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THE POTENTIAL OF A CHILD'S PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE IN THE AWARENESS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS – PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

It has been clearly pointed out that the contemporary views on the very essence of education can be characterized by the presence of a tendency to emphasize a holistic approach to the development of a child's personality, which encompasses the cognitive, psychomotor and affective spheres. Presumably, education understood in this way is done – and, actually, should be done – both in institutions dedicated to this purpose, such as kindergarten or school, but also, and perhaps primarily, in everyday life situations concerning the dynamically changing socio-cultural reality. It is beyond any doubt that the scope and the character of both knowledge and experience acquired by children have changed in the modern dimension of life. According to Dorota Klus-Stańska (2008, p. 110), modern children are “the residents of an ambiguous reality, often difficult to grasp; the reality which is «normal» and «ordinary» to them,

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but not necessarily to their teachers and parents, though. And they do not know any other.” Due to the fact that children’s knowledge comes from various formal and informal contexts (Dumont et al., 2013), the author postulates the need to develop a model of education: “in which knowledge is defined as a rich set of procedures for dealing with information reality and uncertainty, being referred to as not necessarily a set of meanings but rather a way of keeping these meanings in mind” (Klus-Stańska, 2008, p. 14). There is no doubt that due to the extraordinary dynamics of civilization- and socio-cultural transformations, knowledge cannot be understood only from the positivist perspective and fulfill the adaptive and transmissive functions exclusively, but it should be perceived as a dynamic, open category, taking into account personal references, emotions and experiences (Kochanowska, 2018).

Treating knowledge as objective, reliable, formalized, independent of the person possessing it and ready to be conveyed and acquired – which is all characteristic of the transmission model of knowledge and the instrumental education, established in the positivist concept of knowledge (Kwaśnica, 1987), leads – according to Joanna Rutkowiak – to the instrumentalization of the educational process, the essence of which is expressed by the decrease in the individual’s autotelic cognition consistent with one’s interests, passion for exploration and the will to experience social co-existence. The second feature of such understood educational process is simplification, which includes the infantilization of learning, manifesting itself in the tendencies to simplify the cognitive reality, to atomize and dichotomize. Moreover, the participants of the education process understood in the aforementioned way are characterized by passivization, i.e., an attitude towards acquiring knowledge which does not comprise much effort and intellectual mobilization; an approach which “does not require exceeding the level of one’s own development and in this sense can be referred to as anti-development” (Rutkowiak, 2010, pp. 165-166). Meanwhile, in the context of a rapidly changing reality: “the challenge of today is not the amount of knowledge we possess, but its understanding, applying, increasing and clarifying its resources to others – staying in the knowledge network” (Piasecki, 2011, p. 35).

According to the propagated interactive model of education, the child is allowed to build his or her own internal representation of the world. First of all, due to the multiplicity and availability of knowledge sources, school education cannot be detached from the everyday space of children’s lives. Isolating school from their everyday life, transferring knowledge instead of creating circumstances for constructing it and negotiating meanings make it impossible to enrich the abilities of an individual to become the subject of their own actions. According to the preferred holistic approach to learning, what is being addressed is an important issue of using the child’s developmental and educational potential by taking into account not only the strategies of developing cognitive skills, but also the values, views and emotions that make up the psychophysical personality-forming whole. The essence of such an approach to education is openness to the knowledge which a child is already equipped with, and which is acquired to a large extent in the out-of-school environment. Such “ini-

tial” knowledge, if activated and used properly, integrated with the school knowledge, can constitute a factor in the development of the child's learning potential and enrich their abilities to become the subject of their own actions. Therefore, it is the task of the school to use various sources of knowledge, as well as taking advantage of the influences of parallel education (Kochanowska, 2018).

The aim of the article is to present common assumptions of early education teachers concerning the characteristics of a child's personal knowledge. Teachers' convictions constitute a key element of teachers' common pedagogical theories, used to explain learning processes, determine what conditions are favorable for learning, and design didactic and educational situations (Klus-Stańska, 2010). Convictions “allow not only to understand the reality and relate to it, but also define the subject's relations with objects of reality and motivate to undertake particular actions” (Lachowicz-Tabaczek, 2009, p. 262). The reconstruction of popular teachers' assumptions referring to the characteristics of a child's personal knowledge allows to determine whether and what educational potential the surveyed teachers do perceive.

