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Building a classroom community in primary education: findings from student observations

Abstract

The study examines how the length of teaching experience and the type of school influence primary teachers' pedagogical approaches to building a classroom community. Results of observed teachers' professional activities related to developing pupils' accepting behaviour, discipline, cooperation and self-assessment are presented on a sample of 137 primary teachers. A quantitative investigation with a structured observation method was used. Differences between teachers by school type were tested with the Mann-Whitney U-test and differences by length of teaching experience with the Kruskal-Wallis test. Results indicate that the school type and partly also the length of experience influence pedagogical approaches to purposeful building of a classroom community, which may have significant implications for teachers' professional development.

Keywords: primary teachers' professional activities, classroom community, development of pupils' life skills, observation, type of school, length of teachers' teaching experience

Introduction

A classroom community should meet the attributes of activity, a holistic approach to the pupil personality development and support of individuality. This holistic approach must necessarily connect with developing strong, respectful partnerships to understand and build on children's experiences and, as needed,

to strengthen any aspects of the developmental system where there are challenges to children's health and well-being (Darling-Hammond, 2019).

A good classroom community is a prerequisite for a successful curricular reform of education in Slovakia. Its main actor is the teacher. Teacher managerial competencies include knowledge and skills related to building a classroom community and life skills (Borer et al., 2024). Their development requires long-term guidance and active involvement of pupils in the learning process. It is important that pupils are given a reasonable amount of freedom allowing them to take responsibility for learning. A classroom community creates space where pupils and teachers are committed to a shared educational goal and achieve learning through social interaction (Česnavičienė et al., 2022; Adams & Wilson, 2020).

A curriculum reform concerns future teachers. The key step in their pre-gradual preparation is observing an experienced professional directly in teaching (Tarusha, 2024; Zhu, 2023). During their teaching practice, students reflect on processes related to building a classroom community.

The study analyzes observed differences in building a classroom community by teacher trainers in primary education. The aim is to examine to what extent the differences are related to the school type and the length of teachers' teaching experience.

Research Methodology

Research Background

The research problem was the question: *Do factors such as the type of school and years of teaching experience influence primary teachers' professional activities in building a classroom community?*

Observing educational reality is difficult and one observer is not able to observe many teachers at the same time. Thus, the method of structured observation by students in teaching practice was used for 13 weeks. During their continuous teaching practice, observers were present in the classroom during the whole instruction for at least 5 consecutive days. They used an observation sheet of teachers' classroom community forming activities, designed by experts at the Faculty of Education of Matej Bel University.

The observation was carried out by 137 students with 137 primary education teachers. Data collection ended in 2024. Students were identically trained by experts on the data collection method. Before the very research, students learned to identify the observed categories from video records. They watched

segments of instruction aimed at developing pupils' life skills. They recorded the occurrence of activities the teacher trainer used to develop them. They were the life skills identified as per conceptual changes in the Consolidated State Curriculum (2024): *accepting behaviour; managing discipline in learning; work in a team; self-assessment*.

Table 1 presents teachers' professional activities captured objectively and expressed numerically by frequency of occurrence during instruction on the scale: 5 – certainly yes, 4 – yes, 3 – neither yes nor not, 2 – not, 1 – certainly not, 0 – do not know.

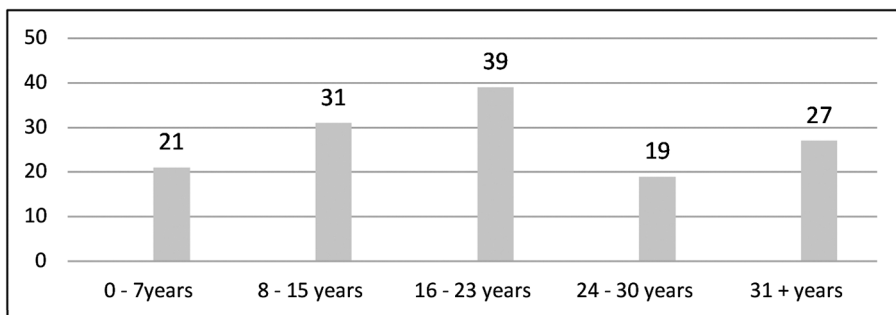
Table 1. Overview of observed professional activities within four life skills

