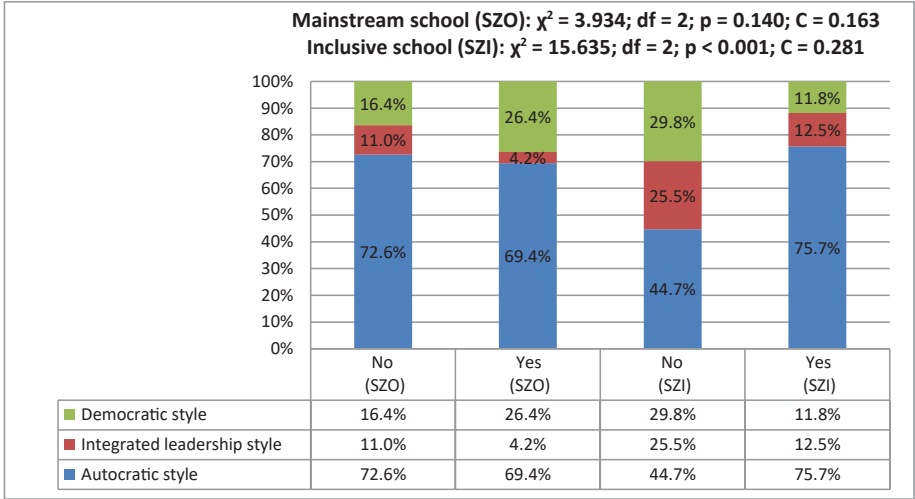|	0–10 years (SZO)	11–20 years (SZO)	More than 20 years (SZO)	0–10 years (SZI)	11–20 years (SZI)	More than 20 years (SZI)
Democratic style	17.1%	18.0%	28.6%	5.9%	23.4%	17.6%
Integrated leadership style	8.6%	6.6%	8.2%	21.6%	12.5%	14.7%
Autocratic style	74.3%	75.4%	63.3%	72.5%	64.1%	67.6%

Source: the author's own research.

The leadership styles preferred by mainstream school teachers did not vary due to seniority ($p > 0.05$). An autocratic task-focused style was most common in each group, with 63.3% of those with more than 20 years' seniority, 75.4% of those with 11 to 20 years' seniority and 74.3% of those with up to 10 years' seniority. However, the percentage differences cannot be used as a basis for drawing conclusions concerning differences between the groups due to the statistically insignificant test result.

Also, the seniority did not influence inclusive school teachers in terms of preferred leadership styles ($p > 0.05$). An autocratic style putting the task first was preferred by 67.6% of teachers with seniority of more than 20 years, 64.1% of teachers with

seniority of 11 to 20 years, and 72.5% of teachers with seniority of up to 10 years. These differences were not statistically significant.

Another comparison referred to the evaluation of the dependence of leadership styles on the participation in postgraduate studies (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Leadership Styles Preferred by the Analysed Early Childhood Education Teachers and Participation in Postgraduate Studies
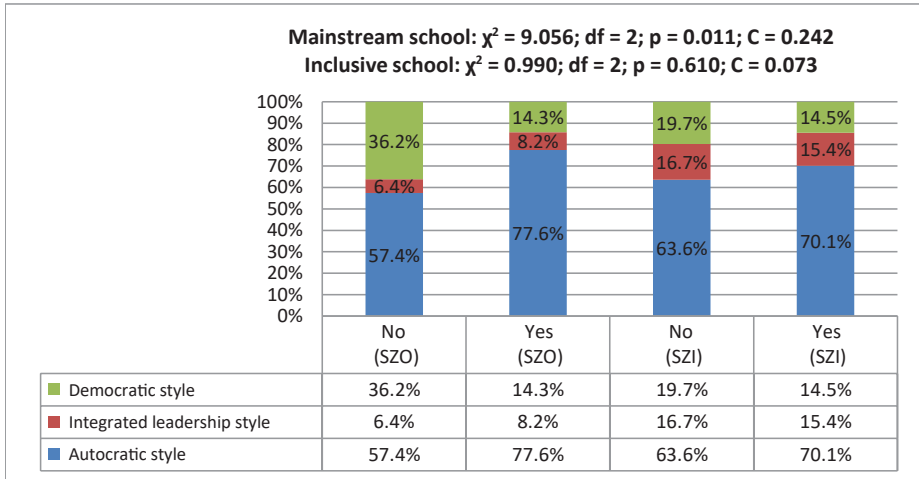

