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Male kindergarten teachers in the perception of parents in the context of social trust

People have a high degree of social confidence and trust in the profession of a teacher. From the social point of view, its representatives carry out special tasks concerning a high regard for the public interest — in this case, the education of the young generations. Therefore, the work of teachers, including preschool teachers, is almost always observed and socially evaluated. It is formally and substantively evaluated by supervision authorities and by society, including children's parents. The article presents preliminary research on the parents' perception of male teachers in kindergarten in the context of social trust. The results show that the respondents feel discomfort due to gender stereotypes about men working with children and about the profession of teaching. However, having contact with a male kindergarten teacher alleviates this discomfort, improves the teacher's assessment of his profession, and increases parents' confidence in his actions.

Keywords: pre-school pedagogy, gender stereotypes, kindergarten teacher, male teacher, pre-school education, social trust, teacher profession stereotypes

Mężczyzna – nauczyciel wychowania przedszkolnego w percepcji rodziców w kontekście zaufania społecznego

Zawód nauczyciela obdarza się wysokim zaufaniem społecznym. Jego przedstawiciele wykonują szczególne, z punktu widzenia społeczeństwa, zadania, związane z troską o wysoką jakość realizacji interesów publicznych, w tym wypadku – z edukacją młodego pokolenia. Praca pedagogów, także nauczycieli wychowania przedszkolnego, jest więc niemal nieustannie obserwowana i oceniana – formalnie i merytorycznie – przez organy nadzoru pedagogicznego – oraz przez społeczeństwo, a często – rodziców dzieci. W artykule zaprezentowano wyniki badań wstępnych dotyczących postrzegania mężczyzn – nauczycieli wychowania przedszkolnego przez rodziców w kontekście zaufania społecznego. Wskazują one, iż respondenci odczuwają

pewien dyskomfort wynikający z obecności stereotypów płci – w zakresie pracy mężczyzn z dziećmi oraz związanych z zawodem nauczyciela. Możliwość współpracy z nauczycielem płci męskiej na co dzień łagodzi je jednak, podnosi ocenę pracy nauczyciela i zwiększa zaufanie rodziców do jego działań.

Słowa kluczowe: pedagogika przedszkolna, stereotypy płci, nauczyciel wychowania przedszkolnego, mężczyzna nauczyciel, wychowanie przedszkolne, zaufanie społeczne, stereotypy związane z zawodem nauczyciela

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Trust in society

The seamless functioning of societies is based on the existence of norms and principles, both those determined by the governing law and unwritten ones resulting from social agreement or tradition. These principles regulate practically all aspects of human life. One such important norm is trust. It is

‘one of the most important values which sustains the cohesion of social groups and, in the wider perspective, societies. Thanks to trust, people understand one another better and social processes run smoothly without more serious conflicts. On the contrary, a lack of trust and too much caution — even though they sometimes help to avoid disappointment — lead to misunderstandings, tension, and conflict’ (CBOS, 2018, p. 1; Łukasik 2018, pp. 109–116).

According to A. Giddens, trust is ‘the vesting of confidence in persons or in abstract systems, made on the basis of a ‘leap into faith’ which brackets ignorance or a lack of information’ (2002, p. 318). Without a basic level of trust in others, social functioning would be much more difficult and actions taken would be so careful and conservative that they could hinder development or even prevent human interaction. If people want to function in a community, they must take the risk and formulate some assumptions related to their uncertain actions. P. Sztompka emphasises that ‘trust is not only a contemplative hope but an involvement based on that hope, an irreversible and risky decision’ (2012, p. 129). This decision often means trusting others with actions they take to meet certain needs which a person — dependent in a sense on relationships with other people — is unable to meet on their own. Therefore, trust is necessary for peaceful, optimistic, and free activity according to the idea that ‘the world is better than it probably is’ (ibid. p. 129). Trust also reduces the uncertainty regarding the actions of others. Thanks to trust, we can assume they will treat us at least neutrally or even with favour (ibid.). This allows us to function in the social environment without constant anxiety and fear of others.

