
Managing Key Competences and Human Capital Development in Early Education in the Polish Education System: Analysis of Teachers' Skills in Assessing Students' Personal Achievements

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Abstract:

Purpose: Analysis of descriptive assessments of students in grades I-III on school certificates in terms of taking into account and formulating their personal achievements oriented towards key competences.

Design/methodology/approach: Document analysis (qualitative content analysis).

Findings: Teachers include and describe students' personal achievements within three key competences: personal, social, and learning; civic; entrepreneurial. A low representation of descriptions of achievements related to cultural awareness and expression competences was found. Certificates were found in which teachers did not include or describe any personal achievements of the students.

Practical implications: The results of the research indicate that despite the requirements of educational law regarding equal treatment and descriptive assessment, there are challenges in their implementation, which may lead to discrimination against some students (inability to obtain knowledge about themselves and potential lack of support in building self-esteem). It is necessary to train teachers in the skills of developing and appreciating students' personal achievements in a key competences-oriented approach.

Originality/value: The article fills a research gap regarding the personal achievements of students oriented towards key competences in their social dimension at the first educational stage. The study focuses on promoting teachers' social awareness of the development of students' personal achievements as a predictor of labour market performance.

Keywords: Educational reports, educational law, children, school, labour market, discrimination.

JEL codes: I21, I24, I25.

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1. Introduction

According to TALIS research, social and emotional skills are "necessary for academic learning, significant predictors of labour market and employment outcomes, and key ingredients of peaceful and prosperous democracies" (OECD, 2024, p. 23).

The early school period is a critical development phase. During this crucial development window, the basic skills acquired during early childhood are transformed into key competences necessary to achieve academic success and ensure future psychosocial well-being and a successful start on the labour market. This phase coincides with the initiation of formal initial education, highlighting the strategic importance of mastering specific developmental spaces.

These competences integrate the mobilisation of cognitive and practical abilities, creativity, motivational aspects and the value system. Their synergistic mastery enables the child to develop autonomy of thought and to take responsibility for their own learning process and actions (OECD, 2010).

Many educational systems include social and emotional skills in their curricula (OECD, 2024). The effectiveness of teachers in teaching these skills depends on their behaviour in the classroom. It is crucial because it influences what the students learn. This is confirmed by research conducted in recent decades (OECD, 2025).

Skilful classroom management is also important in the teaching process. Teachers develop this competence during their professional practice. The goal of effective classroom management is to create conditions in which all students are involved in the learning process (OECD, 2025). It is also necessary for teachers to monitor students' learning progress and provide feedback in order for them to develop (Hattie and Timperley, 2007).

Social interactions with peers and adults are a fundamental mechanism in the process of emotional understanding and acquiring conflict resolution strategies. This process involves negotiation and compromise, often facilitated by adult mediation support. As their development progresses, children demonstrate an increased ability

to recognise emotional states of others. In addition, role-play and creative play are key cognitive tools enabling children to internalize diverse perspectives and understand the spectrum of emotional states (Meloy and Schachner, 2019).

The article presents a description of qualitative research carried out in a Polish school, which is of fundamental importance for promoting the social awareness of teachers in the development of personal achievements of students focused on key competences from the first educational stage, which are an important factor forecasting the results on the labor market.

This means that the presented data fill a research gap regarding the personal achievements of students oriented towards key competences in their social dimension, while taking into account the provisions of educational law in Poland.

Polish educational law (JoL 2022, item 2230, and JoL 2019, item 373), as well as the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning (EU, 2018) open access to high-quality education and lifelong learning for every student from an early age, thanks to which they can acquire and maintain skills enabling full participation in social life and a successful transition to the labour market.

The article presents a summary of the principles of descriptive evaluation of personal achievements of students at the first educational stage and the framework of key competences, constituting the context for the analysis of methodological and competence challenges faced by teachers in the process of evaluating and appreciating individual achievements of students.

