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Teachers' Perceptions Concerning the Future of Professional Development in The Wake of The Covid-19 Pandemic

Gilad Cohen-Ynon[1]
Moshe Sharabi[2]
Anat Hillel[3]

Abstract

Teachers' professional development processes aim to improve the professional abilities of teachers working in schools. The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly accelerated the pedagogical changes in schools due to the requirement to teach/learn remotely, use technological tools while teaching, and emphasize the student's emotional and social needs. The present study examines what teachers expect from present and future professional development processes and the teacher educators leading them. A questionnaire was administered to 264 teachers and student teachers in the final stages of their studies. The findings reveal that guidance skills – the ability to manage student learning (supervision, guidance, training, discipline), Psychological resilience skills - the ability to adapt to challenging situations, and the ability to lead and manage learning groups received high scores as required future skills. The respondents prefer their future training provided by experienced teachers and school principals, short-term courses, and autonomous learning. In light of current professional development practices, these findings could significantly impact how professional development is conducted - in terms of the nature of the training, the content studied, and the identity of future teacher educators.

Keywords: Professional development, Covid-19, Pedagogical changes, Teacher educators

Introduction

In recent years, the Israel Ministry of Education has assimilated "future-oriented pedagogy" in schools – a pedagogy that emphasizes technology, autonomous learning, learning that develops social-emotional skills, interdisciplinary knowledge, and so forth. However, assimilation of this innovative pedagogy has met with relatively low success and has been comprehensively and successfully implemented in only a handful of schools. The Covid-19 pandemic led to numerous changes in learning and teaching processes in schools. It may be said that it led to a "quantum leap" in how teachers are required to work. Due to the social distancing schools were forced to endure, students learned remotely, lesson plans were rewritten, and teachers became proficient in techno-pedagogy. Extensive discussions were held in schools concerning autonomous learning and its high suitability for learning during the pandemic. Additionally, considerable emphasis was placed on close relations between teachers and students and the students themselves. There was an understanding that particular emphasis must be placed on these aspects due to social isolation and that social and emotional factors must be incorporated into the learning process.

These frequent changes strongly impacted teachers' professional development (PD) processes. Before the pandemic, these processes were conducted in a somewhat conservative manner. Learning was conducted frontally in a classroom, led by content experts, and employed predetermined methods (usually 30 hours of instruction per course). A conservative pedagogy was evident in the topics studied in the classes (language, mathematics, English, etc.).

[1] Ph.D. Lecturer and researcher, Jezreel Valley Academic College (corresponding author)
[2] Ph.D. Lecturer and researcher, Jezreel Valley Academic College
[3] M.A. Manager, Pisgah Center – Haifa

Haifa district teachers were surveyed to determine how they envision their professional development in the future. The respondents were asked to address their new needs as professionals and to make inferences about future needs.

Review of literature

Professional training is of great importance for teachers' PD and the added value they bring to the classroom. The term "professional development" in teachers' development is not clearly defined (Sancar et al., 2021). Professional development initiatives (PDI) have many different definitions in the literature. One of the clearest and most comprehensive was proposed by Merchie et al. (2018): "PDI is defined as activities explicitly designed for and provided to educators or certified educational professionals with a focus on enhancing their own and their student's knowledge, skills, and attitudes."

The literature views PD as a process of teachers' growth and development. Current PD models view an effective strategy as considering the teachers' emotional needs and motivations (Korthagen, 2017). According to Korthagen, teachers' PD occurs through knowledge, theory, and experience. In his view, much of a teacher's development takes place unconsciously; a teacher's learning is the product of their cognitive, emotional, and motivational aspects, as well as the social context in which they act; and learning occurs at different levels of multi-dimensional.

Thus, according to this concept, teachers' learning is a complex process that takes place on multiple levels and depends on the individual and their characteristics. Therefore, it is impossible to develop teachers uniformly; instead, different PD methods must be adapted to suit individual teachers.

Korthagen (2017) and others (Caena & Vuorikari, 2021) describe the PD process as an onion-shaped model (see Figure 1), in which behavior patterns, skills, beliefs, identity, and sense of mission contribute to and influence teachers' development and abilities.

