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Reformatting and redesigning the role of a teacher in the shadow of the millennial challenges

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Abstract

The article deals with changing the role of a teacher respecting the millennial challenges in the educational sector. The author provides readers with the outline of the situation in Slovakia as a non-English speaking EU country. He focuses on the teachers' personal integrity and expertise, as well as perspective innovations. Afterwards, he targets the capacities for the overall modernity of teachers and values they are able to bring in. And finally, there are various factors that condition this agenda – the author mentions 3 dilemmas of the educational sector.

Keywords: Formability and modernity of a teacher; Teachers' personal integrity; Learner-centred approach; Dilemmas of educational sector

1. Introduction

What is the profile of today's teachers? Being an innovator, facilitator, or creative motivator? Certainly, we cannot take one particular role and put it at the higher stage than others. Personal integrity of teachers must be viewed in a complex way. We can perceive their modernity from different points of view. Either we will emphasise trendiness and thus the ability to react and decide on a currently valid and beneficial element, or we will appreciate the pragmatic individualistic approach of a teacher. The principal aspect of all this is choosing the quality.

In this article, we provide readers with the outline of the situation in Slovakia as an EU member non-English speaking country. Next, we focus on the teachers' personal integrity and professional competences, as well as perspective innovations. Afterwards, we target the capacities for the overall modernity of teachers. And finally, there are various subjective and objective factors that condition this agenda – we perceive 3 dilemmas of educational sector.

2. Material and methods

The primary method of our research is a literature review [1] of various Slovak published sources. We intend to summarise the basic information dealing with the competences of a teacher perceived in Slovak sources. These data can be universalised to all categories of teachers, regardless of the subject taught. Further, we are focused on the tasks of innovations, formability, and modernity in the educational sector. Finally, we analyse and synthesise, then compare and confront, this material against our practical experience. Our efforts are to see this as objective as it is possible.

When analysing sources, we have to ask a few research questions:

- Which values are teachers able to bring in?

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- Are teachers formable? To what extent?
- What are the current dilemmas of educational sector?

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Which values are teachers able to bring in?

When we talk about innovations, we must mention the system. In the Slovak educational system, a systemic deformation is brought in after each election. Each time after elections, a newly assigned set of politicians want to do some reforms. There is no continuity in legislative processes. The results are chaos, disorganisation, and misconceptions in managing. In operational management, this symptom is called “Bumblebee theory” – often considered to be a poor academic theory. Filley [2] states: *“The label originates in the fact that the bumblebee is said to violate many of the classical laws of aerodynamics, yet, being ignorant of these profound truths, it goes ahead and flies anyway. Similarly, academicians all too often view abstraction as an end in itself, rather than as a means to understanding and explaining reality. Their theory is expressed as untestable propositions or broad prescription.”* Simplified, without descriptors – the common feature is the lack of professional practitioners capable of targeting and naming the problematic points.

Every 4-year electorate period is a closed chapter, after which something new comes. Teachers are always only in positions of executors and at the same time the objects of conceptual changes. This should be changed. The basic concept of the direction of our education together with the identification of the goals we want to achieve is absent. Zimenová [3] reminds that it is typical for the countries successful in implementing school reforms to set goals first and then a strategy for how they want to proceed up to 20 years ahead.

According to Brestenská [4], it is necessary to create a new education atmosphere in schools associated with a reassessment of the perception of its value for people and society. So education should not be seen only as something that concerns us while we attend schools or as something that cannot be avoided on the way to a diploma. For example, an analysis of successful reform school systems (in Scandinavian and Asian countries or Israel) could help us to do this. Regarding innovations, she adds (ibid.) that the word innovation cannot adequately describe the real needs of our education system. This must be done through educational transformation at all levels of schools. It represents a complex and dynamic process that requires long-term development. A process that cannot be carried out in a single-term administration, so it is crucial to find public buy-in for this idea across political frameworks. And most importantly, to start transforming education as soon as possible.

Mistrík [5] critically states that Slovakia has a problem of education sector vision. Education and training should be based on rational conceptions of objectives, ideals, and academic standards, as well as on society’s objectives, such as where we want to go and what kind of children we want to have.

