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Teachers' Personal Qualities as the Determinants of Their Empathetic Abilities

Abstract

Empathy is one of the basic factors of teachers' didactic efficiency and the educational actions undertaken by them. It includes not only the knowledge about the needs and the correct development of the child/pupil but also their ability to perceive inter-subjectively the child's/pupil's world and express their own behaviours reflecting understanding and sympathising.

Thus, the search for the answer to the question what relations between the teacher's constant individual features and empathetic abilities are, seems to be vital. This attempt has been made on the basis of the constant individual personality traits concept put forward by Professor Jolanta Wilsz, the frame of which is constituted by the autonomous systems theory. The basic factors, such as analysis adaptation, retrieval, preference, ability to communicate ideas, tolerance and vulnerability have been applied in the research for the individual didactic efficiency analysis of the surveyed teachers.

The research results undeniably complement the knowledge about teachers with reference to the diagnosis of their vocational aptitude.

Key words: *teachers' empathetic abilities.*

Introduction

The term "empathy" was presumably first used in the German aesthetics to refer to the inclination/ability to identify oneself with the observed object. The contemporary subject literature as well as popular references provide similar

definitions of the notion, which emphasise that “empathy” is an ability to sense and evoke the same feelings and emotions felt by the observed object and treat it as an indispensable tool to establish and maintain interpersonal relations, to provide for the need for security and acceptance, finally to understand and explain human behaviours (Wilsz 2009: 193–255). No wonder, then, that in the caring professions requiring constant contact with the other person (e.g., teachers, doctors, social workers) this ability is considered to be one of the most important factors influencing professional efficiency. Thus, the knowledge about what level of empathy is represented by teachers and what factors determine its development is both interesting and beneficial from the social perspective, therefore the issue needs thorough exploration and the concept of constant individual personality traits put forward by Professor Jolanta Wilsz might be a perfect point of departure for the diagnosis of teachers’ future professional career and their vocational aptitude.

Basic Assumptions of the Constant Individual Personality Traits Concept by Jolanta Wilsz

The theoretical frame of the constant individual personality traits concept is constituted by the autonomous systems theory (Wilsz 2009:261), which is based on the validated assumption that treating a human being as one of the specific cases of the general autonomous system model allows for examining his/her personality as a set of constant individual personality traits which are independent of the environment and the variable qualities dependent on the environment. Constant individual personality traits correspond with the constant steering properties of an autonomous system, whereas variable qualities correspond with the variable steering properties of the system and differentiate between intellectual functions qualities (analysis adaptation and transformation, retrieval, perfection) and interpersonal relations qualities (ability to communicate ideas, tolerance, vulnerability).

Analysis adaptation and transformation is understood as the level of the thinking domain perfection; retrieval as the level of the perceptive and mnemonic domain perfection; perfection/talent as the level of perfection in a certain domain of activity. There is also a division into a positive ability to communicate messages signifying the inclination for giving out the resources to the environment and a negative ability to communicate messages being the inclination for absorbing resources from the environment. Tolerance is defined as a range of the environment influence meeting with the individual’s voluntary adequate reaction. Vulnerability

is a range of the environment influence meeting with the individual's adequate reaction while being under pressure (Wilsz, in: Lewowicki *et al.* 2001).

The knowledge of the constant individual personality traits provides a person with the information about the situation they should head for, what is the most suitable solution for them and which of them guarantees personal or professional success. The elements of situations are constituted by people who also possess their own constant individual personality traits, thus the correspondence of the situations in which people having their own constant individual personality traits perform depends on the constant individual personality traits of other people. Practically, the total correspondence of constant individual personality traits with a situation may be obtained when there is a possibility to create a proper situation for each individual, i.e., a situation being in accordance with his/her traits due to the selection of people representing the traits required for a specific situation (Wilsz, 2001, 2009).

The above-quoted features system is based on the construction of the information and energy connected processes (loading, processing, storing, giving information and energy), which are characterised by functional dependence enabling the individual to sustain the state of relative balance. The dimension and type of human functional balance disturbance is defined by situational factors. The self-regulating functions occurring in a human being are determined by his/her constant individual personality traits (permanent individual differences) and variable traits (non-permanent individual traits) (Wilsz 2001, 2009).

