

# A school head teacher in a teacher's perspective - or how teachers perceive head teachers

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*You have to love your people more than you love your position.<sup>5</sup>*

## **Abstract**

There are numerous ways of describing and understanding the role of school headteachers. One of the most important points of view is that of teachers. Their perception, understanding and expectations towards school heads create an important basis for all processes of educational management and leadership in schools and can decide as to their effectiveness. This is why it is important to describe the understanding of school headteachers' role from that perspective. This paper presents the results of small-scale research carried out with the participation of teachers from Polish schools. The image of school head qualities that is emerging from that research, showing both positive and negative elements, can be treated as a good basis for the development of school leaders competencies.

**Keywords:** headteacher, teachers, leadership, leadership competencies

## **Introduction**

Head teachers have always stirred up many emotions, both positive and negative ones. Who is a head teacher really? What duties does he/she have? What are his/her characteristics? What are the most common characteristics of head teachers? What are the least common characteristics of head teachers? Which characteristics of head teachers are the most important according to teachers? Do these characteristics help head teachers in their work or are they obstacles? What are the relations between the teachers' place of work and the choice of a head teacher's characteristics? How does a head teacher benefit from his/her position? Does a well functioning institution depend on its head teacher? If yes, then what influences this? If not, then on whom else does it depend? What influences it? All these questions and many more come to my mind when I think of head teachers. Who is a head teacher, really?

The paper consists of three parts.

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<sup>5</sup>John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership: Follow Them and People Will Follow You*. Wydawnictwo Studio EMKA, Warszawa 2008, p. 142..

Part one focuses on the many various tasks and roles performed by a head teacher. Part two presents my research methodology and the most interesting research results.

### ***The many aspects of a head teacher***

#### *A head teacher's tasks and roles*

A head teacher should be simultaneously a teacher, manager and organizer capable of providing creative and independent pedagogical supervision and developing remarkable concepts aiming at the improvement of an institution. Apart from the responsibility for the functioning of an educational institution and its employees, a head teacher's characteristics should comprise professional skills, the knowledge of work organization principles, experience, the knowledge of human psyche, the work environment and the code of ethics.

A head teacher should perform various functions and tasks, such as:

- cooperating with the school's or institution's supervising authorities and ensuring the transfer of information;

- organizing the institution's work in accordance with its statute, comprehensive educational plan and internal regulations, in cooperation with other teachers, pupils and parents;

- cooperating with the community;

- cooperating with schools, supervising authorities and parents with respect to the one-year obligatory pre-school preparation courses, compulsory education and the obligation to learn;

- keeping documentation of the teaching process in accordance with the educational law regulations;

- creating material conditions for the implementation of didactic, educational and tutelary tasks;

- cultivating the school's traditions;

- implementing activities aiming at the institution's development;

- developing the school's/ institution's pedagogical supervision plan, its implementation and documentation;

- inspecting didactic classes and other educational activities conducted by teachers as well as other activities ensuing from the institution's statute;

- creating a safe learning environment for children in and outside the school;

- creating conditions for pro-health activities;

- providing psychological and pedagogical assistance to pupils;

- providing social assistance to pupils in a difficult financial situation;

- collecting information concerning other teachers' work and evaluating their work or professional achievements;

- issuing administrative decisions;

- organizing the educational process in order to fully accomplish the kindergarten's/ school's/ institution's tasks;

- taking up preventive and educational measures in the school/ institution;

- analysing the results of promotion, tests, examinations, retake examinations and external examinations (this applies to schools only);

- diagnosing pupils' educational achievements;

- creating conditions for planning the school's/ institution's activities with consideration of pupils' educational needs;

- enabling the development of scholarly, sport and artistic skills of children/ pupils through a proper didactic approach and extra-curricular activities;

- integrating disabled pupils into the educational process;

- creating conditions for individual work and behaviour evaluation of pupils through teachers' didactic and educational activities;

- planning and organizing teacher board meetings and the school's/ institution's council meetings;

- complying with the competencies determined by the teacher board and the school's/ institution's council;

- implementing tasks compliant with the teacher board's and school council's resolutions;

- suspending the implementation of any un-

lawful resolutions made by the teacher board;

- executing orders and suggestions of the supervising authorities;

- implementing tasks indicated by the chief education officer in order to diagnose a particular problem in the school/institution.

In the Polish literature on the subject, the term “educational manager” is frequently used. What does it mean? It means a head teacher who can – on behalf of the school’s owner (a local government, social organization, natural person) create conditions and provide inspiration for a constructive search of new methods and forms of an institution’s educational and organizational activity, i.e. make independent and constructive decisions concerning the people he/she manages and the use of the school’s capital and material resources – and take responsibility for such decisions (Gawrecki, 2003).