Mainstream school (SZO): χ^2 = 3.934; df = 2; p = 0.140; C = 0.163
Inclusive school (SZI): χ^2 = 15.635; df = 2; p < 0.001; C = 0.281

	No (SZO)	Yes (SZO)	No (SZI)	Yes (SZI)
Democratic style	16.4%	26.4%	29.8%	11.8%
Integrated leadership style	11.0%	4.2%	25.5%	12.5%
Autocratic style	72.6%	69.4%	44.7%	75.7%

Source: the author's own research.

The completion of postgraduate studies did not differentiate mainstream school teachers in terms of their preferred leadership styles ($p > 0.05$). The most popular autocratic style, which prioritises the task, was preferred by 69.4% teachers who took part in postgraduate studies and by 72.6% of other teachers. The differences between those groups were not statistically important ($p > 0.05$).

Postgraduate studies, in turn, influenced inclusive school teachers in terms of the preferred leadership style (χ^2 = 15.635; df = 2; $p < 0.001$). The autocratic style preferring the task was more frequent in the group of postgraduates (75.7%) than in the group of other respondents (44.7%). A preference for an integrated leadership style characterised by concern for the task and people (12.5%) and a people-oriented democratic style (11.8%) was found among those who had not completed postgraduate education. The relationship discussed was weak (C = 0.281).

Then, the relationship between the leadership styles preferred by the early childhood education teachers surveyed and their participation in forms of further education such as courses, workshops and training sessions, was assessed (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Leadership Styles Preferred by the Analysed Early Education Teachers and Their Participation in Further Education (Courses/Workshops/Training Sessions)
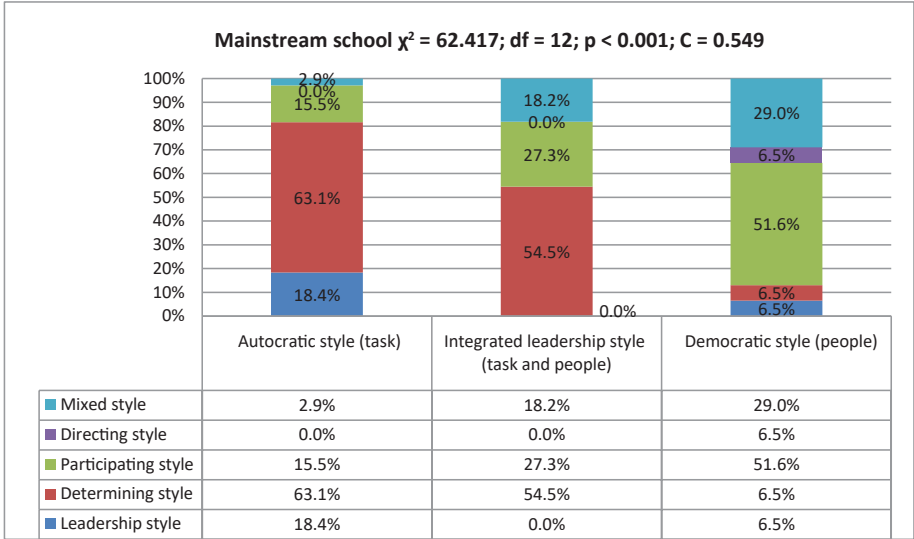
Mainstream school: χ² = 9.056; df = 2; p = 0.011; C = 0.242
Inclusive school: χ² = 0.990; df = 2; p = 0.610; C = 0.073

	No (SZO)	Yes (SZO)	No (SZI)	Yes (SZI)
Democratic style	36.2%	14.3%	19.7%	14.5%
Integrated leadership style	6.4%	8.2%	16.7%	15.4%
Autocratic style	57.4%	77.6%	63.6%	70.1%

Source: the author's own research.

The completion of additional courses, workshops and training sessions differentiated mainstream school teachers in terms of preferred leadership styles (χ^2 = 9.056; df = 2; p = 0.011). An autocratic style focusing on the task was chosen more often by those in further education (77.6%) than by teachers not participating in these forms of further education (57.4%). In contrast, the surveyed teachers who did not receive additional training were more likely to prefer a people-centered democratic style (36.2%). The relationship between the variables was weak (C = 0.242). In the group of inclusive school teachers, the use of additional training session, courses and workshops was not significant for the preferred leadership styles (p > 0.05). In both groups, the distribution of results was similar.