2. Literature Review

In 2006, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union adopted a document entitled "Recommendation 2006/962/EC on key competences for lifelong learning". It provides a European reference framework for the development of competence-oriented education, training and learning.

However, it appears that the current competence requirements are changing, as more and more positions are automated, and technologies play an increasing role in all areas of work and life. At the same time, entrepreneurial, social and civic competences are gaining importance due to the need to ensure resilience and adaptability (EU, 2018).

The document in question also draws attention to the use of good practices supporting educational staff: "the development of key competences, their validation and the provision of competency-oriented education, training and learning should be supported by establishing good practices to better support educational staff in their

tasks and improve their education, update assessment and validation methods and tools, and introduce new and innovative forms of teaching and learning" (EU, 2018).

Key competences necessary for self-fulfilment, health, employment and social inclusion are understood as those competences that each person needs for personal fulfilment and development, employment, social inclusion, sustainable lifestyle, successful life in peaceful societies, conscious management of their lives, and active citizenship.

They are developed in a lifelong learning perspective, from early childhood to adulthood, through formal, non-formal and informal learning in all contexts including family, school, workplace, neighbourhood and other communities (EU, 2018).

All key competences are considered equally important; each contributes to a successful life in society. The reference identifies eight of them: "1. Literacy competencies; 2. Multilingual competences; 3. Mathematical competences and competences in the field of science, technology and engineering; 4. Digital competences; 5. Personal, social and learning competences; 6. Civic competences; 7. Entrepreneurial competences; 8. Cultural awareness and expression competences" (EU, 2018). Key competences are a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes that a learner should develop throughout their life, starting from the first stage of education.

In accordance with the provisions of the educational law in Poland (JoL 2022, item 2230, and JoL 2019, item 373), since 1999, in early school education mid-year and annual classification assessments from educational classes as well as mid-year and annual classification assessment of behavior are descriptive assessments.

In accordance with the regulations formulated in the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 12 February 2019 on professional counselling (JoL 2019 item 325), the student gets to know themselves in the following way: "1.1 describes their interests and defines how to develop them (...) 1.4 gives examples of their strengths in different areas (...)". In everyday school life, following the indicated recommendations helps students to develop their personal achievements.

Assessment is one of the more difficult tasks facing modern teachers in their professional work. Guidance on how to work with students in early school education when the goal is not grades, but rather the development of the students and their abilities, was formulated by Marzena Kędra, recommending a formulation of the final assessment that primarily indicates student progress, as well as strong and weaker areas of student functioning (Kędra, 2021).

The evaluation process goes beyond the pure act of gradation. It covers a spectrum of non-standardised measurement tools. Evaluation systematically engages in

diagnostic analysis of diverse curriculum contexts. This approach enables systematic feedback and improvement of current practices and educational interventions. The use of numerical assessment in early school education faces a fundamental philosophical challenge regarding the nature of the measurement itself.

Conventional psychometrics is based on the assumption that proficiency, ability or competence in a cognitive domain is a "hidden numerical quantity" that can be reliably measured and placed at a specific point on a numerical axis. However, the phenomena studied in early childhood education - such as self-regulation, social awareness and critical thinking - are often intersubjectively constructed and inherently "vaguely defined" (Scharaschkin, 2024)

Referring to the way descriptive behavioural assessment is drafted (for the purposes of this article, the authors have narrowed their considerations, as well as the research conducted, to descriptive assessment of students' behaviour only), it was assumed that teachers should take into account the progress in education, emotional and social development, as well as personal achievements of the student (Rau and Chodoń, 1999).

According to Krystyna Rau and Irena Chodoń, a student's personal achievements may include: knowledge, skills, passions and interests, and progress in the student's behaviour. When evaluating the messages, the authors gave teachers suggestions for descriptions such as: "You are a good reader (...) Congratulations on taking first place in the music competition" (Rau and Chodoń, 1999, p. 44-45).