AROUND THE CATEGORY OF A CHILD'S PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE – A THEORETICAL OUTLINE

The concept of personal knowledge is usually identified or occurs in the context of such terms as: colloquial knowledge, hidden knowledge, silent knowledge, procedural knowledge, operational knowledge, knowledge in action (Klus-Stańska, 2000, p. 147), as well as “pre-understanding,” prior knowledge, primary knowledge, implicit knowledge, deep knowledge, a priori knowledge, pre-knowledge, superstitions, prejudices, meaning-formation structures, regulatory ideas of experience (Kwaśnica, 1992, p. 81). Due to various criteria, such as: the source, the degree of verifiability and substantiveness, etc., personal knowledge is attributed to the following characteristics in the literature:

- a. “[...] knowledge distorted and interwoven with information from common knowledge, more or less tinged with prejudices or «folk truths» [...], constitutes a kind of summary of many people's personal experiences, or even those of entire generations” (Pieter, 1993, p. 79);
- b. “[...] is a partial, simplified, and even distorted reflection of knowledge in an objective sense” (Pieter, 1970, p. 429);
- c. “[...] its «lion's share» is social, due to the sources of origin” (Pieter, 1970, p. 428);
- d. “[...] constitutes a certain structure within personality” (Pieter, 1970, p. 466);
- e. “[...] is connected with the natural, spontaneous experience of reality and the personal action of an individual. It is assigned such attributes as: non-standardized structure and low accessibility of reflection” (Klus-Stańska, 2002, p. 108);

- f. “[...] is highly individual, difficult to formalize, which makes it very difficult to convey or communicate to others. The knowledge comprises such content as: a subjective insight, intuition, premonitions, ideas, values, feelings, images and symbols. It accumulates in every human being as a result of their experiences” (Nonaka, Takeuchi, 2000, p. 25).

Personal knowledge is most frequently identified with the colloquial and extra-curricular knowledge acquired in everyday life situations. It was Dorota Klus-Stańska (2014, p. 152) who the concept was given a different meaning by, indicating two conditions that must appear in order for an individual’s knowledge to acquire a personal character, regarding the process of education. First, the pupil must have the possibility to search for and explore the material or symbolic reality. The second condition is fulfilled when the so-called mental familiarization of public knowledge occurs, which contributes to the spontaneous use of the knowledge by the individual in various school and out-of-school situations. Such an approach denies the traditional dichotomy of personal knowledge *versus* school knowledge, understood as a “relatively coherent system of scientific notions contained in curricula and textbooks, [...] intended to be conveyed by teachers and learnt by students” (Nowak-Łojewska, 2011, p. 151). School knowledge can acquire a personal dimension as long as a student acquires it in the course of his or her own activity and favorable conditions are created for them to construct and reconstruct ways of thinking about the world, and not just learning them by heart. The lack of respect for children’s extracurricular knowledge, resulting from the classroom communication being subordinated to the methodological structure of the curriculum, can lead to students’ difficulties in understanding and employing their knowledge (Klus-Stańska, 2000). Due to the fact that learning is not passive, but constitutes an active process during which changes in the learner’s brain occur (Adamek, 2011, p. 12), the most important task of school should be to teach students how to learn, develop their learning potential (Wollman, 2013, p. 10) taking advantage of children’s extracurricular knowledge and creating conditions for assigning meanings to the knowledge acquired at school.

