Tomas Bata University in Zlín
Library

The evolution of pre-school and elementary school teachers' career trajectories – Career beginnings and ambitions

Citation

DOI

Permanent link

The Evolution of Pre-school and Elementary School Teachers' Career Trajectories - Career Beginnings and Ambitions

Adriana Wiegerová and Beáta Deutscherová

Department of School Education, Faculty of Humanities, Tomas Bata University in Zlín, Zlín, Czech Republic

Abstract. The professionalization of nursery school teachers is currently a much-discussed topic within the Czech Republic. In this study, the authors present interim results of their research into the career trajectories of nursery school teachers, and compare these to the trajectories of junior level elementary school teachers. The research sample comprised thirteen nursery school teachers (3 of whom are currently Czech School Inspectorate inspectors), and also ten junior level elementary school teachers. This sample included five nursery school principals and five elementary school principals. In the qualitative design of the research, two research methods were used, specifically the writing of a themed text, and interviews. By analysing and processing the data obtained, categories were produced which capture different evolutionary phases in the career trajectory of nursery school teachers, elementary school teachers and inspectors.

Keywords: Profession • Career • Career trajectory • Career change • Career event.

1 Introduction

There is a wide spectrum of expectations, opportunities and challenges linked to the professional career of a teacher which help shape their learning and education process as they crystallise over the course of their teaching career. The profession of teacher consists of synchronic, reflecting and diachronic dimensions which reflect their career journey from joining the profession to retirement. This is a process which takes a number of decades. It is a decision of professional direction, followed by a long differentiated period during which an individual acquires practical teaching experience in particular through responding to professional challenges and acquiring a mastery of the profession.

In the ideal case, a career is an invigorating source of personal satisfaction and stimulus to further professional development. It is an "interaction of work roles and other life roles over a person's lifespan, including how they balance paid and unpaid work, and their involvement in learning and education" [1].

Relevant institutional and development factors in a given place and time most influence the course of a teacher's career. This process begins after completion of education and professional preparation, when work and life experiences build up, allowing an individual to achieve the pinnacle of their professional career and personal successes. A teacher's professional career is undoubtedly significantly modified by individual life stages of the individual in the profession, as well as their successive development phases. Initial experiences at the start of teaching may prove relevant predictors of their approach to their further career, although only teachers themselves are able to decide whether to

enter the next phases of their professional maturity with full commitment, or whether they are resigned to their future career advancement.

For effective teaching, teachers' own knowledge of their professional development phases is significant for us [2]. This leads to two fundamental and mutually correlating reasons. This is the relevancy of investigating teachers' development, which is not just "research for research's sake" but also a contribution to help teachers teach better and pupils learn better [3].

Specialist texts dedicated to career or managing one's own career are mainly based on two areas:

- • The first is based on the psychology of the organisation, personnel psychology, management (e.g. [4-6]),
- • The second is based on career advice or career education, or even the psychology of choosing a career or education (e.g. [7-9]).

Sharing and comparing perspectives can thus be beneficial not just for teachers' professionalisation, but also for teachers and students to have a more effective grasp of their current and future work in the education field. Extensive studies of teachers' careers by [10-14] provided new findings which remain relevant. Nevertheless, since the time these results were published, numerous studies have shown that teachers' work has dramatically changed. Although it might appear that a large number of studies have been published abroad which look at the evolution of teachers' career trajectories, this is not the case in regard to nursery school teachers. The small number of studies (especially within Czech education academia) likely reflects the fact that pre-primary education is a relatively young academic discipline which is not well-established within the pedagogy system. To some extent, the fact that "it is perceived that nursery school teachers do not deserve deeper academic investigation because they are attributed lower status than teachers at other school levels" plays a negative role too. This was confirmed in research by [15] and also [16].

2 Research Methodology

2.1 Research Objectives

It should be stated that the research whose preliminary results we present in this study is a continuation of work on the professionalization of nursery school teachers, and builds on research undertaken by the Department of School Education at Tomas Bata University in Zlin's Faculty of Humanities as an exceptional topic in recent years. Basic findings in the topic were ascertained in research from 2016-2017 [16, 17].