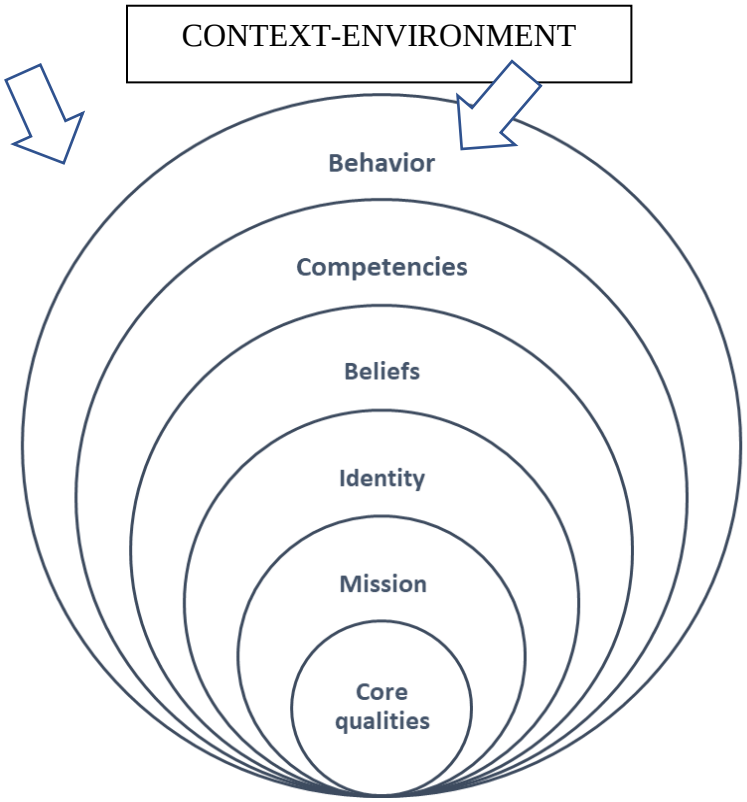


Figure 1. The model of levels in reflection (the onion model; Korthagen, 2017).

In addition to the complexity of the definition of PD, the methods by which this process takes place are varied and multidimensional. Therefore, "PD can entail a variety and multiplicity of initiatives (e.g., workshops, seminars, conferences, summer institutes, action research, and so on)" (Merchie et al., 2018). The author (2021) claims that reflective clinical learning is an effective PD method. Clinical learning is becoming increasingly widespread as a leading teacher education method, and clinical experience is acknowledged as crucial for professional preparation (Cuenca, 2012; Wideen et al., 1998; Wilson et al., 2001).

Another way teachers' PD takes place is through mentors or supervisors who can develop their soft skills. Glickman & Burns, R. W. (2020) describes PD as comprising two main tasks: (1) Collaboration and community: Developing interpersonal familiarity; developing quality placements; creating a culture of collegiality; helping teachers and educators cope with stress; and (2) Curricular and instructional support: Fostering reflective thinking; strengthening curriculum planning; providing focused instructional feedback; fostering theory and practice connections.

Teacher educators play a vital role in PD since they are responsible for the teachers' learning and development. Yet, the literature seldom addresses them. as noted by Meeus et al. (2018). Swennen and van der Klink (2009): "To date, the importance of teacher educators have received insufficient emphasis by policymakers; Partly, for this reason, it is often referred to as a hidden profession" (Swennen & van der Klink, 2009).

The present study examines teachers' preferences regarding the three parameters mentioned in this review: the content of PD, the methods of effective PD, and teachers' professional identity.

Procedure

In February 2022, a survey was conducted on teachers' preferences regarding PD practices in the future. The survey was emailed in the form of a questionnaire to 264 teachers and student teachers and addressed several aspects: First, how teachers perceive the skills they will need five years from now, and accordingly, which PD styles and patterns will help them to acquire and develop these skills. Second, the survey engaged with the desired identity and professional knowledge of the teacher educators who currently train teachers at the Pisgah centers.