In the Western European literature, on the other hand, the term “educational leadership” is deeply rooted, i.e. it is believed that a head teacher should be both an educational manager and an outstanding teacher.

The former and the latter should perform specific roles; the head teacher – manager should be:

- **A strategist** determining the direction of activities, the initiator of changes;
- **A manager** assigning tasks and coordinating their implementation;
- **A financial officer** responsible for financial matters;
- **An arbiter** settling and mediating in disputes;
- **A diplomat** promoting the school in the community and cooperating with various entities.

A head teacher - teacher should be:

- **A teacher** demonstrating mastery in didactic, educational and tutelary activities;
- **A mentor** supporting other employees’ professional development;
- **A counsellor** offering professional advice to pupils, parents and other employees;
- **An ambassador** upholding the teacher’s ethos and participating in various professional groups’ works;

- **An advocate** advocating educational interests in the community.

A head teacher – manager and a head teacher – leader are two different roles which are not mutually exclusive, though. The differences refer to their different tasks and skills. A leader is innovative and willing to change the former rules of conduct and habits, and his/her tasks comprise the determination of an ambitious and far-reaching objective as well as the activation of other employees in pursuit thereof, while a manager concentrates on managing implemented processes, on comparing results with objectives, and correcting any deviations.

In order for an organization to function effectively, both leadership and management are necessary, as the former is essential for introducing changes, while the latter – for achieving results systematically. Management and leadership together guarantee systematic changes, and leadership with management – the maintenance of a proper level of an organization’s compliance with its community.

What is leadership and what is management? Leadership, as it has already been stated, is most often defined as a process of influencing others in order to achieve an organization’s objectives jointly (Mazurkiewicz, 2012). Despite the many various definitions of leadership, four ways of its perception are the most frequent:

1. Leadership as a characteristic;
2. Leadership as a skill;
3. Leadership as a social relation;
4. Leadership as a social process.

With respect to leadership as a characteristic, it concentrates on a person’s individual traits, most frequently those connected with a person’s nature and predispositions.

With respect to leadership as a skill, emphasis is put on leadership skills. Leadership is understood here as an ability to involve others in the process of achieving an objective within a system or community.

In leadership as a social relation, emphasis is put on relations between leaders and their supporters.

And leadership as a social process implies a series of changes taking place in a specific period of time. Leadership consists in expressing a vision, influencing other people's achievements, building a strategy, encouraging people to cooperate as a team and providing an example as well as motivating others in their activities.

Such understanding of leadership is certainly not exhaustive, as there are many other interpretations of this term.

With regard to management, it comprises activities (such as planning, decision making, organizing, motivating, controlling) oriented towards an organization (human, financial, material, informational) and intended to achieve an organization's objectives in an effective and efficient manner.

Management is usually defined in terms of four functions:

- Planning – or determining an organization's objectives and the best method of achieving them.
- Organizing – or grouping activities and resources in a logical manner.
- Motivating – or leading people, which is the main element of relations between a superior and his/her employees.
- Controlling – or observing an organization's progress in the implementation of its objectives.

It is interesting that more and more authors of publications are unwilling to contrast leadership and management. Instead, they claim that leadership and management are inseparable despite the differences between them. These differences refer to the development of a programme, organizational work, work with people, and results.

With respect to the development of a programme, management's function is to plan and specify a budget and allocate resources, while leadership is responsible for the determination of directions and the creation of visions.

A difference can be observed in work with

people as well; in leadership, it is important to present a vision and convince people to share it, while in management, the important things are employing, staffing, giving orders and rewarding.

Organizational work differs too; management comprises planning of details, resolving problems, controlling, monitoring, while leadership focuses on motivating and inspiring, as well as helping people to take risks.

The results are different: change is the result of leadership, while order and consistent actions – of management.

John P. Kotter (1990) accurately characterizes the difference between leadership and management. He emphasises the need to maintain a balance between leadership and management, and furthermore presents a model showing probable effects of typical leadership – management arrangements, depending on the power of processes. He claims that an organization that succeeds in maintaining a balance between leadership and management can develop properly. According to him, strong leadership and strong management guarantee a well organized and motivated team that can be successful.

The conclusion is that it is best to combine leadership and management instead of separating them. It is worth remembering not to put special attention to either management or leadership, as this leads to errors.

### *Head teachers' characteristics, skills and managing styles*

As it has already been said, a head teacher should have managerial skills. Robert L. Katz divided these skills into technical skills, social skills, and conceptual skills.

