

SCHOOL TEACHER OUTSIDE OF CLASS: SELF-REFLECTION OF PEDAGOGUES FROM LATVIA AND RUSSIA ON THEIR COOPERATION WITH COLLEAGUES

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Abstract. *In this article teachers' self-reflection on the cooperation with colleagues is considered. In the study the instruments elaborated in the framework of Latvian-Russian research project on modern teacher professional identity (2014 – 2018) were used: the six component model of the content of the teacher professional identity and the questionnaire "School Teacher Professional Identity". In the international survey carried out in 2017 schoolteachers from Latvia and the Smolensk region of Russia participated; the total number of respondents was 437. The aim of the article is to analyze and compare the data of two national samples for the items of the questionnaire concerning the teachers' self-reflection on the cooperation with colleagues, and reveal differences in views and attitudes of the urban and rural teachers from Latvia and Russia. In general, the mentioned items have relatively high scores in both national samples. At the same time certain differences between the data of Latvian and Russian respondents as well as the urban and rural subgroups of both countries are observed.*

Keywords: *cooperation with colleagues, school teachers of Latvia and Russia, self-reflection, teacher professional identity.*

Introduction

The teaching profession is unique in combining features that are rarely united: being one of the oldest professions, it continues to develop dynamically; the profession is both very widespread and highly intellectual; it is, to a great degree, directed outward (at students) and at the same time requires strong personal introspection and self-reflection. Self-observation and self-reflection are necessary tools for the formation and development of teacher professional identity (TPI) (Jenlink, 2014; Парабучев, 2005; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

By the very nature of her/his work teacher is at the center of many socially significant interactions between people, such as the interaction of generations, people of diverse backgrounds and different levels of education, representatives of various professions. The interaction with colleagues is the most professionally important kind of social contacts and activities of teacher (Vangrieken, Meredith, & Kyndt, 2017; Prytula & Weiman, 2012). The cooperation with colleagues as the subject of self-reflection of modern teachers is in the center of this article. Its aim is to analyze and compare the self-reflection of school teachers from Latvia and the Smolensk region (Russia) on different aspects of cooperation with colleagues, and reveal differences in views and attitudes of urban and rural teachers.

Methodology

This study uses the technique developed in the implementation of the research project “Professional Identity of a Modern Teacher” carried out by the Latvian-Russian group of researchers led by A. Shpona in 2014 – 2018. Based on the analysis of scientific sources (Emerson, 2010; Woo, 2013; Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004), the participants of the project elaborated the six components model of the TPI content. The Cooperation with Colleagues is the 5th structural component of the model; the other components are Philosophy of the Profession, Professional Knowledge and Skills, Professional Roles, Professional Attitude to Work, and Professionally Determined Social Behavior (Шпона et al., 2016). To examine the model the questionnaire “Professional Identity of School Teacher” was created (authors A. Shpona, M. Vidnere, J. Jermolajeva, T. Bogdanova, and S. Silchenkova) consisting of 60 items (statements) grouped into 6 blocks. Respondents are asked to evaluate them by the six point Likert scale (1 point for “strongly disagree” and 6 points for “agree completely”).

The international survey was carried out in 2017 in Latvia and the Smolensk region of Russian Federation. Stratified repetition-free samples were used in the study. The general population was divided into 2 strata: urban school teachers and rural school teachers; the individual respondents were randomly selected from each stratum. In both countries over 20 urban and 20 rural schools participated; the total number of respondents was 437. The samples are representative for the general populations with the permissible sample error: 6.8% for the Smolensk region and 6.4% for Latvia (Ядов, 2007). The questionnaire was tested by Cronbach’s Alfa method. For the component “Cooperation with colleagues”, the corresponding coefficients are 0.96 in the Russian sample) and 0.98 in the Latvian one, which testifies the reliability of the technique.

The main characteristics of the Latvian-Russian samples and urban/rural subgroups are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Characteristics of Latvian (LV) and Russian (RU) samples of teachers
 (Bogdanova, Jermolajeva, & Silchenkova, 2018)

Characteristics Groups	Number of teachers		Age (mean)		Work experience, years (mean)		Education (%)			
	LV	RU	LV	RU	LV	RU	Higher		Specialized secondary	
	LV	RU	LV	RU	LV	RU	LV	RU	LV	RU
Urban schools	182	96	48.4	46.7	22.8	22.8	99.4	97.9	0.6	2.1
Rural schools	53	106	47.9	46.8	22.2	26.5	100	90.6	0	9.4
All	235	202	48.2	47.0	22.7	24.6	99.6	94.0	0.4	5.9

Statistical methods with the significance level of 0.05 were used in the processing the data. For two national samples and four subgroups of urban and rural teachers mean rate, statistical mode, dispersion, standard deviation, and coefficient of variation were calculated for each item. The statistically significant correlations within each block and between the blocks were identified by the Spearman rank correlation analysis. Statistically significant differences were checked by the Mann-Whitney test.