Research tools

The study employed a questionnaire that examined several aspects:

1. Teachers' views regarding the skills and competencies they will need in the future (five years from now).
2. The identity of the professional teacher educators most suited to teach these future skills and competencies.
3. Competencies and knowledge required of teacher educators who lead PD in the future.
4. Future PD frameworks and patterns.

Sample

The sample comprised 264 teachers. Table 1 presents the distribution of the respondents by demographic variables. As Table 1 shows, most of the respondents are women (86.7%), Jews (89%), and hold a BA (35.2%).

Table 1
Distribution of the respondents by demographic variables

	Rate	**Percent**
Gender		
Male	35	13.3
Female	229	86.7
Population sector		
Atheist	3	1.1
Jewish	235	89.0
Arab	23	8.7
Russian	3	1.1
Education		
PhD	6	2.3
Engineer	3	1.1
BA student	3	1.1
BA	93	35.2
BEd	63	23.9
BSc	3	1.1
MA	51	19.3
MEd	42	15.9

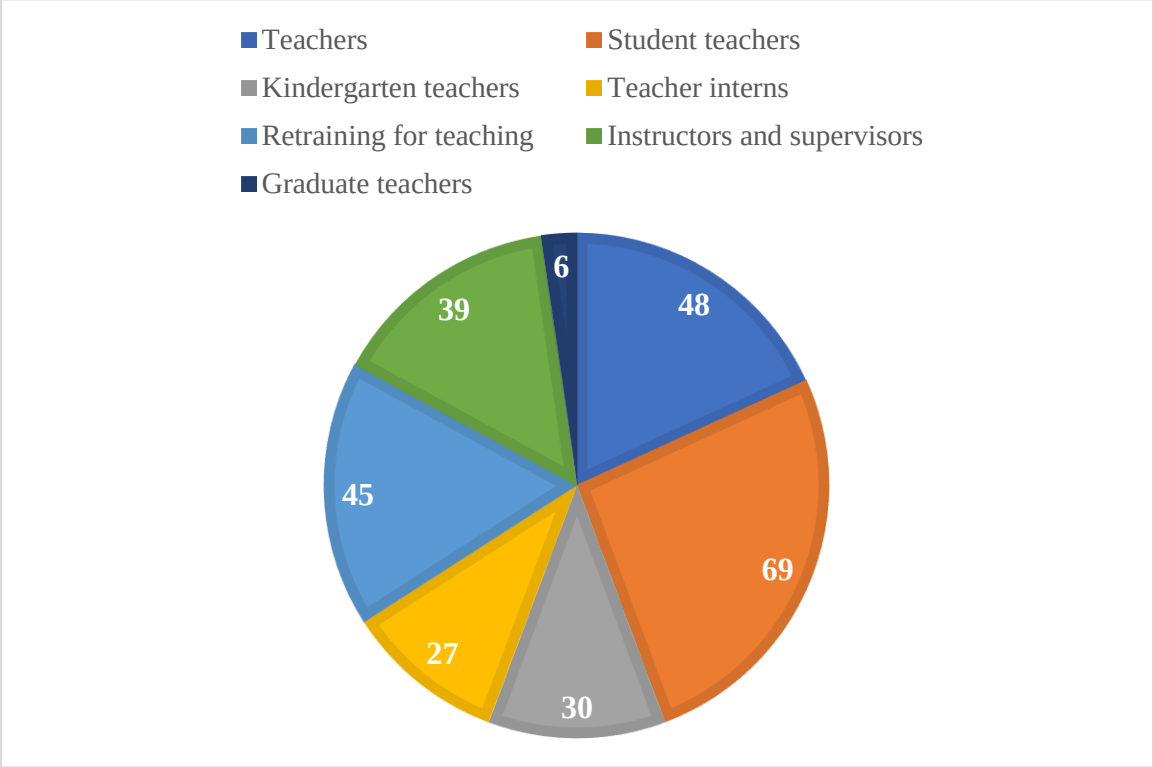


Figure 2. Distribution of the respondents by professional status

Results

First, the survey participants were asked about the degree of importance they ascribe to a range of future skills and the degree to which these skills should be prioritized in teachers' PD processes. The respondents could indicate several skills as their first priority (and their second and third priorities as well). Tables 2 and 3 present the findings:

Table 2
Skills chosen as a first priority by the majority of respondents

Skill	First priority (% of respondents)	
Ability to manage students' learning	50.4%	
Psychological resilience, ability to adapt to challenging situations	48.1%	
Skills to lead and manage learning groups	47.0%	

Only one skill stood out as a second priority: "ability to co-teach."

