Requirements and Support for Primary School Teachers from the Perspective of Senior Teaching Staff

Martin SKUTIL¹,a,* , Eliška Říhová¹,b

¹,²Institute of Primary and Pre-primary Education, Faculty of Education, University of Hradec Králové, Rokitanského 62, 500 03 Hradec Králové, Czech Republic

a martin.skutil@uhk.cz, b eliska.rihova@uhk.cz,

*Corresponding author

Keywords: Primary education, Teacher, Requirements for teachers, Leading teaching staff.

Abstract. Primary education is relatively specific in relation to other levels of the education system. Today, we are talking primarily about the skills that every teacher should abound. Claims of leading teaching staff for teachers often, and I must say that legitimately, go beyond the skills that the teachers bring from the studies at the faculties of education. The aim of the paper is based on a qualitative survey to point out what requirements the leading teaching staff have for primary education teachers. It turns out that in addition to generally anticipated knowledge, communication and organization also play an important role with skills that fully correspond to the currently prevailing concept of constructive education.

Introduction

Changes in the concept of the teaching profession are mainly directed towards its professionalism. For example Kurelová [1] works with more accurate profession-graphology of teachers, derived from a variety of work complexity. This classification has nine categories, ranging from first (occupations with the lowest job complexity) to ninth (occupations with the highest job complexity). Primary school teachers belong to the seventh category - highly complex and qualified job with limited autonomy. This group also includes managers of large organisations, personnel workers, legal advisors and also professional athletes.

Despite a number of common problems in education and difficulties in the reality of teaching work, teachers quite strongly express satisfaction in their profession. We believe that this fact potentially enhances the quality of teachers' work, stabilising forces and hence the functioning of the school.

So that teachers can well assume their roles, good leadership and support in the form of leading teaching staff is a necessity. It is those who raise the requirements for the quality of the pedagogical team and who simultaneously affect the possibility of increasing the quality and fulfilment of teachers.

Theoretical basis

According to the research of Pol and Novotný [2] the Heads generally agree that for the functioning of a school the primary emphasis is on pupils, although it also seems that this goal is not always thriven to be adequately fulfilled. More sporadic is the concentration of the Heads in
our schools on teachers—the Heads sometimes simply forget to also pay more intensive attention to their teaching staff. In this context, for example Elmore [3] notes that the insufficient support of teachers from the school leadership is one of the major factors behind the abandonment of the teaching profession (especially for teachers in the first five years of practice). It can therefore be assumed that the Heads play an important role in the actual development of teachers, they can help beginning teachers in coping with their new roles, to lead experienced teachers to achieve the role of teacher-expert or facilitate teachers at the end of the career to manage this significant career and life milestone. That means among other things that the Head should manage well in the potential stages of a teacher's professional and psychological development, while the interdependence of professional and psychological development is sometimes forgotten by Heads [4].

The basis of professionalism is seen in the emphasis on pedagogical—psychological professionalism. Professionalism in the teaching profession is characterised as a shift from transferring knowledge skills from various disciplines towards the competences forming the model of "wide professionalism," where the share of the teacher on child socialisation and their overall cultivation comes to the fore. More recently it means e.g. the active participation of each teacher in an inner transformation of education.

The professional performance of a teacher is subject to both working conditions and especially the level of their professional competence, which is produced in the process of professionalism. It is the core of the concepts of training programs. Definition of the concept of competence, key competencies, teacher professional competence are not steady and uniform in our country.

In foreign as well as our literature, we can find various definitions of professional core competencies. According to Belz and Siegrist [5] the core competencies were firstly described in connection with the labour market of Mestens in 1974. It was not until the late 1990’s when they entered the realms of education. In the curricula of European countries, in addition to the concept of key competencies (e.g. Austria, Germany) there are nuances of the term, thresholds and final competencies (French Community of Belgium), basic skills (Germany, Portugal, Luxembourg), key qualifications (Germany) and key skills (Great Britain). Also in the Czech environment, a number of authors deal with the notion of competence, in addition to the above.

