

EMANCIPATION OF PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES OF A TEACHER ASSISTANT IN THE PROCESS OF MENTORING AT PRE-SCHOOL INSTITUTION

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Abstract. *When discussing the assistant's emancipated participation in the educational process, it is important not to forget the pre-school teacher who often becomes a formal or informal mentor to the teaching assistant. It is the role of the mentor, his/her influence, that is one of the most important factors in the process of emancipation of the teaching assistant. Interrelationships based on support, respect, tolerance, sharing of experience and responsibility, constant help to each other, and support turn mentoring into a high-quality process that ensures emancipation. It is important that the mentor clearly defines what he/she expects from the assistant and is willing to help him/her to develop. Otherwise, it will not make sense to talk about the emancipation of the teaching assistant's professional activity. Relying on the qualitative research findings it is possible to state that a teacher assistant is supposed to provide a qualified support to an educator and a pupil in ordinary and inclusive educational process. It requires from teacher assistant wide range of competences, enabling him/her to demonstrate rationality, clear value system, professionalism, i.e. to be an emancipated personality. The process of emancipation takes place when there is the harmony among the set of emancipatory legal, philosophical, social, and educational aspects and the personal reality perception, activity and will. In order to develop the emancipation of a teacher assistant's, the competence of the mentor plays the key role, especially his/her abilities to encourage and empower the mentee's independent, still community - directed solutions. Thus, the reversivity of the mentoring process comes to the focus of the attention. The proof of the teacher assistant's emancipation success is considered to be the process of reverse mentoring. The qualitative content analysis of the interviews of the teaching assistants working in pre-school education institutions revealed that the emancipation of teaching assistants is observed in the answers of all informants, but the emancipation of their activities in the mentoring process is only partially ensured.*

Keywords: *emancipation, mentoring, pre-school education, pre-school education teacher assistant.*

Introduction

For quite a long time, classes in various educational institutions have been conducted not only by a teacher, but also by a teacher's assistant. In America, these specialists have been known since the 1960s. Having in mind the fact that teachers work with students with different abilities and knowledge, the assistant performs particularly important functions: help the students with learning difficulties and support those who quickly cope with the given tasks, i.e., individualizes and differentiates the content of the training, if necessary, also conducts inclusive education (Liasidou, 2012; Giangreco, 2013; Ryyanen, Nivala, 2017). Thus, the role of the teacher's assistant in the current complex educational process is particularly relevant, as it creates conditions for a higher quality of the educational process. Full participation in creating a higher quality educational process from the teacher's assistant requires reflection that inspires self-development, making independent decisions that would influence education. Thus, a teaching assistant should be rational, critical thinking, moral, social, and communicative, i.e., emancipated personality (Lissovoy, 2010; Radford, 2012; Čiučiulkienė & Bankauskienė, 2015; Setlhako, 2020).

The problem of the research: the performed documentary analysis and research data demonstrate the lack of conditions for the emancipation of professional activities of teacher assistants in pre - school education institutions.

The object of the research is the emancipation of the activity of a pre-school teacher assistant.

The aim of the research: to reason the emancipation of the activity of a preschool teaching assistant in the mentoring process.

Research methods: research data were collected using a semi-structured interview. The analysis of the findings was performed using the qualitative content analysis method. Scientific research findings reveal that in most cases, mentors create favorable conditions for the emancipation of the professional activity of teacher assistants: they consider the suggestions and opinions of the assistants, scaffold their improvement, share responsibility, and encourage the reversibility of mentoring. Still, there is a lack of legal empowerment of assistants, more frequent reflection on their work, cooperation among the participants of the educational process. So, the emancipation process is gradually commencing, but there are areas to be improved.

The research is based on humanistic and social constructivism theories. In order to answer the research questions, a qualitative semi-structured interview and a focus group discussion were used. Qualitative inductive thematic analysis was used for data analysis.