The next analysis focused on assessing the relationship between leadership styles and class team management styles (Figure 9 and 10) preferred by the surveyed early childhood education teachers of mainstream and inclusive schools.
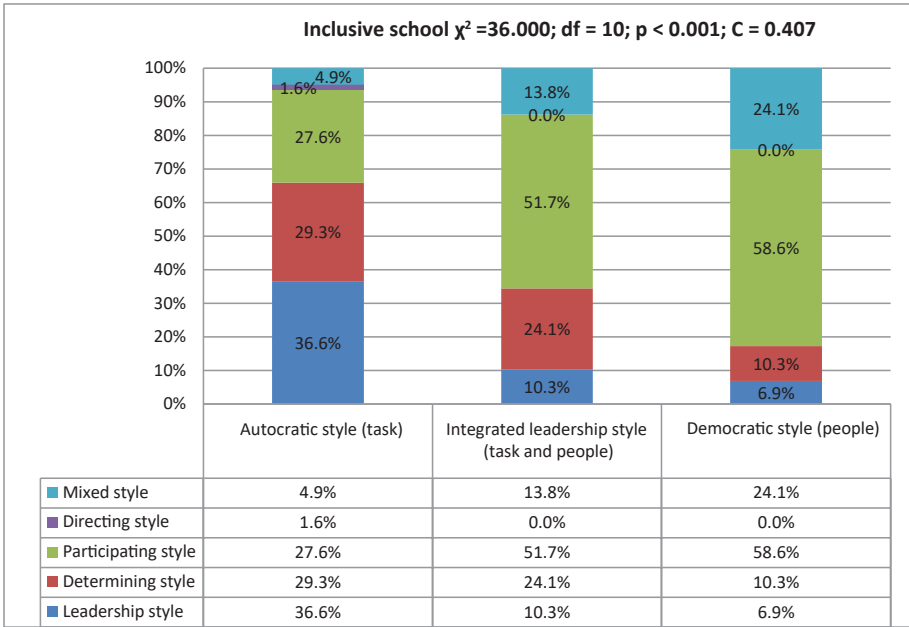
Figure 9. Leadership Styles and Styles of Class Team Management Preferred by Mainstream School Teachers

Mainstream school χ² = 62.417; df = 12; p < 0.001; C = 0.549

	Autocratic style (task)	Integrated leadership style (task and people)	Democratic style (people)
Mixed style	2.9%	18.2%	29.0%
Directing style	0.0%	0.0%	6.5%
Participating style	15.5%	27.3%	51.6%
Determining style	63.1%	54.5%	6.5%
Leadership style	18.4%	0.0%	6.5%

Source: the author's own research.

In the group of mainstream school teachers, there was a statistically significant relationship between the preferred leadership styles and class team management styles (χ^2 = 62.417; df = 12; p < 0.001). Those preferring a task-oriented autocratic style most often (63.1%) preferred a persuasive style. Teachers preferring an integrated leadership style (task and people) also mostly declared that they preferred a persuasive style (54.5%). However, among teachers preferring a democratic style (people), the participating style of class leadership management was most common (29%). This relationship had moderate strength (C = 0.54).

Figure 10. Leadership Styles and Class Team Management Styles Preferred by Inclusive School Teachers

	Autocratic style (task)	Integrated leadership style (task and people)	Democratic style (people)
Inclusive school χ² =36.000; df = 10; p < 0.001; C = 0.407			
Mixed style	4.9%	13.8%	24.1%
Directing style	1.6%	0.0%	0.0%
Participating style	27.6%	51.7%	58.6%
Determining style	29.3%	24.1%	10.3%
Leadership style	36.6%	10.3%	6.9%

Source: the author's own research.

In the group of inclusive school teachers, a statistically significant relationship was found between the preferred leadership styles and class team leadership styles (χ^2 = 36.000; df = 10; p < 0.001). Those with a preference for an autocratic, task-oriented leadership style were most likely (36.6%) to use the determining style of class team management. Among the teachers preferring an integrated (task and people) leadership style, those leading the class team mostly chose a participating style (51.7%). Similarly, teachers preferring a people-oriented democratic style were most likely to use a participating leadership style (58.6%). This relationship had moderate strength (C = 0.407).

