

# Cooperation needed indeed?

## School Leaders' opinions.

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### **Abstract**

Cooperation is crucial in educational context. Erikson says that 'cooperation is the fundamental key of human development' (Erikson, 2013, pp. 26-27). Schools are treated as institutions responsible for preparing young people to be self-regulated and responsible human beings able to cooperate for the sake of their own development (Mazurkiewicz, 2014). Head teachers as school leaders initiate and organize these processes. Sennett thinks that cooperation requires the competences, especially social competences - dialogical competences (listening well to each other, finding common views, conflict management etc.) (Sennett, 2013).

The paper presents the results of research showing how school heads perceive their competencies that will be

taken as a starting point for designing proposals of new type of training for school leaders in Poland. More than 2800 principals of different types of schools were asked to assess their competences in six broad areas. The research aim of this paper is to analyze the perception of cooperation by the principals.

The research shows that competences related to cooperation are important for principals and they declare that they have them. We can conclude as well that cooperation with other entities is more important for principals of school located in smaller cities and in villages.

**Keywords:** cooperation, educational leadership, competences, principals, research

## Introduction

The current complex contemporary educational context increases the difficulty of leadership tasks. In order to be able to face expectations set for schools, educational leadership demands changes in theoretical approach and (mostly) in everyday practice. In multiple voices heard in the discourse of educational leadership, the need for cooperation and participatory leadership is particularly stressed but it could be said that the real transformation takes place when the necessity for the change is visible for practitioners, not only for researchers. This is why we have decided to take a closer look at leaders' mind-sets concerning the issue of cooperation.

### *Interactive leadership*

A democratic society requires democratic schools and the latter require democratic structures and processes. A democratic school requires democratic leadership. It is important to accept that education is a group investment, not an individual contract leading to the acquisition of a right to work or obtaining a degree which results in receiving higher wages. Education is an element of social life, especially of its public dimension. Although pessimistic visions of social development emphasise the collapse of a certain relational model, consisting of trust, cooperation and responsibility for the common good and order (Bauman, 2006) – that

specifically demanding approach, seeing education as a mechanism of social change, sets the direction which the educational leaders should follow: to work for the collective order and cooperation.

Bottery (2004) points out dangers which pose threats to civil society driven by the ideology of having and buying, where consumption has been taken to absurd levels, which the school not only does not oppose but participates in it. Educational leaders have to arrange values and objectives of school in a new hierarchy. There are numerous issues that may and should be discussed while talking about educational leadership. There are plenty of perspectives, theories, research and tasks. In this paper, we would like to focus only on one of the important areas - cooperation. One of the tasks of contemporary leaders is to show the members of the organisation that there are group objectives, which are worth working for, even while devoting part of the focus to individual needs. Without talking about what is important for everyone there will be no school and without an open communication process the educational process will not proceed.

The school needs modern leadership that supports cooperation and permanent communication with people, and needs leadership that effectively uses diverse actions, attitudes, behaviours and values present in every organisation. Leadership must be a process where actions are taken and situations which determine organisational initiatives are created, where others are empowered to act and relations between people are shaped.

Leadership can be truly understood only in a relational context. Theoretical

deliberations and practical requirements for school principals have brought, so far, more misunderstanding than support as they focus mainly on an individual and its predispositions and duties, and underestimate the role of the group. That is why it is worth stressing that even though there are many different ways of conceptualising leadership, its key components are always connected to cooperation and the influence of people on others, and appear only in the context of a group (Northouse, 2007).

Educational leaders share their power and encourage cooperation while helping their co-workers increase their self-esteem and potential. In the face of enormous numbers of new tasks and duties, sharing power is one of the most promising mechanisms of dealing with reality. It is important to re-define the principals' role into that of designers and creators of school culture allowing for the learning of all. Hoerr (2005) uses the concept of distributed intelligence, which implies that our intelligence cannot be limited to what is inside us but is also determined by the skill of using external resources.

Leadership involves the ability to build a team whose members cooperate and are orientated towards the achievement of objectives (Reinhartz & Beach, 2004) which were generated by the team from inside the institution. In this case, the leader is not understood in a traditional way. He or she does not come with a vision of changes and does not lead a procession showing heroically that what he or she suggests is possible. Leadership is about helping others to build self-esteem, to see and use their own potential and jointly develop a vision and strate-

gy of actions. Leadership in education is a long and difficult journey with many diversions, turning points and asking for directions. It is about connections.

