

PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN TEACHING/LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE (THE CONTEXT OF LITHUANIA)

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Abstract

Professional teachers and their continuous professional development are a necessity of the modern world, arising from rapid changes and constant innovations in the life of society, he/she is a promoter of the teaching process, a researcher, a positive participant in the process of change in education, who prioritizes lifelong learning, he/she is sociable and collaborative, a professional in his/her field.

In order to remain competitive in a rapidly changing environment, various educational organizations use various measures that ensure a quick response to these changes. It is understandable that in today's context, the activity of the teacher in an educational institution is becoming diverse, requiring the development of new strategies for education of students, teamwork, project activities, communication and cooperation skills, etc. Therefore, continuous teaching/learning in an educational institution is inseparable from daily activities, which enable strengthening the professional competences of the teacher. The teacher's professional activity is unthinkable without continuous improvement in it, i.e., teaching/learning in the workplace. It is increasingly becoming a part of the culture of the educational organization, which not only helps to adapt to ongoing changes, but also gives the institution the opportunity to work with quality and remain competitive.

Research object – preschool teachers' teaching/learning in the workplace.

Research aim – to reveal the preschool teachers experiences in teaching/learning in the workplace.

Research methodology. The research strategy is qualitative research using the method of structured reflection. The field of research is preschool education institutions. The research was conducted in January-June, 2023. 20 preschool teachers from various Lithuanian preschool education institutions participated in the study. In the study, a common essential characteristic of the participants is linked to a common profession – teachers working in preschool education institutions (preschool teachers, hereinafter – PT). The research participants, while completing the reflection, had to focus on the teaching/learning experience, i.e., remember the activities, during which the teaching/learning took place in the workplace.

Research and data analysis methods: analysis of scientific, methodological, informational literature. The qualitative content analysis method was used for data analysis. Using this method, semantic units were singled out, allowing to understand how the analysed phenomenon and its content are understood by the subjects (PT) themselves. Statements with the same meaning were grouped together into categories and subcategories and interpreted.

Key research results:

- The preschool teachers' perception of teaching/learning in the workplace is the most significant for improving and ensuring the quality of education, because participating in the teaching/learning process in the workplace gives teachers the opportunity to acquire new educational methods and ideas, activity organization and planning skills, which they apply perfectly in their professional activities;
- The preschool teachers' teaching/learning in the workplace takes place by participating in seminars and conferences, preparing various reports for colleagues, leading and observing open activities, reading and analysing various literature, consulting with colleagues and managers of the institution, sharing work experiences with each other.

Keywords: Preschool teacher, professional development, teaching/learning in the workplace, acquired knowledge, factors for professional development.

1 INTRODUCTION

Politicians and scientists often talk about education in abstract terms, emphasizing that the most important thing is the quality of education, however, they do not clearly say who ensures that quality. As the prestige of teachers' activity is declining and the nature of the content of the activity is changing, researchers primarily distinguish psychological factors of the content of teachers' activity, which often become a challenge to their meaningful career [7]. Already almost fifteen years ago [13] emphasized in his article "21st Century Challenges for Lithuanian Teachers" that the greatest challenges for the teacher are associated with the "rapidly increasing volume of scientific knowledge that the student must absorb; with an increase in the complexity of the cognitive content, which requires more effort on the part of both the student and the teacher". Thus, the teacher's activity in the educational institution becomes diverse, which requires the development of new educational strategies, teamwork, project activities, communication and cooperation skills. All this reveals that in order not to fall out of the labour market, the teacher must strive for higher professional qualifications and competences effective for the activity. Raudeliūnienė [15] notices that the ability to use knowledge for effective activities in a changing environment is increasingly being valued because only changes with its meaningful application guarantee the development and progress of the organization, economic independence and competitiveness, democracy, personal satisfaction of each individual. Then knowledge and skills become the most meaningful condition for a successful organization. It has to be admitted that in order to meet the requirements of the knowledge society, traditional forms of qualification improvement are no longer sufficient, it is necessary to look for alternative forms of teaching/learning which would enable continuous, individual teaching/learning of teachers.

