Teachers’ professional identity in the 21st century Romania

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Abstract

The article is focused on the teachers’ professional identity in the 21st century Romania. The teaching profession is facing new kinds of responsibilities, roles and competences in the 21st century. Therefore, the teacher training and teacher education should match the new social demands and students’ needs alike. The theoretical premises of this research are to be found in the studies and theories on the relationship between teachers’ professional identity and teachers’ competences of D. Beijaard, N. Verloop, J.D. Vermut, M. Fullan etc.

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1. Introduction

The educational system within a society based on knowledge and communication abides by the rules of contemporary society, having a direct impact on the teaching roles and competences on particular and on the didactic career in general. The Romanian educational system of the last two decades has suffered numerous changes as a result of a very complex educational reform.

The core of all concerns towards the didactic career is to be found in the effort of all Educational Sciences specialists to redefine the teaching profession according to certain national standards and thus help build didactic professionalism.

The new professionalism entails the acceptance of new roles from the part of the teachers, such as teaching facilitators and co-participants in the learning process, as well as reanalysing the traditional teacher roles, for example the one of adviser (this role is given new dimensions generated by the specific of students nowadays).

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The teaching profession is generally associated to certain fundamental roles categories, which are accepted by most teacher training systems, such as: projecting, management and organization of the learning activities, psycho-educational advising, class management, proper communication with the pupils, parents and work peers, life-long learning programmes, active participation in perfecting the educational process and school innovations, offering educational services to the community e.t.c. 

The current image of the specific educational roles and competences is extremely dynamic ‘within the constant values’. The changes take place as far as the content and hierarchy of the new roles are concerned.

For example, the transmission of knowledge remains one of the functions of teaching. However, it comes second to ‘organising and managing the learning situations’. Participating to the design of the curricula (the school based on curricula development model), alongside the school executive board, is one of the new roles undertaken by the teacher. (Potolea, 2003, p.236)

The acceptance of the new roles by the teachers is one of the ‘soft spots’ of the teacher training reform, due to the fact that this process of acceptance implies subtle psychological mechanisms (fear of the unknown, fear of not rising to the level of new expectations, a decrease of self-esteem and of the image of the self, e.t.c.), all these directly impacting the professional identity.

Becoming aware of one’s professional identity and all the facets it entails, and most importantly, knowing the distances and differences between those facets is one of the fundamental conditions of success and evolution in the teaching profession.

Teachers are a true blend of social representations: the professional identity of the teacher and all of its facets is always confronted to the perceived image (and its corresponding facets) that the pupils have on the teacher.

This is why training and developing the teachers’ professional identity, as well as raising awareness on it, is extremely important in order to be able to optimize and exercise control in a positive and formative manner.

In an analysis of the teacher training strategies used in Romania as compared to other teacher training systems, T. Pălășan (2009) concentrates on examining the paradigms of the professional teacher, which stand at the basis of the teacher training programmes.

According to the author, a prototype of the professional teacher would be: ‘a role- model, a technician, a practitioner, a wise person (‘the reflexive practitioner’), a social actor, a person who is aware of his/her own identity, meaning ‘a person who is interested and aware of his/her own personal development’ (Pălășan, 2009, p.60). This latter feature seems of great importance to us, because it raises most problems in the post-modern society and educational system alike. Based on the definition of the concept of identity as ‘central dimension of the concept of self and the individual, representing his/her general position in society, deriving from his/her belonging to social groups and societies, from its social patterns and its social status’ (Popescu-Neveanu P., 1978, p.319), one can state that the professional identity of the teacher is in fact the conception on his role as a professional, on his competences and on the expectations he/she has to rise up to.

The teachers’ professional identity, as any other type of identity, is in a process of continuous evolution, precisely because of the need to adapt to the new requests and activities of contemporary society.

The role of the teacher’s self-image has a very strong impact upon the pupils’ self-image.

Self-esteem also has positive or negative effects upon the activities that the individual undertakes, due to the fact that it entails an evaluation of self-image.

Self-esteem dynamics can be brought under discussion in the educational environment both in the case teachers and pupils.