Table 3
Skills chosen as a third priority by the majority of respondents

Skill	Third priority (% of respondents)
Ability to learn autonomously	40.5%
Skills to lead the remote learning process	36.0%

Guidance skills, ability to manage students' learning (supervision, guidance, training, discipline), and psychological resilience, received high scores as required future skills. Most respondents chose the ability to learn autonomously and skills to lead remote learning processes as the last priority.

The distribution of respondents concerning the remaining skills was quite similar, and it is evident that they differed in their views concerning their importance: content expertise, ability to develop study materials, and teamwork skills.

Additional skills proposed by the teachers themselves in the open questions included creativity and thinking outside the box; emotional and pedagogical work suited to the current generation – emotional response, antifragility, ability to contain, emotional intelligence; values and inner belief; resilience and ability to rapidly adjust to changes; and using techno-pedagogical tools.

The second question examined the professional identity of the person most suited, in the respondents' view, to lead teachers' PD processes five years from now. The findings are presented in Table 4.

Table 4
Suitability to lead teachers' PD processes five years from now (N=264)

	Mean	**SD**
Experienced Teachers	3.48	0.61
School principals	3.01	0.87
Education department managers	2.2	1.03
Professional instructors	3.27	0.78
Academic lecturers	2.72	0.93
External content experts	2.51	1.06

According to the respondents, the professionals most suited to lead teachers' PD processes are experienced teachers (M=3.48), professional instructors (M=3.27), and school principals (M=3.01); and the least appropriate are education department managers (M=2.2) and external content experts (M=2.51). Academic lecturers obtained an average score (M=2.72).

The information provided in the open questions reveals that of significant importance was the future teacher educators' knowledge and familiarity with the difficulties and needs teachers experience, as well as their experience in their content world.

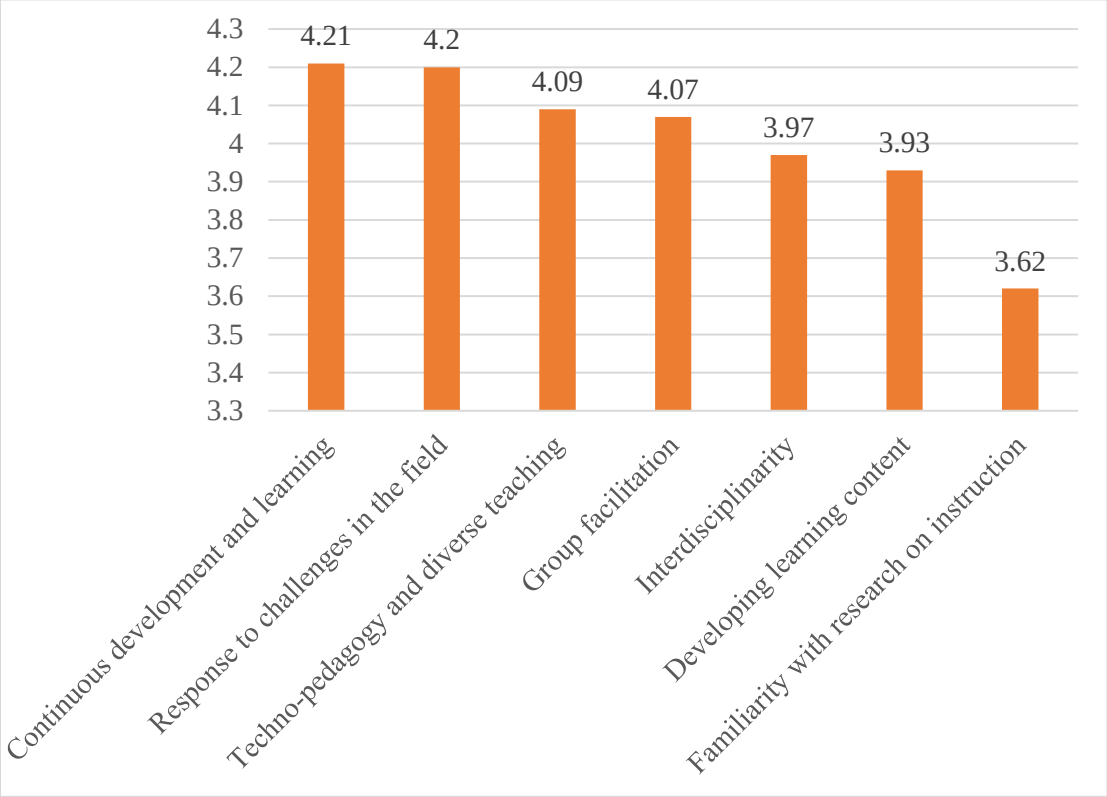
Experienced teachers were chosen because they are perceived to be more familiar than anyone else with teachers' needs; they bring knowledge from the field to the courses and link theory with practice. Most of the respondents felt this way regarding this population.

