

KATARZYNA BŁAŻEJEWSKA¹

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland

ORCID 0000-0003-2793-3276

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SUPPORTING STUDENT AUTONOMY IN EARLY SCHOOL EDUCATION: TEACHING STRATEGIES, CHALLENGES AND CONCLUSIONS FROM PILOT STUDIES

WSPIERANIE AUTONOMII UCZNIÓW EDUKACJI WCZESNOSZKOLNEJ:
STRATEGIE NAUCZYCIELSKIE, WYZWANIA I WNIOSKI Z BADAŃ
PILOTAŻOWYCH

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest omówienie sposobów reagowania, sposobów działania oraz stylów wspierania autonomii uczniów przez nauczycieli edukacji wczesnoszkolnej. Omawiane badania pilotażowe zostały przeprowadzone metodą winietową z wykorzystaniem Kwestionariusza Problemów Szkolnych. Najwyższymi wynikami charakteryzował się styl wysoce wspierający autonomię, najniższymi natomiast styl wysoce kontrolujący. W artykule podkreślono potrzebę pogłębiania wiedzy i umiejętności nauczycieli w zakresie nowoczesnych metod motywowania uczniów, nawiązywania z nimi relacji, utrzymywania równowagi między

¹ **Katarzyna Błażejewska**, Faculty of Pedagogical Sciences; Her scientific interests, research and didactic activity relate to early childhood education, and in particular the organization of the teaching-learning process, student autonomy, the importance of homework and cooperation between the school and the family. E-mail address: k.blazejewska@uksw.edu.pl.

wspieraniem uczniów a stawianiem im wymagań, stosowania metod aktywizujących oraz redukcji wysoce kontrolującego stylu nauczania.

Słowa kluczowe: autonomia, styl nauczania, nauczyciel edukacji wczesnoszkolnej, uczeń

Abstract: The aim of this article is to discuss the response strategies, actions, and styles of supporting student autonomy employed by early childhood education teachers. The pilot study discussed was conducted using the vignette method based on the Problems in Schools Questionnaire. The highest scores were achieved by the highly autonomy-supportive style, while the lowest scores were recorded for the highly controlling style. The article emphasizes the need to deepen teachers' knowledge and skills regarding modern methods of motivating students, building relationships, maintaining a balance between support and expectations, using activating methods, and reducing highly controlling teaching styles.

Keywords: autonomy, teaching style, early years teacher, student

Introduction

Supporting student autonomy in grades 1–3 constitutes one of the key elements of modern early childhood education. It is during this period that the foundations of cognitive independence, responsibility for one's own actions, and intrinsic motivation to learn are formed. Early school experiences have a long-term impact on a student's attitude towards learning; therefore, the organization of the didactic process and the teacher's work style are of particular importance.

Student autonomy, understood as the ability to make decisions regarding one's own learning, self-regulation of actions, and reflection on their effectiveness, is recognized as a key competence of the 21st century. In light of constructivist and humanistic concepts, the school's task is not merely to impart knowledge, but primarily to support students in becoming active subjects of the educational process.

Thus, the role of the teacher in this context is not limited to that of an instructor. They should act as a guide, facilitator, and designer of the learning environment. It is their attitude, choice of working methods, and communication style that determine the extent to which students will be able to develop a sense of agency, independence, and readiness to solve problems independently.

At the same time, supporting student autonomy in grades 1–3 poses many challenges. Teachers must strike a balance between providing structure and safety and allowing students to

act freely and make their own decisions. This requires both pedagogical awareness and flexibility in responding to the diverse developmental needs of students.

The aim of this article is to discuss the response strategies, actions, and styles of supporting student autonomy by early childhood education teachers. This analysis attempts to indicate how to effectively build an environment that supports student autonomy from the first years of education.

Student autonomy – a multidimensional concept

Autonomy, understood as self-reliance, independence, distinctiveness, and the individual's ability to make critical judgments, is one of the key concepts analyzed in pedagogy, psychology, and philosophy (Jezierska 2003; Kwieciński 2021). From a pedagogical perspective, especially regarding minors, this concept gains special significance as it relates to the process of shaping the student's subjectivity and their ability to independently manage their own development.

Autonomy is a vital component of human development, manifested in the ability to make responsible choices, decisions, and self-control. Education towards autonomy is therefore considered one of the fundamental tasks of contemporary pedagogy (Jezierska 2003; Kwieciński 2021).