Literature review

In different countries teacher assistant is defined in different ways. Giangreco (2013) points out that in the world, a person who helps a teacher is called variously - assistant of a pedagogue, teacher's assistant, educational assistant, paraprofessional, paraeducator, learning assistant. Also, these specialists can be called teaching assistants, classroom assistants. The MUKIS website (2014) indicates that the position of the student attendant is closely related to this profession. In the literature and documents of Lithuanian authors, a person who helps a teacher is usually defined as a teacher's assistant. Still, it connotes help not only for the teacher, but also for a special child, class, parents, and the community. The assistant can be considered as an intermediate link between the subject teacher and the social pedagogue (Vilkeliene, 2004).

The teacher's assistant cooperates with the pre-school teacher, special pedagogue, a speech therapist, and other specialists working with the child (group of children), helping the children to use their potential more productively in the educational process. Educators and specialists advise the teacher's assistant on the specifics of providing special assistance in case of one or another disorder. The assistant should also participate in the meetings of the Council of Teachers, the Child Welfare Commission discussing plans, programs, methods, methods, and intensity of assistance for individual work with a child (group of children). Sharples, Webster & Blatchford (2015) present the recommendations for teaching assistants' work in the context of everyday activities. The authors distinguish four essential areas, which are presented in Figure 1.

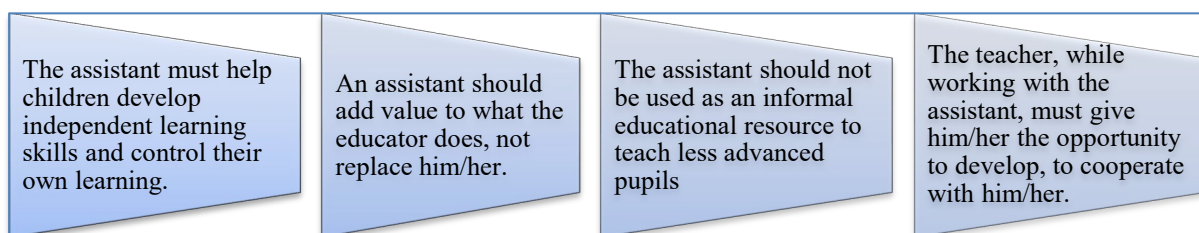


Figure 1 Recommendations for the teaching assistant's work in the context of daily activities (Compiled by Anglickienė & Čiučiulkienė. Reference: Sharples et al., 2015)

It is clear, that the teaching assistant occupies an important place in the educational process and must be professional in many areas. Adequate professional training is undoubtedly important to be able to do one's job properly. Only a qualified, willing, and motivated assistant will be an advantage. Here it is worth paying attention to the concept of volition. Willpower is a quality that enables people to do amazing and complex work, to implement ideas, not to give up, to achieve work and creative achievements. This is an expression of strong will. Personality development is also related to the training of the will, and the

will is a characteristic of a person, who manifests herself/himself in the purposeful regulation of one's actions and activities, the pursuit of a set goal, making every effort to overcome external and internal obstacles (Gennara, Peetz, & Milyavskaya, 2023).

The "help" of an unqualified teacher's assistant, who is not willing to work and improve, who lacks will, can become a distraction. To avoid disturbances, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of cooperation with pedagogues, specialists, the institution's administration, and the parents of the children. One of the most important directions of this cooperation is the connection between the teacher assistant and the teacher working in the group. Pre-school teacher often becomes a formal or informal mentor to the teaching assistant. The teacher is constantly around. The assistant learns from him/her. Mentor's duty is to create all conditions for the assistant to learn, to take over the good practice. Here attention becomes concentrated on the multiple competences of the teacher-mentor who to some extent makes an impact on the professional development of the teacher assistant.



Figure 2 General competences of a preschool teacher - mentor (Compiled by Anglickienė. Reference: Monkevičienė & Autukevičienė, 2011)

While reviewing the content of a preschool teacher – mentor competences it is possible to observe several thematic aspects that characterize teacher – mentor activities. Personal and social block highlight value-based mentoring aspects, information and assessment blocks underline responsible communication, including understanding of legal documents and institution rules. Management and teaching/consulting blocks alongside with managerial skills imply the philosophical constructivistic teaching aspects. This thesaurus of competences

enables a benevolent teacher-mentor to take care of the well-being and development of his/her assistant. By advising him/her, indicating opportunities and ways to improve his/her competences, expand his/her horizons, the teacher-mentor of the preschool institution will contribute not only to the quality of education process but also to the emancipation of the teacher assistant.

