IN-SERVICE TEACHERS' EDUCATION FIELD PREFERENCES IN THEIR FINAL PAPERS

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ABSTRACT

Education is essential to keep up with the constantly developing world. The quality of education systems relies heavily on teachers. Teachers need training, resources and support to do their jobs effectively. It is crucial to train and recruit qualified teachers to ensure the success of the education system. In Latvia, the necessities for the professional development of teachers are determined by the Education Development Guidelines 2021–2027. The article analyses theoretical materials concerning the essence of in-service teacher training. Within the framework of in-service teacher training implemented in the Faculty of Education Sciences and Psychology at the University of Latvia, one of the main priorities of which is to promote the professional development of pre-school and primary school teachers, it was possible to analyse empirical data on teachers' preferences in the context of in-service teacher training. The main findings reveal teachers' need to engage in professional development and their preferences when choosing an educational field, including teaching and research. Empirical research can inform in-service teacher training practices and help develop programmes that better meet the needs of teachers in the classroom. In-service teacher training is crucial to enhance the education workforce's professional development and to improve the quality and effectiveness of the education system.

Keywords: in-service teacher training, primary school, pre-school, preferences, professional development.

Introduction

Education is a condition for keeping pace with the developing world. One of the most important elements of the education system in today's society is the need to prepare teachers to meet the changing social processes in terms of quality and quantity (Kerimgil-Çelik, 2023). The quality of the education system depends on teachers, who need the education, resources and support to do their job well (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016). The three major components of education – namely the teacher, the student and the education system – depend on each other and together account for academic achievement (Epstein, 2018; Prabowo, 2022).

Training and recruiting qualified teachers is essential for the success of the education system. Typically, the successful preparation and education of teachers and prospective teachers is one factor influencing the success of schools and ensuring the development of the education system (Cheng, 2016; Dreer et al., 2017; Livingston, 2016; Şahin & Akinci, 2020). Professional teachers use appropriate teaching materials and strategies; they have the ability to motivate students; they have high skills and a broad view of education; they have an understanding of human nature and society; and they have an inherent commitment to the profession (Dowden et al., 2013; Nyamai, 2021). In order to implement the teaching and learning process, teachers need to be able to create a classroom culture and education workplace that is creative, dynamic, enthusiastic, dialogue-oriented and fun in a meaningful way for students. In-service training is a key element of teachers' professional development (Essel et al., 2009; Prabowo, 2022; Şahin & Akinci, 2020; Saleem & Zamir, 2016).

Essence of In-Service Teacher Training Courses

The main purpose of in-service training is to enhance the professional development of educators in the field of education and the quality and effectiveness of the education system as a whole (Bulut, 2022), as well as to improve the quality of teaching and the strategies to make educational discoveries (Veenman et al., 1994). Thus, in-service teacher training courses aim to promote change and renewal. The goals of in-service training courses need to be effective in the long term (Nicolaidis & Mattheoudakis, 2008) and the objectives to be achieved through in-service training should be clear. It should be stated whether the aim is to achieve a change in behaviour or knowledge (Prabowo, 2022).

Appropriate training can help promote the development of teachers' competence (Tennant et al., 2002). Training is a process of improving knowledge and competence and changing attitudes so that teachers can effectively carry out the tasks assigned to them (Prabowo, 2022; Torrington & Huat, 1994). In-service training courses enhances teachers' professional competencies, as well as their attitudes towards, belief in and perceptions of the profession (Borg, 2011; Şahin & Akinci, 2020; Weinstein, 1989). In-service training courses are a key component in improving teachers' teaching skills and updating their methodological knowledge. In this respect, in-service teacher training courses play a crucial role in ensuring quality classroom teaching by improving teachers' skills (Saiti & Saitis, 2006). In addition, through positive changes in teachers' behaviour, the courses have long-term benefits for education and institutions (Hayes, 1995, 2000; Richards & Farrell, 2005).

In-service training courses can help improve knowledge and understanding of the educational environment as a whole (Wood, 1999). In-service training courses help teachers to create qualitative learning environments in schools; they enable teachers to develop competences relevant to their career opportunities, as well as helping teachers and other staff involved in education to remain motivated and enthusiastic (Bulut, 2022).

