

Королева Елена Владимировна

учитель английского языка

Назарбаев Интеллектуальная школа

физико-математического направления г. Уральск

г. Уральск, Республика Казахстан

TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM IN KAZAKHSTAN

Аннотация: в данной статье речь идет о профессионализме преподавателей в Казахстане. По мнению автора, проблема интенсификации должна быть устранена в кратчайшие сроки. Необходимо позволить преподавателям быть более независимыми, а также следует сократить объем нагрузки.

Ключевые слова: профессионализм, учитель, Казахстан.

Abstract: the article discusses teacher professionalism in Kazakhstan. According to the author, the problem of intensification should be solved immediately. Teachers should be given more autonomy and workload should be reduced.

Keywords: professionalism, teacher, Kazakhstan.

Since gaining its independence, Kazakhstan has implemented a number of educational reforms in order to develop the system of education in the country and enter the global educational arena. Consequently, there is a great demand of highly qualified teachers who are able to bring up a new competitive generation of Kazakhstani students. The government has made many attempts to attract more young people to teacher profession and retain them in schools. Those teachers, who have already worked at schools, have undergone through various professional development courses and improved their professional skills.

However, all those measures taken by Kazakhstani policymakers were not enough as the issue of teacher shortage still exists, the status of teacher profession is rather low and teachers are overloaded and underpaid. Moreover, many teachers feel undervalued by the administration staff that does not provide enough support and many educators start to seek for a better paid jobs in more lucrative spheres and leave school in the very

beginning of their career path. Thus, becoming a highly qualified educator and not to leave the profession because of tough conditions mentioned above has become a challenge for teachers especially novice ones. This paper intends to discuss the main challenges teachers face while becoming a professional and provide viable recommendations on how to improve the current situation in the country.

First of all, it is important to understand how young people decide to enroll in teacher education programs and what factors influence their choice. The government of Kazakhstan allocates a great number of state grants to attract more students to pedagogical programs. Thus, teacher education programs at colleges and universities are rather «popular choice for people with UNT scores too low for other courses, given the high number of training grants available» [3, p. 167]. In other words, those students who perform not so well at school and cannot afford fee-based education take their chance for free higher education and enter teacher training programs. Nonetheless, only a small proportion of university graduates go to work at school. For example, only two students out of my 20 groupmates have become teachers including me. The research also proves that there is «a low transition rate from teacher education graduation to professional service» [5, p. 366]. Students get their diplomas and migrate to spheres that are more profitable. Unfortunately, many of those who enter the profession chose teaching not because of it is their cherished dream or calling to be a school teacher but because they have no other options.

Nevertheless, even if graduates have made a decision to go to school, it does not guarantee that they would like to stay there. The first steps as a teacher are crucial for young educators as «the initial experiences of beginning teachers are the most challenging and influential in their future careers and beginning teachers face a great number of challenges» [4]. In other words, these experiences may influence their further decision whether to stay in the profession or not. So, what are the challenges teachers face at the beginning of their carrer?

One of the most important challenges newly hired teachers face is a process of professional socialization. Shamatov (2005) describes this process as «a complex interplay between individuals and settings, including socio-historic contexts and their

cultural-traditional norms». Once beginning teachers come to school, they may feel that knowledge and practice skills they gained at university do not fit or differ from those required in the workplace. Universities in Kazakhstan has no or lack of collaboration with schools in developing joint programs. Therefore, teacher graduates waste precious time learning outdated practices and useless subjects. For instance, when I studied at university at the major of an English teacher, I had to study mathematics and biology. Having worked as a teacher for ten years, I have never applied this knowledge in my teaching practice. However, such vital skills as how to collaborate with colleagues, provide a constructive feedback for students, and reflect on teacher own practice in order to grow professionally were not the part of university curriculum. Thus, like myriads of other beginning teachers I came to the workplace completely unprepared to school realities and had to adjust not only psychologically but also academically. Limited knowledge and lack of practice add more worries to teacher professional socialization.

The other challenges young teachers encounter in the beginning of their teaching are connected with three realms: classroom, school and community. Classroom challenges include issues with classroom management and discipline, giving instructions and lack of subject knowledge. Work with Senior Management Team (SMT) and colleagues are related to school challenges. Parents and officials who constitute the community may also be an issue for young teachers [4]. Therefore, how successful beginning teacher adjustment will be depends on how successful he or she will be able build relationships within these three realms. In order the process of initial adaptation to be successful, it is essential to offer professional help for beginning teacher. This support can be provided through assigned mentors or senior colleague advice.

