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## IMPROVEMENT OF PEDAGOGICAL SKILLS THROUGH TEACHER PARTICIPATION IN PROFESSIONAL COMPETITIONS

### MEJORA DE HABILIDADES PEDAGÓGICAS A TRAVÉS DE LA PARTICIPACIÓN DOCENTE EN COMPETENCIAS PROFESIONALES

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#### ABSTRACT

This article analyses the impact of the contest “Teacher of the Year” to improve pedagogical skills and creativity of the participants of the contest. It has been revealed that teachers who, constantly improve their skills successfully and easily perform tasks in the competition develop their creativity and it motivates them to introduce new methods in their teaching process. The positive role of participation in the competition is noted, as it helps to develop the teacher's activity, increases his psycho-pedagogical, methodical, informational and communicative competence, provides the opportunity for a teacher to reflect in new ways of doing things, get a professional expertise and try to overcome himself. The conclusion is made, that the contest “Teacher of the Year” has a positive influence on the improvement of the pedagogical excellence of teachers and contributes to disclosing of their personal potential.

#### Keywords:

Pedagogical experience, pedagogical practice, pedagogical education, practical activity, teacher.

#### RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza el impacto del concurso “Profesor del Año” para mejorar las habilidades pedagógicas y la creatividad de los participantes del concurso. Se ha revelado que los docentes que mejoran constantemente sus habilidades realizan con éxito y facilidad tareas en la competencia desarrollan su creatividad y los motiva a introducir nuevos métodos en su proceso de enseñanza. Se destaca el papel positivo de la participación en el concurso, ya que ayuda a desarrollar la actividad del docente, aumenta su competencia psicopedagógica, metódica, informativa y comunicativa, brinda la oportunidad al docente de reflexionar sobre nuevas formas de hacer las cosas, obtener una experiencia profesional y tratar de superarse a sí mismo. Se concluye que el concurso “Profesor del Año” influye positivamente en la mejora de la excelencia pedagógica de los docentes y contribuye a la divulgación de su potencial personal.

#### Palabras clave:

Experiencia pedagógica, práctica pedagógica, educación pedagógica, actividad práctica, docente

## INTRODUCTION

One of the main activities for improving the pedagogical skills of teachers are conferences, seminars and competitions. The organization and holding of the regional contest "Teacher of the Year" are aimed at identifying and supporting the creative teachers, who actively implement innovative educational programmes, dissemination of innovative teaching experience, upgrading the teachers' skills, motivating teachers to improve the quality of their work and their continuous professional development.

Teaching competitions accumulate valuable teaching experience. They become a kind of catalyst for innovative ideas and confirm the loyalty to the best traditions of domestic education (Girba et al., 2014). An analysis of the works published in recent years (Vilenchik, 2018; Korneva, 2019; Kirillov, et al., 2020; Kruglikova, 2021; Chudakova, & Dogadina, 2021). convinces us that there has been a positive change in society's attitude towards education and the teaching profession. Who is the winner of the pedagogical excellence contest? In order to model his image and determine the secrets of his success, an analytical study of the contestants themselves is needed.

Despite the sufficient coverage of the problems of teachers' participation in pedagogical excellence competitions in the publications of different years, there is no research in psychological and pedagogical discourse that highlights the issues of improving the professional skills of teachers through their involvement in the competition movement. Therefore, our aim in this article is to identify the correlation between teachers' participation in pedagogical excellence competitions and the improvement of their professional competencies. The object of the study is to test the effectiveness of the Teacher of the Year competition.

In our opinion, professional competitions are becoming an integrative form that allows not only to increase the level of professional competence in a short period, but also to reach a qualitatively new level of professional vision, to transform teachers' level of professional thinking (Dedurina et al., 2019).

The competition «Teacher of the Year» aims to develop the creative activities of teaching staff in updating the content of education taking into account the new federal state educational standards and the federal law "On Education in the Russian Federation", to support innovative technologies in the organisation of the educational process, to increase the professional skills of teaching staff and to affirm the priorities of education in society.

The task of increasing motivation for continuous professional development, stimulating teachers' creativity, creating conditions for identifying and sharing best practices will be achieved through the development of all-Russian pedagogical events, such as all-Russian competitions: "Teacher of the Year", "Pedagogical debut" and others. All this support professional communities. In this regard, the importance of professional competitions for teachers is increasing, which allow identifying the most talented teachers with outstanding professional and creative abilities and introducing innovative technologies in education.

