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## The Innovative Early Childhood Education Teacher – A Summary of Own Research

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**Abstract:** Content of article by Anna Szkolak *The Innovative Early Childhood Education Teacher – A Summary of Own Research* is related with the debate on the Polish teacher condition in the situation of the system transformation, changes in the Polish school. The particular role in this process is ascribed to an early childhood education teacher and his or her creative competences.

A creative teacher is undoubtedly a teacher with great imaginativeness and inspiration, open to the ideas of others, constantly deepening his knowledge and improving his professional qualifications. Constantly faced with new educational situations, the teacher has to make sure his work is not conventional or formalized but instead requires continuous searching for and creating new solutions. Pedagogical innovation is a characteristic feature of a creative teacher. Empirical research include early childhood teachers in town environment. Their professionalism was valued on the basis of self-assessment. The research results gave the empirical material proving the fact that early childhood education teachers present a good level of creative competences. The end of article is statement, there is no *one right way* for helping young children achieve their creative potential. Teachers will need to continue to experiment and test alternatives to see what is effective in their situation.

**Keywords:** innovation, creative competences, early childhood education teacher

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## **Introduction**

The main objective of modern early education requires a sensitive, wise, creative and critical teacher able to show the student various individual development paths from which to choose. Teaching for creativity has become a fundamental requirement of a modern education system, which is why the early childhood education teacher should acquire new creative competences.

### **Creative teacher – creative pupil**

“Each child is a unique individual and all children are born with the ability to learn. Children have amazing capabilities which indicates that it is through the unity of thinking and feeling that young children can explore their world, represent their ideas, and communicate with others at their highest level. When educators fully understand how exploration, representation, and communication feed one other, they can help children achieve this potential best.

Teachers have to do their best to draw pupil’s attention, so they will have to design creative activities according to the necessities of each child in order to keep interest levels high in the classroom. This work can be difficult if you aren’t able to identify what pupil’s like doing, which has to be incorporated and used as teaching resource to maintain their attention. In this sense, teachers have to adapt their method of teaching according to pupil’s motivation and provide suitable conditions to maintain high levels of motivation. There is little chance for creativity where pupils work for long periods of time, when they have a little active input, when the results are controlled and prescribed or when complex topics are taught in superficial ways. What a creative teacher needs in early childhood education is time to explore, experiment and play with ideas, and we have to provide the right conditions for creativity to flourish.

If we achieve this aim children will become enthusiastic learners, which means that they will be active and creative explorers who are not

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afraid to try out their ideas and to think their own thoughts and to afford this goal is really important to be a creative teacher.

Before explaining what a teacher should do to overcome the routine and catch pupil's attention I will start by showing what creativity means according to some contemporary authors and then we will have to put into practise these theories" (Szkolak, López, 2013, p. 73–74).

According to some authors , the meaning of being creative can be different, but they agree that creativity is a process that can be learnt so if you practice your creativity with different exercises or methods you can improve your capacity to think and act in a creative way. I have selected some authors that I have considered relevant to take into account. What skills and competences should a creative teacher possess in order to work effectively with young primary school students?

Czaja-Chudyba (2013) thinks that "through a creative style of work, personal creativity, that is through creating a special atmosphere during classes, a teacher can effectively trigger children's creativity and constructive criticism" (Czaja-Chudyba, 2013, p. 229). At the same time, Sufa (2011) maintains that "a creative teacher should not only create a proper environment for developing student's creativity but also, if necessary, modify creative activity of children according to their needs and developmental opportunities. He himself should feel the need for creativity" (Sufa, 2011, p. 57). Teachers need reflection about personal pedagogical practice, not only total trust in their practical knowledge (Grochowalska, 2014, p. 34).

"Educators understand that children learn best through meaningful play, therefore, an important competence of a creative's teachers is to provide a child a program which reflects the integration of physical, cognitive, social-emotional, language and self help skills. The best way to afford it is using creative techniques that allow children to express themselves using different methods.

As far as I'm concerned, young children are developmentally capable of classroom experiences which require higher level thinking skills, including analysis (breaking down material into component parts to understand the structure, seeing similarities and differences); synthesis (putting parts

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together to form a new whole, rearranging, reorganizing); and evaluation (judging the value of material based on definite criteria).

Children want and need to express ideas and messages through many different expressive avenues and symbolic media. Young children form mental images, represent their ideas, and communicate with the world in a combination of ways. They need increasing competence and integration across formats including words, gestures, drawings, paintings, sculpture, construction, music, dramatic play, movement, and dance. Through sharing and gaining others' perspectives, and then revisiting and revising their work, children move to new levels of awareness. Teachers act as guides, without imposing ideas and beliefs upon the children.

