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Difficulties and Resources of Teachers' Adaptation in Teachers' Reflection

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Abstract

Improving the quality of teacher's training can be difficult without analyzing the crucial problems and resources to overcome the former which exist at the initial stage of the teacher's work. The article is devoted to this relevant problem. The aim of the article is a comprehensive analysis of factors that are actualizing the capacity of school teachers at the initial stage of their work.

The leading method for researching the problem is the authors' questionnaire "Reflection on early pedagogical experience". A total number of 104 school teachers with a different length of service at school were interviewed. We compared data using the Mann-Whitney U-test in the program Statistica 8.0.

The study reveals the most significant difficulties experienced by teachers in the first years of their work which are divided into three groups: a didactic competence, job requirements ("bureaucratic" difficulties), and interactions with other individuals in the sphere of education. The most various difficulties of a teachers' adaptation are from a group of psychological difficulties.

The data shows that beginning teachers put the support of colleagues, administration and parents in the first place among the resources of their adaptation to the school, while more experienced teachers praised the self-education and creativity in teaching.

Based on our data, we are suggesting that teacher initial education should influence the formation of professional self-awareness of future and novice teachers, motivating them to self-knowledge and self-development within the framework of psychological training and workshops.

Keywords: teacher's adaptation, teacher's professional development, teacher's education, survey

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Introduction

The relevance of the issue discussed in the article is due to the fact that many researchers recognize the great contradictions between the content of pedagogical education and the realities of the schools in which beginner teachers start to work which are discussed in the works of Ayala Arancibia (2014), Kolesnikova (2016), Parcerisa and Verger (2016), Metlik (2018). We analyzed the process of a teacher entering a school is described in the literature as a professional crisis (Danilov & Schustova, 2018), which is accompanied by the appearance of an attrition (Clandinin et al., 2015; Kelchtermans, 2017), inappropriate early career decisions (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012) and can lead to teachers leaving the profession (Tricarico, Jacobs, & Yendol-Hoppey, 2015). Educational reforms place novice teachers in difficult conditions (Martin, Mccaughtry, Hodges-Kulinna, & Cothran, 2007; Parcerisa & Verger, 2016), requiring the development of new models of teacher's training (Ruffinelli, 2014; Choi & Walker, 2018; Laptev, Pisareva, & Tryapitsina, 2019).

Purpose and objectives of the study

Purpose of the study is to comprehensively analyze factors contributing to both the strengthening and the resolving of occupational crisis and the mainstreaming of the vocational and psychological potential of primary and secondary school teachers at the initial stage of their career.

Literature review

In their work, du Plessisa & Sundeb (2017) note that this period of the beginning of a teacher's career does not depend on an educational policy, the system of teacher's training and is described by researchers in different countries. Tricarico et al. (2015) argue that the unique characteristics of schools can additionally affect the adaptation of novice teachers, which was noted for urban schools in economically disadvantageous areas.

Evidently, a number of authors highlights the problem and speaks of the teacher's adaptation to school as a "shock" (Correa, Martínez-Arbelaiz, & Aberasturi-Apr aiz, 2015; Dicke, Elling, Schmeck, & Leutner, 2015). It is difficult to agree with this opinion, taking into account the duration of the practice at the school while future teachers are studying at the university (Laptev et al., 2019), the mentoring of more experienced teachers during the first years (Burke, Aubusson, Schuck, Buchanan, & Prescott, 2015), special counselling centres (Tricarico et al., 2015; Danilov & Schustova, 2018) and other ways supporting teachers and

preventing their departure from school in many countries. Equally important, according to the literature, is the improvement of the psychological resilience of teachers in the early years of their work at school (Johnson et al., 2016; Kaur & Singh, 2019).

As we see in the review, a comprehension of professional training in education is closely related to the consideration of the process of adaptation of novice teachers and factors influencing this process (Henissen, Beckers, & Moerkerke, 2017; Savotina, 2019). Improving the quality of training and professional activities of teachers is difficult to carry out without analyzing the main difficulties, as well as the resources to overcome them, which exist at the initial stage of the pedagogical career. Knowing these features of starting a pedagogical career, teacher's educators can increase the readiness of future teachers to start their service at school by neutralizing potential problems and highlighting factors that will help teachers cope with multiple difficulties and obstacles.

