

DETERMINANTS OF ATTRITION (DROP-OUT) IN THE TEACHING PROFESSION AND NOVICE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract

One of the key factors affecting the quality of primary education is the shortage of teachers. This is partly due to the declining interest in the profession among young people, and partly due to the increasing attrition of qualified teachers, either leaving the profession or transferring to other schools—commonly referred to as drop-out. The professional group most affected by this issue are novice teachers. In this paper, we present the results of research aimed at collecting and analyzing the experiences of novice teachers as they enter the primary education profession. Another goal of this research is to stimulate professional discussion and further inquiry into the issue of drop-out among novice teachers in our country. The questionnaire, which was created by modifying a graphics card, uses a method that gathers responses from novice teachers in the monitored categories on a 5-point scale. The categories represent the roles teachers assume in various educational situations. The findings reveal differences in teachers' perceptions and experiences related to the monitored categories. The category that received the most negative evaluation is 'Broader Social Context'. Novice teachers give positive feedback to the categories within the interactive level of socialization. The research is part of the VEGA project 1/0415/22 focused on research into subjectively perceived difficulty of teachers' professional activities in relation to their life satisfaction.

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Key words

novice teacher, professional activities, primary education teacher, drop-out, teachers' subjectively perceived workload, teacher's life satisfaction

Introduction

Undoubtedly, the teaching profession is among the most demanding careers, particularly in today's era of constant social change and rapid technological progress.

I became a teacher, should I be happy, should I be worried, what's next in my professional career? Will I make it?

Many novice teachers find themselves asking these questions, recognizing that they are expected to deliver high performance in all areas of professional activity right from the start of their careers. The expert nature of the teaching profession is reflected in the various roles teachers assume in educational situations: as class managers, diagnosticians of students' educational needs, consultants for learning difficulties, educators and guardians of ethical, moral, cultural, and spiritual values, facilitators of student learning, innovators and didactic transformers of educational content tailored to the

individual and age characteristics of students, collaborative members of the school team, and reflective professionals (Hupkova & Petlak, 2004; Kasacova, 2005). Despite the current trend of increasing the allocation of practical teaching hours during undergraduate teacher training, the demandingness and complexity of the teaching profession lead novice teachers to doubt their readiness for the profession. Even when novice teachers possess extensive theoretical knowledge, they are often not adequately prepared for the practical demands of teaching they are facing from the very first day. The unseasoned professional skills of novice teachers are not only evident in their instructional performance during the education process, but also in managing real-world classroom situations at school. University studies alone cannot fully prepare a teacher to be a fully equipped professional from the very beginning of their career. According to constructivism, Kosova and Tomengova (2015) assert that human knowledge arises from human activity and interaction with reality. Thus, social knowledge does not directly reflect reality or measured objects, but rather the meaning of these objects as understood by an individual, based on their experiences and reflections. Novice teachers may encounter various challenges in their new workplace that they need to navigate. Some challenges may be difficult for them to address immediately, leading to significant frustration that could result in their failure to enter the profession and ultimately prompt them to leave it altogether. *"The fundamental conclusion for education is that ready-made ideas cannot be directly transferred from one person to another or from theory to practice; rather, individuals must create their own meanings for words, ideas, and experiences based on their activities"* (Kosova & Tomengova, 2015: 10).

The aim of the research was to gather feedback from novice primary school teachers in Slovakia regarding how they adapt to the profession and to identify areas where they feel more or less satisfied. To analyze the areas where they express lower levels of satisfaction that could ultimately influence their decision to leave the profession.