In terms of professional career development for nursery and elementary school teachers, one can suppose on the basis of the above research that there are relevant differences. As such, our objective was to ascertain what the fundamental differences were in teachers' professional careers, why they occurred and what impact they can have on teacher preparation at universities. Another objective was to analyse key career events in the career trajectory of nursery school teachers and junior-level elementary school teachers.

2.2 Research Methods

Two research methods were chosen for this research. The method of a themed written text was used. This is a method of free writing in which a text on a given topic is written. The writing is free, i.e. not

controlled by the researcher - the flow of writing is thus not disturbed or otherwise restricted. Themed writing is essentially the qualitative counterpole of the questionnaire, in which respondents answer a number of questions posed by the researcher. The focus of the themed writing is opposite. The research engages participants in considering themselves. The text they produce is a construction of their own subjectivity. The disadvantage of this method is that it is rather unnatural. Writing is not a natural method of expressing oneself.

Participants were explained the purpose of the research and they were given instructions in relation to the content of the themed writing. Participants were contacted either in person, by e-mail or by telephone. The content of the themed writing text was given the following areas: the reasons why the teacher wanted to become a teacher in their particular type of school, and what circumstances contributed to this decision; the teacher's career beginnings; a key moment in the teacher's career; the reasons why they became school principal and the circumstances which contributed towards that decision. Themed writing was undertaken once in the research study. The texts were analysed in order to find the answer to the research questions. The themed writing text type was written self-reflection. The writing was free and unrestricted. Participants' involvement in the research was voluntary on the basis of obtained consent. The themed writing text was anonymous. Some texts were shorter, not exceeding 300 words, while some texts were longer, with a word count of 850. The shortness of the texts was a surprise. We had anticipated broader and deeper reflection. The reason for this may be participants' weak motivation to provide a written report on their career trajectory, or low text skills for grasping the topic. Contact was established with participants on the basis of previous co-operation.

The other research method was the in-depth interview method. One interview was held with each of the participants. The interview was recorded using a dictaphone. Once the interview was completed, this was followed by the stage of producing the transcript. The transcript was produced by converting the audio recording into written form. Transcripts were essential for practical reasons; analysing data using transcripts is more comfortable than analysing audio recordings. Written down, the researcher is able to make better sense of and faster find their bearings in seeking out relevant places and sections in the interview. Another advantage is more comfortable recording of codes and if needed being able to create one's own notes. Transcripts are produced using transcript rules. These rules ensure the transferral to written form is done in a uniform and similar manner. This produces a reliable foundation for data analysis.

There are a number of transcription rule systems in qualitative research, which are different in their approach to capturing data and level of detail. The characteristics of the rules are mainly determined by the objective of the research and the theoretical perspective which the research identifies with. This transcription system was shown to be acceptable and fully functional for the following analysis. The analysis was based on so-called recursive reading. Repeated reading of particular sections of the interview led to the gradual penetration of participants' thoughts and opinions. This provided a summative picture of participants' statements, aiming for an understanding of the interview as a composite whole. For more details see [18].

Upon first reading, the option of denotation, or immersion in the data was apparent. Subsequently, the first interpretive ideas were recorded, relevant sections and found associations marked. Gradually, a set of codes was produced for the next phase of data analysis [19].

The principle of induction was applied in the research. The advantage of the induction principle was in producing a potentially new perspective on the research phenomenon or phenomena. In this way new terms were gradually born and correlations arose with common features between them.

2.3 Research Participants' Characteristics

The research sample comprises a total of twenty teachers from the Czech Republic and three Czech School Inspectorate inspectors. The makeup of teachers was the following: 10 nursery school teachers (5 teachers and 5 principals), 10 junior-level elementary school teachers (5 teachers and 5 principals). In the Czech Republic, junior-level elementary school comprises children aged 6-10/11 years old. These children attend for a total of five years.

Data collection took place within one stage. Participants were middle-aged or older. As such their life experience was apparent. A total of twenty-two women and one man took part in the research. The numbers represented in the sample investigated is representative in terms of gender for the population of teachers in the Czech Republic, as there is a clear higher representation of women than men, essentially corresponding to the actual structure of the Czech school system, known for its feminisation.