Nowadays, there are quite a few definitions of emancipation. Alvesson and Willmott (1992) give one of the older but still relevant definitions of emancipation. They define emancipation as the process by which individuals or groups free themselves from repressive social and ideological conditions, especially those that impose socially unnecessary restrictions on human for the expression and development of consciousness.

Today, emancipation expands its content, acquires new shades of interpretation. The rapid development of sciences, interdisciplinary scientific trends provide this concept with the new integral, sometimes even metaphorical meanings (Čiučiulkienė & Bankauskienė, 2015). In the legal sense, emancipation is the legal empowerment of a person in his/her professional field, which is revealed in documents defining the specifics of professional activity, normative legal acts. At the philosophical level, emancipation can be understood as rational thinking, which, discovering and creating new knowledge, leads the personality towards enlightened action based on cultured, liberative and moral argumentative practice. Philosophically, emancipation is also closely related to the perception of personal responsibility. In the educational sense, emancipation can be interpreted as a process whose priority is personality change, based on the perception of reality, will and activity. A person's positive attitude towards improvement in his/her professional field, consideration of opportunities for improvement and career advancement, allows us to assume that he/she is moving towards the emancipation of his/her professional activities. At the social level, emancipation can also be interpreted as the successful socialization of a person in the workplace community. The opportunity to demonstrate one's professional abilities, the transition from formal to informal relationships, and finally - the recognition of others leads to the conclusion that a person experiences emancipation (Radford, 2012; Čiučiulkienė & Bankauskienė, 2015).

For the successful implementation of the emancipation process, it is important that the conditions for the implementation of each of the four mentioned aspects are ensured during it. The process of emancipation of a teaching assistant begins when he/she gets acquainted with the documents defining his/her activities. This process, under favorable conditions, continues at the philosophical level, when a person considers his/her personality traits, values, interests, and competences. Later, there is a need to improve in one's professional field, the will to act emerges. Finally, there is full involvement in the social life of the institution, a quest for recognition. A successful process of emancipation, liberation from another person's dependence, prejudices, mistakes, or limitations leads to the

transformation of the assistant into an emancipated one, i.e., a worker who is aware of reality, has activity and will.

Furthermore, it is worth to note that a teacher's assistant is a person who helps a teacher, working with the students who have certain educational difficulties. It is irreplaceable help to implement the educational process in a high-quality manner. Thanks to this specialist, the possibilities of each student's involvement in education are improved, not excluding those with special educational needs, but on the contrary - giving them the opportunity to become active participants. However, working with a teacher's assistant can also lead to certain problems: excessive attention to pupils with SEN, thus disturbing their independence, loss of the teacher's needs to educate all children in the group, taking into account their abilities and needs; lack of qualification of assistants, etc. However, knowing and understanding these problems and their seriousness makes it easy to prevent them from taking root.

During the analysis of documents and literature, it also became clear that a teacher's assistant must have a wide range of competences, demonstrate various abilities, which are also reflected in the abundance of functions performed by him/her. The specifics of the assistant's work require that he/she be distinguished not only by certain general abilities, but also by special knowledge, since these specialists work in preschool education groups attended by children with milder or more severe disabilities.

The emancipation of the teaching assistant can be analyzed in four essential aspects: legal (legal empowerment), philosophical (self-evaluation), educational (personal development) and social (professional socialization). The emancipation of the teaching assistant is manifested in the process of reverse mentoring, when not only the mentor, but also the person under his/her patronage can transfer the accumulated experience and knowledge.

Methodology

A qualitative research data were collected while conducting expert semi-structured interview. The interview questions were formulated while relying on the theoretical aspects revealed in the theoretical part from the concepts of emancipation and mentoring by distinguishing criteria and indicators. Questions posed to teaching assistants were created according the results of theoretical analysis. They can be grouped into five main themes (see Table1).

