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Motivation of Early Childhood Education Teachers in the Pursuit of Pedagogical Mastery

Abstract

The article concerns the role of motivation among early education teachers in striving for pedagogical mastery. The aim of the exploratory research was to outline the motives of early childhood education teachers in their pursuit of pedagogical mastery. The main challenge was to determine what factors motivate a teacher to strive for excellence and what methods are used to achieve it. This question was answered by collecting empirical evidence from January to May 2019. The research conducted by the author was of a mixed nature (quantitative and qualitative).

The findings suggest that there are many motives for Polish teachers of early childhood education to achieve pedagogical mastery, but chief among them is financial gratification. In Poland, the amount of remuneration depends on one's professional degree. A professional career and its further advancement is balanced with the journey to achieve pedagogical mastery.

Keywords: early childhood education teacher, pedagogical mastery, motivation

Introduction

The teacher is one of the main educational actors at all levels of education, from kindergarten to university. Ożóg and Petkowicz (2009) define a teacher as "a person who teaches and helps others to learn by communicating content, developing the capacity for self-education, introducing moral values and attitudes, and participating in their upbringing as a social function" (p. 820). Okoń (2001) recognizes that a teacher is someone who "by passing on messages teaches others or teaches how to live" (p. 256). The first meaning of the word has evolved greatly due to new pedagogical tendencies and has become considerably closer to the second meaning. In view of this, a contemporary teacher is a person who is concerned with the education, upbringing, and development of the students they care for. The success of this work relies on a number of factors, including external conditions and curricula, but mainly on the teachers themselves. The quality of the educational process depends on the competence, personality, knowledge, and professional training of the teacher. The literature on the subject (e.g., Kwiatkowska, 2008; Śliwerski, 2009, 2010; Zacłona, 2012; Szempruch, 2013; Gołębniak & Zamorska, 2014) attaches the greatest importance to these factors and increasingly mentions *teaching mastery*, i.e., being an excellent teacher (Zjaziun, 2005; Szkolak-Stępień, 2016). It should be remembered, however, that the acquisition and broadening of individual professional teaching competences is balanced with the prospective professional development of a teacher, as reflected in their professional career and its advancement, and this in turn constitutes the road to pedagogical mastery (Szkolak--Stępień, 2016, p. 26). In order for this process to take place, the teacher must be appropriately motivated.

Pedagogical mastery

Although in Polish literature the term *pedagogical mastery* is relatively new, its basic principles date back to ancient times. In ancient

Greece, attention was given to the high moral and mental qualifications of teachers (Wołoszyn, 2003, p. 88). This idea was revived in modern times. The 17th-century pedagogue Jan Amos Komeński was of the opinion that the only people equipped to educate young people are suitably trained teachers. In the 19th century, with the formation of pedagogy as a science, the first schools for teachers were established, not only offering access to knowledge in the subjects which would be taught later, but also creating the foundations for working with students. In the 20th century, even greater emphasis was placed on educating teachers, i.e., striving for professional mastery (Mazur, 2015, p. 43 ff.).

Before presenting the concept of *pedagogical mastery*, the terms *master* and *mastery* should be explained. The Dictionary of Contemporary Polish lists four definitions of the term master. For the purpose of this work, the first two are the most important. A master is:

1. "a person decidedly better than others in a particular field, superior to others in terms of skills.
2. a person considered a spiritual guide, a teacher because of superiority in a particular area of life" (Dunaj, 1996, p. 528).

Górniewicz (2017) defines a master as "a person gifted with exceptional talent in a given field of activity or holding a high position in the professional hierarchy" (p. 10). Since ancient times, masters have received exceptional treatment because of their mastery of science, art, sports, or other areas of social activity. Mastery, on the other hand, is defined as the "highest masterful skills in a given discipline" (Dunaj, 1996, p. 528). It follows from these definitions that mastery should be linked to the development of skills in a particular field.

Pedagogical mastery can therefore be described as an outstanding, high-level professional activity of an individual in the field of education or didactics. Mastery is a process that aims for perfection and in practice is never finished. It encourages self-improvement and development and provides encouragement for pedagogical work.

