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Conceptualisation and Research of Teacher Professional Development²

Extended summary

Professional development of subject teachers and primary school teachers is a continuing process that does not begin with initial education, given that the attitudes, values and knowledge that pre-service primary school teachers and future subject teachers acquired as pupils frequently shape the manner in which they will accept new knowledge as university students (Ferguson & Brownlee, 2018; Mauricio, 2015). The purpose of the first conceptualization of teacher professional development was to improve the programs of the initial professional education and professional development. Namely, if we know what problems and issues beginner teachers are concerned about, and which issues are relevant for experienced teachers, we will be able to develop the programs of their education and professional development that will correspond to these issues and concerns. In their three-phase model of teacher professional development, Fuller and Brown (Fuller & Brown, 1975) view this process as development starting with the phase of “self concern” in which teachers focus on student behavior and the expectations of other teachers and the school principal, through the “task concern” phase when teachers are concerned about class size, the lack of time and teaching materials, to the “impact concern” phase in which teachers focus on students’ intellectual, emotional, and social needs. The model of professional development proposed by Berliner (Berliner, 1994) starts from the

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so-called “novice stage” in which teachers need rules and procedures of universal meaning and represent a framework in which they can “safely move”, through the “advanced beginner stage” where teachers understand that the application of rules depends on the context and the “competence stage” where teachers take personal responsibility for the activities in the classroom, to the “effectiveness” and “expert” stages characterized by flexibility, analytic skills, and reflection. Bell and Gilbert (Bell and Gilbert, 1994) view teacher professional development as a learning process in which teachers develop their attitudes, ideas, practice, and become aware of their emotions triggered by the changes. According to these authors, professional development has two aspects: one refers to theoretical concepts and new teaching strategies, while the other refers to day-to-day practice, the evaluation of new ideas in collaborative conditions in which teachers can get support of their colleagues and reflect critically.

Given that teacher professional development is a category which implies the changes of teachers’ professional identity, and that it is a process of continual improvement and expansion of professional horizons, the central *research question* of this paper was the following one: what professional dilemmas and problems are experienced by beginner teachers, and what dilemmas and problems do experienced teachers deal with? The research participants were primary school teachers and subject teachers in primary schools in Belgrade with little work experience (57) and with an extensive work experience (55). The *instrument* used in the research was a type of a reflective essay and it contained only one question addressed both to primary school teachers and subject teachers: What professional issues/problems are you dealing with now? Give an example. A qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) and an inductive approach were used in the *data analysis*, given that the topics were “fact-driven”, and not theory-driven, i.e., the codes and topics were not prepared in advance, but were derived from the data analysis.

The results indicate that the teachers with up to five years of work experience are preoccupied with *class discipline* issues and with retaining their own *authority*, as well as with establishing adequate *sanctions* for specific student behaviour. *Teaching organization* in terms of *student-teacher interaction* and *time management* is also a topic that often preoccupies novice teachers. Experienced teachers are preoccupied with the issues related to the quality of education and their own professional development: mastering specific *knowledge and competencies*, *monitoring* their own work by *evaluation*, and *professional development*.

In their short essay, both primary school teachers and subject teachers confirmed the existence of the Fuller and Brown’s three-phase model of professional development (Fuller & Brown, 1975): the first phase in which the concern for one’s own participation in the teaching process predominates; the second phase in which the focus is on methodological issues of the effectiveness of teaching; the third phase, oriented towards students’ benefits from the educational process. The research results can also be interpreted in the light of the new conceptions of teacher professional development: the theory of teacher-researcher education, the concept of the reflective practitioner (Elliot, 2006), and the theory of the development of the teachers’ professional identity which corresponds to the concept of lifelong learning and continual professional development (Radulović et.al, 2010, p. 166).

Everything elaborated in the above text points to the duty of scientific disciplines included in the research on teacher professional development to further conceptualize and operationalize this process, determine contextual assumptions for its effective development at all levels and in all phases; in addition, these disciplines have to be more sensitive in terms of their research instruments to hear the “voice” of the pre-service and in-service teachers.

Keywords: professional development, three-phase model, beginner teacher, experienced teacher.

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