

CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN A SCHOOL AS A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Changes in the structure of the labor market determine new needs for further education and actualizes lifelong learning as a precondition for sustainable development of the whole society. This means that in general education in Latvia, new learning outcomes are defined, which refer not only to the curriculum, which students have to learn at school, and learning approach which is used for educational purposes, but also for the objectives of teachers' professional development. The context of societal changes also determine different models for school governance, transforming schools into learning organizations, where effective teachers' professional development is one of the most important characteristics of that kind of organization.

The aim of the qualitative research conducted by the author is to find out what are the preconditions for effective professional development of teachers, transforming a school into an effective learning organization. Within the framework of the research, an analysis of the scientific literature has been performed, defining criteria, the implementation of which can increase the efficiency of teachers' professional development and promote the development of the school into an effective learning organization. Within the framework of the research, 2 focus group discussions have been conducted with 8 teachers' professional development experts in Latvia in order to find out the opinion of which professional development criteria mentioned in the scientific literature could have the greatest impact on teachers' performance in working with students. The *Delphi* method has been used to obtain qualitative data, the method of qualitative content analysis has been used for data analysis, and the collection of expert opinions has been performed using the method of interpretive phenomenological analysis.

The data obtained in the research show that the effectiveness of teachers' professional development is increased by the autonomy of teachers to choose what learning content they want to acquire and what kind of learning activities they want to attend; linking the study content with the specifics of a particular subject; availability of feedback and opportunities for reflection during professional development; learning from outside expertise and good practice; regularity of learning and long-term learning, as well as the opportunity to learn inside the school through formalized system of professional development and methodological support.

Keywords: *efficiency, learning organization; professional development; teachers*

Introduction

Since 2016 the development of a new national curriculum has begun in Latvia, the implementation of which has started in 2020, envisaging a gradual transition to the implementation of the competence based approach in the learning process. “The goal of the improved curriculum and approach is a skilled student who wants and is able to learn throughout life, is able to solve real life problems, create innovations, develop various personality traits that help to develop happy and responsible personalities” (Skola2030, 2017). Along with the change in the content and approach of teaching, the question of how to organize the professional development of teachers has become topical so that the changes initiated at the national level are successfully implemented and students and teachers can reach the results set by the national standard.

Another important aspect of educational change in Latvia is related to how school management is organized and what role should be given to the professional development of teachers. The competences based teaching and learning approach expects schools to be managed according to the principles of effective learning organizations, providing the necessary conditions and resources for teachers to learn from each other, to plan curriculum and to analyze their own and colleagues’ teaching and learning practices. In addition, teachers are expected to be provided with individual support in defining their professional development needs based on a variety of lesson performance data (Namsone et al., 2018).

The aim of the research conducted by the author is to find out what are the preconditions for effective teachers’ professional development, transforming the school into an effective learning organization. The research question is also defined – the implementation of which professional development preconditions can increase the efficiency of teachers’ professional development at school as a learning organization. The focus of the study has been chosen so that the results of the study can be used both by school leadership teams, organizing a system of methodological support and professional development in schools, and by teachers more purposefully defining their professional development needs.

School as a learning organization

The school as an effective learning organization is characterized by a clear mission, vision and values that focus on students’ learning outcomes and educational experiences; continuous professional development of teachers and the school leadership team; expanded school influence in the local community; formation of cooperation teams and their effective operation inside and outside the school; creating a culture of innovation

at school; implementation of learning leadership and effective systems for the acquisition of collective knowledge and experience between teachers (OECD, 2016).

The learning organization is a practice that provides schools with a structure and internal culture that is open to change and fosters innovation through lifelong learning (Santa, 2015). As a learning organization, the school defines common goals and creates a collaborative learning environment; individual and collective initiatives and risk-taking for change are encouraged; all aspects related to the operation of the school are regularly reviewed and evaluated; examples of good practice are recognized and strengthened and opportunities for further professional development of teachers are provided (Silins et al., 2002).

Schools that are organized by the principles of a learning organization better adapt and cope with external changes, foster a culture of change and innovation in the school, improve professional performance and job satisfaction of teachers and school leaders, and promote student learning (Kools, George & Steijn, 2020).

In the context of the transformation of the school governance model, the concept of learning community is used alongside the learning organization, which is similar in content but emphasizes the role of community and interrelationships in the successful functioning of the school (Stoll & Kools, 2017). The learning community has a clear vision for its students; collective action in the form of community efforts to question the status quo in an organization, to try out new practices and reflect on the results achieved; collaborative teams that aim to increase the professionalism of each teacher by learning from good practice; action orientation in the form of learning through active participation and social interaction between stakeholders; continuous professional development, in which teachers evaluate their current practice and work to improve their professional performance; orientation on outcomes, which means clearly defined learning goals and quality criteria according to which progress will be measured (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, 2006).