Educational leaders must very often face a culture of fear (Palmer, 1998); doing so involves the necessity to question the traditional approach to interpersonal relations in a professional context. A culture of fear manifests itself in priorities and practices concentrated mainly on guaranteeing one's own safety by proving one's own usefulness and infallibility. It is closely connected with a problem, which is much wider than the stress experienced by a person being assessed; unfortunately, it is a derivative of what happens outside of the school. We will not escape the serious problem that is the crisis of interpersonal relations. It is the reason why social life suffers. Democracy does not depend only on the arrangements of the political system, manner of voting, control, human rights etc. Democracy is based above all on trust in others and on the belief that persons who take decisions on our behalf do that on the basis of sensible opinions and judgements (Meier, 2000). When that trust is missing the democratic system starts to be failing. The same applies to the school. It is absolutely essential to build trust and the sense of security in schools.

Education is about opening eyes and seeing for yourselves the world as it really is in all its complexity and then finding the "tools" and the strength to participate fully, even to change some of what you find (Ayers, 2000). Education is the process of releasing your potential, imagination, joy, energy; it is a process of releasing people, which will never be fair if it involves only a part of society. If we

dare say that teaching needs to ensure security, full involvement and the sense of identity among students, and when we agree that learning is a process of taking responsibility, then we also have to agree that it should involve everyone.

Nothing should restrain us from introducing changes that could make the teaching process an authentic and democratic dialogue between students and their teachers. The school that cultivates the dialogue is an alternative to the present educational system basically oriented towards systematic and reproductive collection of data. A dialogue in education is a sort of relation between persons who talk to each other. It is impossible to occur in a situation when there is one-way communication only. It is impossible to occur when we always try to avoid ambiguity either.

Development and change are difficult to design and to implement. Unfortunately, very often those who are responsible for implementing new reforms do not remember that every change is not only a structural or procedural intervention, but mainly a cultural one. Expecting immediate results and expressing frustration is a sign of lack of understanding of social processes. Every suggestion for change needs to take under consideration the level of awareness and preparation, the culture, the level of understanding of the system and also civil maturity, expectations, mental models, ambitions, infrastructure, finance and cultural software deciding about the style of interactions, hierarchy of values and customs in a particular environment.

### *Educational leadership and cooperation*

When we talk about educational leadership today two main aspects are especially important. First is concentrating leaders' efforts on learning, designing and creating learning situations and conditions (Marzano, Waters, McNulty, 2005; Hattie, 2011). The second one is connected to teamwork, participation and cooperation in the decision making process.

We will focus here on the second aspect. People need each other. We are a part of the living ecosystem and life is a complex phenomenon. People are not able to exist individually; we always build a network of dependency. The dynamics of the human race development are not linear and depend on our abilities and are a result of the game that is influenced by external conditions.

Nowadays, we are facing the threat of the end of economic growth, as we understand it today, mainly because of the burden of knowledge. Paradoxically, the more we know as a human kind the harder it is to access that knowledge; the more we need to use that knowledge the less we are able to reach information that we want. What we need the most is to cooperate with those who know other things that we know. We will not solve the problems of overpopulation, global warming, aging, diseases, scarcity of resources and water without cooperation.

Sennet (2013) divides cooperation into two kinds: cooperation of everyone with everyone, which he calls „difficult cooperation,” and cooperation within a group – „tribal cooperation” when we cooperate with people who are similar to us, but against others. We show sol-

identity to “ours” and hostility to “others.” The tribe is necessary to survive but in societies that type of relations may lead to disastrous outcomes. Aristotle claimed that the state is a community of people with origins from different family tribes. The state contains not only more people but also people who are different because the state cannot arise from identical people (Sennet, 2013).

Cooperation takes many forms, sometimes cooperation is inevitably connected to competition, like in the market, in politics or diplomatic negotiations; sometimes cooperation is an autotelic value like in religious or secular rituals; sometimes, cooperative exchange may lead to negative outcomes for others, like in agreements between banks.