To assess skills, they were encouraged to use notes such as: "I appreciate the huge effort you put into this year's learning; I congratulate you on your physical fitness (...); He's already doing great with free text writing.(...)" (Rau and Chodoń, 1999, p. 44-45). In relation to children's behaviour, the following exemplary description was offered: "You are distinguished by your diligence and dutifulness (...)" (Rau and Chodoń, 1999, p. 43-45).

Particularly with descriptive, individualised assessment, the teacher has the opportunity to communicate to the student in which areas they are successful. This is crucial since every child needs success. However, it is also worth bearing in mind that sometimes "it can be difficult for the teacher to identify and pinpoint a particular child's personal success. Sometimes it is very difficult to see it because it is the success of only that particular child" (Rau and Chodoń, 1999, p. 43).

Replacing restrictive grading of students with individual descriptive assessment and related continuous positive support, as well as the use of formative assessment and personalized education can also be found in the recommendations and conclusions of research prepared by the research teams of the international Pearson agency. The authors of *Preparing for a Renaissance in Assessment* (2014) saw the return of this

type of assessment in the widespread use of formative assessment and personalised education (Barbera and Hill, 2014).

At the same time, the need to change the role of the teacher was emphasised: "the role of the teacher will have changed dramatically and may have become more differentiated. At its apex will be a new class of highly educated and trained professionals, expert in delivering personalised learning, with deep content and pedagogical knowledge, an intimate knowledge of each student, and knowledge and understanding of learning in a digital world" (Barbera and Hill 2014, p. 57).

Another document with important results for the whole education system is the report *Qualified to succeed: Building a 14 -19 education system of choice, diversity and opportunity*. Pearson's report into the Future of Qualifications & Assessment in England, published in 2022. The authors of the report note that teachers should "assess the right skills in the right way, enabling learners to highlight their strengths and successes"(Qualified to succeed, 2022, p. 12).

3. Research Methodology

The application of a qualitative research strategy in the article was determined primarily by the specificity of the issue addressed. The humanistic vision of man and the world, which lies at the basis of this strategy, gave the authors the opportunity to go "beyond what is objective and measurable, which allows them to take up issues related to assessments, values, experiences, i.e. what is individual" (Pilch and Bauman, 2001, p. 278).

The purpose of the study was to analyse the descriptions of the assessment of students' behaviour on school certificates in terms of each child's personal achievements. In contrast, its subject was teachers' descriptions of students' personal achievements in terms of the key competences contained in the descriptive behavioural assessment that was included on school certificates.

The study was to answer the question: To what extent do teachers include and validate students' personal achievements, in the context of key competences, in the content of the descriptive assessment of behaviour on school certificates?

The method of obtaining research material adopted by the authors was document analysis. It was subjected to descriptive assessments of the behaviour of students in grades I-III, found on archived school certificates. The selection of certificates was intentional. A total of 276 school certificate sheets from the school year 2023/2024 were analysed.

The descriptive assessments on the certificates were edited by eleven women and one man who worked in early school education in the public primary school selected for the study located in the centre of a large city with a population of approximately

391,000. Teachers differed in age, seniority, and professional advancement. These data about the respondents were consciously not disclosed, as in the research conducted, the authors were interested in collecting the aforementioned descriptions of teachers regardless of their age, seniority, work experience or education.

Qualitative content analysis of the documents was carried out by the authors by reading the empirical material several times, which made it possible to identify key themes, connections in the data, and to categorise and conceptualise (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2013). A categorisation key was then created and the most distinctive and meaningful quotes were selected from the entire research material.

The selected quotes were subordinated to individual categories from the key. The creation of the categorisation key followed an inductive approach (Szczepaniak, 2012). The categorisation key that emerged from the qualitative study and the analysis of the collected empirical material is already, as Karolina Szczepaniak emphasises, "in itself a specific result of the study.