HUMAN, TECHNOLOGIES AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION, 2024
L. Aboltina, I. Helmane. In-Service Teachers' Education Field Preferences in their Final Papers

52

The success of in-service training courses depends on a variety of variables inside and outside the classroom, such as theoretical knowledge, demonstration, practice, feedback and classroom application (Joyce & Showers, 1980). In-service training courses should be tailored to the specific subject, should address the needs of teachers, and should be continual. Effective in-service training courses provide teachers with real-life solutions with meaningful engagement through collaborative relationships in which teachers are given opportunities for reflection (Burns & Richards, 2009; Vukelich & Wrenn, 1999). Several factors contribute to the effectiveness of in-service training courses (Sokel, 2019):

- Coherence. This can be seen as a key factor not only in a general sense when the programme reflects national goals (Desimone, 2009; Desimone & Garet, 2015), but also as a more context-specific advantage when the content focuses on authentic and explicit challenges faced by teachers (Bayar, 2014; Posnanski, 2002).
- Active participation. In-service training classes lose their effectiveness if they are conducted using traditional methods where only theoretical knowledge is imparted in lectures (Elyas & Al Grigri, 2014; Ko, 2016).
- Collaboration. Working together during sessions encourages reflection and the discovery of new perspectives (Garet et al., 2001; Guskey, 2003; Guskey & Yoon, 2009).

Anyone who is not an education professional cannot be a successful teacher. The teaching profession requires a variety of specific and distinctive skills, such as starting and ending lessons, classroom management skills and the ability to explain the curriculum (Gendy et al., 2014). A professional teacher is expected to be knowledgeable about the subject and to have a mature and intelligent personality (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). A professional teacher must also be committed, master the subject, be responsible, be a systematic thinker and be professionally engaged in the learning process (Prabowo, 2022). One reason for teachers to participate in professional development is to ''increase awareness of strengths and weaknesses'' (Wong, 2021, 143). A teacher's awareness of their own decision-making processes and their strengths and weaknesses in the context of teaching is fundamental to their professional growth and development.

By exploring what teachers really need and want, creators and implementers of in-service training programmes can focus on teachers' real learning challenges (Genoğlu et al., 2016; Hayes, 2000; John & Gravani, 2005). Understanding teachers' needs and preferences within in-service teacher education programmes is an essential step that increases the programmes' relevance to teachers' real needs in the classroom (Roberts, 2008). On the other hand, if teachers' needs and expectations are not taken into account in their professional development, teachers tend to become overly critical, demotivated and unwilling to participate (Groves, 2015; Ho & Topal, 2013; Uztosun, 2018; Yan & He, 2015). It is therefore necessary to undertake the study to ascertain the preferred fields of education for teachers undergoing in-service training, with a particular focus on the content, methodology and practice associated with these fields.

HUMAN, TECHNOLOGIES AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION, 2024
L. Aboltina, I. Helmane. In-Service Teachers' Education Field Preferences in their Final Papers

53

Methodology

The research was carried out at the Adult Pedagogical Education Centre (APEC) of the Faculty of Education Sciences and Psychology at the University of Latvia, where various courses for the further development of teachers' professional competence are implemented. The research targeted in-service training courses for pre-school and primary school teachers at the APEC. All the teachers participating in the in-service training courses had a Bachelor's degree in Education and a teacher qualification. Teachers from different regions of Latvia took part in the courses. All teachers who participated in the in-service training programme consented to take part in the study. The study was conducted in the period from 2023 to 2024, when the in-service training programmes "Pre-school content and didactics for teachers" ($n = 38$) and "Primary education for teachers" ($n = 80$) were running, in which the professional competence of teachers is promoted and the opportunity for teachers to retrain in accordance with the regulations on education and professional qualification required for teachers and the procedure for the development of professional competence of teachers (Cabinet Regulation No. 569, 2018). The pre-school content and didactics in-service training programme is two credits (CP) or 80 contact hours, and the primary teacher education programme is four credits (CP) or 160 contact hours. All teachers are required to complete an independent study in order to meet the requirements of the continuing education programmes and to receive a certificate.

The aim of the study is to ascertain the preferred fields of education teachers undergoing in-service training in terms of content, methodology and practice.

The research questions were:
- RQ1: What fields of education do teachers prefer in pre-school and primary school?
- RQ2: What determines which subject area is studied and practised by teachers?

