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From the Research on Teachers' Professional Identity

Abstract

The text is a report on the pilot research on teachers' professional identity where the *Twenty Statement Test* was applied to the group of 200 primary school teachers. It constitutes an attempt to define teachers' self-concept. The object of the research was teacher identity and its aim was teachers' professional identity diagnosis. The presented description is a fragment of a broader project conducted among primary school teachers of the city of Bytom. On the basis of the collected material a certain general teacher self-concept outline may be created as teachers seem to characterize themselves most frequently by means of the self-assessment category and least frequently by the ambitions and aims category.

Key words: *teacher, professional identity.*

Grounds

The dynamics of the cultural and social changes generates the risk of the individual's sense of confusion increase, as well as their loneliness and moral dilemmas which consequently provoke the constantly updated question of "Who am I?" (Grochmal-Bach, B., MacQueen B.D., Pačalska, M., 2007:15). The problem of identity seems to be particularly difficult for the young generation. A young person has to decide whether they want to remain themselves (which might mean being lonely) or to be Somebody, which might result in identification with a certain group of people and their expectations. While making up their mind they expect

support, first and foremost on the part of the parents, but in particular on the part of teachers, seen as professionals and experts on human relations.

However, such support may be offered only by the teacher who has got their own well-grounded personal identity (Michalak, J., 2001;137). Thus, the diagnosis of teacher identity and the way of its creation appears today to be a problem which requires a very thorough diagnosis for this knowledge may become a basis for drafting aid schemes for teachers, which would cover the professional functions implemented by them.

Identity – the basic concept category

Identity is a complex, multidimensional concept category which is defined on the grounds of various concepts and scientific schools, an object of the unabated interest of human science representatives (philosophers, pedagogues, psychologists and sociologists). Identity also constitutes a central point in discussions on personality. It is the axis around which the personality structure is shaped and its loss disorganizes that structure completely.

The identity shaping process is an extremely difficult task and takes place through dynamic and multidimensional relations with other people (Tołwińska, B., 2001:67). The relational dependence is of reflexive and reciprocal nature. On the one hand a person's actions are the exemplification of their identity, on the other hand, a person's identity is varied due to the knowledge being entailed by this action. Therefore, without a well-grounded sense of identity an individual is not capable of acting effectively. (ibid: 72).

Identity may also be understood as “a socially negotiated individual consciousness project” (Chardin, T.D., in: Bajkowski, T., 2001:74–75) or “a multidimensional construction joining the personal elements of the individual's system with the central values of the culture of the group that the individual belongs to” (Wiktorowicz J., in: Bajkowski, T., 2001:75), making responsible for its final image both the individual and the surrounding people and environment in which the individual is brought up.

The process of identity shaping is not easy and the conditions constituting it may bring numerous ethical problems. A mere attempt to answer the question: “Who am I?” requires a lot of effort and is burdened with a high risk of error. One of the most serious paradoxes of human identity is the fact that a being does not know

who he or she is until they find out who they belong to. But still they do not know who they are as long as they do not notice a substantial difference between them and other people. (Grochmal- Bach, B., MacQueen B.D., Pačalska M., 2007: 14).

The contemporary epoch is characterized by the opulence of changes and instability, as well as by the discontinuity of their self-concept (Barska, A., 2005:16), and “has an influence on the identity constancy and permanence, which affected by them become as flickering as the world itself, changeable and variable, evasive and elusive, uncertain and liquid in their substance. They cannot be expected to be arrayed in one continuous and consequent narration” (Bauman, Z., 2001:11). Thus, a paradoxical situation came into existence which provides extensive opportunities for self-creation, but also implies the menace of identity loss, the identity that is possessed by the individual and that the individual identifies themselves with (Barska, A., 2005:16).