It would be very healthy for societies if we were able to decrease harmful, “tribal” cooperation where “we” cooperate against “you.” The difficulty, as Sennet calls it, is that cooperation demands competencies (in the meaning of abilities to do something with high quality). In this case, he means social and dialogical competencies, which are visible in good listening, appropriate behavior, finding common points in different standpoints, conflict management, avoiding frustration when discussion becomes difficult (Sennet, 2013).

The main challenge lies in the ability to interact with other people on their conditions. It is openness as an ethical attitude that decides about that interaction and also openness as a very practical activity. Cooperation is hard work, and demands interaction with people who are different from us; it has always been a rare and difficult skill to acquire.

Additionally, cooperation is harder because of inequalities (which globally have increased in the 21st century) because of changes in the labor market, structure of modern organizations where people work in isolation from each other, changes in common working times (decreased by short contracts), superficial relations, and constant desire to reduce uncertainty. We are not prepared for the difficulty of cooperating and we need to understand that useful balance between cooperation and competition in different areas of life (from business to entertainment) cannot be reached without serious efforts (Sennett, 2013). However, we have no choice – in order to live, people have to act together. Together we create reality through interactions, communication acts, work, thinking and reflection. Nobody would be a human being without other humans. Organizations are outcomes of social perceptions and contexts. Cooperation is our fate and we need to learn it

Formal educational system for years had to prepare people to be part of the society so that they would not be a burden as adults for that society but would serve it when needed (as workers, soldiers, citizens). Today the aims of education are diverse and contextualized, and also more individualized. Education today is often understood as a process of empowerment, developmental, inspirational and encouraging to ambitious inquiries that lead to freedom and change, both individual and social. Could we learn to cooperate? Could we learn it in school?

The public school is one of a few public institutions that still exist and have a strong influence on societies (although the risk of its disappearance is quite prob-

able). If we require a difficult task from a school, we should also provide support. Among the possible support tools are well-prepared, aware, professional leaders. How are educational leaders able to influence the process of learning cooperation? We investigated the mental models and opinions of Polish headmasters in this matter, on the assumption that what they believe will allow us to predict potential success or failure in the process of improving cooperation on two levels: school organization and students' skills.

### *Methodology*

In order to answer the question about the ability of school leaders to support constructing the cooperative organization cultures and the processes of developing the skill of cooperation, we stated two research questions:

1) to what extent do school principals share the conviction that their personal skills of supporting cooperation in the educational context are important for school functioning?

**Table 1.** Structure of research group (1<sup>st</sup> stage).

	Number	%
<b>Gender</b>		
women	2 214	78,3
men	612	21,7
<b>Age</b>		
less than 36	45	1,6
36-40 years	168	6,0
41-45 years	484	17,2
46-50 years	838	29,7
51-60 years	1 190	42,2
more than 60 years	97	3,4
<b>Experience as head teach</b>		
less than 5 years	738	26,1
6-10 years	875	31,0
11-15 years	655	23,2
more than 15 years	558	19,7
<b>School location</b>		
the village	1 239	43,9
the city below 25 000	508	18,0
the city between 25 000 and 100 000	458	16,2
the city over 100 000	619	21,9

**Source:** own research

2) to what extent do school principals believe they personally have developed these skills?

Data used for analyzing principals' opinions about cooperation were collected as part of a wider investigation for a project aimed at reforming school leaders' preparation and development in Poland. In the first stage of our research more than 2800 school principals (11% of the total number of principals in Poland) answered the questionnaire (CAWI) focusing on the importance and

possession of selected competencies.

A questionnaire asking about head teachers' assessment of competencies was based on the analysis of lists of competencies taken from the vast leadership literature. The whole questionnaire consisted of 86 different questions grouped into six broader areas of competencies (Educational leadership, Management of learning, Educational policy, Management of people in organization, Strategic management in the context of social, legal and economic challenges and Self-manage-

**Table 2.** Structure of research group (2<sup>st</sup> stage).

	Number	%
<b>Gender</b>		
women	132	77,2
men	39	22,8
<b>Age</b>		
less than 36	2	1,2
36-40 years	9	5,3
41-45 years	37	21,6
46-50 years	64	37,4
51-60 years	56	32,7
more than 60 years	3	1,8
<b>Experience as head teach</b>		
less than 5 years	48	28,1
6-10 years	55	32,2
11-15 years	39	22,8
more than 15 years	29	17,0
<b>School location</b>		
kindergarten	17	9,4
primary school	67	37,1
high school	43	23,7
secondary school	32	17,7
vocational school	6	3,3
other schools	6	3,3
no data	10	5,5

**Source:** own research

ment of the professional development).

