

6 Concluding remarks

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In the previous chapters, we focused on the two main concepts crucial for the efficient and up-to-date professional development of teachers: teachers' status and professional competencies for the development of pupils' transversal competencies in educational practice. Too little attention is paid to these issues in practice, and virtually no comprehensive studies can be found in the scientific literature. After the introductory theoretical and methodological starting points, the second chapter provides a theoretical and conceptual framework based on an overview of relevant scientific knowledge about the professional development of teachers. Some basic conceptual definitions and key features of the dominant approach to professional development are also presented, with a special emphasis on the current views which underscore the perspectives of professional development. We devoted the third chapter to the analysis of factors affecting the position and status of the teaching profession, as well as to various approaches to the definition of status and problems of the non-recognition of the teaching profession. Some implications of this analysis are presented here with the aim of improving the status of teaching within the profession and society. The fourth chapter explores self-regulated learning as an important transversal competency, which has, as part of the Comprehensive Curricular Reform, gained in importance with the introduction of the cross-curricular topic "learning to learn". In the fifth chapter, special attention is paid to questions of inclusive education policies and teachers' competencies for inclusive education.

Theoretical considerations and the results of empirical research permeate the chapters of this monograph, which, among other things, seeks to explore the experience and attitudes of elementary school classroom teachers and subject teachers in Croatia and Slovenia towards professional development and status, as well as transversal competencies in the field of self-regulation and inclusion.

The research included a total of 1,867 teachers (1,103 (59.1%) Croatian and 764 (40.9%) Slovenian elementary school teachers), who correctly filled out the questionnaire. The research has resulted, among other things, in a set of verified tools that can serve as good empirical support for future follow-ups on this topic. In addition to the already existing questionnaires which have been translated and adapted to Croatian and Slovenian, such as the Self-Regulated Learning Teacher Belief Scale, SRLTB (Lombaerts, De Backer, Engels, Van Braak and Athanasou,

2009), and the Teachers' Perceptions of Skills Needed for Teaching Diverse Students, original questionnaires were also used in this work. These included the Scale of Teachers' Professional Competencies and Scale of Reputation, which were constructed based on an overview of theory and available research in this subject area. The measurement characteristics of all the applied instruments and the results obtained on the Slovenian and Croatian subsamples are described in the chapters of the monograph.

In this Conclusion, we will reflect on the most important results of our research, and in the light of the obtained findings try to provide effective answers to achieve the desired changes.

The professional development of teachers is observed as a lifelong process of learning and development in the personal, social, and narrow fields of expertise. It is important how teachers perceive their competencies and assess the possibilities for their professional performance in the direction of critical, independent, and responsible decision-making and action. The worldview, attitude towards oneself and others, perception of the relationship between the individual and the school, family and culture in general, knowledge, attitude towards the learning content and methods of teaching, as well as all the experiences that shape the idea of what teaching is and what a teacher's work includes, affect the interpretation and importance which teachers attribute to their teaching experience. Many authors see this as the reason why many professional development programs are not having a genuine impact on changing teaching practices, and even less so on pupils' learning. It is therefore of utmost importance to understand how teachers progress professionally and which conditions contribute to and encourage their growth and progress.

The results obtained in this study show that Croatian and Slovenian teachers on average assess themselves as well qualified, which raises the question of whether they provided realistic assessments of their qualifications or if they maybe attempted to provide favourable responses. Croatian teachers assess their qualifications significantly higher than Slovenian teachers in all areas covered with this research (competency to analyse strengths and weaknesses of their educational work, the establishment of constructive dialogue with their counterparts, and a cooperative partnership with other schools, institutions, and parents), with the exception of the competency of mentoring pre-service students and teacher-trainees. One may wonder whether Croatian teachers are truly more qualified, or whether their self-assessments are less self-critical, i.e., whether the Slovenian teachers are too critical in assessing their competencies when compared to the Croatian ones.