There are various methods and tools for collecting and analyzing data to study teacher adaptation. One of the valid and reliable methods in the scientific literature is the reflexive evaluation by teachers of their entry into school. Interviews, surveys, focus groups, the recordings of stories and other forms (Kelchtermans, 1993; Fleming, 2014; Burke et al., 2015; Danilov & Schustova, 2018; Il'ina & Loginova, 2019) are used for this purpose.

Considering teachers' own experiences early in their careers at school, we can better understand the relationship between objective and subjective factors in the process of adaptation to the pedagogical profession. The difficulties teachers face at the beginning of their careers are very diverse. Therefore, not all difficulties at the beginning of a pedagogical career should lead to a transformation in teacher's training; only the core, the most important of them should be highlighted. Teachers' reflection on their early experience allows us to select such key difficulties in the light of changing sociocultural conditions.

Definitely, an analysis of the retrospective assessment of the initial stage of their professional activity by teachers who have remained in the profession does not reveal insurmountable difficulties. All the difficulties have been overcome anyway, but what exactly has helped the teachers to cope? Research signifies that both school administration support (Cancio, Albrecht, & Johns, 2013) and mentoring (Burke et al., 2015) are important in overcoming the teacher's adaptation crisis.

Summarizing the above studies, we can conclude that an analysis of the resources that help to cope with the early career's challenges that teachers demonstrate in self-reports is of great interest in terms of changing the format and content of teacher's training.

Methodology

The leading method of research of the issue is the author's questionnaire «Reflection on early pedagogical experience» (authors: I. V. Usoltseva, N. A. Savotina, & E. M. Klemyashova). The questionnaire consists of closed questions with multiple choices. Respondents should choose no more than three options for each question. Alternatives to the questions were developed through reviewing the existing literature on the subject and then were tested through an expert survey of scholars and educational practitioners (10 experts).

A total number of 104 school teachers were interviewed, including 98 women and 6 men, with an average age of 40.6 years and an average length of service at school of 15.3 years. The low representation of men reflects the gender composition of the teaching staff of Russian schools. Teachers of primary and secondary schools from Kaluga, Krasnogorsk (Moscow region) and Moscow took part in the study.

The study participants were divided into three groups depending on the teaching experience: up to 5 years (36 people, an average age of 26.9 years, an average experience of 2.5 years), from 5 to 10 years (16 people, an average age of 36.3 years, an average experience of 8.4 years), over 10 years (52 people, an average age of 40.2 years, an average experience of 14.9 years).

A comparison of an early career experience among teachers with different work experience was conducted using the Mann-Whitney U-criterion in the Statistica 8.0 program.

Results

We classified the most significant difficulties encountered by teachers in the first years in school service into the following groups: work requirements (“bureaucratic” difficulties), didactic competence, interaction with other individuals in education, psychological difficulties.

In our study, teachers, regardless of their work experience, mostly noted difficulties that can be described as psychological ones: “one's own tiredness” (42.6% of respondents), “difficulties in maintaining discipline in the classroom” (40.7%), “illusions about the profession” (18.5%), “the psychological climate in the school” (14.8%), “a fear of children” (13.0%), “a weak self-organization” (7.4%).

These data is consistent with the literature on the need of developing for novice teachers the psychological competence in a self-regulation and influencing others for overcoming the crisis of the adaptation (Il'ina & Loginova, 2019; Kaur & Singh, 2019).

The requirements for the position (“bureaucratic” difficulties) and the didactic competence were somewhat less complicated for teachers at the beginning of their career. Among the “bureaucratic” difficulties, the leaders are “an excessive bureaucratization of pedagogical activity” (36.5%), “an excessive workload in preparing electronic documents and reports” (27.8%). Such peculiarity of the work of the modern Russian teachers, related to the specificity of the teacher’s reporting as “training” students for tests at the expense of studying the content of the subject”, was retrospectively realized as a problem at the beginning of the career by a significantly smaller number of teachers (14.8%).

The leader among the difficulties of starting a career, which we attribute to a didactic competence, is “insufficient knowledge obtained at the university” (31.5%). All other difficulties from this group were noted by only a small number of respondents: “difficulties in learning the curriculum by children” (11.1%), “a replacement of educational content by technologies” (9.3%), “the irrelevance of knowledge acquired at the university”(5.6%).