Technical skills are those which are required in order to efficiently organize a school's current educational, administrative and economic activities. Social skills are manifested in interactions with school employees, parents, representatives of a local community, and pupils (Gawrecki, 2003).

Conceptual skills refer to the ability to make right decisions, analyse and resolve problems,

anticipate future events, deal with all organizational matters, balance risks related to the accomplishment of objectives, arrange problems in a hierarchy, etc. (Szczupaczyński, 1998).

Another vision of a head teacher is presented in Cz. Plewka and H. Bednarczyk's (2008) work; they claim that a good head teacher is one who:

- is distinguished by a unique individual style which does him/her credit;
- is dynamic and balanced;
- has a positive attitude to people;
- is a well-mannered person;
- takes his/her employees' problems seriously;
- continuously develops, i.e. increases his/her qualifications on a permanent basis;
- takes care of his/her appearance and reputation.

Now I intend to present the characteristics of a head teacher included in S. Tokarski's book entitled "Managing People" (1997). These characteristics have been selected in a questionnaire carried out among active head teachers. I present them in the order of their significance for the surveyed head teachers:

- Decision-making abilities;
- Leadership;
- Integrity;
- Enthusiasm;
- Imagination;
- Willingness to work hard;
- Analytical skills;
- Ability to understand others;
- Ability to identify opportunities;
- Ability to face difficult situations;
- Ability to adjust to changes promptly;
- Readiness to take risks;
- Resourcefulness;
- Ability to speak clearly;
- Mental acuity;
- Ability to administer effectively;
- Open-mindedness;
- Endurance;
- Readiness to work for many hours;
- Ambition;
- Consistency in pursuing objectives;
- Ability to write clearly;

- Curiosity;
- Ability to use numbers;
- Ability to think in an abstract way.

These characteristics have been selected by the head teachers themselves in the questionnaire; now let me present the characteristics of a leader. As I have already said, to be a good head teacher one has to be a manager and a leader as well. The characteristics I intend to discuss have been described by John C. Maxwell. They are the 21 characteristics of an effective leader:

- A strong character which should be continuously developed;
- Charisma, or an ability to attract people;
- Involvement; it is important not to forget the goal;
- Good communication skills; a leader has to be able to share his/ her knowledge, ideas and enthusiasm;
- Competency is a leader's ability to say, plan and do a particular thing in such a way that others know that you know how...
- Courage;
- Perceptiveness;
- Concentration;
- Generosity; according to the author, giving is the top level of life;
- Initiative, since success is related to activity;
- Ability to listen; a leader should listen to other people's voices;
- Passion; when a leader shows his/her passion to others, he/she usually arouses passion in others.
- Positive attitude;
- Problem solving;
- Good relations with others;
- Responsibility;
- Self-confidence;
- Self-discipline;
- Service to others, or putting other people first;
- Desire to develop; to lead others, you have to learn constantly;
- A vision to achieve only what you can see ahead ( Maxwell, 2008).

I will return to the characteristics, as they have been used as a determinant in my research concerning head teachers.

Apart from a head teacher's characteristics and skills, his/her management or leadership style is also important. A management or leadership style is the superior's way of behaviour with respect to his/her subordinates, which most frequently reflects his/her personality and beliefs concerning proper personnel management.

However, leadership style is often the result-ant of the superior's and his /her subordinates' personality traits as well as the hierarchy of the employee team.

Let me describe some selected leadership styles, according to two authors. Firstly, I will discuss leadership styles presented by R. Lippitt and R. K. White (1939): styles presented by R. Lippitt and R. K. White (1939):

1. **The authoritarian style** – the leader has all power and responsibility, makes decisions on his/her own, and determines tasks and the manner of their implementation without other people's involvement. One-directional communication, i.e. from the top to the bottom, takes place. Order and predictability are certainly the merits, but the absence of employees' initiative and independent thinking is a drawback.

2. **The democratic style** – the leader empowers others, but he/she is responsible for the task implementation, control measures and intervention which are to guarantee the accomplishment of the team's objectives. Subordinates have a lot of freedom with respect to task division and implementation in this style. Two-directional communication takes place: between the leader and his/her subordinates. Employees' involvement and their participation in the decision-making process are the merits, while a time-consuming manner of decision making is a drawback.

3. **The laissez-faire style** – the leader is in favour of broadly understood empowerment, leaving his/her subordinates complete freedom in making decisions concerning task division and implementation. Horizontal communication is dominant: between group members. The merit is that this style makes it possible to resolve certain problems without the leader's interference.

R. Likert (1981) presented different leadership styles; he distinguished:

1. **The oppressive-authoritarian style** – there is a limited information flow between the superior and his/her subordinates, the leader sets the objectives and checks the results. He/she motivates employees by means of penalties and threats. Absence of trust is characteristic.