A survey was used as a data collection tool. This is a quantitative research method used to collect data from a set of respondents. The survey is probably one of the most widely used methodologies in the industry because of its many advantages and benefits in collecting and analysing data (Green et al., 2006). The aim of the survey was to find the views of teachers in in-service training courses on their preferred areas of education in terms of content and methodology and practice.

The teacher survey consists of eight questions, seven of which are semi-closed questions and one open. The content of the teachers' survey is based on the content of the "Pre-school content and didactics" and "Primary education teacher" programmes at the Centre for Adult Pedagogical Education, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Latvia. The data collection was carried out in the framework of in-service training courses when teachers were asked to choose the topic of their final thesis. Course participants completed an online questionnaire on the Google Drive platform. Before completing the questionnaire, participants are informed that participation in the study is voluntary. The teachers were invited to complete the questionnaire anonymously, emphasizing that the identity of the respondent would remain undisclosed, and

HUMAN, TECHNOLOGIES AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION, 2024
L. Aboltina, I. Helmane. In-Service Teachers' Education Field Preferences in their Final Papers

54

that the data would be aggregated for the exclusive purpose of achieving the aims of the study. In the process of analysing the research data, a combination of descriptive and content analysis methods was applied. The descriptive analysis approach involved summarising and interpreting the data based on predetermined themes. For content analysis, codes were established through a thorough examination of the data. These codes were then grouped under appropriate concepts to develop themes. In this study, the researchers individually reviewed the responses provided by the participants. The data were then coded and themes were constructed from the codes identified. Finally, tables or figures were created to present the codes and themes systematically; these were then interpreted.

Results and Discussion

Teachers' professional effectiveness is determined by their continuous professional development, which is required by the demands of the twenty-first century to meet the inevitable challenges that teachers face (Ohlsson et al., 2022). One of the most important conditions for teachers' professional development and in-service training is the identification of teachers' needs (Soodmand et al., 2017). Implementation of the curriculum based on the learning outcomes depends largely on the professionalism of the teacher (Vojir & Rusek, 2021).

The main justification for attending in-service training courses (Table 1) in both teacher professional development programmes is to obtain a certificate. A certificate is a document that attests to the acquisition of a given methodology within a specific field of study. It is issued in accordance with the relevant normative documents set forth in Latvia (Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No 569, 2018). The justification for this need is found in the Regulations on the Education and Professional Qualifications Required of Teachers and the Procedure for the Professional Competence Development of Teachers, which stipulate that teachers working in an educational institution are required to have appropriate education and qualifications (Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No 569, 2018). However, teachers recognise that it is also important to improve their knowledge and skills. Thus, the expertise required for professional activity is determined by participation in in-service training courses based on political decisions and personal interest.

Table 1   Purpose of attending in-service training courses

Indicators	Pre-school in-service teachers		Primary school in-service teachers	
	%	*n*	%	*n*
Get certificate	60.5	23	61.3	49
Improve knowledge and skills	34.2	13	30	24
Understand how to teach and up bring their own children	–	–	1.2	1
Get certificate and improve knowledge and skills	5.3	2	7.5	6

Table 2   In-service training teachers' interests in a particular field and topic

Indicators	Pre-school in-service teachers		Primary school in-service teachers	
	%	n	%	n
Interested in an area of research, a topic	81.6	31	74.7	59
Not interested in a research area, topic	13.2	5	13.9	11
Specifies the precise direction of the research, the topic	5.2	2	11.4	10

Table 3   Choice of field of education for research in primary or pre-school education

Indicators	Pre-school in-service teachers		Primary school in-service teachers	
	%	n	%	n
Science	5.3	2	6.3	5
Social and citizenship	31.6	12	16.3	13
Cultural awareness and self-expression in art	23.7	9	11.3	9
Languages	28.9	11	47.5	38
Mathematics	2.6	1	12.5	10
Health and physical activity	2.6	1	3.7	3
Design and technology	5.3	2	1.2	1

Based on the professional development programme, teachers choose the topic for their final thesis according to their professional interests, needs and abilities. The majority of respondents acknowledge that there are research topics of particular interest. However, there are also teachers who do not have a particular topic that interests them (Table 2). Therefore, more thought needs to be given to how to foster teachers' professional interest in developing their professional competence so that in-service teacher training does not become a formal process that lacks motivation. As research suggests (Bulut, 2022), the role of in-service training is to foster teachers' professional interest and motivation.

