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Teacher Strategies for Fostering Children's Agency: A Case Study of a Second-Grade Classroom

Nauczycielskie mechanizmy budowania sprawczości dzieci na przykładzie klasy drugiej

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Abstract

Aim. Building the agency of the youngest students is currently an important goal of education. However, research reveals significant limitations in this area. The study presented in the text attempts to identify the mechanisms, created by a teacher in the second grade, for developing children's agency. The subject of the research was the teacher's actions in terms of ways of interacting with students, lesson organization, and the quality of tasks proposed to students.

Methods and materials. The research was ethnographic in nature and was conducted in a natural, everyday classroom environment. During the observation, I sat at the back of the classroom and did not participate in the lessons. The data collection method was participatory and overt ethnographic observation.

Results and conclusion. The presented research analyses show that the teacher's actions form a coherent system that allows students to develop independence. This is reflected

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in everyday, small interactions with children, which create a mechanism for building agency. What seems important in this class is the community in which the teacher is "with" the children, not "above" them. This takes the interaction to another level. It gives students self-esteem, building confidence in the meanings of their own choices. However, the teacher's main belief, as reflected in her practices, can be described as a deep respect for the child.

Keywords: student, teacher, early childhood education, teaching practices, student agency

Abstrakt

Cel. Budowanie sprawczości najmłodszych uczniów jest obecnie ważnym celem edukacji. Zakłada się potrzebę poczucia odpowiedzialności za swoje uczenie się oraz wpływu na otaczającą rzeczywistość. Badania ujawniają jednak znaczące ograniczenia w tym obszarze. W badaniach przedstawionych w tekście podjęto próbę rozpoznania mechanizmów tworzonych przez nauczycielkę w klasie drugiej w celu rozwijania sprawczości dzieci. Przedmiotem badań były działania nauczyciela w zakresie sposobów interakcji z uczniami, organizacji lekcji i jakości zadań proponowanych uczniom.

Metody i materiały. Badania miały charakter etnograficzny, były prowadzone w naturalnym i codziennym środowisku klasowym. Podczas obserwacji siedziałam z tyłu klasy i nie brałam udziału w lekcjach. Metodą zbierania danych była obserwacja etnograficzna uczestnicząca i jawna.

Wyniki i wnioski. Z przedstawionych analiz badań wynika, że działania nauczycielki tworzą spójny system pozwalający na budowanie samodzielności uczniów. Przedstawia się on w codziennych, drobnych interakcjach z dziećmi, tworzących mechanizm budowania sprawczości. Istotna wydaje się w tej klasie wspólnota, w której nauczycielka jest „z dziećmi", a nie „nad" nimi i która przenosi interakcje na inny poziom. Daje uczniom przekonanie o ich własnej wartości i buduje zaufanie do sensu własnych wyborów. Istotnym działaniem nauczycielki dla rozwijania poczucia sprawczości jest również jej akceptacja dziecięcości uczniów z całym wachlarzem ich zachowań, problemów i potrzeb. Główne przekonanie nauczycielki uwidaczniane w jej praktykach można jednak opisać jako głęboki szacunek do dziecka, ufność w jego możliwości i zaciekawienie jego osobowością, umysłem i możliwościami.

Słowa kluczowe**:** nauczyciel, uczeń, edukacja wczesnoszkolna, sprawczość ucznia, praktyki nauczycielskie

Children's Agency and Autonomy – Introduction

Contemporary approaches to children recognize agency and autonomy as the key outcomes of learning, both from an educational and a human rights perspective (Mashford-Scott & Church, 2011). Responsibility and subjectivity are recognized as important pedagogical categories, but they remain insufficiently embedded in formal education. In addition, children's agency tends to be examined in a social and relational context, rather than from a cognitive perspective. The sense of agency is linked to specific cognitive and social orientations. Independent thinking, creativity, teamwork, competence, and willingness to solve problems are categories that describe cognitive agency. Within the context of Polish educational traditions, a key question is how teacher's actions support the development of children's cognitive agency. Rigid patterns of thinking and behaviour that are imposed on children in school, particularly in early childhood education (Dąbrowski, 2008; Kalinowska, 2019; Klus-Stańska & Nowicka, 2014; Nowicka, 2010), may limit and hinder the development of autonomous ways of perceiving and understanding the world (Aksman, 2010).

