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Problems and Support Needs of Beginning Teachers during the First Years in the Profession

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Abstract

The article deals with the challenges that new teachers experience in the first years of their profession while dealing with students' educational issues. With the help of quantitative and qualitative research methods the article aims to establish the main reasons identified by the beginning teachers for the problem situations to occur and to assess the need for assistance and support at the beginning of their teaching careers. The study allowed to establish the areas of the professional work where the following difficulties were experienced: in individualizing the learning and teaching processes, in working with students who have special educational needs; in cooperating with parents, in motivating students to learn and others. The standardized interview with school heads revealed that the difficulties experienced by the beginning teachers during their first years in the profession and the need for assistance is neither addressed by school headmasters nor by school communities.

Keywords: beginning (novice/ new) teachers, profession related problems, the need for support, mentors

Introduction

The rapidly changing challenges posed by the 21st century for a person and society are largely directed at the system of education and its main actors – teachers, with the view of the main goal – to educate a literate, thinking, responsible, civic-minded and autonomous person. It is understood that school teachers have to prepare students for a good start not only in choosing the career but also in reinforcing the foundations of humanity necessary for every profession. Therefore, the review of the development of the state and documents regulating the system of education, as well as academic literature on the issues of education makes it clear that teacher education and activities should receive a special attention in order to meet new requirements of responding to the challenges of the times while not forgetting the foundations of education, i.e. the interaction at all levels.

The State Progress Strategy “Lithuania 2030”, the Teacher Education Regulations (2012), the Teaching Practices Regulations (2013), the Description of the Curriculum of the Primary and General Education (2016), the Good School Conception (2016) also identify the same most important problems of teacher education “that school should be one of the most important factors in raising the democratic thinking and awareness of people as well as forming a democratic state” (Lukšienė, 2000). Therefore, in order to guarantee quality in teacher education, there is a need for a close connection between the theoretical studies, the teaching practice and the first working years at school. The close connection among these three component parts not only forms the prerequisite for teachers to acquire the necessary competences, but it also predetermines the path of their professional development.

In recent years there have been carried out a number of studies which show that the first years of work for teachers are critical and may determine their further professional career as well as the quality of their work. According to M. Fullan (1992), although we are perfectly aware of the new teachers’ needs, possibilities, desires but, without the necessary support for novice teachers, we cannot expect high quality from them. Studies have shown that almost all teachers consider their first working years as the most difficult period of their lives and careers. Many teachers consider this time period to be very difficult and even traumatic. Many of the struggles experienced by teachers are related to the management and teaching. The problematic issues are quite diverse and comprise the difficulties related to the assessment of students, work with parents, the development of a consistent teaching style, the understanding of the overall functioning of the school, the learning of rules that ought to be followed and many others. The least studied aspects of this transitional stage are the feelings of fear, anxiety, loneliness and isolation that overwhelm teachers. The research provides sufficient data which indicate that these feelings are by no means rare. Almost all teachers claim that they go through this transitional period “on their own”.

The researchers point out that teachers at beginning of their teaching careers go through the *educational developmental stages of their professional growth* (Frances Fulier, 1969; Feiman-Nemsener, 1983; Sharon Leitwood, 1992; Arends, 1998; Šernas, 1998 and others), and at the beginning the aspects that are the most strongly experienced are the emotional ones: the lack of confidence and concentration only on themselves (i.e. caring only about themselves). At this stage, teachers direct their attention and energy towards the circumstances related to teaching: they start to worry about the lack of time to teach the educational content, they worry about the excessive number of students, and inadequate teaching resources. According to F. Fuller (1969, and later on), next, teachers move on to more serious problems and begin to take interest in social and emotional needs of their students, in how to guarantee impartiality and in teaching strategies as well as in the ways of how to adapt the content taught to their students' needs. Thus, from being oriented towards themselves, the new teachers direct themselves to the needs of their students (Fulier, 1969, p. 207-226).

The new teachers need the maximum of creative effort in acquiring the knowledge and applying it in practice, in studying and gaining their own experience. The friendly support of the intelligent school heads and work in the school community helps teachers to develop. Therefore, while educating novice colleagues the most important task is to establish and maintain collaborative partnership with teachers who have a little or no educational experience. Therefore it is important to talk about research-based support in facilitating the adaptation of the beginning teachers and, at the same time, to help them grow as teachers educators (Day et al, 1998, p. 54).