The research conducted has demonstrated, for instance, that ‘the teacher’s self-esteem determines the level of the pupils self-esteem; consequently, teachers with high self-esteem levels, who think of themselves as competent and meet all the requirements of their profession act in certain ways which lead to high levels of self-esteem among their pupils (they do not insult the pupils, they do not apply immediate punishment, they use encouraging strategies). On the other hand, teachers with low self-esteem levels exhibit deviant behaviours when facing failure, which leads to low levels of self-esteem amongst their pupils’ (Cristina Neamțu, 2003, p.129)

From this perspective, the question ‘how do teachers perceive themselves as professionals in a world of ever-changing values’ remains an open-ended one. A possible answer is to be found in a research on postmodern education ‘teachers have to see themselves as public intellectuals, who design and implement, think and act according to the
political constraints, in favour of a culture of righteousness and freedom’ (Aronowitz, Giroux, 1997, p.209). Hence, the teachers are the ones who have to promote the postmodern values amongst their pupils, by adapting these values to their pupils’ social needs.

Therefore, the professional identity of the teachers can be considered the nucleus of pedagogic awareness, of educational professionalism.

The image of the self and self-esteem depend on the evolution in the teaching career. As they advance in their career, most of the teachers refine their professional identity. It could be said that teachers become more and more aware of their identity and as a result, self-esteem grows stronger. Nevertheless, on a practical level, self-esteem becomes lower particularly in the teaching profession, mostly due to the rapid changes in contemporary society.

Psychologists consider that developing a proper image of the self is the key to success. For Erikson loyalty is the nucleus of identity, it means the possibility to achieve one’s potential, in a context that allows the individual to be himself, loyal to himself and the others.

A research conducted by D. Beijaard, N. Verloop, J. D. Vermut (2000) on the professional identity and the perception of one’s own professional identity shows that many teachers perceive themselves rather as specialists and practitioners than as pedagogues.

The teachers who believe themselves to be specialists, consider that without sound knowledge in the field, one cannot become a good teacher. This is the basis of the teacher’s authority.

The ones who believe themselves to be practitioners are interested in the conditions of learning, planning and projecting the teaching activities

The ‘pedagogues’ are interested in the way that the pupils study and in conducting attractive teaching activities.

Another important aspect in this study was that teacher’s teaching context, experience, and biography are categories of factors that may influence their perceptions of their professional identity.

Indeed in Romania the school culture, the relationship between teachers and students pass through a new change who affect the teachers professional identity.

The roles of teachers today are more and complex. Some roles are being extended (for example the classic role of teaching is today very rich: to teach means more than transmitting information. To teach means to create an adequate learning context, to use ICT, to monitor students’ learning, to help students become active participants in learning etc.) If the constructivist paradigm is present in students’ learning, then the constructivist paradigm must be present in teacher training and teacher education too. Because the constructivist learning involves sharing experience and the capacity to reflect on personal learning strategies, to reflect on personal qualities and weaknesses, it is a strong argument for teacher training. These challenges in teachers’ roles and competencies determine challenges in teachers’ training. “Undoubtedly, the teaching profession is currently facing new kinds of pressure and undergoing profound changes regarding roles, competences, values, the basic knowledge of teacher training, training strategies, the assessment system and professional certification” (Potolea, 2003, p.217).

In our research about teacher as critical thinker (Voinea, 2010, 2011) we demonstraded that a postmodern teacher who is a critical thinker has an innovative behaviour. The teachers are aware that the didactical innovation is an important resource for an efficient students learning. Indeed, the didactical innovation correlates with critical thinking and capacity to reflect. A lot of studies (Bengtson, Bolhuis) demonstrated these things. The capacity to reflect is very important for teacher career because “core reflection (when reflection extends to the two deepest levels in “onion model”) to enhance professional growth”.(Korthagen, Vasalos, 2005).

2. Purpose of study

The purpose of this study is to identify the perception of the self of the Romanian teachers (“beginners” and “experts”) on their professional roles in the Romanian school of the 21st century and their training needs.

3. Research design

The research was conducted on 200 subjects – Romanian teachers, divided into two categories- beginners (2 years experience in teaching) and experts (over 10 years experience in teaching).

