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Professional Development from the Perspective of Kindergarten Teachers in the Czech Republic

*Podnoszenie poziomu profesjonalizacji nauczycieli
przedszkola w Republice Czeskiej*

Abstract: The paper focuses on the professional development of kindergarten teachers in the Czech Republic, presenting the results of a research survey conducted between April and September 2023. The study examines teachers' motives for further education, available professional development opportunities and expectations related to the application of newly acquired knowledge in the innovation of the educational process in kindergartens, taking into account current changes in educational needs. The main aim of the research was to identify the educational needs of female teachers in the areas of child education, management and personal development. The qualitative research was conducted using a non-standardized interview method, which provided insight into the reasons and conditions of teachers' professional development, as well as their opportunities to apply newly acquired skills in practice. The results were compared with similar research from 2017–2020. In particular, digital technologies and the desire to “keep up with the times” were identified as new learning needs. Teachers also expressed a lack of recognition of their professional work by parents and the public, which they perceived as a significant gap in practice.

Keywords: teacher; professional development of teachers; preschool education; kindergarten teacher

Abstrakt: Artykuł koncentruje się na rozwoju zawodowym nauczycieli przedszkolnych w Republice Czeskiej, prezentując wyniki badania ankietowego przeprowadzonego w okresie od kwietnia do września 2023 r. Badanie analizuje motywacje nauczycieli do dalszego kształcenia, dostępne możliwości rozwoju zawodowego i oczekiwania związane z zastosowaniem nowo nabytej wiedzy w innowacji procesu edukacyjnego w przedszkolach, biorąc pod uwagę obecne zmiany w potrzebach edukacyjnych. Głównym celem badania była identyfikacja potrzeb edukacyjnych nauczycielek w obszarach edukacji dzieci, zarządzania i rozwoju osobistego. Badania jakościowe przeprowadzono przy użyciu metody wywiadu niestandardyzowanego, co pozwoliło uzyskać wgląd w powody i warunki rozwoju zawodowego nauczycieli, a także ich możliwości zastosowania nowo nabytych umiejętności w praktyce. Wyniki porównano z podobnymi badaniami z lat 2017–2020. W szczególności technologie cyfrowe

i chęć „nadążania za czasami” zostały zidentyfikowane jako nowe potrzeby edukacyjne. Nauczyciele wyrazili również brak uznania ich pracy zawodowej przez rodziców i opinię publiczną, co postrzegali jako znaczną lukę w praktyce.

Słowa kluczowe: nauczyciel; doskonalenie zawodowe nauczycieli; edukacja przedszkolna; nauczyciel przedszkola

INTRODUCTION

Continuing education is compulsory for teachers in the Czech Republic at all school levels. It is stipulated by law 563/2004 Coll., on Education Staff and on Amendments to Certain Acts, as amended, and Decree No. 317/2005 Coll., on Further Education of Education Staff. Another option is self-education. The teacher chooses his/her own topics and methods of professional self-development. Every year teachers are entitled to 12 days off for self-development (the provisions of Section 24 para. 7 of Act No. 563/2004 Coll., on Education Staff and on Amendments to Certain Acts, as amended by Act No. 383/2005 Coll.). This also applies to kindergarten teachers. Fodorova (2019) stated that the self-development of kindergarten teachers depends on the specifics and conditions of the kindergarten. Principals organise to ensure that days off for self-education do not disrupt the functioning of the kindergarten. Teachers take their professional development seriously and show commitment to improving preschool education (Fodorova, 2019, p. 305). Meeting teachers' learning needs during professional development is important for several reasons. First and foremost, for the teachers themselves, then for the children they educate and the overall kindergarten for the quality achievement of its goals. An important need in teachers' professional development is the need to adapt the topics and content of training to teachers' seniority. Nevertheless, in the Czech Republic there is still no system of professional development, there are no career rules anchored in legislation. In 2015, it was in the early stages of being put into practice. One of the principles of this career system was to establish a teacher standard as the basis for a newly created professional development pathway (<https://msmt.gov.cz/ministerstvo/novinar/v-novem-skolnim-roce-doznamen-karierni-rad-ucitelu>). Professional development is “a purposeful, planned and continuous process of his/her continuous education, consisting in increasing and adjusting his/her professional competences and qualifications, comprehensive personal development, organised and carried out by institutions specialised in this field, as well as in the course of self-education and self-improvement” (Kosiba, 2012, p. 124). Initial formal education is only the beginning of a long-lasting process of becoming a teacher, which already takes place during teaching practice, in contact with real problems, requiring professional judgement and action, and the specificity of this work consists in simultaneously fulfilling two roles: teaching others and learning oneself (Grochowalska, 2014). Therefore, in our research we focused on the motives for further professional development of kindergarten teachers, on the possibilities of their

further education and on the teachers' expectations of using the acquired knowledge in the implementation of innovations in the education of children in kindergartens with regard to the current changes in educational needs.

