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The Sources of the Educational Needs of Nursery School Teachers — an Important Factor for the Direction of Their Further Education

Abstract

The article deals with the sources of the educational needs of nursery school teachers. Fulfilling the needs is a precondition for the quality of the performance of their profession comprising highly qualified professional activities during which the teachers are directly responsible for the course and quality of preschool education in relation to the fulfilment of its objectives. The presented reasons helped us identify the sources of educational needs of nursery school teachers in relation to the length of their teaching experience and to determine the possibilities of fulfilling those needs. The solution used both quantitative and qualitative approaches. We used a questionnaire survey to obtain the quantitative data and structured interviews with open questions to obtain qualitative data.

Keywords: educational needs, nursery school teacher

“Need” is a very frequently used term in these days. The reason is, apart from other things, the fact that our changing environment requires constant adaptation, which everybody tries to cope with the best possible way, however, not always satisfactorily. Definitions describe need as a perceived feeling of deficiency. This can also be applied to the educational needs of teachers, the fulfilment of which brings them both personal and professional satisfaction. When the needs remain neglected, the risk of the teacher’s dissatisfaction over this short-coming increases.

Thinking about the profession of a nursery school teacher, we realize that this vocation is subject to continuous changes that reflect the requirements on the quality of preschool education given by the obligations stemming from the educational policy. In addition to that, however, it also reflects the demands of

management, the legal guardians of children, the statutory authorities, and the public. In order to perform their work in the highest professional quality, it is no longer sufficient to possess one of the main predispositions for the work, which is to love children and to acquire the necessary knowledge and experience during the preparatory education, as well as their subsequent verification in practice and broadening them through their use. To cope with all the changes and needs to be encountered in preschool education, nursery school teachers must continue their education permanently, broaden, deepen their education, or even focus on entirely new areas of education. And it is there where their educational needs to be based on the presented attributes are the main actors, as well as those educational needs which may represent their hobbies among the professional activities they perform. These educational needs are reflected either by teachers themselves or by their environment that mediates them. It is up to the teacher as to what they will do with them and whether they will fulfil them. The options they have been either self-studies or informing management in order to include them in the plan of further education used by the nursery school to organize further education in educational institutions. It is also necessary to keep in mind that each teacher has their own personal preconditions for further education and through them, their educational needs are fulfilled. In other words, these will differ for each individual teacher with their specific length of experience.

The educational needs of teachers can be viewed in two dimensions. The first dimension is the objective one in which needs to be come from the outside. They may be, for example, identified by the head teacher of the school. Fulfilling these needs is in the head teacher's interests in relation to fulfilling the targets of preschool education, the targets of a specific organization. In this regard, the head teacher performs controls of the results of children's education as part of their inspections of teachers' professional activities in lessons. Once the head teacher identifies teachers' educational needs, creating a plan of further education follows as required by Act No. 563/2004 Coll. on pedagogical workers. The head teacher is obliged to organize further education for pedagogical staff in accordance with the plan of further education created with regard to the study interests of pedagogical workers based on an analysis of the needs of the school and its financial possibilities. Plans of further education define the objective of education, the target group of specific teachers, the methods of education (at or outside the workplace), and possibly the educational institution that provides the education. The purpose of the education plan is to motivate teachers towards clearly defined objectives of their education through which they may express their educational needs, which may change with time depending on the social situation (economic, political, social and ethnic) and locality where we live as well as the demographic position we occupy.

The second dimension of the educational needs of teachers is the subjective one, as perceived by the individual. They are determined by their self-reflection, the demands on which are constantly increasing. They require teachers to be able to analyse their own professional activities, present and justify their concept of education, and contribute to the development of the school, cooperate with colleagues, maintain quality communication with parents and as well as their broader social environment.