Competitive activities have a significant impact on the motivation of professional growth and real professional development. It should be noted that the preparation of materials for each competitor is a real school of professional development, as a teacher during this period focuses his efforts on reflecting and structuring his experience most intensively. Mastering the technology of self-analyzing the teaching experience, singling out the most valuable components, developing the ability to evaluate the scientific validity, appropriateness and technological effectiveness of their teaching, all this becomes a prerequisite for successfully, passing the competition.

The competition puts the participant in the position of a researcher and it actualizes the difficulties they experience in their own practice; it shapes the need to overcome their own difficulties and it objectifies the need for self-improvement.

The methodological literacy of a modern teacher is based on the understanding of the need for a creative approach to the available technologies and methods, their adaptation to the real conditions of teaching, taking into account the understanding of different approaches and highlighting the most useful elements in building individual teaching practice.

The Russian Teacher of the Year competition is one of the most effective and innovative forms of revealing the level of professionalism and creative potential of teaching staff.

Participation in the competition promotes the development of the teacher's skills. It increases his/her psychological, pedagogical and methodological, knowledge as well as his/her communication competence. It gives the teacher an opportunity to think about his/her activity in a new way, to get its professional expertise, to test and overcome himself/herself.

The system of competition tasks allows the best teachers to demonstrate their vision of different directions in education for their own professional growth and

personal development (Pakhomova, 2003a; Pakhomova & Duganova, 2006; Privalova, 2008; Pakhomova, 2016).

The competition tasks reflect such accents of modern changes in educational policy as a demand for clear goal-setting, orientation on the development of students' competence in identifying key problems and the ability to find ways to solve them, gaining experience in planning and modelling in education, conducting evaluation and reflective analysis.

The competition tasks have continuity between the different stages and can be presented as logical links that connect the stages of the competition.

Our interest through research focuses on several issues: teachers' competence to apply knowledge in practice, their interest in different aspects of the learning process, their creativity and innovation according to the knowledge acquired, and opportunities for individual activation in the learning process.

The aim is to identify the relationship between teachers' participation in pedagogical excellence competitions and the improvement of their professional competences. The research uses methods that allow to study the experience and creativity of teachers in pedagogical activities.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

An experimental study to identify the correlation between participation in professional pedagogical competitions and the improvement of professional competence was conducted with the teachers of the Chechen Republic who participated in the Teacher of the Year competition over the last five years (2016 to 2021). Of the 20 teachers between the ages of 29 and 45, there were five men and fifteen women. The sample by school teaching discipline determined the predominance of Russian language and literature teachers (12 people), followed by history and social studies teachers (4 people), primary schools teachers (2 people), physics teacher (1 person), and mathematics teacher (1 person).

The object of the study is to test the effectiveness of the Teacher of the Year competition. The survey was conducted to determine the impact of the competition on improving teachers' pedagogical skills and creativity. Twenty teachers participating in the Teacher of the Year competition over the last 5 years. This research is based on two assumptions:

1. The Teacher of the Year competition has a positive impact on improving the pedagogical skills of the participants.

2. Teacher of the Year competition positively influences the development of teachers' creative skills.

Interviews were used in the research. The questionnaire was designed for teachers participating in the Teacher of the Year competition and included open-ended and closed-ended questions. In addition to the questionnaire, we conducted an unstructured interview with the contest participants in order to obtain relevant information on the questions that were the focus of our interest. In order to gain a better understanding of the teachers' activism as well as their commitment to pedagogical excellence issues, we studied the assignments during the competition.

Our interest through research focused on several issues: teachers' competence to apply knowledge in practice, their interest in different aspects of the learning process, teachers' creativity and innovation according to what they have learned, and opportunities for individual activation in the learning process.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When discussing the importance of a teacher's professional excellence, some of the main aspects of this phenomenon should be highlighted. Pedagogical excellence of a teacher, in our opinion, is a set of personal and professional qualities. Along with professional competence it makes sense to talk about such personal qualities as love for children. The factor of unconditional love for children determines to a certain extent the teacher's readiness to interact with them. Here it is reasonable to talk about the peculiarities of development of modern children as representatives of a completely new generation, with information thinking and world outlook. Modern children do not know how to trust adults, including teachers.