Methodological concept of the research

It was assumed that the basis for the devised research will be the theory of self-concept by Kuhn. The self-concept in his view means “the individual’s attitudes (plans of action) directed towards their own mind and body perceived as objects” (Hickman, C.A., Kuhn, M.H., 1956:78 in Bokszański, Z., 1989:96). The core of the self-concept is identity, i.e. its generalized position in society deduced from its statuses in the groups of which the individual is a member, roles which appear from the statuses and social categories, the attribution of which to oneself is the outcome of the group membership. According to its main concepts people “identify themselves also through their values (attraction-aversion) and through the attribution to themselves their own particular features” (Bokszański, Z., 1989: 96). The self-concept, apart from the identity image, also refers to:

- the interest concept and individual aversion (i.e. their attitude to objects, and affective, cognitive and valorizing attitudes);
- the aims and their implementation concept;
- their own image and outlook on life which creates the point of departure frames to be analyzed by the individual and others;
- self-assessment of the fulfilled social roles (Bakszański, Z., 1989: 96).

Research aim and object

The object of the research was teacher identity. Its aim was teachers' professional identity diagnosis. The main research problem was defined through the question:

What self-concept do the Bytom primary school teachers have?

In the process of operational actions on the studied variables the main problem was specified in the following questions:

- Which of Kuhn's categories prevails in the analyzed TST questionnaires?
- Which position in the TST questionnaire was occupied by defining oneself as a teacher?
- What kinds of identity (professional or individual) are represented by the studied group?
- Do they, and to what extent, identify themselves with the teaching profession?

Method

The TST (*Twenty Statement Test*) was applied in the research which, to my knowledge, has not been used so far in the empirical research on the teacher as a person. It is a questionnaire consisting of exhaustive instructions explaining the way of administration as well as its precise structure: "below there are twenty numbered spaces. Please, complete the twenty sentences beginning with 'I am...'. Just write in twenty terms/attributes, bearing in mind that they have to refer to yourself. They should be noted down in order they appear in your mind without pondering over them, as all of them are equally logical and important" (cf.: Appendix 1).

Elaboration of a valuable self-concept theory and the usefulness of the TST are determined by the method of data elaboration. The following points must be taken into consideration (Bakszański, Z., 1989: 101):

- the holistic approach comprising the analysis of the whole included in the TST material obtained from the respondent allowing for the definition of the research participant identity profile;
- the approach concentrated on the presence or absence of the specified categories in the respondents' relations;
- the approach in which a standard tool for studying the TST self-concept is modified in such a way so as to make the respondent able to make

auto-description while simultaneously ordering certain categories used for describing themselves.

For the results interpretation a holistic approach was adopted, which made it possible to use the whole material and create the respondents' general identity outline. The approach is based on the assumption that the self of the social subject has numerous aspects and the significance of respective components of the individual's self is diversified just as the individual's bonds with the social world are (ibid:101).

In the research Kuhn's five categories method was applied according to which the respondents' answers are classified in compliance with a five-point scheme:

- groups and social categories;
- ideological beliefs;
- interests
- ambitions and aims;
- self-assessment.

Forming the proportions of the respective category classes enables to define principles characteristic of each examined person of self-concept organization and diagnose the significance of the professional work in the respondents' identity structure (to reconstruct the sense of professional identity of the examined teachers).

Research progress and organization

The research was conducted at three stages:

- collecting the empirical data (sending the instructions and the research tool to schools via e-mail);
- elaborating the data (analysis, interpretation and conclusions formulation);
- distributing the exploration results to the schools and interested teachers.

Description of the research environment and the studied group

The research was conducted as a pilot research in January 2012 among teachers of three primary schools in the Silesian region. The sample schools selection was intentional, determined by the number of the pupils (teachers from primary schools with no more than 200 pupils). The studied group comprised 53 teachers of various subjects. It ought to be emphasized that despite the fact that the teachers had agreed to participate in the research they were unwilling to complete the questionnaires and in eight cases they were completed only partially, thus, this part of the empirical material was not analyzed. Consequently, the analysis referred

only to 45 fully completed TST questionnaires. Diploma teachers constituted the predominant group of 22 people, then there were 13 appointed teachers, 5 contract teachers and 4 intern teachers. All of them were university graduates of the subject taught with full pedagogical preparation.

Research results

The questionnaire analysis started with classifying the answers according to Kuhn's five categories. Therefore, the groups and social categories classification comprised 30% of the statements; the ideological beliefs category included 6%; interests 5%; ambitions and aims 3% and the self-assessment category 56% (the most).