The educational significance of student agency is increasingly recognized. According to Schoon, agency is not a personality trait, but a process whose dynamic and relational nature is shaped through an individual's interactions with the social context (Schoon, 2018). The development of agency begins in the early years of life. Children learn to understand other people's intentions, which reinforces the development of a sense of self-worth. Self-worth is an important component of the sense of agency (Woodward, 2009). The development of agency is a relational process that involves interactions with family members, peers, and teachers in the course of education (Schoon, 2018).

Responsibility and autonomy are inherent aspects of agency. For these aspects to evolve, individuals must be able to influence their surroundings by recognizing that their actions are effective and that they can exert control over their circumstances. However, boundary-setting is an important part of that process because individuals can exercise their influence only within certain limits (Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, 2007).

The *OECD Learning Compass 2030* project sets out the vision for the future of education and skills, and emphasizes the significance of student agency. Student autonomy is also described as taking responsibility for their own learning, identifying and shaping their educational pathways, fostering positive change in their environment, and enhancing well-being through the development of these capacities (OECD, 2025). In the context of student activity, "it's about acting rather than being acted upon; shaping rather than being shaped; and making responsible decisions and choices rather than accepting those determined by others" (OECD, 2019, p. 13).

Agency in Early Childhood Education – Selected Assumptions and Criticism

Early childhood education has specific aims and is grounded in assumptions that support their achievement. According to Klus-Stańska, this is an important period for identity formation and knowledge integration, during which children also acquire the conceptual and cognitive foundations that will guide their thinking and knowledge in later life (Klus-Stańska, 2014). However, in recent years, numerous researchers have identified problems that arise in early childhood education. Some have even argued that in many aspects, the quality of education is poor at this stage of formal schooling. The article discusses several of these criticisms, which are closely related to the development of student agency.

Many critical remarks target teaching practices that do not foster cognitive independence, or even constrain students' potential. Sowińska highlighted that some teachers do not accept opposing views and frequently belittle their students. Her study demonstrated that only 14% of teachers employed a partnership approach in their classroom practice (Sowińska, 2011). A large-scale study conducted by Dąbrowski and colleagues, revealed that early childhood education teachers adopt diverse attitudes toward students, ranging from negative, through formal, to positive. They surveyed 300 teachers and found a negative correlation between the practices used by teachers with a pessimistic mindset and certain student outcomes, and a positive correlation between the practices used by teachers with a positive mindset, in particular those that promoted student independence (Dąbrowski *et al*., 2008). The lack of faith in students' potential can be a self-fulfilling prophecy that limits their achievements, and the oversimplified content of textbooks and teachers' cognitive expectations — as highlighted by some researchers (Klus-Stańska & Nowicka, 2014) — only exacerbates the problem. At this stage of education, students are socialized in a way that favours controlling intervention by the teacher and rewarding only those students who conform to the imposed behavioural model. (Nowicka, 2010). Some researchers have also pointed to the fragmentation of knowledge, which is not only stripped of its systemic nature but is further divided into the absurd categories of "school" and "out-of-school" knowledge, thereby fostering limited patterns of thinking both during formal education and later in life (Kalinowska, 2015). In early childhood education, teacher-student relations are characterized by a high degree of directiveness and behaviourist assumptions that shape the teacher's actions. The teachers act in the spirit of a given theory, even though they are not aware of it (Klus-Stańska, 2006). In consequence, the teacher is unable to redefine the reality of schooling and the significance of his or her actions (Klus-Stańska, 2006).

Methodological Assumptions

The development of agency among the youngest students is not as frequently observed as would be desired. Research in early primary classrooms has shown that teachers tend to limit children's independence by directing almost every aspect of their activity. Observing children who displayed autonomy and responsibility prompted a closer examination of their everyday classroom life.

