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Kindergarten teachers' perceptions on in-service training and impact on classroom practice

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Abstract

Professional development of teachers has become an essential condition in today's knowledge-based society to sustain the quality of teaching. One of the major goal of the Romanian education system is regarding high quality of teacher professional development programs that should enhance their competences and use of new curricular approaches to facilitate successful practice. It is well-known the axis that improving teachers would improve the teaching and learning in school, which in turn would improve the quality of education at national level. But various factors might contribute to ineffectiveness of teacher professional development, like ethical, structural, cultural, economical, policy or personal issues. Purpose of study concerns on a study that investigated kindergarten teachers' perceptions of their in-service followed training programs, and impact on the professional development process and classroom practice. The qualitative instrument chosen to carry out the research was a structured questionnaire, on-line applied on 84 kindergarten teachers. In qualitative terms, data regarding the perceptions on professional development perspectives of teachers from kindergarten were structured on five issues categories of activities considered to be necessary for teacher training programs, actors that influence the level of teacher professional development, types of activities based on training programs followed that may influence the classroom practice, the level of teacher training programs focused on specific aspects of educational practice, and aspects that might influence the teacher's educational practice. Findings show that there is a significant difference between beginners and newly qualified teachers' perception and those with more than 10 years experience; in the sense that the former focuses more on the visibility and status to the profession, while the second category focuses its approach on professionalization.

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1. Introduction

Professional development of teachers has become an essential condition in today's knowledge-based society to sustain the quality of teaching. The speed and explosion of knowledge has important implications for the role of the school. But still today, teachers are caught between two profiles: those who believe that development continues throughout the life cycle, and those "effective teachers who are searchers who continue to grow and to become more cognitively complex and conceptually flexible" (M.L. Holly & A.McLoughlin, 1989, p. 175). There is currently a much greater concern with the professional development of teachers than existed twenty years ago. For example, one of the major goal of the Romanian education system is regarding high quality of teacher professional development programs that should enhance their competences and use of new curricular approaches to facilitate successful practice. But in the same time, teachers must develop themselves some new personal skills, like emotional communication, motivation for learning, design skills for making computer and media products, counselling, and research skills. Nowadays, the teaching profession requires a highly skilled person, and this is not at all an easy process. It is well-known the axis that improving teachers would improve the teaching and learning in school, which in turn would improve the quality of education at national level. But various factors might contribute to ineffectiveness of teacher professional development, like ethical, structural, cultural, economical, policy or personal issues. Many researchers, like Loucks-Horsley and Matsumoto (1999), Hawley and Valli (2001), Vannatta and Fordham (2004), Klieger and Yakobovitch (2012), Tse, Ming et al (2012) argue that some of the most significant factors are the level of guidance and support through-out the implementation stages, and their willingness to accept the changes, the degree to which teachers support those changes, and their investment above and beyond their regular duties for its success. The willingness is closely related to perception that plays a significant role in an individual's career decision-making, because it can maximize the learning process and teaching approaches. Borko and Putnam (1995) argue that perceptions play a critical role in how teachers learn and make changes in their teaching practice. I believe that knowing/investigating their perceptions it could be a way for curriculum designers and policy makers to redesign pre-service and in-service teacher training programs.

Therefore, this study explores how the professional development is influenced by the followed in-service teacher training and its impact on classroom practice. The main question that this study intended to explore is: which is the impact of the followed in-service programs on classroom practice? To address this main question some subsidiary questions were devised so that main aspects of in-service training can be explored, such as what are the categories of activities considered to be necessary for teacher training? Which actors influence the level of teacher professional development? What are the types of activities based on training programs followed that influence/facilitate the classroom practice? Which is the level of teacher training programs focused on specific aspects of educational practice? What are the challenges faced through in-service programs and its aspects that might influence the teacher's educational practice?

2. Purpose of study

This paper reports on a study that investigated kindergarten teachers' perceptions of their in-service followed training programs, and impact on the professional development process, and classroom practice.

3. Research methods

The qualitative instrument (60 items) chosen to carry out the research was a structured questionnaire on five issues categories of activities considered to be necessary for teacher training, actors that influence the level of teacher professional development, types of activities based on training programs followed that may influence the

classroom practice, the level of teacher training programs focused on specific aspects of educational practice, and aspects that might influence the teacher's educational practice.

This instrument was on-line applied on 84 kindergarten teachers from urban and rural districts, as follows: 32 beginners teachers, 10 newly qualified teachers, 15 qualified teachers - 2nd level, and 27 qualified teachers - 1st level.

4. Findings and results

In qualitative terms, data regarding the perceptions on professional development of teachers from kindergarten were structured on five issues: categories of fields and activities that are considered to be necessary for teacher training programs, actors that influence the level of teacher professional development, types of activities based on training programs followed that may influence the classroom practice, the level of teacher training programs focused on specific aspects of educational practice, and aspects that might influence the teacher's educational practice.