Thus, it is assumed by the concept that all people share the same constant individual personality traits, but the traits are not identical. The individual dimension of traits designates differences between the proportions of the same traits in different people (Wilsz 2009). Moreover, human behaviours reflecting their constant individual personality traits are reactions evoked by the steering energy flow between the elements receiving information from the environment through the stimuli sensed by the receptors and elements returning the information to the environment by the effectors. Those reactions are dependent on the constant individual personality traits of a human being : analysis adaptation and transformation, retrieval, talent, ability to communicate messages, tolerance and vulnerability.

To describe analysis adaptation and transformation, a three-grade scale (high, medium, low) was applied, assuming that an individual of high analysis adaptation and transformation is characterised by impressive intellectual prowess, easiness of deciphering and understanding other people's intentions, possession of his/her own view on any issue, versatility and world curiosity, efficacy in the undertaken

actions and a complex approach to problems, while an individual of low analysis adaptation and transformation has difficulty in associating facts and occurrences, feels helpless, frequently misinterprets situations, is reproductive/imitative and his/her actions are usually ineffective. Medium analysis adaptation and transformation is interpreted as the intermediate state.

The same scale has been applied in the description of retrieval, assuming that a person of high retrieval has a very good memory, learns easily and quickly and is frequently an erudite, a person of low retrieval has difficulty in fast and permanent memorising as well as learning and solving problems. Again a medium retrieval level refers to the intermediate stage.

The observations of a performing person, his/her passion for something and the results of his/her actions have become a frame for describing the kind and the size of his/her talent. Therefore, it has been agreed that a person of great talent shows interest and creativity in a given domain, treats it with passion and feels a continuous need to process and transform the elements constituting it. A person of little talent does not feel the need to process and transform the data, and what is more, avoids acquiring and processing the information which definitely entails difficulty in generating new data/information.

The ability to communicate messages represents individuals aims. To describe the feature, a five-grade scale has been used (high positive, medium positive, zero, medium negative, high negative). The behaviours of people of a great positive ability to communicate messages are characterised by spontaneity, impulsiveness and changes dynamics. Their actions are usually immediate, extemporaneous, naive, whimsical and reckless/inconsiderate. People representing this feature so extensively tend to be thrifless and wasteful, to break the rules and search for new sensations irrespective of the consequences and freely express their thoughts and feelings.

The actions/behaviours of people of a medium ability to communicate messages are intermediate with references to the high positive ability and zero ability. For instance, the inclination towards confabulation is reduced to "colouring" reality, impetuosity is visible mainly in the gestures and style, wastefulness is replaced by claptrap and the need for risk-taking is limited to behaviours aiming at pleasing others.

The behaviours of people of a zero ability to communicate messages result from the internal balance between distracting and collecting information. They are marked out by conscientiousness, efficacy, rectitude, a need to keep law and order, control and adherence to principles. Starting a relationship with others is based on partnership and ethical imperatives.

The acting of people of a medium negative ability to communicate messages results from their predominance of gathering information over distracting. Thus, their priority is to multiply their wealth and extend their knowledge. They aim at efficient target-meeting. They are cautious, foreseeing, operative, continuously pursuing higher career stages.

The acting of people of a high negative ability to communicate messages is the outcome of their immense disproportion between the processes of gathering over collecting. Such individuals are money – and power-oriented irrespective of the physiological or moral cost. Their typical feature is possessiveness and autocracy. It is yet worth noting that the ability to communicate messages changes with age, from high positive to high negative.

Another important determinant of human behaviours is tolerance referred to in the concept in three dimensions: great, reasonable, little (high, medium, low). People showing a high level of tolerance are capable of voluntary acceptance of difference and diversity, open to a new quality and changes, disposed to cooperation and joint action. People representing a low level of tolerance focus on the defence of their own standpoint, are disinclined towards changes, cooperation or joint actions.

Another constant individual personality trait in interpersonal relations is vulnerability. Individuals of high vulnerability are able to accept coercive situations enforced by unwanted stimuli. They easily submit to pressure and compulsion, frequently becoming victims of abuse. They gladly follow instructions and orders, aiming at peaceful coexistence with others. People of low vulnerability are inflexible, they fight for their rights defending their views and decisions but still respecting other people's views and decisions. People of medium vulnerability are characterised by actions intermediate between the two mentioned levels.