Outside the professional qualifications, an important factor is the personality of the teacher. From a psychological point of view we understand personality as a unity of perception and behaviour, or as a summary of congenital and acquired dispositions to ensure that every person is similar to other members of the community, but at the same time they also differ from them as well and they are unique in something. Their personality is constantly evolving throughout their life, and we can find inner conflicts and contradictions in it [6], [7]. This is another element that usually plays a role in the assessment of a person—a teacher—as a complex personality responsible for the upbringing and education. This is a factor that also plays an important role in terms of leading teaching staff in assessing the quality of a teacher.

Teaching staff are the most important and most valuable asset that the Head has at the school [8]. At the same time the Head has myriad of responsibilities which they must meet, to act upon teachers to pursue their education and professional development is time consuming, so it happens only marginally with some Heads. Only 1% of Heads and 4% of Deputy Heads are dedicated to improving the quality of teaching and management of changes for more than 50% of their time [9].
Studies indicate that principals’ leadership has an influence on professional relationships, professional development and school development e.g. [10], [11]. Heads exert a greater impact on teachers’ practice when they work jointly with teachers on aspects that influence their classroom practice. This implies that not only do teachers need to work together, but school leaders should also play an important role in this collaborative process.

**Methodology**

At the beginning of this research there was a few basic questions that relate to the current debate on the use of ICT in education. Are interactive whiteboards really such a great contribution to teaching in primary schools so is it worthy to make a considerable investment in their purchase and maintenance? Is the big boom of this technical didactic means adequate to how they can enrich and enliven teaching? Can interactive whiteboard be the reason why children could change their opinions towards school and begin to look forward to the lessons? How is the deployment of interactive whiteboards in teaching seen by teachers? Isn’t the operation of the table and preparation for individual subjects so complex and time-consuming, that they prefer to leave out the benefits behind their traditional teaching methods?

With regard to the questions, the most appropriate approach to exploration is qualitative methodology that helps to understand the essence of the given phenomenon.

**Research Sample**

The selection of suitable respondents was conceived so that there is a representation of leading teachers from all types of schools, i.e. large urban as well as small schools. The reason was to cover the entire spectrum of school facilities, thereby eliminating the possibility of distortion of data by type of school. In total six semi-structured interviews were carried out.

**Instrument and Procedures**

A semi-structured interview was used as the research method. The respondents were not informed in advance about the specific questions used in the interview. The topic – "requirements for primary school teachers” was the only information they had, the reason was so that respondents didn’t have a chance to prepare the answers to the questions in advance and therefore they answered immediately and naturally. All interviews conducted were also recorded. The answers were then transcribed, while the non-verbal responses of respondents were also recorded [12]. To maintain anonymity, the interview transcripts uses changed first names of respondents and the primary school of a respondent were not identified.

**Data Analysis**

For analysis and data processing the constant comparison method was used, which is based on the constant comparison of responses obtained in the interviews, finding the differences and similarities [13]. This method is suitable for the analysis of the selected research and corresponds the most to the intention to compare the respondents’ answers and create a more general view of the question given.

**Limitation of a Study and Ethical Principles**

Like in any qualitative study, also here we can find limitations arising from the nature of the research survey. The biggest drawback, of course, is subjectivity of the responses. Although
efforts were made to select a representative sample of respondents, their responses of course reflected the personal experience and the specifics of schools in which they work. As another element entering the responses, the respondent can perceive the overall approach of school management on the issue, which is certainly reflected in the overall perspective of the respondents. Limit also includes the impossibility of generalisation of the results to a broader population of teachers, although the data provides an interesting basis for a further, possibly quantitative study.

The ethical aspect has been outlined above. However, it is worth noting that with regard to the possible identification of the respondents, in the interview transcripts there are changed first names of the respondents and the primary school in which the respondent works was not identified.

The Research Results

The analysis of the interviews shows several planes of how school leadership encourages teachers and what demands they place on them. It could seem that these are two unrelated categories, but with deeper insight it is obvious that a certain link exists. Especially at the level that if the school management demands some competence and professionalism, it is willing to support it with its intervention and also at the level that if the teacher shows a relevant interest in supporting, the school tries to meet them. However, the main component is own motivation of teachers.

They know what we want and how we want to aim, so they more often come to me to let them go or if necessary to pay for it, or organise it so they can improve. I am here as an administrator and create conditions to enable them to work. (Jiří).

In this way, the teachers can see for themselves that there is a need to work on themselves. Every teacher has the approach to the possibilities of continuing education. So when a teacher comes to me and wants to go for some training, if nothing extraordinary is going on, then I'm certainly not the one who would prohibit it in any way or discourage them from doing it (Lukáš).

