

Possibilities For Improvement Of Pedagogical Work Of Teachers In The Process Of Further Education In The Conditions Of The Slovak Republic

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Abstract

The present paper deals with the professional development of Slovak primary and secondary school teachers. The author provides the analysis of the qualification growth process and of expanding professional competencies in accordance with the latest scientific knowledge, social needs and requirements for the teaching performance in various institutions of Slovakia. It is realized in the form of actualized education ensuring the latest knowledge mediation, deepening, development and dissemination of professional and pedagogical knowledge and skills. Innovative education will enable improvement of the performance standard of pedagogical or professional activities. The author compares the possibilities of further education in Slovakia with the possibilities of further education in other countries on the basis of experience obtained during her participation in the international project Leonardo da Vinci No. 113421512. **Keywords:** application in teaching practice, improvement of pedagogical work, expanding competencies, credit system, formal and informal education, continuing education, adaptive, actualized and innovative education of teachers.

INTRODUCTION

The end of the 20th century was generally characterized by the change in the perception of the teaching profession also in the CEE countries. The teaching profession in the countries building socialism based on the Communist ideology was closely linked to the ideology of the state up till the 1990s. This approach influenced the selection of candidates for teacher education, the content of the university preparation as well as the practical performance of the teaching profession in practice. After the Velvet Revolution the Slovak education policy focused on creating a legislative framework for more space for autonomous work of schools and more independent work of teachers. Joining the European Union sped up the connection of the Slovak Ministry of Education to European trends. Based on these trends the key European documents in the field of education have been adopted. This new understanding of the teaching profession (neo-professionalism) built on a high-level vocational training is aimed at building up the professionalism of teachers as a lifelong career education system. Such an understanding significantly departs from earlier academic approaches which mainly focused on a strong theoretical component of the subject field that was acquired during university studies. A teacher was traditionally considered to be the main subject of education providing knowledge transfer to pupils in the process of education. The current conception of teacher based on the advanced professional model stresses the teacher's subject-object role in interaction with pupils and the environment; the conception of a teacher comes from a broader professional model [1]. The importance of his/her social role in interaction with pupils, parents and the teaching staff has been increasing. In their work, teachers are also determined by the economic environment, social composition, habits and standards of living [2]. At the same time they co-create an educational environment and atmosphere in the class, they organize and coordinate the activity of pupils and manage and evaluate the learning process [3].

The definition of a graduate profile is largely understood as the determination of the claims and the requirements for the performance of a particular profession. In this sense, *professiography* is "a teaching that deals with identification and description of the claims and requirements of the work (imposed) on man [4] ". In social practice more is being required of the teaching profession than what is defined by the frequent term "graduate profile" these days, in particular as regards the personal dimension, character, willpower and character traits of a teacher education graduate.

Successful completion of university studies does not mean the end of an educational process although a lot of graduates at the moment of getting a university degree think it is. Only at the moment of getting a degree, each graduate's acquired knowledge, its quality and the ability to apply it in practice are directly confronted [5]. Requirements on theoretical knowledge and practical skills of a teacher education graduate in scholarly literature and binding educational documents are determined in a mandatory performative way, such as: they have to manage, know, understand, supervise, be able to, and the like. Similarly, the practical skills of graduates are most commonly defined by the parameters of their performance, how objectively they can diagnose, demonstrate, supervise, use, apply in a creative way, respect etc. Such definitions are of high information value for teacher trainers, supervisors and future employers. However, they represent only one side of teachers' performance. Definitions of required personality qualities of beginning teachers are absent in these parameters [6].

An important factor in solving the current problems of mankind is an effective educational process. Its application is inferred by the authors of the sixth report to the Club of Rome J. W. Botkin, M. Elmandrija and M. Malitza from the need for new forms of learning and learning in the context of constantly changing conditions. The report was published at the end of 1979 and entitled "No Limits to Learning". A new concept of education which is characterized by innovative education is important for the contemporary era. Its essence consists of two basic characteristics: anticipation which is oriented towards preparation for the possibility of emergence of situations, takes into account alternatives extending far into the future (it involves an element of foreseeing consequences of human behaviour for the evolution in form of projections, situational models, scenarios) and participation, thus fellowship of the widest range of people possible, seeking to involve individuals in this process as well, with the aim of making this century not only a century of rights but also of responsibility. This attitude is characterized by collaboration, dialogue and maintenance of active communication. Anticipation is a mental activity, participation is a social one [7]. An effort to theoretically affect the transformation of the contemporary society and its perspectives of development is represented by the concept of a knowledge-based society, or the concept of a learning society. It has been intensively developing in the social sciences and stresses the importance of knowledge for the society, which is also reflected in science and education [8].

