# Lifelong learning and professional development of music teachers: a comparative case study of the perceptions of primary teachers in Spain

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**Abstract**

Lifelong learning and professional development of primary school teachers are essential for quality education. This research compares the experiences of specialist music teachers and generalist primary school teachers in southern Spain. Through semi-structured interviews, it was found that both groups value in-service training and see the need to adapt to socio-cultural and technological changes. However, they point out difficulties such as the lack of time dedicated to training within their working hours and the difficulty of applying what they have learnt due to insufficient resources. While music teachers want more specific training in their area and stress the importance of interdisciplinarity and collaboration between teachers, generalists emphasize the management of diversity in the classroom. Future studies could address how institutions can more effectively support teacher education and development based on the needs identified in this research.

Keywords**:** Comparative, Lifelong learning, Multi-case, Music, Professional development.

## INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning and teacher professional development in primary education are essential pillars to ensure quality education (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). At this educational stage, the cognitive, emotional and social foundations are laid that will influence the holistic development of students throughout their academic lives. It is therefore imperative that teachers have the necessary tools and skills to effectively guide this process. Thus, access to this training and development is a fundamental element in the education system by enabling constant improvement and updating of the quality of teaching (Escudero et al., 2017). Although in an era characterized by rapid technological and pedagogical change, this training is vital for teachers to adapt and respond to new educational demands and challenges. For this reason, it is more than a complement; it is a fundamental necessity to ensure an education that adequately prepares students for the challenges of the 21st century. In turn, teacher professional development contributes significantly to better classroom practices and thus to better student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Kraft et al., 2018). It also contributes to creating a more enriching and motivating learning environment for students (Desimone & Garet, 2015).

This research incorporates a multi-case study design, with the aim of understanding the similarities and differences in the training and professional development experiences of specialist music teachers and generalist teachers, both at primary school level. Through

semi-structured interviews, it seeks to uncover the challenges, achievements, aspirations and difficulties faced by these educators in their quest for professional improvement (Yin, 2020). The purpose is not only to extend the existing literature, but also to offer insights that can guide educational policies and practices tailored to the specific needs of different groups of teachers (Ingersoll et. al, 2018). Considering the potential advantages of investigating diverse perspectives and adopting an innovative method to generate reflections on the issues outlined above, it is proposed to contrast the perceptions of music teachers with those of generalist teachers regarding their own lifelong learning and professional development. To this end, this paper seeks to answer the following research questions through a comparative multi-case study: What are teachers' impressions of in-service teacher training and professional development? Are there similarities in the perspectives of music teachers and non-specialists on in-service training and professional development in primary education? What are the main differences, if any, between your views?

Lifelong learning is a learning process that extends beyond initial formal education, aimed at maintaining, improving and extending professional knowledge, skills and competences throughout an individual's career. In education, this is essential to keep up with pedagogical, technological and social changes that directly impact the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2017). On the other hand, teacher professional development encompasses a broader spectrum than acquiring new knowledge. It includes activities that enable educators to reflect on their practices, collaborate with colleagues and apply new strategies and approaches to their teaching (Avalos, 2011).Several studies have investigated the importance and impact of lifelong learning and professional development in education. For example, Ingersoll et al. (2018) emphasized how professional development can influence the improvement of teaching quality. In-service training and professional development for teachers in primary education is essential to ensure quality teaching and to respond to changing educational demands. However, specific approaches and needs vary according to the teacher's specialization. Thus, music teachers need to keep up-to-date not only in pedagogical techniques, but also in emerging genres, music technology and new teaching methodologies (Bauer, 2014). On the other hand, generalist teachers in primary education are challenged to keep up to date in multiple areas of the curriculum. Their in-service training often focuses on cross-curricular pedagogical strategies, classroom management techniques and the use of educational technology to foster integrated learning (Darling-Hammond et al, 2017). In addition, it is essential for them to be familiar with up-to-date pedagogical approaches that foster critical thinking, problem solving and social-emotional skills in students when tutoring groups (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012). In summary, although both groups share the need for lifelong learning and professional development, their trajectories and emphases may vary according to the specific demands and challenges of their disciplines.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### *Research desing*

This research incorporates a multi-case study design within a qualitative framework. This methodology allows us to explore, in depth, the perceptions, experiences and needs of two specific groups: music teachers and generalist teachers in primary education. It seeks to understand and compare the particularities of each case and to provide a comprehensive picture of in-service training and professional development in both groups. It is therefore framed within a comparative study based on the possibility of understanding social phenomena by making a comparison with two or more contrasting cases (Bryman, 2012). For this purpose, a qualitative multi-case study (Yin, 2014) is designed with two specific cases referring to music teachers and primary school teachers.

