

SUSTAINABILITY AND UNSUSTAINABILITY ASPECTS OF INTEGRATION OF NOVICE TEACHERS IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL SETTING

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Abstract. Teachers are being identified as key actors for ensuring quality education, therefore they need to receive a proper professional support during their first years of work in overcoming initial challenges. As the preliminary research indicates, support that they gain is systemic and fragmentary. The aim of the study is to explore the sustainability and unsustainability aspects of integration of novice teachers in the secondary school system. The research methods employ are semi-structured interviews with fourteen teachers on their adaptation experience in the school system, considering both obstacles and factors of success. Research indicates that novice teachers leave their work within the first three years of teaching by finding demands too high and workload sometimes unmanageable. The authors offer suggestions for a more efficient and coherent process of mentoring and professional development of novice teachers.

Keywords: novice teachers, mentoring, integration, induction, obstacles and the success factors of the induction process, early professional development.

Introduction

Newly qualified teachers are the future of the profession, and their impact on children and the society cannot be overestimated. However, many well-prepared, talented, inspiring and enthusiastic newly qualified teachers leave schools early, according to numerous studies.

Although there is now a wealth of evidence from research confirming how significant it is to appropriately support teachers at each stage of their professional development, still little is being done to approach teacher education, teaching career, and further continuing professional development as a coherent continuum (Hudson, 2017; Henderson & Noble, 2015). In addition, empirical studies on novice teachers' early professional experiences and development are limited in Latvia. Therefore the purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate

sustainability and unsustainability aspects of novice teachers' early professional development, particularly focusing on factors that help or make it challenging for novice teachers to adapt to their new role, teaching profession, and school system. The study seeks to provide deeper understanding and insights into key factors influencing and shaping novice teachers' early professional development and learning in Latvian secondary school settings. The findings might as well contribute to the research that supports cultivating sustainable professional development and learning for teachers.

Literature overview

Beginning teachers' sustainable professional development and integration has recently been recognized worldwide as a key area for improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools.

The first years on the job are commonly considered to be very challenging and emotionally intense for beginning teachers, often referred to as a “sink-or-swim” or “survival” period in teacher's career (c.f. Ingersoll et al., 2014; Voss et al., 2017; Hudson, 2017; Okas et al., 2014). The initial years in the profession have also a significant impact on teacher's future professional development, and it might be very important time for novice teachers to determine their professional beliefs, practices, and philosophy for the rest of their career. An increasing number of studies have found that novice teachers tend to have challenges in core professional practices including planning lessons and courses, applying appropriate and effective instructional strategies, dealing with “difficult” students, managing the classroom and dealing with discipline issues. When entering the profession, teachers are likely to be confronted with a range of emotional challenges, such as feeling of being overwhelmed, ineffective, and unsupported; decreased self-efficacy and self-esteem; insufficient experience and teaching skills to address a variety of everyday situations in school (cf. Owen et al., 2009; Voss et al., 2017; Okas, 2016). Classroom management and a range of discipline issues (including dealing with disruptive and aggressive student behaviour, dealing with physical and verbal violence, bullying or harassment) is generally categorized by novice teachers as a particular and often the biggest concern and reason to change school or even to leave the profession (c.f. Owen et al., 2009; Asphors et al., 2012; Okas et al., 2014). In addition, classroom management and discipline issues are the major areas in which the novice teachers commonly report having little or no necessary practical skills, and needing additional training and support (cf. Petty et al., 2016; Okas et al., 2014; Owen et al., 2009; Conway et al., 2009). Moir (1990) reports about six developmental phases a new teacher goes through during his/her initial years in teaching, namely, anticipation, survival, disillusionment, rejuvenation, reflection, and anticipation. The most