3 Research Findings

3.1 Why Be a Teacher...

There are a large number of reasons for teachers to choose their profession, and these may be highly differentiated. It should be noted that one isn't born a teacher; one rather becomes a teacher. The decision to become a teacher is preceded by many processes, obstacles and development phases. Frequently given motives for teachers to choose the profession include, for example, a desire to work with children and influence the young generation; to do creative work; candidates' impression and conviction that it's easier to get into the Education Faculty than any other faculty; a wish to help and take care of others. According to [15], knowing the motive which led teachers to choose a teaching career is important information which tells us about the situations, events, people and family members, peers, teachers and also career decisions which led to the decision. In order to understand the aspects of teachers' career path development, one must begin investigating the period prior to actual study and joining the profession, i.e. the period when nursery school teachers and junior-level elementary school teachers realised that they wanted to work in teaching. The motivation to take on a teaching career is one of the significant determinants for the establishment and development of teaching professionalism. Maintaining the right motivation over the whole period of working as a teacher is not at all easy, yet it is fundamental to maintain work performance quality. The following subcategories are recorded; teaching career motives may differ.

The research findings based on the responses of research participants demonstrate that teaching for them was either: (a) a substitute solution; or (b) they wanted to become a teacher.

(a) Last resort

Although the decision to become a teacher may seem unimportant for some, the decision can play a large role in the teacher's future teaching career in terms of their approach and experience, quality of work performance, etc. There were teachers in both nursery schools and elementary schools who wanted to be teachers, and also those who came into the profession because they had no other choice.

I studied vocational teaching at secondary schools specialising in medical, social and teaching subjects, and I worked in that field for 7 years. After maternity leave, I couldn't find a job in my qualification, and because I had studied teaching, if at tertiary level, I was accepted at a small elementary school. (UV)

I hadn't planned to study education. I decided to do so when I found out I wouldn't be able to pass the entrance exam for chemistry at agricultural college. (JM)

(b) Wish fulfilled

Another incentive for choosing teaching may be fulfilling a desire to work with children, the opportunity to remain young in spirit, experiencing positive emotions in relations with others, a need to educate, create, continuously self-learn. This desire needs to be fulfilled, and it can be satisfied by starting to study Education, and subsequently the Education student who successfully passes their final exams become a qualified teacher. This desire can represent a purpose in life and personal fulfilment. After satisfying the desire to become a teacher, there are further additional desires in the career which are also driven by incentives, whether internal or external.

"I just wanted to be a teacher in nursery school, already at that time I was saying that I would be a nursery teacher…" (UG)

In childhood when children think of their future career, some participants already knew they wanted to be a teacher. It is true that the profession of teacher is one of the first professions that children encounter in their life. Although a nursery school teacher as perceived by children is not realistic, it can still play an important role in their decision on a future career.

"… so I always wanted to be a teacher (laughter), so it was my dream from childhood and I'm glad I managed to fulfil my dream…" (UH)

In early childhood, a desire to become a teacher is expressed when participants wordlessly play at being a teacher. They remember the powerful experience of playing a teacher at an early age, which is strongly imprinted in their long-term memory.

"I've got one brother, who's 8 years younger, and I often looked after him, from when I first thought about my future job, my goal was clear. " (PS)

"I've always wanted to be a teacher. In childhood, I played at being a teacher and forced my younger brother to be my pupil. " (MT)

"I looked after my 8-years younger brother. I was interested in being in a group, experiencing events with other friends, competition, shared success, enjoyment from play and friendship. That's why I decided to get into teaching. " (UŠ)

There were also teachers amongst the participants for whom school itself fulfilled them. They simply enjoying going to school. This phenomenon is not common amongst children today. It would seem, however, that those involved in this research are from a generation for whom school as an institution was seen positively.