2. **The paternalistic style** – limited cooperation between the leader and the other employees and the employees' limited possibilities of commenting on the leader's orders. Rewarding only loyal employees. Limited trust in employees.

3. **The consultative style** – a two-directional information flow, i.e. the leader is interested in the employees' problems, cooperation and trust, which are motivating factors for him/ her. The leader trusts the employees, asks their opinions, but makes final decisions on his/her own.

4. **The participating style** – considerable cooperation within the team, joint decision making; the employees feel co-responsible, which is a strong motivation for them. The leader has complete trust in the employees, which in fact leads to actual co-management.

### ***Presentation of the research method and its results***

Let me state the objective of my research once again: the presentation of a head teacher's characteristics and the perception of a head teacher by other teachers. I concentrated on the most important characteristics of a head teacher. My main research problem was the perception of a head teacher by other teachers. The specific research problems were as follows:

- What are the most common characteristics of head teachers?

- What are the least common characteristics of head teachers?

- Which characteristics of head teachers are the most important according to teachers?

- What are the relations between teachers' place of work and their choice of a head teacher's characteristics?

In my research, I used the diagnostic survey

method, a questionnaire technique and a survey questionnaire as a research tool. “The diagnostic survey method is a method of gathering knowledge of the structural and functional attributes and the dynamics of social phenomena, opinions and beliefs of selected communities, the intensification and directions of development of certain phenomena and all other phenomena not attributed to particular institutions – of educational importance – based on a specially selected group representing the general population in which such phenomenon occurs”.

Surveys comprise all kinds of social phenomena important for the educational process, as well as the social awareness, opinions and beliefs of certain communities, the growth of these phenomena, their tendencies and intensification. I mean all phenomena not attributed to particular institutions, but rather dispersed among a community. The objective of a survey is to detect such phenomena and to present their structural and functional attributes.

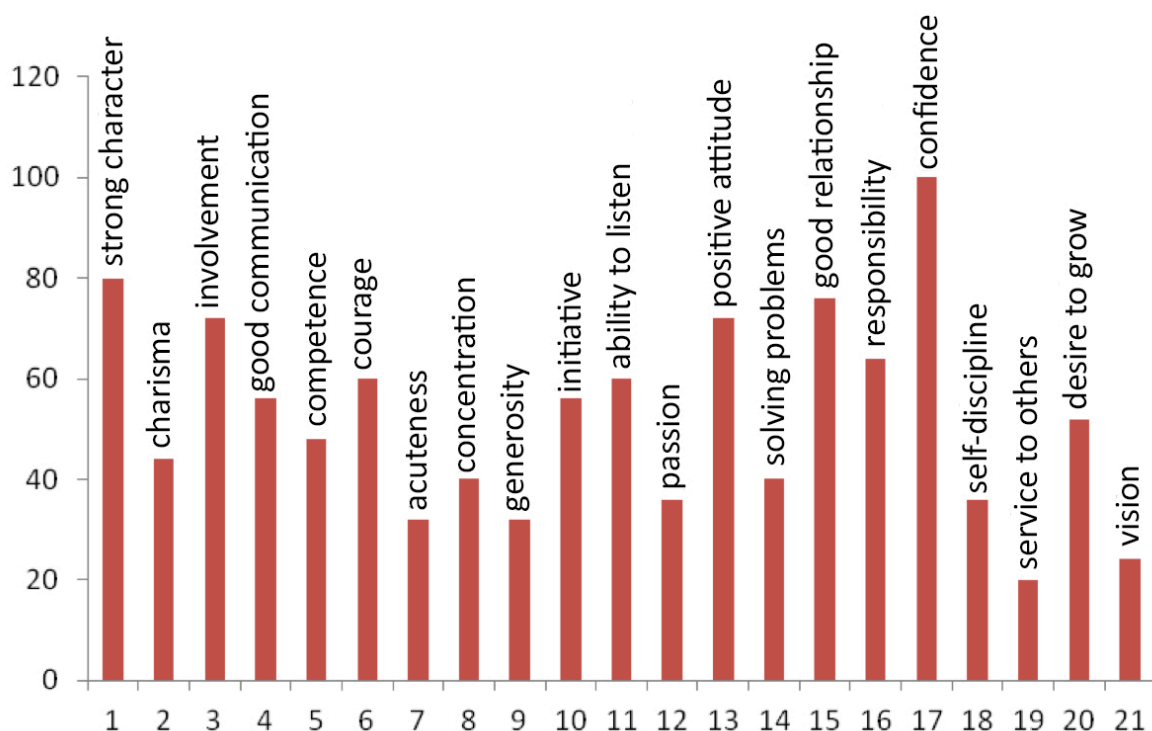
The techniques most frequently used in a diagnostic survey are an interview, a question-

naire, personal documents analysis, statistical techniques, etc. I used a survey questionnaire consisting of 5 questions. The answers to these questions were to present a head teacher’s characteristics as perceived by other teachers. They were also supposed to indicate the most important characteristics of head teachers according to other teachers. The questionnaire includes the 21 characteristics of a leader mentioned by John C. Maxwell in his “The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership. Follow Them and People Will Follow You”.