Table 1 Thematic content of the questionnaire (made by authors)

No.	Title of the theme
1.	Emancipation as a legal empowerment of the teaching assistant.
2.	Philosophical aspects of the emancipation of the teaching assistant's activities: formation of value orientation
3.	Social aspects of the emancipation of the teaching assistant's activities
4.	Educational aspects of the emancipation of the teacher's assistant's activities;
5.	The mentor's competencies that emancipate the activities of the teacher's assistant and enable reverse mentoring.

The interview questionnaire consists of 14 questions. 15 teacher assistants were involved in the interview. Main criteria of the sampling were the work experience of 2 years. All participants were females. The purpose and course of the study, issues of ensuring confidentiality were discussed, and the agreement of the discussion participants to record the conversation with a voice recorder was obtained. The duration of the discussion was 1 hour 45 minutes. The audio recording of the discussion was transcribed into a computer file in Microsoft Word format. The research instrument used for the interview study is a semi-structured interview. For its implementation, 14 main questions were prepared based on the inductive method (see Table 2).

Table 2 Research questionnaire content (made by authors)

Theme	Semi-structured interview questions	Links to the research problem
Emancipation as legal empowerment of teaching assistant.	How does a mentor help you understand the documents governing your activities?	This group of questions aims to reveal whether the teaching assistant is legally empowered in the institution where he/she works. What is the role of the mentor in the context of the emancipation of the legal assistant teacher?
	What are the competence requirements of your profession?	
	What is the mentor's role in your decision-making?	
Philosophical aspects of the emancipation of the teaching assistant's activities: formation of value system.	Reflection of your activity. How do you do reflection independently and together with a mentor?	Šios klausimų grupės klausimais siekiama atskleisti mokytojo padėjėjo emancipaciją filosofiniame kontekste, ir kokia yra mentoriaus įtaka jo vertybinių orientacijų formavimuisi.
	Your responsibilities: how responsible does the mentor make you feel?	
	Do you discuss values that are important to you? What is your attitude towards sharing your experience with a mentor?	

Social aspects of the emancipation of the teaching assistant's activities.	In what ways do you get involved in group/community life? What is the mentor's help?	The questions of this group aim to reveal the emancipation of the teaching assistant in the social context and what the influence of the mentor on the process of his/her socialization at work is.
	Describe your cooperation with the group educator - mentor.	
	Describe your cooperation with the specialists working in the institution. What is the mentor's influence in the communication between you and the specialists?	
Educational aspects of the emancipation of the teacher's assistant.	In what ways, how often and why do you improve your competences? The attitudes of the mentor and the administration regarding your development.	These questions aim to reveal the aspirations of the teacher's assistant in professional development, what motivates him/her to improve and whether the conditions for this improvement are created in the institution.
	How much effort does it take for you to follow the instructions given by the mentor?	
The mentor's competences that emancipate the activities of the teacher's assistant.	What support do you feel from a mentor when you face difficulties at work? Comment.	These questions aim to reveal the importance of the mentor's competencies in order to achieve the emancipation of the professional activities of the teaching assistant.
	What competences of a mentor do you value the most? What negative qualities do you see?	

During the interview, the research participants were left free to initiate new topics or develop those that seemed important to them thus leaving enough space for their evaluations. Qualitative content analysis was carried out according to the steps recommended by Mayring (2014).

Research results

The deductive content analysis was conducted while centering around five major themes: Emancipation as understanding major legal documents and work rules; Formation of the value system; Mentor and mentee communication – moral argumentative conversation practice; Education – an emancipation vector of mentee’s development; Reverse mentoring – the evidence of teacher assistant’s emancipation. Main themes contain 11 categories and 30 subcategories (See Table 3). While summing up the findings of qualitative content analysis, it can be said that legal, philosophical, social, educational aspects of emancipation of teacher assistants can be seen in the answers of all informants. However, to be able to say that the interviewed assistants are emancipated in their professional activities, there is still a lack of the desire to improve the established order.

The most attention should be paid to the lack of legal empowerment of assistants (Table 3, Theme 1, category 1, subcategory 1.4): most of the informants lack knowledge about the documents regulating their activities, about their responsibilities. The knowledge about it is quite abstract. There is also a lack of a bigger mentor and the intervention of the administration. It is they, especially the newly arrived specialist, who should provide all the necessary information on this matter. Knowing that legal empowerment is the first step towards emancipation, we should pay more attention to it.