Sztompka identifies several types of social trust: personal, positional (trust of social roles, professions, positions etc.), commercial, technological, institutional, and system-related (ibid., p. 131). Thus, trust refers not only to people but also to institutions or organisations. Ultimately, it comes down to the relationships with other people (Łukasik, 2018, pp. 95–115) because people are the key elements of ‘organisational beings’ and different structures.

Teaching as a profession of public trust

Education is an area of human life which is largely based on social trust. It is connected with trust in an institution and in a system — the educational system — and the confidence that the law, regulations,

and pedagogical supervision are well-thought-out and provide adequate learning conditions for the young people. It is also related to positional trust in the status of a teacher, as representatives of this profession are expected to provide high-quality educational services. Society trusts teachers who act within the framework of the educational system and entrusts them with a generation of young people who — according to the law — cannot decide for themselves. The responsibility for their lives, growth, and future rests on the adults: the parents who send their children to kindergartens and schools, the teachers who are direct providers of educational services, and the decision-makers who create the legal grounds of the educational system. Thus, teaching as a profession entails certain types of tasks focused on the clients: the children in kindergartens and the pupils in schools. Educational services are also addressed indirectly towards parents and supervisory bodies: school management, supervisory authorities, local governments, and the state, which strive (or should strive) to ensure that graduates are well-educated young citizens who are prepared to live in society.

For these reasons, teaching is seen as a profession of public trust. According to the CBOS report from 2004, it is a 'profession which is crucial for the society in general and is characterised by a special trust between the clients and the teaching staff; an obligatory professional secrecy; an unquestionable moral and ethical attitude of teachers; a high quality of the services provided; and an obligatory membership of teachers in professional associations' (CBOS, 2004 p. 6).

The authors of the report 'Research International Pentor: Professions of Public Trust in the consciousness of Poles' from 2008 say that 22% of the respondents pointed to teaching as a profession of public trust. According to the report, the nature of the profession has not changed compared to the 2004 CBOS report. The respondents also said that teaching involves working with people and is connected with 'entrusting these professionals with the problems, interests, or affairs of other people' (*Zawody zaufania publicznego w świadomości Polaków*, 2008). It is interesting that, under the law, teaching does not have the status of a profession of public trust.¹

In the public awareness, the role of teachers is very strongly associated with the huge importance of this profession in the society, and the relations between teachers and students and their parents are based, to a large extent, on trust. According to the report 'GfK Verein, Trust in Professions 2018 — A GfK Verein study: From firefighters to politicians', 78% of Poles trust teachers, which places this profession in 11th place among the most socially trusted professions in Poland (Bürkl, Müller & Siegert, 2018). Teachers are respected for their professional integrity. In the study conducted in April 2019 by Kantar, 85% of the respondents evaluated teachers positively. According to 17% of Poles, teachers — like doctors — constitute one of the professional groups that deserve the most respect, and 74% of the respondents said that at present, this respect is insuffi-

¹Provisions regarding professions of public trust can be found in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland and in the relevant legal acts on certain professions. Relevant information can also be found in the document issued by the Office for Thematic Analyses of the Chancellery of the Senate: 'Professions of public trust, regulated professions, and free professions: Origins, functioning, and present issues' (*Zawody zaufania publicznego, zawody regulowane oraz wolne zawody. Geneza, funkcjonowanie i aktualne problemy*). Thematic elaboration. OT-625, Warszawa, 2013, https://www.senat.gov.pl/gfx/senat/pl/senatopracowania/56/plik/ot-625_.pdf [Accessed on 8.07.2019].

cient (Kantar, 2019). Respect and trust towards teachers is connected with expectations regarding the proper moral and ethical attitudes. A work ethos is crucial in this profession. Teaching is also associated with passion and being one's calling, as well as with a certain set of character traits and competencies, a fact which has also been described in the pedeutology publications (e.g. Pękała, 2017; Kutrowska, 2008; Kwiatkowska, 1991, 2005, 2008; Zowczak, 2009; Szempruch, 2013).