The survey was carried out among teachers in Małopolska, the majority of them being teachers in the city of Kraków. It was carried out in the end of April and at the beginning of May, 2014. The survey comprised 124 participants: 31 kindergarten teachers, 31 primary school teachers, 31 junior secondary school teachers and 31 secondary school teachers. There were both men and women among them.

The results are presented below (Diagram 1) The first diagram presents the characteristics attributed to head teachers by all the teachers.

**Diagram 1.** The characteristics of head teachers of educational institutions chosen by all teachers participating in the survey



Source: Own research

The most frequently mentioned characteristic is self-confidence. Let me mention the remaining characteristics in the order of their popularity: a strong character, good relations with other people, involvement, a positive attitude, responsibility, courage, and an ability to listen to others. They are followed by good communication skills and initiative, a desire to develop, competency, charisma, concentration and problem solving skills. The less frequently chosen characteristics included passion and self-discipline, perceptiveness and generosity, a vision and service to others.

The characteristics of head teachers most frequently chosen by other teachers include self-confidence, a strong character and good relations with other people. The majority of the surveyed teachers chose these characteristics. The least frequently chosen characteristics of head teachers, according to other teachers, are service to others, a vision, perceptiveness and generosity. The diagram presents these results.

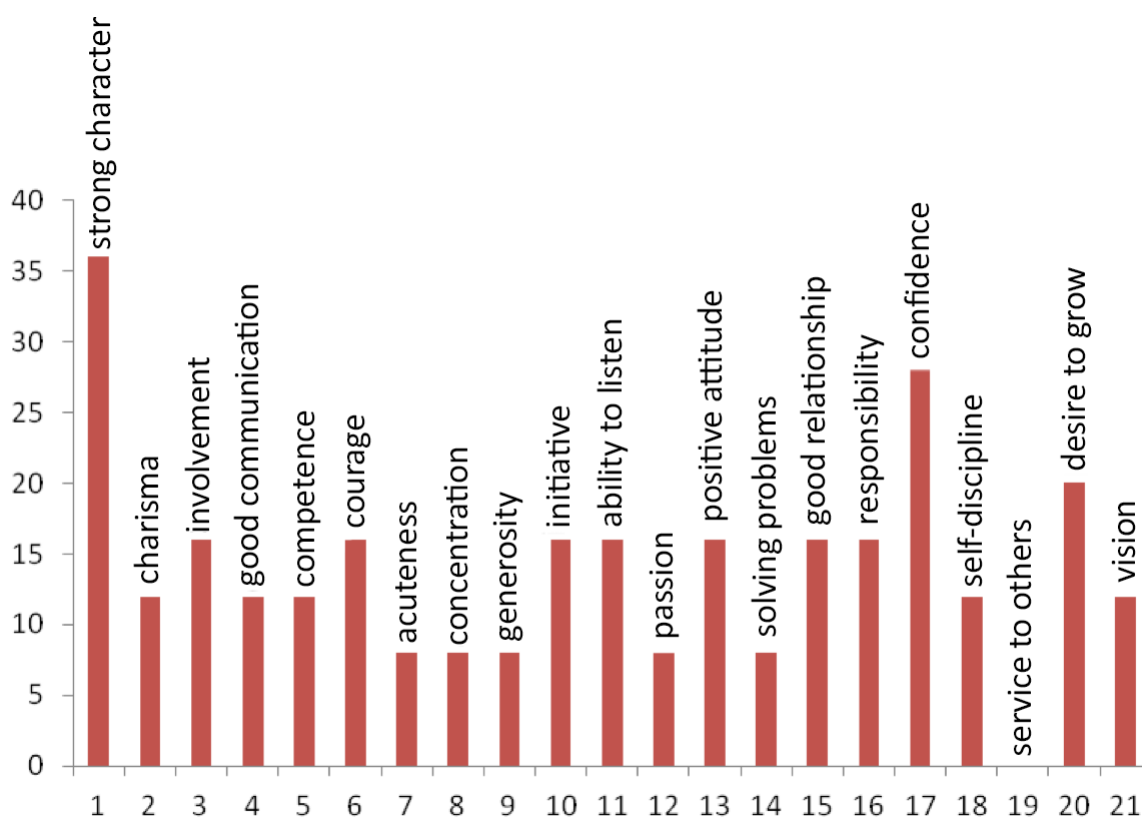
With regard to the answer to the question concerning the important characteristics of an