### *Participants and their selection*

A total of n=22 primary school teachers from the south of Spain participated in this research, of whom just half (n=11) teach music and the rest (n=11) teach primary school subjects without belonging to a specialist group. For the participant selection process, the email addresses of primary school teachers from 18 different schools were collected through various searches on their respective websites and direct communication was established with the school management teams. An email was then sent with full details of the research, including a consent form and a questionnaire in order to obtain socio-demographic data on each participant and information on their teaching experience. After reviewing the responses (a response rate of approximately 65%), participants were selected by means of purposive sampling, incorporating several variables in their professional profiles in order to improve the representation of different populations (Creswell, & Poth, 2018). These variables are: 1) experienced/beginning teachers (minimum 10 years of service); 2) male/female, to maintain parity; and 3) area of teaching specialization. The final sample includes the following approximate proportions of participants: 83% have the aforementioned teaching experience compared to 17%; 75% are female and 25% male; and finally, 50% teach music and 50% generalist subjects.

### *Data collection and analysis*

As a starting point, we asked participants to write a descriptive essay on 'in-service teacher education and professional development' as a criterion for admission to the study. This procedure was implemented to enrich data collection and for triangulation purposes, considering that teachers' essays provide valuable information about their conceptions and perceptions (Bullough, 2019). For this reason, a semi-structured interview was developed, which was previously tested with n=4 people belonging to an analogous population (n=2 music teachers and n=2 generalist teachers). The aim is to make the appropriate modifications to optimize the clarity and sequence of the questions. The sample of participants was then interviewed in person or by videoconference. These interviews, lasting between 30 and 40 minutes, were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Some examples of questions asked are: What is the

importance of continuing education and professional development for you in the field of education; what kind of professional development have you sought or received in recent years; what continuing education opportunities does your institution or professional environment offer you; what do you consider to be the main challenges or barriers you face in seeking continuing education opportunities; how do you decide which professional development opportunities are relevant for you; do you think that exchange and collaboration with other teachers are essential for your professional development; and do you think that the exchange and collaboration with other teachers are essential for your professional development. Also, as this is a semi-structured interview, further questions are asked, if necessary, in response to your comments for further reflection or clarification. The anonymity of the information collected is then guaranteed and the data is consolidated using *Max-QDA* software for detailed analysis. This is followed by a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. This type of analysis allows us to identify, analyze and report on patterns or themes within the data. We adopted the thematic analysis approach, following the guidelines proposed by Boyatzis (1998): multiple revisions, formulation of codes and themes through constant comparison of emerging patterns, and finally, the elaboration of a code manual and the writing of the research report. Saturation was reached at approximately 65% of the analysis, however, all data were considered in the study.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Results

Below are the findings segmented according to the questions posed in the research. The alphabetical designations refer to the participants, where the initial letter identifies the subject and the subsequent letter determines whether they belong to the music ("m") or generalist ("g") group. The numerical value in brackets denotes the number of participants whose interventions were linked to the particular code. In conclusion, it should be noted that certain significant statements from the participants, chosen for their relevance, have been incorporated in order to provide a deeper insight into their perspectives, drawing on their ability to reveal nuance and offer empathetic understanding to the reader, in line with Sandelowski (1994).

