

RENATA ČEPIĆ¹, SANJA TATALOVIĆ VORKAPIĆ, JANA KALIN

CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER – ANALYSIS OF TEACHERS' SELF-PERCEPTIONS

Abstract

Views on the desirable characteristics of teachers and their professional development directly affect the organisation of the initial and continuing professional training of teachers, which in turn largely determines the development of teachers' professional identity. In recent literature, professional identity is enmeshed in a broader societal discourse that is underpinned by values, personal qualities, ideology, relationships, status, training and qualifications. Starting from the point of view that the competences acquired are not sufficient for the teachers' professional activities, and also for reflection on their professional mission and identity and self-examination of their own experiences, beliefs, values and practices, we were interested in how the most important characteristics of quality teachers are viewed by the teachers themselves in two neighbouring countries – Croatia and Slovenia. We expected the results to be very similar due to the similarity of the cultural contexts of both countries. However, as the formation of professional identity depends not only on the broader social context, but also on the specific academic and institutional contexts in which teachers operate and develop, we also expected the answers to differ somewhat, which was confirmed by the results. Croatian teachers identified knowledge, creativity and fairness as the three most important characteristics of a good teacher, while the Slovene teachers identified the teacher's consistency as the most important feature of a good teacher, followed by knowledge and empathy. There was no statistically significant difference in the first three most important characteristics among teachers with regard to the length of their teaching experience and their age.

Key words: self-perception, professional identity, continuing professional development, elementary school teacher

Introduction

In the center of attention of educational experts and decision-makers are questions regarding the tasks of the redefined role of a teacher. Among the relevant issues are teacher competencies which are necessary to establish an approach oriented toward the students and the means of developing them, the appropriate ways of supporting the different periods of the teachers' professional development and the conditions of the personal and professional environments which need to be fulfilled in order for the full professionalisation of the teaching profession to be achieved. Results of recent research on the quality of education clearly indicate that

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the development of students' achievements significantly depends on the process of teaching and learning, and that the impact of teachers on the grades of their students is significant (EC, 2010; Hattie, 2003; Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). It has been shown that students who had effective teachers during their education achieved better results than students who had less successful teachers, and that the impact of quality teachers remains influential in their later education, as well. Based on these studies, the general conclusion that an improvement in the overall quality of education directly depends on the quality of education and the professional development of teachers can be drawn.

One of the best-known conceptualisations of what teachers know is that of Shulman (1987, p. 8), who defines a teacher's knowledge as:

- content knowledge
- pedagogic content knowledge (the ability to contextualise, situate, and personalise the content for the students)
- general pedagogic knowledge (principles and strategies of classroom management and organisation)
- curriculum knowledge
- knowledge of learners and their characteristics
- knowledge of educational contexts, and contexts (group, classroom, community)
- knowledge of educational ends, purposes and values.

During the process of their professional development, it is important to allow teachers to develop in all these areas, as they represent the essential components of a teacher's professional identity (Tatalović Vorkapić, Vujičić & Čepić, 2014).

In the formation of their identity, the teachers' answer to the question of who they are is constantly being shaped with what they perceive their work to be (Graham & Phelps, 2003). Teachers are involved in the shaping of their identity from the beginning of their career. Many authors emphasise that the most important period for the formation of identity is during undergraduate studies (Sutherland, Howard & Markauskaite, 2010).

In recent literature, professional identity is enmeshed in a broader societal discourse that is underpinned by values, personal qualities, ideology, relationships, status, training and qualifications (Kosnik & Beck, 2009; Korthagen, 2004; Beijaard, 2006; Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004; Alsup, 2006 and others). To illustrate, we would like to mention some definitions of professional identity that emphasise its individual characteristics, as they are of great importance for effective teaching (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2012).

Wenger defines identity as what we know, what is foreign and what we choose to know, as well as *how* we know it. Our identities determine who we will interact with in a knowledge-sharing activity, and our willingness and capacity to engage in boundary interactions (Wenger, 2000, p. 239).