educational institution’s head teacher which are not included in the questionnaire, the teachers mentioned the following: decision-making skills, an ability to share their power and responsibility, an ability to admit to having made mistakes, an ability to think in an abstract manner, to understand other people, sincerity, truthfulness, resourcefulness, efficient administration skills, leadership, endurance, consistency, respect for others, open-mindedness, integrity, ambition, willingness to work hard, good manners, an ability to adjust to changes, enthusiasm, honesty, justice, an ability to identify opportunities, an ability to speak and write clearly, imagination, mental acuity, readiness to take risks, analytical skills, objectivity, trust in innovations, an ability to cooperate within a team, compliance with a code of ethics, an ability to motivate other teachers and parents.

According to the teachers, the ten most important characteristics of a head teacher are:

- Leadership;
- Responsibility;
- Good communication skills;

**Diagram 2.** The characteristics of head teachers chosen by the kindergarten teachers participating in the survey



Source: Own research



- Decision-making abilities;
- Involvement;
- Ability to listen to others;
- Desire to develop;
- Good relations with others;
- Charisma,
- Passion.

The remaining characteristics were chosen less frequently. Perceptiveness and generosity were not mentioned at all.

Let me now discuss the answers to the final question, i.e. What is the relation between a teacher’s place of work and his/her choice of a head teacher’s characteristics? The results are presented in the diagrams below (Diagram 2). The four diagrams show the answers provided by typical teachers from a particular institution. The institutions comprised a kindergarten, a primary school, a junior secondary school and secondary schools.

Let me start with the diagram concerning the kindergarten teachers and the characteristics of head teachers of these institutions. As it can be seen, the majority of head teachers here have

the following characteristics: a strong character, self-confidence and a desire to develop. These characteristics prevail. None of the surveyed teachers mentioned service for others as a head teacher’s characteristic.

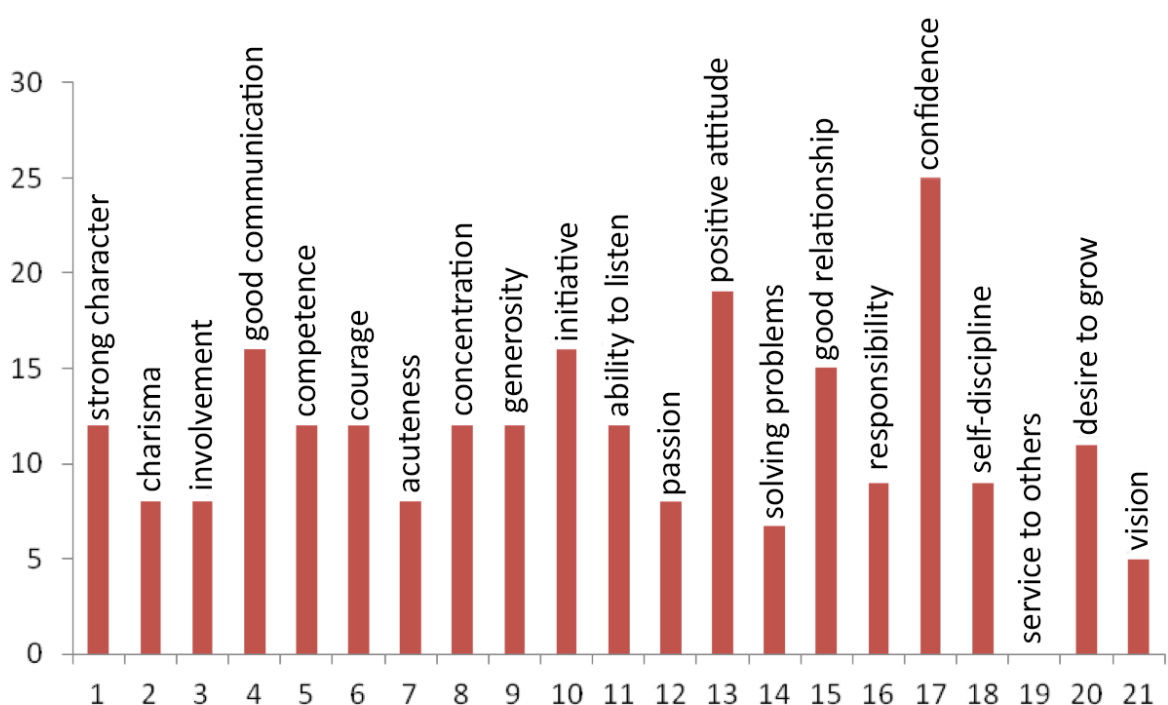
The primary school teachers’ choices are presented in the diagram below (Diagram 3).