THE POTENTIAL OF A CHILD’S PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE IN TEACHERS’ AWARENESS – THE PROCEDURE AND RESEARCH RESULTS

The aim of the qualitative research was to try to reconstruct the traits, documented in the empirical material, attributed by early childhood teachers to a child’s personal knowledge as a component of the child’s potential in the learning process. The theoretical-methodological considerations were situated within the constructivist-interpretive paradigm (Denzin, Lincoln, 2009, pp. 51-52). The research has been carried out with 54 early school education teachers from the Śląskie, Małopolskie and

Podkarpackie Voivodships through individual open interviews. The interview used allowed for interaction between the interviewer and the respondent. The interviewer follows an overall action plan, but there is no specific set of questions that should be asked with the use of particular words and in a certain order (Babbie, 2008). As a result, such an interview allows to capture to a greater extent what the respondents think about the subject, and not what the researcher thinks about it, only looking for the confirmation of their thesis. In the course of the research answers to the following research problems were sought:

1. What attributes do teachers assign to a child's personal knowledge?
2. How is teachers' reflection documented in relation to the significance of a child's personal knowledge as a potential in the child's learning process concerning early childhood education?

In the course of the individual interviews content analysis, a child's personal knowledge features were identified, along with the context in which they appeared, which enabled the determination of how they were understood in relation to the educational value attributed to the personal knowledge of a child. On the basis of the analysis of the collected statements of the early childhood education teachers, the categorization of the constitutive features of a child's personal knowledge was carried out and the significance attributed to the traits by the respondents in terms of the education process was determined. Each of the distinguished features has been illustrated by the example of the teachers' statements.*

The distinguished features involve those demonstrating the understanding of the need to activate the personal knowledge of a child in the education process, as well as those indicating the lack of the respondents' trust in the potential of this kind of children's knowledge. Respondents belonging to the first enumerated the following features.

THE RICHNESS OF A CHILD'S PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

Richness as a feature of contemporary children's personal knowledge was the one to be mentioned in the statements of all the respondents. It was said to be related to the dynamics of children's everyday life space which is widening, mostly due to the new media and multimedia. According to the respondents, the scope of children's personal knowledge increased by the virtual world objects. Such an opinion was reflected, among others, in the following statement: "I've been working with initial classes of primary school for more than twenty years. Today, children have knowledge of such things that the children in the past could not know due to the lack of access to the media, the Internet" [W11].**

* The results presented in the article constitute a part of an in-depth research carried out with the use of complementary research methods within the author's own research, cf. Kochanowska (2018).

** The *W* symbol refers to the number of the interview.

In the respondents' opinion, electronic media accompany a child every day, filling their free time and often the time of obligatory classes, too, which results in the fact that a child's knowledge reflects objects that the child has never encountered in real life. The phenomenon is perceived both in the context of benefits and – much more frequently – threats to the child's development. Above all, the cognitive and moral value of the information conveyed by means of the mass media communication was questioned.

OPENNESS AS A FEATURE OF A CHILD'S PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

According to the respondents, a child's personal knowledge is open, which the teachers associate with children's unlimited desire to explore everything that is in their environment. For children "absorb" the world and the information about it with all their senses. Such an approach towards a child's personal knowledge can be demonstrated in the following examples of the respondents' statements: "The minds of young children are exceedingly absorbent, they constantly acquire new information. The personal knowledge of children changes every day, as they come across new things and events every day, they want to know about them as much as possible" [W5]. "A lot of information is received by children at home, among other children they play with. And this is the personal knowledge. The fact is that a lot of information comes from the television and the Internet..." [W18].

The main motive for acquiring personal knowledge by children is, according to the respondents, cognitive curiosity, which they satisfy through their own activity in the environment that surrounds them, and, above all, through social communication.

THE DYNAMISM OF A CHILD'S PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

The respondents recognize the dynamism of personal knowledge related to the intensive development of a child's cognitive processes at a younger school age. Rapid changes occur concerning the individualization and independence of mental activities. What plays a significant role in this process is a child's wider participation in the social and cultural life of his or her environment. An example statement: "Today, children live in the times of extreme dynamic changes. Since everything changes quickly, so does their personal knowledge. Children know more and more, as they have access to numerous sources of information, they search for information, they experiment. They acquire knowledge from the environment they live in, from the Internet" [W29].

Recognizing and understanding the dynamics of a child's personal knowledge by the examined teachers is extremely important, as the approach constitutes the basis

for shaping children's active and creative attitude towards the process of learning and building their knowledge system.