The spheres of the educational needs of teachers may be observed through professional competences. Within them, teachers define their goals and the content of their self-education. Professional competences are of crucial importance for defining the profession of a teacher, defining the qualification requirements and also for further education. We relate their content to the expressed possible educational needs of teachers. The educational needs relating to the improvement of the professional/field competencies of a teacher stem from the need for improvement in the subject or field they teach, especially through self-studies using expert publications, internet, media, etc. Knowledge acquired in this manner may be applied in practice relatively soon. The educational needs related to improving the didactic and psycho-didactic competencies of teachers are based on their interest in new teaching methods, forms, and means, which they may acquire mainly through workshops. The educational needs related to improving their diagnostic and intervention competencies stem from the need to extend their knowledge in such areas as identifying the educational and learning challenges of children, problems of children's collectives, etc. The educational needs related to improving the social, psychosocial, and communication competencies of teachers stem from the need to be able to communicate with parents, colleagues, school management, etc. The educational needs related to improving the managerial and normative competences of teachers are given by the need to acquire new knowledge in such areas as school legislation, school policy, cooperation on projects, etc. The educational needs related to improving competencies focused on personal and professional development express the interest of teachers in personal development (Lazarová et al., 2006, pp. 66–67).

The education of nursery school teachers is part of legislative documents applicable to the teaching profession. This obligation of further education for teachers is stipulated in Section 24 of the Pedagogical Workers' Act which states that "pedagogical workers are obliged to undergo further education throughout the duration of their pedagogical activity to refresh, maintain, and complement their qualifications" (Act No. 563/2004, 13). According to existing legislation, the further professional education of teachers (and other pedagogical workers) may also be focused in the fields of: 1) achieving

the necessary qualifications; 2) broadening qualifications; 3) deepening qualifications. The sphere of the further education of teachers is also reflected in the Teachers' Career System, which is set to be introduced in the Czech Republic and whose final innovative form is not known yet.

The self-education of teachers is specific in the fact that the teachers define their goals, select the content and methods themselves, motivate themselves, direct and control their learning, and make other decisions. This form of education is typical of self-help development. The self-study of teachers may take place during their leisure time or study leaves on regular working days, either organized by institutions or granted by nursery school management. They are allowed to do so by legislation, specifically by the Pedagogical Workers' Act. Paragraph 7 of Section 24 under "Further education of pedagogical workers" says: "for the purposes of further education mentioned in par. 4, item b), pedagogical workers are entitled to 12 days off during a school year if no serious operational reasons or the participation of the worker in further education present an obstruction to it..." (Act No. 563/2004 Coll.).

Survey

The fulfilment of educational needs is the subject of further education, where this education is mandatory for nursery school teachers defined by the existing system of further education pursuant to Act No. 563/2004 Coll. on pedagogical workers and the amendment of certain laws, as amended. This obligation thus predetermines their active training in certain areas of education. In this respect, we asked: what defines their educational needs?