Life skills	Professional activities	Short name of activity
Accepting behaviour	Teacher encourages pupils' accepting and tolerating behaviour by purposeful activities	Accep1
	Teacher notices and positively evaluates pupils' mutual friendly behaviour	Accep2
	Classroom has a rule for pupils to maintain the order and well-being in the classroom	Accep3
	Teacher has an equal approach to upbringing and education in the classroom	Accep4
Managing discipline in learning	Classroom has rules to manage pupils' discipline in learning	Disc1
	Teacher appreciates and verbally evaluates pupils' efforts	Disc2
	Teacher appreciates and verbally evaluates pupils' perseverance	Disc3
	Classroom has rules to tackle pupils' behavioural and learning problems	Disc4
Work in a team	Teacher purposefully encourages pupils' regular cooperation	Team1
	Classroom has rules for work in groups	Team2
	Classroom has rules for open mutual communication	Team3
	Teacher purposefully encourages pupils' sense of humour	Team4
Self assessment	Classroom has a regular method for pupils' self-assessment	Self1
	Teacher purposefully supports pupils' self-confidence by various activities	Self2
	Teacher purposefully builds pupils' responsibility for their own learning	Self3
	Teacher purposefully encourages pupils' flexibility and overall creativity	Self4

Sample

The research sample consisted of 137 primary school class teachers in regions of Slovakia. Sampling was purposive. Respondents met the criteria relevant for this research. They were divided into five groups by LTE (Graph 1).

Figure 1. Research sample by length of teaching experience (N 137)



The distribution of the sample matches the distribution of elementary school types in the Slovak Republic in 2024 (Network of Schools and School Facilities, available on: <https://www.minedu.sk/siet-skol-a-skolskych-zariadeni-slovenskej-republiky/>).

Characteristics of the research sample by type of school are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Research sample by type of school

School		N	N [%]
Type of school	State school	115	84
	Non-state school	22	16
Total		137	100

Instruments and Procedures

The research goal was formulated and hypotheses set for the variables – length of teaching experience and type of school.

Length of teaching experience (LTE)

Experience gained by practice forms teacher strategies, ways of interacting with pupils, and classroom management (Babiaková et al., 2023; Tabasa et al., 2024). Beginning teachers face challenges in classroom management, pupils' discipline and creating a supportive learning environment. Experienced teachers adopt more effective strategies for problem solving and building a positive classroom climate (Stahnke & Blömeke, 2020). Despite this knowledge, it is not clear how LTE influences specific professional activities in developing pupils' life skills. We have decided to verify it empirically. *There is a statistically significant relationship between teachers' LTE and professional activities developing pupils' four life skills.*

Type of school (TS)

The Slovak school network includes state, church and private elementary schools. All school types must follow the same approved national curriculum. They differ only in the school founder. The founder of state schools is a municipality or town, non-state church schools are founded by the church; non-state private schools are founded by a natural person – non-entrepreneur, a natural person – entrepreneur, or a legal entity. Non-state schools differ in their preferred education philosophy. Church schools prefer the Christian paradigm, and private schools prefer innovative conceptions of education. Differences in the schools are seen also in teachers' strategies for building a classroom community and influencing the school ethos (Green et al., 2020). *There is a statistically significant relationship between TS and teachers' professional activities developing pupils' four life skills.*

Data Analysis

Considering the ordinal nature of the data, with values ranging from 1 to 5, non-parametric statistical methods appropriate for ordinal data were employed to evaluate differences in the distribution of variables between groups. When comparing two groups, the Mann-Whitney U test was applied. For comparisons involving more than two groups, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used, which extends the Mann-Whitney U test to multiple independent groups and evaluates whether the distributions of values differ among them. In cases where

the Kruskal-Wallis test indicated statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$), post-hoc pairwise comparisons were conducted using Dunn's test with Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons. While these tests do not explicitly compare medians or means, descriptive statistics, including medians and means for each group, were calculated and visualization of distributions was included to provide additional context for interpreting the results. All analyses were conducted in R (version 4.3.3).

Results

LTE

There is no statistically significant relationship between teachers' LTE and encouraging pupils' accepting behaviour by purposeful activities, appreciating a mutual friendship and establishing maintenance of order in the classroom. The hypothesis was not confirmed. Graph 2 shows that such activities are certainly or partly present in the classroom. Most frequent answers for all groups of teachers are on the scale "5 – certainly yes" and "4 – yes".

As to LTE, there is a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.0166$) between teachers only in an equal approach to education in the classroom (Tab. 3).

There is no statistically significant relationship between LTE and establishing discipline in learning. The youngest teachers (3.42) and the oldest teachers (3.48) have the lowest average values in the item "Classroom has rules for tackling pupils' behavioural and learning problems".

There is no statistically significant relationship between LTE and encouraging team cooperation. Establishing rules for organizing group work in the classroom yields the value "3 – neither yes nor not" as the most frequent. Regular cooperation of pupils in groups or pairs is most frequently (average 4.19) supported by teachers with experience from 0 to 7 years.