Despite the relatively high assessments of their readiness for professional activity, it was found that Croatian and Slovenian teachers assess their capacity for action in research and development projects, mentoring pre-service students and student-trainees, and establishing a collaborative partnership with other schools and institutions with the lowest values. This suggests that not all teachers have been trained to provide mentorship or to assume the role of a mentor. It is also possible that teachers understand to a somewhat lesser degree the notion of cooperation on various research and development projects and the establishment of cooperation with the broader community as one of their essential tasks. Based on this it can be noted that these are areas in which it would make sense to apply more incentives and provide teachers with additional support in the future.

As expected, teachers with more years of experience assess their qualifications for professional performance in various fields, on average, with higher values, as seen with both the Croatian and Slovenian subsamples. This would be expected if most teachers pursued the desired direction of professional development and were in the mature period of their career (with more than 19 years of teaching experience), which is characterised by a hands-on, critical action, which then develops into relaxed disengagement. The results of previous research suggest that these teachers have achieved a certain degree of autonomy; they act prudently and responsibly in accordance with their views and values; therefore we can expect them to assess their qualifications in key areas with high values.

It is clear that the role and tasks of teachers have increased over time, while their status, compared to other professions, has remained stagnant or has even worsened, as confirmed by the results of many national and international reports and studies. It may be stated that teachers are often caught between the high expectations of society (and probably their own as well) and low professional respect. Problems of low teacher salaries, which lag behind those in the private and public sectors, low living standards, understaffing, feminisation of the profession, insufficient autonomy and exclusion from the development of education policies, lack of entrance control into the profession, misconceptions about the working time of teachers, the general perception that teachers work fewer hours than other professionals, and many other factors belong to the long list of issues that adversely affect the social position and status of such work, which is positioned rather low when observed on a global scale.

Croatian teachers agree, to a greater extent than Slovenian teachers, with the statement that teaching is one of the most important jobs in society, while, on the other hand, they also agree to a greater extent that teachers' work enjoys a low social

reputation and is paid less in comparison to other equally demanding professions. On the other hand, Croatian teachers agree to a lesser extent than Slovenian teachers that their profession provides regular income and financial independence, and that parents and pupils respect them. In this regard, it can be concluded that Croatian elementary school teachers perceive their reputation in society as being lower than is the case with Slovenian teachers, although the Croatian teachers also assess their qualifications for professional activity significantly higher than their Slovenian colleagues. At the same time, they assess themselves as being well qualified for their professional performance, but also as being under-recognised by others compared to how much they think they should be recognised. This discrepancy signals the existence of a number of factors affecting the teachers' self-positioning and the status of the profession. It also appears among Slovenian teachers, but is less pronounced.

The results of this research highlight how teachers rank the reputation of their profession in comparison with the reputation of other professions, such as a preschool teacher, high school teacher, university professor, doctor, nurse, lawyer, entrepreneur, journalist, and stage actor. Regarding the degree of reputation, it was found that Croatian and Slovenian teachers ranked doctors the highest, followed by lawyers and entrepreneurs. The reputation of university professors is ranked only fourth (the highest among teaching professions). In accordance with the results of other research, it is not surprising that Croatian and Slovenian teachers ranked the professions of preschool and elementary school teachers the lowest. Croatian teachers placed high school teachers in the lower part of the Scale of Reputation and ranked the profession third, while nurses occupy this place for the subsample of Slovenian teachers. The results obtained in our research confirm the findings of other studies, according to which the status of teachers varies depending on the education sector. The general perception of the professional status of teachers is "average" in all education sectors, except in higher education. The lower status is more noticeable in the field of early childhood and vocational training and the education of auxiliary teaching staff. Lower professional status is attributed to preschool teachers, teachers in vocational education, and auxiliary teaching staff when compared to other sectors, particularly higher education. It is known that women dominate the preschool and elementary school education fields, but research has found connections between professional status and salary, as well as the existence of a link between the feminisation of the teaching profession, low status, and reduced salary.