In the process of shaping student autonomy, a key role—right after the family—is played by the school and the teacher, who are responsible for constructing the didactic environment in a way that fosters independent learning, reflection, and personal development. As noted by Antonina Gurycka (cited in: Szymański 2014), in the context of the subjectivity of education, it is extremely important to recognize the individual needs and capabilities of students and to adapt both methods and forms of didactic work, as well as the level of requirements, to them. Students should have the opportunity to make decisions and choose tasks and strategies for their implementation, which enables them to develop a sense of agency, control, and responsibility for their own actions.

Creating spaces for sharing knowledge and skills is also an important element of fostering autonomy, which supports community learning. The teacher should systematically provide students with feedback regarding their progress, competencies, and achievements, as well as show appreciation for their successes, which strengthens the students' intrinsic motivation and self-esteem (Kordziński 2022; Kwieciński 2021).

A student who can consciously select a learning strategy, assess its effectiveness, and then persistently implement the undertaken actions, striving to complete them and achieve set goals, is referred to in the literature as a self-regulated (autonomous) student (Filipiak 2025).

The development of individual autonomy is a necessary condition for shaping a mature personality, understood as an integrated, conscious, and responsible form of human functioning in relations with oneself and the social environment. Lack of autonomy prevents the achievement of full self-regulation, reflexivity, and self-determination, which are the basis of personal development (Lejzerowicz, Garbarczyk 2020).

Teaching styles

Teaching styles are integrated concepts of a teacher's didactic activity that express their general attitude towards students and their understanding of the educational process. As emphasized by Renata Nowakowska-Siuta (2006), a teaching style is conditioned by scientific knowledge, life experiences, value systems, beliefs, and attitudes of the teacher. The adopted style thus reflects an individual vision of educational goals, ways of achieving them, and the understanding of the teacher's and student's roles in the learning process.

Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan (2000a; 2000b; 2002; 2020), authors of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), distinguish four teaching styles that affect students' level of motivation and sense of self-determination differently. These include: the autonomy-supportive style, the structuring style, the controlling style, and the neutral style.

The autonomy-supportive style is characterized by taking the student's perspective into account, offering choices—for example, regarding tasks to be performed or methods of their completion—and encouraging the expression of opinions and taking initiative. A teacher using this style fosters the development of students' sense of agency, which in turn strengthens their autonomous motivation and sense of competence, and builds a positive relationship between student and teacher.

The structuring style is characterized by imposing the teacher's will on students, using external forms of pressure such as rewards, punishments, threats, or other means of coercion. Such practices limit student autonomy, leading to a decrease in intrinsic motivation, reduced engagement in the learning process, and deterioration of educational results. Students learning under conditions of excessive control often feel pressure, avoid challenges for fear of failure, and experience stress, lowered self-esteem, and reluctance to learn.

The controlling style is characterized by imposing the teacher's will on the students, using external forms of pressure, such as rewards, punishments, threats or other means of coercion. Such practices limit the autonomy of the student, leading to a decrease in intrinsic motivation, reduced commitment to the learning process and deterioration of educational performance. Students who learn under conditions of excessive control often feel pressure, avoid challenges for fear of failure, experience stress, a decrease in self-esteem and reluctance to learn.

The neutral style is characterized by a lack of both support and control from the teacher. As a result, students' basic psychological needs, such as the need for autonomy, competence, or social relatedness, are not met, which can negatively affect their development and motivation (Deci, Ryan 2020).

The teaching styles used by teachers can be determined by the Problems in Schools Questionnaire (PIS) developed by the authors. It was designed to assess whether teachers tend towards a controlling or autonomy-supportive orientation in motivating students (Deci et al. 1981; Reeve et al. 1999; Uszyńska-Jarmoc 2011). The use of the key developed by the authors allows for the identification of four teaching styles: highly controlling, moderately controlling, moderately supportive, and highly autonomy-supportive.

Research methodology

The study, conducted in 2024, used the vignette method, covering 64 problem situations. The research technique was a survey, enabling the collection of quantitative data regarding participants' opinions. The research tool was a questionnaire developed to obtain detailed information on the studied variables. The questionnaire consisted of three sections:

1. Demographics section (respondent particulars), containing questions regarding basic demographic and professional data, such as gender, age, or seniority.
2. A section based on the Problems in Schools Questionnaire (PIS) by E. L. Deci and R. M. Ryan. This part aimed to diagnose issues within the school environment, with particular emphasis on motivational and relational aspects of the teaching process.
3. An original section, developed by the researcher and modeled after the Problems in Schools Questionnaire, which addressed the teaching methods employed by teachers and the nature of homework assignments.