Content experts were primarily chosen because they are external to the education system, do not conform, and can introduce fresh content; on the other hand, concern was raised since they are not sufficiently connected to the field. The respondents expect **professional instructors** to bring knowledge from psychology, neurology, and emotional work. This is probably due to teachers' emotional and disciplinary problems with the current generation of children. On the other hand, **academic lecturers** were perceived to be theory experts who are not necessarily able to connect the theoretical knowledge in which they specialize to the reality in the classroom.

Education department managers were perceived as possessing management or administrative rather than pedagogical knowledge and insufficiently connected to teachers' development needs.

The respondents' views were divided concerning **school principals** – some felt that they are familiar with teachers' needs and can provide a response to them. In contrast, others claimed that their knowledge is more administrative and insufficiently connected.

The third question engaged with the competencies required of teacher educators who lead teachers' PD processes in the future. Figure 3 presents the findings.



* Scale 1-6

Figure 3. Mean importance of the competencies required of future teacher educators who lead teachers' PD processes

The ability to continuously learn, develop, identify and respond to challenges in the field was ranked as the most critical skill for teacher educators (M=4.21, 4.2, respectively). The skills ranked as being moderately important were knowledge of techno-pedagogy and group facilitation (M=4.09, 4.07, respectively). The skill ranked lowest (required to a lesser degree) was familiarity with the research on instruction (M=3.62).

Notably, none of the skills scored high on the scale, and the variance between the respondents was exceptionally high, indicating disagreement between them. Additionally, an attempt to conduct factor analysis revealed that this question presented only one factor, which attests to the respondents' difficulty distinguishing between the required instructional/educational skills. Making inferences about the skills required of future teacher educators was possibly too challenging for the respondents.

Several aspects of the competencies required of future teacher educators emerged from the open question on this subject:

1. Flexibility and ability to act in changing situations, creative thinking

"Ability to be and act within change, employ creativity and constant flexibility by the situation"; "Critical thinking, reflective thinking"; "Creativity, ability to cope with pressure."

2. Connection to needs in the field, teachers' experiences, and needs

"Ability to learn the needs of the field, the characteristics of teachers' difficulties and motivation. An expert in teaching and learning of teaching staff in the present era. A desire, passion, and curiosity to develop in the field they choose to teach"; "Ability to sense the group, and provide the right tools for it"; "Ability to relate to teachers' experiences"; "Ability to identify changing situations. Each framework and its characteristics".

3. Empathy and emotional intelligence

"Good interpersonal relations skills"; "Sensitivity and empathy."

4. A few respondents referred to values

"Expression of outlooks, and expression of values"; "Ability to conduct a value discourse."

5. Some respondents raised the issue of digital competencies

"Teachers should be digital experts"; "Possess extensive technological knowledge"; "Incorporation of technology and the internet more comprehensively."

