

Part 2

Teacher Education

Jana Kalin, Renata Čepić & Barbara Šteh

Status of Teachers and the Teaching Profession: A Study of Elementary School Teachers' Perspectives

Abstract

In scientific literature a large number of different conceptual definitions of status found that can be applied as a framework for the analysis of different professions although it should be noted that there is no single, universally accepted, unambiguous definition or theoretical construct. For example, Haralambos (1994) defined reputation as the amount of respect and honor associated with social status, characteristics of an individual and his or her lifestyle, while social status, as a determined position in the society that includes a certain role, is a set of standards that define the behavior expected of members of a certain status. In this paper, we will try to establish what points of view elementary school teachers hold regarding the reputation of the teaching profession in the society and how they rank the level of reputation of elementary teachers in relation to the reputation of other professions.

Keywords: elementary school teacher, status of teachers, reputation, professionalism, teaching profession

Introduction

From a review of available studies on professionalism and the status of teachers (Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996; Hargreaves et al., 2006; Hoyle, 2001; Monteiro, 2015; Sachs, 2003, and others) it is noticeable that a large number of definitions of the term status point to its complexity as well as its diverse and ambiguous nature. Monteiro (2015, p. 56) highlighted that the highest level of professionalism is applied to professions that have the highest social importance, responsibility and recognition, which correspond to the ideal type of professional models.

In recent decades, questions of the teaching profession, professionalism, and the need for professionalism in the context of the teaching profession and development of quality education have been in the center of educational experts' attention. Results of recent research undoubtedly show that the students' achievement greatly depends on the process of learning and teaching, but also on the teachers' role (Day, 2013; Day, Sammons, Stobart, Kington & Gu, 2007; Monteiro, 2015; Vizek Vidović & Velkovski, 2013 et al.).

Although the teaching profession has changed considerably over the last few decades, and continues to be faced with defining themselves in relation to other

professions, it is clear that over time the role and tasks of teachers have increased, while their status, compared to other professions, has remained stagnant or has even lowered as confirmed by the results of many different national and international reports. MacBeath (2012) observed that teachers, unlike most other professions, burdened with excessive expectations that society places before them, are caught between high expectations and low professional respect. The few studies conducted in Croatia (e.g. Maršić, 2007; Radeka & Sorić, 2006; Radeka, 2007) also pointed to the dissatisfaction of teachers with their social prestige and status. However, the situation is not the same in all countries. Unlike in England, France, Germany, the United States, New Zealand, and Austria, where the social status of teachers is evaluated as unfavorable, this profession continues to enjoy a good social status in countries such as Scotland, Ireland, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland (Verin, 2004 in Jukić & Reić Ercegovic, 2008).

Monteiro (2015, pp. 63-66) summarized the main features of the overall status of the teaching profession into four groups by synthesizing national and international reports and studies. These are:

1) *Professional and social status are not very prestigious* (lack of challenge criteria for the selection, education, evaluation, low salaries, limited teachers' autonomy, deprofessionalization and feminization of the profession, and others);

2) Lack of or reduced working conditions;

3) Diminishing importance of the teaching profession in public eye;

4) *Other factors* associated with the students' dissatisfaction with the school, school reforms, aggressive students and sometimes parents, and the loss of the traditional direct monopoly as a source of knowledge.

In this paper, we tried to establish what point of view of elementary school teachers hold about the reputation of the teaching profession in the society and how do they rank the level of prestige in relation to the reputation of other professions.

Method

The Scale of reputation was constructed based on a review of the theory and previous research about teacher reputation. We created eight items that shape the Scale of reputation. We included four positive and four negative statements about the reputation of teachers which were listed alternatively in the questionnaire. Statements relating to the general attitude about the reputation of teachers and the importance of teachers' work with regards to the society, the respect and relationship of parents, students, and teachers towards teachers, and the financial dimension of the profession. Teachers were asked to evaluate their level of agreement with statements on a five-point Likert scale (*1 - strongly disagree, 2 - disagree, 3 - partly agree, 4 - agree, 5 - strongly agree*).

We also asked the teachers to classify ten professions (preschool teacher, elementary school teacher, high school teacher, university professor, doctor, nurse, lawyer, entrepreneur, journalist, and stage actor) with regards to the degree of reputation on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means the least respected profession and 10 the most respected profession in the society. We started from Hoyle's (2001) three-component definition of the status of the profession, according to which the component of reputation (Occupational Prestige) indicates status, which is defined

by public opinion – public perception of the relative position of a profession in the hierarchy of professions.

We applied the questionnaire to a representative sample of Slovenian and Croatian teachers and analyzed the differences. The study included a total of 1,867 teachers (764 Slovenian and 1,103 Croatian teachers correctly filled in the questionnaire).

