

BECOMING A TEACHER IN LITHUANIA: PROFESSIONAL SATISFACTION AMONG NOVICE TEACHERS

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Abstract

Novice teachers represent a particularly vulnerable group of practitioners in education, as their professional identity, engagement, and satisfaction are shaped during the early stages of teaching, with professional satisfaction playing a central role in their development, retention, and pedagogical practice. This study aims to identify the key factors shaping professional satisfaction among novice teachers in Lithuania and to examine the role of the school environment in this process. A quantitative research design was employed, based on questionnaire data from 728 novice teachers. The findings show that professional satisfaction is shaped by interrelated dimensions of the school environment, including participation in school life, leadership, socio-psychological climate, working conditions, emotional involvement, and communication. These factors function as an interconnected system supporting professional satisfaction and effective pedagogical practice. A supportive and collaborative environment, together with mentoring and leadership, strengthens novice teachers' capacity to implement student-centered teaching and supports retention.

Keywords: *Beginning teachers, professional satisfaction, school environment, pedagogical practice, teacher retention.*

1. Introduction

The process of becoming a teacher represents a critical early career phase shaping professional satisfaction, development, and retention. In Lithuania, novice teachers face challenges related to workload, classroom management, and integration into the school environment, which influence early professional experiences and career decisions (Toropova et al., 2021; OECD, 2020). Early career teaching is often marked by “reality shock”, reflecting the gap between expectations and practice. Within this context, professional satisfaction serves as a key indicator of how novice teachers make sense of early career experiences and respond to professional demands. It is closely linked to engagement, professional growth, retention, and the quality of pedagogical practice (Lopes & Oliveira, 2020; Toropova et al., 2021; Didžiulienė, 2023). Although research highlights the role of individual and contextual factors, including school environment conditions, in shaping teachers' professional experiences and well-being (OECD, 2020), these are often examined separately. This study aims to identify the key factors shaping professional satisfaction among novice teachers in Lithuania and to examine how early career challenges and contextual conditions interact in shaping their professional experience.

2. Theoretical framework

Understanding novice teachers' professional experiences requires attention to both early career challenges and professional satisfaction (Tang et al., 2023). These interrelated dimensions form the conceptual basis of this framework.

Early career teaching is a critical phase of professional socialization shaped by the interaction between individual expectations and the structural conditions of the school context. During this transition, novice teachers often experience “reality shock” as they encounter complex classroom environments, accountability pressures, and diverse learner needs (Day et al., 2007; Toropova et al., 2021). Research shows that high workload, classroom management challenges, and limited preparedness may undermine well-being and professional commitment. From a theoretical perspective, these challenges can be understood through situated learning and communities of practice, where competence develops through participation in authentic school settings. However, unequal access to mentoring and supportive environments constrain professional learning and development (Toropova et al., 2021). Teacher buoyancy

and professional competence are key resources for coping with everyday demands, highlighting the early career phase as a formative period where professional satisfaction emerges as a key indicator of novice teachers' experiences (Tang et al., 2023).

Professional satisfaction among novice teachers is a multidimensional construct reflecting the evaluation of work, working conditions, and professional fulfilment. It plays a key role in professional development and is associated with stronger professional commitment, lower burnout, and increased teacher retention (Toropova et al., 2021; Han & Wang, 2022; Didžiulienė, 2023). Novice teachers often experience “reality shock”, facing challenges related to classroom management, workload, and role expectations, which may reduce satisfaction in the absence of adequate support (OECD, 2020). Accordingly, professional satisfaction can be understood as a dynamic process shaped by both individual and organizational factors. Although it does not fully capture overall well-being, it remains a key indicator of teachers' functioning, as it is linked to improved well-being, reduced stress, more effective pedagogical practice, and stronger organizational commitment (Toropova et al., 2021; Han & Wang, 2022; Zhou et al., 2024). Professional satisfaction thus provides a central lens for understanding beginning teachers' early career experiences and professional development.

3. Methodology

The study employed a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between school environment factors and professional satisfaction among beginning teachers. Data was collected through a questionnaire survey conducted in 2023. The sample consisted of 728 novice teachers from all municipalities in Lithuania, providing nationwide coverage (72% female and 28% male). Respondents evaluated statements using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The questionnaire included two scales comprising 23 items to assess professional satisfaction and dimensions of the school environment, including participation in school life, leadership, socio-psychological climate, working conditions, emotional involvement, and communication, as well as opportunities for professional growth. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS 23. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data, while inferential methods, including correlation and regression analysis, were applied to examine the relationships between school environmental factors and professional satisfaction. The internal consistency of the scales, assessed using Cronbach's alpha, indicated good reliability for the professional satisfaction scale ($\alpha = 0.84$) and acceptable internal consistency for the school environment scale ($\alpha = 0.76$). The study adhered to the ethical principles of social research, including voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent prior to completing the questionnaire.

4. Results

The analysis examined the relationship between professional satisfaction and school environment factors. Two composite variables were constructed: professional satisfaction and school environment dimensions.

Table 1. Correlation between school environment factors and professional satisfaction.

Variables	N	r	p
School environment – Professional satisfaction	728	0.17	<0.001

Correlation analysis (Table 1) revealed a statistically significant, though weak, positive relationship between school environment factors and professional satisfaction ($r = 0.17$, $p < 0.001$).

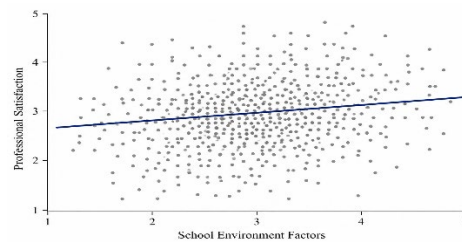
Table 2. Regression analysis of the relationship between school environment factors and professional satisfaction.

Predictor	Outcome	R ²	p
School environment	Professional satisfaction	0.42	<0.001

Regression analysis (Table 2) showed that school environment factors significantly predicted professional satisfaction, explaining 42% variance ($R^2 = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$). Overall, the findings indicate that school environmental factors play a significant role in shaping novice teachers' professional satisfaction.

The relationship between school environmental factors and professional satisfaction demonstrates a weak but positive trend (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Relationship between school environment factors and professional satisfaction.



The visual representation of the data (see Figure 1) indicates a weak but positive association between school environment factors and professional satisfaction. Although the distribution of data points reflects considerable variability, the upward direction of the regression line suggests a consistent, albeit modest, trend. This pattern supports the results of the correlation analysis, confirming a statistically significant relationship between the variables ($r = 0.17$, $p < 0.001$).

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that school environment factors play an important role in shaping beginning teachers' professional satisfaction. Although the relationship was statistically significant but weak, it suggests that early career experiences are influenced by multiple interacting factors (Tang et al., 2023). At the same time, regression analysis has revealed the strong predictive power, highlighted the importance of school context and working conditions (Toropova et al., 2021; Han & Wang, 2022). These results also support the idea that novice teachers experience “reality shock”, which may reduce satisfaction without adequate support (OECD, 2020). Overall, the strengthening key aspects of the school environment—such as participation, communication, and socio-psychological climate—can enhance professional satisfaction, well-being, and teacher retention (Didžiulienė, 2023).

6. Conclusions

School environment emerges as a decisive context shaping beginning teachers' professional satisfaction. Although the direct relationship appears modest, its strong predictive capacity underscores the deeper influence of organisational and relational conditions within schools. Creating inclusive, communicative, and psychologically supportive environments not only enhances professional satisfaction but also strengthens teachers' well-being, engagement, and long-term commitment to the profession.

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