The study followed an interpretative qualitative approach (Sławecki, 2012). The aim of the study was to reconstruct the mechanisms that foster the development of student agency and are activated through the teacher's practices. The teacher's and the students' actions must take the form of regular patterns that are closely linked to their everyday experiences. Drawing on Krzychała's distinction between two categories of knowledge in everyday school practice — knowledge "about" action (communicative knowledge) and knowledge "in" action (conjunctive knowledge) — the present study focused on the latter. The key task was to capture how what happens at school actually unfolds (Krzychała, 2010). The main emphasis was on activities that could potentially support the development of student agency.

The study examined the teacher's modes of interacting with students, the organization of the lesson, and the quality of the tasks assigned to students. The research problem was formulated as follows: How does the teacher foster student agency in the classroom?

The classroom for the study was selected based on the researcher's previous contacts and observations. Several months earlier, the researcher had participated in a study involving observations of mathematics lessons in various classes. The lesson plans followed the constructivist approach, and the topics discussed clearly extended beyond the scope of the early primary school curriculum. In one class, students' behaviour differed markedly from that observed in other classrooms. These students demonstrated a mature approach toward their assignments, possessed debating skills, and showed sensitivity in their interactions with peers. These observations prompted the researcher to examine this class in greater detail. Therefore, purposive sampling was used, as the characteristics of interest to the researcher were strongly present in this class (Flick, 2012). At the next stage of research planning, all participants consented to the video recording of the observed lessons. Each lesson was video recorded in a way that captured the teacher's behaviours and the students' reactions. The dialogues cited in this article were transcribed directly from the recorded materials. All statements were translated by the author.

The study employed an ethnographic approach and was conducted in the natural, everyday classroom environment, considering that the aim of ethnography is to gain a deep understanding of the culture of the field, understood as a set of patterns and processes that shape people's ways of life (Kostera & Krzyworzeka, 2012). During

the observations, the researcher sat at the back of the classroom and did not take part in the lessons. The participants were aware of the researcher's identity; therefore, the observations met the criteria of overt, ethnographic, passive participant observation described by the cited authors (Kostera & Krzyworzeka, 2012). The researcher sought to achieve a deep understanding of the local context from an interpretative perspective.

The researcher observed a total of 22 mathematics and Polish language lessons. The lessons were recorded, and the researcher took field notes during each observation (Gibbs, 2011).

The collected material was subjected to qualitative analysis, during which categories were identified. Elements of situations and dialogues belonging to the same category — defined as the same phenomenon, idea, explanation, or activity (Gibbs, 2011) — were located in the transcripts. The categories that emerged from the data were used to develop analytical codes that incorporated the researcher's interpretation (Gibbs, 2011).

Teacher's Activities – Analysis of the Collected Data

The analysis of the collected data supported the identification of two areas in which student agency was developed: social, and cognitive. Despite this distinction, these areas could not be separated in a strictly dichotomous manner because they often showed substantial overlap. However, the purpose of this distinction was to generate detailed and deep insights about the teacher's activities and the students' responses. In the presented transcripts of classroom interactions, children's names are given using only the initial of their first name.

Teaching Practices – Social Agency

The social dimension of student agency is rooted in the specific cultural context of the surrounding environment. Organizational and relational teaching practices can support the students' autonomy and independence, but they can also constrain them. The activities that significantly promote the development of the students' sense of agency were identified in the observed classroom. The organization of students' time in the classroom and students' communication with the teacher and with peers appear to be most important factors.

Organization of Students' Time in the Classroom

Students Can Use Various Objects in the Classroom without Asking the Teacher's Permission. The described classroom was equipped with cupboards with closed doors and many open storage containers and boxes containing various types of building blocks (Numicon blocks, cube blocks, Lego blocks), balls, and other objects. Different types of pencils, crayons, paper, bowls, and other supplies were stored in the cupboards

with doors. There was also a bookshelf that could be used by the students for quiet reading. The school-owned tablets were stored and charged in a cabinet that was the only locked piece of furniture in the classroom. The remaining objects were freely available to the students. The observer did not record any situations in which a student asked the teacher's permission to use a specific object. It was up to students to decide when and how to use different objects. The children were also free to choose and exchange books and magazines during the daily 15-minute quiet reading time. The teacher also read a book during the quiet reading period. Students could approach the teacher, or the teacher would go to anyone who raised their hand. The classroom was quiet, and all participants respected each other's work.

