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Professional Culture of the Specialist of the Future

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The review of historical teacher-training literature, analysis of new scientific advances in the domain of educators' psychological and didactic skills development, study of current teaching practices and insights derived from our own experience enabled us to provide a theoretical foundation for the "educator's profile" concept and conceptualize a comprehensive teacher performance assessment system. The research questions concern defining professional activity as a component of early childhood educators' competency profile and identifying the appropriate content of instructional management conducive to improvement of the named component. The purpose of the study was to identify what effect meaningful instructional management has on the development of professional activity of early childhood educators. Based on the obtained data on educators' challenges, needs and demands, we created an assessment scorecard that incorporates all available information about educators' professional capacity into a comprehensive system. A valuable input for the assessment of instructional management effectiveness was provided by the analysis of teachers' satisfaction with this development activity.

1. Introduction

It is common knowledge that in order to effectively achieve educational goals the teacher must possess a variety of didactic and psychological capacities. Furthermore, to manage his or her own professional performance the practitioner has to understand such key aspects as: (a) historically developed patterns of teaching; (b) content and design of professional educational activity; (c) principles of learner-centred communication, with teacher-child interactions underpinned by the facilitation approach; (d) teaching functions, personal and professionally relevant characteristics; (e) skills and professionally relevant psycho-physiological characteristics; (f) comprehensive teacher performance measures (Aelenei et al., 2017; Asmolov, 2015; Dudina & Dolgova, 2016a, 2016b).

In view of the above, it is important to theoretically validate the requirements to educators' professional training and psychological preparedness for teaching career, their competencies and professionally relevant personality traits; to look at educational activity design, functions and content in terms of learner-centred communication and in light of professional standards that include a list of requirements for educators (Berzonsky & Papini, 2014; Dorozhkin & Zeer, 2014; Kuzmina et al., 2003).

2. Problem Statement

To help address the problem of early childhood educators' professional development, we should first distinguish between two concepts: competency and skills. We consider "competency" to be a knowledge indicator reflecting a person's performance and professional success, whereas the term "skills" refers to knowledge in action (or abilities) necessary for successful activity in a certain area of education.

In line with current education policy, the problem of early childhood educators' professional development should be essentially considered with regard to individual psycho-pedagogical profile of an educator (Bulfin, 2017; Dolgova, Kutepova, & Potapova, 2017). Note that the French word "*profil*" generally means a side view of a human head or another object.

We define the term "profile" as a combination of basic typical traits that characterize a certain specialty area in the teaching profession. The educator's profile should be viewed in terms of three dimensions: (1) professional activity; (2) learner-centred communication in the context of teacher-child interactions; and (3) personality traits of a modern educator.

3. Research Questions

The research questions concern defining the components of early childhood educators' competency profile and identifying the appropriate content of instructional management conducive to improvement of this profile.

The research questions arose out of the analysis of contemporary paradigm of early childhood educators' professional development that becomes apparent in the individual psycho-pedagogical profile. As noted above, the profile consists of three main components: professional activity, communication principles in the context of interactions with children, and professionally relevant personality traits.

We consider further the first component of early childhood educators' competency profile — professional activity.

Two types of relationships traditionally characterize educational activity: "subject-object" and "subject-subject" relationships that combine to create a comprehensive framework of educational activity (Dolgova et al., 2016a; Dolgova et al., 2016b; Oyserman, Destin, & Novin, 2014). At the core of this framework lies the educational interaction based on learner-centred communication. Educators' professional activity is defined as integrative activity which involves didactic, psychological and technological components. The didactic component includes target functions: socialization, upbringing, development and training. The psychological component contains operational functions: diagnostics and organization. The technological component is deemed an integral part of the comprehensive framework of educational activity, as it is responsible for such functions as design and instructional support. The design function is related to selection, development and implementation of educational content in compliance with educational standards, whereas the instructional support function is aimed at appropriate technologies use and thus contributes to educational performance.