The term identity refers to how teachers see themselves professionally, which includes their sense of their own goals, responsibilities, work style and teaching effectiveness, their degree of satisfaction and their own career development planning (Kosnik & Beck, 2009). Korthagen's onion model (2004) views identity as a dynamic relationship between the deep and the superficial layers of personality in contact with the professional environment. Korthagen (2004) believes that

professional identity is made up of unconscious needs, feelings, values, role models, previous experiences and behaviors which, put together, create a sense of identity.

Teachers' professional identity implies both a cognitive psychological and a sociological perspective: people develop their identity in interaction with other people (sociological perspective), but express their professional identity in their perceptions of 'who they are' and 'who they want to become' as a result of this interaction (cognitive psychological perspective) (Beijaard, 2006).

Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop (2004, pp. 122-123) have identified some features that are essential for the professional identity of teachers based on a review of various studies on professional identity that are linked to the characteristics of the professional identity of teachers, the formation of their identity and studies on stories that (re)present professional identity:

- **Professional identity is an ongoing process** of interpreting and re-interpreting experiences (Kerby, 1991 in Beijaard et al, 2004); the teacher's development never stops and can be best viewed as a process of lifelong learning. This, in other words, means that the formation of the professional identity implies not only the search for answers to the question – Who am I now? – but also to questions such as – Who do I want to become? and How do I see my role as a teacher? Since identity changes over time, this means that its interpretation is subject to change, which indicates that it is a dynamic construct.
- Professional identity **implies both the person and the context**. The teacher's identity is always formed in relation to the characteristics of the culture and the environment in which the teacher works. Teachers differ by the way they interpret professional characteristics in relation to their own values and convictions. There is no single teaching culture in a school and every teacher, influenced by their specific context, develops their own teaching culture.
- A teacher's professional identity **consists of sub-identities** that are more or less in harmony with each other. The notion of sub-identities relates to the different contexts the teachers work in and the relationships they build. It is important for all of these sub-identities to be well-balanced.
- **Agency is an important element of professional identity**, meaning that teachers should be active participants in the process of their own professional development (Coldon & Smith in Beijaard et al, 2004). The ability to reflect and self-reflect is of great importance for working on their professional development, as it allows them to integrate their experiences, knowledge and feelings into their image of themselves as a teacher, and also to plan their professional development. Professional identity is not something teachers have, but something they use in order to make sense of themselves as teachers.

Professional identity formation is a process of practical knowledge-building characterised by the ongoing integration of what is individually and collectively seen as relevant to teaching (Beijaard et al, 2004, p. 123).

Aim of the study

The basic purpose of this study was to investigate the self-perception of elementary school teachers from Croatia and Slovenia when it comes to which three characteristics they hold to be of greatest importance for being a good teacher. Within that aim, three research questions were defined: a) to determine the three most important characteristics that make a good elementary school teacher in two different samples: Croatian and Slovenian teachers; b) to analyse the correlation between these three characteristics in two different samples and the teachers' age and working experience; and c) to compare the characteristics determined in light of the two differing cultural contexts, i.e. to compare between the Croatian and Slovenian teachers. Taking into account prior relevant studies, we expected the self-perception of the teachers within these two samples to be rather similar.

Methods

Subjects

Overall, two hundred and seven teachers participated in this study (two males and two hundred and five females), average age $M=42.45$ ($SD=8.63$, ranged from 24-64 years) with average working experience $M=18.45$ years ($SD=10.03$ ranged from six months to 42 years). Seventy-three of them were elementary school teachers living and working in Croatia. They were all females, working in different elementary schools within the Primorje – Gorski Kotar county. Their average age was $M=43.46$ years ($SD=9.85$) within range from 26 to 64 years. In addition, they reported about their average working experience $M=18.73$ ($SD=11.21$) which ranged from six months to forty-two years of working with school children. The Slovenian sample consisted of one hundred and thirty-four elementary school teachers (two males and one hundred and thirty-two females). Their average age was $M=41.90$ ($SD=7.87$) and ranged from 24 to 59 years. As for their average working experience, it was $M=18.3$ years ($SD=9.35$) and ranged from one to thirty-eight working years.

