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*Mutual Learning Community: Teachers' Opinions  
on Their Learning Possibilities in Schools Implementing  
International Programmes\**

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Społeczność wzajemnego uczenia się. Opinie nauczycieli na temat możliwości ich uczenia się w szkołach realizujących międzynarodowe programy kształcenia

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to identify teachers' opinions on their learning opportunities in schools implementing the following international programmes in Poland: International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), and International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE). The study was conducted using the diagnostic survey method on a group of 103 teachers. The theoretical basis was Wenger's (1998) model of learning in communities of practice, which assumes that adult learning (in this case, teachers) can be analyzed in four areas: (1) *Belonging*, (2) *Doing*, (3) *Becoming*, and (4) *Experiencing*. Therefore, the socio-cultural situation of teachers and their common but specific educational practices conditioned by the specificity of international schools were adopted. The results show that teachers do not feel fully prepared to work after graduation, they use the knowledge and skills acquired in the workplace more often than

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that acquired during studies, and international programmes create favourable conditions for their learning and professional development. Teachers form a learning community at three levels: school, national, and international. Thus, they form a type of community of communities that Wenger calls a 'constellation'.

**Keywords:** workplace learning; teacher education; international educational programmes; international schools

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary reality places high demands on teachers both in terms of subject knowledge, didactic competencies, and personality traits. Learning is necessary not only to ensure high-quality work but also to initiate and implement educational changes. Studies on teacher learning, as the most 'personal' process (as opposed to formal education, courses, and training), seem to help researchers better understand the specificity of the teaching profession. What is particularly interesting and so far not scientifically explained is the learning of teachers implementing international education programmes. These teachers rely mainly on learning from each other because pre-service teacher education prepares them mainly to implement the national curriculum. At the same time, such teachers are too few in number for institutionally organized training or courses to be created for them.

Research on teacher learning in international schools in Poland is gaining popularity in particular due to (1) the deregulatory policy of establishing international schools after the socio-political changes of the 1990s, (2) the growing demand for internationally validated programmes among students that come to Poland from abroad, and (3) a growing aspiration among students and their parents for a wider selection of programmes to choose from compared to the limited choices available in Poland during the communist era (Leek, 2022). In expanding the education market in Poland, the most significant growth in the international school context was noticed with the appearance of new types of international schools within the public education sector, providing international programmes for local families seeking an alternative for their children (Leek, 2022). Research on international programmes has been conducted so far mainly in relation to students and schools as socio-cultural organizations (Doherty, Shield, 2012; Edwards, Underwood, 2012; Lee et al., 2014; Maire, 2021; Outhwaite, Ferri, 2017; Resnik, 2014; Siskin, Weinstein, 2008; Tarc, 2009; Theokas, 2013; Wright, Lee, 2020). Little is known about the professional development and learning of the teachers implementing international programmes, the functions of learning of teachers in International Baccalaureate schools, how teachers organize learning within an interdisciplinary curriculum, what is the specificity of their work in international schools, or what challenges these teachers must deal with.

In our study, we considered the three most popular international programmes in Poland: International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), and International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE). In the 2020/2021 school year, these three programmes were offered at all educational stages in Poland. The IB programme was implemented in Poland in 60 schools, the IGCSE in 10 schools, and AP in 6 schools.

The hypothesis that we assumed in our study is that teachers must learn on-site in schools when implementing the international programme. In other words, the IB curriculum creates favourable conditions on-site in schools for teachers' interdisciplinary learning and professional development.

The IB offers four international educational programmes known as IB programmes. They include the Primary Years Programme (PYP), the Middle Years Programme (MYP), the Diploma Programme (DP), and the Career-related Programme (CP). IB school status is achieved through an authorization process that takes 2–3 years. The IB programme focuses on the individual needs of each student and develops critical thinking and a sense of responsibility. According to the International Baccalaureate Organisation, there are currently more than 5,000 IB schools worldwide and the programme is implemented in more than 140 countries. Diploma Programme (DP) graduates are eligible to continue their studies at universities around the world.

Advanced Placement (AP) is another popular educational programme, developed by the College Board, an American organization associating schools in the United States. Since 1955, the College Board has been responsible for the development of course guidelines and supports teachers involved in the development and implementation of this programme. The AP programme is intended for high school students and allows them to gain specific knowledge in a variety of areas. At present, students can choose from 38 subjects. The IB emphasizes learning based on skill development while the AP is focused on learning the contents of the curriculum. AP courses are focused on the content of a specific academic discipline and are completed with an exam (cf. AP Central, 2023). In Poland, completion of the AP programme is often associated with preparation for the IB.