Šušáková and Ferencová [6] succinctly summarised that excessive pressure on performance and control often weakens creative processes, the desire to learn, experiment, and introduce innovations, and furthermore, it brings fear of failure and unsuccess. The school environment set up in this way is rather a barrier to the introduction of changes and innovations, which are currently a necessity in the environment of Slovak schools. They add that the environment and culture of the school should support innovations and successfully respond to the demands of the times.

The necessity of essential changes is that teachers should be the bearers of change because they themselves are the main elements of the educational process, learners included. As a part of the democratisation of schools, the transfer of competences and managerial processes delegation are desirable to a certain extent. Simultaneously, it does not prevent the positive and creative expression of directors’ personalities with good managerial skills and didactic background. This is the meaning of participative school management. As Hanuljaková [7] adds, another crucial element is a performance climate. A rational and foresight teacher eliminates the climate of coercion and ensures a performance climate, more precisely a supportive and mobilising one. We mean the quality of the educational environment.

Teachers bring several values. The most important is the teacher’s personal integrity, which fundamentally affects everything else. Teachers should be a formative element towards learners. This implies taking into account and realising the importance of building a teacher-learner relationship not only with an educational but also with a socialisation and moral-ethical dimension. Teachers must be consistent in what they say and do to be trustful. As we mentioned in the previous parts, humanism, solidarity, respect, and inclusiveness are other values on which the learner-centred approach should be built.

Zelina [8] emphasises the following three areas for the improvement of schooling and education in Slovakia:

- educational innovation, based mainly on the achievements of cognitive psychology and pedagogy – cognitive hope,
- the concept of self-regulation and self-regulatory learning, which is more related to strategies and methods of education and self-development – behavioural hope,
- the concept of humanisation of a person, based on the theory of humanistic approach to the learner, the theory of non-cognitive development of the learner – non-cognitive or humanistic hope.

3.2. Are teachers formable? To what extent?

Modernity as terminus technicus bears the sign of change. If we were to move strictly within the limits of Bauman's [9] 'Liquid Modernity', where its main characteristics are lightness, fluidity, and mobility, we would arrive at the symptoms of the present time, such as flexibility, movement, and uncertainty. Uncertainty even becomes a powerful individualising force.

When looking for answers to the above question, it is necessary to research both requirements.

Although they sound synonymous, they are not quite so. Changeability carries a certain element of definitiveness – changes from one status quo to another, e.g. passivity vs. activity, formality vs. informality, traditionalism vs. alternativism. Therefore, it is appropriate to use the term "formability of a teacher". We can understand a teacher as a malleable substance that can be modelled according to need and time, and as a result, it bears the sign of temporality.

In practice, we know that despite certain general, immutable principles of education (humanism, solidarity, respect, inclusiveness), we are forced to be flexible and adaptable – to adapt to specific situations and problems that naturally arise regardless of our original intentions and goals. These are certain deviations. Nevertheless, we cannot assign a negative connotation to the word flexibility (in the sense of finding a specific solution to a temporarily changed situation). On the contrary, it is the bearer of the search for a solution, the search for ways to answer questions. Consequently, flexibility as the ability to adapt is an important characteristics of a teacher, and thus directly affects whether a teacher is malleable. The formability of teachers is influenced internally and externally. It depends on how receptive they are to changes. Generally, younger teachers tolerate changes easier.

Proactively setting legislation and conditions for working in education can help stimulate young staff so much that they do not leave for the commercial sphere, e.g. *Stratégia celoživotného vzdelávania a poradenstva na roky 2021-2030* (en. Lifelong Education and Counselling Strategy for 2021-2030) [10]. When understanding the formability of a teacher, a crucial factor is the specifically stimulating working environment of schools and the school system, which can help shape a novice teacher. Their attractiveness and lucrativeness fundamentally influence the preferences of choosing a teacher's profession.