The research group consisted of 50 early childhood education teachers employed in educational institutions in the Masovian Voivodeship. Among the participants, 49 were women

and 1 was a man, reflecting the typical gender structure in the teaching profession at the early education level.

Regarding professional rank (teacher certification level), the study included 16 certified teachers, 16 appointed teachers, 9 contract teachers, and 9 novice teachers. This distribution enabled a diverse perspective on professional experience and teaching practices across different stages of career development.

Analysis of seniority showed that 14 teachers had professional experience of up to 5 years, 15 people had worked in the profession for 5 to 15 years, 11 teachers had 16 to 30 years of experience, while 10 respondents had over 30 years of teaching experience. Such diversity in length of service allowed for the inclusion of perspectives from both teachers starting their careers and those with many years of pedagogical experience, significantly enriching the analysis of the collected empirical material.

The following research questions were posed:

1. What response strategies do early childhood education teachers adopt to support student autonomy?
2. What actions do early childhood education teachers take to support student autonomy?
3. What style of supporting autonomy do teachers demonstrate?

Research results – verification of research problems

The analysis of the research results allowed to obtain answers to the research questions.

1. What response strategies do early childhood education teachers adopt to support student autonomy?

Table 1. Results of the analysis of teachers' responses to support student autonomy.

			N	M	ME	SD	MIN	MAX
	B. Increase her pocket money and promise her faster internet if she continues to make progress.		50	2.04	2.00	1.24	1	6
	B. Tell her that she is doing as well now as many of the other children in her class.		50	3.24	3.00	2.10	1	7
Extrinsic motivation	B. Tell her about the results presented at the meeting, letting her know that they are aware of her increased independence at school and at home.		50	5.78	6.00	1.45	1	7
	B. Continue to emphasize that he has to work hard to get better grades.		50	3.70	4.00	1.79	1	7
Organization of competitions	E. Hold spelling competitions regularly to motivate students to		50	3.00	2.00	1.84	1	7

complete assignments as well as other groups do.

	E. Make them repeat spelling rules all the time and provide them with appropriate educational materials.	50	5.86	6.00	1.36	1	7
	E. Recommend that each student keep an orthographic dictionary and emphasize its importance.	50	5.70	6.00	1.36	2	7
	E. Help in inventing ways to learn spelling rules together (e.g. educational games).	50	6.68	7.00	0.77	4	7
	H. Encouraging the child to talk about their results and what it means to them.	50	5.70	6.00	1.31	2	7
Encouraging the student to think about what is important to the student	H. Reviewing the descriptive grade with him and indicating his position in the class.	50	2.58	2.00	1.50	1	6
	H. Emphasizing that he should try harder, because he may have a problem with promotion to the next grade.	50	3.06	3.00	1.73	1	7
	H. Offering him money for each partial grade above 3 in the second semester.	50	1.34	1.00	0.92	1	6
	A. The need to make Antek aware of the importance of completing the tasks, because he needs to learn this material for his own good.	50	3.62	4.00	1.77	1	7
Emphasis on the need to complete tasks	A. Informing Antek that he does not have to finish all his work now and showing willingness to help find the causes of apathy.	50	6.12	6.00	1.14	1	7
	A. Leaving Antek at school after school until he completes the assignments assigned for that day.	50	1.28	1.00	0.78	1	5
	A. Comparing Antek with other children in terms of the tasks assigned to him and encouraging him to catch up with others.	50	1.62	1.00	1.07	1	5
	D. Asking him to talk about how he intends to deal with this situation.	50	6.10	6.00	1.18	2	7
Allowing the child to make their own decisions	D. Telling him that he should probably give up tomorrow's game to catch up on his spelling.	50	2.70	2.00	1.63	1	6
	D. Checking if others are in the same situation and suggesting that he prepare in the same way as others.	50	2.46	2.00	1.72	1	7
	D. Missing tomorrow's game to have time to study. Football affects his learning and grades too much.	50	2.34	2.00	1.36	1	6

N – Number of subjects; M – mean; ME- median; SD – standard deviation, MIN – the lowest value; MAX – the highest value

Analysis of the above results indicates that the surveyed early childhood education teachers rate highest those didactic strategies that foster active student engagement and the development of cognitive independence. In particular, educational games received high mean scores ($M = 6.68$), which teachers perceive as an effective form of supporting autonomy. This

method combines elements of play with learning, enabling students to make decisions independently, experiment, and learn through experience. Didactic games also allow for differentiation of task difficulty levels, which fosters individualization of the teaching process and gives students a sense of influence over the course of educational activity.

