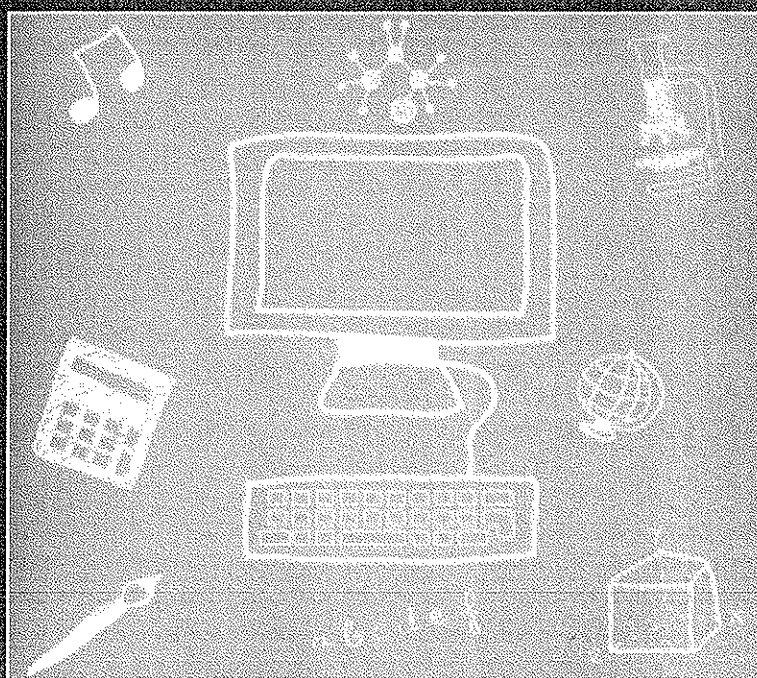


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# SEARCH AND RESEARCH: TEACHER EDUCATION FOR CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS



International Study  
Association of Teachers  
and Teaching



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# Perspectives of teachers on the reputation of their profession in society

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## ABSTRACT

When researching the work and professional development of teachers, we must keep in mind teachers' work and life in a specific social environment in which they are contributing to the well-being of both the individuals and the entire community. Within this context, teachers recognise the value of their work and reputation of their profession. Various international reports and studies suggest that the role of teachers is becoming more demanding and more complex, and that their responsibilities are increasing, while on the other hand, their reputation in society, when compared to other professions, is stagnant or even declining. However, it should be noted that the reputation of the teaching profession is not the same in all countries. This then begs the question of the key factors contributing to this. We assume that the teachers' professional activity, among other things, affects how they perceive their role and position in the society. In this paper we present the points of view of elementary school teachers on the reputation of their profession. We designed a questionnaire that we applied to a representative sample of Slovenian and Croatian teachers, and analysed the differences. The study included a total of 1,867 teachers, 764 from Slovenia and 1,103 from Croatia. It was found that Croatian elementary school teachers, unlike their Slovenian colleagues, believe that the teaching profession enjoys a lower reputation, and that both Croatian and Slovenian teachers rate preschool teaching and their own profession of elementary school teaching as having a lower status.

**KEYWORDS:** elementary school teachers, professionalism, reputation of teaching profession

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Various international reports and studies on the teaching profession suggest that the role of teachers has become more demanding and complex, and that it entails reflective thinking, continuing professional development, autonomy, responsibility, research, and personal judgements (e.g. Policy Paper on Education, 2011; Handbook of good human resource practices in the teaching

profession, 2012; Vermunt, 2014), while on the other hand, their reputation in society, compared to other professions, has either stagnated or decreased. The results of research clearly show that the reputation is associated with quality education, socio-cultural and economic contexts, job security, salaries and working conditions, teachers' professional development, professional autonomy, involvement in decision-making (Hargreaves et al., 2006; Monteiro, 2015; Symeonidis, 2015). In this paper we will mainly be interested in teachers' views on the reputation of their profession in society.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

When considering some of the conceptual issues regarding the professionalism of teachers, Monteiro (2015) highlights four main factors in the determination of the level of professionalism: *value of service* (the importance for individuals and society of the scope of professional expertise), *identity content* (formed by the knowledge, values and qualities that distinguish a profession), *professional autonomy* (the independence and responsibility with which the profession may be individually practised and collectively governed), and *professional and social status* (which results from the previous factors and is reflected in the income, influence and prestige of the profession). Monteiro (2015) emphasises that the highest level of professionalism is applied to the professions that have the highest social importance, responsibility, and recognition.