Regular Small-Group Work. In the observed classroom, students worked in small groups on a daily basis. The students were seated in groups during all observed lessons. They also worked in pairs if that was the teacher's intention. The students were free to choose their seats, or they would take the seat indicated by the teacher, who always explained her choice. If an argument broke out between students, the teacher listened to both sides and always encouraged them to reach an agreement. However, children rarely argued or complained. The researcher observed one situation in which a student pointed out that a classmate had changed his seat. Student [speaking quietly to the teacher]: "Can M. sit over there?" Teacher [looks at M. are replies quietly]: "I will ask him to be quiet if he talks too loudly. It will be his decision."

During the class, the teacher often used phrases such as "you have to reach an agreement," "work it out," and "think it through." She encouraged the students to resolve all disputes without the teacher's involvement. She did not ask the students how they resolved an argument.

Rules for Conduct in the Classroom. The students established six rules of conduct for the classroom setting. All of the rules were positively framed and non-punitive: "I take good care of classroom equipment," "I raise my hand if I want to say something," "I do not run in the classroom," "I work to the best of my ability," "I play peacefully," "I help classmates in need." These rules were meaningful to the children and helped regulate their behaviour. Two boys started running in the classroom during a break. The teacher called the boys to her desk and asked them if they remembered the rules. The boys looked at the board with the rules and agreed that they were not allowed to run in the classroom. It appears that in each case, the students demonstrated an understanding of the teacher's response to their behaviour. Instead of complying with the teacher's request, they adjusted their behaviour to comply with the rules.

The organization of classroom work was also codified in many other situations. There were different types of breaks with different names (such as a meal break). The students could request to watch a music video during the break. A list of such proposals had been prepared earlier, and when a student came forward with a request,

a random option was drawn from the list. The teacher also consistently used random selection whenever there was no clear situational basis for selecting one interested student over another. For example, lots were drawn during the organization of a classroom shop activity, when the number of students who wanted to be vendors exceeded the number of available roles. The teacher quickly prepared eleven matchsticks, six of which had no heads, for students who wanted to play vendors. Students who drew headless matchsticks were assigned the vendor roles. The researcher observed that students who did not draw headless matchsticks were not upset. It seems that the young students found it easier to accept a random draw than the teacher's decision. During the observations, the teacher never selected some students arbitrarily while ignoring others.

The observations also revealed that the teacher had a high degree of confidence in the students' behaviour and independence. Outdoor play and the choice of game were largely regulated by the children's self-discipline; the children organized their playtime and the rules of the game on their own.

In the organization of daily classroom routines, the teacher often assumed the same status as the students. For example, she read a book during the quiet reading time and took her turn as the designated classroom helper. Student [addresses the teacher]: "But B. is absent today." Teacher [gives information]: "But it's my turn to be the classroom helper today."

Use of Student-Generated Work in Class. Children's work was displayed on several boards in the classroom. Most of student-generated materials were used during lessons. These included calendars designed to serve a practical purpose, with their aesthetic appeal playing only a secondary role. On several occasions during the observations, groups of students would check a date in the calendar and discuss the event scheduled on that date.

The windowsills and the tops of the cupboards were packed with models constructed by the students. The classroom also featured a model of a human skeleton built by the students. The way the students moved around in the classroom and made use of the materials indicated that they were very familiar with the space and felt comfortable in it.

Communication with Students

The study also revealed that the type of communication initiated by both the teacher and the students plays an important role in the classroom.

Polite Expressions. The teacher consistently used polite language. In her communication with the students, she frequently used expressions such as "please," "excuse me," or "may I…?" She also made every attempt to respect each child's personal space and physical boundaries. During the observations, the teacher never made spontaneous gestures such as stroking a child's head, touching, or hugging a student. During

lessons, the teacher always sought the student's permission whenever physical contact was required. Teacher: "S., can I take a test measurement? Can I measure your head circumference?"