The IGCSE is the third programme, which was developed more than 30 years ago by the University of Cambridge International Examinations. This is a recognized programme of education for students aged 14 to 16. The IGCSE offers more than 70 subjects. In the educational process, students follow 5–6 subjects, and each subject is certified separately. The programme is not a package that needs to be implemented in its entirety. Schools can combine it with elements of local educational programmes. The IGCSE places emphasis on building subject-related knowledge, but also on developing skills in critical thinking, independent research, problem-solving, and collaboration. Subjects are

completed during the duration of the course and assessed through examinations organized by Cambridge International Examinations (cf. Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2021). Thanks to its holistic approach to education, the IGCSE programme prepares students for international diploma programmes such as the IB. Cambridge Assessment International Education provides teachers with wide access to teaching materials and offers methodological support and participation in training.

### THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

We adopted the situated learning theory developed by Wenger (1998) as a model of learning in communities of practice. This theory puts learning in a socio-cultural perspective. The main unit for analysing learning is the community of practice, human interaction, as well as human interactions and their material, social and cultural environment, and not, as in behaviourist and cognitive approaches, the individual mind (Yuan, McKelvey, 2004). Wenger does not give a strict (operational) definition of learning. However, he strongly relates learning to action and practice that are situated in a material, social, and cultural context. This, in turn, makes learning complex and multi-faceted. According to Wenger, learning consists of four component

1. *Belonging* (membership in a community of practice). Members of a community of practice develop it and share practices, customs, artifacts, symbols, conventions, and stories (including practice history). Commonly, communities of practice do not have their own markings, such as specific names, and therefore it can be said that most often they are not visible. They can be analysed separately, which does not imply the assumption of their isolation from the rest of the world, or they can be viewed as part of a system of communities that Wenger calls a constellation of communities of practice. What a constellation is understood to be depends on the adopted perspective, therefore a community may be part of one or more constellations simultaneously.
2. *Doing* (participation in the practice of that community). Practice is doing something that has its historical and social context, thanks to which what is done is significant. The perception of practice as a process corresponds with this, thanks to which “we can experience the world and our involvement as significant” (Wenger, 1998, p. 51). The actions of the community members are not mechanical (they do not represent a reaction to external stimuli), but are goal-oriented, which shows the teleological nature of the practice. Therefore, the same or similar action may have different meanings in different communities of practice.
3. *Becoming* (constructing identity). Learners participate in community practices. This participation does not relate to a single activity but to the overall

process of being an active participant in the practices of (many) communities of practice and of constructing identity in relation to these communities of practice. Participation is therefore a process of identity, a process of becoming because it allows us to shape who we are and how we interpret what we do and what we do not do. Our identity is shaped by both participation and non-participation, that is, by joining in the practices of some communities and not joining in the practices of other communities. Participation combines doing, talking, thinking, feeling, and belonging. Therefore, it is very broad category and should not be treated only as a synonym for cooperation (collaboration) between members of a community of practice. The shaping of identity is a central concept in Wenger's description of agency.

4. *Experiencing* (negotiating meanings). Experiencing is negotiating meanings. Meaning refers to the transition from the private to a private which is common. It is therefore a social and public activity. Meaning is not fixed once and for all but is produced, discussed, and discursive. Meaning does not exist regardless of the activity, but the meaning of a word is its use in the socio-cultural context. Meaning can be said to be situated because the use of words is situated in time and space, in a certain situation, it is part of a certain activity.

We justify the choice of this theory by the fact that it allows us to consider the socio-cultural location of teachers in schools and their common but very specific practices as a professional group implementing the IB. Moreover, Wenger pays attention to the communities of practice, which for us comprised teachers from schools implementing the international baccalaureate. A further argument in favour of this choice was that this theory has been used successfully in research on adult learning (Gullbekk, 2016; Lloyd, 2009, 2010; Moring, 2011). Its scientific usefulness is related to the belief that the success of an institution, organization or corporation is related to the ability of employees to become involved in social learning systems within institutions, as well as to participate in wider learning systems.

## METHOD

Taking into account the specificity of the studied phenomenon, we decided to use the quantitative paradigm in the design, collection, and analysis of empirical data.

