

SLOVAK VOCATIONAL INSTRUCTORS' SELF-CONCEPT

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Abstract

This research focuses on instructors (trainers) working in the dual vocational education and training (VET) system in Slovakia. Dual VET is a framework for vocational education and training for a profession that is based strongly on students' workplace experience. In Slovakia, significant transformations of the vocational education and training started in 2015. Since this year, employees positions in companies can be established following the new legislature. These employees are called "instructors". They have strong positions in companies in transferring work experience to students at a workplace. This research is divided into two studies, employing a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. In Study I, we posed the following research questions: 1) What distinct profiles of vocational instructors can be identified? and 2) What common characteristics do they share? To answer these questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 vocational instructors across diverse workplaces in Slovakia. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and the resulting transcripts were analysed using open and concept coding. The professional typology that emerged from the interviews comprises five distinct vocational instructors' profiles: (a) Visionaries, (b) Networkers, (c) Coordinators, (d) Solitaires, and (e) Ignorants. In Study II, we asked two research questions: 1) Which components of self-concept can be identified in vocational instructors? 2) How these components of professional self-concept interrelate, i.e., to what extent they form a cohesive whole? To analyse instructors' self-concept, a new self-rating questionnaire was developed and validated. The research sample for this study consisted of 386 vocational instructors employed across a range of industries, such as automotive manufacturing and hotel management. The data provided evidence that the instructors' self-concept can be segmented into a four-component model comprising: (a) self-efficacy, (b) task perception, (c) professional development, and (d) perception of corporate values. The relatively high mean scores across all components suggest that self-efficacy, professional development, task perception, and corporate values are robust elements of their vocational self-concept. The differences between the mean scores of these components are minimal, with self-efficacy and professional development receiving the highest rating. Furthermore, the positive and statistically significant correlations among the components indicate that they are interconnected, suggesting that vocational self-concept functions as a holistic personality characteristic for vocational instructors.

Keywords: *Dual VET, instructors, instructor's professional typology, instructor's self-concept.*

1. Introduction

This study is focused on instructors working in the dual vocational education and training (VET) system in Slovakia. Since this year, employees positions in companies can be established following the new legislature. These employees are called "dual VET instructors". This article presents two distinct components of a comprehensive research project investigating vocational instructors within Slovak enterprises. These components are referred to as Study I (a qualitative exploration utilizing semi-structured interviews) and Study II (a quantitative investigation utilizing self-rating scales).

Study I: Typology of vocational instructors. The aim of this study was to identify professional types of vocational instructors. The research questions were: 1) What distinct profiles of vocational instructors can be identified? 2) Which common characteristics they share? These questions aimed to understand the "voice" of vocational instructors regarding their training of secondary vocational school students. Specifically, we sought to understand the instructors' relationship to their work, to students, and to the company and society, respectively. However, we also wanted to determine what types of instructors in Slovakia engage in working with students, and how this activity satisfies them or shapes them. To address this, 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted with vocational instructors (19 males and 4 females) across diverse workplaces in Slovakia. The interviews took place on the premises of the respective companies; they were audio-recorded and transcribed into written form, which was then analysed using

open and concept coding. The instructors held various positions within the company (i.e., employees, managers, and freelancers) with different functions related to vocational education. The instructors worked in various companies, ranging from large to medium-sized enterprises. It was the size of the enterprise that was important for the role in which the instructor found themselves. This is because in Slovakia, there are large enterprises that have established independent training centers, allowing an instructor to work as an instructor. Here, a shift in professional orientation occurred. From being a professional in a professional field, e.g. welding or car paintwork, one becomes an expert in educating young people in the particular field. In medium-sized and small companies, creating such a position is not possible. The instructors had been working in their position for 5 to 7 years and were between 45 and 65 years old. The age range of the instructors indicates that experienced specialists are dedicated to training young people within the companies.

Study II: Self-concept of vocational instructors. This study examines how instructors think about themselves and their work, how they perceive their role, what values and beliefs they prefer, and what relationship they have with their work and the company where they operate. All these aspects represent an internal characteristic of instructors, the vocational self-concept. The research question were: 1) Which components of self-concept can be identified in vocational instructors? 2) How these components of professional self-concept interrelate, i.e., to what extent they form a cohesive whole? The research sample of the self-concept part of the study focused on 386 vocational instructors who were employed in a range of companies. Men predominate in the sample (74.1%), because these instructors operate largely in male-dominated companies. These comprise rail transport, automotive production, automotive components manufacturing, railway wagon manufacturing, the electrical engineering industry, heating engineering, and meat processing. Conversely, predominantly female sectors are represented by instructors from textile and footwear production, pharmaceutical manufacturing, hospitality (restaurant and hotel services), postal services, and public administration.