Another highly rated strategy is helping to invent ways to facilitate learning ($M = 6.12$). This result demonstrates that teachers recognize the importance of metacognition – the ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate one's own learning process. Supporting the student in seeking individual learning strategies fosters the development of self-regulation and reflexivity, which constitute the foundation of cognitive autonomy.

Engaging students in reflection on their own results also received a relatively high rating ($M = 5.70$). This practice points to teachers' growing awareness regarding the importance of feedback. It is understood here not as an external evaluation, but as a tool supporting the development of intrinsic motivation. Encouraging students to analyze their own progress fosters the building of a sense of responsibility for the learning process and strengthens beliefs in self-efficacy.

Material rewards ($M = 1.34$) and comparing students with one another ($M = 1.62$) were assessed as inappropriate or poorly adequate in the context of supporting autonomy. Such results confirm that the surveyed teachers show awareness of the limitations of extrinsic motivation, which can lead to a weakening of intrinsic motivation if used in an overly controlling manner. Social comparisons and reward systems can foster competition and fear of evaluation instead of strengthening the student's sense of competence and self-determination.

The obtained data suggest that early childhood education teachers increasingly refer to the concept of learning based on cooperation, reflection, and intrinsic motivation, while distancing themselves from traditional, externally controlling methods of educational influence.

2. What actions do early childhood education teachers take to support student autonomy?

Table 2. Analysis of the activities taken by early childhood education teachers to support student autonomy.

			N	M	ME	SD	MIN	MAX
Emphasizing the importance of social skills	C. Emphasizing the importance of self-control for him to succeed in school and other situations.		50	4.60	5.00	1.62	1	7
	C. Placing him in an inclusive class, with support in difficult situations.		50	4.18	4.50	1.95	1	7
	C. Help him see how other children behave in different situations and praise him if he does the same.		50	5.70	6.00	1.43	2	7
	C. Realizing that Damian is probably not getting the attention he needs and paying more attention to him.		50	5.80	6.00	1.43	1	7

	F. Encourage her to interact and praise every social initiative.	50	5.00	5.00	1.60	1	7
	F. Talk to her and emphasize that she should make friends to be happier.	50	3.06	3.00	1.58	1	7
Fostering interaction	F. Ask her to talk about her relationships with other children and encourage her to take small steps when she's ready.	50	5.74	6.00	1.17	1	7
	F. Encourage her to observe how other children relate to each other and to join them.	50	4.54	5.00	1.90	1	7
Showing trust	G. Talking to him about the consequences of theft and what the robbed person feels.	50	6.06	7.00	1.32	2	7
	G. A conversation with him during which she will show her trust in him and try to understand why he did it.	50	5.90	6.50	1.57	1	7
	G. Making a fuss with him and telling him that stealing is something that cannot be tolerated and he must learn it.	50	1.70	1.00	1.13	1	5
	G. Making him realize that it was wrong and asking him to apologize to the teacher and promise not to do it again.	50	4.60	5.00	1.88	1	7

N – Number of subjects; M – mean; ME- median; SD – standard deviation, MIN – the lowest value; MAX – the highest value

Analysis of the data indicates that actions rated best by the surveyed teachers ($M > 5.5$) are those that engage students in reflection on their own emotions, behaviors, and social relationships. High ratings were given, among others, to talking about the consequences of theft ($M = 6.06$) and increasing attention to a student who needs it ($M = 5.80$). Both strategies fit into the current of emotional-social education and align with the approach supporting the development of empathy, self-regulation, and moral responsibility.

A conversation about the consequences of behavior, conducted in a supportive manner, fosters the development of cause-and-effect thinking and the formation of moral awareness in early school-age children. Instead of using punishments or moralizing, the teacher should encourage students to independently reflect on the motives of their own actions and their effects on others. This type of reflection supports the development of empathy and the ability to take another person's perspective, which constitutes one of the key elements of building interpersonal autonomy.