The research was carried out in several stages. Firstly, we conducted an in-depth analysis of the literature on the subject as well as of strategic documents and formal and legal solutions in the field of the functioning of international schools in Poland. The research activities undertaken allowed us to formulate the research question: What is the potential for teachers' learning in schools implementing international programmes? Based on the collected material, in the second key stage, we developed two proprietary questionnaires. In the third stage,

surveys were conducted among teachers at international schools operating in Poland and implementing international programmes: IB, AP, and IGCSE.

The survey was divided into six parts: (1) statistical information and questions about (2) learning as belonging, (3) learning as doing (practice), (4) learning as becoming, and (5) learning as experiencing. Moreover, a section with questions about (6) the sense of community was created, because, according to Wenger's theory, the sense of community permeates all aspects of learning and directly affects its course.

The survey was conducted in 28 schools that had at least 3 years of experience with the IB programme, most often located in urban agglomerations and large cities throughout Poland. The official IB website states that in 2022 there were 65 schools implementing IB programmes. Thirteen of them offered Primary Years Programme, 16 – Middle Years Programme, and 56 – Diploma Programme (International Baccalaureate, 2022). However, there are no statistics on international schools in Poland implementing AP and IGCSE programmes. We estimate there are about 15 of them. There is also no official number of teachers working in international programmes. According to our records, there are about 1,200 teachers.

The results of our research concern Polish schools but may also provide important scientific knowledge for international comparative studies in the field of international education programmes. Conclusions from the research cannot go beyond the scope of the research sample, but if other researchers obtain similar conclusions, then – with an increasing number of studies – the possibility of generalizing the results obtained here and confidence in their correctness will increase.

## FINDINGS

The questionnaire was completed by 103 teachers between November 2021 and January 2022. Teachers took an average of 26 minutes to complete it.

Most of the teachers were women (68; see Figure 1). The gender ratio in the survey corresponds to the general gender proportions in the Polish education system. In Poland, women account for 83% of teachers and this is one of the highest rates in Europe.

Middle-aged teachers, 36–45 years old and 46–55 years old, were the dominant group (see Figure 2). Most of the teachers worked in Warsaw and taught English. Most of them had worked in international schools for 2 years (15%), but the average length of work was 6 years.

The first component of learning in Wenger's theory is "learning as belonging to the community" (see Figure 3). The main conditions of learning are striving for the same goal, being inspired by older colleagues, learning from other members of the community, architectural solutions conducive to learning, and