Therefore, it is important for every educator to know how to communicate in the context of the surrounding reality. A teacher's own interest in his or her own profession is also reflected in the opportunity to participate in various contests that demonstrate professional capacities. Participation in pedagogical competitions increases the teacher's own motivation to be recognised among both the teaching and parental communities. It is clear that a teacher's professional development depends on the abstract environment of the competition. For the participating teacher himself/herself it is important to shape his/her need for self-improvement. It is also important for a teacher to be valued by his/her students, who value openness and sincerity in communication. In our understanding, a teacher's motivation to participate in competitions is a kind of mechanism for the realisation and disclosure of his personal potential.

In line with the notion of creativity as novelty, high quality and appropriate to the teaching, this study defined creativity in a way that is consistent with traditional definitions, but also incorporates more subjective and contextual considerations specific to teaching (the ‘appropriate to the task’ component). “Creative thinking” was described as important for the development of creative thinking; and thus there is a certain ‘cross-pollination ‘ of knowledge, as teachers are open to new ideas from other disciplines or experiences.

Thus, the teachers who participated in our study identified four components of professional excellence as the main ones. The answers were distributed as follows Table 1.

Table 1. The main components of professional excellence.

	Components of professional skills	Respondents
1.	Creative thinking	20
2.	Real-time learning	12
3.	Cross-disciplinary integration	20
4.	Risk-taking	9

Educators described how they applied creative approaches in their classrooms that used real-world learning, cross-curricular connections and a willingness to take intellectual risks. As we have already noted, these were themes that emerged organically from the interview conversations and that related to the competition.

“Risk taking is often a vital component of creativity. Existing thinking and research on creativity often note the importance of interdisciplinary thinking”, replied one respondent. “I assume that another component of learning/teaching in the real world, which is not usually mentioned as the quality of good teaching in general, is one part of this framework of creative learning tendencies”, responded another. Our discussion of real-world learning, cross-curricular connections and the willingness to take intellectual risks highlights the core concepts of creative teaching. This way of dissecting the world is an analytical technique, useful for separating themes and analysing them for understanding, discussion and examples. But the actual relationship between the themes in practice may be more fluid and intertwined. In this way, the three themes support each other in a integrated and creative approach to learning.

Another key finding of this study suggests that external activities always influence the way creative teachers think about their classrooms because teachers tend to ‘teach who they are’, said one respondent, ‘and one of the external activities are competitions like this, which help identify

other excellent teachers and also test their own skills during the competition.

As Dewey writes: “The ideas which elevate art to a pedestal are so vast and subtly ubiquitous that many people would rather be repulsed than delighted if told that they enjoyed its occasional entertainment, at least in part, because of its aesthetic quality. The art that has the most vitality for the common person today is what he does not consider art; for example, film, jazz music, comics. The challenge is to restore trust between the subtle and heightened forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, actions and suffering that are universally recognized as constituting experience,” said one respondent.

“As creative thinkers have often asserted the importance of a ‘rich personal microculture’ (thinking, interests, activities and ways of being in the world) that encourages new combinations of ideas to achieve creative goals,” said one respondent. Thus, creative thinking is not a talent that is unique to certain people, but a matrix of knowledge and inspiration from our life experiences, which can be enhanced if we expand and are free to draw from such diverse personal knowledge/experiences.

The notion of creativity in hobbies or outside life versus creativity in professional achievement is analogous to the paradigm of small ‘c’ (or ‘everyday’ creativity) versus the paradigm of big ‘C’ (or ‘sublime’ creativity).

The lived experience of the teachers in this study shows that small creativity expressed in activities or creative interests has a profound effect on how gifted educators use sublime pedagogical creativity. The personal value they place on creativity in student learning reflects the construct of creativity.

“Many teachers today struggle to balance high stakes testing and credentials with the ability to act flexibly, independently and creatively in their classrooms. Despite being some of the most recognized and respected teachers in the country, many of the teachers in this study noted how acutely aware they are of the systemic challenges facing creativity,” said one respondent.

At national level, education policies may limit innovation in learning. However, at the local level there is always administrator who support innovation and creativity. One respondent said that he that he had a chance to work in a school where the administrators welcomed new and interesting methods to teach in the school. In one of his interview he remarked:

“My principal over the years has been very supportive in that he agrees with me to try new things, he also sees the



fire in the students' eyes, the passion for learning and the passion for science. When the administration sees this, wow, not only do our achievements accelerate, but so do many other things that we don't necessarily measure."