Measuring instrument

With the aim of exploring the three most desirable characteristics for a good educator, a measuring instrument that was created only for the purposes of this study was administered. It consisted of questions pertaining to the teachers' age and working experience, and of one specific question: *“Please, could you be so kind as to write down which three characteristics you consider to be of greatest importance for being a good teacher. Also, please rank these three characteristics according to their importance, with 1 being the most important characteristic.”*

Procedure

Both samples of elementary school teachers from Croatia and Slovenia consisted of teachers working in randomly selected schools located within these two countries. Their participation was completely voluntary and anonymous, and feedback about determined findings was promised to be delivered to them. In each case, application of the questionnaire took approximately five minutes. SPSS 18.0 was used to perform necessary statistical analysis.

Results and discussion

As a response to the first research question of this study, the three most important characteristics of a good elementary school teacher as viewed by Croatian and Slovenian elementary school teachers were determined. Croatian teachers determined these characteristics as follows:

- having knowledge and competencies for working with school children (M=0.74, SD=0.97);
- being creative (M=0.68, SD=1.08);
- being fair (M=0.51, SD=0.97).

Besides these three characteristics, Croatian elementary school teachers emphasised the importance of some other characteristics such as: empathy (M=0.33, SD=0.80), being consistent (M=0.26, SD=0.71), being a patient person (M=0.26, SD=0.78), communicativeness (M=0.21, SD=0.64), caring for children (M=0.16, SD=0.47), skillfulness (M=0.15, SD=0.61), love of the job (M=0.14, SD=0.54), planning classroom activities and tasks (M=0.14, SD=0.61), headiness (M=0.14, SD=0.59), flexibility (M=0.14, SD=0.56), being an educator to children means being a learner too (M=0.14, SD=0.59), eloquence (M=0.12, SD=0.60), openness to novel and different situations (M=0.11, SD=0.54), warmth (M=0.11, SD=0.39), and humour (M=0.11, SD=0.54). A very small number of them mentioned the following characteristics as important, as well: objectivity (M=0.10, SD=0.48), diligence (M=0.10, SD=0.50), organisation skills (M=0.08, SD=0.43), sincerity (M=0.08, SD=0.43), being motivated and being able to motivate children (M=0.07, SD=0.42), optimism (M=0.07, SD=0.42), cheerfulness (M=0.05, SD=0.33), exactness (M=0.05, SD=0.37), to be able to centralise (M=0.04, SD=0.35), having a special sensibility for work with elementary school children (M=0.04, SD=0.35), having authority (M=0.04, SD=0.35), agreeableness (M=0.04, SD=0.35), sociability (M=0.04, SD=0.26), curiosity (M=0.03, SD=0.23). In addition, regarding the second research problem, no significant Spearman coefficient correlations were determined between three the most desirable characteristics (to have knowledge, creativity and fairness) and age and/or working experience. This implies that Croatian elementary school teachers have a rather strong opinion about which professional characteristics they consider to be most important and that it does not change with age or years of working experience.

Analysing the self-perception of the Slovenian sample of elementary school teachers reveals that the characteristics that are considered to be of greatest importance for a good primary school teacher differ somewhat:

- being consistent (M=1.10, SD=1.19);
- having knowledge and competencies for working with school children (M=1.01, SD=0.93);
- empathy (M=0.59, SD=1.01).

After having reported about these three most important characteristics, Slovenian primary school teachers also emphasised the following features: fairness (M=0.49, SD=0.96), creativity (M=0.43, SD=0.95), openness to novel and different situations (M=0.31, SD=0.83), flexibility (M=0.26, SD=0.78), cheerfulness (M=0.18, SD=0.71), being a patient person (M=0.16, SD=0.59), having authority (M=0.13, SD=0.55) and having a special sensibility to work with elementary school

children ($M=0.13$, $SD=0.54$). A very small number of primary school teachers in Slovenia mentioned characteristics such as: communicativeness ($M=0.09$, $SD=0.47$), agreeableness ($M=0.09$, $SD=0.43$), being an educator to children means being a learner too ($M=0.08$, $SD=0.48$), being respectful ($M=0.07$, $SD=0.40$), organisation skills ($M=0.07$, $SD=0.41$), being an emotional stable person ($M=0.07$, $SD=0.45$), love of work ($M=0.07$, $SD=0.39$), tolerance of differences ($M=0.06$, $SD=0.40$) and diligence ($M=0.04$, $SD=0.32$). Very few of them also mentioned characteristics such as: being a good pedagogist, responsibility, curiosity, being a friend to children, motivation and reliability. Just like the Croatian elementary school teachers, the self-perception of Slovenian educators regarding the professional characteristics they consider important does not depend on their age or/and working experience. In other words, there were no significant nonparametric correlations between the three main characteristics (being consistent, having knowledge and empathy) and their age and working experience.

