

## CONSIDERING TEACHERS' IDENTITY, WELL-BEING, AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN CROATIAN CULTURAL CONTEXT

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### Abstract

Previous studies worldwide have shown not only that teachers' professional development is significantly related to their identity and well-being, but also that it should be empirically studied in each specific cultural context. Given the insufficient similar research studies in Croatia, this review paper aims to discuss the theoretical framework of teachers' identity, well-being, and professional development in the context of the characteristics of the educational system and the position of teachers in Croatia. Therefore, this paper presents a systematic literature review and a research proposal to investigate the relationship between the identity of pre-service and in-service teachers of kindergarten and elementary schools, their well-being and professional development in Croatia. The neo-social analytic approach to understanding human personality implies an integrated model of identity-based on five key principles: evolutionary influence on human nature, dispositional personality traits most commonly examined with the Big- Five personality model, characteristic adaptations in particular situations, integrated life stories and the broader social context in which individuals live. At the same time, considerable attention is given to embedding the above principles in the social ecology of everyday life, characterized by motives, values, goals, situations, roles, statuses, competencies, demands, attitudes, developmental tasks, and challenges. Thus, the main contribution of this article is to review the identity model of the teaching profession and propose a research model to examine the relationship between the elements of this model and professional development and well-being. Well-being includes psychological well-being (environmental mastery, self-acceptance, personal growth, meaning in life, positive relationships with others, and autonomy), life and work satisfaction, optimism, self-efficacy, resilience, grit, and flow. The following research questions are posed for discussion: How can the identity, well-being, and professional development of teachers in Croatia be described?; What is the relationship between the different elements of the focused and socio-demographic variables?; How do the aforementioned different elements of identity affect certain aspects of well-being, i.e., what type of identity leads to high levels of well-being and what type of identity and level of well-being leads to a certain type of professional development? The use of qualitative (narrative biographies of a subsample) and quantitative methods (use of scales) are described. The research and practical implications of the proposed study are associated with new findings that will improve existing educational policies that provide guidelines for achieving high levels of well-being in the teaching profession in terms of identity and professional development.

**Keywords:** *Identity, personality traits, pre-service and in-service teachers, professional development, well-being.*

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### 1. Introduction

Educational practice in early childhood and preschool education is a complex, multi-layered, dynamic, and unpredictable action. Korthagen (2004) repeatedly raises the question of the possible frameworks for finding a good teacher, and in the context of this long-term analysis he has pointed out that it is not possible to give a definite answer to this question, but only an umbrella model for a set of possible answers. This umbrella can be based on these two questions: What are the basic qualities of a good teacher and how can we help people become one. In this regard, his reflections are based on the well-known thesis of Hamachek (1999, p. 209): "Consciously, we teach what we know; unconsciously, we teach what we are", which was later confirmed in a number of different studies in this field (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2012, 2015, 2017a,b,c). Although this researcher and many others have confirmed the importance of teachers' professional development and implicit pedagogy, to date there is neither a clear

theoretical model nor holistic research on these three key variables: Teacher Identity, Well-Being, and Professional Development, which is one of the main reasons for writing this review article.

## 2. Theoretical model of identity and professional identity of teachers

One of the integral processes of the entire human experience and functioning is the process of forming one's identity. Indeed, we are constantly involved in this lifelong and dynamic process that changes its manifestations throughout life. Previous research on personal identity has resulted in three theoretical models (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2014). Although socio-analytical and neo-socio-analytical models of personality identity (Roberts, 2006) have made significant contributions to its understanding, the third, recent New Big Five model (McAdams & Pals, 2006) provides an integrative framework for a holistic understanding of the person. This model consists of five main principles that form the basis for this theoretical framework of human personality: biological determinism; dispositional characteristics; situational factors; life narratives; and culture. Personality traits play an important role in human identity, especially when we focus our research on the professional identity of pre- and in-service teachers. Previous research has pointed to the importance of displaying and expressing certain personality traits, most of which are operationalized and measured within the Big Five model (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2012, 2015, 2017a). High levels of extraversion, openness to new experiences, agreeableness, and conscientiousness and low levels of neuroticism have been found to be extremely important and established as such in educational professions (Anđić, Tatalović Vorkapić, and Vargek, 2019; Anđić and Tatalović Vorkapić, 2020; Tatalović Vorkapić, 2012, 2015, 2017a,b,c, 2020; Tatalović Vorkapić and Jelić Puhalo, 2016; Tatalović Vorkapić and Lončarić, 2013; Tatalović Vorkapić and Pelozza, 2017; Tatalović Vorkapić et al., 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020), with higher scores among early childhood educators than primary school teachers on most of personality dimensions.