Difficulties experienced by teachers which are associated with other participants in the educational process (we named this group as “interaction with other individuals of education”) occupy the last place in the retrospective evaluation of teachers. However, relations between novice teachers and their colleagues were complicated, our participants mostly often noted “a rivalry of colleagues’ (18.5%) and “a lack of a support from colleagues” (11.1%). The relationship with the school administration also was an obstacle for the beginning teachers. “A conservatism of the school administration” (20.4%) and “a lack of understanding by the school administration” (7.4%) were mentioned by almost the third of the teachers surveyed.

Contrary to the fears of future teachers, which they often voice to their professors, relations with the parents of the pupils have been a significant challenge for only a small number of teachers. Only 13.0% of participants reported the misunderstanding with their students’ parents in their early career time.

Among the significant problems of modern education that nowadays affect beginner teachers, all respondents noted “a low salary of teachers” (57.4%), “ongoing reforms in education” (53.7%) and “an increasing bureaucracy in education” (40.7%). Differences in these factors between groups of teachers with a various length of service do not reach the level of statistical significance ($p\text{-level} > 0.05$).

In addition, according to the teachers we have asked, today new factors influence the novice teachers, such as the qualities of modern schoolchildren (“it is difficult to teach modern children”, 31.5%) and their parents (“a lack of respect from parents”, 33.3%).

Furthermore, it is interesting to compare the answers to this question by those school teachers who, during the survey, are actually modern beginning teachers and their senior colleagues, who only assume which modern factors have the greatest impact on the early career teachers.

Our survey shows that teachers with work experience for more than 10 years overestimate or underestimate (i.e., indicate more or less often than beginning teachers) factors such as “an infantilism of young teachers” (18.5% of senior teachers and 5.0% of beginner teachers), “too many technologies in education” (7.4% and 0.0% respectively), “it is difficult to teach modern children” (40.7% and 20.0%), “a lack of respect from parents” (22.2% and 34.2%).

All of the teachers surveyed emphasize the importance of modern pedagogical technologies for the beginning teacher.

Our participants began their pedagogical career in different sociocultural conditions. These differences are related to important characteristics that influence the adaptation of teachers, such as the pre- or information society and its problems and risks, the status of teachers in society and differences among generations of students, new guidelines for an educational policy, new tools for teaching and teachers' assessment.

In order to identify the difficulties of a teacher's adaptation that are constant and invariants in the developing society, we analyzed the differences in the answers of teachers depending on their pedagogical experience. We assume that we should consider as crucial obstacles to the adaptation of the teacher the difficulties equally often pointed out by teachers who started their careers in various sociocultural conditions. They should be taken into account when determining the content of teacher initial education in the context of reforming.

In our study such invariants ($p\text{-level} > 0.05$) turned out to be ‘difficulties in mastering the curriculum by schoolchildren’, they were chosen by 10.0% of teachers who have worked in the school for less than 5 years; by 14.3% of teachers with work experience from 5 to 10 years and by 11.1% of teachers with work experience over 10 years. Another invariant is “training” students for tests at the expense of studying the content of the subject” (15.0%, 14.0% and 14.8%, respectively). Such an obstacle for painless adaptation turned out to be “permanent” as “a rivalry of colleagues” (15.0%, 14.3% and 22.2%, respectively).

Discovered constant challenges represent three groups of difficulties at the beginning of a pedagogical career that are the didactic competence, job requirements (“bureaucratic” difficulties), and interactions with other individuals in the sphere of education.

Teachers with a particular length of work experience at school can be described as different generations who are brought up on varied values and expectations in relation to themselves and other people. This, from our point of view, explains the absence of repeated difficulties experienced by diverse generations of teachers which are related to the psychological component of pedagogical activities.

In relation to this group of problems at the beginning of the pedagogical career, we have obtained a large number of statistically significant differences. Thus, statistically significant differences were revealed between answers of teachers with an experience of up to 5 years and of those with an experience from 5 to 10 years for negatively influencing factors such as “one's own tiredness” (p-level = 0.01), “difficulties in maintaining discipline in the classroom” (p-level = 0.02), “illusions about the profession” (p-level = 0.03).