"I liked going to school; I enjoyed finding the answer to why something works this or the other way, and the combination of my rationality and admiration for logic led to my decision to study teaching. " (PH)

"Some of my hobbies at school-age were art and pottery clubs, and also numerous sports-swimming, hiking, skiing and skating. All these circumstances probably led to my choice to study at secondary education school. " (PG)

"From early childhood, I enjoyed subjects at school like PE and art, and I played the violin. So it was probably natural that I applied for secondary education school. " (AL)

Participants were also led to their choice of career by their family, i.e. an example from their own family; where being a teacher was a kind of family tradition.

"... I come from a family of teachers, so the choice was quite easy, I would say it was even a target, and I'd say my parents even encouraged me generally through clubs and interests so I would then be ready for a teaching career..." (PP)

". I come from a family of teachers, so it kind of followed. Right from the word go, from elementary school, I was thinking about it. I played the piano, I sang in a choir and I enjoyed teaching work, so I just decided to go to secondary education school and onwards..." (JH)

3.2 Adaptation Shock, or "Rocky Beginning"

Adaptation to any new environment can produce various situations which may cause difficulties. Adaptation, or the ability to adapt to the school environment, is an important factor which has an impact both on students, children, teachers and even parents. The more difficult the environment, the greater the justification for regulating the adaptation process in which the student and trained teacher enters. Adaptation is the ability of an organism to adapt to the conditions in which it operates. Some teachers look back on it fondly: "*the beginning of my career was wonderful, and my first class of kids have remained long in my memory,* " while some remember certain difficulties.

"Thrown into practice, basically learning on my feet, intensive self-realisation. " (JH)

"The beginning of my career wasn't easy; I didn't know what to do about certain children (and parents). " (PP)

"The beginning of my career was wonderful, and my first class of kids have remained long in my memory. " (PS)

"The beginning of my professional career was difficult, because I was working for a very strict principal. " (JH)

It's clear from the responses given that the teacher - novice is affected by a certain adaptation shock, in particular in working with their senior teacher, in contact with children and also with parents. These three possible areas of conflict are foreseeable. They represent the foundation for good or problematic communication in nursery and elementary school.

Theoretical and research studies have looked at to what extent teachers get through social, cultural and education problems [20], how universities respond to students' needs [21] and what specific steps lead to adaptation [22]. These studies, however, focus more on adaptation to university conditions. In teaching-focused programmes, one must also bear in mind that adaptation also involves institutions in which students-future teachers do their work experience. Even under the conditions of training institutions, students experience adaptation problems which can be expressed at emotional, and also

cognitive and social levels. Disturbing stability in these areas amplifies a more emotional experience of the situation, which can lead to reality shock.

3.3 Gaining the Role of Principal - Major Career Event

People usually achieve a relatively permanent and secure occupational status in middle age. An examination of one's experience and reassessment of one's work plans may lead to a realisation that almost half of one's professional career is over. At some stage in a teacher's professional development, the acquisition of new skills comes to an end or is reduced, and teachers respond to this in various ways. Some settle into routine, others seek out opportunities for self-fulfilment, perhaps through professional growth by acquiring roles which bring new challenges. A school principal is an expert in all areas (curriculum, didactics, school management, school legislation, innovations in teaching, etc.), ideally delegates powers, creates and supports policies leading to improving school quality, seeks out solutions to problems which have a long-term impact, with pupils and children their greatest priority. [23] Organisational and leadership abilities are particularly important for the role of principal.

There are many reasons for becoming a school principal; a higher income, new experiences, personal growth, etc.), and on the other hand there is the risk linked to the job, the level of social responsibility, less time for family and opportunity to exchange attitudes amongst colleagues.

"... I began as a teacher, and, well, then after eight years I was principal because I had worked here as a teacher, so I then moved on to the role of principal when the previous principal took her first retirement..." (UC)

"After a year working at secondary school, I got an unexpected offer from the mayor of the village of principal at my previous elementary school workplace. " (CB)

"I got the role of principal by chance when the previous principal left and none of the other employees had the required education. " (JH)

"The inspector offered me the position of principal because she knew of my relationship to the place and knew my work from regular inspections at our school. " (PP)

The research participants also showed what problems the role of principal can bring, and that they do not always anticipate these. In particular, this applies in terms of social contacts with former colleagues.

