

# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATIONAL WORKERS THROUGHOUT NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

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## **ABSTRACT**

Educational process and education itself has been in the focus of attention of all countries throughout the world. Preparing the students and youngsters for life and field of work has never been more complex than now, especially in the era of globalisation, rapidly changing technology and the incisive influence of neoliberalism. All of these challenges reflect the position and the work of educational institutions and educational workers (kindergarten teachers, school teachers, school counsellors, adult education workers, etc.) which are facing lots of demands in order to improve their quality and performance. Constant necessity for fulfilling the standards for quality, contemporariness and efficiency set by European educational policy is accenting the need for scientific, systematic and global approach towards resolving this complex issue. This paper will examine the paths for professional development of educational workers in the Republic of North Macedonia as a prerequisite for improving the quality of educational process itself, by conducting a quantitative research (survey) among 120 educational workers in several municipalities throughout the country. Results will show a substantial indifference or palliative attempts for conducting systematic approach for professional development of educational workers. As a conclusion, we can stipulate the notion that educational workers are the key strain in the complex chain of education and their professional development should be among the top priorities in the ladder of educational policies of all countries.

**Key words:** educational workers, professional development, non-formal education

## **INTRODUCTION**

Education process has been always in the focus of societal reforms, especially with the start of the new millennium. All the countries around the world are still trying to find the answer to the most common question: How to improve quality of education? The answers are always stipulating one, two, or maybe three variables included in the educational process, but often neglecting maybe the most important one – teachers at all educational levels. Many educational policy makers and researchers in recent decades are acknowledging that teachers are not only one of the “variables” that need to be changed in order to improve the education systems, but they are also the most significant change agents in the education process.

Professional development of teachers is a lifelong learning process which begins with initial teacher education and continues for a lifetime. For many years, teacher’s professional development has been seen as a sporadic activity including the most usual pro-forms of “staff development” and “in-service training” like workshops and short courses that offer teachers partial information on a particular aspect of their field of work. “Only in the past few years has the professional development of teachers has been considered as a long term process that includes regular opportunities and experiences planned systematically to promote growth and development in the profession. This shift has been so dramatic that many have referred to it as ‘new image’

of teacher learning, a ‘new model’ of teacher education, a ‘revolution’ in education, and even a ‘new paradigm’ of professional development” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001).

### **Non-formal education and professional development**

Having in mind that the petrification of formal education cannot follow the dynamics of new demands and needs of life, as well as the fast dynamics of new changes and demands, there is obvious necessity of restructuring the system of initial education and training and the system for professional development of educational workers throughout all educational levels. The result will be seen through decreasing the emanation of their certificate qualifications and increasing their capabilities for permanent educational activity. For educational workers (teachers in primary and secondary education, kindergarten teachers, pedagogues, special educators, educators in adult education, etc.) to be prepared for the role that the rapidly developing society is posing, they have to be involved in organized and functional continuous professional development that can be accomplished through non-formal educational paths.

In its wider sense, non-formal education has an objective to enable expanding and upgrading of the current knowledge, skills and competences that have been obtained early in the initial education and training. It has become the most common form learning and education, as well as real perspective of adult education and professional development in the modern era. Several authors are defining it as “any other educational activity organized outside the formal educational system, no matter whether separated or as a part of some other activity: social, religious, family, etc.” (Savičević, 2003). In European Union official educational documents, non-formal education is defined as any education and training that includes all types/forms of activities of teaching and learning that are not part of the formal education process (Youth cultural center – Bitola, 2009).

Today, non-formal education has become a necessity because it provides individuals at any stage of life to be up to date with the societal development and it counters all that formal education system of education is missing. Hence, it should be stipulated that the goal of non-formal education is not creating a parallel education system to the formal one, but the contrary: complementary support of the formal education and learning, mostly because of its flexibility and capability for adjustment to societal changes happening in the contemporary societies. Non-formal education is contributing towards fulfilling the European vision of “knowledge-based society”. Professional development has been also long-term issue researched by variety of authors from all over the world. Hence, every attempt for defining this complex term is very difficult. The wider definitions of professional development encompass the goal for improving competences of individuals for performing work assignments, which means that in the core of professional development is lifelong learning and the need for upgrading the knowledge, skills and abilities of individuals. It is undoubtful that no matter how good pre-service training for teachers is, it cannot be expected to prepare educational workers for all the challenges they will face throughout their careers. Education systems therefore seek to provide workers with opportunities for in-service professional development in order to maintain a high standard of teaching and to retain a high-quality educational workforce.

Professional development of educational workers can be provided in many ways, ranging from the formal through non-formal and to the informal learning paths. It can be made available through external expertise in the form of courses, workshops or formal qualification programs, through collaboration between educational institutions or staff (*e.g.* observational visits to other schools or teacher networks) or within the educational institutions. In this last case, development can be provided through coaching/mentoring, collaborative planning and teaching, and the sharing of good practices. As OECD's comparative review on teachers noted: "Effective professional development is on-going, includes training, practice and feedback, and provides adequate time and follow-up support. Successful programs involve teachers in learning activities that are similar to ones they will use with their students, and encourage the development of teachers' learning communities. There is growing interest in developing schools as learning organisations, and in ways for teachers to share their expertise and experience more systematically" (OECD, 2005).