The teacher would thank students for doing their work at each stage of the lesson. She was also respectful of every student's work. When she noticed that she was interrupting something a student was doing, she said: "A. [name-diminutive], you're counting, sorry." The tone of her voice was accepting, non-patronizing, curious, and attentive.

The teacher spoke in a calm and accepting voice during each observation. Even when addressing individual students to get their attention, her remarks were never critical or patronizing. During a lesson, the teacher's tone of voice often conveyed curiosity and attention. She never addressed the students in an impatient or raised voice. The teacher often spoke in a soft, but calm voice when trying to get the children's attention.

Other Forms of Communication. The teacher rarely made comments during periods of free activity (during classroom breaks, independent work, or group work). She did not discipline the children by addressing the entire class. If a problem needed to be addressed, the teacher would approach a student and speak quietly, usually saying the student's name in a gentle, requesting tone. She respected the students' right to privacy and did not admonish them in front of the class. However, she did not disregard the children's remarks. The following transcript is a good example of the above. The teacher wrote the name S. and the student's head measurement on the blackboard. There were two students named S. in the class. Student: "But we won't know which S. you have in mind." Teacher: "Very well, I'll add the letter B. [initial of the student's last name]."

All children saw which student was being measured; therefore, the teacher could have ignored the remark and could have ruled arbitrarily that the student's identity was obvious. However, she did not undermine the validity of the children's remarks. The teacher consistently listened to what each child had to say. The students raised their hands if they wanted to answer a teacher's question. The teacher did not choose a particular student, but allowed each willing child to speak. This may explain why the researcher did not observe behaviours that are common in other schools or preschools, where children who want to answer often call out "Me, me!" or practically jump out of their seats. The students in the observed classroom were aware that they could speak whenever they wished to.

During the observations, the teacher never commented on the children's behaviour. For example, in many schools, student tardiness prompts more or less critical remarks from the teacher. In the observed classroom, tardiness was treated as unproblematic, despite the fact that the teacher had to make an extra effort to explain a task to the student who was late. When the researcher expressed surprise at the teacher's attitude, she

replied: “It’s not the children’s fault.” The teacher recognized that the students were not responsible for the circumstances created by adults or their behaviours.

During her interactions with the students, the teacher never blamed the children for incidents involving the teacher and a student. For example, when she accidentally bumped the foot of a student who had stretched it out past the desk, she apologized without commenting on the student’s behaviour. During the observations, the teacher never attempted to shift the blame for these types of incidents onto a student. Instead, she was always the one to apologize, which attests to her high standard of personal conduct.

Interaction Climate. The climate of classroom interactions was shaped by the teacher’s responses to instructional demands or the students’ behaviour, as illustrated by the example below.

When checking and returning worksheets, the teacher noticed that a few were missing and asked one of the students to hand in her worksheet. Student [justifying herself]: “But I did hand it in.” Teacher: “But I checked everything, E. [name-diminutive], and I don’t have yours. I could have misplaced it, but please check at home.” Student: “We had math yesterday, and I’m still not sure if I got all the answers right.” Teacher [friendly]: “Do you know what? Come and see me during the break because I finished marking your work only yesterday.”

During the observations, the teacher answered every question and attempted to address the children’s requests and remarks as they arose. She often smiled when students proposed creative solutions to a problem, even if they were incorrect. The teacher never interrupted the students’ work with loud announcements but would instead approach a student and speak quietly if needed. Students who arrived late for the quiet reading period also showed respect for their classmates. They did not ask questions in a loud voice and did not initiate conversations.

The teacher emphasized the importance of mutual listening as an important element of classroom communication. If a child spoke too quietly, the teacher asked him/her to repeat the statement so it could be heard, as each contribution was valued. The teacher did not engage in one-to-one interactions if other students were not involved in the exchange.

