



Challenges of the Teaching Profession: Student Teacher View of the Status of Teachers in the Society and Their Own Engagement with Their Future Profession

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The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Some people view teaching as a mission, many others consider it as just another job. Teaching profession is publicly perceived as socially valuable and important, a job essential for the development of fundamental societal and human values. However, in 2019 Croatia, one still cannot speak of teaching as a profession. The public perceives teacher's expected high level of enthusiasm as a basic quality of an educator, rather than expecting a high degree of professionalism. Consequently, unlike education policies in some European countries, the historical development of the upgrade to the teaching profession in Croatia is somewhat lagging behind.

The text analyses the status of teachers and the acceptance of the educational profession in Croatia as well as the working conditions in the Croatian education. We present research results of attitudes towards the teaching profession and the social status of teachers expressed by students enrolled in the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Rijeka. The main objective of the research was to determine the attitudes of students on the current status of teachers in Croatia, concurrently examining the level of their readiness to actively engage in achieving better social and material

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status of teachers. The research was conducted in 2018 using the survey method. The results confirmed that the respondents possess developed awareness of the deficiencies in the Croatian school system and the underpaid teaching staff. Aware of the basic weaknesses in the education policy, respondents expressed their willingness to engage in solving these problems. The results also clearly pointed to the need for an essential educational reform to improve the status of the teaching staff.

Keywords: Teacher; educational process; teaching; profession; social status.

1. INTRODUCTION

To paraphrase Maxim Gorky: Teacher - how mighty it sounds! [1] William Glasser [2] has often emphasized that being a successful teacher is perhaps the most difficult profession in society. Teaching is an extremely dynamic activity; its participants create unusual situations on a daily basis, build mutual relationships, occupy different roles, and focus primarily on the pupils. Petrosky [3] describes teaching in picturesque terms – as a human play in which it is not only the pupils that play a privileged role, but the teachers are much like the pupils – the subject of teaching.

Teachers occupy a large percentage of the teaching staff in the Croatian education system: in 2015, 11,440 classroom teachers were employed in elementary schools in Croatia. At the beginning of the new millennium, our teachers were unsure of the way in which Croatian education was moving [4]. For the popularization of the profession and the retention of good teachers in the education system, working conditions and salaries must be attractive enough compared to other types of employment that require similar training. For example, the status of teachers in Finland is at an enviable level because their education is highly valued, so the teaching profession is highly valued [5]. "Finish teachers are the best and the brightest, because universities are able to choose the very best due to high standards of entry" ([5], 8). In Croatia, teachers are expected to demonstrate a high level of enthusiasm that the public perceives as the basic quality of the educator, rather than expecting a high degree of professionalism. This general attitude shows to what extent teaching is primarily perceived as an occupation and then as a profession.

Still, external factors should not encumber the relationship between teachers and students. Dissatisfaction with the societal position, pessimism and negative attitudes toward the situation in both education system and advanced

ideas, can be an impediment for the implementation of valuable innovations in Croatian education system. Teachers' attitudes toward their own education system reflect in the quality of their teaching, classroom atmosphere and relationship with students.

Educational policy-makers in any country do care about the quality of students pursuing education at the faculties of teacher education. Are young students ready to face the challenges of teaching in the digital age? Do they feel able to take on the responsibilities of their chosen profession and dare to initiate changes in higher education?

Looking for answers to these questions, the author conducted a research entitled *Challenges of the Teaching Profession*. In addition to determining students' perception of their future vocation, the research sought to examine whether the choice of the faculty of teacher education was their first choice. Another reason behind the launch of the research was to question the level of professional activism, i.e. to determine the extent to which young people are ready to respond to the challenges of teaching.

1.1 Professional Teacher Culture

Some perceive teaching as a mission, while many note it is just a job as any other. An occupation is the work that someone does to secure their livelihood, while a profession determines the social status that imposes certain obligations, thus securing its professional anatomy [6,7]. The basic types of profession (Smerić [8], 65) are academic professions oriented towards the scientific community, free professions oriented towards the market, and capital professions. The teaching profession falls under the category of state profession – service activity dependent on state bureaucracy and local authorities, such as the social workers or medical staff. University diploma is the basic requirement for admission to the profession, which novice teachers need in order to confirm their completion of five-year studies at a higher education institution [9].

Is the master's degree in primary education a sufficient criterion for confirming the profession of teacher? Profession is an activity that is publicly perceived as socially valuable and significant, a job that is very important for the development of fundamental social and human values. Apart from being publicly accepted, professional knowledge is based on empirical methods of data collection. Qualifications gained throughout education are subject to scrutiny, and education programs enable socialization and acceptance of professional values and culture. A profession is valued in society, presented to its unions, professional associations, and chambers that have their own Code of Ethics. A profession boasts the freedom to make autonomous decisions. Its chambers influence the creation of relevant policies within the profession and offer the possibility of permanent training and certain material reimbursement. The profession, therefore, has its legitimacy in society. Does this also apply to teachers?