Professional development of kindergarten teachers and their educational needs

Many authors, for example, Pavlov and Valica (2006), had worked on the matter of teachers' professional development. They stated that the personal development of a teacher begins with the acquisition of knowledge and competences during university studies, and further development through experience, self-reflection and further education. The authors also pointed out the absence of a link between professional development and motivation (Pavlov & Valica, 2006, p. 86). Vasutova (2006) defined teacher professional development as an important component or stage of becoming a professional that is linked to career progression and work experience – the teacher's achievements in educational work. Due to that, the topic of professional development of teachers includes four stages of activities: 1) expert stage (theoretic, academic, scientific, research, development); 2) educational policy stage (creation of documents which reflect European context and national conditions); 3) legislative stage (rules, decrees, methodological guidelines); 4) practical stage (implementation and reflection) (Vašutová, 2006, p. 60). Kohnová (2007) stated that professional development often wrongfully used as a synonym to a further education of teachers. However, professional development has a wider meaning, which includes matters of professional development systems and relates to a matter of education quality, pairing a quality of teachers' work. It is important to define the educational needs of teacher in context of their professional development. Pavlov (2007) stated that schools and teachers often have a very different image of how teacher's professional development should be carried out, and that conflict might be solved if next conditions are met: "support from governing bodies for the teachers' education, motivation of teachers to develop professionally, a proper analysis of educational needs of teachers, adaptation of school's statutory tasks" (Pavlov, 2007, p. 41).

Proper identification of educational needs of teachers might be achieved from internal and external evaluation. External evaluation mainly includes results of control by the Czech School Inspectorate (*Česká školní inspekce*). Internal evaluating includes classroom visits, interviews and analysis of various documents. It's conducted by a head of a school. After identification of educational needs a creating of a plan of teachers' training begins, which specifies: goal of the training, target group, training methods (on-site, somewhere else), an institution and a lecturer which conducts the training, time of the training (during or outside working hours), equipment, material and technological requirements, evaluation methods (entrance and final test results' comparison, participant's progress monitoring, quantification of benefits through economic indicators, etc.), training cost (Šikýř et al., 2012 p. 167, 172).

Motivation of teachers to continued professional development as a support for their professional development

Reasons for teachers to undergo training might be different and further development might be based on the willingness to learn something new and useful for their work, for example, to solve various situations, even problematic ones, as well as willingness of development, receiving social credit, prestige, etc.

The reasons for professional development of teachers, under which they are able to express their needs connected with education, might change over the years depending on circumstances (economic, political, social, ethnic) and demographic environment that we live in. Fodorova and Solich (2019) conducted research of reasons why kindergarten teachers decided to develop professionally in the Czech Republic and Poland and compared those results. It showed that Czech and Polish teachers alike were motivated for further education due to willingness of personal development and verification of received through practice knowledge. Surveyed teachers noted a need for flexibility and reaction on changes and new trends in children education. The majority of teachers did not list only one reason, but multiple; among them the most frequent ones were gaining new qualifications, thus looking on modern education from another perspective; gaining new competences, which allows to improve the attractiveness of education; willingness to develop and improve skills; one's own ambitions (Fodorová & Solich, 2019, p. 9).

The main aim of the research is to identify the learning needs of kindergarten teachers in three chosen educational domains: 1) education of children; 2) management; 3) personal development. The specific goals are as follows:

1. Finding reasons for teachers for further professional development
2. Identifying conditions and opportunities for professional development
3. Researching expectations of teachers, connected with practical usage of received knowledge.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

The above objectives raise issues of concern regarding whether teachers' reasons for professional development are in line with current changes in society, whether teachers express concerns about problems in professional development caused by institutional conditions, and what expectations they have of practice in their professional development efforts.