The teacher also accommodated the students’ preferred working style. When one of the groups chose to complete their assignment on the floor, the teacher — interested in their activity — knelt down beside them, then sat on the floor, and engaged in a brief conversation.

During lessons, students raised their hands for various reasons — for example, to speak or to indicate that they had finished their task. However, these gestures were not meant to discipline the students but to organize their work. A raised hand was merely a signal for the teacher.

The students' ability to empathize with their classmates contributed to a unique interaction climate. When one student lightly hit her head when working on a task, the researcher expected other children to laugh or comment. Instead, the students responded with a collective "ouch," signalling shared concern. This empathetic reaction is often encountered in adults who can see and resonate with another person's pain.

Conducting Negotiations. In some cases, the children negotiated with the teacher — for example, when arguing for a change in their work groups. The teacher agreed, thereby reinforcing their independence. In another situation, several students made a request while individually preparing a short note on storks. Student: "We want our song." Several students: "Yes, yes." Teacher [laughing]: "All right, but first I'd like you to read and discuss the text. Fifteen minutes will fly by, and then I'll play your song." The teacher delivered on her promise. In yet another situation, children made actual purchases in a shop organized in the classroom by the teacher (the shop offered small items donated by the parents). The researcher figured out that such experiments had been regularly implemented in the class since the first grade. The students paid for their purchases with Numicon building blocks, and the accepted currency was Nufcoin (NU). The teacher decided to give each student 20 NU. The children protested, requested more money, and presented various arguments to support their claims. Teacher: "I'm not giving you 25 NU. Why do you think you need that much?" Student 1: "We should buy everything to make room for new items next year." Teacher: "A stock clearance sale. OK." Student 2: "But I want 20." Teacher: "Why do you want 20?" Student 2: "We got 15 last time, so it should be more now." Student 3: "I think we should get 25, so that we can buy more." Teacher: "I understand your arguments, but I can't give you that much. 20 is all I can give." Teacher: "Last time, you still had change from the previous shop." Student 4: "Are we getting change today?" Teacher: "No, because it's the last shop of the year." Teacher: "Tell you what… I didn't want to give you 25, but K. said something important. You won't be getting change today, so I think that 25 is fair. Your arguments made sense."

At the beginning of the discussion, the teacher clearly wanted to convince the students that a spending budget of 20 NU was sufficient. However, she changed her mind because she adopted a flexible approach and listened to the children's arguments. As a result, the children engaged in an authentic discussion and a negotiation process that ultimately shifted the outcome in their favour.

Patient Acceptance of Children's Extended Response Time. The researcher made several very interesting observations about how the students responded to the teacher's requests. The teacher did not expect immediate compliance; instead, she allowed the children to follow her requests at their own pace. A lesson would begin when the teacher said quietly: "Please take your seats now. Good morning." The children took a while to clear away the things they had been using before the lesson. The teacher

did not hurry them and did not repeat her request. One student returned the building blocks to the drawer calmly and relatively slowly, taking more time than the others. The teacher's only response was [gentle voice, name-diminutive]: "K., are you managing alright?"

The teacher respected the students' individual needs. During one lesson, a boy took out a stuffed toy and played with it in his hand. A few moments later, he returned to his work without any prompting. In the meantime, other children were busy solving a problem, and the whole episode appeared perfectly ordinary and commonplace.

Teaching Practices – Cognitive Agency

The cognitive aspect of agency is naturally associated with the climate of classroom interactions. It appears that the cognitive and social domains not only overlap, but also reinforce each other in fostering the development of a child's agency. By encouraging the students to solve mathematical problems or formulate personal hypotheses, teachers not only promote intellectual independence, but also create space to reflect on classroom discipline and the processes through which peer relations are formed. Group work on an open problem engages all students because it eliminates the fear of being judged. It empowers students to independently adopt a given strategy, teaches them to construct arguments, and enables debate without exposing them to negative evaluative feedback.

The observed classroom had a particularly interesting cognitive climate. Although the study concerned an early stage of schooling, situations promoting intellectual freedom were predominant, and the teacher used the following strategies to build dialogue with the students.