Head teachers taking part in the study were asked to assess the importance of each competency for school functioning and the level of acquisition of the particular competency. The structure of research group from the first stage of research (quantitative) is presented the table below.

The second stage of the research (qualitative) comprised in-depth interviews (IDI) with 200 respondents selected randomly from among the participants of the first stage. The sample was stratified by the duration of a respondent's tenure as head teacher, the type of a community in which a school is located and a respondent's gender.

The assumption of this second stage of research was to find out the understanding of chosen competencies and check how these competencies are applied in practice (all respondents had a right to discuss competency of their choice). At the end 171 interviews were analyzed.

The structure of research group from the second stage of research (quantitative) is presented below.

For this paper, only these competencies connected to cooperation were selected:

1. Understanding the importance of cooperation (by leaders),
2. Creating opportunities for everyone to join cooperation (by leaders within institution),
3. Cooperation with the various stakeholders of the school (students, parents, authorities),
4. Inspiring and organizing cooperation with local environment (citizens, neighborhood),
5. Selecting methods and forms of cooperation on the basis of the context (ad-

equacy to the group and aims),

6. Organizing the schoolwork with other external organizations (supporting and not supporting education like professional development centers, libraries, companies, offices, etc.),

7. Organizing own development through cooperation with other leaders,

8. Awareness of own predispositions and choices (related to cooperation).

### ***Findings: working without precise target***

It needs to be stressed that we were aware that the main source of information were "only" personal opinions, understandings and approaches to the issues of our interest. It is a quite typical dilemma for the majority of social science research that interpretation is always a struggle with questions about what is real and what is not real, what is objective and what is not. While following the constructivist paradigm (Berger & Luckmann, 2010) in looking at social reality, as in this paper, we accept that everything that people believe in is real. Our convictions and individual theories are materials used for building social reality through the multiple processes of interaction, so every opinion shared by the respondents is, in a certain way, objective or at least we treat it as objective.

It was possible to find out some patterns in principals' answers to specific questions about competencies connected to cooperation:

- Gender was the variable radically impacting answers: competencies connected to cooperation were more important for women than men.



- The main variable affecting answers in four of the eight competencies was geographical location of the school: competencies connected to cooperation were more important for principals from bigger towns and cities, less important from villages (only organizing the cooperation with the local environment was more important for those from villages).
- Age impacted answers in the case only of two competencies (of eight).

In general, as to the level of importance, gender and school location were important and as to the level of acquisition experience, age and school location were important.

When asked about acquisition of the competencies assumed to be important for cooperation, more than 80% of principals agreed that they would be able to use these competencies (besides organizing their own development). It was also possible to find variables that impacted principals' answers in the second

category – the level of acquisition of the competencies connected to cooperation:

- The strongest variable in the case of acquisition of competency was work experience (five of eight competencies were impacted): together with experience, the number of principals declaring the acquisition of these competencies increased
- Second variable was the geographical location of school (four of eight competencies were impacted): those from big cities declared having the competencies more often than those from villages.
- Age and gender were also important variables: in a case of age only, the acquisition of three competences were connected to the variable; for gender only one competency: females declared higher competency than men in organizing cooperation with external agencies.