In English literature, the term *teacher professionalism* is used to describe pedagogical mastery. This term relates to the improvement of the

quality and standard of teachers' work and image. Demirkasimoglu (2010), who studied dozens of definitions of teacher professionalism, points out that it is most often defined as performing "professional work with its sociological, ideological, and educational aspects, aiming at achieving the highest standards in teaching profession which is based upon professional formation, knowledge, skill, and values" (p. 2051). According to Tichenor and Tichenor (2004–2005), a professional teacher is one who "is dedicated to teaching, represents the best in the profession, and sets the highest standards for best practice" (p. 90). In turn, Wise (1989) considered professional teachers to be people who "have a very good knowledge of the subjects they teach [and] know the standards and practice of their profession. Moreover, they are capable of analyzing and meeting the needs of their pupils" (pp. 304–305).

Bocharova (2016) analyzed a number of definitions of pedagogical mastery and on this basis developed her own interpretation. According to her, pedagogical mastery is "the highest level of pedagogical activity, which is expressed in the creativity of a teacher, and the constant improvement of the art of teaching, upbringing, and self-development of man" (p. 205). This consists of eight basic features. The first is professional competence, i.e., broad knowledge in the fields of psychology, pedagogy, methodology, didactics, the teaching of a given subject, communication, assessment, etc., – the entire knowledge which forms the skills and tools of a teacher. The next element that fits into the definition of pedagogical mastery is specific personality traits. A teacher/master should be rational, highly ethical, optimistic, empathic, determined, understanding, and tolerant. A teacher/master should use the appropriate pedagogical technique, including habits and skills which help to increase the effectiveness of didactic and educational processes. This means a pedagogical approach that, in essence, is the ability to control emotions and use the appropriate means of educational communication, language, gestures, etc. Pedagogical mastery also includes pedagogical tact, i.e., the ability to choose the right tone and style of communication, not only with students but also with other school employees. The next element is pedagogical creativity, i.e., the creative selection of methods and forms of teaching. The variety of student personalities makes

it necessary for the teacher to be creative and imaginative and to use non-standard solutions, as repetition does not facilitate the development of students. Humanistic orientation, which means focusing on the other person, morality, and spiritual values, is also very important. It relates to the awareness that upbringing depends on the personality and attitudes of the teacher. This orientation is expressed in the concern for the needs and welfare of a child, as well as its comprehensive development. The next element is a culture of communication, i.e., a masterful command of the spoken word and the ability to express thoughts in a precise, accurate, and understandable manner. Pupils value teachers who do not create barriers in communication and who are easy to communicate with. The last component is pedagogical skills, i.e., the special personality traits of the pedagogue which determine the success of pedagogical activity (Bocharova, 2016, p. 208).

The literature on the subject distinguishes three types of pedagogical mastery. The first and the lowest is imitative mastery. Its essence is to act according to existing patterns and to try to match the skills of a master. The second level of mastery relates to adopting proven and recognized teaching methods, but modifying, improving, and enriching them with one's own educational and didactic ideas. The final stage of mastery relates to a situation in which teachers use innovative ideas in their educational activities, enabling them to achieve outstanding didactic and educational results. Such innovative ideas could include, for example, the creation of a new computer program which will be successfully used in classes. It can be seen that reaching mastery is in itself a form of education that lasts throughout the professional life of a teacher (Galant, 1993; Szkolak-Stępień, 2016). Sobieszczyk and Wojciechowska (2015, pp. 58–59) distinguished as many as four stages of achieving mastery. These include the stage of methodological models, the stage of critical reflection, the stage of self-control, and the creative stage.

In pedagogical mastery, several important aspects can be distinguished:

- Ethical – Professional mastery, the process of striving for it, and the desire to achieve it are inalienable aspects of the professional ethics of a teacher. Mediocrity and ignorance are fundamental sins that should be excluded from the teaching profession;

- Esthetic – Mastery can be seen as a form of art. The teacher educates, and in doing so creates beauty. Those who, through mastery, skillfully and consciously pursue an accepted and set goal become masters in the creation of beauty;
- Humanistic – if work is defined as a deliberate and conscious activity, being an exclusive attribute of man, a constitutive element of humanity, then mastery in work is its affirmation, and at the same time the ascension to the highest peaks of humanism. Mastery in work is a source of human dignity;
- Didactic – A master increases the opportunities of development for students and serves to consolidate their knowledge and acquisition of it;
- Educational – A master is an authority to pupils (Szkolak-Stępień, 2016, p. 40);

Educational mastery requires not only the improvement of professional qualifications in order to make the teaching process more effective, but also lifelong learning in many areas of life.