His students are increasingly meeting and exceeding their standards (even in a poor and impoverished rural district) because of his willingness to focus on creative and diverse approaches to learning, and due to the support of the administration that allows him to do so. But he admits that many teachers are not so lucky and summarizes the current systemic problems as such:

"I think there is a lot of fear. And when teachers teach in fear, they take few risks. And ultimately I think it will destroy our educational system, this fear-based atmosphere where it's all about performance."

The role of creativity in teacher education is not always clear and varies between schools and programs. Learning behaviours and values are often shaped or grounded in learning before the work begins. Consequently, we stress the importance of introducing creativity into teaching and learning practices at this stage of teacher education.

Helping young teachers to be creative is one important way in which curricula can prepare new teachers to think of themselves as creative individuals. Teacher education courses that encourage connections between creative hobbies and interests, and teacher practice, lessons and activities can be important to consider. Pre-service teachers could be well served by being required to take courses in art or music (or anything of interest outside their main teaching specialisation) and then integrate this interdisciplinary knowledge into their courses. Providing senior teachers with more experience to be involved in planning art/design or music-based lessons is also a step towards more creative teaching practices.

In our view, it is necessary to use as many different resources as possible to develop interdisciplinary thinking and learning. This can be done by offering special courses with a particular focus on disciplinary integration. Above all, this strategy is applicable to secondary school teachers. Undoubtedly, such integrated approaches can also be offered to primary school teachers before they start. But, we must take into account the features of Russian education. The school teachers are often in their own 'bunkers' and such courses are rarely offered to those who can benefit the most.

Modern tertiary institutions need to meet modern demands by training the right professionals. Faculties should make sure they integrate theory and practical teaching, as theory constantly evolves due to changes in theoretical

thought and education and these changes are incorporated into the various educational institutions. Faculties provide professional training that focus on instilling research and academic skills on the one hand, and acquiring educational and methodological content, strategies and models of teaching on the other.

Future educators appropriate knowledge and skills needed for their careers (Boicu & Zabihi-Moghaddam, 2021; Cucco & Larsen, 2021). Theory is necessary, but not always sufficient for teacher to be successful. All theory needs to be supported by the necessary practical skills and knowledge. Practical training can provide adequate support for theoretical knowledge. Future teachers are able to participate in the practical learning process through experience. Evidence suggests that educator learning is enhanced in the context of schools as professional communities, where teachers engage in regular professional dialogue with each other and receive guidance and adequate learning resources. In addition, teachers are also given the opportunity to participate in various workshops, contests and competitions that contribute to improving their pedagogical and creative skills.

Pedagogical experience is complemented by pedagogical practice and demonstration sessions on the one hand and theoretical knowledge on the other.

In this article, we analyse the impact of the "Teacher of the Year" competition on the improvement of pedagogical skills of teachers over the last 5 years.

The modern world objectively challenges its members to navigate freely in a dynamic marketplace, in an ever-renewing information space. This, in turn, obliges educators to be creative, because the modern stage of scientific, technological and information revolution is characterised by hyper-competition. The actors of the global community, i.e. individual corporations and countries are striving for scientific, technological and economic superiority.

The most important factors of competitiveness include:

1. Availability of qualified, creative staff.
2. The ability of management to organize and stimulate creative activity, their readiness to accept the innovative thought and their ability to create conditions for its implementation in life are of the utmost importance. In this regard, the system of professional development faces the problem of the qualitative improvement development and promotion of pedagogical staff. They need to be highly educated, creative, competent and able to train such graduates, who will lead the country to the forefront of scientific and technological progress.

This problem can be successfully solved by developing and implementing a scientifically grounded system of early detection, selection and further development in the process of the professional development of gifted and talented teachers. That is establish a creative, intellectual and professional foundation for Russian education. One of the ways to create such a system is to organize and hold professional competitions "Teacher of the Year", "School of the Year", etc.

Since the development of teachers' creative abilities lies at the heart of the competition let us consider the peculiarities of creativity in the educational process.