Thus, it is not only the general public, but also the representatives of pedagogical sciences, academic circles, and teacher training centres which describe teaching according to standards which list it as a profession of public trust.

Kindergarten teachers: feminisation and stereotypes

The profession of kindergarten teacher is afforded a very high level of social trust, as its representatives have a very important responsibility — the education of children who are just beginning their paths in life and their education. To ensure the best functioning of the youngest members of society, their legal caregivers (usually parents) pay close attention to matters related to education, particularly in kindergarten.

Preschool teaching differs from working in a school. The educational process is organised around the developmental abilities of children aged 3–6 years, so the focus is on different areas than in primary school. According to the provisions of the core curriculum,

‘the goal of preschool education is to support the overall development of a child. This support is provided through care and teaching/learning, which allows children to discover their own abilities and the meaning of actions and to gather experiences as they discover what is true, good, and beautiful. As a result of such support, children mature enough to enter the first stage of their schooling’ (Podstawa programowa wychowania przedszkolnego dla przedszkoli, oddziałów przedszkolnych w szkołach podstawowych oraz innych form wychowania przedszkolnego, 14 February 2017).

Thus, kindergarten teachers are mainly caregivers and educators. At the same time, they are also responsible for transferring knowledge and developing skills the children will need during further stages of their education, in primary school.

Such characteristics of kindergarten teaching lead to feminisation and the stereotypical opinion that it is designed for women. The report ‘Liczą się nauczyciele. Raport o stanie edukacji 2013’ (2014) shows that in 2013 in Poland, men constituted 1% of all kindergarten teachers, while in 2016 they made up 2.2%, according to the OECD (OECD, 2016).² This profession is associated mainly with the stereotypically female

² In this report, kindergarten teachers are classified at ISCED2011 level 0 programme 2 (OECD, 2016). ISCED2011 is International Standard Classification of Education developed by UNESCO Institute for Statistics. In this classification, level 0 programme 2 is assigned to early childhood education, which means pre-primary education — for children aged 3 — children ready to go to primary school (in Poland — 6-year-old children). For international comparability purposes, the term ‘early childhood education’ is used to label ISCED level 0, <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-isced-2011-en.pdf>

tasks of providing care, which do not require high competencies or specialised knowledge. Such an opinion results from the fact that during the first few years of a child's life, it is very often the mother who plays that role. Traits like care, understanding, warmth, responsibility, being nice, and smiling, etc., which are assigned to kindergarten teachers, are also associated with the typical role of women as caregivers. Because stereotypes are 'established opinions based not on verified data but on anecdotes and rumours' (Sillamy, 1995, p. 278), not consisting of much information but having an established and hardly changeable evaluative and emotional component (Chlewiński, 1992; Pospiszyl, 2009), such images of traits or responsibilities connected with working in kindergarten translate into thinking about kindergarten professionals as being female. The common Polish name for a kindergarten teacher, *przedszkolanka*, infantilises the whole profession, and — because it has no masculine form in the Polish language — it discriminates against the male representatives of this vocation.

Stereotypes are usually activated in new, unknown situations. This is the case when parents send their children to kindergarten for the first time. The idea that a warm, friendly lady will look after their children as they work increases their sense of security and reduces the stress stemming from separation and leaving their child with a stranger. However, in some circumstances this stereotypical thinking increases the level of stress instead of reducing it.

These days, when fathers are more and more engaged in childcare, a kindergarten teacher is sometimes male. Even though such a situation raises a surprised, friendly curiosity and a willingness to cooperate with a male teacher, it is completely outside the stereotypical thinking about the '(lady) kindergarten teacher', which causes a cognitive dissonance. Sometimes, this generates new stereotypes which may be harmful for men — regarding a lack of competence, effeminate nature, or even being a threat to the children (by being prone to abuse or paedophilia). All of this may trigger concerns and a reluctance to leave children under the care of a male kindergarten teacher. In such cases, parents may experience less anxiety or stress as they get to know the teacher, communicate with him, and learn about his work and required competencies.