LTE has no statistically significant relationship with activities related to pupils' self-assessment. Teachers with experience of 31 and more years have the least established regular method for pupils' self-assessment (average 3.28). Teachers with the least experience support pupils' responsibility for their own learning the most (average 4.43).

Figure 2. Frequency distributions of responses (0-5) for 16 variables based on the teacher’s length of experience. “1” indicates “certainly not”, while “5” represents “certainly yes”. The response “0” (“do not know”) was included in the frequency calculations but excluded from further analyses. Dashed vertical lines denote mean values, and solid lines represent medians for each category. The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test (KW) are displayed in the upper-left corner of each panel with exact p-values shown for significant differences and $p>0.05$ for non-significant results

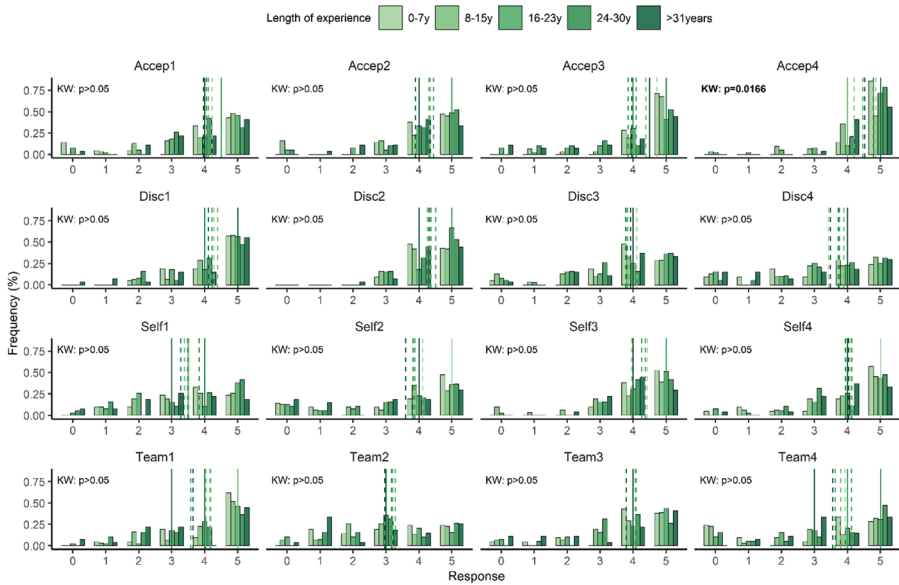


Table 3. Median values (with means in parentheses) calculated for each variable based on the teacher’s length of experience. The results of Kruskal-Wallis tests (p-values) assess overall statistical differences between the categories. Asterisks indicate pairs of categories with statistically significant differences ($p<0.05$) identified through post-hoc comparisons

Variable	Length of experience (years)					
	p-value	0–7	8–5	16– 23	24–30	> 31
Accep1	0.8520	4.5(4.22)	4(3.97)	4.5(4.11)	4(4.05)	4(3.96)
Accep2	0.3861	4(4.33)	5(4.35)	5(4.3)	5(4.44)	4(3.89)
Accep3	0.1043	5(4.71)	5(4.39)	4(4.08)	5(3.84)	4.5(3.96)
Accep4	0.0166	5(4.86)	4(4.2)	5(4.47)	5(4.79)	5(4.52)
Disc1	0.9402	5(4.29)	5(4.39)	5(4.23)	4(4.11)	5(4.12)
Disc2	0.4617	4(4.33)	4(4.26)	4(4.51)	5(4.37)	4(4.3)

Variable	p-value	Length of experience (years)				
		0–7	8–5	16– 23	24–30	> 31
Disc3	0.9790	4(4.1)	4(3.81)	4(3.83)	4(3.78)	4(3.92)
Disc4	0.8515	4(3.42)	4(3.89)	4(3.76)	4(3.72)	4(3.48)
Team1	0.4056	5(4.19)	5(4.03)	4(4.16)	4(3.58)	3(3.64)
Team2	0.9655	3(3.19)	3(3.21)	3(3.29)	3(3.16)	3(2.96)
Team3	0.8018	4(4.05)	4(4.07)	4(4.08)	4(3.79)	4(3.79)
Team4	0.5075	4(3.94)	4(3.79)	4(3.63)	5(4.13)	3(3.56)
Self1	0.6305	4(3.52)	4(3.39)	3.5(3.47)	4(3.83)	3(3.28)
Self2	0.7365	5(4.11)	4(3.81)	4(3.88)	4(3.82)	4(3.59)
Self3	0.2670	5(4.43)	4(3.96)	5(4.37)	4(4.26)	4(4)
Self4	0.8128	5(4.15)	4(3.94)	4(4.11)	4(3.95)	4(4.04)

TS

The hypothesis that TS influences developing pupils' life skills by teachers was confirmed. Almost all observed activities are statistically significant in relation to TS (Graph 3).