In Lithuania, participation in professional development is a necessary condition for achieving a career and a higher salary. However, it seems that the need for professional development of teachers is greater than their real possibilities because teachers do not find the right time for professional development or cannot participate in it due to incompatible work schedules. Scientific research typically focuses on how teachers learn, how they improve their teaching/learning, and how they change their skills and knowledge in practice to offer improved teaching/learning experiences to their students [1]. Malinauskienė [12] analysed the problems of upgrading the qualifications and professional development of teachers of preschool education institutions and issues of competence, meanwhile, Smilgienė and Masiliauskienė [18], [19] researched the possibilities and conditions of professional development of preschool teachers, recognition and assessment processes of knowledge acquired in a preschool education institution. The research conducted by Dautaras and Rukštelienė [8]. On the teachers' attitude towards the motivation for lifelong teaching/learning showed that the main ways of teaching/learning of teachers are non-formal learning (seminars, courses) and teaching/learning in a formal way. Jurašaitė-Harbisson [9] explored teachers' non-formal workplace teaching/learning, focusing on different areas and topics of greatest interest to teachers.

There is no shortage of research in recent decades that analyzes the aspect of teacher development in one way or another, however, there is still little comprehensive and integrated research that reveals the teaching/learning experiences of preschool teachers in the workplace. Considering all this, a problem question arises: *What are the teaching/learning experiences of preschool teachers in the workplace?*

Research object – preschool teachers' teaching/learning in the workplace.

Research aim – to reveal the preschool teachers experiences in teaching/learning in the workplace.

2 METHODOLOGY

It is significant for the study of preschool teachers' (hereinafter – PTs) teaching/learning experiences in the workplace that proponents of the philosophy of pragmatism [14]; [6] prioritize the learner's daily experience, experiential learning, and an open environment that promotes development. In accordance with this approach, the article looks at the professional development of preschool teachers in the workplace through the daily learning experiences of teachers. The research was also guided by the approach of the philosophy of sociocultural constructivism [6] that social reality is created taking into account its interaction with the environment (including institutional). According to Berger and Luckmann [2] the institutional world is perceived as an objective reality.

A qualitative research strategy was used in the study of PTs' experiences of teaching/learning in the workplace. The approach was followed that qualitative research allows for detailed knowledge and description of the chosen object of knowledge, i.e., teachers' experiences of teaching/learning in the workplace.

Structured *written reflection* was used for the collection of research data, which is identified with reflecting including previous experience, feelings, connection with practical theory, which leads to a new understanding of what actions should be in a particular situation, testing the theory in practice, which results in new ideas [4]. In education science, reflection is a way of thinking, when a person critically analyses, becomes aware of, and interprets the content, form and prerequisites of his/her thinking, the structure and characteristics of his/her spiritual world [4]. According to Bennett, Rolheiser-Bennett, and Stevahn [3], reflection has a significant impact on professional development. By applying this research method, the aim was to find out the experiences of teaching/learning in the workplace of twenty Lithuanian preschool teachers, i.e., describe the activities during which the teaching/learning took place in the workplace.

The research was conducted in January-June 2023. Twenty participants, PTs from various Lithuanian preschool education institutions took part in the study, which gives the research the opportunity to look at the analysed problem in a multifaceted way. The average age of the research participants is forty-five years. Eleven participants had up to 5 years of pedagogical work experience, four had 6-10 years, two had 11-15 years of experience, three research participants had more than twenty years of work experience, therefore, the research sample is representative, and can reflect the views of professionals in this field in the context of the analysed problem. In addition, in the study, a common essential characteristic of the participants is linked to a common profession – teachers working in preschool education institutions were interviewed.

The research aimed to reveal what are the determining factors of preschool teachers' professional development in the workplace.

The research participants were selected by applying the sampling of a favourable situation and the *sampling based on the principle of volunteering*. Preschool teachers were contacted after presenting the research problem in advance. Only a part of the research data is presented and discussed in the article.

Research ethics were ensured by informing research participants about the aim of the research, introducing them to the progress of the research, the use and dissemination of the research data. Consent of the informants regarding the conduct of the study was obtained. Confidentiality was guaranteed to the research participants. In order to guarantee confidentiality, the name of the participant was changed to the participant code (number), for example, R (1), R (2), etc.