Research procedure

In the context of social trust towards kindergarten teachers and the stereotypes regarding this profession, it is interesting to explore the opinions of parents about men working in kindergartens. The main objective of this study, conducted in November 2018, was to investigate how parents of preschoolers view male kindergarten teachers. The study included parents' opinions, emotions, and impressions related to the question of men performing the role of caregivers and educators of children. It was also interesting to study whether there is a difference and, if so, what kind of difference there is between the opinions and feelings of parents of children who were in groups where the teacher was a man and parents whose children were in a group led by a woman. The study was performed using the diagnostic survey method, using an original questionnaire with ten questions, divided into four thematic groups: the need to employ men in kindergarten; the characteristics of a male kindergarten teacher; tasks male kindergarten teachers should or should not perform; and feelings

related to entrusting one's child to a male kindergarten teacher. The sample consisted of 42 parents of kindergarten children from Cracow, who were divided into two groups. Group 1 (23 people) were parents who had not had any experience with a male kindergarten teacher (NE); Group 2 (19 people) were parents who had had some experience with a male kindergarten teacher (E).

The image of a male kindergarten teacher according to parents

The results show that regardless of whether parents had had any contact with a male kindergarten teacher or not, they think it would be beneficial if men also worked in preschools. The majority of the respondents think more men should work as kindergarten teachers. This opinion is shared by more parents from Group 1. This might result from the fact that the parents who did not have contact with a male teacher would have had a greater chance of experiencing it, and this would meet their expectation. The respondents also declared that they would like a man to look after their children in kindergarten. This is 'wishful thinking' of both those parents who had not had the opportunity to work with a male kindergarten teacher and those who had had such an experience.

Table 1
The need to employ male kindergarten teachers

	'I think more men should work as kindergarten teachers.'	'I would like a male teacher to look after my child in kindergarten.'	'Male kindergarten teachers are needed.'
Group 1 (NE)	82.6%	65.2%	82.6%
Group 2 (E)	63.2%	84.2%	84.2%
Total	73.8%	73.8%	83.3%

Source: Author's original research

Today's parents recognise that their children need to interact with people of both genders while in kindergarten. Perhaps they think it is an 'extension' of relations at home, where mothers and fathers more and more often are engaged equally in the care and education of their children, and thus interactions of children with men are seen as natural.

The respondents were also given the choice of 45 traits by which to characterise male kindergarten teachers. They include both the ideas of what a teacher should be like (the opinions of parents from Group 1) and the characteristics of actual teachers (the opinions of parents from Group 2). The choices of the respondents allowed the researchers to create an interesting characterisation of male kindergarten teachers, as seen from the point of view of parents. The respondents in both groups gave quite similar answers, though it is easy to notice that those who had had the opportunity to work with male teachers rated them slightly higher than

those who had never had such opportunity. The parents from Group 1 could only rely on their imagination, beliefs, or stereotypes about kindergarten teachers in general, or about men taking care of children, as the situation where the teacher is a man was new to them. These parents were more cautious, conservative, and distrustful, and their answers were more restrained. The parents who had had some experience with male kindergarten teachers were referring to their own experiences incorporated into their worldview.