Unlike education policies in some European countries, the historical development of the upgrade to the teaching profession in Croatia is somewhat lagging behind. This is confirmed by the fact that the teaching profession in Croatia is not sufficiently developed in order to define the corpus of its basic professional knowledge [10]. If we asked ourselves whether teachers themselves determine their professional standards, training programs, development and status in society, the answer would be a negative one: teachers still do not define their professional behavior and career scale.

Novelties have been introduced into the higher education system based on the conclusions of the Yerevan Ministerial Conference in 2015. Apart from the creation of new instruments in the quality assurance systems, the reform also covers teaching, which at the level of higher education should focus more on the students [11]. The future teacher should be familiar with national education policies, education reforms, and their impact on the school system, which is a precondition for their professional work and lifelong learning [2].

In spite of its responsible and often stressful job, the teacher calling should be seen as a source of positive emotions and the possibility of self-promotion, self-fulfillment, and development of a business culture [12]. The UNESCO document Education for All vividly confirms the key role of the teacher in economic development; it

therapeutically advises preschool teachers around the world to avoid succumbing to anger and instead seek to maintain composure. It is necessary to concentrate on the positive aspects of the profession in the pursuit of changes for the better.

Today's generations of students have changed considerably in comparison to generations from thirty years ago. The digital world greatly influences social relationships. Contemporary students live in a very different world from their parents and grandparents, and not only in the context of changed personal expectations and worldviews. The overall IT presence also causes cognitive changes that are needed to function in a digitized reality. Such changes are inevitably reflected in the relationships inside the family and society, but also in the relationship among the participants in the educational process. With regards to classroom teaching, the role of teachers is changing significantly in modern teaching – the teacher has now transformed from a 'knowledge transferor' into a moderator, trainer, and person who facilitates the pupils' learning process – a reflective practitioner [9]. Despite the achievements of modern technology and advanced teaching aids, the teacher remains a crucial factor in the quality of the teaching process. A more frequent use of the new teaching technology has by no means "pushed the teacher out" of the game; the teacher plays a key role in the creation of quality education. This awareness is all the more significant given the importance of education in the social and economic development of each country.

Not so long ago teachers enjoyed privileged social status along with doctors, lawyers, and clergy. Today, the teaching profession in Croatia is underestimated both in material and status terms. Does the cause of devaluation hide in gender imbalance or the fact that a man in a modern patriarchy seeks a profession with a higher socio-economic status and leaves the teaching profession up to the woman? [13] Feminization of education is a common global phenomenon [6]. Labor sociology has been trying to answer the question of whether feminization of professions is simultaneously an indicator of the crisis of a certain profession.

It should be noted that the financial aspect, payment of teachers' work, and the equipment of a school do not have to affect the students' satisfaction and their attitude toward the school. For example, Macedonian teachers are at the

very bottom of the best-paid staff list, but students in Macedonia are the most satisfied with their education and school attendance. We would expect the Scandinavian students to be the most satisfied, but this is not the case: the relationship between the financial situation and the students' satisfaction with the school is almost inversely proportional in Denmark and Macedonia. Croatian teachers should be aware that both material circumstances and their salaries are only one of the elements (though very important) of their calling, and that extracurricular factors should in no way affect the quality of teaching and their students' satisfaction. It should always be borne in mind that classes are organized for students; children do not attend school because of teachers.

Despite the general attitude that our teachers are dissatisfied, some research points to the wrong perception of the public. Vidić [14] conducted a survey that showed a fairly decent level of satisfaction with teachers' work in elementary schools. Differences in teachers' satisfaction with regards to work experience and workplace were also investigated [15]. Research participants were most satisfied with the relationship with their associates and the job itself, but the least satisfied with their salary. Data analysis has shown that classroom teachers are generally more satisfied with their work than subject teachers.

Children need satisfied teachers; they should not be burdened with personal problems and worries. We can raise a question that is not difficult to answer: Can a person dissatisfied with their life be a successful and good teacher? It is clear that school satisfaction is the result of the quality work of educators. The seriousness of work and the importance of education are unquestionable, but this does not exclude enjoying work and teaching. Action that excludes having fun will at some point result in dissatisfaction [16].