## 3. Theoretical model of well-being an teachers' well-being

In contrast to subjective well-being, eudaimonia is realized based on the feelings that arise when someone moves towards self-realization in terms of developing their unique potentials and progressing towards important goals in life (Ryan & Deci, 2006). There are two models of eudaemonic well-being: the model of psychological well-being and the theory of basic psychological needs as a theory of self-determination. The psychological well-being model is explained in more detail because of due its empirical verification and reliable measurability (Ryff & Singer, 2006). This model emphasizes that an individual's psychological well-being is realized based on his own development and self-realization, which includes six components: self-acceptance, purpose in life, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, personal growth and autonomy. Insight into the teachers' well-being is extremely important for several reasons. One of the most important determinants of children's well-being is the well-being of their teachers, as confirmed by McCallum and Price (2010): "*Well teachers, well students*". Previous domestic research has shown that some other characteristics of pre-service and in-service teachers are also extremely important, such as optimism, satisfaction with work and subjective well-being (Tatalović Vorkapić & Čepić, 2020), highlighting the importance of these features in teachers.

## 4. General, inclusive an ecological aspects of teachers' professional development

*"We understand professional development "as a lifelong learning and development process in the personal, social, and narrow professional fields, whereby it is important how the teacher views his/her competencies and how he/she assesses the opportunities for professional action in the direction of critical, independent, and responsible decision-making and action"* (Čepić & Kalin, 2017, p.7). Opfer and Pedder (2010) identified six characteristics of effective professional development: Applicability to the educational context (i.e., classroom and school), clearly communicated goals and purposes, expert support, respect for participants' prior knowledge and experience, incorporation of effective teaching and learning strategies, and support for questioning and problem solving. Teachers' professional identity is a dynamic and multi-layered process that can be understood not only as the result of influences on teachers in initial and continuing education, but also as an ongoing interaction between teachers' personal worlds and the collective discourses of the community in which they live (Olsen 2008). During the formation of his/her professional identity, each teacher passes through certain stages that have their own features, roles and responsibilities. In recent literature, professional identity is integrated into a broader social discourse driven by values, personal characteristics, ideology, relationships, status, education, and qualifications (Androusoy & Tsafos, 2018). In order to objectively examine and understand their professional identities, narratives, storytelling, autobiographical writing, educational biography have increasingly appeared in

research in the last twenty years as a method and research subject in teachers' education (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2006). In describing identity, it has already been noted that narratives ('telling' and 'retelling' of a person's life) are considered as part of identity, but also as a method. As reflection they help teachers create new meanings and enable them to organize and articulate their knowledge and beliefs about education and make connections between their personal and professional lives (Čepić & Šćulac, 2019). In addition to the general characteristics of professional identity, it is necessary to mention the characteristics of inclusiveness and ecology in the professional activities of teachers.

Teachers have positive attitudes toward inclusive education and at the same time, they are considered insufficiently qualified to teach in inclusive education (Skočić Mihić, 2011). Teachers who have been trained and have experience working with these children (Forlin, 2001) and who have participated in initial or ongoing training on inclusive teaching (Sharma & Sokal, 2015) feel more competent. Initial training contributes to the acquisition of teacher competencies in inclusive teaching (Acedo, 2008), and the impact on pre-service and in-service teachers' positive attitudes toward inclusion and competencies to create, implement, and evaluate individualized education programs for students with disabilities (Van Laarhoven et al., 2007). Under the influence of the information before and after attending the inclusive training course, teachers' attitudes became more positive, their concerns decreased, and their sense of competence for teaching inclusive classes increased.

Ecological identity is actually a concept of self-perception based on the recognition of one's connectedness and dependence on the natural world. The social and cultural context is significantly related to the development of ecological identity and proecological behaviors, as well as empathy (as part of ecological identity (Clayton, 2003), which is linked to teachers' personality traits and is especially important when it comes to love and care for the environment and living beings (construct of nature connectedness) (Anđić & Šuperina, 2021). Kretz (2014) highlights the development of an ecological selfhood as a central component of his own pedagogical approach. Kızılay and Önal (2019) found a medium-significant effect of prospective teachers' (who teach science) ecological identity on their pro-ecological behaviors and emphasized the importance of their initial education. There is a significant lack of studies on influence of nature connectedness, i.e. its relationship with/on teachers' personality traits and professional development, as well as with their pedagogical practices and teaching processes in education in Croatia.

## **5. Conclusion – From theory to research proposal**

Although the concept of identity is worth exploring in its own right, it is extremely important to examine it in the context of the pre- and in-service teachers' identity. Until now studies focused only on examining the relationship between some parts of teachers' well-being and identity, to there is a lack of a holistic approach to a more comprehensive understanding of the development and interplay of elements in the pre- and in-service teachers' identity, the relationship between professional and environmental identity within personal identity, their relationship and dynamics in the context of professional development, and the overall impact of all processes on their psychological well-being. Although the personality model presented considers all the key elements for understanding identity development, the positioning of professional and other identities (e.g., ecological and inclusive) defined within specific social roles of an individual and the required competencies of teachers do not have a clear place in the model, nor is their interaction both with each other and with other elements of the model clear, which will be addressed in this study. Moreover, although the model clearly emphasizes the importance of its dynamic and processual features, it is not entirely clear what exactly happens in the development of teachers' identity. Finally, the model does not answer on the question of pre- and in-service teachers' well-being. By taking a holistic approach to the study of teacher identity, well-being, and professional development within the framework of contemporary theoretical models, it will be possible to achieve a better understanding of the above concepts and provide an entirely new theoretical model that will ultimately have significant implications for educational policy in our country, particularly in relation to the planning of teacher professional development programs.

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