Results

The statements of the questionnaire block “Cooperation with Colleagues” offered to teachers for the evaluation are as follows:

1. To develop my professional skills, I consult with colleagues and take into account their comments on my work.
2. Participation in professional associations, methodological councils, and pedagogical conferences really increases my qualification.
3. I actively participate in meetings of teaching staff and work of the school pedagogical council.
4. I have participated in professional skills competitions.
5. Participation in the jury, expert councils, attestation commissions do not destroy sincere and constructive relations with colleagues.
6. I have no problems in the communication with the school administration and supervisory bodies.
7. I consider it important to introduce my ideas and projects to colleagues, including colleagues from other schools.
8. In discussions it is interesting for me to listen and understand the opinion of colleagues, even if they do not coincide with my point of view.
9. I have experience of cooperation with colleagues from other educational institutions and scientific research laboratories.

10. I like taking part in joint holidays, trips and other group events with colleagues.

The generalized statistics of answers of the Latvian and Russian teachers is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Statistical indicators of Latvian (LV) and Russian (RU) samples for items of component “Cooperation with Colleagues”

Item	Mode		Mean value		Dispersion		Standard deviation		Coefficient of variation (CoV, %)	
	LV	RU	LV	RU	LV	RU	LV	RU	LV	RU
1	6	5	5.21	4.98	0.69	0.90	0.83	0.95	15.91	19.07
2	6	5	5.08	4.86	1.02	0.99	1.01	0.99	19.89	20.48
3	6	5	5.16	4.95	0.97	1.26	0.99	1.12	19.12	22.66
4	5	6	3.53	3.62	2.99	3.59	1.73	1.89	48.97	52.29
5	5	5	4.03	4.27	2.62	2.40	1.62	1.58	40.21	36.95
6	6	5	4.99	4.87	1.54	1.45	1.24	1.20	24.85	24.69
7	5	5	4.58	4.43	1.18	1.67	1.08	1.29	23.60	29.16
8	5	5	5.17	5.06	0.84	0.95	0.92	0.98	17.76	19.28
9	5	5	3.96	4.01	2.57	2.67	1.60	1.63	40.46	40.72
10	6	5	5.01	4.86	1.23	1.29	1.11	1.13	22.17	23.37
Component as a whole	5	5	4.67	4.59	1.90	1.95	1.38	1.39	29.47	30.24

The data show that in general, the Latvian and Russian teachers highly appreciate the value of the professional community, feel included in it, and are aware of the importance of professional interaction. In both national samples, the mode of teachers’ rates for all 10 items taken together is 5 (“agree”); the modes for the component’s separate items are 5 or 6 (“agree completely”). However the comparison of the data of the Latvian and Russian samples by the Mann-Whitney test demonstrates statistically significant differences for this TPI component (Tab. 3).

Table 3 Mann-Whitney U-test for Latvian and Russian data on TPI component “Cooperation with Colleagues”

Latvian sample (the criteria below are significant for $p < .05$)										
	Rank Sum 1	Rank Sum 2	U	Z	p-level	Z	p-level	Valid N 1	Valid N 2	2*1 sided exact p
Russian sample	36.5	239.5	15.5	-2.49	0.01	-2.49	0.01	6	17	0.01

The Spearman rank correlation analysis of the data reveals a strong correlation between the component “Cooperation with Colleagues” and TPI as a whole, which indicates the importance of this component in the general TPI structure: the corresponding Spearman’s rank correlation coefficients are 0.71 for Latvian teachers and 0.78 for Russian teachers. There are also statistically significant intercomponent correlations with the other TPI components (in the range 0.42 – 0.66 in the Russian sample and 0.44 – 0.46 in the Latvian one).

The teachers of both countries readily participate in professional associations, methodological councils, and pedagogical conferences, realizing their usefulness and effectiveness to improve the quality of work (Item 2). The teachers consider active participation in meetings of the school pedagogical council as professional duty (Item 3). They often discuss with colleagues general professional issues and their own professional problems, the results of work in formal and informal settings; these discussions are important for them (Item 1). Pedagogues perceive comments and reviews of colleagues on their work as a tool to improve the work quality (the mode of Item 1 is 6 for Latvian teachers and 5 for Russian teachers; CoV are 15.91% and 19.07%, respectively).