An optimistic image and a perspective for school practice is created by the vision of a child perceived by the respondents as an active, curious individual, open to new knowledge and experiences, and exploring the surrounding reality. The teachers are aware that the modern dynamic space of life within which a child functions is the source of his or her rich experience and personal knowledge. A child has a large amount of personal knowledge "waiting" for activation in the process of constructing knowledge at school.

The second set of features that appeared in the statements of the majority of respondents may indicate the teachers' lack of confidence in the potential of a child's personal knowledge.

AN OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHARACTER OF A CHILD'S PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

The analysis of the respondents' statements proves that they identify a child's personal knowledge solely with out-of-school knowledge, acquired every day in the space of life. The principal sources of this kind of knowledge are seen in the child's social environment. The respondents emphasized, above all, the role of the family and peer groups in transferring knowledge and shaping a child's system of values. "It can be said that a child's personal knowledge is a collection of information that the child possesses. Such knowledge is brought by the child to school, and it has been acquired before at home, e.g. from conversations with parents, in the playground, e.g. from other children, the Internet, or, for instance, through watching TV" [W3].

In the respondents' opinion, it is also through various forms of cognitive activities that a child acquires knowledge, e.g. experiments, observations, performed either alone or together with other people in everyday life situations. None of the statements indicated the possibility of personalizing school knowledge, attributing a personal character to school knowledge.

AN INVOLUNTARY CHARACTER OF THE PROCESS OF ACQUIRING A CHILD'S PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

The teachers mainly see the involuntary influence of the social environment and the media on the scope of a child's personal knowledge and the developing system of values and norms. Both the environment of the child's development and interactions with others determine what and how the child learns and develops his or her thinking abilities. The way of understanding the social environment described by the respondents as a source of personal knowledge indicates the transmissive character

of the information conveyed to a child by adult members of society and peers. The statements lacked references to Jerome Bruner's (2006) socio-cultural theory, according to which a child is not passive while subjected to socialization and transference of knowledge, but actively participates in this process, negotiates, creates "the community of minds" jointly with others.

GLOBALITY AS A FEATURE OF PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

According to the respondents, children most frequently connect the objects of their personal knowledge with a specific situation, the context in which the knowledge has been acquired. "When children share knowledge with others, they usually refer to a specific situation in which they got acquainted with the thing, the phenomenon. They are often surprised when they learn something new about it, other than what they have already known [...]. Sometimes they even do not want to accept it" [W21].

In the teachers' opinion, younger children are characterized by a one-dimensional way of thinking, in which ideas, aspirations and goals that go beyond the framework of previously acquired information, opinions and modes of conduct cause anxiety, or sometimes even objection.

THE CONCRETENESS OF PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

The concreteness or generality of knowledge remain in relation to the possibility of its internal transformations. According to the vast majority of respondents, children's personal knowledge is characterized by concreteness. The respondents connected the feature with a child's concrete-imaginative thinking at a younger school age. The teachers stated, for instance: "A child's personal knowledge concerns specific objects, phenomena, as children still think on the basis of a concrete thing. Thinking is related to a particular action. Children are not able to generalize yet, it is difficult for them to use concepts. The more abstract a notion is, the more difficult it is for them to understand and use it" [W5].

According to these respondents, a child is not yet able to take an active part in the formation of different models of reality by hypothesizing and formulating predictions that are verified in the process of learning.

THE LACK OR A LOW LEVEL OF INTEGRATION OF A CHILD'S PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

In the opinion of a large group of the respondents, children's personal knowledge can be characterized by its disintegration or a low level of integration, which means

that children have problems with perceiving relationships and dependencies between pieces of information, even those of a substantive nature, and logical, pragmatic relationships, etc. seem even more problematic for them. This feature of a child's personal knowledge is indicated by the following examples of the teachers' statements: "Personal knowledge of children is very dispersed. Children do know a lot, but the knowledge is unordered. Children often do not see connections between pieces of information they have [...]. Their personal knowledge is sort of «shredded»" [W13].

According to the respondents, children have problems with capturing the structure of a subject and understanding it in a way that allows making meaningful connection to a number of other elements. It should be noted that due to the functionality of knowledge, both the lack of integration and the complete integration of knowledge are disadvantageous. A certain level of an organizational chaos fosters the functionality of knowledge. According to Klus-Stańska (2002, p. 90): "constructing meanings requires the occurrence of a phase of students' «experiencing cognitive chaos,» resulting in ambiguity and views and opinions turning out to be problematic. The cognitive dissonance allows to undertaking research activities and negotiating the postulated meanings, as well as conducting cognitive autoregulation of the diagnosed situation."