Results and discussion

Views of teachers about the reputation of the teaching profession

We determined what views elementary school teachers hold about the reputation of the teaching profession. Research has revealed that Croatian teachers achieve on average higher scores on the Scale of low reputation when compared to Slovenian teachers ($M = 4.01$ $M = 3.83$) and the differences are statistically significant. It can be concluded then that Croatian teachers have a lower perception of their reputation than Slovenian teachers. For statements which form the Scale of low reputation the difference between Croatian and Slovenian teachers proved to be statistically significant in all statements except one – “The low reputation of the teaching profession affects my satisfaction with work”. On average, teachers tend to agree with this statement (average rate for the entire sample was 3.74).

The entire sample mainly agrees that the teaching profession does not have a high reputation in the society ($M = 4.28$); Croatian teachers thereby achieved a higher statistically significant average rate than Slovenian ($M = 4.39$ $M = 4.13$). From the average score it is evident that teachers agree that they receive lower salaries than other equally demanding professions with the same level of education ($M = 4.23$). At this statement Croatian teachers achieved the highest average score and statistically significantly differ from Slovenian teachers ($M = 4.42$ $M = 3.97$), which is probably due to a worse economic situation in Croatia and lower average salaries of elementary school teachers. In this regard it should be noted that the Republic of Croatia considerably lags behind the EU averages and does not follow its recommendations in terms of the percentage of GDP which should be allocated for education and scientific research. The EU average for education is 4.5%, while the Croatian is 3.5%. According to data from the Institute for the Development of Education, Slovenia allocates 5.7% of its GDP for education, which puts it in the top 15 countries of the European Union when it comes to investing in education. Also, based on the main requirements, i.e. EU recommendations (2015) countries should provide at least 6% of their GDP for education, which has yet to be achieved in many countries. Among the factors that adversely affect the social position and status of the teaching profession are in particular low salaries of teachers and in this research we found that elementary school teachers share this view.

Slovenian teachers also achieve a significantly higher level of agreement regarding another statement on the Scale of low reputation when compared to Croatian teachers. Slovenian teachers largely agree with the statement that the media usually portrays teachers in a negative light ($M = 3.56$ $M = 3.44$). This raises the question of what teachers can do to improve their reputation in the society in terms of promoting their status and professionalism.

Concerning positive statements about the teaching reputation the entire sample of teachers largely agrees that the work of teachers is among the most important ones in the society ($M = 4.15$), which is in line with our expectations. Croatian teachers agree to a significantly higher degree with this statement than Slovenian teachers ($M = 4.25$ $M = 4.01$). Teachers agree to a somewhat lesser degree with the statement that the teaching profession provides a regular income and financial independence ($M = 3.32$) although the majority of teachers in the sample has an indefinite employment contract. There are also reported statistically significant differences between Croatian and Slovenian teachers, which in turn can probably be attributed to the weaker economic situation in Croatia. Croatian teachers believe to a lesser extent that the teaching profession provides regular income ($M = 3.10$ $M = 3.62$).

In the entire sample, the teachers least agree that parents respect teachers ($M = 2.66$) and that students respect teachers ($M = 2.91$). Again, there are significant differences between Croatian and Slovenian teachers. In both cases Slovenian teachers on average agree more that parents ($M = 2.71$ $M = 2.62$) and students ($M = 3.00$ $M = 2.85$) respect teachers. In this context we mention Verhoeven et al. (2006), who pointed out that a certain degree of responsibility for the societal reputation lies in the hands of teachers and that through their professional activity they can certainly contribute to achieving greater respect among their students and parents for their work and thereby contribute to shattering of the myth that the society has no respect for teachers.

Croatian teachers agree to a greater extent than Slovenian teachers with the fact that teaching is amongst the most important professions in the society, while, on the other hand, they evaluate to an even greater extent that teaching has a low reputation in the society and is less paid than other equally demanding professions. On the other hand, Croatian teachers agree to a lesser extent than Slovenian teachers that their occupation allows regular income and financial independence, as well as that their parents and students respect them. From the abovementioned it can be concluded that Croatian elementary school teachers feel that their profession has a lower standing in the society than Slovenian elementary school teachers.