Besides, young children learn through meaningful activities in which different subject areas are integrated. Open-ended discussions and long-term activities bring together whole- language activities, science, social studies, dramatic play, and artistic creation. Activities that are meaningful and relevant to the child's life experiences provide opportunities to teach across the curriculum and assist children in seeing the interrelationships of things they are learning" (Szkolak, López, 2013, p. 77).

### **The Creative Competences of Early Childhood Education Teachers – a summary of own research<sup>6,7</sup>**

Every teacher starting his work at school should understand that creative competences are indispensable in their everyday work and significantly increase its effectiveness.

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<sup>6</sup> A detailed description of the research is published in Polish: A. Szkolak, *Mistrzostwo zawodowe nauczycieli wczesnej edukacji. Istota, treść, uwarunkowania* [Professional Mastery of Early Education Teachers. The Essence, Contents and Conditions], Attica, Cracow 2013.

<sup>7</sup> A full research report about creative competences of early childhood education teachers is published in English: A. Szkolak, *Creative Teacher – a Study Report*, [in:] *Předškolní vzdělávání v teorii a praxi. Jaká je současná situace v české republice a zahraniční východiska pro vzdělávání u nás* (ed.) Z. Syslová; V. Rodová, Masarykova Univerzita, Brno 2014, p. 176–184.

A closer look has been taken at a catalogue of creative competences of early childhood education teachers. Furthermore, an attempt has been made to diagnose the competences during the whole period of a teacher's professional activity. The subjects of the research were teachers from primary schools located in cities in the Świętokrzyskie region. The following questions were asked:

1. Are you able to prepare your own teaching curriculum?
2. Do you improve your teaching and training skills? Do you modernize your teaching tools and introduce innovative solutions?
3. Do you create your own educational projects (e.g. lesson plans, articles) and publish them in educational journals?

The first question in the survey was related to the ability to design the teacher's own curriculum.

**Table 1. Self-assessment of the ability to design teacher's own teaching curriculum in the context of the length of service**

Are you able to design your own teaching curriculum?										
Self-assessment category	Length of service in years								Total	
	0 – 5		6 – 15		16 – 25		More than 25			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
High	3	30	17	47	17	41	3	23	40	40
Average	6	60	11	30	22	53	9	69	48	48
Low	1	10	8	23	2	6	1	8	12	12
<b>Total</b>	10	100	36	100	41	100	13	100	100	100

The results obtained show that a comparable number of teachers assess the level of abilities to design their own teaching curriculum as high – 40% and as average – 48%. Only 12% admit they are not able to design their own teaching curriculum. The results are similar in all groups of teachers. In the group of teachers with the shortest length of service out of 10 people only 3 (30%) are unable to design a curriculum for early school education, 6 (60%) report an average interest in designing their own curriculum for grades 1–3 of early school education whereas 1 person (10%) reported a high interest in doing so. In the group of teachers with the length of service spanning from 6 to 15 years, 47% of the surveyed teachers reported a high level of ability to prepare a teaching curriculum, 30% – average and 8% – no ability to do so. In the group of teachers with the length of service from 16 to 25 years approximately half (41%) reports high level of the ability to design one's own teaching curriculum, 22 teachers (53%) – average level and 2 (6%) – low level. Based on the self-assessment of teachers working in their profession for longer than 25 years, 23% reports high level of the ability to design their own teaching curriculum, 69% – average whereas 8% – low.

The empirical material points to certain problems existing in connection with the ability to design one's own teaching curriculum. The majority of teachers reported an average level of ability in this respect.

The respondents were also asked about whether and how they improve their teaching and training skills and whether they modernize their teaching tools and introduce innovative solutions.

The results presented in Table 2 refer to the answers to Question 2, taking into account the length of service of the surveyed teachers.

As can be seen from the results presented in Table 2, the surveyed teachers reported a high level of ability to improve their teaching and training skills (93%). In the light of self-assessment, all teachers working not longer than 15 years have no problems in introducing innovative solutions to teaching activities. More experienced teachers also make some attempts to modernize their teaching tools. A high level of self-assessment was reported by 38 teachers (92%) with the length of service from 16 to 25 years and 9 teachers (69%) working for longer than 25 years.

**Table 2. Self-assessment of the level of improvement of teaching and training skills as well as undertaken attempts at modernizing teaching tools and introducing innovative solutions.**

Do you improve your teaching and training skills? Do you modernize your teaching tools and introduce innovative solutions?										
Self-assessment category	Length of service in years								Total	
	0 – 5		6 – 15		16 – 25		More than 25			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
High	10	100	36	100	38	92	9	69	93	93
Average	0	0	0	0	3	8	4	31	7	7
Low	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	10	100	36	100	41	100	13	100	100	100

Only 8% of the respondents consider their creative abilities in their contacts with students as average. These are 3 teachers in the group of teachers with the length of service from 16 to 25 years and 4 (31%) from the group of teachers working for longer than 25 years. No teachers assessed the level of their creative abilities in teaching as low.

