

Between competences and uncertainty – self-assessment of preparation for the teaching profession in the narratives of pedagogy students

Między kompetencjami a niepewnością – samoocena przygotowania do zawodu nauczyciela w narracjach studentów pedagogiki

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Introduction

Contemporary education is undergoing dynamic changes that are redefining both the goals of education and the competency profile of teachers. Faced with the growing complexity of school realities, the teacher's role is no longer limited solely to imparting knowledge – advanced social, communication, and emotional skills, as well as high ethical awareness, are now required (Kwiatkowska 2008; Śliwerski 2021).

Pedagogical literature increasingly emphasizes that what is crucial is not only what and how a teacher teaches, but above all, who they are as a person functioning in an educational environment based on dialogue, responsibility, and reflectiveness (Nowak 2020, p. 159). The debate on the professional preparation of future teachers highlights, on the one hand, the growing competences of students of pedagogy, such as openness to cultural diversity, the use of activating methods, and the development of emotional intelligence (Czerepaniak-Walczak 2016). On the other hand, it points to significant shortcomings, including in mental resilience, self-reflection skills, stress management, and dialogue with students and their parents (Marek 2019; Tokarska 2022). These deficits, although not always visible in formal academic programs, directly impact the quality of the teaching and learning process. In the face of growing social expectations for the teaching profession and the challenges posed by the reality of an information and multicultural society, it is becoming justified to redefine the competency and axiological profile of the 21st-century teacher. This article attempts to analyze selected competencies and incompetencies revealed

by pedagogy students – future teachers – from the perspective of current research, educational documents, and axiological reflection on the teaching profession. Particular emphasis is placed on demonstrating the dissonance between the requirements formulated in the Standards of Education for the Teaching Profession (MEiN 2021) and the actual level of students' preparation for educational work – both in substantive, interpersonal, emotional, and reflective aspects (Lis 2022; Tokarska 2022, p. 35). This analysis fits into a broader reflection on the axiological dimension of the teaching profession – understood not only as a provider of curriculum content, but also as a guide, educator, and person responsible for creating an environment conducive to the holistic development of children (Czerepaniak-Walczak 2016; Śliwerski 2021). In the context of challenges such as increasing social pressure, cultural diversity of students, and changing relationships within the school space, reflection on the level of preparation of pedagogy students for the role of a teacher seems not only timely but also indispensable.

Research methodology

The subject of this study was the perceptions of pedagogy students regarding the specific nature of teaching, their perceived competency deficits, and the emotions and concerns associated with their planned entry into the profession. Particular attention was paid to students' reflections on the professional role of teachers, without analyzing the respondents' gender identity (it should be noted that the study was dominated by women, reflecting the structure of the population studying pedagogy). The aim of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of how future teachers perceive their professional preparation, what competencies they consider crucial, what skills they lack, and what emotions they experience in the context of entering the professional role. The study's objectives were defined along three complementary dimensions:

- cognitive goal – to identify students' perceptions of the teaching profession and the competencies necessary to perform it:
 - theoretical goal – to conceptualize the phenomenon of competence and incompetence in the teaching profession,
 - practical goal – to identify recurring student concerns about their future professional career, which may serve as a starting point for modifying the content and forms of academic education.

Research problem and questions

The main research problem was formulated as follows:

What are students' concerns about their planned teaching career and what do they stem from?

This problem leads to specific questions:

1. Who and what – in the students' opinion – will they face as future teachers?
2. What specific concerns are associated with their planned teaching career?
3. What were the motivations behind the decision to choose teaching as a profession?
4. In what areas do students believe that pedagogical studies do not provide sufficient preparation for school work?
5. What are future teachers' perceptions of collaboration with students' parents?

Research paradigm and method

The study was conducted using a qualitative paradigm, employing the in-depth interview method. The narrative interview technique with structuring elements was employed, allowing for the exploration of students' personal reflections, beliefs, emotions, and experiences. The research tool was a narrative interview questionnaire containing open-ended questions aimed at analyzing educational experiences and expectations and fears related to future careers.