harmful ones – survival and disillusionment – are described as time when teachers encounter various challenges, trying to transform their predominantly theoretical knowledge into effective practice, solving unexpected situations, and learning a lot at a very rapid pace. As a result, teachers are likely to become emotionally and physically tired, and disillusioned, losing self-confidence, and excitement about teaching and starting questioning their competence and profession choice (Moir, 1990). Thus, “surviving” often becomes new teachers’ main priority; they tend to concentrate on coping with their concerns rather than on providing high quality education. Having little or no professional experience and proven coping strategies, novice teachers “stick to whatever practices enable them to survive, whether or not they represent ‘best’ practice in that situation. Without systematized support, new teachers continue to depend on these strategies no matter how effective they actually are (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). It is only after some time, when novices gain enough practical experience, their focus is shifted from “non-teaching concerns and self-concerns” (“How am I doing?”) to “teaching concerns” (“How are the students doing?”).

“Becoming a teacher” is a complex and systematic process that extends far beyond standard four-year initial teacher education programme (Hudson, 2017; Okas et al., 2014). At the same time, it is essential to make sure that all students receive the benefit of quality teachers, no matter how experienced they are. Jensen et al. (2012) claim that “the quality of teaching received by students has the greatest impact on their education outcomes outside the impact of individual and family characteristics”. Indeed, research indicates that increase in teachers’ quality and effectiveness is highly likely to have the most noticeable impact on students’ achievement. Students with a highly effective teacher, taking other variables into consideration, are more likely to achieve better results (or the same results but within considerably shorter period of time) than the students with a less effective teacher (c.f. Gerritsen et al., 2016; Jensen et al., 2012; Aaronson et al., 2007; Conway et al., 2009). Further, students’ academic achievements tend to improve with teacher experience increase (Gerritsen et al., 2016; Hanushek, 2011). Thus, substantial number of hours of professional practice in various real school contexts is considered to be essential for building teacher competence, because “professionalism in teaching field is achieved through years of professional work” (Okas et al., 2014). Obviously, practice makes perfect, and there is evidence from various studies on novice and experienced teachers’ effectiveness indicating that novices tend to have notably lower levels of self-efficacy beliefs (Jensen et al., 2012; Melnick & Meister, 2008); when compared to experienced teachers, novices tend to spend more time on classroom management and discipline issues than on actual teaching (c.f. Owen et al., 2009, Okas et al., 2014;); novice teachers tend to feel less confident to communicate with parents and utilize multiple methods of communication; novices tend to be

more concerned about dealing with poor student behaviour and lesson planning (Okas et al., 2014; Melnick & Meister, 2008), and to have worse classroom climate in their classrooms; and finally novice teachers are likely to have greater professional development needs (Jensen et al., 2012; Okas et al., 2014).

Another urgent policy issue and reason for debate is the degree of newly qualified teachers' preparedness to provide high quality education, as well as the applicability of the content of teacher education programs. On the one side of the debate are those who argue that initial teacher education is sufficient to provide teachers with all necessary teaching skills and competences required to successfully teach and integrate into school system; on the other side, however, there are those who feel more sceptical about novice teachers' readiness to provide high quality education right after completing their traditional three or four-year teacher education. The latter argue that the traditional teacher education generally do not provide adequate hours of real-life pedagogical practice in different school contexts, which makes it predominantly theory-oriented. There seems to be lack of relevance and connection of professional learning to teacher's real work (Hudson, 2017; Okas, 2016). That is why newly qualified teachers require systematic and meaningful professional support, purposeful training, and guidance in order to develop expertise, gain confidence, and ultimately succeed in their classrooms (Okas, 2016; Hudson, 2017; Owen et al., 2009). Darling-Hammond (2008) believes that "teachers learn best by studying, doing, and reflecting; by collaborating with other teachers; by looking closely at students and their work; and by sharing what they see. This kind of learning cannot occur in college classrooms divorced from practice or in school classrooms divorced from knowledge about how to interpret practice".

It becomes evident that when schools hire newly qualified teachers with little or no experience, they cannot always expect them to perform as effectively, as their more experienced peers. Teacher education is just the initial stage in the continuum of teachers' sustainable professional development (Hudson, 2017; Petty et al., 2016) and it is critically important that the process of "becoming a teacher" is approached "as a gradual process, including initial education, the induction phase, and continuing professional development. The point at which newly qualified teachers transfer from initial teacher education and move into professional life is seen as crucial for further professional commitment and development" (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015).