The Choice of a Professional Career from the Perspective of Constant Individual Personality Traits

Choosing an optimal professional career for an individual implies the necessity to compare the set of constant individual personality traits with the features indispensable to acquire knowledge, skills needed in the profession and properties essential for performing the job/profession. The described concept is a specific matrix on the basis of which such comparisons can be made conscientiously and scientifically validated. The concept, then, is applied to problem-solving in terms of an individual's professional functioning, such as preparation for making the

right professional choice, selecting of a vocational education specialisation, planning professional development, diagnosing a successful professional career and it might also constitute a tool in obtaining knowledge about individual professional usefulness and be the basis for pre-marital and marital counselling.

Value of the Teacher's Constant Individual Personality Traits with Reference to Empathetic Competence

The teacher's empathetic abilities in the domain of intellectual functions are favoured by the high analysis adaptation and transformation ability allowing for recognising emotions and their sources as well as naming and interpreting them. Medium analysis adaptation and transformation seems to be sufficient guaranteeing the adequate knowledge and skills to share in the didactic and educational process. Moreover, a high level of empathy is favoured by the ability to communicate messages which is close to zero, tolerance which is placed between reasonable/medium and high and vulnerability between low and medium. (Wilsz 2001)

Own research on the issue

Assuming the adequacy of constant individual personality traits, research was conducted aimed at validating the following hypothesis: the greater the accordance of the teacher's analysis adaptation and transformation ability, ability to communicate messages, tolerance and vulnerability values with the values shown by the model, the higher the level of his/her empathetic abilities.

The research comprised 15 primary school teachers during the school year 2008/2009. The constant individual personality traits were defined on the basis of different behaviours observed in miscellaneous school situations and interviews with the headmasters, the descriptions of which are illustrated by the charts below.

The description of characteristic behaviour for different values of the teacher's analysis adaptation and transformation ability: (own study based on the constant individual personality traits model by J. Wilsz).

High – the teacher easily associates the facts and analyses/processes a lot of data concerning his/her pupils. He/She is able to draw conclusions from previous behaviour and does not neglect the occurring problems but solves them efficiently and in a complex way.

Medium – the teacher's behaviour is intermediate between the high and low levels of analysis adaptation and transformation ability.

Low – the teacher has difficulty in directing the didactic and educational process, drawing apt conclusions, associating facts quickly and estimating situations properly.

The description of characteristic behaviour for the different values of the teacher's ability to communicate messages:

High positive – the teacher's behaviour is characterized by recklessness, high mood dynamics, lack of consequences participation. His/Her reactions are usually violent, impatient and frequently inadequate in particular situations.

Medium positive – the teacher's behaviour is intermediate between medium positive and zero.

Zero – the teacher's behaviour is marked out by efficiency and righteousness, discipline, composition and patience, reactions are thought-over and considerate, fully reflecting the general norms and principles.

Medium negative – the teacher is fully involved and devoted. His/Her reactions are thought-over and considerate as well as target-oriented.

High negative – the teacher shows an authoritarian behaviour, full of dos and don'ts, whose actions/reactions are characterized by exaggerated adherence to rules and distance.

The description of characteristic behaviour for the different values of the teacher's tolerance.

High – the teacher willingly works with the pupils deriving enjoyment and satisfaction from the work, but still respecting the subjectivity principle. He/She is understanding, composed and patient.

Reasonable – the teacher's behaviour is intermediate between the high and low level of tolerance.

Low – the teacher has difficulty in accepting all the pupils. His/Her behaviour stimulates and escalates conflicts. He/She is inflexible as well as demand – and instruction-oriented.

Source: own study based on the constant individual personality traits model by J.Wilsz

The description of characteristic behaviour for the different values of the teacher's vulnerability.

High – Conformist behaviour prevails. The teacher does not often have his/her own viewpoint or is afraid to express it. He/She is labile in his/her opinions

and judgments, often changes them and is easily influenced. The teacher is not credible and does not enjoy the pupils' respect.

Medium – the teacher's behaviour is intermediate between low and high vulnerability.