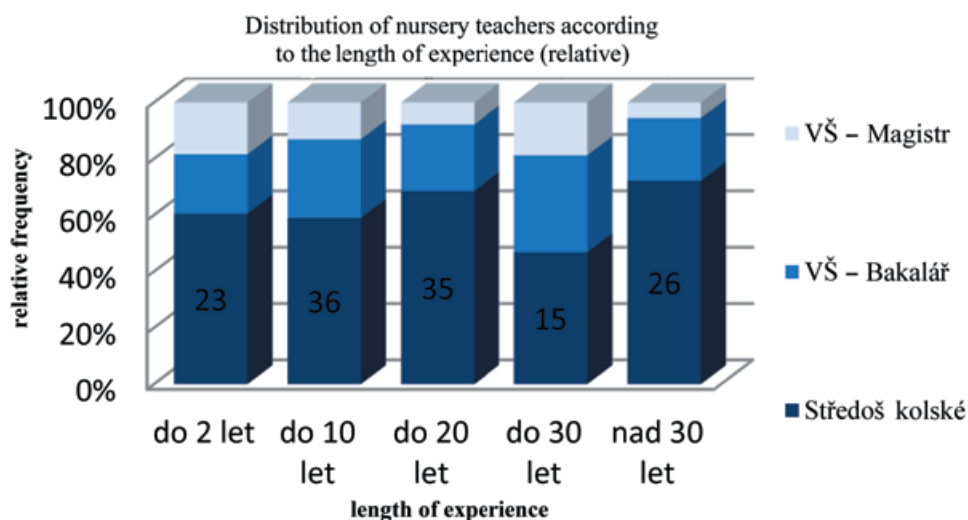
Research Objective

To discover the grounds of the educational needs of teachers of various lengths of experience and the possibilities of fulfilling such needs.

Research Set

The first group consists of 218 active teachers. The results of the research within this group were obtained using a quantitative method — a questionnaire survey.

The second group consists of 46 active teachers/students (students of the 3rd year of combined studies of the "Nursery School Teacher" major). The re-



Source: our own research

sults of the research within this group were obtained using a quantitative method — a questionnaire survey.

The third group consists of 15 active teachers. The results of the research were obtained using a qualitative method — interview.

The distribution of respondents — teachers according to the length of experience and the achieved level of education (218 teachers) are presented above for illustration.

Research Results Interpretation

First, we were interested in who directs the further education of teachers, which may be related to their motivation and defining the content in their further education in the respective areas of education. The answer to that question was that teachers, regardless of the length of their experience, direct their further education themselves.

The answer to the question of the origin of the educational needs of teachers and the related fulfilment of their educational needs depends largely on their awareness, in other words, where their educational needs come from. One of the most frequently identified sources of the educational needs of teachers was, regardless of the length of their experience, their self-evaluation as a teacher, i.e. their self-reflection. Other than that, the sources are activities related to the direct education of children.

For teachers with up to 10 and over 30 years of experience, these are also stimuli from trainings and workshops, and for teachers with up to 30 years of experience, they are activities both related and unrelated to education.

The identified source of the educational needs of teachers, self-reflection, was complemented with one more finding, i.e. what are the possibilities and techniques of self-reflection used by teachers for gaining self-knowledge in terms of their own professional activities on which their educational activities are based? The first result is that among the possibilities of their self-reflection, the students/teachers regardless of the length of their experience (46) most frequently identified the reflection of their teaching and, within it, informal evaluation (0–2 years — 21/68%, 3–10 years — 7/23%, 10 and more years — 3/10%). Similarly, the teachers/students with up to 2 (18/62%) and 10 (11/38%) years of experience spoke of the possibility of using a reflective journal. The students/teachers, however, differ according to the length of their experience in terms of the technique of their self-reflection. Teachers with 0–2 years of experience mostly use interviews with parents (22/69%), those with 3–10 years of experience use interviews with colleagues (14/44%), and those with 10 or more years of experience use photo documentation of children's activities (8/44%).

The sources of the educational needs of teachers which are important for the direction of their further education were also identified through interviews (15 teachers). The categories of sources of the educational needs are as follows. The first is the area of legislation, where the teachers claimed that in their educational needs they react to requirements given by social changes in the sphere of education legislation. The next category is educational reality, where teachers claimed that they use their knowledge acquired in their direct work with children. Yet another category is the head teacher, which identifies the education required from them by the head teacher, and their own needs — as they reflect their needs themselves in their self-evaluation, i.e. their self-reflection. In the case of the interviewed teachers, the sources of their educational needs differ in relation to the length of their experience. The category of educational reality was identified as the source by 7 teachers with up to 10 years of experience, 3 teachers with more than 30 years of experience and 1 teacher with up to 20 years of experience. In total, 11 teachers selected this category. The second most chosen category is the category of legislation, and the total number of teachers who selected it was 5; 1 teacher of each of the groups with up to 10, 20, and 30 years of experience and 2 teachers with more than 30 years of experience. This category informs us that teachers also consider social changes reflected in education legislation in their educational needs. The category head teacher and own needs based on teachers' self-reflection was selected by 1 teacher with up to 10 years

of experience and 2 teachers with up to 20 years of experience. In total, this category was selected by only 3 teachers. We illustrate the findings with selected responses from teachers. Question: What is the source of your present educational needs?