Criteria for effective teachers' professional development

The success of educational reforms is influenced by the professionalism and openness of teachers to change, because without motivation and proactive involvement in shaping and managing the content of change, reforms in education and school sector will not be possible and will fail (Borko, 2004; Clark & Gokmenoglu, 2015). Teachers' individual competence, professionalism and personal motivation determine how effectively reforms in the education sector are ensured and how high the students' learning achievements in this reform will be (Boeskens, Nusche & Yurita, 2020).

Therefore, effective in-service teacher training aimed to improve teachers' professional performance is a prerequisite for making school an effective learning organization.

The author of the study, by analyzing the sources of scientific literature, has summarized the criteria, the implementation of which can directly or indirectly increase the effectiveness of teacher professional development, meaning the impact of in-service teacher training on student performance (see Table No. 1 for a list of criteria). The criteria for effective in-service teacher training cover a wide range of aspects related to the content of in-service teacher training, the learning approach chosen, as well as the planning of in-service teacher training and the development of a methodological support system at school.

Table 1. Criteria for effective teachers' professional development in a school as a learning organization

Criterion	Annotation of criterion
1. Linking the study content with the content of the subject	Teachers acquire knowledge and skills that directly contribute to improving the performance of a particular subject, such as teaching methods and strategies for better content delivery, rather than general knowledge of teaching principles (Desimone, 2009, 2011; Wei et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017)
2. Active participation of teachers in the learning process	Teachers have the opportunity to learn from the previous experiences of themselves and other colleagues. They have the opportunity to systematically reflect on their experiences and discuss with colleagues to form a new collective experience (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Desimone, 2009, 2011; Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017).
3. Collaborative learning	Teachers are learning with other colleagues by engaging in conversations and discussions about their previous experiences and performance in the classroom. The school has a system for identifying examples of good practice and sharing knowledge within the organization. Professional knowledge and collective understanding are constructed as a result of teacher collaboration and interaction (Desimone, 2009, 2011; Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017; Namsone et al., 2018).
4. Learning from the good practice	Teachers learn from examples of good practice by observing lessons led by other colleagues and then discussing what they have seen. It is therefore important for teachers to know the criteria for professional performance according to which they can evaluate their performance in lessons (OECD, 2009; Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017).

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Criterion	Annotation of criterion
5. Reflection on previous professional activities	The school has a system for teachers to reflect on their professional performance, learning content, methods and teaching approach, for example, through self-assessment of their activities, creating a portfolio, etc. The school organizes individual and collective reflection on teachers' professional performance (Desimone, 2009, 2011; Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017; Namsone et al., 2018; Weston & Clay, 2018; Roessger, 2020).
6. Methodical support system in school	Teachers are provided with mentoring and coaching and the opportunity to participate in communities of practice, where teachers work together to find solutions to identified problems and discuss the results in order to learn from their own and other colleagues' experiences (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Walter & Briggs, 2012; Namsone et al., 2018).
7. Availability of feedback for teachers	Teachers receive constructive feedback on their performance according to previously defined performance criteria. Teachers identify weaknesses in their performance and set goals for improvement to support student learning (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017; Namsone et al., 2018).
8. Long-term learning	Teachers acquire similar curricula over a longer period of time in order to strengthen their knowledge and skills, to delve into the content issues addressed, to receive the necessary methodological support and to put them into practice (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017; Namsone et al., 2018).
9. Availability of resources for teacher learning	The school devotes time and financial resources to provide opportunities for teachers to learn, for example by providing paid working hours during which teachers can participate in in-service training outside the lesson planning and classroom management (Walter & Briggs, 2012; Cleaver et al., 2019).
10. Regularity of learning	Teachers learn regularly so that they have the opportunity to learn new content – teaching methods, strategies, etc. – to test them in practice and to evaluate their impact on the teachers' performance and learning outcomes for students (Namsone et al., 2018).
11. Transfer of the acquired content to professional practice	Teachers systematically use and practice the acquired learning content in their work with students. The school has a system for organizing and ensuring the transfer from teacher learning to everyday practice (Weston & Clay, 2018; Brion, 2020).