The development of teachers beyond their initial training can serve a number of objectives according to OECD report, including:

- to update individuals' knowledge of a subject in light of recent advances in the area;
- to update individuals' skills, attitudes and approaches in light of the development of new teaching techniques and objectives, new circumstances and new educational research;
- to enable individuals to apply changes made to curricula or other aspects of teaching practice;
- to enable schools to develop and apply new strategies concerning the curriculum and other aspects of teaching practice;
- to exchange information and expertise among teachers and others, *e.g.* academics, industrialists; and
- to help weaker teachers become more effective.

Bolam's conception of professional development of educational workers (Bolam, 1994) is focusing on:

- adding to their professional knowledge;
- improving their professional skills;
- clarifying their professional values; and
- enabling their students to be educated more effectively.

Bolam's definition assumes that, in essence, continuous professional development embodies three components:

1. *professional training*: short courses, conferences and workshops, largely focused on practice and skills;
2. *professional education*: longer courses focused on theory and research-based knowledge; and
3. *professional support*: job-embedded arrangements/procedures.

### **Types of professional development of educational workers**

Educational workers are becoming more aware about the significance of professional development in the framework of lifelong learning concept. Therefore, they tend to be involved in any form of the variety of learning possibilities that formal, non-formal or

informal education and learning is offering. But still, systematical planning of professional development of educational workers should be made according to the individual and institutional needs and specifications.

The most common types of professional development of educational workers are the following:

- Congress – scientific or professional gathering with big number of participants (usually above 200) where experts or practitioners present the most prevalent acknowledgments from specific discipline and/or subject area. Its consisted of one or several plenary lectures at the beginning and several parallel sessions afterwards grouped according to thematic areas;
- Conference - scientific or professional gathering that aims to provide current notions, contents and discussions of some topic. Conferences provide possibilities for obtaining new notions, exchanging experiences and networking with experts from the same or similar area. They are usually consisted of 70-150 participants;
- Symposium – professional gathering, similar to a smaller conference where experts present their notions, views and/or research results on certain topic. Participants summaries are time limited to 15-20 minutes followed also by time limited discussions.
- Seminar – organized form of learning consisted of relatively small group of participants (20-25) aimed to increase their knowledge on certain topics. Teaching methods are interactive led by the instructor/educator and the time schedule duration differs from one to several days.
- Webinar – It’s an online seminar that is conducted with support from computer technology and internet. It is very useful type of professional development because it doesn’t demand for participants to be physically present at one place and it also have some economic benefits.
- Round table – professional discussion on certain topic where every participant can actively participate. It presents interactive discussion led by moderator and finishes with summarizing conclusions of participants. Round table participants should have previous experience or expertise on the topic of discussion.
- Panel discussion – organized for big number of participants which are experts from certain area. Participants are discussing about the topic from different angles and points of view and they present their opinions and attitudes. Panel discussion is effective form of professional development that lasts for couple of hours.
- Workshop – Type of professional development intended to improve participant’s skills, techniques, ideas and knowledge that can use in their work. They can last from couple of hours to several days and the number of participants can vary, but usually is around 20.

Some of the most common collaborative forms of professional development are the following:

- Action research – a process where practitioners systematically investigate their own educational practice using research techniques and reflections in order to understand, evaluate and improve it.

- Case study –research method involving an up-close, in-depth, and detailed examination of a particular case. Generally, a case can be any unit of analysis, including individuals, organizations, events, or actions.
- Learning communities – they represent resolving practical challenges that derive from everyday educational context. They are consisted of a group (around 10) of co-workers working on improvement of their own practice by learning together.

Some of the less formal (informal) professional development activities among educational workers according to OECD are:

- reading professional literature (*e.g.* journals, evidence-based papers, thesis papers); and
- engaging in informal dialogue with peers on how to improve teaching (OECD, 2009).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research and also the main research question is to investigate whether non-formal education is contributing towards professional development of educational workers in Republic of North Macedonia. This encompasses several aspects or indicators:

- Topics for professional development;
- Providers of different forms of professional development;
- Reasons for involving in forms of professional development;
- Informing about the offer for professional development;
- Professional development and improving the quality of education.

This research has quantitative character because the main research technique is inquiry and research instrument used is survey. The main instrument used in the survey is questionnaire (from Likert type of scale) consisted of four group of questions related to the research indicators.