It is a disturbing fact that both the Croatian and Slovenian teachers in our research agree the least with the statement that they are respected by the pupils who are the

first “users” of their knowledge. In this context, we should mention that a certain degree of responsibility for the profession’s reputation in society lies in the hands of teachers themselves, and that through providing high quality and excellence in their professional activities they can contribute to achieving greater respect from pupils and parents, both for themselves and their work, and thus to improving their reputation, status, and respect in society.

Reputation, status, and respect are three different characteristics of an occupation. *Reputation* is defined by public opinion and the public perception of the relative position of an occupation in the hierarchy of occupations. It points to *status* as a category into which educated groups classify a particular occupation and *respect* for those who can observe the qualities which individuals demonstrate in their work (the perception of an occupation by the general public due to the personal qualities which individuals demonstrate while performing basic tasks, i.e., their care, competence, and commitment to work). Undoubtedly, a certain degree of responsibility is on the teachers themselves because they hold this respect in their hands and can improve it. Satisfaction with education, the well-being of pupils, assumptions about the child-preschool teacher role, parents’ participation and interest – these are all things that a teacher can impact depending on how he/she deals with pupils and their parents, and therefore teachers can also contribute to raising the respect that society has for teachers. It should be expected that the dynamic changes taking place in our region will impose a need for the creation of an education policy that gives priority to the improvement of salaries and working conditions, as these appear to be the most critical factors affecting the professional status and self-esteem of teachers, the provision of high quality teacher education, professional development opportunities and promising careers, ensurance of academic freedom, autonomy, and participation in decision-making, advocating for a strong system of public education in local communities, maintenance of a regular dialogue between educational associations and the government, and encouragement for teachers’ participation in public policy development.

Although many factors significantly affect the process of learning and teaching, some aspects of teachers’ roles have a greater impact on the quality of the learning process and outcomes than others. Two equally important dimensions that characterise the role of teachers, associated with the concept of identity, are related to the professional and personal dimensions. The professionalism of teachers is not only the totality of their competencies. A true teacher, at any level of teaching, is determined above all things, as emphasised by Korthagen (2009), by his/her personal qualities such as beliefs, emotional engagement, intrinsic motivation for professional activity, ethical commitment, and identification of the mission in their

profession. In other words, a teacher is the result of his/her “cumulative autobiography” that operates from personal constructs, beliefs, understanding, learning, professional growth, and development. In this monograph we do not show the results of the analysis of differences in personality dimensions and self-assessed levels of professional competencies, nor the correlation between socio-demographic variables and personality dimensions. In pedagogical situations, the importance of articulating and verifying teachers’ values, beliefs, and attitudes is of utmost importance, as they contribute to a better understanding and development of their professionalism and professional identity, as well as to ensuring children’s wellbeing.

In modern educational contexts emphasis is placed on the development of innovation, creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking, entrepreneurship, computer literacy, and social and other competencies that cannot be achieved in a traditional education sector with its emphasis on knowledge transfer. Transversal competences are recognised as important teaching skills in the organisation of the learning and teaching process and the teachers’ professional development, as well as in the process of teaching these competencies to pupils. The purpose of transversal competencies is to provide integrated learning across disciplinary boundaries, as well as to encourage the connecting of various areas of learning, which contributes to the development of key competencies and skills. Many terms are “alternately” used to describe transversal competencies/skills in different countries, such as cross-curricular competencies/skills, key competencies, 21st-century skills, and so on.

New tasks and roles require of teachers the acquisition of new competences, such as the competence “learning to learn” (including the adaptability to change, self-regulated learning, and coping with failure). These challenges impose on the teacher the need to develop higher levels of knowledge and complex cognitive skills. The transversal competence “learning to learn” and both civic and social skills play a key role in education. Inclusive education is defined as “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education” (UNESCO, 2005, p.13). In an inclusive classroom the teacher work with pupils with different educational needs. This implies strengthening the teacher’s interdisciplinary collaborative skills for modelling and the development of transversal competencies among pupils.