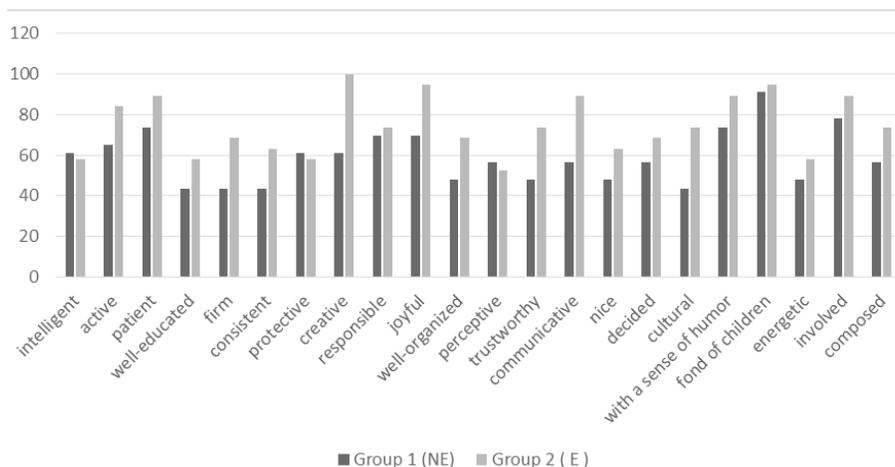


Figure 1. Characteristics of a male kindergarten teacher

Source: Author's original research

For many respondents from both groups, it was important that teachers like working with children and feel responsible for them. There was also the aspect connected with care responsibilities. Parents want kindergarten teachers to pay close attention to what their children do because distractions may lead to a tragedy. It seems that this is the reason why respondents from both groups chose 'perceptiveness' as a characteristic of a teacher.

Many traits which can be observed during direct collaboration of parents and teachers were chosen by the parents from Group 2 (for example, organised, active, consistent, and involved). During their interactions with male teachers, parents have many opportunities to watch them at work, both during everyday organised activities and trips or special events. When participating in different activities, including ones dedicated to parents (like Mother's Day or Father' Day), parents can see what are they like. The parents who had had the opportunity to collaborate with male kindergarten teachers were able to list the characteristics based on their own memories and experiences. The parents who had not had such an experience chose traits based on their ideas and expectations. It is interesting that the characteristics chosen by the respondents confirm, to some

extent, the stereotype regarding the way men behave — active, organised, firm, orientated toward acting in the physical world, and not controlled by emotions.

The biggest differences were observed in relation to four traits — trustworthy, creative, communicative, and cultural — these traits were decidedly more often chosen by the parents who had experienced daily interaction with male kindergarten teachers. The trait ‘trustworthy’ was chosen often as a consequence of being in a situation which was familiar for the parents. Having direct contact with male kindergarten teachers, they had a chance to test, observe, and evaluate them. These characteristics were chosen because, in general, people trust someone they already know more. In new, unfamiliar situations, they tend to be cautious, uncertain, and undecided.

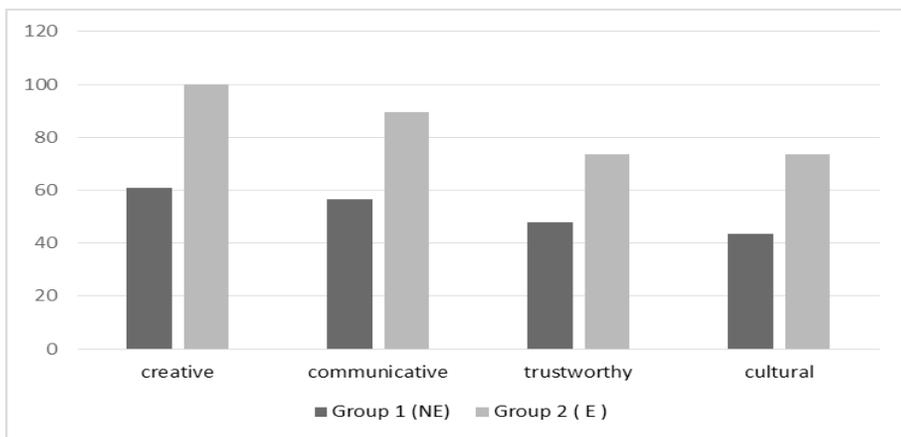


Figure 2. Selected characteristics of male kindergarten teachers — differences in parents’ choices

Source: Author’s original research

The degree of trust towards male kindergarten teachers and a rather careful attitude could be observed when analysing the answers regarding the tasks male teachers should or should not perform. As already mentioned, the primary role of kindergarten teachers is caregiving, followed by education or didactics. Therefore, we have identified the most typical examples of these tasks. Caregiving responsibilities involve helping children with 1) dressing and undressing when needed, 2) eating, and 3) using the bathroom. Educational tasks include, for example, conflict resolution, support, and help in building relationships, whereas didactic tasks involve teaching. The parents had to decide which tasks male kindergarten teachers should or should not perform. The percentage results from both groups are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Professional tasks male kindergarten teachers should perform