One of such forms of assistance – mentoring as a help of a more experienced person to a less experienced one – is not a new phenomenon. The very term itself comes from the Homer's "Odyssey", written in the ancient Greece in 700 BC. In the context of life-long learning it acquired a new meaning and means different functions performed by a mentor, but above all, it denotes a caring relationship, cooperation with a young colleague. N. Mačianskienė (2004, p. 9) claims: "Mentoring is a reciprocal activity the aim of which is to prepare and empower the mentees to take responsibility for their own learning and development." In various countries (in the UK, the USA, Canada and others) a mentor is referred to as an *associate teacher*, *clinical instructor* or *cooperative teacher* and etc.

Having established the difficulties that the beginning teachers experience in their first years in the profession and their needs for assistance, we seek to improve teacher education. According to K. F. Jonson (2002, p. 8), the assistance provided to teachers has a positive impact: the teacher's competences improve, they feel more confident, there appears the intentionality to their actions and their professionalism develops.

The research question is: in what directions should the quality of teacher education be improved?

While looking for the solution paths to this problem, the following academic aim was raised – to investigate the problems that arise for the beginning teachers during their first years (1-3 school years) in the profession and to disclose the needs for the necessary support that they have.

Research objectives

- To reveal the problems experienced by in-service teachers;
- To determine the main causes for these problems to arise;
- To establish the needs teachers have for the necessary assistance;
- To discuss the relationship between the support and assistance that teachers expect and the one they actually receive.

The focus of the research were teachers working in progymnasium from 1 to 3 years (who teach students from the 3rd grade onwards).

Research methods

Theoretical: the analysis of academic, didactic, pedagogical and psychological literature and educational documents. Empirical: quantitative research method – questionnaire for teachers, qualitative research method – semi-standardized interview with 6 school heads. This method was used to retrieve authentic and important information necessary to disclose the researched question (Rupsiene, 2007).

Statistical: the quantitative analysis of the research data was carried out using SPSS 12.0 for Windows software.

In order to determine the frequency and reliability of the respondents' answers chi-square (χ^2) test was used and the significance level when $p > 0,05$ – the difference is not statistically significant; when $p < 0,05$ – the difference is statistically significant; when $p < 0,01$ or $p < 0,001$ – the difference is very significant. The set significance levels help to reveal the importance of different aspects of the question under investigation.

Research participants

In order to identify the problems that the beginning teachers face during the first years of teaching and their needs for assistance, there was carried out research in schools, in grades from third to eighth, during the school terms of 2009-2010 and 2014-2015. The participants of the research were the teachers and school heads who work in the progymnasium schools in the city of Vilnius, and the regions of Trakai, Utena, Ukmergė, Alytus. The research was carried out with the assistance of the graduate students of Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences. During the first

and second research stages there were surveyed the teachers who work with the third to eighth grades. The total sample was 609 (301 and 308) teachers and 6 school heads. The researchers presented the unified instructions to the respondents and sought to guarantee similar conditions for the administration of the questionnaire.

Results and findings

The literature analysis has shown that teachers from different countries during their first three years in teaching experience a lot of and very similar problems while carrying out various roles in the process of education. The theoretical analysis has revealed and confirmed the common situation in the pedagogical practice that the failures experienced by teachers in the the first years of teaching have an impact on the quality of their further professional activity, their career, the formation of personal value orientations, and etc.

In order to achieve high quality teacher education singled out in the education strategies from the years 2008-2012 and 2013-2022, the researchers wanted to find out what difficulties – problems were experienced by teachers during the first three years of their pedagogical activity. The initial analysis of the research data has shown that the problems experienced by the primary school (grades 3-4), and junior gymnasium (progymnasium) (grades 5-8) teachers were similar according to educational activities, but different in their intensity and frequency.

The analysis of the data revealed that the new teachers in primary schools and progymnasiums identified the following urgent problems: the individualization of teaching and learning, work with special needs students, motivation of students to learn, communication and educational activities with parents and others. The significant differences between the primary and progymnasium teachers could be observed in the way they resolve conflicts, determine the needs of their students, plan and organize educational activities of their students. It is important to note that with the introduction of the three different pedagogical practices (of an observer, teacher assistant and under the supervision of the mentor) into the study process, it became easier for the beginning teachers to deal with some of these problems. They could acquire practical skills, competences to resolve conflicts, determine students' needs, motivate them, work with special needs students and etc. However, it became more difficult to work with the class community, to organize educational activities, to use information technologies. Less significant differences could be observed between the two cross-sections of primary school teachers.