To address this issue, we formulated research questions that reflect the main objective of this study, which is to compare selected findings from previous research on teacher professional development.

1. What new domains of education, connected with professional development, were included to the needs of teachers?

2. In what ways did conditions for further education of teachers, and problems they face during work, change?
3. In which of the identified educational domains (education, management, personal development) will teachers have the biggest need for professional development?

MATERIAL AND METHODS

At the outset of our investigation, focused on the professional development of kindergarten teachers, we defined a key research question. The aim was to find out whether the current training needs of kindergarten teachers differ from the preferences in previous years, or whether completely new areas of training are emerging compared to those identified in the research conducted in 2017–2020. In previous investigations, we have used quantitative research based on a non-standardized questionnaire. In the current research investigation, we have adopted a qualitative approach for data collection, specifically a non-standardized interview method with open-ended questions. This approach was chosen in order to gain a deeper understanding of the motives and professional development needs of the women teachers. The non-standardised interview allows respondents to express themselves freely and provide more detailed information about their learning needs and the reasons that lead them to further development. Open-ended questions allowed for the identification of new areas of learning and provided space for reflection on current professional needs, and we assumed that respondents would provide sufficient explanation and context for their professional development in their accounts. This method of data collection proved useful for exploring subjective attitudes and motivations, and provided a more comprehensive view of the current educational needs of kindergarten teachers.

Characteristics of research environment

The research sample in the 2017–2022 and current surveys consisted of female kindergarten teachers who were purposively selected based on specific criteria, including their length of experience, professional experience, and the geographic location of the kindergartens in which they work. This was a heterogeneous group including both short and long-serving teachers, which allowed us to explore differences in their professional needs and attitudes at different stages of their careers. At the same time, the type of kindergartens (urban, rural) was taken into account, which provided a broader perspective on the influence of institutional conditions on the professional development of female teachers.

Teachers were selected to represent different types of early childhood education settings and to reflect demographic and regional differences. Overall, 218 teachers participated in the 2017–2020 research and 78 teachers participated in the current

research, with a diverse range of ages and years of experience to provide a representative sample for examining professional development in a broader context.

RESULTS

The level of professionalism of pedagogical staff was surveyed using open-ended questions. The questions did not cover the needs connected with educational domains (education, management, personal development), chosen for the purpose of this paper. The needs were taken into account only after the analysis of the results of the survey. We asked three open-ended questions:

1. What is the reason for you to continue education and what do you feel the need to educate yourself in, are there any topics, in which you were not interested before?

2. Do you think that all the conditions required for your further education and professional development will be met and are you concerned about any obstacles in accomplishing your personal development?

3. How do you perceive the practical applicability and efficiency of acquired skills? From whom and what type of acknowledgement do you expect to receive because of your professional development?

We present the most frequent answers for the questions and, for the purpose of clarity, marked them with codes. Let us define repeating reasons, given as answers for the first questions using codes:

- to improve one's own work R/62/79.5%
- to avoid stagnation in this dynamic domain R/38/48.7%

Repeating answers for the question about **what specific topics teachers want to improve in** given in codes:

- digital technology R/42/53.8%
- alternative methods of work, alternative education R/26/33.3%
- education of children with special needs R/32/41.0%

The answers were sorted into the educational domain.

- **education R/78/100%**
- **personal development R/69/88.5%**
- **management R/3/3.8%**

Teachers are most motivated to develop their skills in the domains of education of children and personal development. Only one respondent/head felt the need to develop in the domain of management, having the highest level of education, and 2 teachers were planning to apply for a head's position. In the domain of education, they felt the need for development in the area of modern technologies, including digital technologies. The analysis showed that teachers with longer seniority expressed the biggest amount of those, while teachers of shorter seniority expressed the need for development in alternative methods of education, which did not appear in the

answers of those with longer seniority. The next big group of answers was connected with the need of training in special education. Educational needs for community education, education of two-years old kids and education of foreigners appeared in a small number of answers.

Comparison: In a survey “Educational Needs of Preschool Education Teachers”, from 2017, respondents expressed the most educational needs concerning inclusive education and education of children with special needs, music skills, foreign languages, developmental psychology. In current surveys the educational need for inclusive education persists. Needs, connected with digital technologies, were not presented in 2017 surveys, but instead computer skills were listed. Respondents in 2017 also had the need for education in the domain of management, school legislation, stress management and control, communicational skills, project-based education – those were among the most frequent. In current surveys none of those educational needs were expressed by an increased number of respondents.