As the first plane, which the leading teaching staff talked about was the financial area. It turns out that with this in mind, the school management tries to cope to secure grants or projects, or range of activities thanks to which the teacher can earn some funds, e.g. by after school courses.

Of course I also try to support them financially, if possible, you know, because it's ... for a man it is a big driving motivating force, so if I have money left, I really give it to them to reward them for the fact that they are trying and do a lot of activities beyond their work. That’s how it works in small schools; we all have a lot more work than usual (Lucie).

Another identified plane is the area of methodology. Leading staff regularly communicate with their teachers. In the event that a teacher has a problem, it is possible at any time to come to the school management and discuss it. In this connection teamwork enters significantly to the foreground. If teachers are able to communicate with each other, a number of methodological (and personal) problems can be solved between themselves, without the intervention of the management. However it is essential that the school leaders create an environment to make the communication functional, useful and open.

They can knock on my door. You have seen it, I'm really trying to understand them. I have experienced it, that a person is left on their own, so I think that the leadership is here for both to help and advice, I don’t mean that I'll go and solve it, no, no way. We also have a deal with teachers that first we can talk about it to see if they deal with it well. This even works in the
teachers’ rooms, where they cooperate, they try to solve a problem regarding education and behaviour, it doesn’t matter, but they can also say to each other: "Hey, I’m doing it in this way, what about you? How do you do it, what do you think about it? This didn’t work for me", and so on. (Marie)

The third area where leading teaching staff support teachers, where their erudition is required, is the area of material. This is related to the current trend of clarity in teaching as well as with a greater emphasis on working with information and modern information and communication technologies. They are considered important but not crucial by the leading staff. It is interesting that although many respondents highlight the benefits of ICT, they are not close to the traditional didactic material resources, such as maps, atlases, encyclopedias, worksheets and the like. The most important feature in this context is the creativity of teachers who can effectively use the available didactic material resources.

We have bought a number of different educational projects, from mathematics, Czech, elementary science, natural science, geography... and there are various educational entertainment programs, which the teacher can also use (Martina)

Well, it’s a bit of a two-sided weapon. This means that, of course, as I said, we cannot teach, as we used to do fifty years ago. On the other hand, let’s face it, in the past some innovative approaches were a bit of a blind alley. That means it’s about to have a certain perspective and don’t go into everything by head first just because now it is a fashion to be fast, people talk about it now and so on (Karel)

The last plane is an external evaluation. Most schools are not based on their experience and internal evaluation mechanisms, but they also use the methods of obtaining data from students, parents and the public. This is not a crucial element of the evaluation, however, school management considers it as an important additional moment, which helps to create a vivid picture of the functioning of teachers.

Here again is a great advantage that we really are a small school, so I miss almost nothing... we do joint projects, so I experience how they behave towards pupils, and I have feedback, of course from the children as well as parents, and because we are in the village, so I just have feedback, how satisfied are parents, students and teachers (Martina)

About once a year, every two years, we do this kind of questionnaires – pupil, parent questionnaires (Lucie)

Summary

Within the implemented interviews we managed to identify several areas which the leading teaching workers consider important, from the perspective of the support of teachers, and in which they require teachers to be active themselves.

The most important requirement is a teacher’s ability to communicate and work in teams. It is obvious that school leaders try to create appropriate conditions, whether by the fact that they support co-operative operations, or by creating an atmosphere of trust.

In terms of teaching the important point is also the support in the area of material-teaching and methodological, observations are regularly carried out in the context of individual classes and consequently there are methodological steps analysed and discussed. With a view to upgrading the educational process, the school supports these trends by providing adequate material resources, which teachers can use at their discretion, in the classroom. Such feedback is not only an internal but also an external evaluation of teachers.
A separate chapter is financial rewards of the teachers. In many countries it is a long under-funded profession and the same situation is in the Czech Republic. All respondents stated that their goal is to raise funds for a better evaluation of teachers; despite—or perhaps because of—they are aware that teachers do not exercise their profession just for the money.

**Acknowledgement**

This research was financially supported by a specific research project of the Faculty of Education, University of Hradec Králové No. 2105/2016 Requirements for primary school teachers from the perspective of senior teaching staff.

**References**