This is because the subsequent categories of the key represent further themes or minor aspects of the main themes described in the texts analysed. It is thus a kind of list of issues raised by the research material, aiming to capture their maximum diversity" (Szczepaniak, 2012, p. 98).

Categorisation key:

- Students' personal achievements in regards to personal, social and learning competences:
 - Activity in class
 - Representing the class in contests, festivals and competitions
 - Student attitude
- Students' personal achievements in regards to civic competences:
 - Helping others
 - Involvement in community actions
- Students' personal achievements in regards to entrepreneurial Competences:
 - Cooperation and initiative
 - Work for the class and the school
- Students' personal achievements in regards to cultural awareness and expression competences
 - Student interests
 - Descriptions of overcoming barriers

In the next stage, each category of the key was enriched with quotes from records on school certificates to provide the reader with an insight into the empirical material, which was presented by the author in the next part of the article.

4. Research Results and Discussion

Students "[...] experience evaluation, which is a source of many emotions for them, both positive and negative" (Misiorna, 2000, p. 244-245) from the first moments spent at school. Descriptive assessment used in early school education enables the child to gain knowledge about themselves; it influences the creation of a self-image, which in turn influences the building of self-esteem.

Barbara Woynarowska, following Nathaniel Branden, draws attention to the basic pillars of self-esteem, which can be divided into internal sources and external factors. Among the external factors, she names, among others: "the educational methods used in the school, e.g.: emphasising the dignity of the child, supporting children in respecting each other, fair assessment, transmission of values" (Woynarowska, 2017, p. 313).

Barbara Woynarowska, on the other hand, emphasises that the key to building a student's self-esteem is to appreciate the child for what they have done, not for what they are (Woynarowska, 2017). Examples of teachers' skills in strengthening students' self-confidence and valuing their personal achievements oriented towards key competences are described in Tables 1 to 4.

Based on the interpreted empirical material, there are examples of descriptive assessments formulated by teachers who responsibly assess students' behaviour by monitoring their development, and the edited descriptive assessments indicate the realisation of key competences in the student: personal, social and learning competences; civic competences; entrepreneurial competences; and cultural awareness and expression competences.

The results of the survey included in Table 1 relate to personal, social and learning competences. According to the definition, these are "the ability to self-reflect, manage time and information effectively, collaborate constructively with others, maintain mental resilience and manage one's own learning and career" (EU, 2018).

Table 1. *Students' personal achievements in regards to personal, social and learning competences*

1.1. Descriptions of activity in class	He eagerly participates in the tasks proposed by the school and the teacher, and therefore undertakes many extracurricular tasks.
	She is distinguished by her diligence and dutifulness.
	She is very active in class.
	He demonstrates a high level of activity in class.
1.2. Descriptions of representing the class in contests, festivals and competitions	Her extraordinary activity in school and extracurricular competitions deserves admiration.
	He successfully represents the school in competitions and festivals.
	She represents the school in sports competitions.

	He participates in subject competitions.
1.3. Descriptions of the student's attitude	She performs her duties perfectly.
	Jacob's attitude is exemplary.
	His attitude as a student and a classmate fully deserves to be recognised and named "Exemplary Student".

Source: Own work.

Table 2 presents the survey results on civic competences, i.e. the ability to act and participate fully in civic and social life (EU, 2018).

Table 2. *Students' personal achievements in regards to civic competences*

2.1. Descriptions of helping others	She is happy to help other children.
	He is very helpful.
	She enjoys the successes of her classmates and is happy to help them.
	He is happy to help other children and take action for the benefit of the class.
	She is always kind and willing to help.
	He is willing to help others and reliable.
2.2. Descriptions of involvement in community actions	He participates in community actions
	She participates in community actions and competitions.

Source: Own work.

Table number 3 includes data on results related to teachers' appreciation of entrepreneurial competences in students, which "refer to the ability to take opportunities and ideas and turn them into value for others. They are based on creativity, critical thinking and problem solving, taking initiative and perseverance, and teamwork skills " (EU, 2018).

