

A Comparison of Professional Careers of Early Childhood Teachers: A Qualitative Investigation

Adriana Wiegerová, Beáta Deutscharová

Abstract

The aim of this study was to describe the development of preschool and primary school teachers' careers. The theoretical portion of this study summarizes knowledge about a teacher's profession and the development of a teacher's career. The results of qualitatively oriented research are presented in the empirical portion. The researched data was obtained through twenty in-depth interviews that were conducted with teachers and kindergarten school directors, teachers, and head teachers at primary schools. By analysing and processing interviews, categories that capture the teachers' career paths were identified. The processing and evaluation of obtained data led to the creation of a theoretical model of the career path of preschool and primary school teachers.

Keywords: teacher professional career; teacher profession; professionalization; crucial moments.

Srovnání profesní kariéry učitelů dětí předškolního věku a učitelů na základních školách: kvalitativní výzkumné šetření

Abstrakt

Cílem této studie bylo popsat vývoj kariéry učitelů dětí předškolního věku a učitelů na základních školách. Teoretická část této studie shrnuje znalosti o profesi učitele a vývoji profesní kariéry. Výsledky kvalitativně orientovaného výzkumu jsou prezentovány v empirické části. Uvedené údaje byly získány prostřednictvím dvaceti hloubkových rozhovorů, které byly provedeny s učiteli a řediteli mateřských škol a učiteli a řediteli základních škol. Na základě analýzy a zpracování rozhovorů byly identifikovány kategorie, které zachycují různé kariéry učitelů. Zpracování a vyhodnocení získaných dat vedlo k vytvoření teoretického modelu kariérního postupu učitelů dětí předškolního věku a učitelů na základních školách.

Klíčová slova: profesní kariéra učitele, profese učitele, profesionalizace; rozhodující okamžiky.

1 Introduction

Teaching as a profession plays a very significant and important role in society and has a long history. In the context of the development of society, the field of education and cognition has increased, and as a result the view on the teaching profession varies (Vašutová 2004, Lukášová 2003, Deutscherová & Wiegerová, 2016). The teaching profession can be studied from the point of view of the didactic field, the phase of a teacher's professional career or the typology of a teacher's personality. In this study we focus on the professional career of teachers that work in preschool and primary schools. The professional career in accordance with the theory of Day, Calderhead, and Denicolo (2014) is understood as a progressive development that a person goes through throughout his/her life. The concept of a career is often misunderstood as only an individual career path. This is a very limited understanding of this concept. A career can be of either a progressive or regressive trend. An individual does not need to identify himself/herself with a career, because every person has a different set of values.

According to Šnýdrová (2006), the professional career is always judged according to certain criteria, namely: the job position in which the individual is, the amount of wages, material benefits, the number of subordinate workers, the extent of responsibility, decision-making powers, and others.

Professional career differentiates into two elementary dimensions a) objective and b) subjective. A subjective career reflects an individual, a subjective interpretation of a career, a subjective interpretation of objective and subjective data, and the subjective meanings of an objective career. An objective or so-called external career is created by judgement of others and is recorded in personal documentation.

In principle, we can talk about four stages of a professional career. The preparatory stage lasts till the first starting of employment. The career start-up stage is defined from the first starting of employment to approximately the age of thirty-five of an individual, in this time period a "shock of reality" may occur. The next stage concerns a career of middle-aged individuals, lasting approximately from the age of thirty-five to fifty-five of an individual. The last career stage for individuals of an older age is characterized from the age of fifty-five, and the typical feature of this stage is passing down experience through mentoring or coaching younger colleagues. Sikes' model (1985) differentiates a professional career into five successive stages. The first stage lasts from the age of twenty-one to twenty-eight. In this stage there are also significant events that are a turning point in a teacher's profession, see Sikes, Measor, and Woods (1985). The second stage is characteristic of individuals aged between twenty-eight to thirty-three; some individuals may be promoted at this stage and therefore move professionally forward. The third stage is defined as an individual from the age of thirty to forty. This period is typical for finding a balance in the actual career (Huberman 1995). The fourth penultimate stage is defined as the range from the age of forty to fifty or fifty-five, at this stage there is a decline of professional ambitions. The last fifth stage is typical for individuals aged fifty and fifty-five or more and one of the tasks in this stage is so-called career guidance.

1.1 Problem statement

In terms of the professional career development of teachers in preschools and primary schools, we have thought that there are relevant differences. We wanted to find the crucial differences in the professional careers of these teachers, why they arise, and what impact they can have on preparation of future teachers at universities.