Sample, participant characteristics, and study area

The study involved 127 students, including 122 women and 5 men, studying English Philology – Teaching Specialization (second-cycle studies) and Pre-school and Early Childhood Education (long-cycle master's degree programs). The sampling was purposeful and intentional – in line with the assumptions of qualitative research – and only those planning to pursue a teaching career declared their participation. The study was conducted at two academic centers: the University of Silesia in Katowice (Faculty of Humanities) and the Humanitas Academy in Sosnowiec. Data were collected starting in the 2021/2022 academic year and are being continuously updated in the summer semesters of subsequent academic years. Participants demonstrated a high level of engagement and willingness to participate.

Research procedure and data analysis

Individual interviews were conducted during the spring semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes, was recorded with the respondents' consent, and then transcribed. The empirical material was analyzed using thematic analysis according to Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. Thematic codes – such as fear of evaluation, difficulty building authority, and low mental resilience – were identified through a multi-stage data review and then verified by a second researcher to enhance the validity and reliability of interpretations. The study was conducted in accordance with applicable research ethics standards, including the principles of voluntariness, informed consent, anonymity, and the right to withdraw from participation at any stage. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the method of data processing, and the principles of data presentation.

Conceptualization of teacher competencies in contemporary pedagogical literature

In an era of intense social, cultural, and technological change, the teaching profession is becoming increasingly complex. Modern educators are expected to possess not only a high level of substantive knowledge, but also communication, emotional, and organizational skills, an attitude of openness to change, and a willingness to continuously improve. Teacher competencies are therefore becoming a key category in pedagogical discourse, and their conceptualization takes many forms – from classical approaches, which primarily emphasize the didactic aspect, to holistic approaches, which view the teacher as a guide for student development in intellectual, social, and axiological dimensions. The literature emphasizes that teaching competencies are not a homogeneous structure – they constitute a complex system of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are interconnected and dynamically developing. Their development takes place both during academic education and in everyday professional practice, through experience, reflection, and interaction with students and the school environment. Contemporary competency models emphasize flexibility, the ability to personalize the teaching process, and decision-making in conditions of uncertainty and the volatility of educational realities. The aim of this study is to present selected definitions and typologies of teacher competencies found in pedagogical literature and to discuss their functions and importance in the

context of educational practice. Particular attention is paid to the proposals of Polish authors, such as Andrzej Nowak and Kazimierz Denek, who provide an in-depth analysis of the structure and functions of teaching competencies in relation to contemporary educational challenges. This chapter also serves as a starting point for further consideration of incompetences and areas of uncertainty revealed in the narratives of teaching students.

Contemporary challenges facing the teaching profession

The teaching profession in the contemporary world is undergoing significant transformations resulting from profound social, cultural, economic, and technological changes. Pedagogical literature and international reports indicate that teachers are now expected to do much more than simply impart knowledge in accordance with the core curriculum. They simultaneously fulfill the roles of educators, mentors, cultural mediators, student needs assessors, and facilitators of individual development (Śliwerski 2021; OECD 2021). One of the key challenges facing teachers is the growing heterogeneity of school classes. Students differ in their cognitive abilities, learning needs, cultural background, language, social status, migration experiences, and family circumstances. Consequently, teachers must constantly adapt their teaching and learning strategies to diverse conditions and flexibly respond to changing educational needs (Gajda 2019, p. 29). Another significant challenge is the pressure associated with evaluating teachers' work, both from institutions (e.g., school boards, principals, governing bodies), parents, and the public. In an era of widespread digitalization and mediatization of social life, teachers' work is subject to constant observation and evaluation, often based on simplified criteria and expectations that are not always consistent with the realities of school life (Falecki 2022, p. 79). Teachers are also grappling with challenges related to digital education and the technological transformation of schools. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed deficits in this area, revealing inequalities in access to technology and lack of digital skills among some teachers. Currently, teachers are expected not only to be proficient in using digital tools but also competent in designing digital learning environments, creating interactive materials, and conducting classes in hybrid or remote formats (Redecker 2017, p. 99). Psychosocial factors affecting teachers' professional well-being are also an important aspect. The literature describes burnout, a reduced sense of agency, and chronic stress, which negatively impact teaching quality, motivation, and job satisfaction (Skalbania 2015, p. 67). Ad-

