Practitioner Research in Kindergarten and Teachers´ Professional Development

Research literacy is becoming a very important part in teacher education. There is ample evidence that teacher research can be a powerful factor in the lives of teacher-researchers: teacher-researchers report learning more about their students, about their schools or kindergartens, and about themselves; they use this knowledge to modify their practice, to feel more professional, and to engage ?authentically? with the profession of teaching in a new way (for more on this, see Berger, Boles & Troen 2005). The entire teacher education system should be based on the belief that research of educational practice is one of the instruments for establishing and ensuring the quality of this practice and important factor in promoting teachers´ professional development. Teachers? professional development is a lifelong process in which teachers constantly acquire new knowledge, develop new skills and competences and they move towards a better quality of teaching performance and other professional work in the school and kindergarten. This process includes teachers? individual, professional and social dimension, and it also means teachers? progressing towards the direction of critical, independent, responsible decision-making and acting (Vogrinc, Valen?i? Zuljan, 2009). ?

One of the main problems of educational research conducted by academics is the dissemination of research findings to practitioners, and this is one of the principal reasons for educational research failing to have an adequate influence on the improvement of practice. One way to change educational research so that it improves the practice of (preschool) teachers in schools and kindergartens is to change the research agenda and the research process. This means adopting, as an essential prerequisite for improvement, the involvement of practitioners in all aspects of the research process, from the creation of strategic research plans, the selection of research priorities, and the funding of projects, to the dissemination and implementation of policies and practices arising from or influenced by research findings (cf. Hargreaves 2007).
Practitioner research can be seen as an attempt to link teaching and research so that they are no longer dichotomous activities (Cole & Knowles 2004). It can be defined as a process in which preschool teachers and other participants in kindergartens evaluate, in a managed, systematic, controlled (with clearly stipulated criteria) and critical manner, their own pedagogical work and the effects and processes linked to teaching by means of the strategies, methods and techniques of pedagogical research (Seberová 2010).

In the present paper, we answer the following research questions: (1) How often do preschool teachers undertake research work? (2) In which phases of the research process do preschool teachers express their willingness to participate? (3) Which predictors have a statistically significant influence on the frequency with which preschool teachers engage in research work? (4) What is the correlation between preschool teachers’ attitude towards their professional development and frequency of conducting research work?

**Method**

The causal-nonexperimental method of educational research was employed in the empirical research. The data from the questionnaires were processed using methods of descriptive and inferential statistics. The statistical procedures employed were: frequency distribution (f, f%) of the attributive variables, basic descriptive statistics of the numerical variables (mean, standard deviation), correlation, multiple regression, forced entry method, factor analysis to test the instrument validity, as well as Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient as a measure of instrument reliability. Data collecting was carried out in January 2013. A questionnaire was prepared composed of several assessment scales and a set of questions that attempt to determine the preschool teachers' opinion regarding how much research-related knowledge they obtained during their studies. The present paper only deals with the data collected with some the questions and with the assessment scale regarding the preschool teachers' willingness to cooperate in individual phases of the research process. On the basis of Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient, the evaluation scale reached a sufficient level of reliability (a = 0.94) and validity (with the first factor we explain 69.74% of the variance). The research was conducted on a representative sample of preschool teachers employed in Slovenian kindergartens. The questionnaire was completed by 470 preschool teachers employed in 83 kindergartens throughout Slovenia, of which 96.7% were women and 3.3% men. The average age of the preschool teachers was 39.47 years (with a standard deviation of 10.02 years), and they had an average of 17.19 years of work experience (standard deviation of 11.55 years).

**Expected Outcomes**

Preschool teachers should be acquainted with the latest research in the fields of teaching and learning, they should be able to translate research results into sound practice, and they should possess suitable academic and professional qualifications to conduct research. ?As professionals, (preschool) teachers cannot be only implementers of decisions, but also partners in their development? (Niemi & Jakku-Sihvonen 2006, p. 32). With empirical research conducted on a representative sample, we determined that less than one third of preschool teachers employed in Slovenian kindergartens have conducted some kind of research work or participated in research work. Preschool teachers who already have experience with research work are most prepared to participate in the planning of research content and least prepared to participate in the preparation of instruments for gathering data. On the basis of multiple regression, we can conclude that the factors that have the greatest influence on the frequency of engaging in research work are the preschool teachers? level of training for conducting research work, level of training for conducting research work, the prevailing climate in the kindergarten, the level of burdening of preschool teachers with other responsibilities, their apprehension regarding the misuse of date obtained through research and their attitude towards their professional development. In order for preschool teachers to
commit to research, it is vital that, even while studying, they gain an awareness of the fact that research of educational practice is one of the instruments for establishing and ensuring the quality of this practice and an important factor in their professional development. Another important factor is kindergarten culture, which should establish favorable conditions for research efforts. Furthermore, it is important that those employed in kindergartens can have confidence in being able to openly discuss the results and findings obtained, without fear of the misuse of the acquired data.

References


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