2. Methods and results

The research method in *Study I* was semi-structured interview. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and subsequently analysed using open and axial coding. For *Study II*, a self-rating questionnaire was employed. Because no suitable research instrument was available to meet our specific objectives, we developed a novel instrument. Based on its conceptual content, we refer to it as the *Professional Self-concept Questionnaire for Dual Education Instructors*. A detailed description of the development and psychometric validation of this questionnaire has been published by Gavora and Wiegerová (2026). The results are presented sequentially, beginning with Study I and followed by Study II. In Study I, the following typology of vocational instructors in Slovakia has been identified in interviews: **Visionaries** – They are in love with their work, constantly believe in changes and success, and believe in the meaning of working with students. They became instructors through an agreement with the company, as based on their personal conviction. **Networkers** – They try to connect the school, family, and company. They often encounter students' problems and try to solve them. However, they frequently break the rules by directly contacting the families, which they are not supposed to do. **Coordinators** – They try to organize their work while seeking to understand the students. However, their work is primarily focused on administrative activities. They are not in direct contact with the students during teaching. They are more oriented toward the field of adult education. **Solitaires** – They organize work for both students and instructors but do not have much understanding for the students. They are afraid that if they pass their know-how on to someone else, they will lose their specialized position within the company. **Ignorants** – Indifferent to the students, they became instructors under pressure from the company. The company forced them into this activity because they had no other expert in the given field. Three main characteristics of vocational instructors emerged from the interviews: A) Instructors' perceptions of students and their satisfaction with the focus of training within their company. B) Perceptions of their work by the employer. C) Satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the role, and support of, the state, family, and company regarding the student training.

In *Study II*, factor analyses generated four factors (components), which we consider to be the vocational instructors' professional self-concept profile. Based on their content, we named these components: **self-efficacy, perception of activity, professional development, and corporate values**. The arithmetic means for the professional self-concept components are remarkably high: 4.12 (SD = 0,58) for self-efficacy, 4.12 (SD = 0,65) for professional development, 4.03 (SD = 0,78) for corporate values, and 3.76 (0,75) for the perception of tasks. All mean scores exceed the midpoint of the five-point Likert scale, with three components (self-efficacy, corporate values, and professional development) surpassing it substantially. This indicates that these four components serve as powerful elements of vocational instructors' professional self-concept, constituting an integral part of their professional makeup. The correlations between the components of the vocational self-concept are positive. This means that there is a

direct relationship between them. Further, all correlations are statistically highly significant. The correlations ranged from 0.475 to 0.624. In evaluating them, we can rely on Cohen's (1988) interpretation: correlations from 0.30 to 0.50 should be considered medium, while correlations from 0.50 to 0.70 are considered strong. The identified correlations thus show that the relationship between the individual components of vocational self-concept measured in our sample of respondents is relatively strong. This also suggests that these components are interconnected. The vocational self-concept is holistic. Its components form a consistent whole. For example, an instructor's belief in the good quality of their educational activities with students (perception of tasks) can increase their self-efficacy.

3. Discussion and conclusion

Similar findings to those emerging from the qualitative component of our study can be found in the work of the Swiss researcher Besozzi (2026), who examined the career trajectories of instructors. Consistent with her findings, our results suggest that most respondents perceived the instructor position as both a challenge and a source of motivation. They expressed considerable satisfaction in becoming “quasi-teachers” who could pass on their professional experience to future generations. Besozzi further reported that participants in her study commonly perceived the role of the instructor as comparable to that of a school teacher, a conclusion likewise supported by our findings. In their accounts, instructors frequently referred to their own school experiences and drew on didactic and methodological approaches remembered from the school environment to explain their current teaching practices. The components of the vocational self-concept that emerged from the quantitative data exhibit certain overlap with conceptualizations of the professional self-concept of vocational education teachers. Several studies have reported teacher competence as a key component of professionalism (Smith & Tuck, 2023). In this study, competencies are implicitly included in the self-efficacy component, as belief in one's own abilities must be based on existing professional knowledge and skills. The perception of tasks was identified as a component of self-concept in studies by Bükki and Fehérvári (2024). Conversely, corporate values were not identified in the literature on self-concept of vocational education teachers, because teachers are employees of schools and not enterprises. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of vocational instructors and their professional role within dual and vocational education system. The findings indicate that vocational instructors perceive their work not only as the transmission of occupational knowledge and skills, but also as an educational and developmental responsibility closely connected to their professional self-concept. The research revealed strong links between prior occupational experience, teaching/training practices, self-efficacy, and commitment to supporting students' learning. The study also highlighted the importance of workplace culture and professional development in shaping instructors' experiences and career trajectories.

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