It appears that in-service teacher's choice of subject areas differs (Table 3). Pre-school education teachers are more interested in social and citizenship education, languages, cultural awareness and self-expression in art, while primary school teachers are more interested in languages, social and civic learning, cultural awareness and self-expression in art, mathematics, and science. The responses confirm a national trend character-ised by an insufficient number of STEM teachers (OECD, 2014; Birzina et al., 2023). Pre-school teachers' different interests in the subject areas can be explained in the con-text of the organisation of an integrated pedagogical process in pre-school education, which, unlike at the primary stage, requires each teacher to be familiar with the content and methodology of several subject areas. This probably also determines the in-service teachers' choice of education field in their research. As research on the holistic view of sustainability points out, it is defined by three dimensions: environmental, economic and social. The economic dimension is particularly highlighted, emphasising the readiness of human resources, more specifically teachers, to work in an integrated way in pre-school (Atkinson et al., 2007; Ohlsson et al., 2022).

HUMAN, TECHNOLOGIES AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION, 2024
L. Aboltina, I. Helmane. In-Service Teachers' Education Field Preferences in their Final Papers

56

Table 4   Factors determining teachers' choice of topic for their final paper

Indicators	Pre-school in-service teachers		Primary school in-service teachers	
	%	n	%	n
Available literature and resources	2.6	1	2.5	2
Lecturer as a consultant in the chosen field	2.6	1	3.8	3
Background knowledge	31.6	12	12.7	10
Previous research projects	5.3	2	–	–
The problem situation they would like to solve	39.5	15	53.2	42
Accident and coincidence	5.3	2	2.5	2
Interest in the field of education	13.2	5	20.3	16

Table 5   Choice of field of education for implementing the teaching/learning process

Indicators	Pre-school in-service teachers		Primary school in-service teachers	
	%	n	%	n
Science	7.9	3	10	8
Social and citizenship	18.4	7	10	8
Cultural awareness and self-expression in art	26.3	10	12.5	10
Languages	31.6	12	31.2	25
Mathematics	2.6	1	23.8	19
Health and physical activity	5.3	2	–	–
Design and technology	7.9	3	12.5	10

Typically, for the majority of in-service pre-school and primary school teachers, the choice of the topic for the final paper is related to a problem they want to solve. Pre-school teachers are more likely than primary teachers indicate that the choice of the topic for the final paper is related to their background knowledge. Pre-school teachers, unlike primary teachers, indicate that the choice of the topic for the final paper is related to their interest in the subject area. The majority of teachers (Table 4) choose the topic of their final paper based on the problem they want to solve, their background knowledge and their interest in the field. Pre-school teachers' choice is more influenced by background knowledge, while primary school teachers' choice is more influenced by interest in the subject area. It can be concluded that teachers analyse the pedagogical process, perceive problem situations, and engage in their solution when developing their final paper. This probably indicates the teachers' critical thinking skills and the need to look for solutions to problem situations.

In-service teachers' preferences for areas of learning to study in depth cover almost all areas. However, primary teachers do not associate their professional activity with the learning area of health and physical activity (Table 5). The proportional distribution differs between pre-school and primary school education. Pre-school teachers are more likely to indicate the language domain, the domain of cultural awareness and

HUMAN, TECHNOLOGIES AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION, 2024
L. Aboltina, I. Helmane. In-Service Teachers' Education Field Preferences in their Final Papers

57

self-expression arts, and the domain of social and citizenship education, while primary teachers are more likely to indicate languages, mathematics and, in equal proportions, social and citizenship education, science, and design and technology; they are less likely to indicate the field of cultural awareness and self-expression arts. It can be concluded that when comparing the areas chosen by pre-school teachers with those of primary teachers, teachers are willing to be involved in all areas of learning, but the proportions are different.