Task	Group 1 (NE)	Group 2 (E)
Conducting didactic activities	95.7%	100%
Helping with dressing and undressing when needed	78.3%	94.7%
Educational tasks (for example, conflict resolution, support, and help in building relationships)	95.7%	100%
Assisting children during meals	95.7%	94.7%
Assisting children as they use the bathroom	73.9%	100%

Source: Author's original research

While the differences in opinions regarding the educational and didactic responsibilities are practically unnoticeable, the parents who had no contact with male teachers were more reluctant to say men should engage in care responsibilities, especially ones involving direct physical contact with children. It seems this is connected with the stereotypical thinking that men may pose a threat in improper physical contact with children and, in consequence, may be suspected of abuse or paedophilia. Again, such caution may be related to the lack of knowledge of the nature of the kindergarten teaching profession and the situation. It also confirms the fact that we trust someone we know more, but our trust is limited in situations which require some risk when we want our needs to be met by another person — in this case, the need to provide care for a child whilst the parents are working.

The study also revealed differences in parents' feelings regarding leaving a child under the care of a male kindergarten teacher. Again, the parents who had worked with male teachers showed a higher level of comfort (68.4%), joy (57.9%), and peace (68.4%) and a lower level of fear (10.5%) than the parents who did not have such experiences. In Group 1, the results were as follows: comfort — 26.1%, joy — 26.1%, peace — 30.4%, and fear — 17.4%. This also confirms the thesis that unfamiliar situations are not comfortable for people who approach even the idea of such situations with a large degree of caution and distrust. Circumstances which are known are seen as being more friendly. Interestingly, the level of fear in both groups was not high. The prevailing feelings of joy and peace may be connected with curiosity, willingness, or the need to experience what it is like to work with a male kindergarten teacher.

The situation when parents have the opportunity to regularly interact with a male kindergarten teacher who works with their children is not very common in Poland. Thus, it is an experience which rather stimulates caution and distrust. Despite declarations that they want male teachers to take care of their children and that they see the need to have more male staff in kindergartens, the parents who did not have an opportunity to interact with male kindergarten teachers were quite cautious in their choices. The shift was visible when the situation was familiar — in such cases, the parents were friendlier and did not evaluate male teachers in the context of gender. They emphasised this shift in spontaneous comments once they had completed the survey:

'If not Mr R., then I don't know...' 'I think he has really changed my opinion on whether kindergartens need male staff. Because I think they are needed...' 'But if I didn't know him, it would be hard for me...' 'We are thrilled to have Mr R., even though at the beginning...' 'They pointed out that it was only thanks to direct contact with the teacher that they changed their opinion about men working with small children, and they admitted they had been much more distrustful before.'

Summary

Due to the feminisation of the profession of kindergarten teacher, situations when a man looks after children in a kindergarten or co-leads a group are very rare. This generates surprise and distrust, which naturally trigger the stereotypical thinking which helps us to become accustomed to new situations. To some extent, these stereotypes were noticeable in the opinions of parents regarding male teachers. They were mainly related to parents' concerns over men engaging in caregiving tasks which require direct physical contact with a child. It may be encouraging that the parents who did not have any experience working with male teachers gave very similar answers to those given by the parents who had had such an opportunity. This may indicate that the social perception of men looking after small children is changing, and that situations where they assume caregiving and educational responsibilities are becoming more and more popular and natural.

The parents signalled that there is a need for more male teaching staff in kindergartens, so it is worth taking specific actions in this regard. First of all, an extended, specific social dialogue should be initiated on the value of the presence of men in the social world of children and their role in education – a dialogue which would help them realise they can engage in caregiving and educational tasks with the youngest children to the same extent as women. An interesting solution would be to provide opportunities for the parents to observe male teachers as they work with the preschoolers, leading groups or additional activities in the kindergarten. Gradually familiarising the public with this relatively new situation could reduce the fear and increase the level of social trust towards professional male caregivers.