The most repeating answers for the second question about their expectations about conditions and obstacles to accomplishing further education were grouped using codes:

- have positive expectations concerning conditions for further education from school’s administration R/65/83.3%,
- have concerns connected with lack of funding from school R/57/73.1%,
- have concerns connected with the lack of time R/25/32.1%.

Teachers stated that kindergarten has the conditions for further development, there is wide range of offers from specialised institutions, but lecturers and training courses’ contents are not always of good quality. They were concerned about possible lack of funding for further education, because even now they note that any trainings are coordinated by their institutions and every person is allowed to participate a limited amount of those.

Comparison: In 2017, respondents noted as an obstacle for further education the fact of absence of organisational support (temporal replacement on working place for the duration of the course). It was one of the most frequent problems (109/50% out of 218 respondents). In current surveys this problem is not presented. In 2017 one of the problems for 7/3.2% of respondents were insufficient range of content’s offers – topics of training, while in the current survey respondents expressed an opinion, that the range of content offers for educational trainings is sufficient. In 2017, respondents did not mention the quality of lecturers, while in the current survey, they expressed a negative opinion concerning lecturers and the quality of their services.

In the third question we tried to determine how teachers perceive the practical efficiency of knowledge and skills they will acquire, as well as what are their credit expectations due to further education. The most frequent answers are grouped by codes:

Usage:

- Will use everything to improve their work with children R/72/92.3%

Credit:

- need for regulation, connected with promotions R/38/48.7%
- expect a financial reward R/18/23.1%
- a praise for colleagues R/67/85.9%

Teachers expressed the need for implementation of ways to get a promotion, which would increase their efforts to develop professionally, and gratitude would be in accordance with regulations. Some of them stated, that they do not feel credited enough neither by school's administration, nor financially. Interestingly, teachers with secondary education with the highest seniority felt the least financially credited. According to payment regulations in education, those teachers had already achieved the highest possible salary. However, respondents with lower seniority and higher education, being at the top of salary list, were satisfied with their financial situation. The majority of teachers noted a credit they got from colleagues and their kids. They did not expect any credit from their parents and felt undervalued by them. In their answers they also mentioned a need for increased social importance of preschool education. We are not comparing these answers since we did not survey the level of credit teachers received in previous years.

Identified needs connected with professional development that are “new” in comparison with previous years are, unsurprisingly, digital technologies. Last year, as a part of National Recovery Plan (*Plán národní obnovy*), implemented by The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS, MŠMT), kindergartens received funding to purchase digital toys and tools. As a current educational need teachers mentioned an education of children with special needs. Interestingly, a need to “keep up with” the fast-changing times was mentioned by teachers with 30 years of seniority or less. The identified educational need is one, as expressed by lower seniority teachers, connected with alternative education. In terms of kindergartens, only the lack of funding is noted. Evaluating their own work, teachers almost unanimously mentioned the lack of positive opinions from parents and from society.

DISCUSSION

The reason for professional development of teachers is usually their work with children, for whom they want to ensure a comprehensive development. The topic of their further education is based on their educational work and needs, connected with development of society. They face a need for digital technology education and education of children with special need in preschool age. One of the goals of this survey was finding out, whether there are any “new” educational needs of teachers in comparison with surveys, conducted in previous years. The most frequently appearing need was the one, connected with digital technologies. Another “new” educational need, even thought not the most frequent one, was connected with education of foreigners. It is

mentioned that conditions for teachers' education are favourable. However, limitations of their education stem from lack of funding by institutions, which is dependent from a budget, assigned to a school by governmental policies. A range of offers from institutions, providing further education for teachers, is considered by them as sufficient; however, it is deemed to not always be of the highest quality in terms of contents and competences of lecturers. Teachers see the possibility of practical usage of acquired knowledge for their work with children, which motivates them for further professional development. For their efforts, teachers get a credit from their colleagues, but a system of promotions would ensure them a bigger level of safety concerning their rewards.

CONCLUSIONS

This survey inspired us to introduce new research topics. We would be interested in educational needs of teachers depending on the levels of their seniority and education, including their expectations of kindergarten education.

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