To sum up, it needs to be stressed that the majority of respondents assessed the level of improving their teaching and training skills, modernizing their teaching tools and introducing innovative solutions as high. In this way, they are able to master their teaching, introducing new solutions which lead to better teaching outcomes and faster progress of students. The teachers participating in the study are engaged in searching, examining and experimenting, thus going off the beaten track when it comes to improving their teaching and training skills.

The last question connected with creative competences regarded the ability to design the teacher's own educational projects and to publish

them. Based on the results presented in Table 3 it can be concluded that the answers to the given question depended on the length of service.

**Table 3. Self-assessment concerning the creation of teacher's own educational projects (e.g. lesson plans, articles) and publishing them in educational journals.**

Do you create your own educational projects (e.g. lesson plans, articles) and publish them in educational journals?										
Self-assessment category	Length of service in years								Total	
	0 – 5		6 – 15		16 – 25		More than 25			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
High	3	30	12	33	13	31	4	30	32	32
Average	6	60	15	41	19	46	7	53	47	47
Low	1	10	9	26	9	23	2	17	21	21
<b>Total</b>	10	100	36	100	41	100	13	100	100	100

The highest number of surveyed teachers (47%) reported a moderate level of self-assessment concerning the creation of their own educational projects. A similar number of teachers assessed their level of abilities as high – 32% and low – 21%. There were no significant differences in the results between the groups of teachers with the length of service of up to 5 years and from 6 to 15 years, in which approximately one third of the respondents, 30% and 33% respectively, assessed the level of abilities to create their own lesson plans and write articles as high, 60% and 41% – as average whereas 10% and 26% do not create educational projects and do not publish articles in educational journals. The teachers with a length of service from 16 to 25 years reported a little worse results – 31% assessed their abilities to create educational project

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as high, whereas 46% claimed their abilities in this respect were average. 23% of the respondents are not involved in the preparation of their own educational projects and publishing them. More than half of teachers (53%) with the length of service of 25 years or more claimed that their abilities to create educational projects are average. 30% (4 teachers) state that they present new educational ideas, however, 17% (2 teachers) reveal that in their work they do not pay attention to new ideas concerning educational work with children.

Comparing the research results presented above with the results of a study conducted by Włoch (2006), similar conclusions can be drawn, namely in both studies a small number of teachers are reported to write their own lesson plans. The majority of teachers use ready curricula and only a small percentage of teachers participating in the study writes their own curricula or modifies the existing ones (Włoch, 2006). The conclusions drawn from both studies are that teachers prefer to use ready curricula rather than design their own ones and bear the moral and professional responsibilities for them.

However, the answers provided by the teachers participating in the study are contradictory. On the one hand, many teachers admit to having some problems with designing their own educational projects, on the other, they claim that they introduce innovative solutions to their process of education. It might be concluded that the teachers are aware of the problems connected with improving their teaching and training skills but nevertheless make attempts at modernizing them.

### **Conclusion**

The results presented point to two trends. On the one hand, the teachers undertake creative activities, manifested by the improvement of teaching and training skills and attempting at obtaining additional professional qualifications. On the other hand, the teachers are not always ready to design their own curriculum or write individual educational projects, such as lesson plans or articles.

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Looking at the self-assessment of creative competences of early school education teachers, the overall conclusion is that such competences are developed at an average level. Nevertheless, this part of research can be summarized with an optimistic statement that the surveyed teachers have the ability to assess their work critically. This, in turn, guarantees the understanding of the need for continuous professional development, both in terms of knowledge and creative undertakings.

“As we have seen children have amazing capabilities to learn, and the best way of promote and motivate their knowledge is through creativity, which also means the unity of thinking and feeling that young children can explore their world, represent their ideas, and communicate with others at their highest level. When educators fully understand how exploration, representation, and communication feed one other, they can help children achieve this potential best.

The main objective of a creative teacher is that pupils learn in a motivating way, so we have to design activities to achieve our aim. In my opinion it is important that pupils interact with each other to create a favourable climate in the classroom to enhance their learning, and now we know different techniques to achieve it. We can try to put into practice in class, and maybe we will have to change some of the point according to children’s necessities because every child is unique (...). Pupils should be given enough freedom to practise and learn from their mistakes because it is more effective to prompt pupils into discovering their own mistakes and helping them to find the right solution for themselves. I think that it is also really important to cooperate with families, because it has no sense to work on some values in the classroom if then children are learning in the opposite way in their own houses.

Finally, there is no *one right way* for helping young children achieve their creative potential. Teachers will need to continue to experiment and test alternatives to see what is effective in their situation” (Szkolak, López, 2013, p. 84).

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The subject of scientific interest are issues of preschool and elementary education. The study area is the professional competence of early childhood education teacher. The author pays particular attention to the issues of the pedagogical mastery of early childhood education teacher.

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