Low – the teacher has his/her own viewpoints and often shares them. He/She is not easily influenced but respects other people's opinions and beliefs. He/She enjoys the pupils' respect and friendliness.

Chart 1. Values of the constant personality specific individual features of the surveyed/observed teachers.

	From medium to high	From medium positive to medium negative	From medium to high	From low to medium
1	high	medium negative	medium	medium
2	high	medium negative	medium	medium
3	medium	medium positive	low	high
4	high	medium positive	medium	medium
5	high	medium positive	medium	medium
6	high	zero	high	low
7	high	medium negative	medium	medium
8	medium	medium negative	low	high
9	high	medium positive	medium	medium
10	high	zero	high	medium
11	high	zero	high	medium
12	high	medium positive	high	medium
13	high	zero	high	medium
14	high	zero	high	medium
15	high	medium negative	medium	medium

source: own research

The research result analysis proves the validity of the hypothesis that the greater the accordance of the constant individual personality trait values with the values shown in the model, the higher the teacher's empathetic competence level. Certain features which are unfavourable while performing professional tasks were represented by the teachers who were in discordance with the model, illustrated by teachers 3 and 8 who frequently got involved in conflicts, faced problems with consistency and requirements as well as had difficulty in accepting all the pupils in the class.

Chart 2. The list of the headmaster interview results with reference to the observed behaviours of the examined teachers.

Teacher's code	Observed behaviours categories					
	Enters into conflicts with pupils	Shows warm-heartedness to pupils	Loses control in the presence of pupils (gets angry)	Appropriately and skillfully talks with pupils	Is able to detect/see t pupils' interests	Properly interprets pupils' behaviours
1	never	always	never	always	very often	very often
2	rarely	very often	very rarely	very often	often	often
3	often	often	often		rarely	rarely
4	very rarely	very often	never	very often	very often	often
5	very rarely	very often		very often	very often	very often
6	never	always	never	always	always	always
7	very rarely	often	never	always	often	very often
8	rarely		rarely	rarely	rarely	rarely
9	very rarely	often	rarely	often	often	often
10	never	very often	never	very often	very often	very often
11	never	very often		very often	very often	very often
12	often	very often	often	very often	very often	very often
13	never	always	never	always	very often	always
14	never	always	never	always	very often	always
15	very rarely		never	very often	very often	very often

Source: own research

Conclusions

The educational process is a continuous array of interpersonal relations to a large extent created by the teacher's empathetic abilities. Research shows that tolerance, compared with other constant individual personality traits, determines the level of empathy to the greatest extent. Thus, this feature should be vital while deciding on employing a person as a teacher.

The analysis adaptation and transformation ability is another feature in the hierarchy responsible for the teacher's empathetic abilities advocating the idea of high requirements to be met by candidates, showing clearly that a prospective teacher ought to represent a high intellectual capacity, an extensive knowledge of the subject (it might be useful to prepare a set of questions and tasks revealing a candidate's erudition level during an interview) as well as general knowledge guaranteeing a critical view and interpretation of the observed facts and phenomena

and also an ability to work out efficacious didactic and educational strategies. Therefore, simulated tasks are worth considering in candidate selection.

In the context of the presented research (the findings of which, for obvious reasons, are only partly presented) the ability to communicate messages occupies the third place which, to my mind, should oblige school headmasters and daily care centres principals (employers) to get to know candidates' views not only on education and up-bringing but also on the role of the teacher in the contemporary world.

The last factor reported is vulnerability which might be observed via individual contact with the person applying for the post of teacher.

The research findings induce the reflection on the question of teacher additional training and developing further skills. Still, a rough analysis of the curricula implemented at schools and teachers' workshops show that efficient communication training, very fashionable and popular nowadays, is limited to presenting the ways of learning instrumental negotiation techniques or basic empathy "tools" such as paraphrasing, probing/testing, concluding and reflecting feelings (Egan 2007:153–156). Without a thorough anthropological knowledge the techniques might be not only ineffective but also applied dubiously from the ethical point of view, e.g., in a cynical way (i.e., in order to manipulate). Responsible empathy use is possible only when the teacher perceives the pupil/student from a wide perspective, realising his/her capabilities as well as limitations and impediments requiring intervention. Thus, systematic monitoring of the quality of the offered workshops and training for teachers seems to be well-founded.

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