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CONCEPT OF TEACHER PROFESSIONAL AGENCY

Summary. The purpose of the current article is to explore the usage of „teacher professional agency” concept and explore the perspectives of the concept usage through creation of different modelling cases. The concept analysis method was applied in order to collect the recent literature and explore the concept of teacher professional agency. The results indicate that the concept of teacher professional agency is viewed from diverse perspectives, depending on theoretical foundations of authors. The implications for further theoretical research on teacher professional agency are provided.

Keywords: agency, teacher professional agency, intentional action.

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КОНЦЕПЦІЯ ПРОФЕСІЙНОЇ ДІЄВОСТІ ВЧИТЕЛЯ

Анотація. Мета цієї статті – дослідити використання концепції «професійної дієвості вчителя» (*teacher professional agency*) та дослідити перспективи її використання шляхом створення різних зразків для моделювання. Метод аналізу концепції був застосований для збору літератури та вивчення концепції професійної дієвості вчителів. Новизна дослідження полягає в тому, що за результатами аналізу концепції професійної дієвості вчителя, були виділені характерні особливості даної концепції та на їх основі змодельовані зразки ситуацій, де професійна дієвість вчителя представлена емпірично. Результати вказують на те, що концепція професійної дієвості вчителя розглядається з різних точок зору, залежно від теоретичних основ авторів. Взагалі, дієвість людини проявляється, якщо система висуває певні вимоги, що суперечать її переконанням чи особистим цінностям. Поняття "професійної дієвості" охоплює спроможність професіональних працівників чи керівників здійснювати контроль над своєю роботою, робочим середовищем або впливати на них. Професійна дієвість вчителя розглядається як спроможність вчителя чи колективу вчителів планувати та робити навмисні дії (*intentional action*), впливаючи на власну професійну діяльність, ініціювати зміни в навчальному процесі, сприяти розвитку та вдосконаленню якості шкільного навчання. Професійна дієвість розглядається як явище, що проявляється через певні дії, а не через окремі властивості чи риси характеру вчителя. Ставлення вчителя до своєї професійної дієвості залежить від його або її індивідуального сприйняття своєї професії, а також професійних поглядів та переконань. На основі своїх професійних переконань вчитель обирає певну позицію. Професійна дієвість передбачає саме позицію активного втручання та впливу вчителя в професійному оточенні. Професійна дієвість залежить від рівня професійної автономії вчителя, а також від матеріальних та соціальних чинників. В статті наголошується, що наявність професійної дієвості у вчителів сприяє закріпленню статусу вчителя як «агента змін», прискоренню впровадження освітніх іновацій, покращенню результатів навчання та виховання, розвитку та вдосконаленню школи.

Ключові слова: дієвість, професійна дієвість вчителя, навмисна дія.

Introduction. Nowadays teachers are seen as main actors of school improvement who are expected to go beyond their prescribed roles and act within the structures of professional environment. Teachers are required to make professional decisions, implement innovations, negotiate personal, professional and social requirements and cope with different situations and challenging environments in their daily practices, and, as a result, provide better learning environments for their students [12], lead own learning and personal development [5]. Thus, the topic of teacher professional agency gets attention in recent educational literature. Giddens [6] states that people are able to exercise agency if the system poses some irrelevant requirements which contradict one's conceptions. The concept of "professional agency" refers to professional actors (employees and leaders) who can exercise control over, or have an effect on, their work and work environment [9]. Professional agency is viewed as action-based phenomenon manifested through actions rather than individual properties or character traits [13]. The action is intentional in nature and the agency is seen as a combination of

intention and action [7]. Professional agency refers to professional actors (employees and leaders) who are able to exercise control and make an impact on their work and work environment [9], and manifested in making choices, influence and decisions, negotiating, and taking stances at the professional environment [12].

Problem statement. The research is aimed at investigation of teacher professional agency concept (TPA). The research questions are what are the main attributes of the concept? What are the model and contrary cases of teacher professional agency?

Methods. The research process was comprised of two stages:

- 1) Systematic literature review, including scientific sources selection, abstract and article review,
- 2) "teacher professional agency" concept analysis applying Walker and Avant [15] methodology.