Teacher 1: "It is what our head teacher requires from us and the work with children." Teacher 2: "It is the work with children, the situations when I don't know what to do, but also my own interests."

We found out that the most frequent source of educational needs in this group of teachers is the educational reality. These teachers also identified self-reflection as one of the sources, however, it is not the most frequent source, as it was in the previous group of teachers.

Having found the grounds of identification of teachers' own educational needs in order to determine the content of their further education in the respective educational fields, another inevitable precondition of fulfilling these needs is the personal motivation of teachers (218 respondents). We found that it differed among individual categories, probably because the length of experience of the teachers was rather structured. Teachers with up to 2 years of experience were motivated to fulfil their educational needs mostly by their shortcomings, teachers with up to 10, 20, and 30 years of experience (we found agreement here) mostly wanted to enhance their work and improve in a certain area of education. It seems to be quite interesting that teachers with up to 30 and over 30 years of experience declared they were motivated for their education by their desire for knowledge, while other teachers show a much lower level of this aspect in comparison. Teachers with over 30 years of experience also see their motivation in the need to improve themselves. Within this category of teachers, we found motivation in the area of the perception of their shortcomings and desire to enhance their work was quite low compared to other categories of teachers. On the other hand, this category, unlike the others, understands their education also as their hobby.

When teachers identify their educational needs and are motivated for their realization, the needs are fulfilled. We found out that the teachers educate themselves regardless of the length of their experience. The only answers that the teachers do not educate themselves were from teachers with up to 2 (10) and 10 years of experience (15). With regard to the total number of respondents, this group of teachers is very small.

Regarding the practical realization of education, the teachers selected the possibility of education 1, 2, 3 to 4 times per school year. The most common frequency of education according to the teachers was two times in a school year.

We complemented this scope of frequencies of education in institutions as stated by the teachers with the ideas of teachers concerning their

further education from the result of our research survey — 46 respondents. In it, the teachers/students perceive the need of education taking place 2, 4, and 5 times a year. Our previous research survey showed that the maximum was two courses per school year, where this number is also the most frequent idea of the students/teachers; however, they also add the frequency of 5 times a year. The ideas of teachers concerning the course of their further education differ according to the length of their experience.

We have also complemented the issues of the frequency of education with expected other possibilities of their education and thus fulfilling their educational needs (46 respondents). Students/teachers, regardless of the length of their experience, want to also use self-study, such as visits to libraries and studying expert publications or journals and searching for information on the internet (opinions given in response to an open question on the questionnaire survey). Regarding further organized education, the students/teachers suggest (in another open question) internships at nursery schools abroad and in the Czech Republic (respondents with up to 2 and 10 years of practice), while students/teachers with up to 10 years of practice add that they would like practical training with the supervision of an experienced pedagogue. The teachers provided information that they have an idea about the possibilities of fulfilling their educational needs even in new areas representing their educational needs that differ in relation to the length of their experience.

Following the presented results of the research into the possibilities of the fulfilment of their educational needs, the teachers evaluated their awareness of the possibilities of practical realization of their further education (218 respondents). The teachers most frequently stated that they lacked any awareness — those with up to 2 years (16/55%) and above 30 years of experience (6/21%) (in total 29/100% responses), those with up to 30 years of experience (22/23%) have some information (in total 94/100% responses), those with up to 10 (31/32%) and 20 years of experience (29/30%) stated that they are well-informed in this regard (in total 97/100 % responses). In general, it is possible to say that the teachers are informed; however, the depth and extent of their orientation in the possibilities of education differ according to the length of their experience. If we follow the possibilities of education of the teachers (218 — 100%) without sorting them into groups according to the length of their experience, the most frequent answer was that they knew something or a lot about the possibilities of further education. Only a small group of teachers has no knowledge in the respective area and, according to what was previously said, this lack of information is most frequent among teachers with up to 2 years of experience.