During the analysis of the answers to the philosophical emancipation part, represented by value centered activities (Table 3, Theme 2, Category 4) it became clear that there is a great lack of self-reflection of the teaching assistants. It happens that activity reflection does not take place together with the mentor. This is an area that needs to be paid attention to. Reflecting on one's own activities and reviewing the aspects that need to be improved helps not only to improve oneself but also to improve the curriculum. A similar situation emerges with responsibilities that are not entirely clear to the assistants. One should have familiarized oneself with them at the stage of legal empowerment.

However, positive aspects can also be observed - these are rather significant manifestations of the reversibility of mentoring, which are revealed when the mentor and the assistant willingly share and exchange available knowledge, information, and other resources. This shows that the process of emancipation in the professional activities of teacher assistants is taking place, but there are still areas for improvement (Table 3, Theme 5).

Table 3 Manifestation of themes, categories, and subcategories of “Emancipation of professional activities of a teacher assistant in the process of Mentoring” (made by authors)

Main themes	Categories	Subcategories
Emancipation as understanding major legal documents and work rules.	1. Studying professional activity documents.	1.1 Knowledge of the content of documents. 1.2 Lack of familiarity with documents. 1.3 Mentor's help in getting to know the documents. 1.4 Lack of mentor's help in getting to know the documents.
	2. Professional requirements for a teacher's assistant.	2.1 Special knowledge. 2.2 Personal characteristics.
Formation of the value system	3. The mentor's influence on the assistant's decisions.	3.1. A teaching assistant's approach to sharing his experience with a mentor. 3.2. Implementation of a values-based mentoring model.
	4. Reflection of the teaching assistant's activities.	4.1. Value guidelines for reflection. 4.2. Ability to analyze successes and failures.

Mentor and mentee communication – moral argumentative conversation practice	5. Mentor and mentee reasoning activities	5.1. Decision-making through communication and cooperation. 5.2. Final decisions are made by the mentor.
	6. Involvement of the teaching assistant in the life of the group and the community of the institution.	6.1. Experiences of involvement in group/community. 6.2. Ways of engaging in group life. 6.3 Ways to engage in community life. 6.4. Mentor support in getting involved in group/community life.
Education – an emancipation vector of mentee’s development	7. Responsibilities of the teaching assistant.	7.1. Knowledge of one's responsibilities. 7.2. Experience comes with responsibility. 7.3. The mentor's approach to the assistant's responsibility. 7.4. Sharing of responsibility.
	8. The teacher's assistant's motivation to improve his/her competences.	8.1. Ways of improving competences. 8.2. Frequency of competence development through qualification courses. 8.3 Mentor, administration support and creation of conditions for improving competences.
Reverse mentoring – the evidence of teacher assistant’s emancipation.	9. Cooperation between teacher assistant and mentor.	9.1. Ways of self-reflection of activity. 9.2. Self-reflection of the activity is not carried out. 9.3. Discussion of the activity with the mentor.
	10. Expression of the teacher assistant's will.	10.1. Willingness to try. 10.2. Quality of work.
	11. The willingness of the teaching assistant to share the experience.	11.1 The mentor's openness to learning from his/her protégé. 11.2. Protégé's readiness to share his/her achievements and give qualified recommendation to the colleagues and mentor.

In the field of social emancipation, it became clear that all respondents feel fully involved in the life of the group in which they work, as well as in the community of the entire institution. Although the mentor's help in forming relationships with the team was almost not evident, the conditions were created for the assistants to get involved in social life on their own, gradually, independently.

During the analysis of the educational aspects of emancipation, it became clear that teacher assistants spend a lot of time on personal development: they attend seminars, read literature, etc. There are also manifestations of a mentor's help: he/she recommends the necessary sources, provides information, offers seminars, encourages personal improvement. It also turned out that all the survey participants are considering becoming teachers in the future. The analysis of the mentor's competences that emancipate the activities of the teaching assistant revealed that all mentors provide support to their assistant, which is very

important in the emancipation process. Mentors have many competencies that help this process to be successful.