For answers of teachers with an experience of up to 5 years and of those with an experience of more than 10 years, these considerable differences also apply to other negative factors such as “one's own tiredness,” (p-level = 0.04), “a fear of children” (p-level = 0.03) and “a weak self-organization” (p-level = 0.01).

Another issue of our research is the resources that helped teachers at the beginning of their careers to cope with stress and the crisis of adaptation to professional activities.

Regardless of the length of service at school, the teachers surveyed indicated such resources as “a self-education” (53.7%), “a love for children” (52.6%), “a support of colleagues” (46.3%), “a knowledge gained at the university” (44.4%), “a creative approach to teaching” (37.2%). Less important, however, for successful adaptation, according to our teachers, were such resources as “an administrative support” (22.2%), “a help of my students' parents” (18.5%), “an assistance of a guidance counselor” (14.8%) and “a help of a school psychologist” (5.6%).

Moreover, for teachers with up to 5 years of experience and for those with experience between 5 and 10 years we have identified significant differences for resources in the adaptation, such as “a support of colleagues” (p-level = 0.03), “a support of a school administration” (p-level = 0.02) and “a self-education» (p-level = 0.03). Support of colleagues and of a school administration in the early stages of the adaptation was more frequently named by teachers with experience up to five years, and a self-education was important for teachers with a longer school experience.

Statistically significant differences in the answers of teachers with work experience up to 5 years and of those with work experience over 10 years include positive resources such as “self-education” (p-level = 0.04), “a creative approach to teaching” (p-level = 0.02), “help of my students' parents” (p-level = 0.04).

Discussions

According to literary sources (Cancio et al., 2013; Ayala Arancibia, 2014; Correa et al., 2015), one of the most significant problems for novice teachers is a lack of knowledge at their first years at school, but in our study only a third of respondents indicated it. The didactic competence like «insufficient knowledge obtained at the university» as an obstacle of starting a career noted 31.5% of teachers surveyed. This requires further research.

As we mentioned above, the scientific literature (Martin et al., 2007; Parcerisa & Verger, 2016) emphasizes the need for an appropriate assistance for teachers in the early stage of a career in adapting to school reforms, which should be one of the tasks of vocational training. Our data supports this opinion. Among the significant problems of modern education affecting beginner teachers, respondents noted «ongoing reforms in education» (53.7%). Differences between groups of teachers with a various length of service do not reach the level of statistical significance ($p\text{-level} > 0.05$).

Support of colleagues and of a school administration in the early stages of the adaptation was more frequently named by teachers with experience up to five years, and a self-education was important for teachers with a longer school experience. This fact leads us to the conclusion that it is difficult for novice teachers overcoming the crisis of adaptation by seeking resources within themselves, in their internal resources, for example, in enhancing their didactic competence through self-learning or creativity in pedagogical activities.

Psychological well-being at the beginning of a pedagogical career seems to depend on external factors, although novice teachers are not aware of this (only 5% of teachers with under 5 years of an experience mentioned the infantilism of modern teachers as a negative factor for an adaptation).

This trend is reflected to a similar extent in the choice of novice teachers made from among external resources for coping with challenges in an early career time. They value the support of parents. Teachers with a longer school experience emphasized their inner abilities and proneness to self-learning and being creative in teaching.

Conclusion

It is established that the constant challenges of early years of school service represent three groups of difficulties at the beginning of a pedagogical career: a didactic competence, job requirements (“bureaucratic” difficulties), and interactions with other individuals of education. They should be taken into

account when determining the content of teacher's initial education in the context of its reforms. The most various problems of teachers' adaptation are from a group of psychological difficulties.

Our survey shows that teachers with a work experience of more than 10 years overestimate or underestimate (i.e., indicate more or less often than beginning teachers) factors influencing the adaptation of novice teachers. This is to be taken into account when they are supervising new teachers at schools.

Moreover, the new generation of teachers, at the beginning of their careers, prefer more likely than the "older" generation of teachers to focus on external recourses including support from colleagues, school administration and parents, and, to a lesser extent, coping with a crisis with their own resources, such as knowledge gained in teacher's training and a creative approach to teaching.

Based on the results of our research, the following practical conclusions can be drawn: pedagogical education can and should influence the professional awareness of future and beginning teachers, motivating them to deepen their knowledge and acquire general professional competences, self-knowledge and self-development within the framework of psychological and pedagogical trainings, master classes and workshops.

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