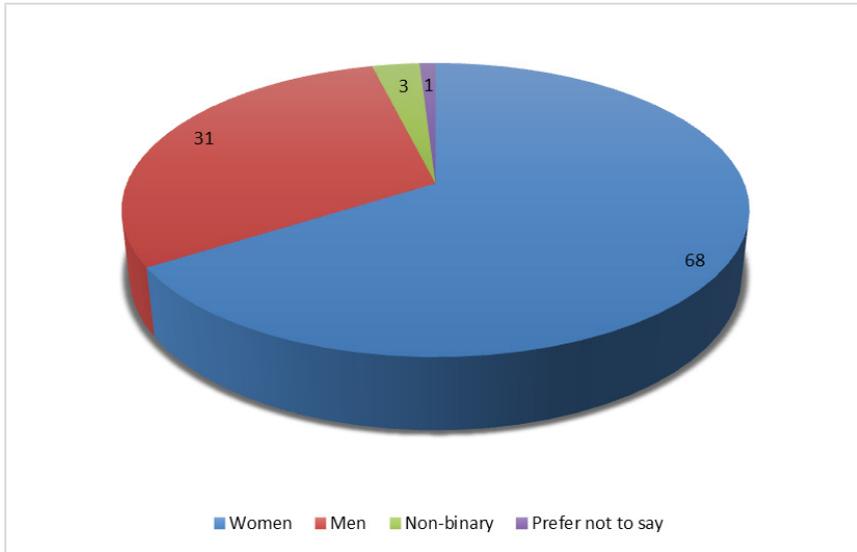


Figure 1. Gender

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

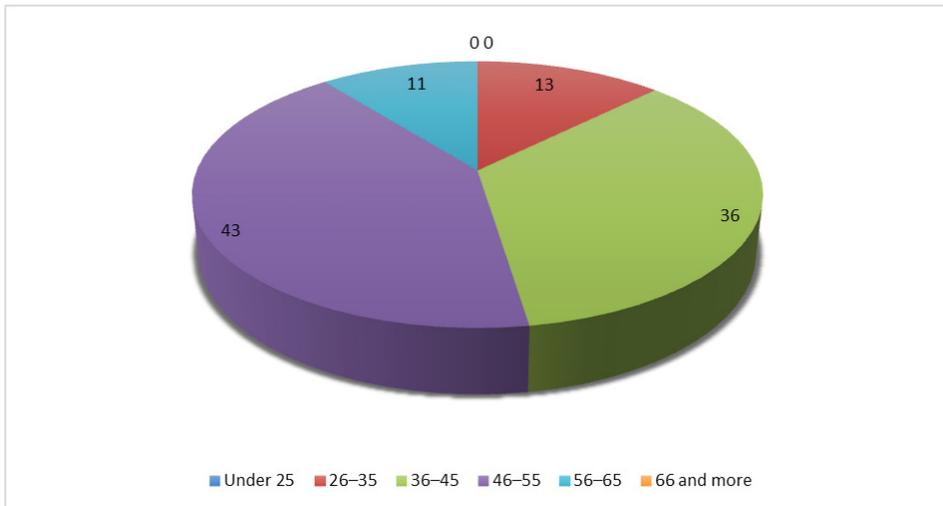


Figure 2. Age

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

acting in a similar way to the members of similar communities. For each of these determinants, the teachers' responses were quite similar. This means that teachers have similar experiences and opinions in this regard. Most of the teachers agreed with our statements. There was also a large group of teachers who did not have an opinion on these statements. A relatively large number of teachers disagreed with the statement: *I learn teaching methods from teachers from my school*. This means that their learning does not consist in simply copying other teachers' working methods, but in independently constructing their own methods. On the other hand, a confirmation of a strong belonging to the teachers' community is the distribution of responses to the statement about acting in a similar way to other teachers. The vast majority of teachers strongly agree or agree with this statement. In the concept of learning developed by Wenger, the place of learning is also important. Most of the teachers found the school architecture to be suitable for their needs, and at the same time relatively few teachers did not have an opinion about this. From these responses, the image of teachers as a community committed to their own development emerges. It is an individual engagement, not copying the behaviour of others.

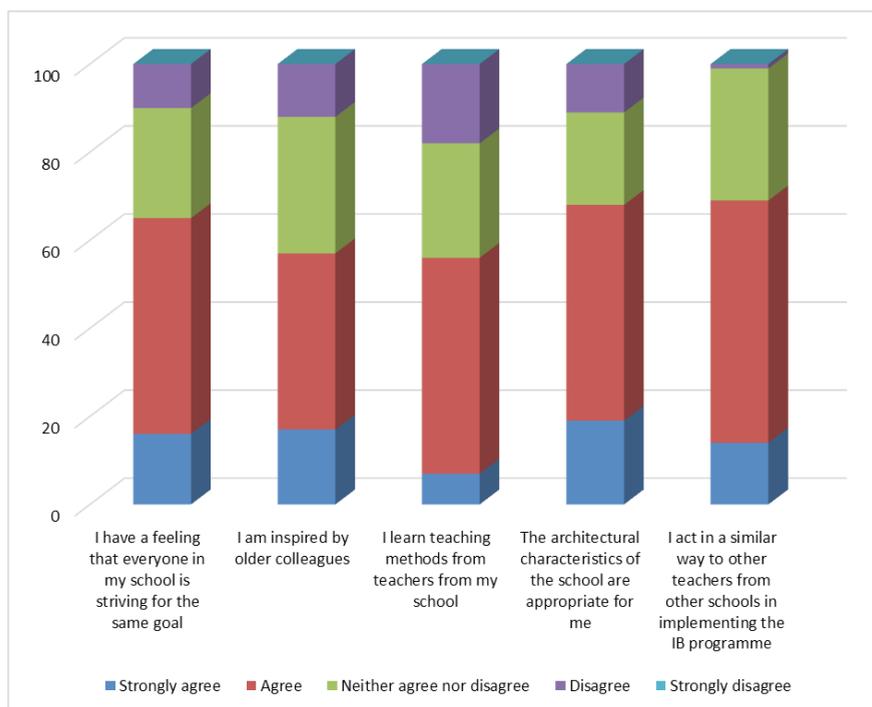


Figure 3. Learning as belonging to the community

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The second component of Wenger's theory that we investigated is doing (practice; see Figure 4). We obtained similar distributions of answers to the first three questions: about the importance of work at school, the importance of work goals, and the understanding of the social importance of work. On the other hand, the distribution of answers to the next two questions was significantly different. Out of 103 teachers, only 13 strongly agreed that their work pattern is based on knowledge acquired during pre-service teacher training. At the same time, the greatest number of teachers neither agree nor disagree, disagree or strongly disagree. Such responses show that the academic training of teachers does not take into account the specificity of the international curriculum. It focuses solely on the national curriculum. Thus, teachers who are involved in the implementation of international curricula must learn on their own. This is also confirmed by the distribution of answers to the last question within this component. Out of 103 teachers, only a few denied that their work pattern is the result of their professional experience.