"It was a wonderful period, accompanied by the unpleasant realisation that as principal you're always on your own. Your friends become acquaintances, and some of your acquaintances become adversaries, or even enemies. " (UH)

"After taking up the role, I became convinced that it was the biggest mistake I'd ever made. I didn't enjoy my job. " (MT)

3.4 Another Career Milestone - Becoming an Inspector

As has been mentioned, our participants included three Czech School Inspectorate inspectors. This institution is focused on monitoring and inspection. What was interesting in the presented research was the fact that being an inspector was a kind of imagined objective for many ambitious teachers. In

the case of our participants, the inspectors were women who wanted to be school principals, but there ambitions were not fulfilled, and they therefore decided to try being inspectors.

"... our deputy head contacted me to ask if I wanted to go to the Czech School Inspectorate, that I was clever, the town had just done what they'd done, so would I like to try this...” (UG)

"... I met an inspector, and in just an ordinary informal discussion I also began considering it, so of course I looked at the Czech School Inspectorate website career section, and there was an opening for this position. It was the position of special teacher, junior level teacher, so I applied, I fulfilled the essentials that were required and I took part in the recruitment procedure in Prague...” (MT)

"... well, so I was keeping an eye on it before ... whether any recruitment procedure was announced and then it was... I began looking to see what I could do, and the fact that my mum worked at the Inspectorate meant I knew a little about the job...” (UŠ) The career trajectory of their job can be outlined graphically as follows (Fig. 1):
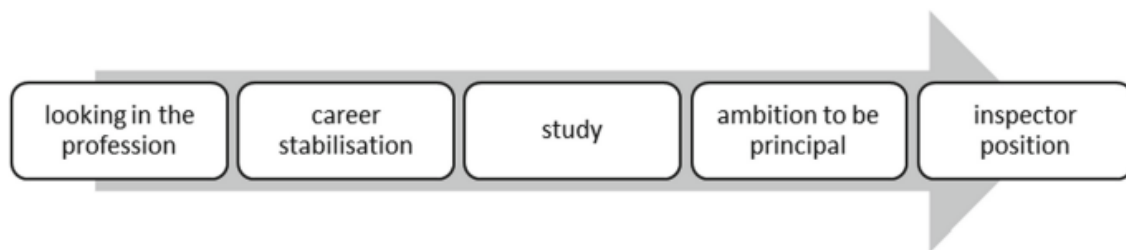

Fig. 1. Inspector career trajectory. It is shown that investigating the career of inspector can significantly enrich research. As such, in future we are considering expanding this group of research participants.

4 Conclusion

Teaching is above all a social category. It does not exist beyond the human realm. It is shaped and fixed in social acts, i.e. activities, in which people enter into mutual interactions and exchange meanings. These activities include what takes place within the universities, i.e. in the space where humans gradually become teachers. A social act is socially recognised purposeful behaviour, both verbal and non-verbal, direct and mediated, through which and within which one creates new meanings and refines, clarifies and fixes already existing meanings. It is these social acts which are important in the process of professionalising students during the period of undertaking work experience. Social acts, however, are not just about creating and clarifying meanings. On the one hand, social categories construct, and on the other hand they serve as an interpretative framework through which one understands items and phenomena around oneself and acts in accordance.

All people with life experience of school education construct the concept of teaching. However, those who are teachers, or who are on the path to becoming teachers, have a double construction. This second construction is the building of teacher identity. The social construct of teacher is individualised, become a part of the "I". The construction of a teacher's professional identity is a continuous, permanent and unceasing process, but the most malleable period is the start of a teacher's professional career. In the first phase a certain preconcept of a teacher is formed, in childhood often done through play in the form of self-presentation as a teacher. Through the impact of new situations (life, academic, professional), this preconcept is deepened.

We believe that it is mainly the influence of the academic and professional situations which students experience during their work experience which deepens their own professional identity. Young people reach an ever deeper grasp of their role, which takes place not just during the process of construction, but also reconstruction, of identity. The processes described take place not just consciously, but also implicitly, unconsciously.