Most of the teachers chose self-confidence, and then a positive attitude, initiative, and good communication skills; not a single teacher chose service to others.

Diagrams four and five present the characteristics chosen by the junior secondary school teachers and the secondary school teachers. The junior secondary school teachers chose the following characteristics: involvement, a positive attitude, problem solving, responsibility, self-confidence and good relations with other people; a vision was not mentioned at all.

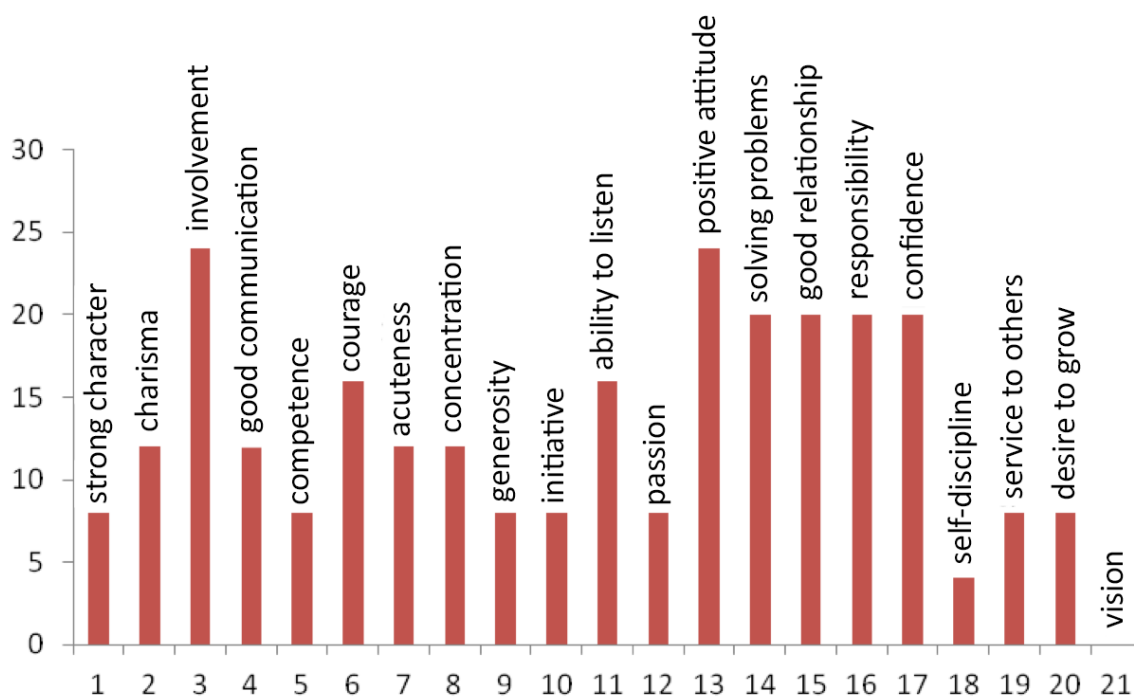
The secondary school teachers chose self-confidence, a strong character, involvement and good relations with other people. The least frequently chosen characteristics were perceptiveness, generosity and problem solving.