The qualitative method of content analysis was used for the analysis of the research data. The texts provided by the informants are the research material for the qualitative content analysis, i.e., educational diagnostics, reflecting the individual's reflection process, which is the main aspect of professional development in the institution. An open coding method was used to analyse the *reflection* material, essential and secondary categories (subcategories) were distinguished, revealing the factors of professional development in the workplace. The categories and subcategories are illustrated with excerpts from the authentic statements of the research participants.

3 RESULTS

Applying the approaches of the theories of learning organization, learning teacher community and experiential learning, the preschool education institution is perceived and studied as an organization that implements the strategy of teacher learning in the organization in order to achieve the goals of education policy, in which high-quality child education and a new culture of teachers' learning and quality become the aspirations of teachers and the organization. *The first question of the teachers' reflection on teaching/learning in the workplace aimed to find out the informants' attitude towards teaching/learning in the workplace.* The analysis of the data revealed that the concept of teachers' teaching/learning in the workplace is broad. Teachers learn continuously, because professional development is a long-term process that lasts a lifetime, each time adding or updating knowledge. Most of the informants believe that teaching/learning in the workplace is **updating/consolidating knowledge and competences** (R4; R11; R14; R15; R17; R18), **sharing of experience with colleagues** (R2; R7; R5; R9; R13; R19), **opportunity to improve** (R2; R4; R11; R13; R14; R15; R17; R20), **pursuit and expansion of new knowledge/competences** (R1; R2; R5; R9; R13; R17) and **application of knowledge at work** (R7; R15; R18; R19). **In-service training** (R8; R10; R19), **personal development** (R7; R19), acquisition of **new skills** (R18; R20) are less frequently mentioned. Also, among the answers are opinions that teaching/learning in the workplace is an **opportunity to try something new, a means** to maintain the effectiveness of education and teachers.

The article aims to answer the question: what are the reasons for teaching/learning in the workplace of preschool teachers? The obtained results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Reasons for teaching/learning IN the workplace (N=20).

Category	Subcategory	Number of statements	Statements illustrating the category (language is unedited) Several examples of statements that best reflect the category have been presented
Teaching/learning during working hours		3	"<...> The development of competences is organized during working hours " (R1); "various surveys and research can be conducted in your workplace, institution " (R13);
Time saving		5	" Time is saved " (R3); " It saves time " (P8); " Time is saved " (R9); "There is no need to go or drive anywhere, which saves time " (R5);
Work environment		3	"I feel more comfortable and confident when this happens in a regular work environment " (R1); " Common environment " (R8);
Personal needs (16)	Self-respect	1	" Self-respect " (R6);
	Assessment/self-assessment	3	"Parents' assessment . Assessment , criticism by the administration, colleagues" (R4); " Self-assessment of your capabilities" (R14);
	Desire to improve	9	" Improvement " (R6); "I want to improve " (R12); "I improve as I learn <...>" (R15); "Desire to improve and update professional skills" (R16); "Growth and improvement " (R18);
	Practice	1	" Practice " (R10);
	Small financial resources	1	" No large financial resources are required" (R16);
	Responsibility	1	" Responsibility " (R14);
Growing needs of students		3	"The ever-growing needs of children" (R2); "The needs and interests of students" (R14); "The changing needs of children" (R17);
Demands on teachers		2	"Encouraged by constantly growing demands on teachers " (R15); "Constantly improving society, changing demands " (R11);
Changing life		1	"A constantly changing life " (R 14);
Need for knowledge		3	" Need for knowledge " (R6); "I feel curious to learn something new " (R12); "The need for new knowledge " (R20);
Teaching/learning in a team		1	"It is nice to learn with or from my colleagues " (R8);
Consultation of colleagues		2	"It is possible to consult with teachers with more experience" (R13); "You have more courage to ask questions and discuss with your colleagues" (R 5);
Systematic problem solving		3	" Problems (disagreements, misunderstandings) that have arisen are solved more systematically " (R2); "learn about problem solving techniques " (R7); " Problem solving " (R10);
Productivity of work		1	"The productivity of work is improving" (R2);
Practical knowledge		1	" Practical knowledge " (R3);
Smoothness of the educational process		1	" Smoothness of the educational process " (R6);
Convenience		5	"It is convenient when training takes place on site" (R9); " Convenient and practical" (R11); " Convenient in terms of time and place" (R16);
Opportunity to share experience		5	"Dissemination of experience " (R10); "A creative community of teachers to draw new ideas from" (R11); " Sharing knowledge with colleagues" (R16);
Communication and cooperation		2	"While learning, I can communicate with new speakers, lecturers" (R15); "You can immediately share with colleagues, collaborate " (R9);