Table 6   Development of the final paper expanded teachers' professional knowledge and skills

Indicators	Pre-school in-service teachers		Primary school in-service teachers	
	%	*n*	%	*n*
Completely	47.4	18	39.2	31
Almost completely	28.9	11	39.2	31
Partially	23.7	9	20.3	16
Not at all	–	–	–	–

The majority of in-service pre-school and primary teachers felt that the final paper had fully extended their professional knowledge and skills (Table 6). Fewer pre-school teachers and primary teachers believed that it had almost completely broadened their professional knowledge and skills. On the other hand, there are pre-school teachers and primary teachers who considered that their professional knowledge and skills were only partially enhanced. In conclusion, there is a need for regular monitoring of in-service training programmes, reviewing and improving their content and organisation to meet teachers' professional interests and needs, and practice-based in-service studies (Şahin & Akinci, 2020; Uztosun, 2018). Teachers' professional development is seen as a long-term process that includes regular opportunities and experiences and that is systematically planned to promote growth and development in the teaching profession (Villegas-Reimers, 2003).

Teachers identify and describe challenges for further professional activity based on the final paper of the course. Teachers' need for and engagement in research activity indicates professional development and educational growth (Derakhshan et al., 2020). The development of the final paper of the in-service training course confirms that teachers have improved their research skills, as evidenced by the following statements:

> *I will continue research on the topic of the final work of the course because it is relevant to my interests.*

> *I will continue researching children's adaptation in practice; it was proved that theoretical knowledge does not always materialize.*

> *The study confirmed that integrating language into mathematics improved literacy.*

> *I will use what I have learned from the coursework in my daily teaching of mathematics.*

HUMAN, TECHNOLOGIES AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION, 2024
L. Aboltina, I. Helmane. In-Service Teachers' Education Field Preferences in their Final Papers

58

In-service teachers point to the need to plan future activities as a challenge, which shows the need to strengthen teachers' planning skills:

> *Time planning is a challenge, to plan time properly to be able to devote enough time to each linguistic skill to achieve the set goals.*

> *To plan group activities in nature, to identify and use methods in lessons that promote children's speech development…*

> *Time planning and systematic analysis of results…*

Overall, the results of the final paper motivate the teachers to undertake further independent research and action:

> *As a professional, I would like to continue to explore and try out more techniques to promote self-help skills in younger children.*

> *To be able to find ways and approaches to work simultaneously with gifted children, 'standard' children and those who have difficulties with reading, comprehension and performance in the classroom.*

> *To improve and develop the promotion of wellbeing in school, not only in the first grade, the school should improve and improve the development of a good sense of wellbeing at the classroom level, as each age comes with its own challenges and problems.*

According to the teachers' answers, they are motivated to acquire new knowledge and skills and to try them out in practice:

> *To continue looking for effective feedback methods, to find digital, effective solutions for their implementation, to use their time and the time of the students for effective data processing.*

> *I would like to continue exploring and trying out more techniques that will enhance the self-help skills of younger children.*

> *To implement the ideas discovered in the study, to continue developing students' literacy and foster their creative self-expression.*

Thus, teachers emphasize both growth and professional development opportunities in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the learning process, which is in line with the Latvian Standard of the Teaching Profession (Skolotāju profesijas standarts, 2020).

Conclusions

- Most teachers attend continuing professional development courses to obtain a certificate, which is required as a regulatory document for the right to work as a pre-primary and primary education teacher.
- Teachers are motivated to further their independent learning and action. Unfortunately, relatively few teachers are interested in science teaching. This confirms the national trend of insufficient numbers of teachers in STEM.

HUMAN, TECHNOLOGIES AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION, 2024
L. Aboltina, I. Helmane. In-Service Teachers' Education Field Preferences in their Final Papers

59

- Strengthening teachers' professional competence in in-service training programmes requires cooperation with employers, identifying the subject areas in which teachers work and/or intend to work, and offering in-depth training in the content of the subject area – i.e. through the development of a final coursework study in the chosen subject area.
- The development of teachers' professional competence should include a mechanism to monitor how teachers' professional interests and motivation are fostered, so that in-service training does not become a process of teacher professional development that does not reflect the essence of education.
- In-service training strengthens teachers' planning skills, research skills, systematic feedback and analysis. One way to enhance teachers' professionalism in Latvia is for teachers to participate in continuing professional development courses at the Faculty of Education and Science of the University of Latvia.

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HUMAN, TECHNOLOGIES AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION, 2024
L. Aboltina, I. Helmane. In-Service Teachers' Education Field Preferences in their Final Papers

60

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HUMAN, TECHNOLOGIES AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION, 2024
L. Aboltina, I. Helmane. In-Service Teachers' Education Field Preferences in their Final Papers

62