Novice Teachers – Supporting Their Adaptation As They Enter Teaching Practice

A teacher in society is regarded as an individual whose behavior and demeanor significantly influence the personalities of others. The mutual interaction among these participants in the educational process should facilitate positive changes in educates regarding the acquisition of certain knowledge and behavioral patterns. In general, a teacher is defined as *a qualified educational professional who works with children, youth, and adults in a school environment, utilizing their acquired training in education and pedagogy* (Kolar et al., 2012). A primary education teacher works with a group of younger children aged 6 to 10 years. Being a good teacher means constantly asking questions and considering many things at the same time. Developing the competencies necessary for effective teaching, while navigating countless educational situations or issues, all without losing sight of one's own dreams and interests, is a challenging task that often leads to

conflicts and problems. Pollard (1998) outlines the everyday dilemmas of the teaching profession. Having to decide between two options and choose the right one, while each has its own legitimacy, means that teachers must continuously make compromises. This creates a state of constant tension. After entering educational practice, novice teachers face the challenges of managing class documentation and handling administrative issues. They often feel insecure about their competences and powers to collaborate with educators, particularly when it comes to communicating and providing educational recommendations to parents. Another area of challenges arises from the situation in schools, which is different and brings situations which they did not experience in practical training during their studies. Initiation into the profession and the associated challenges are evident in every profession, but they are particularly pronounced for teachers, as they work with children and their legal guardians, and education and pedagogy are a society-wide issue. Reflecting on the work of Simonik (1994), Kasacova (2002) identifies six of the most challenging activities from the 24 assessed, namely: working with underachieving learners, maintaining classroom discipline during teaching, sustaining learners' attention, fostering learner motivation, and establishing individual contacts with parents. The author cites collaboration with colleagues, selecting and using appropriate resources, and explaining new material as the least burdensome activities.

The undergraduate training of future teachers plays a crucial role. It is essential to prepare future teachers as professionals in both theory and practice, equipping them to understand the topic of children and their development and the various ways to influence it (Kasacova, 2002). Future experiences, their overall satisfaction in future, and the desire to remain in the profession

also depend on this preparatory phase and initial encounters with educational practice.

Currently, there is significant interest across all EU and OECD countries in effectively transforming the content and goals of teacher training. Undergraduate teacher training is shaped by various theoretical concepts of education, which are based on distinct philosophical, historical, political, and social contexts, including the personal approach and personality theory of K. Lewin, humanistic education as proposed by C.R. Rogers, and the socio-cognitive theory of J. Piaget. (Kasacova & Tabacakova, 2010). A prominent concept in teacher training today is the reflexive model, which emphasizes systematic reflection during student training as a key factor in their professional growth. It is based on socio-cognitive theory, built on the principles of constructivism, and on the application of self-reflexive techniques.

Not in every country, they place the same emphasis on the inclusion of novice teachers. The Slovak Republic is the country where the status of beginning teachers is defined by legislation. Slovakia and the Czech Republic have the same historical context due to their common history. Before 1989, every novice teacher could depend on having a mentor (introductory) teacher. In Slovakia, since 2009, the incorporation into the profession has taken on a formal character in accordance with Act No. 317/2009 and Directive No.

19/2009 (Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic, 2009; NR SR, 2009). The duration of the introductory period for novice teachers is set at a minimum of 3 months and a maximum of 2 years. The schools create an adaptation program and the whole process is completed by an exam conducted as an open class before a three-member committee. Countries such as the Netherlands, Bavaria (Germany), Finland, Hungary, and others did not have a formal legislative definition for the inclusion of novice teachers in the past. Currently, Bavaria (Germany) has a legally regulated adaptation process defined within the legislative framework for the education and practical training of beginning teachers, established in 1992 and modified in 2007, which specifies an adaptation period of 24 months. Several countries, such as the Netherlands and Finland, although lacking legislative obligations for adaptive education, develop their own projects and programs in schools out of initiative and necessity. They also utilize international and national projects that offer support programs they could apply in practice (Hanusova et al., 2017; Lofstrom & Eisenschmidt, 2009; Tikhonova et al., 2024).

The adaptation process is one in which an individual adjusts to biological and social conditions (Kolar et al., 2012). Social adaptation can be described as a process in which an individual focuses on their own changes in response to the established social conditions (Prucha et al., 2003). Social and professional adaptation includes the process of an individual adapting to the specific requirements and needs associated with fulfilling the responsibilities of a new job position. As part of this process, practice has proven that teachers at the beginning of their professional career need an introducing colleague - a teacher who will be a mentor, a coach - a person they can turn to during their adaptation to the profession. The requirement for serving as a mentoring teaching expert is to attain at least the minimum career level for teaching staff, as defined by Act No. 138/2019 Coll., § 31, par. 3 (NR SR, 2019). The mentor teacher should have a lot of professional experience (Babiakova et al., 2022). They should be prepared to share their empirical knowledge gained from the educational process and everyday school life with their less experienced colleagues - novice teachers. Thus, he or she becomes an advisor, mentor, and mediator of essential information for the novice teacher. High-quality adaptation programs for novice teachers appear to contribute significantly to their retention in the profession (Kelley, 2004).