For this research, a research method of an in-depth interview was chosen. Interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone. After the interview was carried out, the transcription phase followed. During the repeated reading of some interview parts, there was a gradual entering into the participants' thoughts and opinions. This resulted in a summary of participants' testimonies and contributed to the understanding of the interview as a complex. Already at the first reading, the possibility of denotation or so-called immersion in the data appeared. Subsequently, the first interpretative ideas were recorded, the relevant sections identified, and the associations found. Gradually, a list of notes was created for the next stage of data analysis. The principle of induction

was used in this research. The benefit of this induction principle was the emergence of a potentially new view on a research phenomenon(a). While reading and producing the transcript, firstly, the sensitive parts were identified – segments of the transcript that provided some relevant information. These were marked with codes. The segments were of a varying length. For example, “no other choice than becoming a teacher”, “not every teacher is a good teacher”, “the realisation of desire”. After all codes were given, they were systematized and grouped according to a significance and then hierarchically sorted. The result of this procedure was the revelation of basic categories, which were afterwards processed in a descriptive way.

1.2 Sample

The research sample consisted of a total of twenty teachers from the Czech Republic, five teachers of preschools, five teachers of primary schools, five directors of primary schools, and five directors of preschools. The participants were chosen intentionally. The participants were teachers in their middle age and they were contacted by phone.

The personal data of the participants was also presented in the research, hence, in order to ensure anonymity, fictitious names and abbreviations such as UA, UC were used to refer to the participants. In the study, we avoid the precise indication of the places in which teachers used to live or have been living, used to work or have been working. Informed consent was submitted to the participants prior to implementation of the interview. By signing the consent, the participants confirmed their participation in the research.

2 Findings

In the following text, the data obtained through in-depth interviews with teachers and directors of preschools, teachers of primary schools and directors of primary schools is interpreted.

2.1 Turning points or a way towards achievement of professional goals

Turning points are “key events in the life of an individual and his/her surroundings concerning the change of decision. These make the individual to choose a particular action that leads to certain goals”. (Sikes, 1985, p. 57) Thus, these are situations or events that represent a significant change for a teacher, a turning point in the development of his/her professional career.

The period of change must not always be anticipated, it may have both a positive and negative influence, and may even contain a certain traumatic element. With the passage of time, we can truthfully state whether we evaluate the event as successful or unsuccessful, and what factors have affected a certain event. We will find this out after or during the transition from one professional development phase to another, which is mostly correlated to a change of a job position or an employer.

Our participants went through several significant changes.

To provide a better overview, we present the processing of outputs in a graphical form. Each chart illustrates the development of a professional career with turning point(s) of a preschool teacher or a primary school teacher. In the chart, these events are marked in yellow. On the horizontal axis, a time zone is displayed. The vertical axis shows the events of each teacher and its range of values from one to six. The closer the curve approaches zero, the more negatively the event is perceived at the time it happened. By contrast, the closer the curve approaches the value of six, the more positively the event is perceived at the time it happened.

The following turning points occurred for participants:

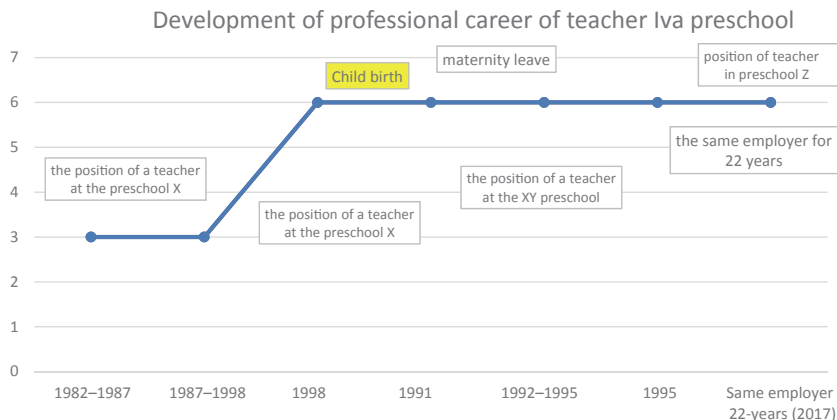
- a) the birth of a child,
- b) gaining the position of director,
- c) graduation,
- d) job loss.

As you can see, the first three events have positive connotations, the other is on the opposite side of the spectrum.

2.1 The birth of a child

Chart 1

An example of the professional development of a female teacher with an emphasis on the period of the birth of a child



An important turning point that has changed the view of a profession is the birth of a child. In particular, women's emotions are changing, and the emotional and decision-making experience interferes more with the profession.