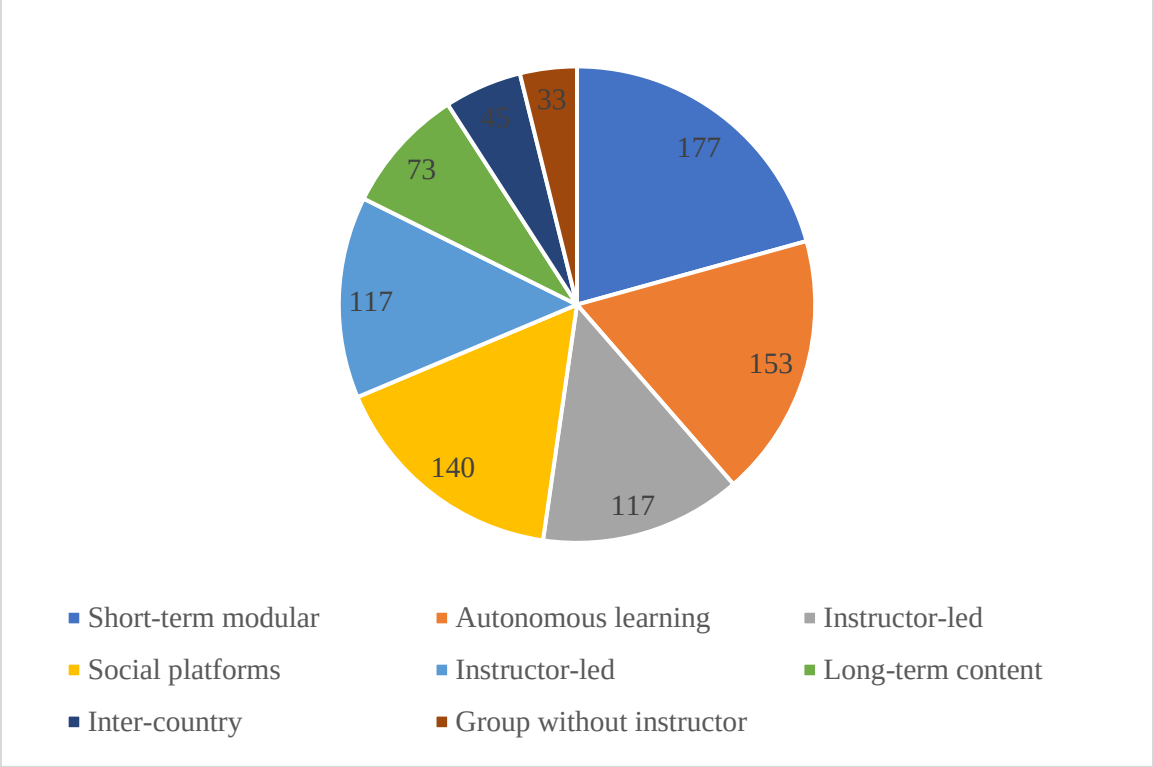
6. Ability to develop beneficial and supportive communication and promote a positive and pleasant classroom climate

"Possessing knowledge on the non-formal [education] and a particular field of content + (important) possessing knowledge and experience concerning different age groups"; "High ability in group facilitation"; "Therapeutic competencies that provide a suitable response to emotional situations, such as CBT."

7. Diverse knowledge and multidisciplinary skills

"Innovative skills and abilities in interdisciplinary teaching"; "Possessing diverse knowledge in several fields"; "Ability to listen and organize new information at a given time for different populations and age groups."
The last two questions engaged with the training frameworks for teachers and teacher educators.

The fourth question examined what will characterize teachers' PD five years from now. The findings are presented in Figure 4.



* Number of respondents in each category

Figure 4. The respondents' choices of the essential PD frameworks in the future

The PD frameworks chosen by most respondents were (in descending order) – short-term modular, autonomous learning, using social platforms and media, and instructor-led. A large percentage also chose long-term understanding of specific content.