Conclusions and discussion

The participants of both studies, who are in favor of early education, claim that it would be beneficial for children experiencing social exclusion, as it helps to reduce social problems. When discussing the legal empowerment of the teaching assistant, which, according to Čiučiulkiene and Bankauskiene (2015), is the first step towards the professional emancipation of the teaching assistant, it can be noticed that it is not given much importance. Teacher assistants lack knowledge about the documents that regulate their activities. Neither the institution's administration nor the mentor usually helps in this matter and does not help the assistant to be familiar with these documents.

When discussing the emancipation of teaching assistants on a philosophical level, it is appropriate to mention one of the components - responsibility, which is discussed by Lissovoy, (2010), Ratzinger (2016) and De Ridder, Van der Weiden, Gillebaart, Benjamins & Ybema, (2020). According to the authors, this is one of the features of justice, the foundation of moral behavior. By taking responsibility for his/her actions and deeds, a person expresses himself/herself as a full-fledged personality, assumes it as his/her own identity. The conducted research revealed that the assistants feel a great responsibility in their work, but they cannot precisely define their responsibilities. The division of responsibility between the mentor and the assistant also became evident, which can be considered a very positive thing.

When discussing the emancipation of the teaching assistant in an educational aspect, one can refer to Radford (2012) and the insights of Tur Porres, Wildemeersch and Simons (2014). According to the authors, with a favorable assessment of oneself and one's own knowledge in professional activities, the need for personal development arises - the need to raise one's qualifications, interest in career opportunities. The strong will of the assistants also becomes apparent. The desire to work and perform their work as well as possible, consideration of career opportunities, constant interest in them, improvement of their competences. This shows a successful emancipation in the educational field.

When discussing the emancipation of the teacher's assistant at the social level, it is possible to refer to those that emphasize the necessity of cooperation, planning, coordination, and implementation of joint activities among the participants of the educational process to help students with special needs overcome learning difficulties. The authors note that all of this is sorely lacking. During the analysis of the qualitative research, the lack of cooperation between teacher assistants, pedagogues, and specialists became evident. Although, according to the teacher's assistant, he/she must receive all the information about

the child's individual characteristics, the identified disorder, and educational recommendations, this is still lacking in practice.

The significance of the mentor's competences for the development of his/her protégé is discussed by Montvilaitė and Janulaitienė (2014), revealing that the mentor's competence is closely related to the development of the protégé. The research revealed that assistants work with professionals in their field who can provide all kinds of help, support, and support that help them improve. This shows that mentors can create favorable conditions for assistants' emancipation.

The emancipation of the professional activity of a teacher's assistant is a social state dominated by perception of reality, activity and will. The process of emancipation takes place under favorable legal (legal empowerment), philosophical (self-evaluation), educational (personal development) and social (professional socialization) conditions. The combination of these four aspects of emancipation and perception of reality, activity and volition, their fulfillment in professional activities, with the help of a mentor, gives the teacher's assistant liberation, allows him to feel independent, a full participant in the educational process.

The competence of the mentor, the ability to convey the available knowledge, is important is very important while emancipating the activities of the teaching assistant. It must be characterized by general: personal, social, information and communication, assessment, managerial, training and consulting, didactic: selection of educational content, educational planning, application of educational technologies, creation of educational environment, educational process management competencies. (Lissovoy, 2010). With their help, helping to form the basic competences of the teaching assistant, which would involve him/her in the educational process. The proof of the success of the emancipation of the teaching assistant is the process of reversibility of mentoring (Marcinkus - Murphy, 2012; Augustinienė & Čiučiulkiene, 2013), during which not only the mentor, but also the assistant shares available knowledge, advice, and useful information (Jordan & Sorell, 2019).

To enable the emancipation of professional activity teaching assistants, lack knowledge about the content of the documents regulating professional activity and the help of mentors in this area. Self-reflections of assistant activities, greater and more frequent communication between mentor and assistant, discussion of activities, cooperation in decision-making should be expanded. Mentor support in forming relationships with the community of the group, institution, creation of conditions for the professional development of assistants, communication, and cooperation with specialists in various fields must be developed as well.

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