

The Importance of Professional Self-Knowledge in the Initial and In-Service Training of Teachers

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The Paris Conference on Education 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Rogers's person-centered approach has had a major impact on the social professions and the methods used in this field, so I have tried to briefly present the methods that can be used in the initial and in-service training of teachers. As professional self-knowledge is an important area of becoming a teacher and pedagogical work, I emphasize the importance of this area in the initial and in-service training of teachers. In this research, I undertook to find a connection between teachers' professional self-awareness, mental health status and professional well-being. In my questionnaire, I used an adapted version of Jacqueline Royer's (2005) test of metamorphoses. The results allow us to conclude that most teachers in the sample have a need for mental health help, and in the absence of it, they see themselves negatively. In the case of the examined sample, the level of professional well-being is related to the years spent on the field and the state of mental health.

Keywords: Professional Self-Knowledge, Teacher Training, Person-Centered Approach

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Introduction

The importance of professional self-awareness and its development as an essential element of a teacher's career is outlined in the teacher training literature of the early 21st century (Diamond, 1991; Kagan, 1992; Winitzky&Kauchak, 1997). However, its uptake in teacher training practice is still lagging behind. In Romania, at the levels of training where it is present, it is not preceded by an individual or group experience of personal self-awareness, which would be an important basis and starting point for professional self-awareness. Of course, the two (personal and professional self-awareness) are intertwined, but from the point of view of training, it would be ideal for them to be built on each other.

Mental health, as one of the most important pedagogical competences of teachers, is becoming an increasingly widespread professional requirement in teacher training, although it is still being dealt with on the theoretical level. In Romania, there are few teacher training institutions that include educational units on self-awareness in their curricula. For the time being, the focus is on the development of reflection as an important pedagogical skill (Schön, 1983; Zeichner&Liston, 1996; Westbury, Hopmann & Riquarts, 1999) and the practical possibilities and methods of its development.

Theoretical Foundations and Scientific Significance

Carl Rogers's person-centred approach (2013) has had a significant impact on the helping professions in recent decades. The same is true for teacher training and the in-service training of teachers. A teacher's most important tool is their personality and therefore their mental health is of utmost importance. Through self-awareness activities and development, we can support teachers' mental health.

The person-centred approach (Rogers, 2013) is a way of being, whereby people living together turn towards each other as persons. According to this, every person is equally important, every individual and everyone's individuality must be respected, and everyone must be given the opportunity to develop and to receive attention. Rogers, drawing on his experience of leading person-centred group work, has provided a wealth of theoretical and practical insights into the legitimacy of this approach in areas where the personality of the professional is also a fundamental work tool. It is important that in the person-centred approach, the key factor of positive change in personality is primarily the individual and not the external conditions and influences (e.g., therapeutic methods). The importance of a person-centred approach to teacher training is supported by research on beliefs that appeared in the early 1990s (Pajares, 1992; Zhihui, 1996; Calderhead, 1996), showing that the teachers' preconceived beliefs influence their professional effectiveness. Exploring beliefs is therefore important, right from the start of training.

Person-centredness provides an excellent theoretical basis for the development of teachers' personal development and professional self-awareness. The person-centred approach originated in psychotherapy, but quickly spread to the social and educational arenas, where it took root in the orientation towards group methods and proved to be a powerful tool for building resilience in individuals and organisations. In later years, it also became the basis for development methods such as video training in schools, the Bálint group, the self-awareness psychodrama group, the Gordon method, encounter groups, bibliotherapy or the audio diary. (Brophy, 2004; Elder, 2007; Gordon, 2003; Káplár, Dorner, 2020; Birta-Székely, 2022a; 2022b).

Research Questions and Methods

The primary aim of this research is to explore the links between teachers' professional self-awareness and their mental health. I wanted to know how teachers who have been in the profession for several years see themselves, and whether the presence or absence of mental health support could be linked to this self-image or not. The research questions are the following:

1. Is there a correlation between professional self-awareness and mental health?
2. Does teaching experience influence mental health?