There are various reasons that encourage preschool teachers to learn in the workplace. The reasons for the development of teachers are usually related to the satisfaction of personal needs and the implementation of tasks set by the community of the institution [11]. Therefore, it is not surprising that one of the most prominent motives that encourage teachers to learn in the workplace is **the satisfaction of personal needs**. The individual professional development needs of a preschool teacher are perceived as a new opportunity to realize personal abilities, inclinations and aspirations, to solve those problems that are understood as obstacles to better results of professional activity, job satisfaction, changes in thinking and behaviour [17]. The informants singled out the **desire to improve** (R2; R7; R6; R12; R15; R16; R17; R18; R20) as the main reason why teachers learn in the workplace. It is also mentioned that the **time** that is spent and saved in teaching/learning in the workplace is important. Five informants noted that they are encouraged to learn in the workplace because of the **time saved**, as well as the **convenience**, as teaching/learning takes place in the workplace. Other informants are encouraged to learn by the **lack of knowledge, problem solving**, the opportunity to **learn in a team**, and **share experience**. There is also a prevailing opinion among the informants that teaching/learning in the workplace is necessary due to the **growing needs of students** and greater **demands on teachers**. Children are becoming increasingly receptive to new technologies, accustomed to the fast pace of life, the realities of intense social and economic life. Therefore, there is a need for teachers to adapt to children and their needs. The success of the student in the educational process directly depends on the quality of the teacher's activities. In the reflection, the teachers had to identify the ways, in which teaching/learning takes place in the workplace. The obtained results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Ways of teachers' learning in the workplace (N=20).

Category	Number of statements	Statements illustrating the category (language is unedited) Several examples of statements that best reflect the category have been presented
Lecture	9	"<...> I listen to lectures and training courses at the institution <...>" (R8); "Various lecturers come to the institution to give lectures <...>" (R9); "I participate in on-site events and lectures organized by the institution <...>" (R13); "<...> Listening to the lectures organized in the educational institution <...>" (R19);
Conference	4	"<...> Conferences and seminars are organized in the institution <...>" (R11); "I take part in the <...> conferences organized by the institution <...>" (R13); "I participate in seminars, conferences , lectures organized by the institution <...>" (R15);
Seminar	9	"I attend the seminars organized <...>" (R7); "I take part in the <...> seminars organized by the institution <...>" (R13); "I participate in seminars , conferences, lectures organized by the institution <...>" (R15); "I participate in open activities, conferences, lectures, seminars , which are organized in the institution <...>" (R17);
Reading literature	8	"<...> literature , articles on the Internet are read <...>" (R19); "<...> I study the literature on the subject <...>" (R1); "<...> During non-contact hours, we read various literature <...>" (R9); "<...> Reading and analysing literature <...>" (R11); "<...> analysing scientific literature in non-contact hours <...>" (R13);
Remote teaching/learning	9	"<...> I listen to lectures on the pedagogas.lt website <...>" (R1); "<...> I can listen to training remotely during non-contact hours" (R8); "<...> listening to seminars and lectures remotely " (R13); "<...>I also listen to seminars remotely <...>" (R15);
Consultation with a colleague/administration	9	"<...> Consultations with colleagues <...>" (R19); " Consultations by the administration (R2); "<...> We consult with colleagues" (R9); "<...> Consultations with colleagues <...>" (R13); "<...> I consult with my colleagues <...>" (R15); "<...> Consultations with colleagues <...>" (R19);
Conducting/observation of open activities	14	"<...> Open activities of colleagues are observed <...>" (R19); "<...> I participate in open activities , etc. organized by the institution on site" (R1); " Open activities in nursery/kindergarten groups" (R2); "I observe the open activities of teachers <...>" (R8); "Observation and organization of open activities <...>" (R11); " Observation of open activities <...>"
Presentations	5	"<...> presentations from the work experience <...>" (R3); "<...> Preparation and listening of presentations , and discussions <...>" (R11);