In turn, actions consisting of increasing attention and support towards a student who requires it indicate teachers' sensitivity to children's individual emotional needs. Such an approach is consistent with the concept of child-centered education, where the teacher-student relationship is based on trust, empathy, and genuine interest in the student as a person. As a result, students experience a sense of emotional security, which is a condition for the development of cognitive and social independence.

Actions rated as less appropriate ($M < 4$) include those that may generate social pressure or place students in situations exceeding their current emotional and developmental capabilities.

An example is a conversation about the necessity of making friends with a peer ($M = 3.06$). The low rating may result from teachers' belief that friendship and social relationships should form naturally, and excessive interference by adults can lead to reluctance or a sense of coercion.

These results confirm that the surveyed teachers prefer an approach based on dialogue, reflection, and empathy. They therefore avoid actions that may violate the child's emotional autonomy.

3. What style of supporting autonomy do teachers demonstrate?

Based on the questionnaire key, four scales of styles supporting student autonomy in the learning process were constructed, as presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Reliability analysis results

	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
Highly controlling style	.696	16
Moderately controlling style	.671	17
Moderately autonomy-supportive style	.762	16
Highly autonomy-supportive style	.806	16

Reliability analysis of the measurement scales used showed satisfactory psychometric properties of the tool. High Cronbach's alpha coefficient values were obtained for scales describing the moderately supportive style and the highly supportive style. In both cases, the statistic values exceeded the level of $\alpha = 0.70$, indicating good internal consistency of the items included in the given scale. This means that the measurement of these styles is characterized by stability and can be considered reliable in the context of pilot studies. Slightly lower, though close to the acceptable threshold, results were obtained for scales referring to the moderately controlling style and highly controlling style ($\alpha < 0.70$). It is worth emphasizing, however, that these differences are not significant and may result from the limited size of the research sample. It can be assumed that with a larger number of respondents, alpha coefficient values would reach a level above 0.70, which would allow these scales to be considered fully reliable. The obtained results thus indicate that all scales of the tool possess satisfactory internal consistency, enabling their use in further quantitative analyses.

Table 4. Basic Stats

	N	M	Me	SD	MIN	MAX	P
Highly controlling style	50	3.38	3.34	0.67	1.81	4.75	.200

Moderately controlling style	50	4.19	4.15	0.66	2.59	5.29	.200
Moderately autonomy-supportive style	50	4.84	4.88	0.69	3.31	6.25	.200
Highly autonomy-supportive style	50	5.95	6.09	0.65	4.31	7.00	.035

N – Number of subjects; M – mean; ME- median; SD – standard deviation, MIN – the lowest value; MAX – the highest value; p – significance level of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test

The mean values obtained in the study suggest a clear differentiation in the preferred teaching styles used by early childhood education teachers. The highest scores were recorded for the highly autonomy-supportive style ($M = 5.95$; $SE = 0.65$), which means that the surveyed teachers identify to the greatest extent with pedagogical practices fostering student independence, agency, and co-responsibility for the learning process. The high level of this variable confirms the trend of moving away from traditional, controlling teaching models towards an approach based on partnership and educational dialogue.

Conversely, the lowest mean values were obtained for the highly controlling style ($M = 3.38$; $SD = 0.67$), indicating that the surveyed teachers less frequently refer to didactic and educational strategies based on coercion, strict supervision, and external control. This result can be interpreted as a manifestation of transformation in pedagogical awareness, consisting of a gradual departure from the authoritarian model of teacher-student relations in favor of supporting autonomy, dialogue, and reflexivity.