Methods

In this research, we examined the topic of novice teachers in primary education. Our goal was to explore the experiences of novice teachers in primary schools and identify the determinants they perceive as the biggest obstacles or burdens, which often lead them to leave the profession. In relation to the main objective, we formulated the below research questions:

RQ1: Which of the examined categories do novice teachers perceive very positively?

RQ2: Which of the examined categories do novice teachers perceive very negatively?

RQ3: Which determinants, as expressed in the individual items of the categories, do novice teachers perceive as the most significant in relation to their sense of successfully managing their introduction into practice?

To answer the questions, we carried out quantitative research.

The research group consisted of teachers of the first level (primary education) of elementary schools in Slovakia. The requirement was to have a maximum of two years of experience at the primary level of elementary school. While looking for a research sample, we encountered a problem that Slovakia's school system lacks records of novice teachers. We therefore reached out to the principals of elementary schools, who provided us with the necessary contacts.

The research group consisted of N=92 novice teachers (48 female and 4 male teachers). Except for three respondents, all met the qualification requirements to be a teacher for the 1st level of elementary school (for primary education).

The proposed design of the research was based on a study from the publication titled "Do They Want to Stay or Leave?" Beginning Teachers In Czech Elementary Schools." (Hanusova et al., 2017) We did not use a complex replication of the mentioned research, we modified the questionnaire structure in the form of a graphic card in accordance with our goals (according to Gavora, 2010). The graphic card itself comprised 7 areas focused on topics related to teachers' work: children and classroom, school, colleagues, school management, community close to school, living conditions, and broader social context. Each area had 4 defined sub-areas, which are presented in the below tables containing the research evaluation. On a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, the respondents assigned each item with a degree of satisfaction, where 1 represents the lowest level of satisfaction up to 5 showing the highest level of satisfaction.

We used a Google form to create the questionnaire and assign the responses into groups. The results were statistically processed and evaluated using Microsoft Excel, presented in the form of frequency, and recorded into tables. The mean (M) and the median (Md) value was calculated for individual items.

Results

We presented the results of the analysis of the N=92 questionnaires in tables that list precise data on the frequency of responses on the rating scale for each item in each area. Higher values indicate a positive perception of the area, while lower values suggest a more negative perception.

In the first category *Children and Classroom*, the median was $Md=4$ for the following items: the ability to maintain discipline and appropriate respect, engage children, foster curiosity, and a friendly atmosphere and good relationships with children and parents. For the mentioned items, half of the teachers reported a value of 4 or higher on the scale, indicating positive experiences. A lower median $Md=3$ was recorded in the perception of one's ability to develop the potential of each learner.

Table 1: Response Frequency For Items In The Category *Children and Classroom*

Children and Classroom Items	1	2	3	4	5	M	Md
Ability to maintain discipline and appropriate respect	0	16	20	34	22	3.67	4
Ability to engage children, foster curiosity	0	5	19	47	21	3.91	4
Ability to develop the potential of each learner	3	11	36	35	7	3.35	3
Friendly atmosphere and good relationships with children and parents	1	6	17	42	26	3.93	4

Note. The scale used ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Second category – *School* was perceived more positively by teachers, as indicated by all four items receiving a median value $Md=4$.

Table 2: Response Frequency For Items In The Category *School*

School Items	1	2	3	4	5	M	Md
Its location, accessibility	3	15	15	19	40	3.85	4
School environment, the coziness of its premises	1	14	24	31	22	3.64	4
School operation, school organization	2	6	32	28	24	3.72	4
School equipment and resources (tools, books, consumables)	4	16	24	32	16	3.43	4

Note. The scale used ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Respondents expressed their satisfaction with relationships with colleagues, with how they perceive support from colleagues and, in particular, with the support and guidance received from their mentor teachers. The results presented in the table indicate that respondents perceive their colleagues' support positively ($Md=4$). Regarding support from their mentor teachers, more than half of the respondents reported a significantly positive experience ($Md=5$).