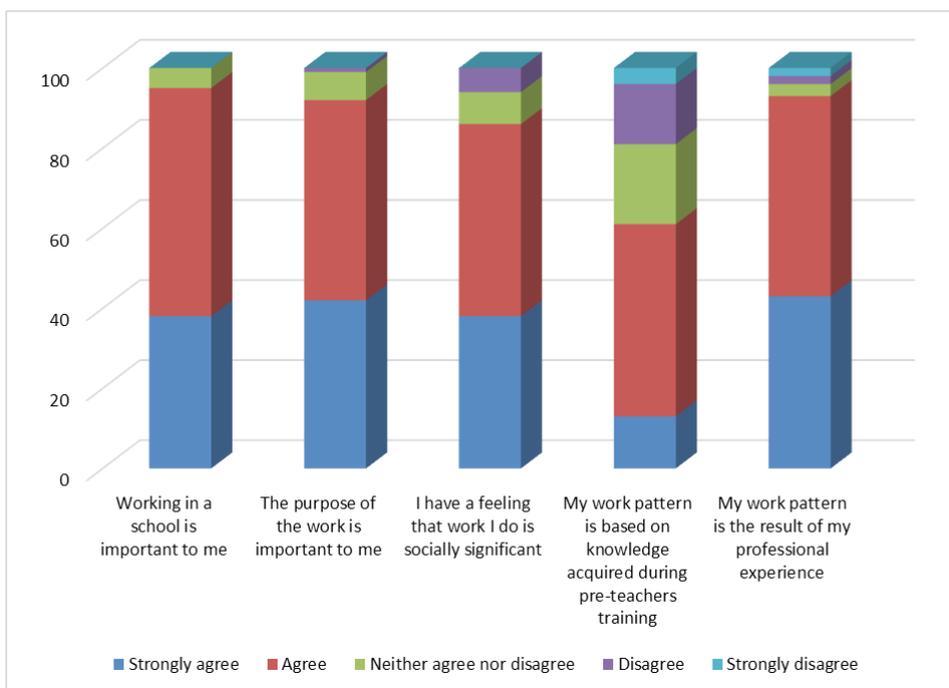


Figure 4. Learning as doing

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The third analysed component of learning was becoming a member of the teacher community (see Figure 5). Sixty-two teachers agreed or strongly agreed

that the school community shapes their identity, and 33 teachers had no opinion on this statement. Slightly fewer respondents agreed with the statement that they feel that they are an inspiration for other teachers at school. Even fewer teachers strongly agreed or agreed that they think in a similar way to other teachers. While clearly, most people agreed or definitely agreed with the statement that they belong to the school community of teachers.