ministrative burdens, excessive bureaucracy, job instability, and low pay further exacerbate these difficulties. Modern teachers must also navigate a social reality characterized by increasing polarization of views, a crisis of authority, and the relativization of values, which requires the development of specific axiological and dialogical competencies (Czerepaniak-Walczak 2016, p. 118). Serving as a guide for young people in a pluralistic and often unstable reality poses both an ethical and personal challenge. All of the above aspects point to the need to redefine the role of the teacher – from a program implementer to a reflective practitioner who can combine substantive, educational, and social competencies with deep ethical awareness and a willingness to continuously develop. In this context, teacher education should be not only academic, but also practical, relational and focused on the realities of working in a diverse educational environment (Kwiatkowska 2008).

Incompetence, deficits, and fears – the concept and its importance in the educational process

Contemporary pedagogy is increasingly moving away from a one-sided emphasis on teacher competences, drawing attention to the parallel existence of their opposites – incompetences, deficits, and internal fears. This approach aligns with the trend of reflective pedagogy, which recognizes uncertainty, errors, and the limits of one's own abilities as integral elements of the professional development process (Czerepaniak-Walczak 2016). Unlike traditional models of education that focus on patterns and standards, reflective pedagogy asks questions about what is missing, not just what has already been mastered. Incompetence should not be viewed solely as a state of deficiency or lack of knowledge, but as a dynamic component of the learning and self-development process. As Brookfield (2017) notes, awareness of one's own incompetence can be a starting point for critical reflection on one's own practice and for learning from mistakes. Incompetence thus gains constructive status – as long as it is recognized, interpreted and reflected upon. In the context of teacher education, incompetence most often manifests itself in the form of uncertainty, a lack of agency, difficulties in interpersonal communication, low emotional resilience, and a lack of confidence in one's own professional abilities (Marek 2019; Tokarska 2022). In our own research, students' statements were particularly frequent, indicating difficulties in establishing authority, fear of confrontation with demanding parents, and uncertainty in making educational deci-

sions. Such experiences can be understood as an indicator of incomplete preparation, but also as a natural phase of transition from the role of student to teacher. When analyzing the phenomenon of incompetence in pedagogical literature, it is worth referring to Noel Burch's (1970) concept of "conscious incompetence", in which the learner becomes aware of gaps in their knowledge or skills. This moment – though psychologically challenging – is crucial from the perspective of professional development, as it allows for the transition to the phase of active competence acquisition and self-improvement. For future teachers, reflecting on one's own incompetence can lead to more authentic, empathetic, and ethical functioning in the educational space. From this perspective, the incompetencies revealed in the narratives of teacher education students should not be treated as failures of the education system, but as potential sources of development. Incorporating reflection on incompetence into professional preparation programs allows for the modeling of an attitude of openness, critical thinking, and a willingness to engage in lifelong learning – competencies now considered the foundation of teacher professionalism (Day 2004; Śliwerski 2021).

Analysis of the research results, identifying thematic categories and main themes

The aim of the analysis was to identify recurring themes, concerns, and subjective assessments of competence and incompetence expressed by students preparing to work as teachers. The research material consisted of 15 transcripts of individual narrative interviews, which were subjected to thematic analysis according to the procedure developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The coding process identified main categories and sub-codes, which allowed for organizing the content of the interviews around key issues emerging in the students' narratives. Content analysis of the interviews led to the identification of five main thematic categories, which were most frequently present in the participants' responses. Each category includes a set of sub-codes illustrating specific areas of uncertainty, beliefs, and attitudes of the students:

- Concerns about entering the teaching profession: fear of a lack of authority in the eyes of students, fear of confrontation with parents, low self-esteem related to the level of practical preparation.
- Insufficient practical preparation: excessive generality of academic content, lack of experience working with students with special educational needs, insufficient exercises to develop interpersonal skills.