The professionalism of a professional teacher in the learning society of the 21st century is not possible without constant reflections on the constantly changing needs of the society. Therefore, the position of the institutions providing continuing education has been reinforced. An important feature of the reinforcement of their activities is connection and integration of various types of institutions dealing with teachers, too. The current model of continuing education in the Slovak Republic is based on important international documents:

- a) Recommendation Concerning the Status of Teachers (1966) recognizing the essential role of teachers in educational advancement and the importance of their contribution to the development of man in modern society.

- b) Memorandum on Open Distance Learning in the European Community (1991) highlighting the needs for and the benefits of distance learning as the main way of expanding access to education for everyone during biocultural development.
- c) The Bologna Declaration (1999) unifying and simplifying multi-stage education systems of 31 countries and enabling the mobility of students through the established system of ECTS credits.
- d) A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (Brussels, 2000) and the follow-up documents relating to the conditions for lifelong learning, permanent learning and developing skills and interests by people of any age.
- e) The Lisbon Strategy (Lisbon, 2000) postulating a strategic goal for the next decade aimed at raising the quality of human potential in the field of employment and social cohesion against social exclusion.
- f) Raising the Quality of Learning for All (Dublin, 2004) perceiving the teaching career as a lifelong learning programme that integrates undergraduate teacher education, entry into work and continuous professional development, whereas teachers have to be motivated, encouraged and stimulated by constant professional development.
- g) The European Qualifications Framework EQF (2005), the goal of which is to define and form a tool in Europe that will enable to establish relationships between qualifications frameworks among Member States and thereby create recognition of individuals' qualifications.

National documents constituting the basis for continuing education are represented by the National Report on Lifelong Learning, Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 2001 which declares Slovak schools to be the main institutions of the lifelong learning network. The document also contains a proposal to develop a system of standards and accreditation for teaching positions and educators in the system of continuing education. In the part about teachers within the frame of the Milénium project (2002) it is stated, inter alia, that quality education of teaching staff concerns their entry into work, lifelong learning, motivation for learning and compliance with the Teacher Code of Ethics. The document *Národný program výchovy a vzdelávania* (the National Programme of Training and Education) defines teacher as the decisive factor in training, indicates strategic aims in the process of professionalisation of teachers – concerning mainly areas of teachers' career development. It postulates the need for standardisation of the requirements for their qualification. It also prioritises development of teaching staff profiles and standards for the assessment of their competencies in practice, for their career paths and creating incentive policies for improving the quality and efficiency of educational work. The importance of these requirements were increased by the Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic 2006-2009 underlining high professionalism of teachers as a condition for the development of education in the Slovak Republic, provided an incentive system of remuneration is created.

In the context of implementation of the Manifesto in 2004 the above mentioned *Koncepcia profesijného rozvoja učiteľa v kariérnom systéme* (the Conception of Professional Development of Teachers in the Career System) was developed. In accordance with the trend of building systems of continuing teacher education, as it is in other so-called genuine professions, these systems create prerequisites for teachers' professional development through continuing education as a system element of national training systems [9]. Teachers' professional development is an essential condition for their professionalism in a biocultural aspect. This is a continuous process which includes all the dimensions of professionalism (the professional, personal, and operational one) and relates to the development of professional competencies. As it has been the case with the foreign literature already since the end of the

last century, there is an effort to identify the essence of professionalism of teachers by means of key competencies in the currently valid Slovak model. A systematic attention has been devoted to the concept of competency both in theory and research in the last decade. It is understood as a kind of competency which, according to Švec (2002), is affected by a number of factors (Fig.1) [10]:

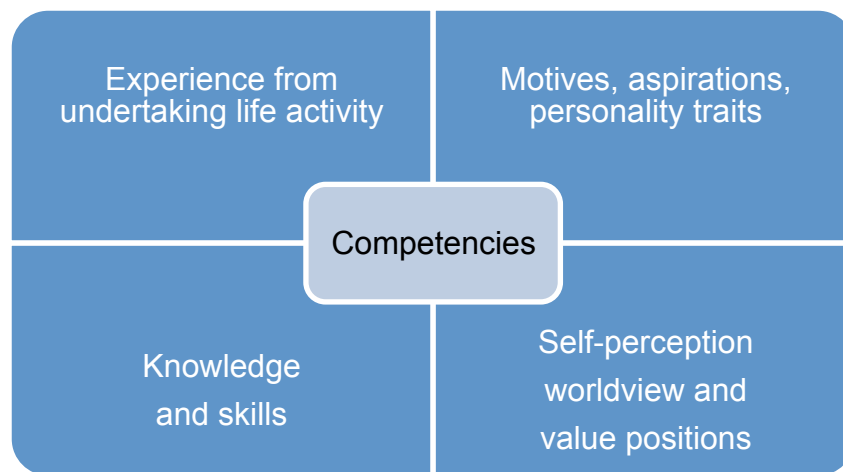


Fig. 1 Competency profile of a teaching staff member

The created competency profile of a teaching staff member is elaborated on in professional standards and follow-up competencies in the individual categories of teaching staff, in key competencies and capabilities and their quality indicators [11]. The competency profile of a teacher is the foundation for the development of professional standards of the individual categories of teaching staff (e.g., teacher in primary education, teacher in the lower secondary education, educator, etc.). The competency profile [12], drawn up by experts, respects the following basic conceptual starting points:

- The priority of holistic personality development of a teacher.
- The consistency of national policies and European documents laying down the requirements for building a learning society based on the principles of lifelong learning.
- Establishment of measurable objectives in the area of teacher professionalism, in the professional and personal dimension. Competency profile and standards of the profession are a matter for the expert domain.

The rudimentary areas of pedagogical staff member's work concerns the key competencies. It is efficient to divide the required teacher competencies of the above mentioned conceptual starting points into three main broad groups (dimensions):

- 1) Teachers' competencies in relation to pupils: their input, process and output characteristics of and conditions for the development of the pupils' personality.
- 2) Competencies orientated towards the education process, concerning the conditions and areas of the way teaching theory transforms teaching contents by strategies that facilitate teaching and learning processes of pupils.
- 3) Competencies orientated towards teachers' self-improvement (for more [12] and [13]). Professional development of teachers covers both dimensions of professionalism (professional and personal one) as it concerns their professional competencies development as well as respecting the principles of the professional ethics of a teacher.

Objectives Of The Career System Concept

The role of the career system concept is to maintain and sustain the high quality of education in accordance with the understanding of the mastery of teaching. It is a profession that is being

carried out in the public interest. Its professional and decisive autonomy should be protected as such; one should clearly articulate professional competencies, skills and abilities based on the formalized knowledge gained during long-term preparation and the subsequent continuing education. Newly formulated objectives are designed to improve the processes, with an emphasis on:

- 1) The personality of a teacher as a self-improving entity. The career system should create the opportunity for teachers to develop themselves, to meet the needs of self realization, personal and professional satisfaction and give them the certainty of social valuation of their efforts and their work on themselves. It is related to the prevention of negative phenomena – professional stagnation, burn-out, sense of professional inadequacy, loss of the ability to compete on the labour market [14].
- 2) The school institution as a tool of improving the quality of the teaching staff. The school management can rely on such a system in planning, implementation and evaluation of the vision and objectives for the development of a school. Such a system can be an argument when implementing the vision and objectives of the school. It is related to the prevention of negative phenomena – loss of school's reputation, students leaving, reduced ability to compete, up to dissolution of school.
- 3) The overall social development, the quality of teachers as the prospect of societal development and sustainable development of the society. Respecting documents that support the development of teachers is a prerequisite for the development of society as a whole. It is related to the prevention of negative phenomena – referred to in connection with a crisis of the teaching profession (for more [14]).