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Criterion	Annotation of criterion
12. Teacher participation and autonomy in the choice of curriculum and learning format	Teachers have the opportunity to choose for themselves what content they need and how they will learn it. Teachers exercise “ownership” and autonomy in their professional development (Walter & Briggs, 2012; Patton, Parker & Tannehill, 2015).
13. Collection of data on teachers’ professional performance	The school collects a wide range of data on teacher performance, such as observing and analyzing lessons, conducting individual growth interviews with teachers, surveying parents and students, etc., to define teachers’ actual professional development needs (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012; Lazdına et al., 2021).
14. Planning of professional development in school	The school has a clear, data-driven goal to improve teacher performance in the classroom. This is reflected in school planning documents, such as development plans, self-assessment reports, etc. The professional development activities in which teachers participate directly support the achievement of the set goals (Walter & Briggs, 2012; Lazdına et al., 2021).
15. Coherence of teacher professional development with other aspects of change in the school	Teachers learn the content, which also helps to achieve other goals defined by the school. The school has a rationale for how teacher-acquired learning content helps the school to become a more effective learning organization (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Wei et al., 2009).
16. Elements of functional and attitude improvement in the professional development	Teachers not only learn functional content (new teaching methods, strategies and approaches) but also experience an increase in attitudes and beliefs (teachers learn content that broadens their horizons in education, improves personal effectiveness, motivation, and changes or strengthens professional beliefs) (Evans, 2008).
17. Assessing the impact on students’ learning results	The school assesses and verifies whether and how the content of learning in professional development activities improves the quality of students’ learning and helps them to achieve learning outcomes (Weston & Clay, 2018).
18. Use of outside expertise and good practice	Teachers have the opportunity to learn from professionals outside the school, not only from the teachers in other schools, but also from experts in other fields. In this way, teachers identify current issues and needs in the education sector to make appropriate changes in their practice (Korthagen, 2004; Walter & Briggs, 2012).
19. In-service learning	The context of each school is unique, so teachers learn in the real working environment, analyze real learning situations and look for solutions to everyday school-related problems (Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Billett, 2004; Eraut, 2007; Cleaver et al., 2020).

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Criterion	Annotation of criterion
20. An example of school leadership in a process of continuous professional development	The school leadership team participates in the training sessions, initiates in-service training activities for teachers and demonstrates the practical application of learning. School management engages in setting professional development goals in relation to broader organizational development goals and demonstrate leadership (Cheng, 2017; Bilbokaite et al., 2020; Lazdiņa et al., 2021).
21. The use of formal and informal learning	Formal or traditional teacher learning – participation in conferences, seminars, lectures, workshops, etc. – is supplemented by informal learning, for example, participation in teacher cooperation groups, observation of lessons, mentoring, acquaintance with the latest pedagogical literature, etc. (Fraser et al., 2007; Vaessen, van den Beemt & de Laat, 2014; Wohlfahrt, 2018).

Methodology

The *Delphi* method was used to obtain qualitative data for the study. It is used in the form of structured discussions with experts in the field to find out their views and to reach a possible consensus on issues related to the research problem (Grime & Wright, 2016). Experts in the negotiations are selected on the basis of their previous professional experience and in-depth knowledge of the subject, and usually between 5 and 20 experts in the field (Rowe & Wright, 2001).

Within the framework of the qualitative research carried out by the author of the research, 2 focus group discussions were conducted with 8 teachers' professional development experts in Latvia. Their aim was to find out the opinion of experts, which of the criteria for effective teachers' professional development mentioned in the sources of scientific literature could have the greatest impact on the performance of teachers in lessons and, consequently, on the formation of the school into an effective learning organization. The focus group discussions took place on 1 April and 6 April 2021 online on the Zoom platform.

For the data analysis experts were coded to the following logic – notation F1 was used for experts from the first focus group discussion, notation F2 was used for experts from the second focus group discussion. Notation E and the number from 1 to 8 was used to recognize concrete expert. In the focus group discussions participated Edīte Sarva, educational methodologist of Limbaži State Gymnasium (expert F1E1); Inese Vilciņa, “Skola2030” expert in curriculum development (expert F1E2); Laima Geikina, professor at the

University of Latvia (expert F1E3); Inga Pāvula, senior expert of “Skola2030” (expert F1E4); Edīte Kanaviņa, head of the Education Department of Gulbene Region (expert F2E1); Dana Narvaiša, head of the Competence Center of the educational company “Lielvārds” (expert F2E2); Anda Priedīte, principal of Mežciems Primary School (expert F2E3); Evija Slokenberga, Jelgava State Gymnasium education methodologist (expert F2E4).