The applied method is not free from certain limitations resulting from the necessity of writing twenty statements referring to one's own person which is not an easy task and requires an effort which might and probably does generate making up "enforced" answers or giving it up at all. Moreover, because of some enigmatic statements, e.g.: "I am what I am", "I am because I am", "I am quite, quite...", "I am sensible/clever", etc., it is impossible to qualify them univocally for only one category. This sort of statements composed 10% of the empirical material and were omitted in further analyses.

The majority of the characteristic features referred to the self-assessment category, the most frequent ones were the following terms: *friendly, sociable, exceptional, sensitive, efficient, conscientious, frank, responsible, glad, over-worked, happy, hard-working, active*.

The second place with reference to the number of the obtained answers is occupied by the first category – groups and social categories (30% of the statements), which is exemplified by the terms: *woman, mother, wife, teacher, Polish, Silesian, brunette, human being*.

The third place belongs to the ideological beliefs category. They include such statements as: *ecologist, atheist, Catholic, patriot, apolitical*. Arranging this category posed most difficulties because these terms may also be included in the groups and social categories. Yet, it was assumed that the respondents giving this type of answers identify themselves in these cases more with a particular ideology, belief or faith rather than with a social group.

The interests category occupies the fourth position, e.g.: *I am a rock music fan, I am a bibliophile*.

The fourth category – ambitions and aims, gained the fewest number of statements, i.e. 3%.

In the process of the TST questionnaires analysis particular attention was paid to the part in which the respondents described themselves as an employee, teacher or tutor. It may confirm the importance of the performed role in their life. It is also significant when defining whether teachers possess social or individual identity; if they define themselves through the prism of their profession or whether other features are important for them. The results are rather surprising as it was assumed that defining themselves by means of the performed profession would occupy a high position in the questionnaire, especially that the research was conducted in their workplace. However, it turned out that the teachers defined themselves through the prism of their profession to a very small extent. Only 45% of the examined teachers identify themselves with the performed profession and what is more, if the profession is mentioned, it is placed in further positions (usually from the 11th to 14th).

While analyzing the data, three identity components which occurred in the answers were considered, i.e. personality traits, appearance and place of residence. They are substantial elements shaping a human being. Chart 1 presents the results.

Chart 1. Personality traits, appearance and place of residence in the answers

Category	Number of indications
Personality traits	29%
Appearance	5%
Place of residence – city/region/country	3%

Source: own research

The results clearly show that the teachers most willingly described themselves through the prism of the possessed (in their own opinion) personality traits – 29%. The studied group described themselves as sensitive, brave, responsible, conscientious, efficient, hard-working and, which is rather peculiar, *impatient, unpunctual, lazy* only alleviated by *sometimes*. External characteristics were mentioned very rarely, only 5% referred to appearance. The following descriptions were given: *fat, pretty, handsome, brunette, ginger-haired* or *fit*. Even less frequently the teachers' answers indicated their place of residence. Only 3% of the statements referred to being Polish, Silesian or European.

Conclusions

On the basis of the collected material a certain general teacher self-concept outline may be created as they characterized themselves most frequently by means of the self-assessment category and least frequently by the ambitions and aims category. The conclusion coming out of the self-concept described in this way is the fact that teachers concentrate on their own person and further professional development perspectives are omitted by them. This state of affairs enables neither to shape positive personal development perspectives nor to implement one's life aims and ambitions.

Another conclusion drawn from the research refers to the professional sphere and the teachers' work performance. Despite the fact that in the majority of the questionnaires the statement "I am a teacher" occurred, its average position on the list is 13. Taking into consideration the importance of the teaching profession and the role it plays in shaping student personality, it must be described as highly unsatisfactory.

Next crucial issue which manifested itself in the research is that the studied group depicted themselves according to the personality traits represented by them (it must be remarked that a substantial number of them were unflattering), their appearance was omitted (which might signify low self-esteem) as well as their place of residence – city/region/country. With no regard for one's own place of living and consequently the sense of belonging or being attached to a particular environment provides a bit distorted image of a teacher who, through their work, ought to form national identity among their students and promote the culture of a given city or region.

Finally, it is worth noticing that the teacher's identification with the performed profession is one of the elementary conditions for the proper and efficient implementation of their professional tasks, and in particular the actions connected with making space for complete auto-creation and emancipation of the student (Kwiatkowska, H., 2005).

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