4. Purpose of the Study

The review of historical teacher-training literature, analysis of new scientific advances in the domain of educators' psychological and didactic skills development, study of current teaching practices and insights derived from our own experience in educational systems ranging from preschool settings to higher education institutions enabled us to conceptualize a comprehensive teacher performance assessment system that is used by employers in developing recruitment policy, managing employees, organizing employee training and appraisal, making employment contracts, creating job descriptions and establishing compensation systems.

Below we provide a list of comprehensive teacher performance measures that depend on the level of educators' competency:

- outcomes of the children's upbringing, development and education subject to their aptitude and learning capability as well as to available opportunities;
- feedback from educational service consumers — children and their parents;
- internal audit, surveys, observation and analysis of educators' plans and reports;
- participation in professional skills competitions, conferences of varying scope, training sessions and workshops;
- children's success rate at competitions, Olympiads, etc.;
- professional development through timely completion of training courses, retraining, work placement and self-education programmes;
- sharing educational experience through publications;
- development of innovative projects, original methods and guidelines;
- having necessary personality traits and socially important characteristics; establishing learner-centred communication with children; mastery of professional educational activity and skills.

The development of early childhood educators' competency profile under discussion cannot occur automatically. It requires meaningful instructional management.

Hence, the purpose of the study was to identify what effect meaningful instructional management has on the development of professional activity as a component of early childhood educators' competency profile.

5. Research Methods

The main research method was educational experiment — a useful way to distinguish the studied characteristic from others and to intentionally change the impact conditions (Zabrodin & Pakhaliyan, 2015).

When designing the experiment, we took seriously the inherent features of the method, which allowed us to study the whole process of how instructional management is being implemented with no compromising of the integrity of the process.

The tasks of the experimental procedures were:

1. To introduce a comprehensive instructional management system into the teaching practice.

2. To identify evaluation criteria for experimental procedures effectiveness.

3. To evaluate experimental procedures effectiveness using the identified criteria.

At the first stage, a summative experiment was carried out to study and review instructional management system in a Chelyabinsk pre-school educational institution — the nursery school No. 216.

At the second stage, a formative experiment was conducted with the same teaching staff. The experimental findings were then summarized. Questionnaire-based survey was used as one of the main methods of gathering source information. It is an efficient way to collect a wide range of information from a large number of people within a short period of time. Yet, we understood that the information gathered through the survey is subject to biases, since it shows the studied aspects only as they are represented in the respondents' minds.

To adjust for possible biases and inconsistencies, we developed questionnaires containing both direct and indirect, both relevant and control questions. The information was collected as follows: at the first stage, baseline assessment was conducted which involved identifying instructional management content and methods at the named nursery school as well as evaluating educators' satisfaction with how instructional management is being implemented. Questionnaires were also used to assess the level of educators' didactic skills.

At the second stage, a questionnaire-based survey was conducted to study educators' attitudes to instructional management and to determine the level of didactic skills developed in the course of instructional management implementation. In addition, the survey at this stage was used to research educators' motives to engage in instructional management.

At the end of the formative experiment, the survey helped identify the level of educators' satisfaction with how instructional management is being implemented.

Seven questionnaires were used as a research instrument:

1. The content of instructional management in the city's nursery schools.

2. Methods of instructional management implementation.

3. Satisfaction with instructional management.

4. Satisfaction with educational activity.

5. Drivers for instructional management.

6. Barriers for instructional management.

7. Educators' self-development ability.

To obtain the necessary data on instructional management set-up, we also included additional research methods such as observation and interviews. Observation is a common practice to understand educational processes. This technique is intended essentially to selectively collect data on a process in the context of direct communication and feedback with the observed object.

In our experiment, observation served a number of purposes.

First, it was a source of information for verification of the data gathered through various methods (systematic observation, occasional observation). The findings of systematic observation helped identify patterns in educators' didactic skills building in the process of instructional management activities, gain insight into development of their motives to engage in these activities and analyse the respective level of satisfaction.