**Diagram 3.** The characteristics of head teachers chosen by the primary school teachers participating in the survey



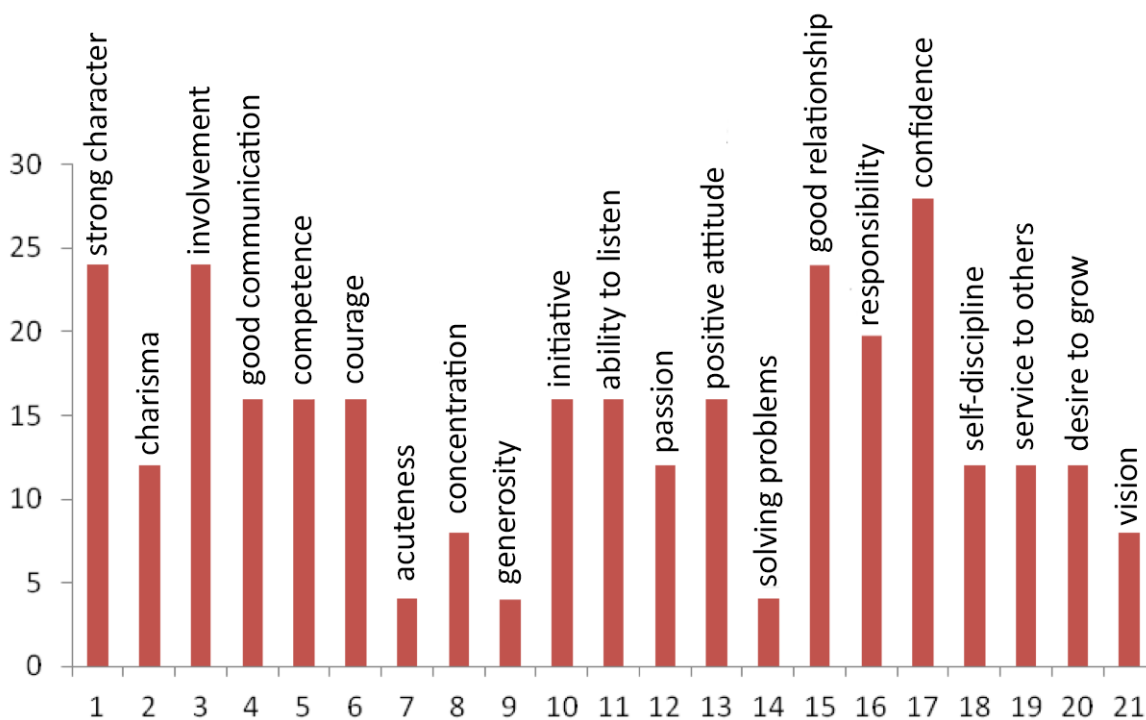
Source: Own research

**Diagram 4.** The characteristics of head teachers' chosen by the junior secondary school teachers participating in the survey.



Source: Own research

**Diagram 5.** The head teachers' characteristics chosen by secondary school teachers participating in the survey.



Source: Own research

## **Conclusion**

Summing up the survey, I would like to highlight the fact that in view of the choices made by all the surveyed teachers, head teachers are self-confident persons with a strong character, having good relations with other people, involved and having a positive attitude. Head teachers' passion, self-discipline, perceptiveness, generosity, vision and service to others were chosen the least frequently.

In the surveyed teachers' opinion, the most important characteristics of head teachers are self-confidence and a strong character, and the least frequently mentioned ones – a vision and service to others.

The teachers mentioned the following most important characteristics of head teachers in the order of their importance: leadership, responsibility, good communication skills, an ability to make decisions, involvement, an ability to listen to others, a desire to develop, good relations with other people, charisma, passion.

It is significant that some of head teachers' characteristics such as self-confidence and a strong character, which were mentioned quite often by the teachers, are not included among the characteristics above.

With respect to the type of institutions in which the surveyed teachers work, certain differences can be observed. The kindergarten teachers claim to have self-confident head teachers, with a strong character, who want to develop. But they do not have any vision and they do not serve others.

The primary school teachers claim they have head teachers who are self-confident, have a positive attitude, good communication skills and initiative, but little vision and little willingness to serve others. A vision and service to others are the two least popular characteristics, similarly to the opinions of the kindergarten teachers.

The junior secondary school teachers most frequently chose such characteristics as involvement, a positive attitude, problem solving, responsibility and self-confidence. They claimed that their head teachers did not possess

self-discipline, and in particular – a vision.

The secondary school teachers claimed that their head teachers were self-confident, involved, had a strong character, and good relations with other people. But perceptiveness, generosity and problem solving are the least frequently mentioned characteristics here. Regardless of the perception of head teachers by other teachers and the differences in such perception, the important thing is that head teachers have the same tasks and obligations despite the different characteristics they possess. It is the characteristics, though, that guarantee their success in their professional work. A head teacher should be dynamic, successful, balanced, with a positive attitude to people, friendly, cheerful, with a sense of humour, well-mannered and thoughtful of his/her employees. It is important for him/her to continuously develop and improve qualifications, as well as to have an individual style, a good reputation, and to be a mediagenic person. It is perhaps the most important for a head teacher to lead others, or to motivate and influence others to make them willing to change things.

A good leader is aware of the conditions in which he/she acts, is capable of managing changes in an organization and of understanding what is happening in the community in which he/she acts. A good leader should constantly be involved in the learning process, which allows him/ her to keep pace with changes by using diversified sources of knowledge. A leader can identify the strengths of his/her activities as well as the activities of people cooperating with him/her. Let me conclude with a statement of a great importance to me. Each leader is aware of his/her potential, tasks and of the influence he/she exerts on other people and organizations, and therefore, each leader takes responsibility for his/her actions as well as other people's actions – people cannot act and cooperate in a team without a leader.

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