The authors of the questionnaire expected higher discrepancy of data at Item 6 (“I have no problems in the communication with the school administration and supervisory bodies”), but the expectation was not confirmed. The modern schools of Latvia and the Smolensk region are not a zone of acute conflicts between teachers and school administration or supervisor authorities: the modes 6 (“agree completely”) and 5 (“agree”) in the Latvian and in the Russian samples indicate constructive interaction in the ongoing dialogue between them. Although CoV for Item 6 (24.85% in the Latvian sample and 24.69% in the Russian one) are greater than CoV for Items 1, 2, and 3, however they do not exceed 33%, which testifies that the data are homogeneous enough to draw conclusions based on the mean rates and modes. Beside the cooperation in work, teachers willingly spend their free time with colleagues (Item 10): the modes in the Latvian and Russian samples are 6 and 5, relatively.

Compared to the data of the Russian sample, the abovementioned Items 1, 2, 3, 6, and 10 in the Latvian sample have higher mean rates and greater value of mode (6 “agree completely” versus 5 “agree”), whereas the indicators for Items 7 (“I consider it important to introduce my ideas and projects to colleagues, including colleagues from other schools”) and 8 (“In discussions it is interesting for me to listen and understand the opinion of colleagues, even if they do not coincide with my point of view”) have the equal mode 5, and mean rates are very close to each other. Altogether, it can be concluded that compared to the Russian colleagues, the Latvian teachers, in general, are more open to personal and professional communication; they have more confidence in their colleagues. This indicates that cooperative relationships in Latvian schools are freer and more

constructive than in the schools of the Smolensk region. These features of the psychological atmosphere in the Latvian teacher community may be connected with certain traits of the national mentality, namely, restrained expression of feelings and opinions, respect for other people's psychological space, strong thoroughness in work.

Only for Item 4 related to participation in pedagogical skills contests, the general Russian indicators are higher than the Latvian ones. In both teacher groups, this item shows the lowest mean rates (3.53 and 3.62 in Latvian and Russian samples, respectively), which means that the teachers rarely participate in professional skill contests. However the modes in Latvian and Russian samples are 5 and 6, that is, many teachers do participate in professional contests. Here the highest CoVs are observed (48.97% for Latvians and 52.29% for the Russians), so the mean values and modes cannot be considered typical and reliable for the samples. For example, in the Russian sample the number of the answers "strongly disagree" (46 respondents) almost coincides with the number of the answers "fully agree" (48); a similar situation is in the Latvian sample. The teachers self-reflection on this aspect of the professional cooperation is essentially individual and depends on many circumstances, probably including professional biography, psychological atmosphere in the school team, and personal characteristics of respondents.

In both national samples, high dispersion of answers (37% – 41%) and relatively low mean rates (about 4.0) are also observed at Item 5 (the question of the impact of teacher's participation in jury, expert councils and attestation commissions on her/his relations with colleagues) and Item 9 (the experience of cooperation with colleagues from other educational institutions and scientific research laboratories). In Latvian and Russian samples, CoVs for Item 5 are 40.21% and 36.95%, respectively. About 15% of respondents certainly believe that the interpersonal relationship can deteriorate if a colleague evaluates their teaching skills and makes decisions, on which additional payments, certification category, or other professional bonuses may depend. Professional evaluation and competition is a conflict-causing factor in any professional community; the teacher community is not an exception. It is possible, however, to reduce the conflictogenity of professional assessment and competition by increasing the objectivity of the set criteria of evaluation, ensuring reliable feedback between contestants and jury (discussion and detailed analysis of the evaluated work), as well as by strengthening the personal responsibility of all members of expert commissions for their decisions.

Another weak point in professional collaboration of school teachers is the cooperation with colleagues from other educational institutions and scientific research laboratories (Item 9). The data show that despite the high mode (5 in both samples), quite a lot of teachers (18 % and 21 % in the Latvian and Russian

samples) have no opportunity or wish to share experience with colleagues from other institutions, which does not contribute to their professional development. CoVs at this item are 40.46% and 40.72%, respectively.

In both national samples, there are identified some differences between the data of the urban and rural teachers subgroups (Tab. 4 and 5).

Compared to the Russian urban teachers, the data of their rural colleagues show greater involvement in professional collaboration (Tab. 4). In the Russian rural subgroup, Items 1, 3, 5, 6, and 10 received maximum mode 6 (whereas the mode for these items in the urban subgroup is 5) and higher mean rates. This indicates closer cohesion of small pedagogical teams in rural schools, smaller distance between the administration and staff, closer interpersonal relationship.