We used a test called “I, the teacher” (M. Voinea), who was adapted from the test “Who I am” and the interview.
Likewise, two questionnaires were used (T. Pălaşan). One of the questionnaires aimed at identifying the functions and requirements/roles of the beginner teachers and the other questionnaire aimed at designing an inventory of professional skills acquired by teachers during their initial training and in the first two years of actual teaching in class. In the case of the latter questionnaire, the respondents had to mention the means by which they acquired a certain experience, by writing either ‘E’ (exercise, consciously practised in school) or ‘R’ (reflexive, via personal effort, with no explicit contribution from the trainer).

4. Findings and Results

Both the quantitative and the qualitative analysis of the results have shown that the teachers are aware of their new roles and competences. The perception of their professional roles is not really a traditional perception, because teaching is an important role which defines the teachers “the teacher is a person who knows how to teach” but to teach in the 21st century means to create an adequate learning context, to use ICT, to monitor students’ learning, to help students become active participants in the learning process etc.

The analysis of the essays ‘I, the Teacher’ has revealed the fact that teachers are aware of their own professional roles and have a clear image of their own responsibilities, but only at a superficial level, as the qualitative analysis of the essays has shown (for instance, experience and the teaching title stand for ‘the essence’ of defining the teaching profession).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 - Frequency of topics on self-identity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topics Related to Knowing One’s Own Professional Identity</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity (name, age, experience, teaching title)</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason of choosing the teaching career (having the educator/teacher as a role-model; own choice)</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with the pupils</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality Features</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching career development</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Behaviour (used methods, communicating with pupils, ways of awarding rewards)</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation Behaviour (methods used in the evaluation process, ways of evaluating)</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results obtained (Pupils’ results—contests, college admission exams, gratefulness behaviour)</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinions and experiences</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration with other people (parents; peers)</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the questionnaire (T. Pălaşan) on the classification of the teacher’s functions have revealed the following situation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Classification of the teacher’s functions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Function of the teacher</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. The development and consolidation of the skills and cognitive capacities function</td>
<td>28.88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The projecting, organising and conducting of the instructive-educational process function</td>
<td>27.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The Promotion of the attitudes favourable to the socio-cultural integration of the students function</td>
<td>14.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The ‘entertainer’ and involvement in extra-curricular activities function</td>
<td>10.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The complex communication function</td>
<td>10.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The advising, educational and professional counselling function</td>
<td>8.20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data emphasise the fact that teachers define the teaching profession via its classic functions, trying to reshape them according to the requirements of their pupils and those of society.

The second questionnaire— the knowledge and skills inventory—has emphasized both the strong and the weak points of one’s own teaching behaviour, although it contains mainly positive answers. The answers reported to the entire sample show a balanced average as far as the E-R options are concerned (exercise 52% reflection 48%) but also reflect certain problematic areas of the teachers’ professional identity, which can be optimized via the training
and life-long learning programmes. A selection of pieces of knowledge and capacities is rendered below (Pâlășan, 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge, capacities</th>
<th>E%</th>
<th>R%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I know how to introduce myself to students</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know how to link previous knowledge to new information</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know how to ask pupils to find out my feelings</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know how to talk to pupils to find out their level of expectation</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know how to talk to pupils to find out the difficulties they shall face</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know how to schedule the teaching process in sequentially during a week</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know how to ask pupils to come up with exercises to be solved.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Conclusions and Recommendations:

One of the main conclusions to be drawn is that the teachers’ professional identity still abides by the rules of the classical image of the teacher. This entails an effort of the teachers to become aware of their own professional identity, and this process can be significantly enhanced by the contact with other working peers, and the training courses seen as a way to redefine professional roles and develop one’s teaching career.

Another important conclusion is that the teacher who is aware of their role and responsibilities is a co-learner with his students and can engage their students in exploring and constructing the knowledge and positive attitudes learning. Indeed, the teachers can not to develop collaboration, positive attitude for change, the different acceptance and tolerance if they are not together with their student in a learning experience. The students need to see that the teacher is not a “magister” who knows all, who has all the answers, etc.

The students need to see that the teacher is a real person, who has a lot of positive and negative experience, who does not always have the right answer, who learns permanently, who collaborates with students or colleagues.

The students need to see that the teacher is a model of critical thinker: a teacher who searches and selects relevant information, who asks and creates new questions and waits not a single answer; a teacher who has pedagogical values and promotes these values in his behaviour; a teacher who believes in his students’ power to change.

References