Population in the survey are 120 educational workers from all educational levels (pedagogues, teachers from primary education, kindergarten teachers and special educators) from five municipalities of Republic of North Macedonia: Skopje, Strumica, Ohrid, Kavadarci and Bitola.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of units in the research sample

Characteristics of the sample		N	%
Gender	Female	110	90,16
	Male	12	9,84
	Total	122	100,00
Working position	Pedagogue	52	42,62
	Teacher	46	37,70
	Special educator	20	16,39
	Kindergarten teacher	4	3,28
	Total	122	100,00

Age	22-34	36	30,25
	35-44	29	24,37
	45-54	27	22,69
	55-64	27	22,69
	Total	119	100,00
Work experience	Up to 5 years	38	31,15
	6-14 years	20	16,39
	15-24 years	25	20,49
	More than 25 years	39	31,97
Total		122	100,00

## RESULTS AND COMMENTS OF THE RESEARCH

Regarding the first research indicator about the topics for professional development, we can conclude that all groups of educational workers are equally included in professional development offer. The answers differ regarding the topics for professional development. Hence, educational workers stated that the most common topics for professional development are Consultative work with students (63%); Consultative work with parents (83%) and Resolving conflicts among peers (55%). They are less included in professional development about the topics: *Working with children with special education needs* (33%) and *Applying assistive technology in work with children with special education needs* (30%). This is a negative data that implies that even though the concept of inclusive education in Republic of North Macedonia should be fully implemented in primary and secondary education, educational workers are still not prepared or well-trained about this current issue.

Regarding the second indicator of the research about the providers of non-formal educational forms of professional development we investigate the most common providers in the country. Educational workers stated that the most common providers of non-formal educational forms of professional development are the following (listed by rang of priority):

- Bureau of development of education;
- Public higher education institutions (Universities, Faculties, etc.);
- Ministry of education and science of Republic of North Macedonia;
- Professional societies and bodies;
- Non-governmental institutions;
- Foreign providers of educational services;
- Municipalities;
- Public and private institutions.

From the list of providers, we can conclude that the state institutions like: *Ministry of education and science, Bureau of development of education and Public higher education institutions* are among providers that offer most non-formal professional development services. This data shows that the governmental institutions show substantial interest for professional development of educational workers, which is a positive indicator. But still, the contents/topics of professional development services are remaining questionable because they do not always correspond with educational

workers needs. Another data about the municipalities being at the bottom of the scale of providers is worrying, because it shows that at local level, municipalities do not investigate which professional needs educational workers have and do not act according to them when planning professional development of educational staff.

Third group of questions are referring to educational workers opinions about reasons why they get involved in different forms of non-formal professional development. Below are listed according to priority the most common reasons:

- Professional development;
- Personal development;
- Improvement of educational work;
- Being up to date with novelties and innovations in education;
- Cooperation with colleagues and experts from educational area;
- Obtaining higher external evaluation grade;
- Promotion;
- Financial benefit;
- Fulfilling their own free time.

Biggest motive for involving at any form of professional development, educational workers find in their professional and personal development, and less in fulfilling their own free time and expected financial benefit. This results were expected, having in mind that there isn't any mechanism that will reward educational workers according their professional development activity. This also counts about promotion in higher working position. That is why usually educational workers are not motivated in involving at any form of professional development.

The last indicator is about correlation between involvement in professional development and improving the quality of education. Results from inquired educational workers show interesting results, but they all agree that there is a strong correlation between these two variables (professional development and quality of education).

Their answers orbit between modes 3-4, which means that they fully agree with all of the offered statements of improving the different aspects of quality of education, like: implementing innovations in education; improving the concept of inclusion in education; improving multiethnic tolerance and coherence in education; improving the student achievements; implementing contemporary learning and teaching methods and techniques; improving student assessment methods, etc. Therefore, we can conclude that all of the offered statements of professional development are contributing towards promoting quality of education of different educational institutions.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The world that we live in today is demanding and complex and quality education is the key for answering these complex demands that new age is posing. Educational workers at all educational levels have to possess certain competences that will provide successful implementation of educational processes. These competences should be constantly improved and upgraded in the framework of their professional development. High-quality professional development strategies are essential to all educational institutions. The days of educational staff development sessions consisting of “sit-and-

get” workshops and expert-delivered awareness campaigns are long gone. We are now moving toward more effective and more engaging professional development models. Research and experience help us recognize that high-quality ongoing professional development that deepens educational workers content knowledge and pedagogical skills; provides opportunities for practice, research, and reflection; and includes efforts that are job-embedded, sustained, and collaborative will assist in the goal to remain up-to-date (Sparks, 2002).

Non-formal education represents one of the most applicable and useful form used in professional development of educational workers. Results from the research presented in this paper show non-significant systematic approach towards professional development of educational workers in Republic of North Macedonia. Even though, they are involved in sporadical and usually not appropriate forms of professional development, they often don't correspond with their professional interests and needs. Having in mind all of the above and leaded by the goal of this research, we recommend the following:

- Governmental institutions responsible for professional development of educational workers to conduct semi-annual inquiries about professional interests and needs, so that professional development offer can correspond with educational worker's demands;
- Creating digital base of educational workers at national level which will provide exchanging information, experiences and practices and will contribute towards personal and professional development;
- Implementation of standards for professional development of educational workers at all levels, especially the part where there should be interventions in salaries and promotions of educational workers that meet the standards;
- Improvements in the public information system about professional development offer in the area of education, so that all educational workers can have access to it;
- Equipping human resources in the field of education in municipalities, that will contribute towards more systematic approach towards professional development of educational workers at local level.

All these recommendations are directed not only to improve the systematic approach of professional development of educational workers, but also for improve the overall quality of educational process in Republic of North Macedonia.

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