### *Similarities between our two cases*

In the data analysis carried out on the opinions and perceptions of the sample of participants regarding in-service teacher training and professional development, four common themes emerged in the two cases compared in this paper. These themes were: "importance" in defining the relevance and essentiality of teacher training and development in education; "time" in relation to the availability of time to undertake such training, as well as the total amount of time required to complete it; "applicability", referring to the possibility of rapid and effective incorporation into the classroom; and "relevance", in relation to the relevance or appropriateness for application to a specific context. In addition, the analysis of the essays written individually by each participant did not reveal any additional perspectives or opinions, so there was a remarkable consistency

with the interviews. As far as "importance" is concerned, all the participants (n=22) emphasize the importance and value of carrying out training, given its repercussion in the classroom and its positive influence on the improvement of the teaching-learning process. Furthermore, they maintain that "teachers should be in a continuous training process, as new needs arise and it is necessary to keep up to date with resources and methodological trends" (Bg, Am, Cm).

In relation to the issue of "time", the code "I don't have time" stands out, which is identified with the highest frequency in both situations compared (19). The justifications offered by the sample of participants are very similar, referring to the limited time available to carry out activities aimed at teacher training and professional development. In this sense, they express that during their working day they do not have the time to do so, relegating these activities to their leisure time. On numerous occasions (16), participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of time, especially as they consider both their ongoing training and professional development to be essential. It is notable that the code "if I want to train, I always have to take time away from my family, use personal time" is expressed with recurrence (17).

In the segment dedicated to "applicability", the code "use in the classroom" stands out as having the highest rate of occurrence between the two cases compared. Within this code, the sample of participants articulates their concerns in relation to the difficulty they perceive when trying to effectively implement in their classrooms what they have acquired during the trainings. They point out that "it is very difficult to use what they have learned in class because resources in the classrooms are often scarce" (Am). A group of participants (11) stress that, in addition to the aforementioned adversities, there is also the time needed to prepare the teaching resources based on the training received, time which is not usually available. In addition, it is pointed out that "more time can be spent in the session trying to collect everything necessary to carry it out rather than implementing the content learned with the students" (Em).

Under the theme of "relevance", the predominant code refers to the "direct implementation of the contents" acquired in the training courses by teachers, which refers to their usefulness and immediate incorporation in the classroom. In this direction, a segment of the sample of participants (14) perceives that the knowledge and tools offered are oriented to different educational levels than the one they teach. Because of this, they again have to "spend time adapting them to their specific contexts" (Cg). Furthermore, they link this point to the previous one, highlighting that on many occasions (14) they do not find direct applicability and relevance according to their educational levels.

### Differences between our two cases
#### a. Music teachers
Within the responses of the music participants, the code "need for specialized training" (19) is identified. In this context, the entire sample emphasizes the imperative need for training courses that are suited to the specificities of music teaching. The observation that "there are many courses on generalist subjects and tutor-oriented education, but few on music" (Dm) stands out. On the other hand, with regard to training courses that deal with new technologies, it is pointed out that "in few cases are they easy to implement

in the music classroom due to the scarcity of resources" (Em). In this sense, another frequent code called "use of technology" is underlined, which reflects the teachers' interest in expanding their knowledge of digital tools and specific applications for the musical field (9). Finally, a last code is highlighted which refers to 'interdisciplinary collaboration' (8). It highlights the aspiration of music teachers to integrate curricular content in synergy with their colleagues from other disciplines.

**b. *Generalist teachers***

Generalist teachers highlight a code called 'managing classroom diversity' (9). In this area, they underline the complications inherent in providing individualized attention to students, given the difference in learning rates and levels, as well as the presence of specific educational needs in the classroom. In relation to this, they emphasize the need for access to specialized training that "provides them with resources and easy-to-apply strategies to mitigate this challenge" (Bg). On the other hand, there is another code relating to "resources and materials" (9). Here, teachers identify the lack of these as an obstacle that requires a significant investment of time for their preparation. According to the participants, if such resources "were easily applicable in the classroom, they would be very useful and it would not be necessary to invest time in their creation or re-elaboration" (Hg).

In a related vein, another reiterated code stands out: "the difficult use of technology". On this occasion, the challenges associated with the immediate implementation of technological tools in the classroom are evident, similar to other difficulties with general resources. However, they emphasize the relevance and benefits of using technology by considering it as an "element that captures students' attention" (Ag).