Since the start of the new millennium, teaching institutions have started to focus increasingly more on the aspect of creativity. This aspect of personality is an individual's social, emotional, cognitive and professional advantage and is also one of the most sought after qualities of thinking. Educational institutions widely acknowledge the need for creativity and they believe they should nurture and support it within their learning environments (Azak & Molal, 2021; Bhattacharjee, 2021). Unfortunately, creative learning have not been formally studied enough, there is little research done to better understand how creative teachers think, work and function in the classroom and how their creative methods can serve other teachers in the future.

We need to understand successful educators' creative behaviour both in their personal life and in the classroom. However, the abstract and complex nature of creativity makes it difficult to study, this is further complicated because no single consistent definition of 'creativity' exist, neither do we know its impact on effective learning.

Currently Russian education focuses mainly on high-performance and standards-based assessment while simultaneously recognising the importance of creativity in learning. There is no doubt that creativity and the development of critical and creative thinking are vital in the 21st century. This necessitates researching successful creative learning practices as exhibited at the Teacher of the Year competition.

Given the lack of a common understanding, one of the aims of this study is to understand how such competitions contribute to the development of teachers' creativity. Moreover, we sought to explore how their perceptions of creativity influence their practice in the classroom.

Some research shows that personal hobbies and aspirations enrich creative people and this in turn makes them creative in their profession. Root-Bernstein found that successful scientists are more likely to engage creative pursuits and nurture their personal interests in areas outside

their field of expertise (Root-Bernstein, et al., 2008). More importantly, these specialists are convinced that their interests and hobbies have played a significant role in their careers. Thus, this study also investigates the relationship between personal and professional creativity in teaching and tries to discover where successful teachers get their creative ideas.

So-called successful or "highly professional" educators were thoroughly interviewed in an attempt to find answers to these complex and obscure questions. In this study, successful teachers are seen as those who had either been awarded the Teacher of the Year award or who were one of the few national finalists. This award is renowned for excellent and exceptional teaching, and the creativity of the finalists are often what distinguishes them from the rest. During the interviews, the educators gave their perspectives on teaching and they explained how creativity is part of their lives and thinking, and how their personal passions and hobbies inspire creative teaching.

In recent decades, there has been an emphasis on standardization and accountability in Russian educational policy, which is quantified through standardized tests. When teachers are deprived of opportunities to develop creativity in their classrooms, students cannot begin to develop the mastery of critical or creative thinking. This does not mean that there is no place for standards or accountability criteria, but rather that the current high-stakes testing model or 'teacher-proofed' curricula inhibit the development of creativity in classrooms and students.

This is problematic because on a global level, creative thinkers are needed to solve problems and develop solutions in today's society (Lynch et al., 2021; Turbovskoy, 2021). The world's leading companies, such as Apple or Microsoft, are looking for progressive employees. In mathematics or science, creativity is closely linked to professional achievement. In matters of design, art or music, creativity is a driving force in moving society forward.

These teachers often used art, movement or music as an effective and creative method to teach ordinary school subjects. Including these creative strategies in the national curriculum would enhance teachers' performance and help embed creative teaching methods. Moreover, making these approaches common knowledge will be useful to all teachers (Duganova & Pakhomova, 2015).

Creativity is eagerly studied at educational institutions, but today formal education is still characterised by inflexible policies and curriculum, emphasis on standardised assessment and an attitude of simply 'learning for a test'. This does not necessarily provide room for creativity.

This study aimed to better understand personal and professional creativity, with a focus on how these approaches — characterised by authenticity, art, aesthetics, inter-discipline, open-mindedness and taking risks — can help to meet the learning and research needs of the future.

## CONCLUSIONS

Thus, the experience of conducting professional mastery competitions shows that pedagogical competitions have become an effective form of professional development and pedagogical competence enhancement. Participation in competitions requires thorough preparation, in the course of which a teacher becomes a researcher of his/her own pedagogical experience; acquires knowledge of new pedagogical technologies; gets acquainted with scientific developments in the field of pedagogy and psychology and uses diagnostic methods in evaluating the results of his/her pedagogical experience by using diagnostic methods to assess the results of his (her) teaching experience.

For a teacher, competition is not only a form of professionally competing and demonstrating his or her abilities to achieve a quality result, but also a means of discovering personal difficulties and lack of professionalism, which in turn stimulates the need for further professional training.

The Teacher of the Year of Russia competition is one of the most effective innovative forms of revealing the level of professionalism and creative potential of teachers. The main focus of the competition remains the pedagogy of dignity and free individuality, cooperation and creativity.

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