In order for a particular identity to be constructed, social and cognitive processes are not enough. Humans need a certain emotional foundation in order to be receptive to social categories, and in order to engage in the construction process. As such, the affective side of the construction process is always important in forming social categories. These are transformed and fulfilled during work experience and higher education study itself.

In the case of teachers, the affective side of the construction process is very powerful, one reason being that people with values such as altruism and a positive relationship to children seek (or should be seeking) a career in teaching.

References

1. Jackson, C.H. (ed.): ELGPN Glosář. ELGPN Tools, no. 2. c2015, Praha: Centrum Euroguidance (2015). http://www.elgpn.eu/publications/browse-by-language/czech/elgpn-glosar

2. Stroot, S., et al.: Peer assistance and review guidebook. Ohio Department of Education, Columbus (1998). http://education.utoledo.edu/par/Stages.html

3. Lukas, J.: Učitel - jeho profesní vývoj a sociální vztahy ve škole: disertační práce. Masarykova univerzita, Fakulta sociálních studií, Katedra psychologie, Brno (2011)

4. Sturges, J.: All in a day's work? Career self-management and the management of the boundary between work and non-work. Hum. Resour. Manag. J. 18(2) (2015)

5. King, Z.: Career self-management: a framework for guidance of employed adults. Br. J. Guid. Counc. 29(1) (2001)

6. Noe, R.A.: Is career management related to employee development and performance? J. Organ. Behav. 17(2) (1996)

7. Vuorinen, R., Watts, A.G. (eds.): Politiky celoživotního poradenství: Evropský nástroj pro tvůrce politik. ELGPN Tools, No. 1. Centrum Euroguidance, Praha (2011)

8. Thomsen, R.: A Nordic Perspective on Career Competences and Guidance - Career Choices and Career Learning. NVL & ELGPN Concept Note. c2015, Oslo: NVL (2014). http://www. elgpn.eu/publications/browse-by-language/english/career-choicesand-career-learning.-nvl-elgpn-concept-note

9. Vaughan, K.: The potential of career management competencies for renewed focus and direction in career education. N. Z. Annu. Rev. Educ. 20 (2010)

10. Lortie, D.: Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study. University of Chicago Press, Chicago (1975)

11. Sikes, P., Measor, L., Woods, P.: Teacher Careers: Crises and Continuities. Falmer Press, London (1985)

12. Huberman, M.: The Lives of Teachers. Cassell, London; Teachers' College, New York (1993a)

13. Huberman, M.: The model of the independent artisan in teachers' professional relations. In: Little, J.W., McLaughlin, M.W. (eds.) Teachers' Work: Individuals (1993b)

14. Fessler, R., Christensen, J.: The Teacher Career Cycle: Understanding and Guiding the Professional Development of Teachers. Allyn and Bacon, Boston (1992)

15. Wiegerová, A., Gavora, P.: Proč se chci stát učitelkou v mateřské škole? Pohled kvalitativního výzkumu. Pedagogická orientace 24, 4 (2014)

16. Wiegerová, A., Deutscherová, B.: A Comparison of Professional Careers of Early Childhool Teachers: A Qualitative Investigation. E-pedagogium, 4/2018 (2018)

17. Deutscherová, B., Wiegerová, A.: Professionalization of teachers of preschools. In: 9th International Conference of Education, Research and Innovation. Book Series: ICERI Proceedings, pp. 1575-1580 (2016)

18. Pope, C., Mays, N.: Qualitative Research in Health Care, 3rd edn. Blackwell Pub./BMJ Books, Malden (2000)

19. Miles, M.B., Huberman, A.M., Saldaňa, J.: Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook, 3rd edn (2014)

20. Clinciu, A.: Adaptation and stress for the first year university students. Procedia - Soc. Behav. Sci. 78, 718-722 (2013)

21. Feldt, R.C., et al.: Measurement adjustment to college: construct validity of the student adaptation to college questionnaire. Meas. Eval. Couns. Dev. 2011, 44-92 (2011)

22. Chang, E.C., et al.: Relation between problemsolving styles and psycholog