Research methodology

The study employed qualitative phenomenological research design (Hobbs, 2015). To address the questions raised in the study, the data were collected mainly through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The study sought to examine four

broad groups of sustainability and unsustainability aspects affecting novice teachers` early professional experience and sustainable professional growth: (1) teachers` well-being; (2) teachers` perceptions of their initial teacher education, their own self-efficacy, and preparedness to teach; (3) teachers` perceptions of their early teaching experience, and (4) teachers` needs for professional development and support. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, encoded and further analysed using a semantic content analysis method so as to identify categories and subcategories to describe the content. Initially, the data for each of the research participants were analysed, raising and coding the main themes that emerged from responses. Next, the data were analysed by using cross-analysis method, identifying the similarities and differences between the themes. The connections between emerging themes were identified and examined, and then a number of superordinate themes were also identified.

The participants of the study were 14 novice teachers, working in 11 Latvian comprehensive schools. The data were collected between November 2016 and November 2017. The participants were selected randomly based on willingness and convenience. All of them were teachers of different subjects and primary school teachers who have gone through at least four years of formal teacher training at a university level. All of them had been from 2 months to 3 years in the profession. Eighty five per cent of the novice teachers involved in the study were females and the majority of the respondents were under 29 years of age. Twelve of the 14 respondents were trained to teach grades 1 to 12, whilst 2 were trained to teach at primary level.

Results and discussion

The results of the interviews are presented in this section. First, the respondents were asked to identify the professional areas that they find most challenging and troublesome, as well as the areas of their work they found most in need of further development. In addition, the respondents were invited to offer their advice for overcoming these difficulties. As a result, 27 coding categories emerged from the interviews, which were further grouped into 3 overarching themes. (1) learning to control and regulate complex classroom situations (“Teaching practices”), (2) learning to communicate and build relationships (“Communication and Relationships”), and (3) learning to control and regulate teachers` own emotional resources (“Emotional well-being”). The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Novice teachers' key areas of concern

I Coding categories under the theme “Teaching Practices”	f=14	%
(1) Handling a range of classroom management or discipline situations (including dealing with disruptive and aggressive student behaviour; dealing with bullying or harassment in the classroom);	14	100.0
(2) Engaging students and motivating them to learn;	12	85.7
(3) Understanding and addressing learners' individual learning needs;	12	85.7
(4) Dealing with students with special educational needs; identifying and supporting learners who experience behavioural, emotional, social, and learning difficulties;	12	85.7
(5) Managing resources, selecting and adapting curriculum and instructional materials;	10	71.4
(6) Managing workload/paperwork;	9	64.3
(7) Planning lessons and courses;	9	64.3
(8) Managing time, dealing with time constraints;	9	64.3
(9) Assessing learning, establishing a grading system that's fair and motivating;	7	50.0
(10) Using a variety of instructional methods and tools, inter alia, ICT tools	5	35.7
(11) Job stability, remuneration	2	14.3
(12) Lack of opportunities for growth and promotion	1	7.1
II Coding categories under the theme “Communication and Relationships”	f=14	%
Challenging relationships with (13) students' parents;	6	42.9
(14) students;	7	50.0
(15) colleagues;	9	64.3
(16) school administrators;	5	35.7
(17) Little or no support from colleagues and administration; unsupportive school culture	10	71.4
(18) Feeling of professional isolation, depreciation of novice teachers' ideas and opinions, disapproval of the novice teachers' expertise and competence;	9	64.3
(19) Lack of appraisal and feedback;	5	35.7
III Coding categories under the theme “Emotional well-being”	f=14	%
(20) Concerns for teacher's personal physical and mental health and wellbeing	5	35.7
(21) Regular stress, emotional and/or physical overload	10	71.4
(22) Unexpectedly demanding, complex, and intense work	9	64.3
(23) Lack of confidence, insecurity, low self-esteem	5	35.7
(24) Feeling of demotivation, frustration, distress, chronic fatigue	6	42.8
(25) Managing work-life balance	8	57.1