Teachers’ transversal competencies in the field of self-regulation and inclusion have not yet been sufficiently explored, and there is room for improvement in the area of interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research. Teachers already have to deal with an overloaded curriculum and different requirements in inclusive settings. Therefore,

it might be difficult to find a way to develop demanding transversal competencies, since they generally require a high level of the teacher's and learner's engagement and interaction. It is necessary to implement the development of transversal competences into initial and continuing teacher education. According to the latest documents on inclusive policies, almost every preschool and elementary classroom teacher has worked in an inclusive classroom made up of pupils with different educational needs. Therefore, it is crucial to expand the related research, especially when it comes to the relationships among competence and the various motivational factors, activities, and environments that support self-regulation of behaviour and competencies in education. When it comes to teachers who are already in the workforce, it is necessary to further invest in the growth of the aforementioned competencies through professional development. This can increase the teachers' ability to respond and cope with demanding situations in inclusive educational settings, and can result in benefits for the reputation of teachers in society.

Self-regulated learning is a vital transversal competence, which in the draft version of the new Croatian curriculum gained importance with the introduction of the cross-curricular topic "learning to learn". Teachers' attitudes and beliefs about the importance of self-regulated learning largely determine their readiness to introduce the activities and organisation of classes which would be stimulating for the development of the competence of such learning. Such attitudes and beliefs are formed during the initial and continuing education of teachers, so it is an interesting question to what extent their self-assessment of the degree of professional competence can be associated with positive beliefs about the importance of encouraging the self-regulation of learning in pupils. In order to investigate the correlation between the self-assessment of professional competencies and proactive teachers' beliefs about self-regulated learning, the Scale of Teachers' Beliefs about Self-Regulated Learning (Lombaerts, Backer, Engels, van Braak, & Athanasou, 2009) was translated into Croatian and Slovenian and adapted to the local conditions in these two countries. The scale showed satisfactory psychometric properties. The original factor structure was replicated and showed a stable factor structure across the Slovenian and Croatian subsamples. The reliability of the scale on both samples was also satisfactory. No statistically significant differences with regard to the teachers' beliefs were found between Slovenian and Croatian groups. Professional competence has a low (although statistically significantly) positive association with proactive beliefs about self-regulated learning, pointing to a certain minimum contribution of vocational training to the development of a positive, proactive attitude toward self-regulated learning. An almost equal result was obtained on the subsamples of Slovenian and Croatian teachers indicating a need to change initial

and continuing education in order to provide better information about the importance of encouraging the competence of self-regulated learning through a variety of cross-curricular teaching activities. In Croatia, the latest proposal of the comprehensive curricular reform related to the cross-curricular topic “learning to learn” will not produce the desired effect if the education of teachers does not encourage proactive attitudes towards the importance of facilitating free and independent choices, and if it does not intrinsically motivate the activities of pupils in the classroom with the goal of developing self-regulated learning skills as an important precondition for lifelong learning.

An inclusive education policy has significantly affected the inclusion of pupils with different educational needs, interests, and opportunities in the regular heterogeneous classes. Therefore, it is crucial for the teaching of pupils with different educational needs to be individualised, and that teachers have the competence for individualised instruction. The paradox of the inclusive education policy is reflected in the legislation, according to which teachers should be trained well to teach all pupils according to their educational needs, while at the same time their pre-service education does not conform with modern requirements. Pre-service education should enable teachers to take responsibility for the learning and achievements of all pupils, including inclusive attitudes and values, as well as the knowledge and skills for teaching in inclusive classes. This is because pre-service education can enhance positive attitudes toward inclusion and the skills of prospective teachers, as well as raising their confidence in the development, implementation, and evaluation of individualised educational programs for pupils with different educational needs. Moreover, the results of previous studies clearly show that teachers support inclusive education, although they report a moderate level of qualification for teaching in inclusive classrooms.