Continuing education in the Slovak Republic forms a part of the lifelong learning programme and is considered to be a process of acquisition of knowledge, skills and competencies with the aim to maintain, restore, improve, expand and update the professional competencies of a pedagogical staff member and of a professional staff member. Those competencies are necessary for the performance of educational and professional activities. Continuing education is an effective tool for teachers' professional development which ensures the process of deepening, improvement and expansion of both qualification prerequisites and professional competencies within the defined framework (scientific knowledge, societal needs and requirements). They are necessary for high-quality performance of teaching and professional activities (for more [15]).

The Level Of The Slovak System Of Continuing Education In An International Comparison

What is the quality of the continuing education provided to teachers in the Slovak Republic in comparison with other European countries? Is it possible to create an effective standardized model of a professional teacher education which would be effective in different countries of the European Union? On what basis should be continuing education built, if it is to become an instrument improving and developing the competencies of teaching staff in the education sector?

There was an attempt to provide answers to these and other questions by a group of scientific and pedagogical workers who participate in education of students in teaching programmes of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Žilina in Žilina. It was done in terms of mapping out and analysing the situation concerning continuing education in selected EU countries,

together with writing a guide about the best models of teacher education. These tasks were carried out by the Žilina team in cooperation with seven Leonardo da Vinci international research partners, led by a team of researchers from the Birmingham City University. Other university offices involved in the Leonardo project included departments of the University of Beira Interior of Portugal, the Capa Anatolio Teacher Training School in Turkey, the National Institute for Training and Career Development in Education in Bulgaria and the Novancia Business School in Paris.

The motivation behind this international project, initiated by the British team led by Alex Kendall, was a document issued by the UK Government about education entitled "the Importance of Teaching". There is a postulate in it, resulting from the analysis of educational systems, that "all the evidence from different educational systems around the world shows that the most important factor in determining how well children do" is the fact that teachers have access to lifelong learning, with the possibility to "observe and work with other teachers and (receive) appropriate training for leadership positions." According to the statistical data from 2010, only 25 % of teachers regularly participate in post-graduate studies and three quarters of all teacher activities are included in the category of passive learning. Such a situation with continuing education of teachers is more or less similar in all countries of the European Union.

The objectives of the first phase of the Leonardo project focused on mapping out the situation of teachers' postgraduate education in selected countries of Central and Western Europe. It also concentrated on the follow-up comparison and comprehensive analysis of the systems of further education of teachers in the participating partner countries. To meet these objectives, it was necessary to "map out the terrain" and get an adequate amount of information on the modalities for further education of teachers of all school grades in seven partner countries and to produce a clear idea about functioning of the continuing education in the respective countries. The survey was based on combined research methods. During the data collection phase, quantitative methods were represented by e-questionnaires which are available for the respondents on a wikispace website of the project. Qualitative methods were represented by managed, structured interviews and processes of selective and systematic observation. An additional analysis of the national documents and legislation related to the continuing education of teachers in the respective countries was used. It served to create an overall picture of the status and roles of institutions and systems which provide such an education.

The online questionnaires for teachers were statistically processed. The conditions of teachers for education in individual countries were examined by means of respondents' – teachers of all grades of education and their answers: Bulgaria (437), Slovakia (210), the UK (148), France (40), Portugal (28) and Turkey (48). In terms of the target group analysis, it was predominantly female teachers who took part in the research (83 %), which reflects a strong feminization of school systems. The vast majority of the investigated group consisted of teachers of pupils over the age of 11 years (72 %) with more than 10 years of experience (63 %). The basics of the qualitative method were represented by managed interviews with teachers who had a different length of practice. They were chosen as representatives of all school levels of the given country. The particular sets of questions were orientated towards the key areas of further education such as:

- decisive aspects of educational offerings, ascertaining who the initiators of the continuing education of teachers are, more factors of the decision-making process,
- creating pre-concepts of the conceptualization of work/education/pupils,
- ascertaining, what teachers consider to be of high value (beneficial) in continuing education,
- defining of the surplus, the unbeneficial, or what teachers consider to be of low value in the continuing education,

- the impact (the benefits) of continuing education on the quality of particular pedagogical work of teachers,
- existing ways and the most commonly applied forms of professional growth of teachers,
- external and internal motivational factors affecting continuing education,
- the relation of continuing education to initiatory (preparatory) education of teachers, and
- the institutional framework of ongoing forms of continuing education of teachers.