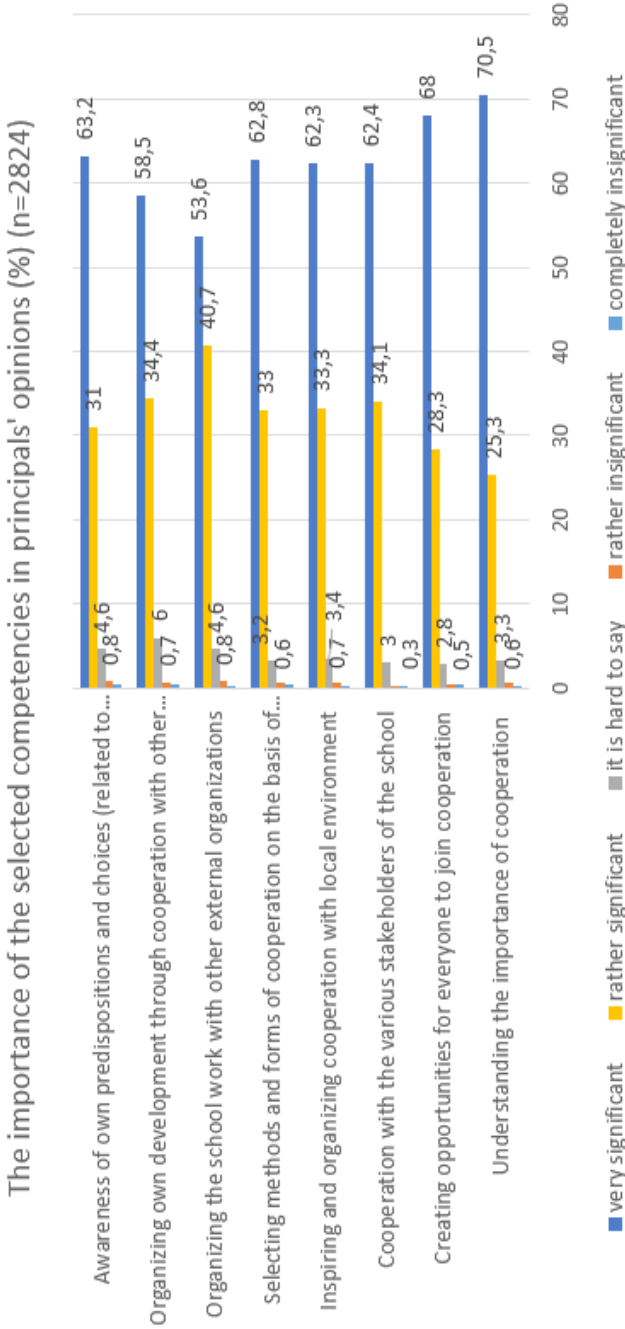
General findings from the quantitative data were that: principals believe that “everything is important.” Both, when we look at all 86 competencies included in the survey and when we analyze only

**Table 3.** Variables impacting opinions about competences

Differentiating variables	Relevance level
Authentic leadership	8 of 8 competences
School location	4 of 8 competences
Age	2 of 8 competences
Differentiating variables	Acquisition level
Experience	5 of 8 competences
School location	4 of 8 competences
Age	3 of 8 competences
Gender	1 of 8 competences