Table 1: The Lack of practical skills in working with students

Practical skills	Primary schools (3-4 grades)		Progymnasium schools (5-8 grades)	
	2009- 2010 school year (%)	2014- 2015 school year (%)	2009- 2010 school year (%)	2014- 2015 school year (%)
To appropriately choose the teaching content	20.6	24.1	26.3	31.5
To individualize the learning and teaching process	56.0	60.1	51.4	53.0
To work with children with special needs	60.3	62.8	64.4	50.0
To manage the class, to maintain the environment conducive to productive work	28.8	34.1	25.4	30.0
To resolve conflicts	14.0	18.0	45.0	39.4
To inovatively use information technologies in the classroom	35.4	20.1	24.7	29.9
To appropriately assess students' progress	32.2	38.1	22.3	20.2
To identify and respond to students' needs	33.1	17.3	43.8	33.0
To communicate and cooperate with parents	30.4	41.1	46.5	40.3
To motivate students to learn and act	48.2	48.0	59.4	50.3
To convey the teaching content in an understandable way	28.7	27.3	30.1	22.2
To plan and organise the educational activities of students	13.5	14.4	59.0	62.7
To communicate with colleagues and heads	12.0	12.2	16.0	14.0

The majority of the respondents valued the skills acquired during their teaching practices/placements; on the other hand, the difficulties were blamed on the demands of a specific time period or concrete situations. The skills acquired during the practices were higly rated by 45.5 % of the respondents; 39.0% rated them as satisfactory and 15.5 as unsatisfactory.

Analyzing the causes that could impede the start of the professional activity, the respondents in both cross sections indicated very similar reasons.

Table 2: Reasons which make work challenging for the beginning teachers

Reasons	Primary grades (3-4 grades)		Progymnasium grades (5-8 grades)	
	2009- 2010 school year (%)	2014- 2015 school year (%)	2009- 2010 school year (%)	2014- 2015 school year (%)
Inadequate preparation for teaching practice	40.0	39.8	63.4	40.0
Lack of support from teachers	48.0	47.1	60.	53.7
Too heavy workload	30.4	33.0	45.0	52.0
Lack of good rapport with the colleagues	12.6	15.0	32.0	35.0
Irrational school management	15.3	15.0	30.2	30.6
Inadequate theoretical preparation	11.8	10.0	23.0	20.1
Irrational demands posed for teachers and schools by parents	14.0	20.2	25.8	39.1
Lack of students' responsibility towards their duties	6.8	7.8	33.0	49.8
Inadequate personal efforts	4.5	7.3	12.0	9.1
Gaps in the educational policy	3.7	6.1	19.8	26.3

The research data revealed that the lack of practical knowledge and skills was one of the obstacles for the successful pedagogical activity. The majority of respondents expressed their wish to lengthen various teaching practices/placements, to make the cooperation and consultations with university teachers and school teachers more intense during teaching practices. While commenting on the former practices teachers-respondents mentioned their suggestions that had not been implemented: to organise discussions-conferences, to introduce study modules (seminars) after the teaching practice to discuss the experienced problems, to look for methods of implementation of the possible solutions.

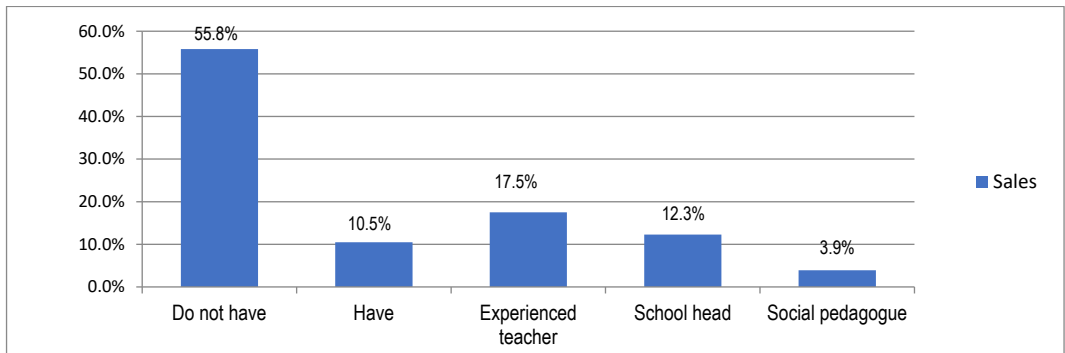
The analysis of the academic literature, practical pedagogical activity and the present research indicate that during the period of adaptation, the lack of sufficient support and assistance, and sharing of experience was experienced by almost half of the new teachers. Therefore, only some of the teachers experienced the feelings of safety,

satisfaction, communication which undoubtedly would have an impact on their further decision to pursue their profession, and on the belief in their abilities.