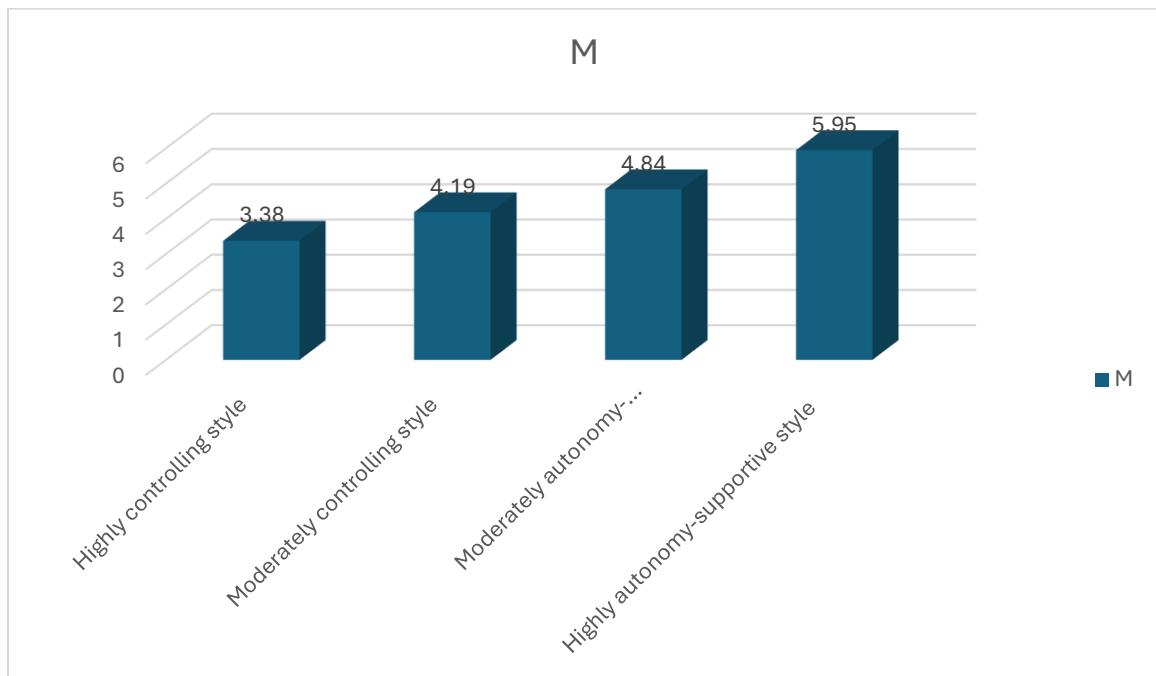


Chart 1. Mean values of styles supporting student autonomy in the learning process.

Summary and conclusions

Based on the obtained research results, it can be stated that the surveyed early childhood education teachers predominantly prefer didactic-educational strategies conducive to the development of student autonomy and independence. Their practice is dominated by actions aimed at cooperation, positive reinforcement, and building relationships based on trust and empathy.

Respondents perceive extrinsic motivation—based on a system of rewards, comparisons, and pressure—as a less effective and less desirable form of pedagogical influence. Strategies taking into account empathy, understanding student emotions, and supporting their sense of agency are rated highest. This indicates the dominance of a reflective and supportive approach. Conversely, actions based on criticism, coercion, and moralizing received the lowest ratings, which may evidence teachers' gradual departure from a controlling teaching style.

At the same time, relatively high standard deviations are noticeable in some items, suggesting the occurrence of diverse attitudes among the surveyed teachers—not all implement strategies supporting student autonomy to the same extent.

Based on the conducted analysis, the following challenges for early childhood education teachers can be formulated:

1. Increasing the coherence of the educational approach – it is necessary to deepen knowledge and improve skills regarding modern methods of motivating and supporting student self-regulation.
2. Maintaining a balance between support and requirements – it is important to build relationships based on trust while maintaining clear boundaries and consequences of actions, which fosters the development of students' responsibility for their own decisions.
3. Developing teachers' emotional and communication competencies – effective support of student autonomy requires a high level of empathy, the ability to dialogue about emotions, and the capacity to build partnership relations with children.
4. Implementing practical forms of cooperation and reflection – it is advisable to more frequently use activating methods, such as projects, didactic games, reflective discussions, or joint problem solving, which support self-regulation and cognitive development of students.
5. Limiting elements of the controlling style – it is recommended to move away from didactic practices based on external control and coercion in favor of strengthening students' intrinsic motivation.

The analysis of the pilot study results thus indicates that teachers of grades 1–3 mostly prefer an empathetic and supportive pedagogical approach, based on dialogue, understanding emotions, and joint search for solutions. The respondents declare a departure from authoritarian methods in favor of the concept of education based on trust, partnership, and emotional support. They consider the teacher-student relationship based on trust and the possibility of independent reflection and action adapted to the individual pace of the child's development as key factors in supporting student autonomy.

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