Experts for participation in the focus group discussions were selected, taking into account the direct relevance of their job responsibilities to the planning and implementation of in-service teacher training, not only within their own organization but also at a wider regional or national level. Thus, for example, several of the discussion participants work in State Gymnasiums, which, in accordance with the regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers, are responsible for implementing the functions of the regional methodological center and providing professional development opportunities for teachers on a wider regional scale (Cabinet of Ministers, 2020). The choice of experts was also related to their current or previous participation in the implementation of the project “School2030”, which emphasizes the need to implement a personalized and in-service training system for teachers in Latvia.

Prior to participating in the focus group discussion, the experts were sent the material prepared by the author on each of the criteria for the effective teachers’ professional development (see Table No. 1), about which the experts will be invited to comment during the discussion. Due to the wide range of content discussed in the expert discussion, 2 separate discussions were organized instead of 1, thus providing an opportunity for each expert to express his or her views on the role of these criteria in improving the effectiveness of teacher professional development.

The opinions of the experts were summarized using the principles of qualitative content analysis. It is a method of data analysis that involves the systematic and objective selection of qualitative data according to defined research categories. The aim of qualitative content analysis is to reduce the amount of qualitative data obtained in the research, so that it can then be described and interpreted in accordance with the research questions (Schreier, 2014). The author of the study has compiled the opinions of experts using interpretive phenomenological analysis. It is a method that accepts the personal perceptions and experiences of the individuals involved, including the researcher, in relation to the chosen social phenomenon being studied. Thus, the research emphasis is on an in-depth understanding of individuals’ personal experiences rather than on finding out objective, all-encompassing truth (Dunworth, 2011).

Results

Although opinions of experts differ on which criteria for effective teacher professional development have the greatest impact on teacher performance in the classroom, there are a number of criteria on which the impact is unanimous.

Teacher participation and autonomy

Experts agree that there is a balance needed between the principle of compulsory and voluntary teachers' professional development. On the one hand, it is necessary to allow teachers to choose for themselves what and how they are going to learn in professional development activities, as this promotes motivation and makes learning more important personally. On the other hand, the school has an important common goal for all the teachers to pursue in the professional development.

F1E1: *"In our school, we have set a goal for the professional development of teachers that is binding on all teachers, but we have let them to choose themselves the way how they are going to achieve that goal."*

In this way, the principle of compulsory and voluntary learning is balanced, as teachers are given the opportunity to study with other teachers in school-organized training activities. At the same time, however, the choice of teachers to pursue the goal set by the school in a different way is accepted, demonstrating the example that the goal can be achieved in a variety of professional development formats.

With regard to the idea of autonomy in the context of in-service teacher training, experts point out that teachers must be able to define their own learning needs while taking responsibility for their implementation. This attitude is due to the fact that within the school as a learning organization, it provides an opportunity to create an individual development plan tailored to each teacher, according to current performance and the results of continuous professional development.

F2E2: *"Every teacher needs to answer a number of questions before participating in the process of professional development, such as what I want to achieve and learn as a professional; where I am currently facing the goal; how do I know that I am right there; how do I get from where I am to where I want to be."*

Link with the content of the subject

Experts of focus group discussions point out that an important precondition for effective professional development of teachers at school is the direct link between the curriculum acquired in in-service training activities and the content of the subject taught by the teacher. This means

that teachers need to acquire knowledge and skills that they will be able to use immediately in teaching their subject in order to reduce the cognitive load that may arise when they are planning how to transfer the acquired learning content to everyday practice.

F1E1: *“Professional development certainly has content that should be learned by all teachers in the same school, for example about in-depth learning or lesson structure, but teachers’ ability to transfer the content they have learned to the context of their subject is limited. Teachers can learn more and are more willing to use the knowledge they have learned during professional development activities if the content is related to the specific subject the teacher is teaching.”*

The implementation of this criterion increases the speed with which the acquired learning content is implemented in practice in order to achieve improvements in the teacher’s performance working with students. In addition, it reduces teachers’ skepticism and internal resistance to change, as well as the belief that the content to be learned is important and practicable.

In relation to this criterion, experts agree that in situations where teachers are learning content related to their subject, the transfer is already taking place during the learning process, so teachers may not spend extra time thinking about how they could use the content they have learned during the professional development activities.

F2E4: *“The teacher must be primarily a professional in the field and must know the content of the subject. However, he must also be aware of the teaching methods and techniques that are most effective in teaching a particular subject.”*

Providing access to such knowledge and skills in the context of professional development strengthens teachers’ confidence that the content they acquire can improve students’ learning outcomes and achieve teachers’ learning goals for the students.