It is undeniable that initial experience has an effect on teacher professional path and further professional development. Hence, some patterns of teaching style might be established even earlier in the childhood and based on our learning experiences. Mewborn and Tyminski (2006) claim that pre-service teachers are greatly affected by their experiences as learners. No matter whether these experiences are negative or positive, they have «a tremendous influence on who they [learners] become as teachers» (p. 32).

It is wondering how our school teachers root our understanding of good and bad teaching. If we had a positive role model of a teacher we are likely to follow it in our teaching style. If we observed poor teaching, we will do our best not to be such kind of a teacher. Personally, it was a discovery for me and looking back, I realize that my teacher had great influence on my ways of teaching and treating students. It made me think that I might be a role model for my students in their future life. Unfortunately, not all teachers think about it in their everyday practice. I believe that every teacher should remember that he or she is role model for his or her students to follow. That is why to be professional is essential.

Turning back to the issues teachers face, not only beginning teachers experience difficulties of becoming a qualified teacher, experienced teachers face problems as well. One of the major problems that all teacher have is intensification of work. At times we have so much paper work to be done, that we forget about our primary responsibility – teaching. Teachers spend less time for preparing for lessons but more time for writing a new report for SMT. Therefore, educator rarely have time for self-development and reflection on their teaching practice. Consequently, intensification does not lead to better performance and professional growth; on the contrary, it leads to stagnation.

Being overwhelmed with paperwork, duties and responsibilities, teachers often experience the feeling of guilt. They often feel that they owe something to someone or have not finished some work and their brain has no rest even when their working day is over. Hargreaves (1995) claims that the phenomenon of *teacher guilt* may motivate teachers and even improve their practice, however, «when guilt is bound up with overwhelming feelings of frustration and anxiety, it can become demotivating and disabling in one's work and one's life» (p. 142). In my opinion, teacher guilt is often used by SMT as tool for teacher manipulation. I do not agree that guilt may have a positive effect as it often leads to stress and job dissatisfaction.

Admittedly, we cannot always blame the government and administration staff in all problems teachers face. One of the problem that teachers could solve on their own is developing teacher collaborative culture. Unfortunately, the majority of Kazakhstani

teachers do not collaborate enough and individualism is the most prevailing culture in mainstream schools. According to Hargreaves (1995) collaboration and collegiality might be a driving force for professional growth and improvement. I think that the problem of teacher collaboration cannot be solved as long as we have the outdated «stavka» system when teachers have to teach only 18 hours per week. They do not spend their time together with their colleagues and prepare their lesson plans individually. Yet, I am glad that we have a network of Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools that develop collaboration and collegiality. Despite the fact that prevailing culture in NIS is a contrived collegiality, it encourages teachers work together and share their expertise with their colleagues. Being a part of this system, I have an opportunity to observe how this contrived collegiality turns into collaboration and gives fruitful results.

It is obvious that despite the increasing interest of Kazakhstani government to improve educational system in the country and provide the finest education for the new generation, the issues still exist and they are here to be addressed as soon as possible. Apart from obvious solution to increase teacher salary, there is number of other measures that could be taken by the government. First of all, it is essential to raise teacher status and increase the authority of teachers. Teaching should not be the last chance to obtain free higher education. Only the brightest students should be accepted to teacher training programs. Hence, it is unlikely to happen without raising teacher salary. Many media sources often portray teachers from the negative side and it contributes to undermining the status of the teaching profession. Thus, it is also important to promote a positive image of a teacher in media.

Another recommendation related to the challenges beginning teachers face when they just come to school. In order to ease the process of young teacher adaptation it is vital to provide all necessary support for them. Thus, they should be assigned with a mentor and mentor's work should be paid and not to put much burden on a mentor. I think it would be a great idea to create a blog or a website for novice teachers where they could share their problems with their senior colleagues and SMT. Young teachers should be provided with complete guidance on how to work with students and their

parents. Perhaps, psychological help during the initial period of adaptation will be useful as well. Furthermore, the curriculum of teacher training programs should be reviewed and updated as it provides only theoretical knowledge and does not prepare teacher graduates for real life. I strongly believe that close collaboration of universities and schools and creation of joint programs are essential for successful integration of beginning teachers into teaching profession and their further retention in educational system.

The problem of intensification should be solved immediately. Teachers should be given more autonomy and workload should be reduced. Members of SMT should not delegate their duties and responsibilities to teachers veiling it with the fashionable term *distributed leadership*. The outdated *stavka* system of payment should be abolished, as it does not provide opportunity for collaboration. To sum up, I believe that slowly but surely Kazakhstan moves to its optimistic goals and it would be great to adopt the best practices of NIS in mainstream schools in the Kazakhstan. However, such tremendous changes do not occur in one day and the government of the country should remember about it.

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