It is clear that there is a significant relationship between TS and encouraging pupils' accepting and tolerating behaviour ($p=0.0074$), mutually friendly behaviour ($p=0.042$; establishing rules for life in the classroom, ($p=0.0043$). The relationship between TS and an equal approach to education in the classroom is not statistically significant (Tab. 4).

Rules for managing pupils' discipline in learning ($p=0.0055$), appreciating pupils' efforts ($p=0.0412$) and appreciating pupils' perseverance ($p=0.0017$) show statistically significant differences in favour of non-state schools. Rules for tackling pupils' behavioural and learning problems show no significant differences ($p=0.1374$).

Teachers' activities encouraging pupils' regular cooperation ($p=0.0004$), rules for work in groups ($p=0.0005$) and rules for open mutual communication ($p=0.0034$) show statistically significant differences in favour of non-state schools. Teachers at these schools are likely to support pupils' team work more. On the contrary, the variable "Teacher purposefully encourages a sense of humour" returned no statistically significant difference ($p=0.1627$).

The least significance is in establishing the life skill of self-assessment. A regular method for pupils' self-assessment shows a significant difference

($p=0.0295$) in favour of non-state schools. On the contrary, there are no statistically significant differences in supporting pupils' self-confidence ($p=0.0764$), flexibility and creativity ($p=0.0876$) and building responsibility for learning ($p=0.1593$). Self-assessment may not be markedly influenced by TS within the dimensions examined.

Figure 3. Frequency distributions of responses (0–5) for 16 variables, categorized by school founder (private vs. state). “1” indicates “certainly not”, while “5” represents “certainly yes”. The response “0” (“do not know”) was included in the frequency calculations but excluded from further analyses. Dashed vertical lines denote mean values, and solid lines represent medians for each category. The results of the Mann-Whitney U test (M-W U) are displayed in the upper-left corner of each panel with exact p-values shown for significant differences and $p>0.05$ for non-significant results

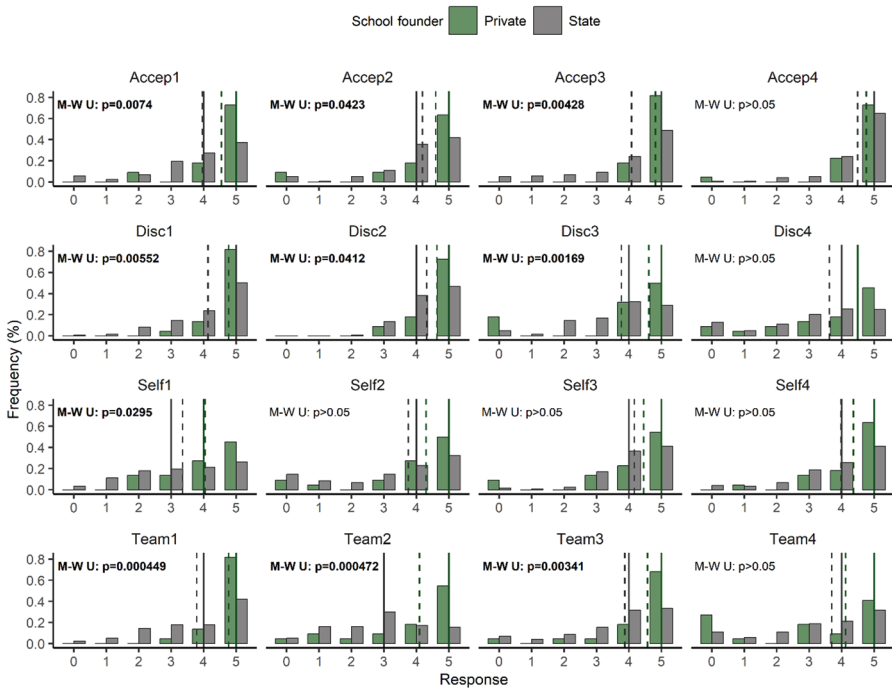


Table 4. Median values (with means in parentheses) calculated for each variable, categorized by school type (state vs. private). The results of Mann-Whitney U tests (p-values) assess statistical differences between the two categories.