Table 3: Response Frequency For Items In The Category *Colleagues*

Colleagues Items	1	2	3	4	5	M	Md
Collegial relationships and the atmosphere among the teaching staff	2	11	11	32	36	3.97	4
Support from the mentor teacher	2	7	11	23	49	4.2	5
Support from other teachers	5	5	13	29	40	4.02	4
Relationships outside the workplace	6	10	20	25	31	3.71	4

Note The scale used ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Category *School Management* returned positive results, satisfaction in all four items is expressed by the median $Md=4$. The majority of respondents positively assessed the headteacher's professional approach.

Table 4: School Management - Frequency Of Responses For Individual Items

School Management Items	1	2	3	4	5	M	Md
Professionalism (expertise) of headteacher	3	6	13	26	44	4.11	4
Allocation of work duties	4	11	23	29	26	3.71	4
Review and feedback	3	10	20	32	27	3.76	4
Supporting teachers' professional development	4	8	23	32	25	3.72	4

Note The scale used ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Category *Community Close To School* was ranked among those rated neutrally. The median value for individual items falls within the neutral range $Md=3$. Respondents evaluated recognition from parents somewhat more positively ($Md=3$) than recognition and interest from the school administration and other organizations or communities associated with the school.

Table 5: Community Close To School - Frequency Of Responses For Individual Items

Community Close To School	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Md</i>
Recognition from parents	5	19	22	35	11	3.3	3
Interest from the school administration body	7	18	26	29	12	3.23	3
Recognition from the surrounding organizations and institutions	8	17	24	33	10	3.22	3
Cooperation with the community close to the school	12	13	33	25	9	3.07	3

Note The scale used ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

The **Broader Social Context** category yielded significantly more negative results compared to all other categories. In the perception of novice teachers, its individual components are generally viewed within the slightly negative range, except for the level of teacher training, which was rated at a neutral level. Novice teachers reported feelings that the teaching profession is undervalued and reflect a low quality of school system management, and they negatively assess society's interest in education. The listed items yielded a median of $Md=2$. Respondents also viewed the level of teacher training for their profession more negatively ($Md=3$).

Table 6: Broader Social Context - Frequency of Responses

Broader Social Context	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Md</i>
Appreciation of the teaching profession	20	30	26	15	1	2.42	2
Society's interest in education	15	36	32	8	1	2.4	2
Level of educational system as an institutional department	20	31	35	6	0	2.29	2
Level of teacher training	5	21	40	24	2	2.97	3

Note The scale used ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

In the category **Living Conditions**, it was specifically the item 'Support from one's family' that emerged as a significant determinant influencing novice teachers' decision to remain in the profession ($Md=5$). On the other hand,

salary conditions are also one of the items that the respondents rated rather neutrally ($Md=3$), hence contributing to their lower level of satisfaction with their early teaching careers.

Table 7: Living Conditions - Frequency Of Responses For Individual Items

Living Conditions	1	2	3	4	5	M	Md
Housing	8	19	18	19	28	3.4 3	4
Family, support from one's own family	4	6	12	22	48	4.1 2	5
Salary conditions	12	31	27	18	4	2.6 8	3
Overall satisfaction	2	10	33	34	13	3.5	4

Note The scale used ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Discussion

When exploring and analyzing teachers' working conditions, we can differentiate between the conditions defined by factors 'outside' the school—primary conditions—and those created by the school itself, through the management and teaching staff 'inside' the education institutions—secondary conditions (Urbanek, 2005: 153).