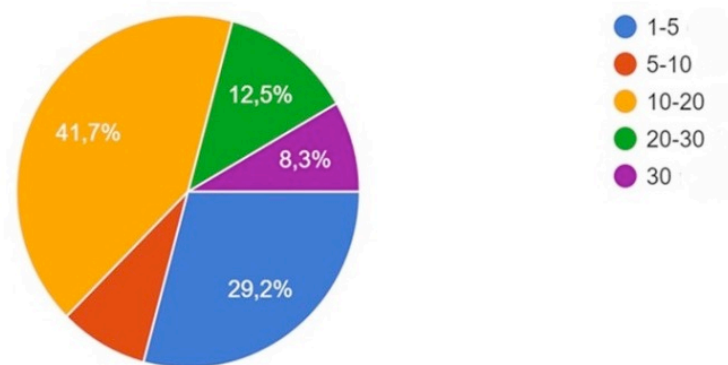


Figure 1: Teaching experience (N=157)

157 Romanian teachers participated in the questionnaire survey; the number of years in the profession is shown in Figure 1. 63% have more than ten years' experience.

I measured how teachers perceive themselves using an adapted version of Jacqueline Royer's Metamorphoses Test (1963). The personality test relies on symbolic thinking by switching off the control of rationality. It works similarly to role-playing, where stepping into someone else's shoes provides a shield in which the person can be more honest and braver about themselves. The test asks for identification across several categories, i.e., a positive response or a negative response in the same category (e.g., Which colour would you be and which not?).

I used three items of the personality test in my questionnaire (animal, object, famous person), but I was only interested in the negative object choices, and I processed the answers given to this. I used content analysis of metaphors to analyse. I classified participants' negative object choices into three categories: strongly negative, moderately negative, and neutral.

Results and Discussion

Based on content analysis and the summary of the negative choices (Table 1), 97% of teachers who have been teaching for more than ten years chose an object with strong or moderately negative content. Most of the objects in the neutral category (87%) were chosen by early career teachers.

What object would I NOT be?			
The analysis of metaphors			
Strongly negative	e.g. doormat, dustbin, dishwashing sponge, mop, toilet paper	45%	97% 10+ years teaching experience
Mildly negative	e.g. slippers, snow shovel, dagger, knife, needle, leaky jar	30%	
Neutral	e.g. mobile phone, pendulum clock, road, stationery, door knob	25%	87% under 10 years teaching experience

Table 1. What object would I NOT be?

As shown in Table 2, only 2% of participating teachers have used any mental health services in the last five years. Nevertheless, a larger proportion (69%) noted that they would have a great need for it. 2% chose self-awareness training as an answer to this question.

<i>Have you benefited from any mental health services in the last 5 years?</i>	
YES	NO
2%	98%

Table 2. Have you benefited from any mental health services in the last 5 years?

I also wanted to know what pedagogical and professional beliefs the participating teachers identified with. For this purpose, they had to choose between two quotes (Table 3). The Zsigmond M6ricz quote focuses on teaching, sharing knowledge, while the Karl Menninger quote focuses on the personality of the teacher. Teachers were almost evenly split between the two quotes, but the balance tipped towards the Menninger quote, with 59% choosing it, indicating that they believe the teacher's personality to be more important than what they teach. The respondents' teaching experience was not relevant in this case. It was interesting, however, that the majority of those who chose the Zsigmond M6ricz quote gave strongly negative answers in the metamorphosis test. This result can also indicate that teachers who focus professionally on teaching express their lower level of mental health through negative metaphors. Teachers who emphasise personality, chose moderately negative or neutral metaphors. This is since they are more conscious of themselves and their professional self-awareness. They were also the ones who indicated their need for mental health services.

Which of the following quotes is closest to your professional beliefs?	
"I believe that there is no greater joy than teaching someone something they don't know." (M6ricz Zsigmond)	41%
"The teacher personality is more important than what they teach." (Karl Menninger)	59%

Table 3. Professional beliefs

Conclusion

The results suggest that the teachers in the survey have a high need for mental health support, i.e., teachers need mental health support as much as any other helping profession. This can be started in early teacher training by using self-awareness activities, with an increasing shift towards professional self-awareness.

A further development of the research could be to include a larger number of items and a target group, such as university students, who would act as a control group of the above group with several years of teaching experience.

Acknowledgements

The research was carried out with the support of the Communitas Foundation travel program.

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