Stage 1. Conducting the literature review

According to Wenner and Campbell [16], the criteria of literature selection for teacher professional agency concept analysis should be based on several practical criteria, inclusive and exclusive. The in-

clusive/exclusive criteria for sources selection were the following:

- Exclude studies in which participants are not schoolteachers (academics, pre-school teachers, administration staff).

- Include pieces where teacher professional agency in education is a subject of the study; studies with peripherally included TPA were excluded.

- Include articles published in the peer-reviewed journals with open access and full-text articles.

The Academic Search Complete (EBSCO) database was used to search for the relevant scientific literature using the defining word “teacher professional agency”. The search was narrowed to sources published in a decade period from 2010 to 2020 and was not limited to specific publishing journals or geographical location. However, only articles published in English were considered. The primary search provided 824 pieces.

The next step included the abstract review applying the inclusion/exclusion criteria, described above. As a result, the sample of 28 pieces of literature were included for full review.

Stage 2. Concept analysis

The concept analysis method of Walker and Avant [15] is the most frequently utilized method, used mostly in fields of nursing and business studies. The method implies 8 steps of concept analysis: concept selection, determination of the aims or purposes of analysis, identifying all uses of concept, determining the model, borderline and contrary cases. The goal of the concept analysis is to determine the ordinary and scientific usage of the same concept, to make the meaning of an existing concept clearly comprehensible, to enrich an existing theory, and to develop an operational definition [15].

Research results

Literature review: Attributes of teacher professional agency concept

The notion of teacher agency emerged to conceptualize teacher efforts to make choices and conduct intentional actions that make significant impact within their professional environments [12], when teachers act autonomously and to effect change [10].

Professional agency is something that people do in practice [2]. However, this does not imply that mere teacher behavior can be used as criterion for professional agency. Rather, the teacher behaviors combined with internal processes such as attitudes, emotions and cognitive processes which constitute the complexity of professional agency [12]. Thus, agency is viewed as intentional action and teachers are able to elaborate on reasons behind those actions. Teachers are led by certain self-encompassing values and self-determined goals through planning and execution of strategic actions [5]. Thus, teacher professional agency can be manifested through teacher’s conscious actions which correspond to one’s professional goals and values. Accordingly, actions performed accidentally or without any purpose cannot be perceived as teacher professional agency, but rather reaction or response.

Teacher professional agency can be manifested individually or collectively and practiced when professional subjects and/or communities make choices, take stances, and have an influence on their work and/or professional identities. Teacher agency is viewed as professional actions teacher

take within the working contexts, which condition, allow and determine those actions [4]. The emphasis of pedagogical action is a core characteristic of teachers’ professional agency [12]. Sense of agency is reflected in the internal locus of control, taking responsibility of the situation as well as making suggestions, pedagogical choices and conscious decisions on the basis of their own professional goals and reflection [4; 13].

Agentic action can also come from a teacher’s curiosity [14]. In this there seems to be something related to teachers as generators of changed practice. van der Herijden et al.’s study identified four characteristics of agency from the literature: mastery, entrepreneurship, collaboration and lifelong learning. Mastery is seen through being skilled and competent to execute professional duties. Entrepreneurship is manifested in being engaged in innovative professional practices, which is linked to the collaboration culture at certain professional environment. The characteristic of lifelong learning is manifested through readiness to learn and seek to increase own professional qualification and skills.

Antecedents and consequences of teacher professional agency

The antecedents of teacher professional agency

The notion of professional identity is crucial when speaking about agency. Identity is formed through the particular interaction of the individual and the context and so it is unique for each individual teacher [1]. The impact of the policy environment with increased accountability, international comparisons and policy emulation on teachers’ work can challenge teachers’ understanding of what it means to be a teacher and their identity as a teacher [4]. Therefore, teachers compare their own pre-existing beliefs and expectations of what it means to be a teacher to interpret, evaluate and appropriate the conditions of professional environment [5]. Teacher professional agency can be developed during pre-service teacher training practice when perspective teachers are being involved into emancipatory dialogue towards positive change [8].

The most salient and expected consequence of teacher agency is change. Teachers act and bring change into school life in terms of better student learning [7], influence school policy and make it more favorable for marginalized groups of students [11] and spread agentic actions beyond their classrooms [3]. Teacher professional agency plays an important role in student engagement into learning, enhancement of student achievement and learning results [7].