1.2 Characteristics of a Successful Teacher

Since school is a *learning organization* in which the students are active participants in classroom, the contemporary leader of the teaching process has to be a reflective practitioner. It is clear that the working atmosphere in the classroom depends on the teacher, because (s)he is the leader of that process, but it is equally important that the teacher hears and listens to his/her

students. In the professional relationship with his/her work, the educator should not bring his/her personal problems to work and burden the students.

Brajša [4] lists four key features of a successful teacher: imaginativeness, emotionality, ambitiousness, and awareness of oneself, one's abilities and the lack thereof. Lopez [17] introduces the term transformational or *T-factor* for excellent teaching. Teachers with a *T-factor* achieve excellent results, fulfilling the set outcomes in a pleasant classroom atmosphere where students are satisfied and feel appreciated. Quality instruction implies a good preparation of the teacher who knows how to plan and organize teaching in the best way [12]. Professionalism of teachers is not only the totality of their competences. A true teacher, at any level of teaching is determined above all things, as emphasized by Korthagen [18], by his personal qualities such as beliefs, emotional engagement, intrinsic motivation for professional activity, ethical commitment, and identification of the mission in their profession [9].

When we think about the quality of education, one of the fundamental goals of each teacher should be to monitor their students' maturation and progress. In the professional development of teachers, self-assessment is hoped to be a necessary instrument for permanent monitoring and improvement of the quality of teaching [18]. To be professional in their work, teachers require more than merely formal university education or the gained explicit knowledge; they must be prepared to systematically analyze and change their work practice, whereby showing their maturity, seriousness, and taking responsibility for their own development [19,17]. Trainees should not be burdened with the level of expertise at the beginning of their working life in education system - everybody has to go through the four-grade curriculum multiple times in order to efficiently fulfill the planned goals [20].

The Institute for Social Research in Zagreb systematically carries out projects related to the professional work of teachers in Croatia. It is certainly worth mentioning the two most important ones: *Professional development of teachers during initial education and internship* and *Professional development of teachers during initial education - longitudinal approach* [21]. The starting point of these projects was the idea that for the professional development of teachers it is important to connect the internal and external

context in which initial education and internship take place. If students do not reassess their beliefs about the teaching profession during their formal education, then teacher education studies will not lead to desirable outcomes [22].

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Purpose and Objectives of the Research

The research entitled *Challenges of the Teaching Profession* was conducted in February 2018 at the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Rijeka. The respondents comprised first to fifth year students of primary teacher education. The purpose of this research was to determine the attitudes of students on the current position of teachers in Croatia, and to point out (warn about) the trends and challenges that teachers encounter in their national context. The aims of research are: to analyze the views of respondents on the current status of teachers in Croatia, to examine whether the choice of the faculty of teacher education was their first choice, to examine the level of professional activism, actually the level of their readiness to actively engage in achieving better social and material status of teachers.

2.1.1 Research objectives

1. To determine whether there is a statistically significant difference in the choice of studies.
2. To determine the distribution of results with respect to the students' positive or negative attitudes regarding the social status of teachers in Croatia.
3. To determine the distribution of results with regards to the self-assessment of the respondents on the determination to engage in achieving a better material and social status of teachers.
4. To examine the students' attitudes regarding the weaknesses and negative characteristics (sides) of teaching.

2.1.1.1 Research hypotheses

Before conducting this research, the author had certain expectations. Thus, according to the research objectives, the following hypotheses were set:

H 1: There is no statistically significant difference between the respondents in the

choice of enrollment at a faculty of teacher education.

H 2: Respondents do not have a positive attitude towards the social status of teachers in Croatia.

H 3: There is no statistically significant difference in the students' attitudes towards the determination to achieve better material and social status of teachers and their own engagement in it.

H 4: Respondents believe that it is primarily necessary to improve the teachers' material status.

2.1.1.2 Research Methods and Sample of Respondents

We used the descriptive and casual-non-experimental method of pedagogical research [23,22]. For this purpose, we used a questionnaire in physical form which asked the Croatian respondents 10 questions that are consistent with the presented purpose and research objectives. The first two questions included specifying the gender and year of studies. In the third question the students could choose between two offered study programs. This was followed by a series of seven statements on a Likert-type scale in which respondents should provide an answer by circling those answers that best describe their point of view. The last question was an open-type question that required a short descriptive answer.

The research was conducted on a sample of 161 students of primary teacher education – 33 first-year students, 32 second-year students, 38 third-year students, 32 fourth-year students, and 26 fifth-year students. Among these students, 152 were female and 9 male (5.5%) [19]. The questionnaire was completed by students from Croatia as part of regular study obligations.