- High social expectations for teachers: social and media pressure regarding the role of a teacher, a sense of emotional and moral responsibility for student well-being.
- Motivations for choosing the teaching profession: the need to help others, a sense of vocation, inspiration from personal school experiences.
- Key competencies as assessed by students: interpersonal communication skills, the ability to manage a group of students, emotional resilience, and empathy for students.

Representative quotes

To illustrate the aforementioned categories, selected student statements are presented below. The quotes have been preserved in their original form, with full respect for the participants' anonymity.

- Concerns about entering the teaching profession:
 - “I’m afraid that students won’t listen to me, that I won’t be firm enough with them”.
 - “My biggest fear as a future teacher is confrontation with a parent, lack of adequate knowledge, lack of motivation, fear of failure, lack of assertiveness, and the inability to help a student with a disability or from a dysfunctional family”.
- On student internships and pedagogical studies:
 - “We didn’t have enough internships during college. I don’t know how to behave in a difficult situation in the classroom”.
- Intrinsic motivations:
 - “I’ve always wanted to help children. I know it’s difficult work, but I feel this is my path”.
 - “My studies didn’t prepare me for working with a child who had lost a parent (due to death or divorce), with a child with diabetes, emotional and mental health problems, a neglected child (dirty, infested with lice), or confronting the parents of such children”.

Analysis summary

The analysis of student narratives revealed that those preparing to become teachers have a partial awareness of both the expectations of their future role and their own limitations. The most frequently reported deficiencies concerned interpersonal skills, practical preparation for working with students, and a lack

of self-confidence in difficult situations. At the same time, the motivations for choosing teaching as a profession were, in most cases, based on altruistic values, a sense of mission, and the need to help. The students' statements revealed not only deficiencies in professional preparation but also a high level of emotional involvement and an internal sense of responsibility. The conclusions from the analysis indicate the need to strengthen the practical component of teacher education and to more systematically develop soft skills such as communication, emotional resilience, assertiveness, and empathy.

Only then will it be possible to educate teachers capable of acting responsibly, reflectively, and effectively in an increasingly complex school environment. The results of the study reveal a complex picture of the self-assessment of teaching students. The narratives of the respondents reveal deep emotional involvement, a high awareness of the importance of the teaching role, and numerous anxieties related to the future performance of this role. The areas of incompetence and deficits identified in the analysis – such as a lack of self-confidence, difficulties in establishing authority, fear of contact with parents, and insufficient preparation for working with struggling students – indicate significant gaps in the process of academic preparation for the profession. These observations are consistent with previous findings by researchers studying teaching competencies. As Śliwerski (2021) notes, the contemporary teacher cannot be perceived solely as an implementer of the core curriculum, but as a person fulfilling a multidimensional educational, social, and cultural role.

This perspective is reflected in students' statements, who do not deny the importance of substantive knowledge but much more frequently emphasize the importance of soft skills, interpersonal skills, and emotional resilience. It is also noteworthy that students intuitively describe many characteristics of a reflective teacher – open to self-reflection, aware of their own limitations, and ready for lifelong learning. In light of Day's concept (2004, 2008), such a teacher enters subsequent stages of professionalization, transforming personal experiences into a source of professional development. It is worth noting, however, that respondents declare the potential for this approach rather than actually implementing it, which may result from a lack of appropriate tools and experience.