The causes of failures that were named by the teachers directed the researchers' efforts to investigate the kind of support that the beginning teachers needed. According to Hudson (2012), understanding how to support beginning teachers must include beginning teachers' views on how they experience support within their schools. These viewpoints may help to devise strategies for supporting them in their early careers.

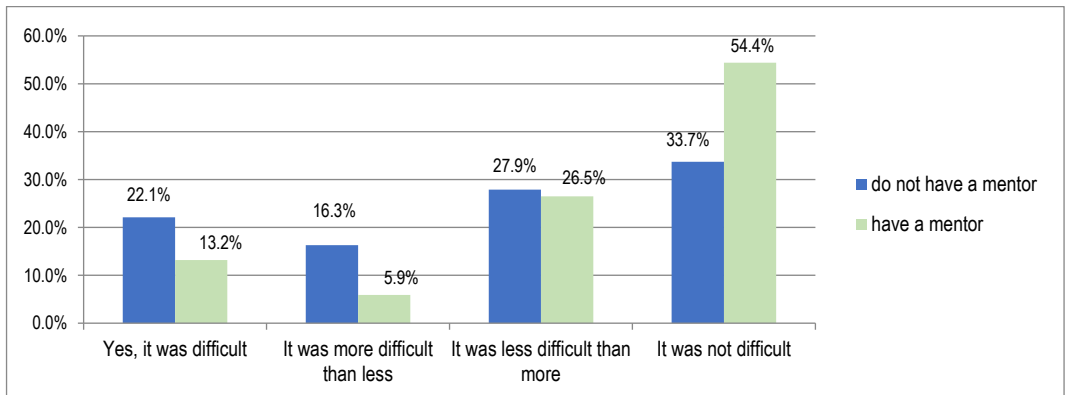
The respondents of the both cross-sections of the present research (from 55.9 to 60%) indicated that they wanted to have a mentor.

Fig. 1. Percentage of the beginning teachers who have an officially designated mentor



The analysis of respondents' answers to the question: "Was the adaptation at school difficult for you?" showed that it was significantly easier to adapt for the new teachers with mentors than for those who did not have one. This is confirmed by the statistical significance.

Fig. 2. Adaptation at school



$$\chi^2 = 8,793 \text{ df} = 3, p = 0,030 (p < 0,05)$$

Among respondents' commentaries are frequently repeated evaluations like "I am (feel) safe", "I feel confident", "they believe in me", "they are satisfied with my work because I meet all the requirements that are posed for teachers". The research data (Figure 1 and Figure 2) as well as respondents' comments indicate that the support provided by the mentor to the novice teacher is not only important in its psychological and emotional sense and helps for the novice teachers to take up new roles of educators, but it also promotes the application of the acquired theoretical knowledge in the pedagogical process initiating and contributing to the educational community and educational process, as well as the culture of communication and spreading the positive image of an institution.

While analyzing the beginning teachers' assistance needs (expectations) for various educational activities, there were singled out the main areas where the help of an experienced teacher (mentor) could be very useful: preparation for different practical activities (classes, events), their observation, discussion and evaluation, planning of the educational activity (monitoring the class, organising extra curricular activities, methodological activities and so on), resolution of conflicts with the students, parents, colleagues, decision making about bullying, management of documentation. The findings revealed areas that need improvement in order to achieve the high quality of teacher education both during the studies and during the first years of working at school. One of such areas is related to classroom management. A 2004 Public Agenda survey found that 85 percent of teachers believed "new teachers are particularly unprepared for dealing with behavior problems in their classrooms" (cited from Goodwin, 2012, p. 84-85). Thus, mentors who are aware of this problem could provide the support for beginning teachers.

As far as the difficulties experienced by the beginning teachers are concerned, both cross sections of the research confirmed that without mentors the identified problems were solved with difficulty: there was observed the loss of confidence among the beginning teachers in their professional powers, skills, abilities to become competent teachers. It is important that the statistical analysis confirmed that the difference in the data obtained from the new teachers who had a mentor and those who did not was statistically significant ($p < 0,05$). This shows the reliability of the data.