Overall, most of the novice teachers indicated that their first teaching experience was relatively successful. However, there were clearly differences of opinions about the major challenges, especially regarding various teaching tasks. All the respondents rated handling a range of classroom management, classroom organization and discipline situations as their main concerns. They also reported feeling inadequately prepared to deal with these issues in their classrooms because these aspects were insufficiently addressed during their teacher education. More than two thirds of the respondents reported having considerable difficulties with poor student behaviour on daily and weekly basis. The novice teachers stressed that they received little or no support or assistance in addressing classroom management and poor pupil behaviour issues. In addition, dealing with lack of student engagement and motivation was also cited by more than two thirds of the respondents as their major concern.

More than half of the respondents admitted that they regularly experienced difficulties with planning, searching and adapting teaching materials, learning activities and tools that would work best in a particular context and with particular students. In general, the challenges with time management, time constraints, massive workload, long- and short-term planning, and self-organization were mentioned by the majority of the respondents. More than half of them admitted that they often felt ineffective in organizing their time in and out of class. They also added that they often did not have enough time and energy to communicate more closely with their students, to analyze their individual needs, as well as to give proper feedback and support; as a result, differentiated approach to teaching and addressing students' individual learning needs was cited as another substantial concern for the novice teachers.

Additionally, almost half of the respondents admitted that they felt frustrated about not having enough time for self-evaluation, reflection, analysis and improvement of their own teaching methods and techniques. Individual respondents indicated that because of constant stress, time pressure, and massive workload they had to reject a lot of teaching ideas and methods that they found effective and engaging; instead, they had to choose those methods and materials that were easier and faster to apply in the class, regardless of their possible lower effectiveness. They explained there was little time and energy left for creativity and experimentation, that is why teachers often had to stick to the materials and methods that were commonly in use for years, rather than to those that might bring real and sustainable results. About one third of the respondents indicated that they had to reject their initially student-centered and “democratic” teaching approach into a more authoritarian and traditional way, inter alia, because of time pressure and discipline issues in the classroom.

As shown in Table 3, there were clearly differences of opinions regarding communication aspects and relationships with colleagues, administration, students and their parents: half of the respondents described their relationships with students as largely challenging, particularly in the beginning of their careers; others indicated that it was initially rather difficult to build positive and collaborative relationships with colleagues, especially more experienced ones. In addition, the respondents experienced feelings of professional isolation, lack of appraisal and feedback, and unsupportive school culture.

Further, the teachers were asked to describe their early professional experiences in terms of their emotional well-being. As a result, a variety of affective responses emerged, some of them positive, some negative, and some mixed, as shown in Table 3. Most of the respondents indicated that they had experienced “high” and “very high” level of stress during their first years of teaching. The respondents specified that they occasionally experienced feeling frustration, dissatisfaction, exhaustion, and anxiety, and individual respondents confessed about having experienced feeling of distress, anger, chronic fatigue, and even depression.

Overall, however, the respondents indicated that despite all the challenges and intensity of their work, they generally believe that working closely with children and having possibility to influence their development and growth is very pleasant, inspirational, exciting, and rewarding, but at the same time very stressful, with some teachers saying the job has somewhat affected their mental or physical well-being. About one third of the novice teachers reported feeling occasionally insecure and weak in their teacher’s role, because the job was unexpectedly demanding, challenging, and intense, with a lot of unexpected situations, different from what they had learnt in their university classrooms and what they had practiced in a controlled environment. The respondents suggested that the issues associated with teachers’ emotional well-being should be rigorously addressed during the initial teacher education and professional development courses, because teacher’s emotional well-being and ability to cope with regular stress has strong impact on students’ learning.