Motivation of teachers in their pursuit of excellence

The concept of motivation is derived from the Latin language and is connected with words like *motus* or *motio*, meaning movement and motion, respectively (Korpanty, 2001, p. 286). In this context, motivation is linked to progress in action. According to the Dictionary of Contemporary Polish, motivation is "a factor which causes a person's action, encourages them to do something" (Dunaj, 1996, p. 540). Łukasiewicz and Ożóg (2009) defined motivation as "an internal system that organizes the behavior of individuals and leads to the achievement of states of affairs important to them, or a set of cultural and social factors that influence the behavior of individuals, groups, and communities" (p. 359). These authors emphasize that motivation is a set of motives that are responsible for the initiation, direction, intensity, maintenance, and completion of behavior.

In the literature on psychology, motivation is expressed either as a mental state or as a personality trait. As far as the first meaning is concerned, motivation is a state of internal tension, the aim of which is to induce behavior in order to reduce said state. In the second sense, motivation is the fixed attribute of an individual, which gives behavior a certain constant orientation (Wach, 1997, p. 7).

Motivation can be seen as the driving force of man. It is worth noting, however, that if motivation is too strong, it may impede action, and in extreme situations even paralyse it. This is due to the fact that strong emotional tension is able to disrupt and deform activities, thus causing them to be disorganized. If an individual is subject to strong motives, concentration is reduced, numerous errors occur, and the attention mechanism is weakened. It is therefore stressed that strong motivation reduces efficiency, which in turn reduces labor productivity (Penc, 1998, p. 137).

Motivation is divided into internal and external. Internal motivation occurs when stimuli appear spontaneously and cause a person to behave in a certain way. Internal stimuli can be, for example, an interesting job that involves challenges, the possibility of developing skills, or responsibility. External motivation, on the other hand, occurs when the stimuli come from outside. External motivators include salary increases, promotions, various types of awards, among other things, but also penalties or fear of being penalized (Pietroń & Pyszczek, 2007, pp. 9–10).

Considering external factors that motivate a person to work, these can be divided into wage and non-wage factors, while the latter can be further divided into tangible and intangible factors. Wage factors are, of course, the amount of remuneration for the work performed. The remuneration depends on a number of factors, including the type of work performed, the level of education, competences, and so on (Antoszak, 2017, p. 184). State policy and laws are of great importance in terms of wages. Through administrative decisions, the state may influence the salaries of employees, especially those employed by the government and local authorities. The second group consists of non-wage factors. Intangible non-wage factors are those that are tangible but are not provided in the form of monetary compensation. Intangible motivational factors include:

- medical insurance,
- additional insurance,
- accommodation,
- tickets for sporting activities, the theater, etc.,
- social security funding,
- a training system,
- benefits in the form of laptops, mobile phones, etc. (Leśniewski & Berny, 2011, p. 105),
- assigning more difficult tasks to the employee,
- extending the scope of responsibility and independence of the employee,
- consulting with the employee and including the employee in decision-making,
- treating the employee courteously,
- the employer recognizing the employee, or
- praising the employee (Ciechanowski, 2012, pp. 23–24).

The methodology of the research (summary)

In the methodological assumptions of any research are elements such as the aim of research, research problems, methods, techniques and research tools, the organization of the research, and the characteristics of the study group.

The general aim of this research was to outline the motives of an early childhood education teacher in achieving pedagogical mastery. The main challenge was to determine what factors motivate a teacher to strive for excellence and what methods are used to achieve it. This question was answered by collecting empirical evidence from January to May 2019. The research conducted by the author was of a mixed nature (quantitative and qualitative). The quantitative portion utilized a diagnostic survey. A total of 50 early childhood education teachers were surveyed using a proprietary questionnaire, with the majority of respondents being selected at random. The teachers came from different regions of Poland. Based on the

researcher's judgement, to supplement the quantitative research, a qualitative method was chosen. For this purpose, in-depth interviews were conducted with eight teachers from the city of Kielce. For this purpose, the selection of respondents was not randomized, as qualitative research is concerned with opinions and observations, rather than statistics.

Results

As mentioned above, the pursuit of pedagogical mastery may be dictated by numerous factors, as there are a number of motivators which encourage individuals to achieve excellence in the teaching profession.