During the stage of the research conducted in 2014-2015, the beginning teachers were asked to express their opinions about internship (of a duration of half a year or a whole year) that the Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences planned to introduce after the studies and only after the completion of which the students would receive their diploma. The data showed that 82% of respondents positively evaluated this provision, referring to the possibility that those students who irresponsibly chose their studies would not be able to work as teachers after their graduation.

Respondents called for the prompt introduction of one-year practice – school placement at the end of the studies.

To sum up, the quantitative data showed that the majority of new teachers in educational activities sought self-realization, development, recognition, achievement of a certain status, professional mastery. In their pedagogical work they especially valued the rapport with colleagues, cooperation, the opportunity to grow and develop, while getting assistance in solving complex practical problems.

Using the standardized interviews there were interviewed school headmasters. The aim was to find out their opinions about problems experienced by the working professionals and ways to support them and to find out what was expected of the contemporary beginning teachers in the context of the current reform of education.

School heads could be expected to take on the leadership of providing mentors with the “increased release time from the classroom to facilitate mentor–mentee collaboration and develop the essential knowledge and skills in key areas such as planning, programming, assessment, special education, and reporting is essential in order that leadership avenues can address individualized needs ”(Fantili, McDougall, 2009: 824).

School heads were asked the following questions: *What competences were expected of new teachers?, How the school investigated assistance needs of the beginning teachers and how this assistance was organised? Who provided the assistance?, Which teacher would the headmaster choose to hire – the one who had just graduated or the one who already had an employment record and would be considered an experienced teacher?* The interviewed headmasters were asked to motivate their answers.

The analysis of the standardized interviews revealed that all six headmasters believed that their schools created fairly good conditions for the fulfillment of new teachers. New teachers themselves chose and were delegated to take up various roles and responsibilities. The young professionals were expected to demonstrate pedagogical competences of high-quality, the ability to communicate (to closely collaborate with colleagues, administration, parents), tolerance, interest in the educational process, creativity, initiative, engagement in social activities, support of students’ organizations, development of projects, etc.. The emphasis was placed on the ability to properly evaluate and interpret the significance of their profession to an individual, state, and respect for their profession and others.

Asked how the schools investigated the assistance needs of the beginning teachers and how well this assistance was organized, school heads claimed that if there was a necessity they could organize joint consultations, individual talks and methodological workshops. The two school heads pointed out that they were carrying out the research in order to find out what kind of support was needed by new teachers. The

three heads indicated that, depending on a concrete situation, a mentor could be appointed for the beginning teacher.

None of the headmasters who participated in the interview indicated that their professional position obliged them to mentor the beginning teachers. The heads would choose to hire teachers with 5-10 years of work experience, rather than the ones who had just completed their studies. The headmasters stressed that the more experienced teachers were more mature persons willing to search for and disclose their professional powers and skills, were more likely to quickly adapt to the current requirements, which led to faster adaptation at a new job, and helped to ensure the quality of educational content. Only one of the respondents would choose beginning professionals and was prepared to enable them to initiate activities, introduce innovations mastered during the study years. This study confirms the present reality – schoolmasters do not want to hire beginning teachers. Thus, school headmasters could be called to rethink their view of the role they perform in supporting beginning teachers. According to Hudson, P. (2012) teachers and school executives need to have an input into developing beginning teachers acting not only as moderators of an education system as a whole, but also improving the process of education at the level of a particular school.

Conclusions

Beginning teachers face a number of problems during the first years in the profession and, in order to successfully address these problems, beginning teachers need assistance. The research has shown that the beginning teachers most positively evaluated the support provided by their mentors.

The opportunity to work alongside experienced teachers, to consult with them about the difficulties, enables new teachers to quickly grasp the theoretical and practical unity of the pedagogical activity, to adapt in the community that exists in a given institution, to understand and evaluate the sense of their work experiencing satisfaction and realising the significance of teacher's profession.

The analysis of the school headmasters' opinions about beginning teachers revealed that the modern school does not provide opportunities for new teachers to apply their most current theoretical and practical knowledge and skills and to use technology based, active methods in the process of teaching and learning, to contribute to community changes while, at the same time, strengthening the competences of new teachers.

The data has shown that the support for the beginning teachers provided by the school heads (and school communities) is not adequate and does not meet the beginning teachers' needs.

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