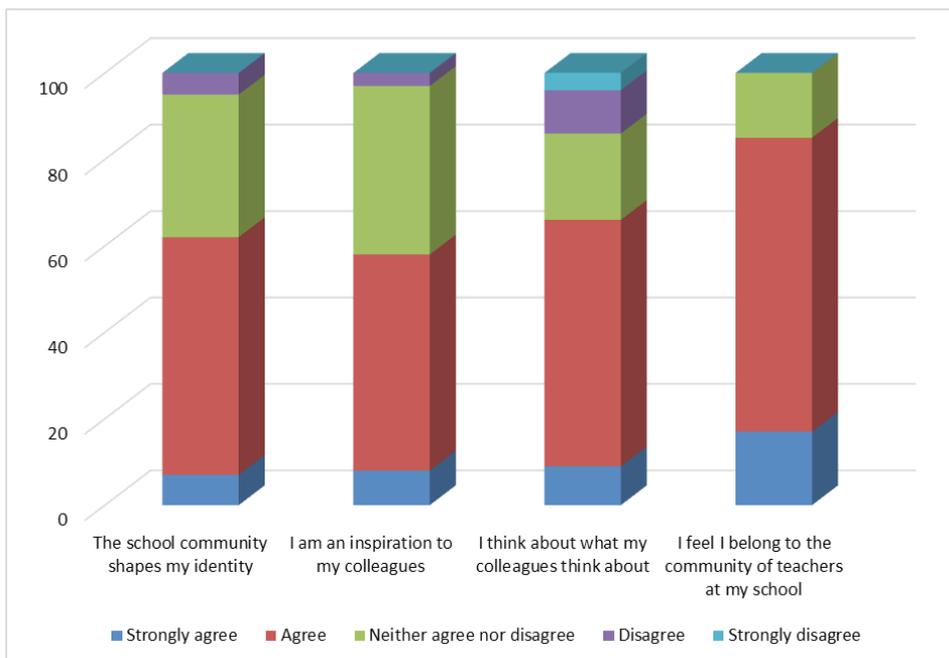


Figure 5. Learning as becoming

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The last component of learning in Wenger's theory is learning as experience (see Figure 6). The largest number of teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the opinion that being at school has a strong impact on how they interpret the world. The distribution of responses to the other three statements were very similar. Over half of the teachers strongly agreed or agreed with the opinions that working at school changes their relationship with people, that teachers share common areas of interest, and that school ceremonies are important to them.

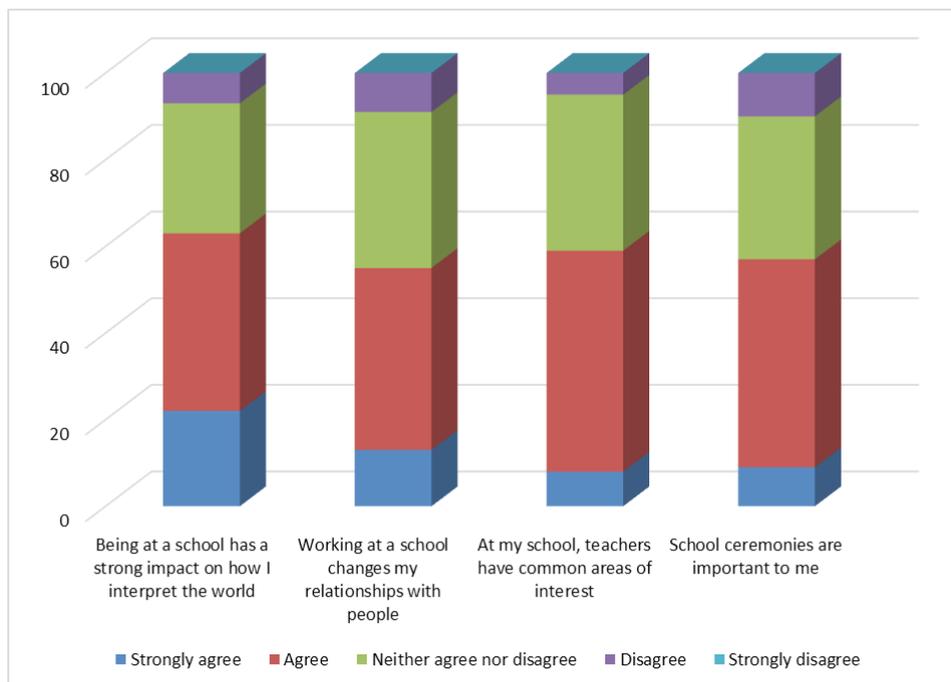


Figure 6. Learning as experience

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Apart from the four basic components of learning according to Wenger's theory of learning, we decided to additionally examine a fifth component, which is the teachers' community, because it is mainly the characteristics of a community that learning depends on, and at the same time learning shapes the community (see Figure 7).

Out of 103 teachers, as many as 93 strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that they have harmonious relations with other teachers at school. However, the distribution of responses was significantly different regarding the statement that in the school there is a rapid flow of information – only 62 teachers strongly agreed or agreed with this statement. In the case of statements about the flow of information, spontaneous relations with other teachers, and a common perspective when looking at the world, there were relatively many teachers who did not have an opinion, disagreed or strongly disagreed.