Table 1 shows the motives that guided teachers in achieving pedagogical mastery.

**Table 1. Motives for the pursuit of pedagogical mastery
by the percentage of respondents who indicated them**

Motive	%
Earning higher wages	87
Pursuing self-fulfillment in the profession	66
Being an authority	48
Achieving a level equal to that of teachers who are perceived as masters	41
Being remembered by the students	37
Gaining recognition in the environment	33
Receiving rewards	28
Having a very good performance appraisal	26
Improving the performance of the school	19
Sharing knowledge with others	17
Testing oneself	16
Being recognized and valued	14
Personal development	12
Helping pupils with special educational needs	10
Fear of dismissal	4

As seen in Table 1, the factors which guided teachers towards pedagogical mastery were varied. Most of the respondents (87%) stated that higher wages were their main motive, so it can be concluded that wage motivation was the primary factor for respondents. An important motive was the need to fulfill oneself in the profession, i.e., to perform one's role as an educator (66%). Almost half of the respondents (48%) considered it important to be an authority, while 41% were motivated by the prospect of reaching the level of teachers who are perceived as masters. The smallest number of respondents claimed that they were motivated by the fact that they helped students with special educational needs (10%) or were afraid of being laid off from their jobs.

The question of motives for striving for pedagogical mastery also appeared during the in-depth interview. The teachers included in the study presented different motives for becoming a master of the profession.

"I won't lie. I wanted to achieve mastery of my profession for financial, and probably ambitious, reasons. Striving for professional mastery gives a sense of purpose to my work. The need to become a better and better teacher brought me a lot of satisfaction and pride" (K8).

"Of course, the financial incentive and the need to develop" (K3).

"Improving one's working conditions is a great motivation to strive for mastery. I'm not sure if you'll understand me correctly. What I mean is that if a teacher doesn't pursue further education, doesn't prepare for classes, it's much harder for him or her to work. Once a scenario has been developed, it will certainly be useful in the future. Mastery is achieved through experience. You need to improve in order to make your work easier" (K2).

"The aim of pursuing mastery is to perform your duties in the best possible way, to be a professional and to help students, because that's what we are here for. I would like to point out that by striving for mastery we develop and shape ourselves, our personality, and learn to be and live for others" (K6).

"Perhaps the strongest motivation is self-improvement, gaining skills to work with students. But it is also important to strive for authority. It may be because of vanity, but who doesn't want to be perfect, admired, valued for their work, and praised. That's when it becomes fun, inspiring, and motivating, and so the circle is complete" (K5).

The above statements show that teachers were guided mainly by financial considerations in their efforts to achieve pedagogical mastery. Gaining prestige among pedagogical staff played a significant role. Teachers emphasized a willingness to fulfill themselves in the profession, and to strive for personal development.

The early childhood education teachers were asked what methods they use to achieve pedagogical mastery. Their answers are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Methods used by teachers in striving for pedagogical mastery
by the percentage of respondents who indicated them**

Category	%
Self-education	86
Conversations with other experienced teachers	72
Courses and training	68
Additional university studies	59
Engaging in various social and educational projects	53
Diligent performance of duties	47
Following the example of other teachers	34
Developing one's own passions and interests	22
Listening to the comments of pupils or parents	11

Table 2 shows that the largest percentage of respondents considered self-education to be the most important factor in striving for pedagogical mastery (86%). This was closely followed by conversations with experienced teachers (72%) and courses and training (68%). More than half of the surveyed teachers indicated that earning an additional degree (59%)

and engaging in various social and educational projects (53%) brought them closer to pedagogical mastery. Less than half of the respondents mentioned such methods as diligent performance of duties (47%), taking examples from other teachers (34%), developing one's own passions and interests (22%), or listening to the comments of pupils or parents (11%).

Similar answers appeared in the course of the interview.

"In order to become a master in my profession, I improve my work technique, I participate in the various forms of training imposed by the school, but also ones chosen by myself and sometimes paid for on my own. I try to broaden my knowledge and skills by studying pedagogical literature and literature on the subject. I worked as an examiner for the District Examination Board. I was taught exercises and I presented my classes to other teachers and mentored younger teachers. Striving for professional mastery gives a sense of purpose to my work. The need to become a better and better teacher brought me a lot of satisfaction and pride" (K8).

