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Teacher self-directed learning and self-professional development: Perspectives and challenges in contemporary educational reality

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Abstract

This paper explores the concepts of self-directed learning (automorphism) and self-professional development (self-epimorphosis) among teachers as central pillars of lifelong learning and professional growth. It analyzes the theoretical foundations of these concepts, the motivating forces that drive teachers into these processes, and the factors that either facilitate or impede them. The article highlights the critical importance of continuous personal and professional upgrading for educators to adapt to modern pedagogical demands, enhance the quality of teaching, and promote innovation in the school environment.

Keywords: Self-Directed Learning; Self-Professional Development; Professional Development; Lifelong Learning; Teachers

1. Introduction

In the modern, rapidly changing socio-technological environment, the educational system is constantly called upon to adapt to new needs and challenges. Teachers, as the main protagonists of this adaptation, are at the heart of these developments. Their initial training, although fundamental, is insufficient to meet the ever-increasing demands of the profession. The need for continuous learning, knowledge renewal, and the acquisition of new skills becomes imperative, leading to the recognition of self-directed learning and self-professional development as crucial processes (1). This article aims to develop the theoretical framework surrounding these concepts, highlighting their importance for the professional and personal development of educators.

2. Conceptual Clarification: Self-Directed Learning and Self-Professional Development

The terms "self-directed learning" (αυτομόρφωση - automorphism) and "self-professional development" (αυτοεπιμόρφωση - self-epimorphosis) are often used interchangeably, yet they carry distinct conceptual nuances that are worth exploring.

Self-directed learning refers to an individual's autonomous and systematic effort to acquire knowledge and skills outside the frameworks of formal or non-formal education (2). It presupposes intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and the individual's ability to define their learning goals, choose learning resources and methods, and evaluate their progress. Self-directed learning can be broader, aiming at personal fulfillment and the expansion of general knowledge, without necessarily a direct link to the professional field.

On the other hand, self-professional development constitutes a more targeted form of self-directed learning, focused on professional growth and improvement (3). For teachers, self-professional development involves actively seeking and

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integrating new pedagogical knowledge, teaching methodologies, technological tools, and best practices, with the aim of upgrading their teaching work and responding more effectively to students' needs. It often includes participation in seminars, conferences, workshops, online courses, or the study of specialized literature, at the teacher's own initiative.

The relationship between the two concepts is interactive and dynamic. Self-directed learning can create a broad knowledge base and cultivate the learning autonomy essential for self-professional development. Conversely, the need for professional self-development can trigger broader self-directed learning pursuits, as teachers identify knowledge gaps or new areas of interest that extend beyond their immediate subject matter.

3. Motivations for Teacher Self-Directed Learning and Self-Professional Development

Teachers' decision to engage in self-directed learning and self-professional development processes is driven by a range of factors, both internal and external.

Regarding internal motivations, a personal commitment to professional excellence and a desire for continuous improvement prevail. Teachers often pursue self-directed learning out of an inherent curiosity for knowledge and a passion for their profession (4). The sense of professional competence, self-actualization, and satisfaction from providing quality educational work are powerful incentives (5). Furthermore, the need to adapt to new pedagogical theories and practices, as well as the desire to remain relevant and effective in an evolving environment, push teachers towards continuous learning (6).

External motivations include the demands of the educational system and society. Changes in curricula, the introduction of new technologies in the classroom, the need to manage student diversity, and increased expectations from parents and society, necessitate the continuous upgrading of teachers' skills (7). In some cases, professional advancement, evaluation, or the possibility of taking on new roles within the school unit also serve as external incentives for self-professional development.

4. Factors Influencing Self-Directed Learning and Self-Professional Development

The implementation of self-directed learning and self-professional development is affected by various factors, which can act as either facilitators or barriers.

4.1. Facilitating factors include

4.1.1. Access to Resources

Easy and quality access to libraries, online platforms (MOOCs), educational software, scientific journals, and educational materials is fundamental (6).

4.1.2. Support from School Administration

Encouragement, provision of time, recognition of efforts, and the creation of a climate of trust by school leaders enhance teachers' initiative (8).

4.1.3. Professional Learning Communities

Collaboration with colleagues, exchange of best practices, and collective problem-solving within professional learning communities contribute to mutual support and the promotion of continuous development (9).

4.1.4. Personal Commitment and Self-Regulation

The inherent desire and ability of the teacher to self-direct their learning constitute the core of success.

Conversely, impeding factors are often complex

4.1.5. Lack of Time

Demanding teaching schedules, administrative duties, and family obligations often leave little or no time for self-directed learning (10).

4.1.6. Lack of Incentives and Recognition

The absence of systematic incentives, either from the state or from the school environment itself, as well as the lack of recognition for efforts, can discourage teachers.

4.1.7. Financial Constraints

The cost of participating in quality professional development programs or purchasing specialized literature can be a significant barrier.

4.1.8. Personal Resistances

Lack of motivation, absence of belief in personal abilities (low self-efficacy), or difficulty adapting to new methods can constitute internal barriers (5).

4.1.9. Bureaucratic Obstacles

Complex and time-consuming procedures for approving participation in programs or recognizing acquired qualifications can be deterrents.

5. The Importance of Self-Directed Learning and Self-Professional Development in Teachers' Personal and Professional Growth

Self-directed learning and self-professional development are fundamental mechanisms for the holistic development of teachers, with multiple benefits:

5.1. Enhancing Teaching Effectiveness

Through continuous learning, teachers gain access to innovative teaching strategies, new technologies, and assessment methods, improving the quality of their teaching and making it more engaging and effective for students (11).

5.2. Adapting to Contemporary Educational Needs

Self-directed learning allows teachers to stay informed about the latest developments in educational science, the psychology of learning, and societal demands, better preparing students for the future.

5.3. Developing Professional Profile and Self-Confidence

The acquisition of new knowledge and skills enhances teachers' professional identity and self-confidence, leading to increased job satisfaction and reducing the risk of burnout (3).

5.4. Serving as a Role Model for Students

A teacher who demonstrates a commitment to lifelong learning serves as a living role model for their students, encouraging them to adopt a similar attitude towards knowledge and personal growth.

5.5. Contributing to School Innovation and Improvement

Active and self-developing teachers are often those who introduce innovative practices in their schools, contributing to the renewal and improvement of the educational system as a whole (12).

6. Conclusion and Future Perspectives

Self-directed learning and self-professional development are fundamental components of teachers' professional growth in the contemporary era. The theoretical analysis highlights their multifaceted importance for enhancing teaching effectiveness, adapting to educational reforms, and achieving personal fulfillment for educators.

To further promote this process, it is essential to create a supportive environment. This includes the development of flexible and accessible professional development programs, the provision of adequate resources, encouragement from school administration, and recognition of teachers' efforts by the state. Investing in the continuous learning of teachers is not just an expense, but a strategic investment in the quality of education and, ultimately, in the future of society.

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