Variable	Type of school (Founder)		
	p-value	State	Private
Accep1	0.0074	4 (3.96)	5 (4.55)
Accep2	0.0423	4 (4.19)	5(4.6)
Accep3	0.0043	5 (4.08)	5(4.82)
Accep4	0.2489	5 (4.49)	5(4.76)
Disc1	0.0055	5 (4.14)	5(4.77)
Disc2	0.0412	4 (4.32)	5(4.64)
Disc3	0.0017	4 (3.77)	5(4.61)
Disc4	0.1374	4 (3.62)	4.5(4)
Team1	0.0004	4 (3.79)	5(4.77)
Team2	0.0005	3 (2.99)	5(4.1)
Team3	0.0034	4 (3.87)	5(4.57)
Team4	0.1627	4 (3.69)	5(4.13)
Self1	0.0295	3 (3.35)	4(4.05)
Self2	0.0764	4 (3.75)	5(4.3)
Self3	0.1593	4 (4.17)	5(4.45)
Self4	0.0876	4 (3.98)	5(4.36)

Discussion

According to the Consolidated State Curriculum (2024) one goal of elementary education is to build a values and culture-based framework in pupils' personalities. It orients and accompanies them in planning and achieving life goals, as well as in participating in social, cultural and global activities.

The results of our research show that TS is an important factor in meeting this goal. At non-state elementary schools, as a rule, school management, teachers, pupils and parents agree on the values, principles and rules of the school functioning. They cooperate in creating and fulfilling a common idea of the education process and goals (Waldo, 2024). They consider building a classroom community a basis of the school culture and ethos. At state schools, with more pupils and teachers, agreement on values is more difficult.

Teachers in non-state schools have higher scores in building accepting behaviour, establishing discipline and supporting team cooperation. Only strategies for managing classroom discipline are similar both at state and non-state schools.

Developing self-assessment shows a statistically significant difference between state and non-state schools only in the regularity of pupils' self-assessment. Pupils' self-assessment is not regular at state schools. Supporting pupils' self-confidence, responsibility and creativity is comparable in teachers of all schools.

On the contrary, LTE has almost no influence on the occurrence of professional activities for purposeful building of a classroom community by developing pupils' life skills. This has been confirmed also by other researchers (Ahmed et al., 2024; AbdulRab, 2023). They suggest that LTE is not a main determinant of pupils' social competence development, but rather individual educational attitudes and school as a functional ecosystem. A statistical significance appears only in an equal approach to education in the classroom. Teachers with LTE from 8 to 15 years are likely to take instruction and pupils' performance as more important than upbringing and building life skills. This finding is in line with research indicating that mid-career teachers tend to be more results-oriented and testing-oriented, while more experienced teachers with longer experience return to a more holistic approach to education and emphasize pupils' emotional well-being (Meshko et al., 2021). Future research may include the influence of teachers' personality dispositions and teaching styles.

The culture and ethos of the institution also play a role in developing life skills. As Green et al. (2020) state, school openness and adaptability influence teachers' ability to respond to pupils' needs and create an environment fostering holistic development of personality. If a school functions as a learning organization, it can adapt to challenges and create conditions for pedagogical work also in the field of upbringing.

A limitation of the research is the subjective view of observers on educational reality. However, the research experience of students can be seen as developing professional competencies as per the "Teacher as a Researcher" concept. A limitation is also the uneven sample of state and non-state schools, resulting from the distribution of school types in Slovakia.

Conclusions

A new finding in the field of pedagogical sciences is the findings on the determinants of teachers' approaches to building a classroom community. Teachers of state and non-state schools differ in emphasis on social aspects of education. Non-state school teachers more often include situations aimed at developing pupils' life skills in the educational process. They support formation of a classroom community by thoughtful practices. The length of teaching experience does not significantly influence formation of a classroom community. A spe-

cial group is teachers with 8–15 years' teaching experience, in a stable phase of professional development. They emphasize fulfilment of formal curricular requirements. They prefer state-formulated educational standards to developing pupils' social and personal competencies, which may relate to the society's pressure to compare pupils' performance at schools.

The research results suggest a need to support teachers in the development of their professional activities by further education. The findings raise new research challenges for examining primary teachers' views on current possibilities of their soft skills development. An important step in relation to the on-going school reform is also modification of methodological guidelines and evaluating mechanisms to motivate teachers to perform activities aimed at developing pupils' life skills. A benefit for the scientific field of pedagogy is the empirically proved finding that teachers' professional activities developing pupils' acceptance, discipline in learning, teamwork and self-assessment depend on the school type and its preferred upbringing and education paradigm.

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