Another important theme that emerged from the interviews was the content, quality, and effect of initial teacher education. There were clearly differences of opinions about the strength and weaknesses of initial teacher education content. In general, according to the responses, there seems to be a significant degree of discrepancy between the content of teacher education programs and the pedagogical skills required in schools. About two thirds of the respondents described the content as “excessively theory-oriented, leaving too little room for practical work”, “too conservative”, “disconnected or distant from school reality”, “inapplicable” especially in regard to such complex issues as disruptive student behaviour, classroom management and organization. More than half of the

respondents reported being unsatisfied with their pedagogical pre-service practice, indicating, that its biggest weakness is that it is inadequately short with too few hours available for lessons teaching at different levels and in different classes. In fact, typically Latvian teachers do not receive rigorous professional pre-service practice and on-the-job training. Student teachers spent only about 16 per cent of their study time on pedagogical practice (While teacher education program typically includes the total of 160 KP, only 26 KP are allocated to lesson observation and pedagogical practice altogether.), which is less than 20 lessons in real school environment in 4 years' time altogether.

However, in general, absolute majority of the respondents rated the overall quality of their initial teacher education as "very good" or "good" especially at providing them with sufficient subject knowledge. The teachers identified multiple strengths of their teacher education programs, especially in regards to the ability to provide strong theoretical background. The task for which most respondents reported being "very well" or "well" prepared after graduation was teaching in their assigned subject matter and ability to use a variety of instructional methods and ICT tools in classroom instruction. The task with the smallest number of the respondents reporting being well or very well prepared was handling a range of classroom management or discipline issues. The consensus among the respondents was that the following steps should be taken in order to improve initial teacher education quality and make it more practice-oriented: (1) training emphasis should be placed on teacher education that is applicable and relevant, and (2) training should be mainly school-based: teacher training universities should closely cooperate with schools and other non-formal educational institution for children and teenagers.

According to the results of the survey, the support measures at each novice teacher's school varied considerably, however, in general, most teachers reported that they were not fully satisfied with the support they had received. Only two teachers had access to on-the-job training activities, and only one novice teacher reported being assigned a mentor. Two thirds of the respondents indicated that they had a high level of need for professional, psychological and socialization support, additional training, and constructive feedback on their teaching from experienced colleagues and school administrators so as to improve their effectiveness and teaching skills. Importantly, almost all novice teachers rated emotional support and cooperative school culture among the most helpful factors in their professional development. Additional on-the-job training focusing especially on such complex areas as classroom management and procedures, discipline, and dealing with students with diverse learning needs is unanimously considered to be very helpful.

Conclusion

The initial years in teaching are generally considered to be highly intense and challenging for novice teachers. The current survey revealed a range of factors influencing and shaping newly qualified teachers' sustainable professional development and growth. Based on the findings of the study, the sustainability aspects positively influencing novice teachers' well-being, professional development and performance include: emotional rapport with students, positive relationships with colleagues and administration, appraisal and regular constructive feedback from peers and school leaders, professional support and collaborative climate, professional freedom, availability of necessary quality resources, and assistance for those who are new to the profession. The major unsustainability aspects include a significant degree of discrepancy between the content of teacher education programs and the pedagogical skills required in schools, lack of meaningful, systematic, and structured professional support system available for newly qualified teachers, as well as unsupportive school culture.

It is highly important for schools to develop effective policies to attract, recruit, retain, and support the continued learning of well-prepared and most talented teachers. In this respect, numerous actions are being taken on national and local levels worldwide to understand the needs of novice teachers, to address them, to facilitate their transition from student teacher to full-time professionals, and finally to promote teachers' sustainable instructional, personal and professional growth. These supportive measures for newly qualified teachers typically include mentoring, scheduled meetings with peers, co-teaching (team teaching), workshops and additional training for beginning teachers to inform them of relevant topics during their initial years in the classroom, to share ideas and methods, to discuss the most challenging issues, to learn to deal with a variety of troublesome situations in the classroom. It is recommended that these school practices and policies are incorporated into every teacher's ongoing professional development route (together forming so-called induction program for novice teachers) in order to provide a systematic and structured support and assistance in teacher's mastery development.

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