Frequent Presentation of Problems to Students. The teacher consistently proposed tasks that required the students to develop their own thinking strategies and arguments. She asked for the students' opinions concerning their actions and choices. Teacher: "Do you think such measurements are worthwhile?"

Students as Experts. During one lesson, the students worked in pairs to construct problem-solving tasks. Next, the willing pairs presented their tasks to the class, and the problems were solved in small groups. The authors of the task acted as experts and advisers and answered their classmates' questions. The teacher did not intervene and did not evaluate the offered support.

Spontaneous Use of Students' Ideas. Problem questions appeared not only as the main task to be solved, but also as auxiliary questions arising spontaneously from classroom situations. During a mathematics class, the students were tasked with designing the shape of an animal enclosure with a perimeter of 24 units on a square grid. All solutions were then presented to the group. The designed enclosures had the shape of various polygons. Suddenly, one of the students raised his hand. Student: "This segment times will be a square." Teacher: "All right M., come up to the blackboard

and tell us about your idea." Student [walks up to the blackboard and writes]: "1 m x 1 m." Student: "That makes one square meter." Teacher [confirming]: "Yes, you are right. That makes one square meter. I have a question for all of you – does every enclosure have the same number of squares?" The teacher's question followed directly from the student's idea and was framed in a way that matched the students' cognitive abilities. Highlighting that the shape of a polygon determines the number of unit squares was an important geometric observation. Such intended and unintended, spontaneous problems formed the basis of classroom work, particularly during mathematics lessons.

Curiosity and Appreciation for Students' Ideas. The teacher supported the students' work, often using words such as "extraordinary" or "genius." During lessons, the students' attempts to explain or justify their answers were met with genuine interest from the teacher. Teacher: "What surprised you, what did you find out?" Student: "That storks can't sing." Teacher: "Excellent, T., that's very interesting."

Students' Cognitive Decision-Making. During one lesson, the students were tasked with writing a brief note about storks. First, they watched a nest with young storks, and then they read a text about storks. When asking the students to write the note, the teacher suggested that they could use their tablets to get more information. Some students used their tablets, whereas others decided that they had acquired enough information. The teacher encouraged the children to explore, prompting them to look for information that was new and interesting.

During the observations, the teacher naturally encouraged the students to make their own decisions about how to approach a problem. At one point, the children became interested in the circumference of a circle. The teacher asked them for their ideas on how to calculate it. Most suggestions involved measurement. Through their own investigations, the students discovered that a circle with a circumference of 24 m had a radius of 4 m. This was an impressively accurate approximation of the relationship between radius and circumference. The teacher had a clear preference for educational practices that did not demand "learning," but experiencing. The thinking processes activated at that moment formed the basis for knowledge construction.

Referencing Students' Personal Knowledge. During another lesson, the students measured the circumference of their heads and used the word "around" when reporting the results. The teacher asked all children who raised their hands to present the results. The students gave the results in centimetres, specifying either "exactly" or "around." The teacher asked each student which of the two applied to their measurement and then, with interest, began a discussion. Teacher: "So, what does 'around' mean?" Student 1: "Not equal but more or less." Teacher [repeats with approval]: "More or less. L., would you like to add anything else?" Student 2: "For me, 'around' means that I'm 50% sure of my answer." Teacher [smiling]: "All right, I understand." Student 3: "'Around' means that it's not certain, that it can be something else." Teacher: "OK." Student 4: "You

think that this could be the result, but you don't really know for sure." Student 5: "You say 'around' when you don't feel like giving the exact number." Teacher: "OK. A.?" Student 6: "'Around' is like a hypothesis." Teacher: "Like when we conduct experiments and formulate a hypothesis? What do you think, K.?" Student 7: "Yes." Teacher: "OK."

The teacher did not correct or judge the students' answers and acknowledged them without commentary. She often asked: "Does anyone agree or disagree? Why?" The students gave different answers, but the teacher never gave any indication that some responses were better (more correct) than others. She only asked the students to explain their reasoning. Some students noticed an error while presenting their arguments, and changed their minds.