The role of feedback and reflection

Teacher professional development experts emphasize that a prerequisite for teacher growth is the opportunity to receive a quality, immediate and practical feedback on their performance in lessons.

F2E2: *“Teacher learning is about giving, receiving, analyzing and talking about feedback on a regular basis.”*

It is the feedback on a teacher’s professional performance that can help to improve the teacher’s performance in class, as it strengthens understanding and the confidence in the desired practice and provides specific, experiential recommendations for improving professional performance. In the context of teacher professional development at school as an learning organization, it is important to implement alternative learning practices, such as lesson

observation between teachers, lesson observation by school administration, teacher learning groups, etc., as this provides more reflection and feedback for teachers.

Experts also emphasize that teachers learn from their personal and other professionals' previous experience, so reflection is an important criterion for the effectiveness of professional development. At the same time, however, it is pointed out that this is difficult to do, as *“teachers often feel anxious when offered various reflection questions”* (F1E2). This means that teachers' ability to reflect on their professional performance and past experience is a skill that needs to be strengthened in particular to enhance teachers' ability to assess and justify *“why I do it, how do I get it and how I know I get it”* (F2E4).

The use of external expertise and good practice

The experts of the focus group discussions point out that both learning from good practice at school and using external experience and expertise are important preconditions to rise the effectiveness of teachers' professional development, thus expanding teachers' access to new knowledge and experience that can change their attitudes and beliefs about the changes inside the school.

F1E4: *“In situations where teachers learn from other types of experience available, such as in private companies, NGOs, schools and elsewhere, there is changes happening in teachers' values and beliefs.”*

This is important to transform the school into an effective learning organization, where the exchange of information between teachers and other stakeholders in the education process, such as researchers, entrepreneurs, etc. provide teachers with access to the knowledge gained in these organizations and use it to improve their professional practice. Given that not all the necessary experience and expertise is always available to teachers in the school, there is a need to learn from good practice outside the school, for example through exchange visits to other schools and organizations already at the next level of growth, especially in cases where learning from good practice is difficult on the ground, for example due to the small size of the school.

Regularity of learning and long-term learning

Experts point out that teachers need time as a part of their professional development activities to update their previous experience and plan the use of the learning content in working with students. Therefore, regularity and duration of the learning are important criteria for effective teacher learning. This means that for teachers it is necessary, individually or together with other teachers, to learn similar content over a longer period of time, for example throughout the school year. Teacher learning cannot be

a campaign activity, usually in the form of a one-off attendance at courses or seminars. Effective teacher learning is when it takes place on a regular and systematic basis and time and financial resources are allocated to its implementation.

F2E4: *“It’s better to learn to do one professional thing thoroughly than to break it down, and as a result you can’t say exactly what you have learned as a teacher.”*

Regularity of learning and implementation of professional development over a longer period of time provides an opportunity for teachers to practice the acquired knowledge and skills, as well as to effectively implement the transfer of the acquired learning content to the professional practice in working with students.

F1E3: *“If a teacher does not apply the acquired knowledge and skills in practice, there is no learning cycle and new motivation to continuously improve the professional performance.”*

In a school as a learning organization, it is important to think about the system for transferring learning content from in-service training to real work situations in order to improve the teacher’s long-term performance in teaching and to strengthen motivation and confidence in the practical usefulness of in-service training.

Conclusions

The discussions of experts allow to conclude that all the criteria for the effectiveness of teachers’ professional development mentioned in the scientific literature are important and can have a positive impact on the teacher’s performance in working with students. This means that the effectiveness of teachers’ learning can be increased by combining all the above mentioned criteria into a unified further education system at the school. However, in the conditions of limited intellectual and financial resources in which schools operate in Latvia, it is important to think about which criteria within the system of teachers’ professional development could create greater impact, as the development goals of the school, the role of the school in the local community and teachers’ previous learning experience differs.

The professional development of teachers is a fundamental precondition for the successful transformation of a school into an effective learning organization. What kind of teacher professional development activities are implemented in the school, what professional support the school leadership provides to its staff, what diverse data is collected to evaluate the school’s performance and define future development needs directly determine the school’s mission, vision and values. The mechanisms for teacher

co-operation in the school will be implemented and the degree to which the school will be open to change will create an innovative organizational culture aimed at improving students' learning outcomes and experiences. Therefore, at the national and local level in Latvia, it is necessary to develop the support system for schools, how to promote efficient, high-quality and goal-oriented professional development of teachers.

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