- One of the mitigating factors is not being burdened by stereotypes – the absence of an unproductive routine or the symptom of burnout, or moral and ethical defects of behaviour – a higher tendency to comply with *Etický kódex pedagogických zamestnancov a odborných zamestnancov* (en. Code of Ethics for Teaching Staff and Professional Staff) [11].
- According to The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) - 2013 Results, about 82% of all teachers and 60% of all school principals in Slovakia were women [12]. We underline that there has been a long-lasting discussion over defeminisation of the educational sector by initiating support and stimulating male novice teachers to start and develop their careers in the public educational sector. The results are questionable.
- Other factors are age, state of health, level of intrinsic motivation, and willingness to improve and learn. Based on the up-mentioned study, Kanovská [13] warns of the risk of a decrease in the share of novice teachers, so there is a critical risk of ageing of the teaching staff.
- Among novice teachers, we perceive their weaker local ties (as non-sufficient or non-existing family obligations) = higher mobility. We can interpret it various. It is positive in terms of willingness to relocate to a place of a job position offered. At the same time, it is a negative feature of not yet willing to settle down and localise.
- Another specific factor may be the qualifications and expertise of teachers. According to Pavlov [14], qualified for teaching activities are those who, in accordance with the applicable legislation, have obtained the necessary level of education (complete secondary vocational education, bachelor's, master's degree in higher education) for the relevant level of school (kindergarten, primary, secondary). Official statistics document almost 100% qualification in our schools. As he continues, however, teachers' expertise becomes a more serious problem.

Teachers must meet not only the requirements of the level of education but also the expertise. They should teach the subjects of approval (field of study) that they completed as part of their teacher training. We add that a teacher with 20 years of experience can understand teaching other subjects than his approval as a dishonour of own expertise and many years of experience, unlike a younger colleague.

- Professional self-development of teachers, see Pavlov and Krystoň [15], is a lifelong process when, under the influence of internal motives and needs, there is a self-regulated development of personality traits, professional competences, and overall potential for own pedagogical activity. It all merges into a unique structure (integrity) of a self-realising teacher-professional. We are talking about the personal integrity of a teacher.

In contradiction to the above, we draw attention to *Závěrečná správa Revízie výdavkov na vzdelávanie roku 2017* (en. The Final Report of the Review of Education Expenditure in 2017) [16] by The Ministry of Treasury and Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Science of the Slovak Republic, where it is stated that Slovak educational sector has been achieving below-average and, in recent years, deteriorating results compared to the most advanced countries. The document (ibid.) further states that teachers' professional development does not sufficiently meet the development needs of teachers and schools. In a more detailed elaboration, it mainly concerns the lack of a suitable offer of further education and the low salaries, especially for young teachers, as well as insufficient consideration of performance and quality in remuneration.

3.3. What are the current dilemmas of educational sector?

We perceive three dilemmas:

- The first dilemma is the choice between knowledge and creativity. Many teachers are only performance-oriented – it is the easiest approach. The learner performs, and the teacher evaluates with a grade. The mentioned approach is already outdated and oriented only on knowledge as a final product. It can show quality, but is obtained mainly through a passive approach – the learner passively receives the material from the teacher. In the sense of applying an approach directed at the needs of the learner, the modern teacher will prefer a creative approach, which means the active participation of the learner, and thus a higher quality of the educational process.
- The second dilemma is the choice between etatism (statism) or pragmatic individualism in the approach to a career. In the past, the dominant role in all areas of life was played by the state with a centralist approach to management and problem-solving. Teachers were strictly in the role of statisticians. From the point of view of today's requirements for education and training, it is obvious that the initiative must be taken by the sector itself, especially by teachers. And that is why we can discuss the individual pragmatic approach of teachers – they need to be given space for individual initiative and creativity according to their pragmatically adapted educational program.
- The third dilemma is trendiness. It is important that it is not self-serving in the sense of forcibly introducing a certain teaching strategy regardless of suitability and effectiveness. We repeatedly emphasise the approach focused on the needs of the learner (learner-centred), which is the crucial factor in the decision, not fashion.

4. Conclusion

In this article, we dealt with the factors that affect the ability to be a formable and innovative teacher in the 21st century. The modernity of a teacher in his/her approach to own teacher profile lays the foundations for future qualitative success. It is important not to stop being satisfied with the results achieved, to look for new challenges and goals, and not to forget that learners should be at the centre of attention. This is the only way to prevent stagnation or even burnout.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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