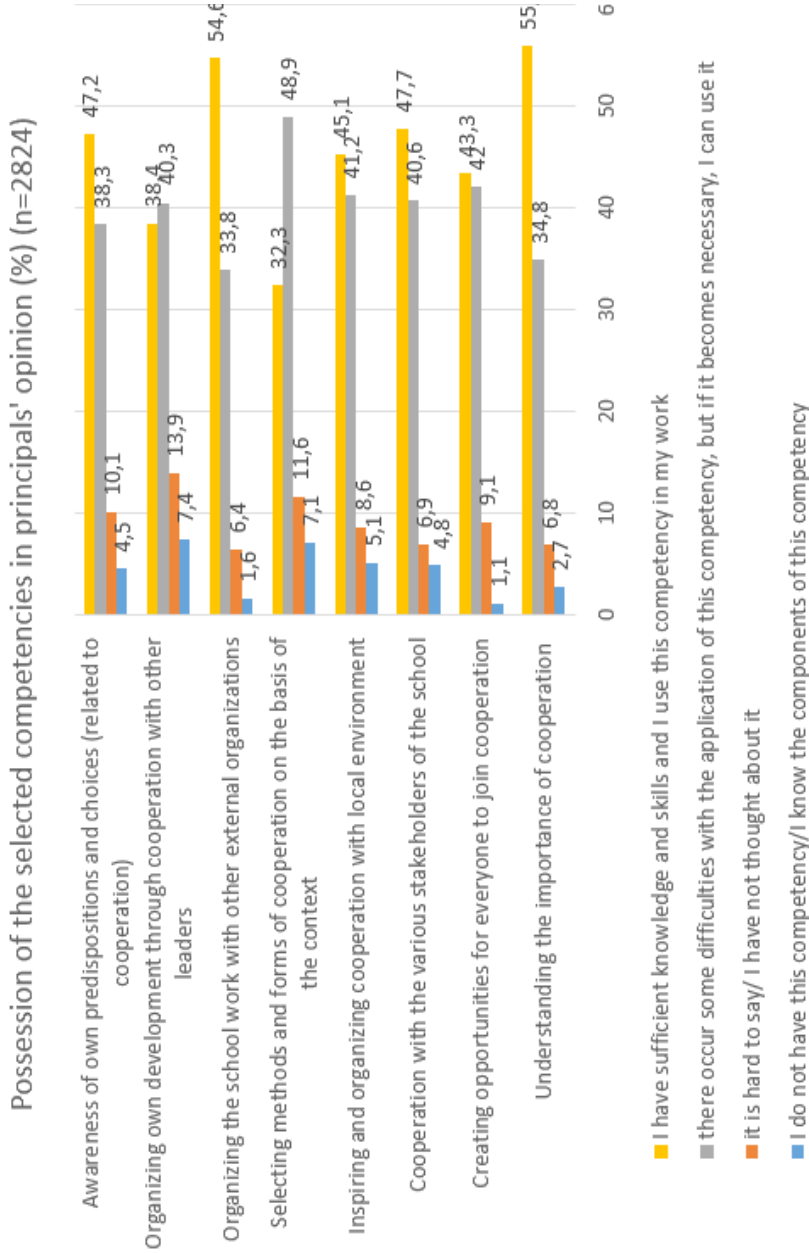
**Source:** own research

**Figure 1.** Opinions of school principals about importance of competency



**Source:** own research

**Figure 2.** Acquisition of competencies



**Source:** own research

these competencies connected to cooperation, these competencies seem to be very important for school principals. In the case of competencies connected to cooperation, more than 90% of principals declared that all are very important. It would be great if we accept the result as a picture of their mental models, however that conclusion is controversial when one considers all competences – there are almost no differences (or very few) between different kinds of competences. That result did not allow us to create a hierarchical list of the importance of competencies or decide what is or should be prioritized in leaders' work. One of the possible explanations for this is the lack of a defined principals' role, lack of established priorities, and overall lack of public discourse about priorities in leaders' work. This is the situation of Polish school principals – loneliness and separation, lack of a supportive network or supportive agencies.

From the results of the survey, it is also possible to say that the importance of a competency was assessed higher than the level of acquisition of it in every case (although principals were still claiming that they have all these competencies). When we think about possible explanations for principals claiming in huge majority that they have all competencies, the principals' fear comes to mind. Perhaps people are not able to admit that they are not able to do something, are not secure, need to prove something, or are afraid of unjust assessment. We believe that this situation that Polish school principals find themselves in has impacted the general results of the survey. Principals work under social pressure, facing difficulties to fulfill expectations and de-

mands. Polish school principals feel that it is not appropriate to admit they have any deficits or need help in any area.

To understand the importance and level of acquiring a particular competency, the qualitative individual interviews were conducted. Principals were free to nominate their strongest and weakest competency and talk about them. In general, choices were scattered among multiple competencies and it was difficult to identify consistent strong and weak competencies. Very rarely did more than 17 respondents (of 171) hold the same opinion, and the majority of strengths and weaknesses were typically shared by fewer than 10% of principals.

During the interviews, 14 principals decided that understanding the importance of cooperation for effective organization was their strength and also stated that it is important for school operation. Cooperation was understood as conducting common activities with teaching staff, parents, students and environment. One of the respondents said: *When we are aware that everything what happens here is our common effort it becomes obvious that it is our destiny to cooperate.*

In practice, the understood meaning of cooperation is visible in involving teachers in different school duties and creating task teams: *I use deputy principals as support in working with different teams.* Principals claimed that this competency results in meetings with parents and students and also with local environment representatives. Those 14 principals believed that the meaning of this competency is clearer for more experienced leaders.