The translation of the managed interviews transcripts with the representatives of teachers of all three degrees were carried out on the basis of the so-called Grounded theory. After processing the data collected and a causal analysis, the participants from the respective countries compared the results of the research to the results of other countries. There were several interesting findings which were described in the final report of the project and which allowed to:

- use positive experience with progressive and effective forms of education that support teachers' professional growth in their respective countries,
- create optimal offerings for further teacher education,
- create a model for effective access to possibilities for continuing teacher education

The next step was writing and sharing the guide to the best programmes of this kind in Europe that provide continuing education in the education sector, with regard to the contents and models of these programmes. These objectives were met by:

- 1) an established partnership that brought together education providers and employers in the sector who support their employees in development, and
- 2) writing of a practical guide to the models of similar continuing education for the education sector,
- 3) compiling a report which can be used as a draft for political decisions regarding education in each region. That concerns projects with the purpose of emphasizing the specific needs of the European educational market and of providing education that can meet those needs.

In June 2013 the team published a report which mapped out the key skills required from employees in the education sector. The communication of the results and findings was ensured on the local and European level as well. The implementation strategy of research findings was carried out by means of small teams in each region with relevant members: schools, local authorities, education providers, and self-government. Each subgroup representative is a member of the partnership and actively participated in the individual events of the project. The conclusions of the comparison and the interesting findings were presented corporatively by the international team of organizers at the IPDA Conference in Birmingham. Alex Kendall and Phil Taylor represented the project team of the University. The subsequent discussion and feedback of the audience were very incentive when completing the project and preparing a new one which should build on the research findings.

CONCLUSION

There are differences in the field of continuing education of staff in the European education sector. The participating representatives apprehended them in a more thorough way thanks to the project. The results of the project showed a number of discrepancies but also enabled to present continuing education systems to employees in the European education sector without losing the necessary regional specificities. The project promoted increased European

cooperation also by enabling 30 employees and educators to personally experience a different culture through teacher exchanges. At the same time it allowed the teams from each region to gain a new experience with a European region similar to their own, which helped to build common awareness in the process of acquiring and implementing project results into educational practice. By sharing the research results with a wider public, the participants of the project succeeded in at least partially changing the idea in the minds of teachers that the work of a teacher after graduation is represented by focusing on teaching pupils, without the need for further work on oneself. Dissemination was also a part of the output – providing the research results to a wider professional public, increasing the importance of continuing education for teachers at governing bodies – school managements, boards of education and school policy representatives of each country. The social impact of teachers' work far exceeds the boundaries of school, the resort and the sector, and extends to all areas of life and society. It seems as though the school policy representatives are only a little aware of this fact, as the social significance of the work of teachers does not correspond to their social status and prestige of their profession at all.

The overall frustration of Bulgarian teachers at the state of education as well as at the present continuing education conveyed a negative impression. That on the whole corresponded to our Slovak reality and it probably reflects the situation of the post-socialist countries. In comparison with this reality (interviews with teachers from practice) the formal lectures given by experts from the Bulgarian Ministry sounded artificial or at the very least incongruent. It was on the ground of the fact that these experts who take care of further education portrayed the conditions for teacher education as optimal.

Maybe therefore we reflected on the efforts to improve the quality of the of continuing education processes. Improving the quality of the provided continuing education should be supported by accreditation of continuing education programmes which the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic decided on with effect from 1st January 2014. Representatives of school policy should focus more on improving conditions for teachers in the nearest time, because as research has shown, the conditions and characteristics of this profession in relation to teacher's person are not only positive. We are aware of such ones that attract teachers to the profession, and increase the degree of their identification with the profession, the so called identification factors. Other conditions put teachers off from the profession, make it difficult for them to work and the teachers do not recognize future perspectives. We called them factors of teacher's discontent with the profession. Unfortunately, the second group of factors that negatively affect the work of teachers has been on the rise in recent decades, which contributes to the unattractiveness of the profession among prospective university students in the Slovak Republic.

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