Model, borderline and contrary cases of teacher professional agency

Model case

The construction of the model case requires a real-life example in order to demonstrate all possible aspects and attributes of the central concept [15]. These key attributes were addressed in order to seek for a real-life example and illustrate the notions of teacher professional agency. The following examples were taken from the real-life experiences of in-service teachers; however, names and teaching subjects were changed.

“Anna had been working as a Biology teacher at school for ten years. She noticed that her students

are not motivated to learn. Some of them have problems with attention, others are not interested in lessons. Earlier, being a student at university, Anna imagined her teaching differently: interested students, who listen the meaningful information, and engage into learning (*attitude*). Thus, she decided to change the way lessons were held in order to engage her students (*intentional action*). She decided to teach differently, so the next lesson was organized outdoors (*act differently*). Anna read the relevant literature on a topic (*professional learning*). She knew that the school administration would support her decision, and indeed, the school principal approved this novelty (*autonomy*). Together with students they went to the schoolyard and had a lesson there. The students were investigating the symbiosis of plants and insects. Anna noticed that student involvement significantly increased. Later, together with colleagues Anna initiated the “Outdoor school” (*collaboration*), where teachers could organize their outdoor lessons.”

Thus, the teacher professional agency was triggered by the internal attitude of teacher, so Anna wanted to bring her aspirations into reality. Thus, the intentional influence of a single teacher and later developed into a collective effort. Teacher professional agency manifested through intentional effort of teacher aimed at improvement of student learning and assurance of student and teacher well-being at school. The teacher had a choice to act or not to act, therefore, the outdoor school would not appear without Anna’s intervention. The action was a volunteering in nature and teacher devoted her personal time. Teacher professional agency is dependent on external conditions and resources available. The resources may encompass school’s material conditions, relationships within school community, attitudes and beliefs of teachers. The current case demonstrated the availability of different resources and favorable material conditions for teacher agency to appear and develop.

Borderline case

The borderline cases demonstrate the examples which include almost all defining attributes of the concept.

Rita is a novel in-service teacher working about 6 months as the Primary school teacher-assistant. She had a very helpful mentor, officially assigned by the school principal, as this was her first year of teaching. Rita’s teaching style was rather monotonous and lacking variety, and sometimes her students were bored and disobedient. Her mentor

noticed this problem and suggested Rita to review her teaching style and bring more gamification into teaching process. Rita agreed and for the next lesson she brought some board games to teach numbers. This innovation was positively accepted by students and by the mentor, so Rita continued to develop her teaching involving games and their elements into learning process.

Although, the current example demonstrates the action of teacher to change the existing order, the action is not intentional in nature, but rather a reaction of teacher to external stimulus (the mentor’s request). Thus, the significant characteristic of agency is intentional character of action.

Contrary case

The contrary case, conversely, requires showing the opposite side of the concept, what the concept is not [15]. In order to demonstrate the contrary case, the real-life example from interview with teacher was taken.

Tomas has been working as a History teacher for almost two years. He enjoyed his work; however, he faced the issue that his teenage students did not want to read a historical literature and refused to think critically about history of humanity. Tomas was very upset, when one of the students could not name the reasons of industrial revolution and its’ consequences in our everyday life. Instead of searching for some other ways of action, Tomas started to blame students’ parents and saw their fault in absence of interest in History. Tomas did not quit his job, he remained at school extremely dissatisfied and demoralized.

The current case demonstrates the acceptance of failure by the teacher, and, as a result, he experienced dissatisfaction and anxiety. Absence of intentional action to influence the situation, to motivate students for learning, but instead blaming others (students, their parents) show teacher’s humility and acceptance of own incapability to impact. Thus, the current example does not contain any of the defining attributes of teacher professional agency.

Conclusions. Teacher professional agency is related to teacher’s professional identity, expertise and experience and depends on sociocultural conditions of certain period of time and availability of resources. Teacher professional agency depends on teacher professional beliefs and attitudes, whether the desired aims and outcomes were achieved and correspond to teacher’s value system. Intentional action and striving to change the existing situation evoke agentic capacity of teacher.

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