"...maybe because I became a mother, I was totally looking at it all differently, at the profession. You know, I have always loved children, but I was not that emotionally involved in it, I was taking it only as a profession, but then when you see the little child to grow up and it is always with you and you still hold it by hand, well, then you take the job quite differently..." (UI)

2.2 Gaining the position of a director

A middle-aged person usually achieves a relatively stable and secure job position. The assessment of experience and reassessment of work plans can lead to almost a half of the professional career already occurring. At a certain stage of a teacher's development, the development of new skills is suspended or decreased and teachers respond to that in different ways. Some become routine workers, others start looking for opportunities of self-realization, perhaps through professional growth in the form of gaining a function that brings new challenges. There are many reasons for becoming a school direc-

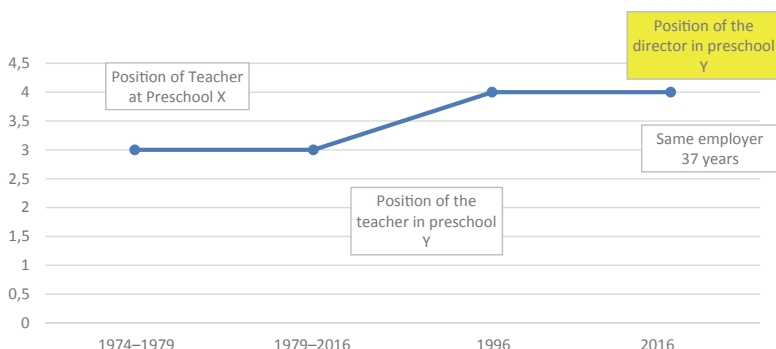
tor like (new contacts, higher income, new experience, personal growth, etc.), on the other hand, there is also a risk which is connected with this position: the level of social responsibility, less time for a family, and a possible change in the attitudes of colleagues.

"...I started as a teacher and then, after eight years, I became a director, because I had worked here as a teacher, afterwards, after the current director retired I took over the position of a director..." (UC)

Chart 2

An example of the professional development of a female teacher with an emphasis on gaining the position of a director

Development of the professional career of the director of Dita Preschool



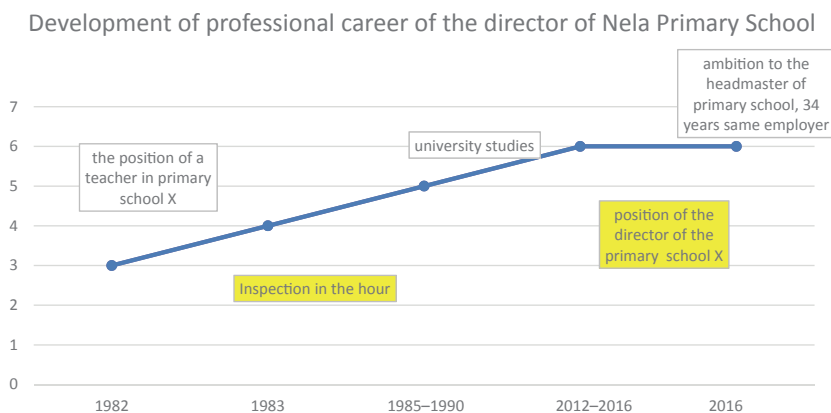
2.3 Graduation

On the following career path, three turning points can be observed; the first turning point is a recognition by the Czech School Inspectorate, which was a stimulus and led to the development of skills, abilities, and most importantly to the continuation of the profession. The second turning point was the beginning of studies and graduation, followed by the procedure for selection of the director.

"... when the inspectorate came to the school for a control, my performance was evaluated very positively. I was not used to it and I think that it was actually the stimulation to continue in this profession and so I started with my studies and finally, I graduated. I have the feeling that I know more now and I also know how to defend what I am doing..." (UN)

Chart 3

An example of the professional development of a female teacher who has experienced several turning points

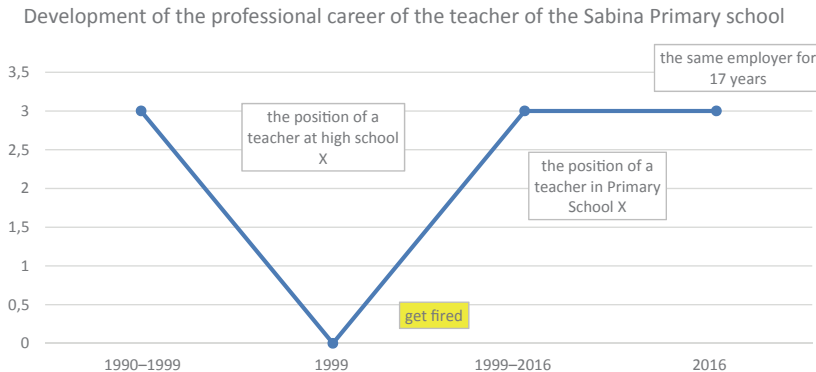


2.4 Job loss

Some participants in this research suddenly became unemployed and did not know what to do next or even whether or not to continue working as teachers. The unexpected termination of employment was for everyone a very difficult situation. The course of this situation is affected by several factors and leads to a decrease of a need for further qualifications or loss of flexibility and rigidity, financial problems, family problems. Everyone is looking for a job, especially according to their personal preferences. The unexpected termination of employment is in general not taken positively, but it can be a stimulation for self-realization.