Creating conditions allowing everyone involved in the teaching and learn-

ing process, as well as parents and other stakeholders, to join the cooperation was selected as a competency by 11 principals interviewed. Eight of them thought it was their strength and three said that it was their weakness. Nine thought it an important competency. The word “condition” was understood in different ways – from climate to money. Principals mentioned that in practice they see an urgent necessity for motivation. They also slightly changed a meaning of the sentence – from creating conditions – open space, to almost ordering people to be involved: *I organized a festival and allowed every teacher to join with his/her class or it is important because it decreases the amount of work on principal's side.* They saw a significant resistance against cooperation and team projects. Those who said that this competency is their weakness claimed that they still do not know their school.

Cooperation with different stakeholders and partners for supporting students' development was selected by 24 of the participating principals. Twenty-two of them said it is their strength, making it one of the most common strengths and two mentioned it as a weakness. Eighteen of the 24 declared it as an important competency for school functioning.

Respondents understood cooperation as inviting different stakeholders to different activities but they admitted that cooperation with stakeholders and external partners for students' development is usually difficult to achieve: *Yes, it looks like... different institutions... Principal has to cooperate...* So, they see value in organizing common initiatives, but have problems with detailed explanations and examples – the difficult part is:

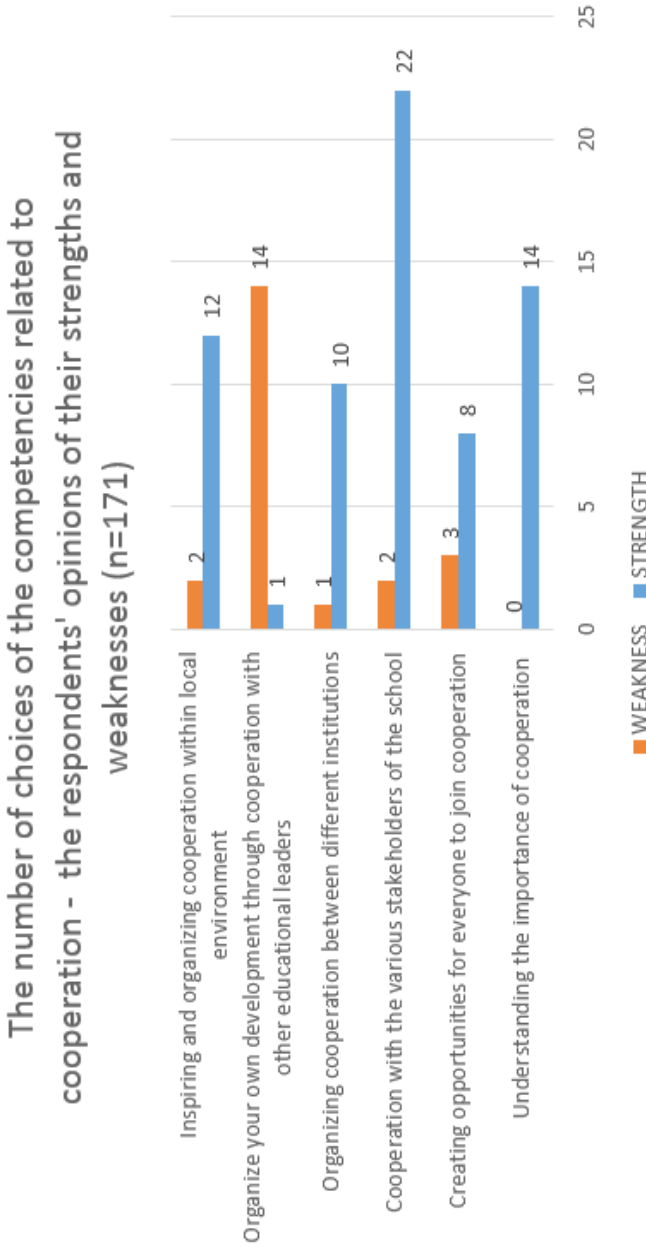
support of students' development. More easily, they gave examples of initiatives serving integration with the community, believing that this is also beneficial for student development: *We organize together with local community for example Seniors' Day, Christmas etc.*

Cooperation with the external world is important for creating a public image – a school has to care about its image in the local community, and a network also provides a feeling of security: *I believe it is important to create a positive climate around the school (...) so later it is possible to ask for help when needed.* It is understood mainly as short-term cooperation about a specific issue or project, which sometimes may transform in something bigger.