Inclusive education is a global descriptor of education policies with many challenges in the implementation of inclusive legal policies in practice (UNESCO, 2005). The results of this work indicate a moderate level of the studied teachers’ competencies for inclusive teaching, whereby a higher level is perceived for managing classroom discipline and encouraging the development of social skills. Their level of self-perceived competencies for individualised instruction is associated with professional competencies, but not with the age or years of teaching experience. Female teachers perceived themselves as more competent for individualised instruction. No cross-cultural differences in perceived competencies for individualised instruction were observed between the Croatian and Slovenian teachers, except in connection with their level of professional and inclusive competence, which is higher in Croatian teachers.

Teaching in today's highly heterogeneous classes regarding the pupils' educational needs requires a high level of teaching skills for individualised instruction, writing, implementation, and evaluation of IEPs, co-operation with professional experts and creating positive a classroom climate by strengthening the pupils' social skills. Considering that the contents of the pre-service teachers' educational programs focused on the competencies needed to teach regular pupils, as well as the dominant acquisition of competencies for inclusive teaching through self-directed learning, it is difficult to assume that teachers are able to respond to the demands of today's inclusive practice, which emphasises that quality teaching is characterised by an individualised approach based on the strengths of each pupil. The number of children with disabilities, especially those with significant needs for individualisation, is increasing in regular classes under the influence of the inclusive policy. Therefore, it is important to provide teachers with the set of competencies needed to teach diverse pupils in inclusive settings during pre-service teacher education, to strengthen self-efficacy, as well as efficiency in collaboration with professional experts, as all of these steps can have enhance teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusion. Therefore, seeing the professional development of teachers as a long-term process that involves various forms of systematically planned opportunities and gaining experience is crucial for the development of the competencies that are essential for an inclusive teacher, as evidenced by the results of this research.

Finally, teachers are responsible for the expansion of the boundaries of professional knowledge through reflective practice and systematic engagement in continuing professional development. If our goal is to contribute to the creation of innovative educational practice and to encourage the development of innovation, creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking, entrepreneurship, computer literacy, social and other competencies, and the implementation of appropriate activities in the classroom, then, among other things, we ought to reconsider traditional educational approaches while questioning many established educational theories and practical solutions.

Despite recognising the importance of professional development and the pressures arising from current educational requirements, most of the opportunities for professional development remain fragmented, insufficiently linked to the curriculum, and inappropriate in relation to the teachers' needs, requirements, and opportunities. In order for teachers to acquire competencies needed for these new roles, it is necessary to ensure the quality of initial education and a coherent process of continuing professional development. Professional development does not happen

in a vacuum, and it is essential that it includes other elements in a broader context (such as professional identity, characteristics of the environment, social conditions, and development of motives for participation in professional development), which can also affect the institutional practice of professional development.

The great challenge of modern educational institutions is finding innovative ways to apply the situated/contextualised knowledge of teachers, as well as their experience and expertise, in promoting the development of transversal competencies, such as professional development within the teachers' classroom practice or of the teachers' practice. Maintaining a high level of teachers' abilities to act in different fields of professional activity and their progress in critical, independent, and responsible decision-making and action require an appropriate institutional, administrative, and organisational structure, which recognises the importance of continuous learning and promoting such developments at the individual and institutional levels. Providing an environment that supports learning plays a critical role in the success of learning and educational efforts, especially if one considers the contemporary context of work and learning, which is characterised by continuous change. A prerequisite for such an initiative is the establishment of an organisational culture and climate that would be based on trust, respect, critical reflection, collaboration, communication, and the distribution of responsibilities.

All this has a significant impact on the professional development of teachers as critical intellectuals who, in the context of intellectual and personal structures, integrate openness to new knowledge. Finally, teachers can change/transform their practices only if they also examine and modify their theories and concepts of teaching and learning. In this context, improving the generally low economic status and position of the teaching profession in society, recognition of teachers as equal partners in the creation of educational policy, and improvement of the quality of initial and continuing professional development of teachers are at the very centre of educational priorities.

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