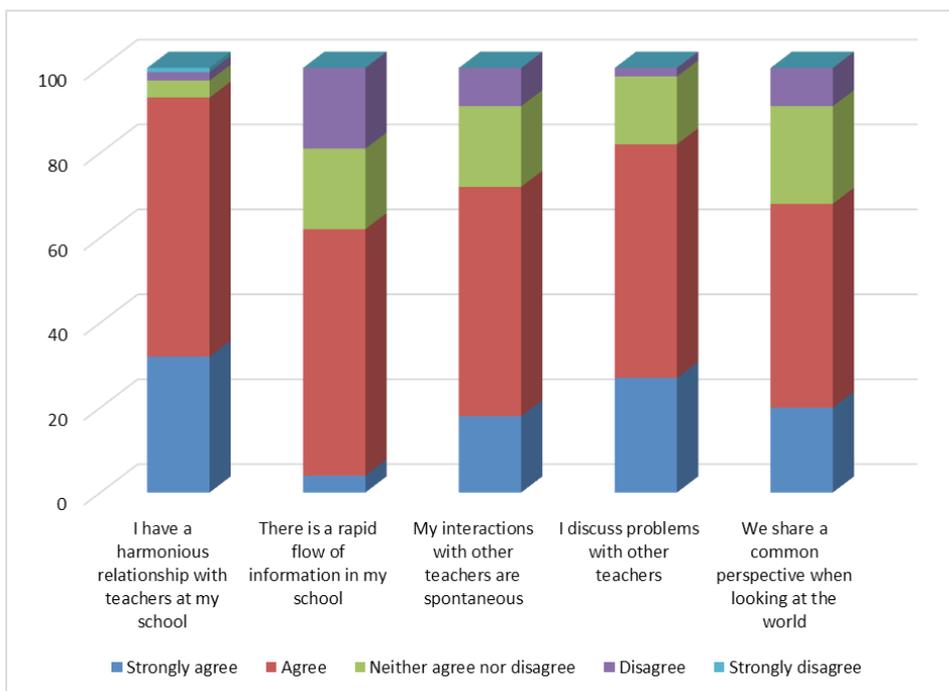


Figure 7. Teachers' community

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The conclusions of this part of our study are as follows:

- teachers have a strong sense of belonging to the community of teachers implementing international education programmes,
- they learn a lot through every day school practice and activities because professional preparation during their studies is not necessarily relevant,
- participation in the implementation of international education programmes allows them to feel like members of the community of teachers,
- the implementation of international public programmes partially influences their perception of the world.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Teaching – the basic task of teachers – is a complex process determined by many factors. In the contemporary world, full of dynamic changes, teaching requires constant learning by the teacher. The research results illustrate that teachers in schools implementing international programmes have favourable conditions for school-situated learning and professional development. In their daily work at school, they make more use of the knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired

in the workplace than those acquired during pre-service teacher training. The knowledge of teachers implementing international education programmes grows from their personal experiences, mutual cooperation, observing other teachers, and reflecting on their own practice. Their professional development is not about acquiring a certain level of academic education and then only about improving, but about constantly becoming a teacher.

Lampinen, Konu, Kettunen, and Suutala (2018) claim that belongingness is a central element for the integration into services, one which influences motivation and the quality of the educational experience. Tyler and Lind's (1992) relational model of authority assumes that a person's attitude towards authority is impacted more by relational aspects of their contacts with institutional authorities than by procedural aspects. Another model of belonging in relation to the institution posited by Tyler and Blader (2003) emphasizes the satisfactory interactions with authorities of an institution that promote feelings of belonging to the group. Tyler and Blader's (2003) "social identity mediation hypothesis" assumes that positive attitudes towards the authorities depend on interactions with authority representatives, because they "depend upon whether people see themselves and authorities as part of a common in-group" (Reicher, Stott, 2020, p. 695). The present study focused on interactions with a specific institutional authority – the school – where teachers' *learning as belonging* means that they become part of the school institution, understand as a community, through learning and developing common practices, customs, artefacts, symbols, conventions and stories, including school history. This belonging within an institution concerns not only the school itself but also the national community of teachers working in international programmes and their community. Depending on the problem or subject taught, teaching communities form constellations in which teachers learn from each other and support each other. Tyler and Blader (2003) claim that when part of a community, people tend to formulate interpretations about interactions of the social status of members of a particular group or institution. If the information is positive, there is a tendency to consider the authority legitimate and readily accept the legal and social norms needed to maintain a positive long-term relationship with the social group, institution or society. Our study shows that belonging supports identification with each of these communities to a varying extent and with varying strength. Further qualitative research is needed to explain why and what this depends on.