The respondents' responses also clearly highlight the discrepancy between the academic model of teacher education and the school reality into which graduates are expected to enter. Students are critical of the generality of the content taught and the insufficient number of practical training sessions, which aligns with the findings of Tokarska's (2022) research, which indicates the low

adaptability of teacher education graduates when faced with real-world school problems. The lack of preparation for working with students with special educational needs, from dysfunctional families, or struggling with health issues was cited by the respondents as one of the main sources of anxiety. The findings also show that motivations for pursuing teacher education are often altruistic in nature or stem from positive school experiences from their own childhood. Although such motivations are consistent with the traditional image of a teacher as a person “called to the profession” (Denek 2008, p. 117), they may constitute insufficient preparation for struggling with everyday professional life, especially in the face of high social expectations and systemic overload of teachers (Falecki 2022 and Skałbania 2015).

Therefore, the analysis of student narratives indicates the need for a fundamental reformulation of the assumptions of teacher education in Poland. Increasing the number of hours of practical training, incorporating soft skills and mental resilience training, and creating a space for reflection on one’s own limitations and experienced emotions seems essential. It is also necessary to expand the educational offerings with modules devoted to working in culturally and socially diverse environments, with an emphasis on ethical and educational competencies.

Summary

This article does not exhaust the full scope of competencies required in the teaching profession, but it highlights the most significant areas in light of declarations made by students enrolled in teacher education programs. The presented set of competencies is open and dynamic – it requires continuous development, supplementation, and adaptation to the evolving realities of education. These competencies do not occur in isolation – they intersect and complement each other, forming a multifaceted professional profile. A modern teacher should integrate theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and personality-related competencies that are essential for building relationships based on trust, empathy, and responsibility.

To summarize, the following conclusions can be drawn: first, the research findings confirm that teachers often face situations that exceed their individual adaptive resources, which negatively affects classroom climate and the well-being of both students and the broader educational community (Schutz et al. 2009, p. 119). Second, personal and socio-emotional competencies, including

metacognition – the ability to understand oneself and others through reflection on mental states and behaviors – gain particular importance (Cervellione et al. 2023, p. 91). Third, teachers who possess emotional regulation skills are more effective in building social relationships, managing student behavior, and preventing disciplinary problems (Sutton, Wheatley 2003).

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SUMMARY

The article addresses the issue of self-assessment of teacher preparation based on the narratives of students enrolled in teacher education programs. The aim of the study was to identify declared competencies, perceived deficits, and concerns associated with entering the teaching profession in the context of contemporary educational challenges. A qualitative research approach was employed using narrative interviews. The study included 127 students who intended to pursue a teaching career. Thematic analysis revealed five main categories: fears related to entering the profession, insufficient practical preparation, societal expectations, motivations for becoming a teacher, and key personal competencies. The findings highlight the need to strengthen the practical component of teacher education and to develop soft, emotional, and reflective competencies.

KEYWORDS: teacher competencies, incompetence, self-evaluation, education students, teacher preparation, narrative interview, teacher education

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł porusza kwestię samooceny przygotowania nauczycieli na podstawie narracji studentów kierunków pedagogicznych. Celem badania była identyfikacja deklarowanych kompetencji, postrzeganych deficytów oraz obaw związanych z podjęciem pracy w zawodzie nauczyciela w kontekście współczesnych wyzwań edukacyjnych. Zastosowano jakościowe podejście badawcze z wykorzystaniem wywiadów narracyjnych. Badaniem objęto 127 studentów planujących karierę nauczycielską. Analiza tema-

tyczna ujawniła pięć głównych kategorii: obawy związane z podjęciem pracy w zawodzie, niewystarczające przygotowanie praktyczne, oczekiwania społeczne, motywacja do zostania nauczycielem oraz kluczowe kompetencje osobiste. Wyniki podkreślają potrzebę wzmocnienia praktycznego komponentu kształcenia nauczycieli oraz rozwoju kompetencji miękkich, emocjonalnych i refleksyjnych.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: kompetencje nauczycieli, niekompetencja, samoocena, edukacja studentów, przygotowanie nauczycieli, wywiad narracyjny, kształcenie nauczycieli