The area of further education possibilities is also complemented with findings concerning the perception of teachers of the fulfilment of

their educational needs. In this respect, we were interested in whether teachers receive education in areas that are new for them (218 respondents). The most frequent response of the teachers, regardless of the length of their experience, was that they receive education in areas that are new for them, with the exception for teachers with up to 30 years of experience, whose most frequent answer was that the areas of their education are not new for them.

The teachers claimed that they perceive their educational needs, they are aware of them, and wish to fulfil them (218 respondents). We were interested in knowing, then, whether they were able to identify the area in which they want to apply the acquired educational needs. The most frequent answer, regardless of the length of experience, was that they wish to apply them in their pedagogical work: teachers with up to 2 years of experience — 32/16%, up to 10 years of experience — 49/25%, up to 20 years of experience — 51/26%, up to 30 years — 32/16%, and above 30 years of experience — 36/15% of the total of 200/100% answers. Teachers with up to 10 years of experience (55/49% of the total of 113/100% responses) stated, in a higher percentage compared to other groups according to the length of experience, that they want to provide work stimuli for their colleagues, and teachers with up to 20 years of experience (39/20% of the total of 132/100% answers) wish to provide stimuli to initiate changes in nursery schools.

The presented results of our research survey provide information on how and from where the teachers become aware of their educational needs, which subsequently determine the areas of their further education and their ideas of the possibilities and their practical fulfilment (218 respondents). However, the realization of the fulfilment of the teachers' educational needs is also closely connected with obstacles, which may affect it. Therefore, we focused on whether the teachers were aware of such obstacles and where they see them. We observed their responses in relation to the length of their experience on a scale from a "material obstacle" to "no obstacles at all". The teachers perceive obstacles to their further education differently in relation to the length of their experience. Coincidences in perceiving barriers to education appear in the conditions at the workplace, practical application of knowledge and the possibility of using self-studies.

In relation to the claimed obstacles to education, we present one more finding, which is a recurrent phenomenon identified by the teachers that we found valid. It is the claimed need and willingness to go through further education on the side of the teachers in combination with the obstacle of funding on the side of the respective organization. Question: What are the obstacles you see in the way of the realization of your education? Teacher 1: "There is an obstacle on the side of the employer: the education is possible only twice a year, and there is insufficient funding." Teacher 2: "Funding on the side of the organization; I don't see any obstacles on my side, I know I need education."

Summary of the Research Survey

Regarding the issue of the sources of educational needs, we found these to be self-reflection and the activities connected with the direct education of children regardless of the length of their teaching experience. In the area of the possibilities and techniques of self-reflection used by the teachers for self-evaluation in terms of their professional activities, we found that regardless of the length of experience, the teachers most frequently claimed the reflection of their teaching and, within it, informal evaluation. In terms of the self-reflection techniques, the teachers differ according to the length of their experience. They claim them to be interviews with parents, interviews with colleagues, and photo-documentation of the children's activities. In terms of the sources of the teachers' educational needs, an important part belongs to their motivation to realize them. We discovered diversity of motivation across the individual categories according to the length of experience, probably because the length of the experience of teachers was quite structured. Regardless of the length of experience, the teachers direct their further education on their own. The teachers wish to apply the acquired educational needs in their pedagogical practice regardless of the length of their experience. In the sphere of the possibilities of fulfilling their educational needs, we found that the teachers educate themselves regardless of the length of their experience, but that there are also some teachers who do not. The identified obstacles in the realization of the education of the teachers and thus also in the fulfilment of their educational needs to be differed with various lengths of their experience.

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