Meetings of the methodological circle	2	" Meetings of the methodological circle <...>" (R3); "<...> Methodological meetings , during which teachers share their experiences, difficulties, etc." (R11);
Events	1	"<...> we participate in various projects and events <...>" (R4);
Experiential teaching/ learning	1	"<...> You also learn, I think, from your own experience , you choose the right methods and tools, you decide what is not suitable" (R20);
Sharing of experience	5	"<...> I share good work experience " (R7); "<...> we share our work experience <...>" (R9); "<...> to share good work experience with colleagues" (R18);
Communication/ collaboration of colleagues	4	"<...> communication and cooperation with colleagues" (R14); "<...> I cooperate with my colleagues and gain different experience" <...> (R1);
Observation	1	"<...> I observe the work of colleagues" (R6);
Practical sessions	1	"<...> I participate in the theoretical and practical sessions of lecturers who come to the institution" (R16);
Training 3	1	"Participation in seminars, training courses and lectures <...>" (R20); "<...> Participation in seminars, various training courses" (R19); "I listen to lectures and training courses at the institution <...>" (R8);

The analysis revealed that various methods of teaching/learning in the workplace prevail in the preschool education institution X. According to Dačiulytė and etc., there are various teaching/learning methods, and the teacher can choose the most acceptable and convenient one for him/her. The author also suggests dividing teaching/learning methods according to activity groups: collegial transfer of experience (consulting, open activity), specialized events (conferences, seminars, lectures), and academic method of acquiring competences (e.g., remotely) [5]. In the preschool education institution X, the most common way of teaching/learning in the workplace is **observing or conducting open activities** (R1; R2; R3; R5; R7; R8; R9; R10; R11; R14; R15; R16; R17; R19). This is also confirmed by the analysis of the reports on the pedagogical activities of the teachers of the preschool education institution X, during which it also became clear that the teachers often participate in the open activities of their colleagues. Many informants also mention that they learn in the workplace by participating in **seminars** organized by the institution (R20; R19; R2; R4; R7; R11; R12; R13; R14; R15; R17;), as well as **lectures** (R20; R19; R2; R8; R9; R13; R14; R15; R17), also learn **remotely** (R1; R5; R8; R9; R10; R13; R15; R16; R17). **Consultation with colleagues and administration** was also often mentioned among the informants (R2; R5; R6; R9; R10; R13; R15; R19). **Sharing of experience, listening to, or preparing presentations, conferences** are mentioned less frequently. One informant singled out **experiential learning**: "<...> You also learn, I think, from your own **experience**, you choose the right methods and tools, you decide what is not suitable" (R20). According to Smilgienė and Juodaitytė [17], if teaching/learning in the workplace becomes a natural daily ritual of the teacher's professional activity, then he/she not only acquires new knowledge, but he/she also tries to put it into practice and in the process receives new knowledge again. Teachers learn through collaboration, sharing experiences with each other, discussion, observation, etc.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The study revealed that preschool teachers' perception of teaching/learning in the workplace is the most significant for improvement and quality assurance of education, whereas for teachers, participating in the teaching/learning process in the workplace gives them the opportunity to acquire new educational methods and ideas, as well as the skills of organizing and planning activities, which they apply perfectly in their professional activities.

Teachers of Lithuanian preschool education institutions usually learn in the workplace due to personal needs, i.e., personal desire to improve, and the desire to be appreciated by those around them. Other significant reasons for learning in the workplace are convenience and time saving. Learning is also driven by the lack of knowledge.

Teachers indicated that teaching/learning in the workplace takes place by participating in seminars, conferences, preparing various presentations for the teacher community, conducting and observing open activities, remote learning. Teachers at the institution learn by reading and analysing various literature, consulting with colleagues and the heads of the institution, sharing professional work experience with each other and conducting open activities.

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