Teacher's Emphasis on Success Rather than Error. In the cognitive climate created by the teacher, the emphasis was on students' successes. Their ways of thinking and acting were validated and met with genuine interest or even admiration. This type of support was evident even when the teacher was marking the students' spelling tests. She underlined all the words that were spelled correctly. As a result, students immediately saw how much they were capable of, because the underlined words far outnumbered the remaining ones.

In turn, errors were regarded as natural components of the learning process. During a break, a group of students were talking about an upcoming event, using self-made calendars as a reference. One of the boys suddenly noticed that one of the calendars was missing a date. The children informed the teacher, and some of them argued that the author (they mentioned the student's name) had made a mistake. The teacher checked the calendar, corrected the dates, but did not allow the children to comment. She said that errors were normal, and she praised the students for spotting the mistake.

A climate of independent action and thinking undoubtedly laid the foundation for the development of cognitive agency in the observed classroom. The young students clearly trusted their ideas and treated them seriously.

Conclusion

An analysis of the research results indicates that the teacher's practices created a cohesive system that fostered the development of students' agency. These practices were reflected in the small everyday interactions with the children, which formed a mechanism for fostering agency. In this way, by interacting and collaborating with others, children acquire a broader range of skills, attitudes, and experiences enabling autonomy. This process was facilitated by shared values, goals, and expectations, and it highlights the reciprocal processes between the learner and significant others (Schoon, 2018). The observed classroom seemed to thrive on a sense of community,

in which the teacher was "with" the children rather than "above" them. Children received greater validation for their ideas and actions through spontaneous dialogue and participation in classroom activities than through formal grading. Most importantly, the teacher prioritized dialogue over instruction and moralizing. She had a genuine interest in the students as thinking human beings, rather than simply as her wards, which elevated these interactions to an entirely different level. She instilled confidence in her students and encouraged them to trust their choices. The organization of class work in small groups also promoted problem solving, discussion, and independent thinking (Gorzeńska & Radanowicz, 2019).

The teacher also supported the development of children's agency by embracing their childlike nature, including the full spectrum of their behaviours, problems, and needs. The students perceived her quiet support as a natural extension of their relationship that did not position them on the "other side" as those who lack knowledge. The teacher fostered a sense of competence in her students, but also showed them that their ideas may require small adjustments. Her practices embodied deep respect for children, trust in their capacities, and genuine interest in their personalities, minds, and abilities.

The most important processes unfolded within seemingly insignificant everyday interactions. Perhaps this is why they often go unnoticed by many teachers, parents, and even school principals. The teacher was unaware of her practices and was sometimes surprised by the researcher's observations and reflections.

These observations represent only one possible interpretation of the collected data. However, this interpretation highlights how difficult it is to capture and illustrate the ways in which the educational practices in the observed classroom differ from the traditional approaches found in many Polish early-primary classrooms. Perhaps the genuine development of children's agency calls for change not in the curriculum, but in a completely different domain. What is needed is a re-evaluation of the teacher's personal beliefs concerning who the child is, what the teacher's role in the educational process should be, and what it means to respect a child. Previous research has also shown that the youngest students have difficulty explaining what it means to respect a child, but they have no difficulty defining respect for the teacher (Kalinowska, 2024). Students behaved differently in the observed classroom. The respect they are shown teaches them to respect one another. Their behaviour is well described by the subjective responsibility model developed by Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz. The described classroom practices primarily reflect the aspects of subjective (autonomous) responsibility rather than formal responsibility, which the author associates with subordination (Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, 2007).

Children learn by experiencing phenomena first-hand. According to Brzezińska, development is the outcome of the exchange between an individual and his or her surroundings, particularly between the individual and other people (Brzezińska, 2010). Polite behaviour does not develop because teachers demand the use of "magic words" such

as "please," "thank you," "excuse me," and "I'm sorry," but because children themselves are treated with courtesy. Students must experience such treatment themselves in order to treat others with respect; they need to experience social reciprocity. Responsibility and independence develop only when children practice them from a young age. A sense of agency likewise develops only when it is experienced on a daily basis.

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