Conclusions

On the basis of the research carried out, conclusions were drawn which, due to the size of the group, are not subject to generalisation:

1. The surveyed early childhood education teachers strongly prefer an autocratic leadership style in which the leader-teacher focuses primarily on the task and

its verification, while the needs of the students are not important in the process. What is significant, and worrying at the same time, is the fact emerging from the research that this is the approach preferred by the surveyed teachers regardless of seniority, professional promotion and type of school.

One pattern is also puzzling, namely that the surveyed early childhood education teachers who had not completed postgraduate studies or training sessions/workshops and courses preferred an integrated, task-oriented and people-oriented leadership style, which was primarily characteristic of teachers from inclusive schools, and a people-oriented democratic style, which was important for teachers of both surveyed groups from mainstream and inclusive schools.

2. In both groups of early childhood education teachers surveyed, a statistically significant relationship was found between the preferred leadership styles and class team management styles. Mainstream school teachers preferring a task-oriented autocratic style and an integrated leadership style focused equally on task and people were most likely to reach for a persuasive team leadership style, focusing primarily on the quality of the task completion.

    In turn, teachers in inclusive schools preferring a task-oriented autocratic style reached for a directing style, which shows a certain consistency in the approach to task completion, making it a priority without paying attention to students' needs. In contrast, teachers preferring a task- and people-oriented integrated leadership style or a people-oriented democratic style preferred a participating style when working with the class team. Such a correlation allows the claim to be made that teachers surveyed who recognise the subjectivity of students give them the power to co-manage the learning process and share with them the responsibility for the quality of the tasks completed. The task thus falls to the background, however, it still retains its importance stemming from the educational process.

Discussion of the Results

The opinion of Michael Fielding (2006) is of relevance to the research presented here, as this author placed task- and result-oriented schools in opposition to person-centered schools. The former are based on functional relationships, i.e. impersonal and temporary ones, while the latter take into account the person and are based on commitment and relationships, which is crucial for the effectiveness of the activities undertaken. This position corresponds closely with the research approach of Robin Precey (2011) who draws our attention to schools' approach to tasks. The researcher points out that institutions that focus only on results are built primarily on functional

relationships, whereas schools that value the student focus on personal relationships, which, in turn, matches the approach of "education for everyone".

The qualitative research by Maria Flores (2018) highlights teachers' informal educational leadership and its dimension of influence. The teachers interviewed emphasised their role as leaders of the learning process in relation to the school class. This view of the role of teachers as informal leaders fits in with the role of change promoters. Another issue highlighted by the teachers interviewed was the creation of a conducive learning environment inside and outside the school classroom. Teachers emphasised their responsibility for the quality of learning, the development of students and their well-being, but also the atmosphere in the school. It is the classroom that is the key leadership environment for teachers-leaders.

The results presented here are supported in the research of Tang Ngang and Nur Abdullah (2015) who found significant, positive and moderate to strong, relationships between teachers' leadership practice and class management practice. The results of the study showed that the leadership practice of the teachers surveyed is an important aspect of improvement in the area of class management, especially for those teachers who teach in special education classes and work with students with learning difficulties.

The importance of the attitudes represented by the leader for the effectiveness of students and teachers is also found in the research by Kaye Pepper and Lisa Hamilton Thomas (2002) who found that the leadership style influences learning environment and students' success in the school environment depends on it. These findings correlate with the recent research by Verónica Espinosa and Jorge González (2023) who found that teacher leadership that focuses on them as individuals and on their development is particularly important for students. According to the researchers, what was the most valuable was leadership based on the passion for teaching, respect, commitment to the students' success, motivation and understanding, as well as making wise demands on the students.

The teacher, as an architect of the educational environment and a creator of students' activities taking into account their needs and capabilities, co-creates the microsystem that is the educational environment in which the child develops his/her individual experiences, builds knowledge and his/her attitude towards himself or herself and the world (Bałachowicz, 2014, p. 25). It is largely up to the teacher to empathetically and positively motivate his/her students to acquire new learning experiences, while wisely using their individual potential to develop their unique abilities.

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