2.1.1.3 Processing and displaying data

The variables included in the research are: students' age and gender, and self-assessment of students' ability to perform activities within the profession. The respondents completed the questionnaire during class. An analysis of the acquired data was carried out using SPSS 23.0., system for statistical calculations. The collected data was organized and entered into the SPSS database. In addition to the basic descriptive statistics we used a multivariate method of data processing according to Mejovšek (2008), so that

the variables were simultaneously processed to obtain a complete and accurate insight into the research problem. We presented the results in tabular and textual form.

3. RESULTS WITH INTERPRETATION

The first aim of the research was to identify possible statistical differences in the choice of studies and faculties. The hypothesis was: *There is no statistically significant difference between the respondents in the choice of enrollment at a faculty of teacher education.* However, the result was rather unexpected: 91 students opted for the answer a) *first choice*, while, on the other hand, as many as 70 students (43.5%) chose the answer b) *not the first choice*. Since there is a statistically significant difference in the respondents' responses, the hypothesis was rejected.

The second aim of the research was to determine the students' attitudes regarding the current status of teachers in the country: The hypothesis was: *Respondents do not have a positive attitude towards the social status of teachers in Croatia.* In this context, two options were offered to the respondents: *The status of teachers in Croatia is satisfactory* and *The*

teaching occupation is appreciated in contemporary Croatian society. Most students provided a negative response to the first statement: 51 respondents *fully disagreed* and 91 respondents *mostly disagreed* with the offered option (88% of respondents). The outcome was similar for the second statement: 46 respondents *fully disagreed* with it and 85 respondents *mostly disagreed* with the offered statement (81% in total). The high percentage of negative responses confirmed the second research hypothesis.

The third aim was to ascertain the distribution of results with respect to the respondents' determination to participate in achieving better material and social status of teachers. The hypothesis was: *There is no statistically significant difference in the students' attitudes towards the determination to achieve better material and social status of teachers and their own engagement in it.* The respondents were offered the following statements: *I am ready to take on the responsibility for improving the social position of teachers* and *I am certain that through my dedication and determination I will achieve greater rights as well as better material and social status of teachers.* While a large number of respondents (77) *fully agreed* with the first

Table 1. Choice of enrollment at the Faculty of Teacher Education

Enrollment in teacher studies was my					
First choice			Not my first choice		
Year of studies	F	M	Year of studies	F	M
first	19	1	first	12	1
second	13	1	second	17	1
third	26	0	third	12	0
fourth	14	2	fourth	14	2
fifth	14	1	fifth	11	0
total	86	5	total	66	4
SUM		91	SUM		70
%		56.5	%		43.5

Table 2. The attitudes of respondents towards the social status of teachers in Croatia

The teaching occupation is appreciated in contemporary Croatian society					
Year of studies	Fully disagreed	Mostly disagreed	I have no opinion	Mostly agreed	Fully agreed
first	5	25	1	2	0
second	12	14	6	0	0
third	11	24	1	2	0
fourth	12	17	2	1	0
fifth	11	10	3	2	0
Total	51	90	13	7	0
%	32	56	8	4	0

Table 3. The attitudes of respondents towards determination to achieve better material and social status of teachers

I will achieve greater rights as well as better material and social status of teachers					
Year of studies	Fully disagreed	Mostly disagreed	I have no opinion	Mostly agreed	fully agreed
first	0	0	12	15	6
second	0	2	12	14	4
third	1	0	11	14	12
fourth	2	3	6	15	6
fifth	1	0	4	14	7
Total	4	5	45	72	35
%	2	3	28	45	22

offered statement (48%), only a half of that number of respondents (35) *fully agreed* with the second statement (22%), while as many as 45 respondents (28%) did not have an opinion about their role in improving the social status of teachers. Therefore, the third hypothesis was partially rejected.

The fourth aim of research was to examine students' attitudes regarding the weaknesses and negative characteristics of teaching. The hypothesis was: *Respondents believe that it is primarily necessary to improve the teachers' material status*. The respondents could write their answer to the open-type question: *Write what would, in your opinion, have to change in the Croatian education regarding the teaching profession?* Based on the obtained feedback, the responses were grouped according to the frequency of occurrence:

- Teacher salary needs to be increased. (49 respondents)
- The awareness of the importance of teachers and their contribution to society should be raised. (29)
- It would be good to introduce enrollment exams, reduce enrollment quota, and select the best students. (17)
- It is necessary to establish a Chamber of Teachers. (10)

Other observations referred to the teachers' accelerated retirement, introduction of additional pedagogical training, salary bonuses and awards for quality individuals, implementation of additional teacher evaluation, media coverage of positive developments in school system, better school equipment, etc. The initial hypothesis was partially confirmed, however, in addition to material difficulties, the respondents also highlighted the social component – the perception of the teaching profession in the public eye. They are highly critical of enrollment

quotas and the selection of applicants at faculties of teacher education.