*Learning as doing* seems to be the key issue for understanding the teachers' learning. Their daily work is associated with intense, often all-day activities. These activities are creative, because it is mainly up to these teachers to prepare and conduct the lessons. They also prepare to teach materials themselves. Using Wenger's words, it can be said that their "involvement is significant" (Wenger, 1998, p. 51) in the functioning of the schools, in other teachers' work, and in the

students' lives. Their activities are not “mechanical”, not externally stimulated, but arise from inner conviction and are goal-oriented, which shows the teleological nature of this teacher learning. Learning by doing includes cooperative learning, adventure learning, group projects, and apprenticeship (Mann, 2011), allowing this process to be looked at from a broad perspective. A study by Kilburn, Nind, and Wiles (2014) also emphasized the usefulness of learning by doing in facilitating the learning process, which suggests that this dimension of learning is particularly important for teachers in the first years of implementing international programmes.

The teachers' *learning as becoming* (constructing identity) relies on participation in school community practices and constellations. Participation is something more than cooperation (collaboration) between teachers of a community of practice. Their identity is shaped by their school community, but also by other communities of teachers from international schools, which favour identification with the constellation. The relationship of learning and identity is not new (identity is based on the works of Rogers and Freire) and is not Wenger's original contribution to the knowledge of learning. As Kolb and Kolb note (2009, p. 5):

People who see themselves as learners are those who trust their direct personal experiences and their ability to learn from them. Their primary focus is not on immediate performance or goal achievement but on the ongoing process of learning from these experiences. Instead of desiring some fixed goal, they prefer the excitement of being in the process of potentialities being born.

Our findings have shown these “potentialities” are wide. Teachers are active participants in the educational practices in international programmes. They construct an identity in relation to international programmes. Through the prism of work in an international school, they shape who they are and how they interpret what they do and what they do not do.

And finally *learning as experiencing* (negotiating meanings). Experiencing concerns mainly the meanings teachers assign to their job and professional role. Experiencing is endless, it even takes place during leisure time, it is discussed and is discursive. Experiencing depends on socio-cultural context, time and space, in other words, it is socio-culturally situated. And because teachers come from different communities, they bring new qualities within the constellation and expand the potential for mutual learning. Illeris, referring to the learning theory by Wenger, is of the opinion that this theory gives “a special twist”, because

the central message is not that all learning is influenced by the situation in which it takes place, but rather by the certain type of situations that have some specific learning qualities, i.e. situations that the author generally term legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice. This occurs, e.g., typically in apprenticeships in an enterprise, whereas what takes place in a formalised education programme is not considered a community of practice and is therefore not treated as situated learning. (Illeris, 2004, p. 146)

This means that in our research – based on the theory of situational learners – teachers' experiencing of various formalized forms of learning can be undervalued. It is therefore possible that there are other practices and situations of teachers learning in international schools that our research included. Wenger in his later writings posited that experiencing can be a way to describe and assess the nature of social learning in a community of practice and experiencing is created as a result of peoples' activities and in their interactions with others in situated learning (see Wenger, Trayner, Laat, 2011).

Our research looked primarily at learning opportunities. The results of these studies indicate that these possibilities are varied and multiple. Thus, a new, interesting area for further research has emerged, consisting in study of how these possibilities are substantively used by teachers and what the results are.

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## ABSTRAKT

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie opinii nauczycieli na temat ich możliwości uczenia się w szkołach realizujących w Polsce następujące międzynarodowe programy kształcenia: *International Baccalaureate* (IB), *Advanced Placement* (AP) oraz *International General Certificate of Secondary Education* (IGCSE). Badanie zostało przeprowadzone metodą sondażu diagnostycznego na grupie 103 nauczycieli. Podstawą teoretyczną był model uczenia się we wspólnocie praktyków Wengera (1998), który zakłada, że uczenie się dorosłych (w tym przypadku nauczycieli) może być analizowane w czterech obszarach: (1) przynależność, (2) działanie, (3) stawianie się i (4) doświadczanie. Przyjęto więc społeczno-kulturowe usytuowanie nauczycieli oraz ich wspólne, ale swoiste praktyki edukacyjne uwarunkowane specyfiką szkół międzynarodowych. Wyniki wskazują, że nauczyciele nie czują się w pełni przygotowani do pracy po ukończeniu studiów, częściej korzystają z wiedzy i umiejętności zdobytych w miejscu pracy niż na studiach, a programy międzynarodowe stwarzają im raczej dogodne warunki do uczenia się i rozwoju zawodowego. Nauczyciele tworzą społeczność uczącą się na trzech poziomach: szkolnym, krajowym i międzynarodowym. Jest to więc rodzaj wspólnoty wspólnot, którą Wenger nazywa „konstelacją”.

**Słowa kluczowe:** uczenie się w miejscu pracy; edukacja nauczycieli; międzynarodowe programy kształcenia; szkoły międzynarodowe