The final question engaged with the respondents' conjectures regarding the training of future teacher educators who lead teachers' PD processes five years from now – what training frameworks will train them and provide the knowledge and the competencies required of them. The findings are presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Future training frameworks for teacher educators who lead teachers' PD processes

	Mean	SD
Academic training	3.14	1.04
Training at PISGAH centers	3.17	.94
Instructor-led training	3.22	.94
Training in schools	3.25	.99

No significant differences were found in the respondents' conjectures regarding this aspect. Additionally, the variance between them is relatively high, indicating different outlooks among the respondents.

Discussion

The study aimed to examine teachers' perceptions regarding the skills and competencies required of future teacher educators. As with other studies of this kind, it is based on the (somewhat chaotic) present and the needs of teachers in the present. This should be considered when using the findings to plan for the future.

When the skills required of future teachers were examined, skills associated with three aspects stood out in the survey: (1) Facilitation; (2) the interface with students – emotional, pedagogical, and disciplinary; and (3) psychological resilience and ability to change by changing situations.

Surprisingly, and prominent throughout the survey, the ability to learn autonomously or techno-pedagogical skills did not receive high scores from the teachers, despite being a significant facet of the Israel Ministry of Education's future programs. The teachers possibly felt that they had crossed that hurdle and now seek to receive more in-depth training in aspects relevant to the difficulties they are experiencing in the post-Covid era. When asked to indicate which skills they require, they mainly specified skills from the content worlds of agility, inner resilience, and ability to conduct emotional work with their students. The findings probably reflect the extended period teachers experienced professional uncertainty due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Similarly, the responses to the question "Who is most suited to lead teachers' PD processes five years from now?" correspond with the above, and it appears that in the teachers' view, the value of knowledge external to the education system, such as that provided by content experts or external lecturers, has fallen. They prefer to be trained by other teachers, mainly due to their familiarity with the reality in the field and their relevant knowledge and experience in dealing with similar situations.

It is possible that as a consequence of the past two years, during which teachers were bombarded with external knowledge, expert lectures, and so on, they now feel that this knowledge was not sufficiently connected to their actual needs and ability to contend with the complex situation. The value of experts, in their view, is in providing information that could not have been provided by other teachers, especially aspects associated with students' psychological issues – which teachers have been increasingly encountering.

The issue became even more complex when the teachers were asked to assess the required competencies for future teacher educators. They had difficulty responding to this question, and there is considerable variance between them and the mean assessments in all the aspects included in this part of the survey. Making inferences about the skills required of future teacher educators was possibly too challenging for the respondents.

The findings in this part may be summarized as the "holy trinity," which also emerged in the previous section, in which the teachers were asked to assess future skills they would need. It was found that teachers need educators who are familiar with the field, possess flexibility, resilience, empathy, and emotional intelligence, and can pass these skills on to them.

The study also presents surprising findings concerning the teachers' preferred PD trajectory. These results counter the prevailing perception in the teacher education system, whereby the training provided by an instructor is homogenous and relatively long. They prefer short modular courses provided on internet platforms or autonomous learning, the kind of learning that can provide them with accurate, immediate knowledge when needed. Guided learning (by an instructor) was their fourth preference.

Key points

1. the findings reveal exciting aspects regarding the respondents' preferences concerning professional training and development and the knowledge this training should provide. In the survey and their verbal responses, the teachers refer to a lesser degree to specific content, such as interdisciplinarity, autonomous learning, or content knowledge, and a greater degree to situational issues that fall under the concept of "resilience." They note the importance of emotional intelligence, emotional work with students, ability to read the situation and change accordingly and swiftly.
2. The study reveals that the respondents' trust in external knowledge provided by external experts has weakened, and the importance of experts is declining. On the other hand, there is an apparent demand for practical competencies – the teachers want to learn from their colleagues since they perceive them as possessing "real" or more "relevant" knowledge, and being more open to change, such as learning in ways they would not have considered in the past.
3. The issue of "readiness for change" that emerges in this survey constitutes an essential aspect in our view, and it allows us to cautiously predict that teachers, as a somewhat conservative profession, have emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic and its multiple lockdowns with greater openness for the necessary change. The present challenge now passes into the hands of those tasked with developing teacher education processes – the essential change needs to be acknowledged in how training is provided and knowledge is conveyed.

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