Table 4 Statistical indicators of Russian urban (U) and rural (R) subgroups

Item	Mode		Mean value		Dispersion		Standard deviation		Coefficient of variation (CoV, %)	
	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R
1	5	6	4.89	5.06	0.50	1.12	0.71	1.06	16.50	20.93
2	5	5	4.81	4.90	0.68	1.07	0.83	1.03	19.84	21.08
3	5	6	4.77	5.10	1.26	0.86	1.12	0.93	26.94	18.21
4	6	4	3.67	3.56	3.91	3.38	1.98	1.84	53.48	51.64
5	5	6	3.95	4.56	3.00	1.94	1.73	1.39	43.39	30.60
6	5	6	4.82	4.92	0.98	1.74	0.99	1.32	22.11	26.80
7	5	5	4.39	4.47	1.42	1.76	1.19	1.33	28.72	29.64
8	5	5	4.99	5.12	1.10	0.95	1.05	0.97	19.61	18.99
9	4	5	4.05	3.97	2.40	2.77	1.55	1.66	39.61	41.91
10	5	6	4.70	5.00	1.44	1.10	1.20	1.05	25.68	21.02
Component as a whole	5	6	4.43	4.67	1.82	1.91	1.35	1.38	30.92	29.59

The same trend is observed in the data of the Latvian sample (Tab. 5). There are five items with the mode 6 in the rural subgroup versus three items in the urban one. However the difference between Latvian urban and rural subgroups is less than that is in the Russian sample.

Table 5 Statistical indicators of Latvian urban and rural subgroups

Item	Mode		Mean value		Dispersion		Standard deviation		Coefficient of variation (CoV, %)	
	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R
1	5	6	5.18	5.30	0.69	0.68	0.83	0.82	16.04	15.51
2	6	6	5.03	5.25	1.10	0.73	1.05	0.85	20.85	16.26
3	6	6	5.05	5.53	1.00	0.72	1.00	0.85	19.81	15.30
4	5	5	3.46	3.77	3.05	2.76	1.75	1.66	50.49	43.99

5	5	5	3.99	4.13	2.61	2.69	1.62	1.64	40.44	39.72
6	5	6	4.96	5.11	1.57	1.45	1.25	1.20	25.26	23.54
7	5	5	4.57	4.62	1.20	1.12	1.09	1.06	23.96	22.94
8	5	5	5.17	5.17	0.86	0.80	0.93	0.89	17.94	17.27
9	5	5	3.98	3.89	2.53	2.76	1.59	1.66	39.91	42.71
10	6	6	4.97	5.15	1.23	1.25	1.11	1.12	22.32	21.67
Component as a whole	5	6	4.64	4.79	1.91	1.84	1.38	1.36	29.78	28.30

It should be emphasized that only few teachers from rural schools of Latvia and Russia participate in the pedagogical skill contests (Item 4). It seems that the reason for this fact is not only and not so much in the lack of skills, but in the rules of the organization of contests, which put rural teachers in unequal position due to the inequality of technical and financial possibilities of urban and rural schools.

Conclusions

The data of the survey demonstrate the importance of the component “Cooperation with Colleagues” in the TPI structure. In general, the Latvian and Russian school teachers highly appreciate the value of the professional community, feel included in it, and are aware of the necessity of the professional cooperation.

At the same time, analysis of the data has shown the weak points in the studied component of the professional identity of teachers. The great dispersion of answers in certain items indicates that the teacher self-reflection on some aspects of the professional cooperation is essentially individual and depends on many circumstances, probably including professional biography, psychological atmosphere in the school team, and personal characteristics of respondents.

Especially high discrepancy of answers is observed in the items concerning professional competition, interaction of personal and professional relationships in process of mutual evaluation of pedagogical skills, and collaboration with colleagues from other educational and research institutions. Only few teachers from the rural schools of Latvia and Russia participate in pedagogical skill contests. This implies the need to change the rules of the organization of contests, which now put rural teachers in unequal position due to the inequality of technical and financial possibilities of urban and rural schools.

The results of the study suggest the necessity of changes in the system of teacher certification and out-of-service teacher training. It is necessary to reduce the conflictogeny of professional assessment and competition by increasing the objectivity of the set criteria of evaluation, ensuring reliable feedback between contestants and jury (discussion and detailed analysis of the evaluated work), as

well as by strengthening the personal responsibility of all members of expert commissions for their decisions.

In both countries, no significant conflicts or confrontation between teachers and school administrators or supervisors are diagnosed; their interaction is based on constructive dialogue on key issues.

Compared to the Russian teachers, their Latvian colleagues, in general, are more open to personal and professional communication and have more confidence in their colleagues. This indicates that cooperative relationships in Latvian schools are freer and more constructive than in the schools of the Smolensk region.

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