Determinants that can affect novice teachers' decision to remain in or leave the profession can be perceived from the perspectives mentioned above. Based on Pollard's model (1998), from the perspective of the interactive level of socialization, the overall category *Students and Classroom* was perceived very positively by novice teachers. More pronounced issues were highlighted in responses to item 3, focused on working with and educating children with special educational needs (SEN). The need for further teacher training in working with pupils with SEN has also been confirmed by international findings (OECD, 2019), where 26% of Slovak teachers reported this need. “The key aspect of training educators for inclusive education is ensuring they fully understand the way how learners acquire knowledge and skills” (Duchovicova, et. al., p.30). In the category *Teaching and Perception of Teaching*, the results indicated that this factor is viewed as a key determinant that rather supports novice teachers' decisions to remain in the profession. This result aligns with findings from Czech research, which demonstrated that the interactive level of socialization (pupils and class, teaching and perception of teaching) acts as a predictor of staying in the education field, rather than a determinant for dropping out (Hanusova et al., 2017).

The institutional level of socialization includes several categories. Respondents perceive the *Colleagues* category more positively. These findings confirm that relationships with colleagues and acceptance into the team are crucial for novice teachers. They can often be a key determinant influencing novice teachers' decisions to leave the profession. The Czech research (Hanusova et al., 2017) does not identify workplace relationships as

a determinant of educational drop-out; rather, it views them as an incentive for changes within the school. We can regard dissatisfaction in the category *School Management* as a determining factor leading to changes in work positions within elementary education, rather than as a definitive drop-out from the education. For novice teachers, high-quality mentoring is important, but so is the recognition and support from school management, which provides them with opportunities for personal self-realization (Eteläpelto et al., 2015). One determinant highlighted by the respondents is the mentoring provided by the mentor teacher. In our research, it was positively evaluated by novice teachers ($Md=5$). It is also encouraging that the analysis of research projects focused on adaptation training revealed that up to 77.9% of novice teachers agreed with the statement that their school offers a high-quality adaptation process in collaboration with a mentor, although there were also suggestions for improvements (Hall et al., 2019). The results from both mentioned levels of socialization and their categories represented in the questionnaire provide responses to the questions RQ1 and RQ3.

The cultural level of socialization was represented by categories related to the perception of both the immediate and broader social context of the teaching profession. The most significant determinant within the category of *Life Satisfaction*, which respondents perceive negatively, is the financial evaluation of teachers, specifically their salary level. One can assume that today, salary levels are associated with the undervaluation of the teaching profession in society, with the educational policy, and the low social status and recognition of teachers. These questionnaire items were those that the majority of novice teachers perceived and rated with a highly negative evaluation. International research studies (Guarino et al., 2006) indicate that financial compensation is the primary factor contributing to teacher drop-out. Their findings highlight a correlation between higher salaries and lower teacher drop-out rates. The results presented at the cultural level of socialization provide answers to the RQ2. Also, the perception of undergraduate teacher training at universities was an important determinant. In the questionnaire, this item received approximately 50% positive evaluations from respondents regarding their preparedness, while 50% provided more negative feedback. Svec (1999) emphasizes that the essence of teacher training lies in developing a graduate model. Kyriacou discusses in detail the professional competencies related to the implementation of the educational process (1996, 2018). When teachers observe the daily life at school and the way how their colleagues work, they often enhance their professional competencies through their own enthusiasm.

Research Limits

The primary limitation of the presented research was the process of obtaining the research sample. The influence of the socio-cultural environment in different regions of Slovakia can also be considered a limitation when selecting the responses. While the teaching profession remains attractive in the eastern part of Slovakia, primarily due to limited job opportunities in other sectors, it is perceived as significantly less appealing in western Slovakia. In the next step, the results of the questionnaires were also analyzed

using interviews with novice teachers, thus some items in the categories may show the need for looking deeper into the reasons for selecting the particular answers.

Conclusion

Novice teachers encountered a range of positive and negative experiences when entering their teaching practice. Decisions about whether to remain in the profession or leave it altogether are based on the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their experiences. It is essential to eliminate factors that have the potential to increase the drop-out rate, while strengthening those that help retain teachers in their profession.

The research was conducted as part of the VEGA 1/0415/22 project, which aimed to explore the connections between teachers' subjective perceptions of work demands and their life satisfaction, specifically focusing on two subcategories: kindergarten teachers and primary school teachers.

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