INADEQUACY IN REFLECTING THE REALITY

According to the respondents, the knowledge and concepts acquired by children frequently prove to be erroneous or incomplete due to their limited experience. In the respondents' opinion when children get acquainted with something, they focus on specific, often superficial, external features of things, which constitutes a factor that hinders shaping the right concepts at school. An example statement: "Children at a younger school age already know many concepts and they are contained in their personal knowledge, but usually they are not valid to what they mean and include. Children refer them most often to specific things. Sometimes it is parents who misconceive notions and transfer them to children, thus there are problems at school [...]. In most cases, it is necessary to shape these concepts at school, anyway" [W51].

Meanwhile, in terms of education, it is extremely important for teachers to understand the relationships that occur between concepts formulated at school and those already known to students. An important role is played by "invoking" knowledge already possessed by students, which should be taken into account in the process of developing concepts that pupils encounter at school. Based on the assumption that the prior knowledge is a starting point for learning and constitutes a kind of an organizing forerunner, like an anchor, a "mental scaffolding" for the new teaching material (Arends, 1998), a huge body of knowledge and experience which, if updated and used properly in both spontaneous and planned didactic situations, can turn out to be a factor for developing and constructing new meanings by pupils.

THE SUBJECTIVISM OF PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

In the teachers' opinion, a child's personal knowledge is characterized by subjectivism, which is expressed in the fact that children are convinced that their knowledge is true, and their judgments, especially those concerning values, depend on their personal experiences, impressions and emotional reactions. Children have their own vision of the world, knowledge about it, ideas about the reality they are getting to know. "The way the world is perceived by children at the early school age is still very subjective and imperfect, as children pay attention to what is important to them. It is changing gradually" [W26]. "A child's personal knowledge is subjective. It often includes a distorted or even false image of the world. It is the child who decides what he or she learns and from what perspective" [W39].

The subjectivism of a child's personal knowledge is related by the respondents to its aforementioned feature, i.e. inadequacy.

THE LINEARITY OF PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

The feature, understood as a continuous quantitative increase in the child's knowledge, was mentioned by all the respondents. A significant group of the teachers (37) also took up the issue of the linearity of personal knowledge in the context of the process of acquiring new experiences and information, and then their use. According to the respondents, the process of acquiring a child's personal knowledge is continuous. Children constantly gain new experiences in everyday life situations, as well as through various forms of activity. "Children learn all the time and everywhere [...]. They have more and more personal knowledge, which they can then apply to solve various tasks" [W28].

The respondents drew attention to the quantitative increase of knowledge, not to its qualitative changes.

THE (A)SYMMETRY OF A CHILD'S PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE IN RELATION TO THE TEACHER'S KNOWLEDGE

At the declarative level, all the teachers emphasized their openness to a child's personal knowledge and the acceptance of a child's free speech. However, most of them treat this type of knowledge as "less significant" from the point of view of didactic value and indicate the need to put it into the school knowledge frameworks. "Children speak up, discuss things with one another, ask questions. Although their knowledge is still small, the information they have usually do not contribute anything to the class, I try to introduce dialog in the classroom and let the children express themselves as much as possible" [W21].

Such an approach towards a child's knowledge results in shaping the awareness in children's minds at the beginning of their school education that the extracurricular and the school knowledge are two separate "worlds." And, what is more, the former one is insignificant. However, according to Stanisław Dylak (2013, p. 139): "if we do not want students to go out with two edifices of knowledge, the school knowledge (scholarly) and the personal, colloquial one, live (most of them) in epistemological schizophrenia, then we, as educators, must undertake such school activities that trigger procedures for activating students' colloquial knowledge and modifying it through the scientific knowledge, which we want to immerse the students in." In this context, the task of a teacher as the so-called "sensitive adult" (Schaffer, 2005, p. 226), is organizing educational situations related to children's freedom of speech and provoking cognitive conflicts, as well as planning to exploit the child's potential.

CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary theories of learning and teaching emphasize the cultural context of learning, which is associated with organizing space in which students will make use their mental potential, where they will be equipped with learning tools, and where they will experience the sense of being able to use their own intellect (Filipiak, 2011, p. 107). Each student contributes to the educational interaction enriching it with their own individual resources, which include, among others, a wealth of experience gained from encountering other people met in various fields of culture: home, playground, environment (Filipiak, 2008). A child's personal knowledge can be referred to as a component of the child's learning potential, which has an individual, temporal character, socio-culturally conditioned, and which can change depending on the practice of learning not only at school, but also outside. A child's personal knowledge becomes particularly important when being related to such learning dispositions, identified by Guy Claxton (Wollman, 2015) and making up a child's learning potential, as the so-called reciprocation and entrepreneurship. The essence of the former notion is expressed in the ability to "give and take knowledge" during cooperation, to respect and accept other points of view, whereas entrepreneurship is expressed in the individual's use of a full range of resources from the wider world, i.e.: other people, books, the Internet, past experience, future opportunities, etc. However, the research of the educational practice shows that "the school reality does not match the out-of-school one, as the teaching process is still the same as it was in the past – learning is more re-creative than creative, it resembles a production system in a factory, strives for unification, not personalization, and limits, instead of giving autonomy" (Grochalska, 2015, p. 171). The standpoint is also confirmed by the results of the research presented in the article, which prove that early childhood education teachers are characterized by the lack of belief in the potential of a child's personal knowledge. Although they are aware of its richness and dynamics, it is

due to its subjectivity, concreteness, lack of integration and inadequacy in reflecting reality that they do not see the necessity of employing it in the process of constructing knowledge at school. Whereas the educational activities of the school should be aimed at providing students with a coherent picture of the world and preparing them for the out-of-school life by transferring knowledge in such a way it can be integrated into their everyday experiences. The path to achieving the aforementioned goals leads through the acceptance and respect for a child's personal knowledge and teachers' creating educational situations to integrate student's personal knowledge with the school knowledge and give the latter a personal character.

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THE POTENTIAL OF A CHILD'S PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE IN THE AWARENESS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS – PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Keywords: early school education, educational potential, children's personal knowledge, teachers' beliefs

Abstract: Presented within the following article, the discussion on the functioning of a child's personal knowledge phenomenon as a learning potential in the awareness of early-stage education teachers is embedded in the context of constructivism, understood as a theory of knowledge, cognition and learning, more specifically the socio-cultural concept, according to which students learn in interaction with the environment, going into the "community of minds" and actively constructing knowledge using the knowledge already possessed. In the course of the analysis of the content of open interviews conducted with teachers, the features attributed to a child's personal knowledge were separated and analyzed in the context of the importance attached to them by the respondents in the process of developing learning potential in early-stage education.

POTENCJAŁ WIEDZY OSOBISTEJ DZIECKA W ŚWIADOMOŚCI NAUCZYCIELI WCZESNEJ EDUKACJI – IMPLIKACJE PRAKTYCZNE

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja wczesnoszkolna, potencjał edukacyjny, wiedza osobista dziecka, przekonania nauczycieli

Streszczenie: Podjęte w artykule rozważania nad funkcjonowaniem w świadomości nauczycieli wczesnej edukacji fenomenu wiedzy osobistej dziecka jako potencjału uczenia się osadzone zostały w kontekście konstruktywizmu jako teorii wiedzy, poznawania i uczenia się, konkretnie koncepcji socjokulturowej, zgodnie z którą uczniowie uczą się w interakcji z otoczeniem, wchodząc we „wspólnotę umysłów” i aktywnie konstruując wiedzę z wykorzystaniem wiedzy już przez siebie posiadanej. W toku analizy treści wywiadów otwartych przeprowadzonych z nauczycielkami wyodrębniono cechy przypisywane wiedzy osobistej dziecka i poddano je analizie w kontekście znaczenia nadawanego jej przez badane w procesie rozwijania potencjału uczenia się w edukacji wczesnoszkolnej.