4. DISCUSSION

Research results encourage reflection. This primarily applies to the entering student population – the fact that the faculty of teacher education was not the first choice of studies to a large number of respondents is worrying. This brings into question the interest of future teachers to work at school and educate new generations. It is obvious that to some respondents the enrollment at the faculty of teacher education was a spare, backup option. If they were led by some of the external factors in choosing their studies, such as the influence of parents, a friend's urging, or a lesser line of resistance, these are not valid reasons for choosing a profession to which they will devote their entire career lifetime. In any case, this is not an intrinsic, inner, motivation. In future research we could examine the reasons why young people choose a faculty that was not their first (desired) choice.

Respondents generally share the same attitudes about the current status of teachers in the country and in that sense they have no illusions. As many as 142 respondents (88%) believe that the current status of teachers in Croatia is unsatisfactory. This opinion is mostly conditioned by media influence, but students have also developed their attitude based on own experiences gained in school practice during studies. They are aware of the current state of the teaching profession that is not appealing to the younger generation, the need to change public perceptions and improve the status of teachers in society. This attitude by students is not necessarily discouraging. Despite the negative public perception, students still chose the teacher education, thereby demonstrating their readiness to perform a job that is not

generally the most desirable. It is important to emphasize that no statistically significant deviations were identified in the students' attitudes with regards to age and gender.

When it comes to the respondents' determination to achieve a better material and social status of teachers and their own engagement in achieving results, most respondents are ready to take on the responsibility to improve the social position of teachers (48%). There is a far greater percentage of undecided respondents: almost one third of the respondents do not have a firm attitude about their own role in initiating changes in education. The most undecided respondents (35) are in the first three years of studies. This fact correlates with the percentage of students who have chosen teacher studies and points to a certain passivity of future teachers to possible reforms in the Croatian education system. We cannot expect the significant change in the position of educators, or the positive shift in the development of teaching profession, if future teachers are unsure whether they can affect the quality of educational work. Only active, self-conscious individuals, willing to take responsibility to improve social reputation and material status of a particular profession, can pursue radical reforms.

With their answers to the last question the students have confirmed the seriousness of the survey approach and the maturity of thinking about the shortcomings of Croatian education. The students reiterated the anticipated reference to the material underpayment of the teaching staff by highlighting key problems such as: the need to change the negative trend of poor selection of students upon enrollment, the need to establish a Chamber of Teachers, and the need to influence the public opinion regarding the teaching profession. Thus, apart from the material component, the respondents demonstrated a developed social awareness of the inevitable implementation of essential education reforms.

5. CONCLUSION

The postmodern period brings with it numerous dangers, primarily the pressure of politics and the society's enormous expectations from education. Unlike the education policies in some other European countries, the historical development of the upgrades in the teaching profession in Croatia is somewhat lagging. The reception of the teaching profession in Croatia, the

experience of a society and the social status of a teacher cannot under any circumstances leave a person indifferent, but they cannot be a decisive factor in self-esteem, belief in the teaching profession, hope in change, and committed work in career development. The syntagm "teaching career" sounds over-emphasized because "career" is associated with power, wealth, and social influence, all that is currently lacking in the teaching profession, but material abundance and social status are not the only condition of human satisfaction and happiness.

The research has pointed to the neuralgic points of Croatian education policy and the inevitable need to upgrade the teaching profession. As long as the teacher's profession is not able to independently develop the corpus of its core professional knowledge, the present situation will not change. Teachers have to define their own professional standards, behaviors and careers themselves. Young generations of future educators need to be educated at faculties of teacher education, treated as full members of the academic community, with their future profession enjoying a proper legitimacy in society.

With a professional approach to teaching, the teacher defends the dignity of his/her profession. Teachers should be enabled to act independently and competently as critical intellectuals in accordance with the professional standards and ethical rules of the educational profession, in the best interests of the students with whom they collaborate in the teaching process. In this context, it is necessary to draft documents for the professionalization of the teaching profession, as well as the teachers' code of ethics, all within the Croatian Qualifications Framework. It is essential to develop a model and introduce a (re)licensing system to acquire and retain a permit to work in education. Therefore, firstly, it is necessary to define the competence standards required for the professionalization of teaching. Professional standards should improve the teaching profession, and it must regulate itself. Then the phrase "reflective practitioner" will come to life in full context, signifying the professionalization of teachers, the profession that promotes change, and appropriately influences them with the appropriate social status [24].

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, patient's written consent has been collected and preserved by the authors.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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