The competency named: “inspiring and organizing cooperation within local environment” was selected by 14 principals interviewed. Twelve said it is their strength and 11 said it is important. Principals assumed that the most important element of that competency is building a network of support and sustainable cooperation: *I would like to connect different institutions in order to solve our problems.* Respondents were sure that cross-institutional support enriches the school's educational offerings.

Organizing cooperation among different external institutions was found as their strength by 10 principals and by one as weakness. They claimed it was connected to school's important task, especially in rural areas: *In such a small village we need to help students to integrate with external world* – this was an opinion of one of respondents. Another said: *sooner we start it, sooner stu-*

**Figure 3.** Selected strengths and weaknesses



**Source:** own research

*dents will benefit from it, it is important for students to be able to participate in different initiatives, visits, workshops.*

Again it was noticed that external cooperation would positively impact the image of school. Principals believe it is about presenting an open attitude towards the environment because it allows going into the environment and creating ties, and is also about exchange: I always say it is fifty-fifty: we will give something away it will be easier to get something from others. They also reported negative aspects: *it should not be based on papers, that I will receive letter and I will respond, this is not cooperation, but they do not have time to establish more serious cooperation.* Principals also see the necessity for being active in this relationship: *I am here to be inside community, to talk to them.* Many want to work on this competency further.

For the largest number of school principals, their weakest competency was building a network for support of personal development. Fourteen principals told us they are not using cooperation with other leaders for their improvement but nine of them believed it was an important competency. They also understood “other leaders” not only as school principals but expressed a need to network with local authorities. Respondents stressed the difficulties coming from lack of time, money and skills, lack of opportunities and cooperation. They talked about lack of trust among schools and principals because of the completion, unequal relations and cheating. As one principal stated: *every school is struggling to survive individually and I feel internal resistance when I am supposed*

*to ask anyone for help.* They declared that any kind of professional networks or teams supporting principals’ work would be very beneficial and is necessary.

### ***Conclusion: uncertain professionals***

We need cooperation on at least two levels: organizational and societal. It is expected that schools will not only use cooperation for improvement but also to prepare people for further cooperation. It is leaders’ obligation to support a cooperative culture and values because strong and positive school culture serves several beneficial functions: fostering effort and productivity, improving collegial and collaborative activities, supporting successful change and improvement efforts, building commitments, amplifying energy and motivation focusing attention on what is important (Fischer, Frey & Pumpian, 2012).

Educational leaders need a well-articulated knowledge base, which is a prerequisite for developing expertise in a systemic way within any domain. Education has experienced a significant growth in its knowledge base, particularly regarding effective pedagogy but also motivation and cooperative learning. Increasing students’ engagement and establishing and maintaining effective relationship with students are the keystones of teaching, which is difficult to achieve without collegiality and a positive environment (Marzano, Frontier & Livingston, 2011).

In order to be able to develop the knowledge base needed for competencies connected with leadership, Polish school principals also need appropriate attitudes towards cooperation. What

we know from our research is that respondents understand the necessity of cooperation and that a significant majority of them declared that these competencies are important for school functioning and also are important for them as individual leaders – they declared that they possess these competencies.

We also may state that more female principals are aware of the importance of cooperation than male principals. We also know that school principals from big cities more often admit that competencies connected with cooperation are important for school functioning and that they have these competencies than it is the case of principals from smaller towns and villages. Although experienced principals declared the acquisition of mentioned competencies more often than these with shorter experience in leader position, during the interviews it appeared that it is difficult to show any pattern in selection of the strongest and the weakest competencies.

To summarize we may conclude that on the surface, principals are aware of the meaning of cooperation, however their enthusiasm seems a little bit superficial. We suggest this it is a result of their uncertainty or even fear of public scrutiny. They need support and acceptance so that they would be able to focus more on co-workers with empathy, curiosity towards others and dialogical approach that allows openness and freedom.



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