**Discussion**

The findings show remarkable convergences between the perspectives of specialist music teachers and generalist music teachers with regard to in-service training and professional development. These convergences are manifested in the valuation of both as an essential pillar for guaranteeing quality education. In this sense, quality education is understood as that which "ensures inclusive and equitable quality education and fosters lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNESCO, 2017, p.12). In this sense, the teacher is perceived as a constant learner (Ainscow, 2001), which is why lifelong learning is fundamental and should be understood as "a right and a duty, as well as a personal, social and institutional task" (Escudero, 2020,p.113).

In terms of relevance, teachers emphasize the imperative need for constant updating in the face of changes in society, justifying adaptation to new demands. With regard to time, it is crucial to highlight the lack of working hours for teacher training, which leads educators to use part of their free time for professional development. Next, the problem of the direct applicability of the contents and strategies acquired in teacher training is highlighted, underlining the deficiency of resources, including technological resources. This leads to the loss of time for a significant part of the session, which affects the teaching-learning process.

In the area of relevance, the constant adaptation of training courses to specific educational levels is a necessity in order to achieve applicable methods and solutions. On the other hand, with regard to the differences reflected in the results, some remarkable points emerge. One of them is the music teachers' request for greater diversity and frequency in training related to their specialist, especially with regard to technological integration in the field of music education. Furthermore, these professionals highlight the importance of promoting interdisciplinarity in schools and collaboration between teachers. Thus, it is essential to promote interdisciplinary links and activities that prevent the isolated segmentation of content between the various disciplines (Sierra et al., 2013) and constitute a theoretical-methodological framework on which to base pedagogical strategies (Bell et al., 2022). Furthermore, contemporary education demands professionals with the ability to delve into knowledge, cultivate the capacity for self-learning and collaborate cooperatively to solve problems and transcend traditional barriers between areas (González & Villodre, 2020). Therefore, lifelong learning needs to be oriented towards interdisciplinary educational work and favour the transition to more inclusive educational institutions (Lorente, 2023).

Finally, generalist teachers attach particular importance to the management of attention to diversity, emphasizing the urgency of acquiring skills, resources and strategies to facilitate teaching that is as individualized as possible. It is therefore necessary to implement changes in teacher training that favour the improvement of legislative frameworks. These adjustments should favour inclusive practices that provide individualized education, understanding diversity as a valuable factor in the teaching-learning processes (Hurtado et al., 2019). This diversity requires a focus on the supports and resources needed to remove barriers that could restrict student participation and learning (Ávila & López, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

Lifelong learning and professional development for teachers in primary education emerge as crucial imperatives, not only because of their role in ensuring quality education, but also because of the constant demands of the 21st century. During primary education, a foundation is laid that will profoundly influence students' academic and personal development. There is a remarkable similarity in the perspectives of specialist music teachers and generalist music teachers on training and professional development. Both groups underline the essentiality of teacher training and development, the time required for the acquisition, preparation and implementation of such training, and the direct applicability of such training in the classroom. Furthermore, they recognize the need for constant updating in response to societal developments and the challenges of adapting to new demands.

On the other hand, the lack and need for specific working hours for teacher training is evident, leading educators to use their free time for this purpose. The direct applicability of the knowledge learned is another recurrent concern, especially in the face of insufficient resources, including technological resources. The adaptation of training to specific educational levels is underlined as essential, ensuring methods and solutions that

are relevant. In terms of differences in perspectives, music teachers express a desire for more diverse and frequent training in their specialist and, in particular, with the integration of technology in music education. In addition, they highlight the need to promote interdisciplinarity in schools, identifying collaboration between music teachers and generalist teachers as an opportunity for enriching projects. For their part, generalist teachers give primacy to the management of attention to diversity on this issue, stressing the urgency of acquiring competences that allow for more individualized teaching. Also, this research has certain limitations. These are based on the restricted sample of primary school teachers in southern Spain, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other geographical or educational contexts. In addition, the sample could be expanded in future researches in a holistic perspective.

As for future lines of research, it would be relevant to investigate how educational institutions, at the administrative and political level, can effectively facilitate and promote in-service teacher training and professional development, taking into account the specific needs and challenges of the educators defined in this research.

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