To be easier to extract the conclusions and to devise some recommendations, the data gathered will be presented by using a comparison between answers of those teachers who have less than 10 years of teaching experience (usually they are the beginners and newly qualified teachers), and teachers with more than ten year teaching experience (they already have the 2nd level of being qualified teacher). Another reason for this comparison is that teachers have different needs regarding their professional development, and, usually, these needs are related to the level of teaching experience.

4.1. Categories of fields and activities that are considered to be necessary for teacher training programs

Making these comparison between teachers who have and not have teaching experience more than 10 years, the data gathered show that teachers with more than 10 years teaching experience believe that the main issues of professional development that have impact on classroom practice are: classroom management, teaching design, instruction methodology, parent education, and conflict management. While younger teachers (less than 10 years of teaching experience) rank on the top the communication abilities, family involvement strategies, management courses, use of computer programs and educational platforms, and developing educational projects. Regarding those categories of activities that are considered to be necessary for teacher training programs, both groups of teachers set up next on the top: specialized studies (through high school and B.A.), reflective internship practice, pedagogical meetings, team teaching activities, and conceiving the educational projects.

4.2. Actors that influence the level of teacher professional development

Common responses were provided by all teachers regarding the first five actors that might influence the level of their professional development: the self, the level of knowledge, the headmaster, the chief of methodical commission, and the team of teachers from kindergarten. On the last positions, there were significant differences between those two groups: if the teachers with more than 10 years of teaching experience agreed that the less influence on their professional development is caused by the relationship with children's parents and school inspector, the beginners and newly qualified teachers couldn't indicate an actor that has little or no influence on their development.

4.3. Types of activities based on training programs followed that may influence the classroom practice

From seven activities suggested that may influence the educational practice, only two were common for all teachers, such as activities for developing empathy and decision-making. Following different training programs,

the perception of teachers with 1st and 2nd level of practical experience is that the classroom practice is most influenced by and through activities for developing skills to an assertive communication and learning management activities through games. On the other hand, the perception of the beginners and newly qualified teachers is that the classroom practice is most influenced by and through self-awareness activities and conflict mediation activities. It can be seen that there is a direct correlation between previous answers and these ones.

4.4. The level of teacher training programs focused on specific aspects of educational practice

All investigated teachers complained about that most training programs are focused on interactions skills with adults and capacity for speech and communication, and too few training programs are addressing to development of emotional expressiveness, development of emotional control, capacity of listening and understanding, and promoting the personal security practices.

4.5. Aspects that might influence the teacher's educational practice

Only in two cases there were similar answers for all investigated teachers that were agreed on the aspects that might influence and it's reflected into the teacher's educational practice: use of information communication technologies, and their expectations regarding personal development. If the educational practice of teachers with 1st and 2nd level of teaching experience is influenced by the involvement in an international project, differentiate children learning activities, and personal training, data collected from beginners and newly qualified teachers show that they are highly influenced by a personal career development plan, access to journals, and access to a professional community network.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study investigated kindergarten teachers' perceptions of their in-service followed training programs, and impact on the professional development process and classroom practice.

Teachers' perceptions of their in-service followed training programs seem to be one of dissatisfaction because many training programs remain at a formal level and less focused on the real needs of beneficiaries. For example, a visible element of the professional development is portfolio. Usually, the portfolio is increasingly being used as a tool for supporting self-regulated learning, and all teachers must prepare its portfolio, but they claim that they are in a strange situation where they have to conceive too many materials for the portfolio than to deal with what is the most important, namely teaching. Also, they mentioned that reflective internships practice are specified by law, but even today there were not put in practice for various reasons, and this only one of the factors that causes domino effect into the classroom practice and professional development.

I believe that in order to improve the teaching practice, teachers should be helped to understand and apply the new curricular approaches because they have the final decision over what occurs in the classroom. Therefore, training programs should preferably be situated and meaningful, and all these programs should comply to the principles of adult learning where the learning activities are more effective when they are characterized by clear connections with daily practice in which problems, questions, and solutions are integrated.

Regarding professional development process, findings show that there is a significant difference between beginners and newly qualified teachers' perception and those with more than 10 years experience; in the sense that the former focuses more on the visibility and status to the profession, while the second category focuses its approach on professionalization.

Summarize in a few words, there are required some recommendations, such as awareness of the importance of pre-service and in-service teacher training following the axis of professional development quality. Or, another one could be regarding to the correlation between the educational sectoral policy and management of professional

development training. Also, I consider that the use of professional development plan is to structure their development path in terms of learning goals and plans of actions, and to stimulate and support the professional development of teachers. Therefore, it is required the necessity of implementing personal development and career management programs for this group of experts in early education.

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