Chart 4

An example of the professional development of a female teacher with an emphasis on the loss of the first job that led to a new goal(s)



3 Conclusions

On the basis of the analysis of the interview, three essential categories were created, which are significant in terms of the development of a career path of a preschool teacher and a primary school teacher.

Based on the analysis of twenty in-depth interviews followed by the compilation of twenty career paths of preschool teachers, preschool directors, primary school teachers, and primary school directors, theoretical models for the development of these teachers' career paths were compiled. In principle, it can be stated that preschool female teachers move faster into the phase of stagnation. The data showed that this is also caused by the fact that they start their professional careers relatively early (usually at the age of 18 after the graduation from secondary school), at that time they are not prepared to make decisions.

Table 1

Comparison of a preschool teacher and a primary school teacher

Category	Preschool teacher	Primary school teacher
Educational attainment	Secondary school	University/college
Age of children	3–6 years old, heterogeneous	7–11 years old, homogeneous
Visit of the facility	voluntary/compulsory from the age of 5	compulsory
Educational activity	controlled activity 20 min.	lesson 45 min.
Contact with parents	everyday	parent-teacher conferences
Organization of the school year	school year	midyear
Organization of the day	regime	fixed schedule
Pedagogical team	2 class teachers	1 class teacher
Technical conditions	classrooms, rest room-with beds, lavatory	after school facility, school canteen
Material equipment of classroom	beds	benches

We can consider the professional career of every teacher as a unique one, yet we can find some common features. Features based on which the above theoretical models, in particular, the career paths of preschool teachers and primary school teachers, were compiled.

References

- Day, Ch., Calderhead, J., & Denicolo, P. (2012). *Research on teacher thinking: understanding professional development*. London: Routledge.
- Deutscherová, B., & Wiegerová, A. (2016). Professionalization of teachers of preschools. *9th international conference of education, research and innovation*. Book Series: ICERI Proceedings Pages: 1575–1580.
- Huberman, M. (1995). Professional Careers and Professional Development: Some Intersections. In T. R. Guskey, & M. Huberman. *Professional Development in Education: new paradigms and practices* (193–224). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lukášová, H. (2015). *Učitelské sebepojetí a jeho zkoumání*. Zlín: Univerzita Tomáše Bati ve Zlíně, Fakulta humanitních studií.
- Sikes, P. J., Measor, L., & Woods, P. (1985). *Teacher careers: crises and continuities*. Philadelphia, PA: Falmer Press.
- Sinclair, C.; Dowson, M., & Mcinerney, D. M. (2006). Motivations to Teach: Psychometric. Perspectives across the First Semester of Teacher Education. *Teachers College Record*. 108(6), 1132–1154.
- Šnýdrová, I. (2006). *Manažerka a stres*. Praha: Grada.
- Vašutová, J. (2004). *Profese učitele v českém vzdělávacím kontextu*. Brno: Paido.
- Wiegerová, A., & Gavora, P. (2014). Proč se chci stát učitelkou v mateřské škole? Pohled kvalitativního výzkumu. *Pedagogická orientace*, 24(4), 510–534.

Assoc. prof. Adriana Wiegerová has obtained an MA degree from the Faculty of Education in Nitra, study field Teaching Pedagogy and Biology (1992), she defended her PhD thesis in Pedagogy in 2001. She has been working as an associate professor at Tomas Bata University in Zlín, Faculty of Humanities, Department of School Education, since 2012. At present she is the Head of the department. Assoc. prof. Wiegerová works in international organizations O.M.E.P (**World Organization for Early Childhood Education**), and EARLI (European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction). She is a member of editorial boards of several journals. In research, she deals mainly with professional career of academicians and professionalization of teaching. At the faculty she is responsible for organization of PhD studies, and also leads courses for doctoral students and arranges regular specialized events form them.

Bc. Beáta Deutscherová, MBA has obtained a bachelor's degree in Teacher Education for Kindergartens at the Faculty of Humanities at Tomas Bata University in Zlín, and continues at a postgraduate degree in Pre-school Pedagogy. He works at the position of the Student Scientific Staff at the Institute of School Pedagogy in Zlín. She is a member of the Academic Senate of the Faculty of Humanities of UTB in Zlín. He acts as an assessor for the National Accreditation Authority for Higher Education. She is also a member of the Association of Preschool Education and the Czech Pedagogical Society.