"I don't just stop at what the system requires of me, but I look for and learn what I need to know in order to be a role model and master in the eyes of my students. I want to do what I do well, and that's why I'm still educating myself. I also search for free online courses for teachers. This is how I strive for mastery" (K1).

"Striving for pedagogical mastery is a really difficult matter. I think every teacher would like to be good at what they do. The internet is a great help. I follow discussion forums for teachers and various blogs written by teachers. It's such a treasure trove of knowledge, you can draw on the ideas of others or ask different questions to become a high-level teacher" (K3).

"I like to seek advice from experienced colleagues and ask them for advice. When possible, I also try to participate in various types of conferences that deal with useful teaching ways and methods" (K6).

"For me, the most important thing is to see and understand the needs of the students, because they are what matters. Whenever I meet with students and treat them as equal partners, I see that they have specific problems, and I look for solutions to solve those problems and find an antidote, I think I'm climbing the ladder to mastery. This is very important to me, perhaps because I had a difficult childhood and met a teacher on my way who helped me a lot. Striving for mastery, and this may sound philosophical or strange, is listening to another person" (K5).

In their statements, teachers stressed the role of self-education and participation in various courses and training programs. They mainly emphasized the role of the internet as a priority form of improvement, and thus of striving for pedagogical mastery. The respondents pointed out that pedagogical mastery is achieved in cooperation with other teachers.

Conclusion

There are many possible motives for early childhood education teachers to achieve pedagogical mastery which balance with lifelong learning. An unquestionable factor that encourages teachers to continue to develop in the pursuit of perfection is a higher salary. In Poland, in accordance with the amended Teacher's Charter, there is a four-level system of rank promotion from trainee teacher through contract teacher and appointed teacher up to chartered teacher. There is also the title of professor of education, though this is honorary and is awarded to qualified teachers without changing their rank (Act of January 26, 1982 – Teacher's card, Journal of Laws No. 3, item 19, as amended). The promotion of rank involves an increase in salary. However, the financial reward for achieving consecutive ranks in professional advancement should be much higher, since, as already mentioned, it is the main factor that motivates people to improve their skills in the teaching profession. Moreover, parallel to promotion, remuneration should increase with the length of service of the teacher, and the amount should be determined by regulation. Therefore,

it is worth considering the introduction of specialization degrees after reaching the level of a certified teacher (the highest level of promotion). These would enable teachers to develop further. Degrees of specialization would not be mandatory, but would significantly increase teachers' competences, which would be the preferred way for teachers who really wish to achieve mastery of their profession.

> Professional development becomes a need for teachers with specific attitudes, with intellectual autonomy and openness, imagination and sensitivity. It is an important part of teachers' professional lives and influences their success and personal satisfaction at work with *young people*." (Szkolak, 2012, p. 29)

Szempruch states that teachers' lifelong learning may be achieved in various forms of organization by public and non-public institutions, especially universities and training institutions. This consists of three basic elements that complement and overlap each other: education (teacher studies and pedagogical practice), supplementary education (e.g., graduate studies providing the qualifications necessary for employment, graduate studies providing qualifications in another specialization, qualification courses providing the qualifications necessary for employment in a given school or in a second specialization, or remote learning which provides qualifications), professional development (e.g., supplementary graduate studies, courses certifying them to perform other educational tasks, supplementary courses, supporting training, or remote learning) (Szempruch, 2001). Therefore, school principals should provide teachers with opportunities for further education, improvement, and, where possible, funding for participating in various types of workshops, training courses, and graduate studies.

Early childhood education teachers should also be encouraged to cooperate with other teachers.

> Cooperation between teachers is beneficial and much can be achieved through it. It improves problem-solving, among other

things, because you listen to different opinions. It helps to look at a given situation from a different perspective and, consequently, to decide together on a specific dilemma. Thanks to it, teachers can improve their individual skills and integrate. In addition, it offers the possibility to influence current problems, which results in a sense of greater responsibility for the fate of the school and its students. Cooperating teachers will be role models for pupils who will want to learn from them and also make decisions and solve problems together. In addition, efficiently cooperating teachers have the opportunity to engage in dialogue with other teachers from different disciplines and with different backgrounds or work experience. This cooperation often involves exchanging views, joint action planning or team problem-solving, sharing examples of good practice to improve one's own work and reflections on teaching and its effectiveness (Szkolak-Stępień & Vaskevic-Buś, 2017, p. 153).

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