Table 3. *Students' personal achievements in regards to entrepreneurial competences*

3.1 Descriptions of cooperation and initiative	He agreeably and creatively collaborates in a team.
	She demonstrates a high degree of initiative and independence.
3.2. Descriptions of work for the class and the school	Her great willingness to act for the benefit of the class really stands out.
	He is involved in the life of the class, showing his own initiative in working for others.
	His commitment to the class deserves special mention. She is eager to take all actions and performs them with commitment and responsibility.
	She actively participates in the life of the class, school and environment.

Source: Own work.

Teachers indicated numerous personal achievements of students within the framework of key competences: personal, social and in the field of learning; civic competences and entrepreneurial competences, and the example entries indicated in Tables 1 to 3 could be found among many archived certificates.

The last table, numbered 4, deals with cultural awareness and expression competences, which include an understanding of ideas and a respect for the way they are creatively expressed in different cultures (EU, 2018).

Table 4. *Students' personal achievements in regards to cultural awareness and expression competences*

4.1. Descriptions of student interests	She demonstrates above-average artistic ability. He develops his interests.
3.2. Descriptions of overcoming barriers	She breaks through her barriers and takes part in public speaking.

Source: *Own work.*

A different situation than when presenting the results of the study for the above three competences took place when analyzing the provisions on the cultural awareness and expression competences - Table 4. Here, the authors found only two examples.

Therefore, it seems that in the future teachers should pay more attention to this area and subject it to in-depth evaluation. It should aim to answer the questions: 1) Are these competences being developed in students but it has not been noted on school certificates? 2) Or are teachers actually overlooking them in the course of their teaching? 3) Do teachers fail to recognise them in their students' achievements?

However, the greatest concern is the fact that when analysing the research material, the authors also came across such descriptive assessments in which the teachers did not include and describe any personal achievements of the students. As recommended by Tim Rapley, when analysing documents, the researcher should focus on both what is in the text and what is not. Tim Rapley highlights the importance of the silences, lacks and omissions that researchers encounter when analysing documents (Rapley, 2018).

And it is precisely such a lack that was perceived during this research work. It is possible that there is a group of teachers who, although aware of the importance of students' personal achievements oriented towards key competences, are not able to appreciate them due to their own lack of skills, thus discriminating against these students and preventing them from learning about themselves.

Polish educational institutions have a duty to ensure that all students are treated equally. The situation described indicates that, despite these legal requirements, implementation challenges remain. This raises questions about support for educational staff.

5. Conclusions, Proposals, Recommendations

As it turns out, teachers' social knowledge in Poland remains insufficient despite research and existing publications on descriptive behavioural assessment and the importance of students' personal achievement oriented towards key competences.

Teachers' skills and approaches to appreciating students' personal achievements oriented towards key competences should be used primarily for children's acquisition of self-knowledge, building self-esteem, realising student potential, and developing their abilities and talents.

On the other hand, the teachers themselves, when guiding the process of behavioural assessment, should show the way forward, being aware of the great importance of behavioural assessment for the children and how much it affects their process of learning about themselves.

Descriptive assessment is such an important tool in the work of teachers that an analysis of how descriptive assessment is formulated is necessary, making it possible to move "from assessment to appreciation" (Rasfeld and Breidenbach 2015, p. 126).

Thus, the introduction of changes to both current assessment and the way descriptions are formulated on students' school certificates is still the responsibility of every teacher. Teachers' awareness of this issue is crucial, and the research results presented here can provide a basis for discussion in the Polish education system.

In-service training for teachers to improve their ability to develop students' personal achievement in a key competence approach is necessary to change the way they teach and learn. Educational staff can be supported through activities such as the creation of innovative practices, participation in research and appropriate use of new technologies in competence-oriented teaching and learning approaches, as well as the provision of guidance, access to centres of expertise, provision of tools and materials that can improve the quality of teaching and learning methods and practices.

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