Reputation of the teaching profession compared to other professions

We were interested to know how elementary school teachers rank the reputation of their profession compared to the reputation of other professions. We differentiated ten professions (preschool teacher, elementary school teacher, high school teacher, university professor, doctor, nurse, lawyer, entrepreneur, journalist, and stage actor) with regards to the degree of reputation. Both Croatian and Slovenian teachers on average ranked doctors the highest, however, the reputation of doctors in the Slovenian subsample has a significantly higher average ranking in comparison with the Croatian subsample of teachers ($M = 8.14$ $M = 7.85$). In the second place on the level of reputation are lawyers, both among Slovenian and Croatian teachers, and there are no major differences between them. It is surprising that entrepreneurs are ranked third on the scale of reputation among both, Croatian and Slovenian teachers, whereby this profession occupies a significantly higher average rank ($M = 7.07$ $M = 6.62$) on the Croatian subsample. The results may not be so surprising in an increasingly consumer-oriented society where a good

economic status and material goods rank high on the scale of values. According to estimates of elementary school teachers, the profession of a university professor ranks only fourth and occupies a somewhat better position among Slovenian teachers in relation to Croatian ($M = 6.45$ $M = 6.23$). Both Croatian and Slovenian teachers rank theater actors and journalists in the middle of the scale of reputation, whereby Slovenian teachers rank the journalists slightly better ($M = 5.26$ $M = 5.01$), which may even be surprising given that Slovenian teachers largely agree that the media usually show teachers in a negative light.

As it was expected, the following professions can be found in the bottom part of the scale: high school teacher, nurse, and elementary school teacher with the preschool teacher in the last place. It is interesting that Croatian teachers ranked the reputation of nurses higher than secondary school teachers ($M = 4.76$ $M = 4.55$), while the Slovenian teachers, contrary to this, on average ranked high school teachers higher than nurses ($M = 4.89$ $M = 4.00$). Due to this, there are statistically significant differences between the two subsamples. Croatian and Slovenian teachers ranked on average the reputation of preschool teachers the lowest, while they ranked their own profession second, with the occupation of elementary school teachers as having a slightly better average ranking in the Slovenian subsample compared to the Croatian subsample ($M = 3.94$ $M = 3, 61$).

Conclusion

In our study, we were interested to find out how the status of the teaching profession is perceived by the teachers themselves – they evaluated their agreement with some viewpoints regarding the prestige of the teaching profession in the society. In all statements connected to the reputation statistically significant differences were noticed between Croatian and Slovenian teachers, except in the statement “The low reputation of the teaching profession affects my satisfaction with work”. It can therefore be concluded that Croatian elementary school teachers perceive the profession as having a lower reputation in the society than their Slovenian colleagues.

We were curious to know how teachers evaluate their profession in comparison to other professions. As expected, the results show that Croatian and Slovenian teachers rank the occupation of doctors the highest, followed by lawyers and entrepreneurs in terms of the degree of reputation. The occupation of a university professor is ranked (only) fourth on the scale of reputation (the highest rank among teaching professions). At the bottom part of the scale of reputation both among Croatian and Slovenian teachers is the occupation of preschool teachers and elementary school teachers.

The results obtained in our study are confirmed by the results of other studies (e.g. Symeonidis, 2015), 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 educational sectors except in higher education. A lower status is perceived more frequently in the field of early childhood, vocational training, and education of assistant teachers. Preschool teachers, teachers with vocational degrees, and additional teaching staff are associated with a lower professional status compared to other sectors, particularly higher education. It is known that women dominate the preschool and elementary school education and research has found

connections between the professional status and salary as well as the existence of a connection between the feminization of the teaching profession, low status, and reduced salaries. Our research shows that elementary school teachers themselves do not attach a high reputation even to higher education teachers, and ranked them on average on the fourth place among the ten professions.

It would be interesting to find out how others evaluate the work of teachers and their reputation. Imamović (2014) determined on a sample of Slovenian teachers that teachers rank themselves lower on the scale of importance of occupations than the parents of their students. It is worth to think about how teachers perceive their position in the society and the importance attributed to them. What is worrying is perhaps the fact that Croatian and Slovenian teachers in our study agree the least with the fact that they are respected by the students who are the first “users” of their knowledge.

One of the central and open questions that arises from all previously considered findings is the question of which measures could be used to possibly improve the status of teachers in the society.

In a recent report of the Education International Research Institute (EI) (Symeonidis, 2015, pp. 12-13) on how to improve the status of teachers and the teaching profession the following priorities in the creation of educational policy are emphasized: 1) improvement of salaries and working conditions which are seen as the most critical factors affecting the professional status and personal self-esteem of teachers, 2) provision of high quality teacher education, professional development opportunities, and promising career, 3) insurance of academic freedom, autonomy, and participation in decision-making, 4) advocating a strong system of public education in local communities, and 5) maintenance of a regular dialogue between educational associations and governments, and encouraging teachers to participate in public policy development.

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Prof. Dr. Jana Kalin, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia,
jana.kalin@guest.arnes.si

Assist. Prof. Dr. Renata Čepić, Faculty of Teacher Education in Rijeka, University of Rijeka, Croatia, renata.cepic@uniri.hr

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Barbara Šteh, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia,
barbara.steh@guest.arnes.si