Second, the observation technique was combined with interviews and document analysis. Interview as a research tool is widely used in education. According to best practice, we conducted interviews according to a certain plan, with responses recorded either by the interviewer or by mechanical devices (a recorder).

"Effectiveness" is defined as ability to be successful and produce desired output. The measure of instructional management effectiveness is meaningful improvement in education process quality.

We used the following evaluation criteria for instructional management effectiveness: professional activity performance; learner-centred communication; development of professionally relevant personality traits of a modern educator; and educators' self-development ability.

As we focused on defining measures of didactic skills development, our study identified the following five developmental levels:

1st level — lowest. Educators do not have professional awareness and a grasp of teaching practices, are incapable of setting goals and achieving them in a systematic manner.

2nd level — low. Educators have a very limited comprehension of teaching practices. Their level of training includes just basic knowledge of education and psychology. Teaching tasks are performed in a substandard manner.

3rd level — middle. Educators show a noticeable proficiency, consistency and commitment, but teaching tasks are defined or performed improperly. Components of actions are poorly developed.

4th level — high. The professional awareness is of a more comprehensive character, with theoretical thinking prevailing. The rationale of actions is determined by right selection of goals: timeliness and promptness of execution.

5th level — highest. The professional awareness of teaching actions is characterized by high scientific and theoretical level. There is a clear professional orientation, commitment and focus on the target of educational interventions, right selection of goals and the means of achieving them. Educators

demonstrate a creative approach to teaching practice, they are confident and flexible in the use of professional skills. The teaching tasks at hand are performed successfully and in a creative manner.

To measure the level of didactic skills development the method of self-assessment was used along with educators' evaluation ratings as assigned by nursery school directors.

6. Findings

Instructional management notably differs from other types of professional development used in pre-school educational institutions as it is more closely connected to daily teaching activities and ongoing practical challenges that require quick response.

Instructional management of any kind should be designed to help educators learn to identify and close typical gaps in children's knowledge, skills and behaviours, to gather and capture best practice in order to drive improved learning and upbringing outcomes. Hence, the practical aspect of educators' professional development is becoming a priority these days (Yafayeva, 2011; Vianello, Schnabl, Sriram, & Nosek, 2013; Rudolph & Figge, 2017). Properly organized instructional management that meets educators' expectations should be seen as a way of resolving the dialectical contradiction between modern requirements to early childhood education and the current quality of educational process.

With regard to a specific early childhood professional, we have categorized the tasks of instructional management as follows:

1. Compensatory tasks (that help overcome challenges and close gaps in the educator's theoretical and technological training).

2. Adaptive tasks (that enable best practice elements transfer to a new setting with allowance for their specific features and changing requirements).

3. The tasks of proficiency development as a measure of the educator's creative growth.

The right choice of tasks in the context of the experimental group determined the appropriate content of instructional management.

The study of educators' self-development ability showed that in the experimental group (EG) the number of teachers with active self-development was 70% higher than in the control group (CG).

The study findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 01. The level of educators' self-development ability (control stage) (%)

Self-development ability	Educators	
	EG	CG
Active self-development	78%	8%
Self-development failed due to external circumstances	20%	61%
Self-development discontinued	2%	31%

7. Conclusion

Thus, the conducted experimental instructional management procedures have contributed to early childhood educators' active self-development and resulted in a higher level of their competency.

The change in proficiency self-assessment provided relatively objective evidence of the level of educators' knowledge, expertise and skills. Still, for a more credible assessment of proficiency change, we got an expert evaluation by directors, administrators, subject supervisors and teaching staff. Comparison of self-assessment against expert evaluation provided insight into the actual level of educators' knowledge, expertise and skills.

The findings suggest a progress in development of such constructive skills as design of future activity, choice of the system and sequence of actions (both ones' own and those of children), setting up tools to control children's actions.

The performance of the experimental group shows that meaningful instructional management in conjunction with self-development promotes active professional activity as a component of early childhood educators' competency profile.

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