In response to the third research problem, a Chi-square test was run with the purpose of determining significant differences between the frequency of the three most preferred characteristics between the Croatian and Slovenian elementary school teachers. These two samples showed that their perception differed significantly when it comes to two main characteristics: being consistent ($\chi^2=29.99$, $df=1,3$, $p=.001$) and having knowledge ($\chi^2=20.39$, $df=1,3$, $p=.02$). In other words, the Slovenian elementary school teachers emphasised these two properties significantly more than Croatian elementary school teachers. When it comes to other important and relevant professional characteristics as pointed out by these two samples (empathy, creativity and fairness), no significant difference was determined.

Conclusion

In this study, we were interested in the most important characteristics of a good teacher, and how teachers of primary school classes in two neighbouring countries, Croatia and Slovenia, perceive them. Given the similarity of the cultural context, we expected that the results would be very similar. We are aware of the fact that, in addition to the wider social environment, the immediate environment of the school, i.e. the institutional environment, school climate and culture are also very significant school for the formation of professional identity. Due to the aforementioned, we assumed that the responses of the Croatian and Slovenian teachers would be also be somewhat different. Croatian teachers emphasised knowledge, creativity and fairness as the most important characteristics of good teachers, while the Slovene teachers, in addition to knowledge, emphasised empathy and the consistency of the teacher's behaviour as the most important characteristics, with creativity and fairness are right behind in fourth and fifth place. Also, empathy and consistency are the fourth and fifth most common choice among Croatian teachers. Interestingly, the Slovenian teachers emphasise consistency as the most important characteristic, while Croatian ones stress professional knowledge and a competence to work with students.

In light of the theory on the development of teachers' professional identity, we expected statistically significant differences to occur among teachers in connection with the length of teaching experience or their age. Interestingly, this was not confirmed for the first three most important features. Regardless of their age and

years of teaching experience, teachers both within the Slovenian and the Croatian sample mentioned the same three characteristics as being most important. Based on this, we can draw conclusions about the power of identity and beliefs about the most important characteristics that they recognise and try to implement in their work within a shared vision of the school.

Theoretical considerations and empirical research on teachers' professional identity indicate that it is a construct that is impermanent and subject to change. This means that the formation of the professional identity can be at least partially influenced by initial teacher education, as well as their continuing professional development. In other words, in order to make this kind of knowledge open to analysis and reflection, and for it to contribute to the professional development of teachers and their understanding of their professional identity, it is important to create the conditions for reflection, analysis, and change in their concept of themselves and turn unconscious professional identity into conscious, especially in the initial training of teachers. Articulation and examination of their own values, beliefs and attitudes, which they themselves often do not fully understand, can encourage a better understanding of the process and the development of professionalism in teachers, as well as the development of their professional identity. In addition, it implies that knowledge on the self-perception of the teachers' desirable professional identity can be of help to decision-makers, institutions for initial teacher training, professional associations that develop programmes for continuing professional education and others. Since identity changes over time due to contexts and relationships, it also means that its interpretation is subject to change. Therefore, in further research it would be interesting to track the longitudinal changes in the self-perception of actual and desired personal and professional characteristics of teachers in order to obtain a realistic picture of the perceived desirable professional characteristics of good teachers, as well as the factors that play an important role in the development of teachers' professional identity. In addition, it is particularly necessary to work on the development of measuring instruments and on improving the research methodology for studying the professional identity of teachers.

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Assist. Prof. Dr. Renata Čepić
Faculty of Teacher Education in Rijeka
University of Rijeka
Croatia
renata@ufri.hr

Assist. Prof. Dr. Sanja Tatalović Vorkapić
Faculty of Teacher Education in Rijeka
University of Rijeka
Croatia
sanjatv@ufri.hr

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Jana Kalin
Faculty of Arts
University of Ljubljana
Slovenia
jana.kalin@guest.arnes.si