Hoyle (2001) offers a three-component definition of *occupational status*, according to which the *prestige*, *status*, and *esteem* of the profession are three different aspects of professional status. He therefore suggests that *occupational prestige* refers to status, which is defined by public opinion, *occupational status* is defined by educational and comparable professions, and *occupational esteem*, which refers to the perception of the profession by the general public due to the personal qualities that individuals demonstrate when performing basic tasks.

The ILO/UNESCO (1997) report, published twenty years ago, has remained relevant to this day. It highlights some of the general causes of the decline of teachers' status: poor communication with the government and a reduction of public funds for education; a neglect of the promotion of the teaching status and professionalism; the perception of the community of the inefficiency of teachers in achieving educational outcomes; and a reduction in the general perception of society of the quality and value of public education.

Based on numerous studies (Fuller, Goodwyn & Francis-Brophy, 2013; Hargreaves, et al., 2006; Hoyle, 2001; Monteiro, 2015; Symeonidis, 2015; Verhoeven, Aelterman, Rots & Buvens, 2006), we can extract the following factors that particularly adversely affect the reputation of teachers: low teacher salaries, low living standards, the feminisation and deprofessionalisation of the

profession, insufficient autonomy and exclusion from education policies, a lack of incentives for career advancement. Some authors (e.g. Monteiro, 2015) have stressed that the teaching profession is perhaps the profession that is most exposed to public opinion – such visibility puts it in a position of greater exposure to criticism and increasing social consequences in case of failure and the mediocrity of bad teachers. MacBeath (2012) observes that teachers are burdened with excessive expectations that society places before them and are caught between high expectations and low professional respect. Unfavourable working conditions also have a negative impact on the reputation of the teaching profession (large and very heterogeneous classes, the constant increase and expansion of programmes, task overload and lack of funds, aggressiveness of pupils and parents, etc.).

When researching teacher status, it is necessary to consider contextual factors, such as basic social issues in relation to the social, moral, and political dimensions of schooling, the characteristics of the education system, and the organisation of schools. All this specifically (co-)determines the role of teachers in various countries across the globe.

Unlike countries such as Scotland, Ireland, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland, in which the teaching profession enjoys good social status, the status of teachers in England, France, Germany, the US, New Zealand, and Austria is not as favourable (Verin, 2004). Some studies conducted in Croatia (Radeka & Sorić, 2006) also point to the dissatisfaction of teachers with their social reputation. Imamović (2014) determined on a sample of Slovenian teachers that teachers rank themselves lower on the scale of the importance of occupations than the parents of their students. It is worth considering how teachers perceive their position in society and the importance attributed to them.

### 3. AIM OF THE RESEARCH

In this research, we tried to establish the point of view of elementary school teachers on the reputation of the teaching profession in society and to rank the level of the reputation of elementary school teachers in relation to the reputation of other professions. Also, we were interested in the differences in responses between Croatian and Slovenian teachers.

### 4. METHODOLOGY

The scale of reputation was constructed based on the review of theory and previous research on teacher reputation. We included four positive and four negative statements about the reputation of teachers, which were listed alternatively in the questionnaire. The statements related to the general attitudes about the reputation of teachers and the importance of teachers' work with regard to society, the respect and relationship of parents, students, and

teachers towards teachers, and the financial dimension of the profession. The teachers were asked to evaluate their level of agreement with the statements on a five-point Likert scale (1 – *strongly disagree*, 2 – *disagree*, 3 – *partly agree*, 4 – *agree*, 5 – *strongly agree*).

Furthermore, we asked the teachers to classify ten professions (preschool teacher, elementary school teacher, high-school teacher, university teacher, doctor, nurse, lawyer, entrepreneur, journalist, and stage actor) with regard to the degree of reputation on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means the least respected profession and 10 the most respected profession in society.

We distributed the questionnaire to a representative sample of Slovenian and Croatian teachers and analysed the differences. The study included a total of 1,867 teachers (764 Slovenian and 1,103 Croatian teachers correctly filled in the questionnaire).

## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 5.1. Attitudes of teachers about the reputation of their profession

We determined what views elementary school teachers hold about the reputation of the teaching profession. Concerning positive statements about teaching reputation, the entire sample of the teachers largely agrees that the work of teachers is among the most important ones in society ( $M = 4.15$ ), which is in line with our expectations. Croatian teachers agree to a significantly higher degree with this statement than Slovenian teachers ( $M = 4.25$  :  $M = 4.01$ ). Teachers agree to a somewhat lesser degree with the statement that the teaching profession provides a regular income and financial independence ( $M = 3.32$ ), although the majority of the teachers in the sample has a permanent employment contract. There are also statistically significant differences between Croatian and Slovenian teachers, which in turn can probably be attributed to the weaker economic situation in Croatia. Croatian teachers believe to a lesser extent that the teaching profession provides regular income ( $M = 3.10$  :  $M = 3.62$ ).

In the entire sample, the teachers least agree with the statement that parents respect teachers ( $M = 2.66$ ) and that students respect teachers ( $M = 2.91$ ). Again, there are significant differences between Croatian and Slovenian teachers. In both cases Slovenian teachers on average agree more that parents ( $M = 2.71$  :  $M = 2.62$ ) and students ( $M = 3.00$  :  $M = 2.85$ ) respect teachers. In this context we mention Verhoeven et al. (2006), who points out that a certain degree of responsibility for societal reputation lies in the hands of teachers and that through their professional activity they can certainly contribute to achieving greater respect among their students and parents.

Croatian teachers agree to a greater extent than Slovenian teachers with the statement that teaching is amongst the most important professions in society,

while on the other hand, they believe to an even greater extent that teaching has a low reputation in society and is paid less than other equally demanding professions. Furthermore, Croatian teachers agree to a lesser extent than Slovenian teachers that their occupation provides regular income and financial independence, as well as that the parents and students respect them.

Among the negative statements about teachers' reputation, the teachers in the entire sample agree to the greatest degree that the teaching profession has a low reputation in society ( $M = 4.28$ ); here Croatian teachers achieved a statistically significantly higher average rate than Slovenian ones ( $M = 4.39 : M = 4.13$ ). Research has revealed that Croatian teachers achieve on average higher scores on the Scale of low reputation when compared to Slovenian teachers ( $M = 4.01 : M = 3.83$ ) and the differences are statistically significant. For the statements which form the Scale of low reputation the difference between Croatian and Slovenian teachers proved to be statistically significant in all the statements except one – "The low reputation of the teaching profession affects my satisfaction with work." On average, teachers tend to agree with this statement (the average rate for the entire sample was 3.74).

From the average score it is evident teachers agree that they receive lower salaries than other equally demanding professions with the same level of education ( $M = 4.23$ ). At this statement Croatian teachers achieved the highest average score of agreement, which also statistically significantly differs from that of Slovenian teachers ( $M = 4.42 : M = 3.97$ ), probably due to a worse economic situation in Croatia and lower average salaries of elementary school teachers.

Slovenian teachers agree statistically significantly more with the statement that the media usually portrays teachers in a negative light ( $M = 3.56 : M = 3.44$ ). This raises the question of what teachers can do to improve their reputation in society in terms of promoting their status. In this regard, it can be highlighted that Croatian teachers perceive their reputation in society as being lower than Slovenian teachers, which signals the existence of numerous factors that are reflected on the teachers' self-assessment of their profession's reputation.

## 5.2. Teachers' ranking of their profession in the context of other professions

We were interested to know how elementary school teachers rank the reputation of their profession compared to the reputation of other professions. We differentiated ten professions (preschool teacher, elementary school teacher, high-school teacher, university teacher, doctor, nurse, lawyer, entrepreneur, journalist, and stage actor) with regard to the degree of reputation.



It was determined that on the scale of reputation both Croatian and Slovenian teachers rank highest the profession of doctors, then lawyers and entrepreneurs. The reputation of doctors in the Slovenian subsample has an even higher average ranking in comparison with the Croatian subsample of teachers ( $M = 8.14 : M = 7.85$ ). On the other hand, the reputation of entrepreneurs has a significantly higher average rank in the Croatian subsample ( $M = 7.07 : M = 6.62$ ). The results may not be surprising in an increasingly consumer-oriented society, where a good economic status and material goods rank high on the scale of values.

According to the estimates of elementary school teachers, the profession of a university teacher ranks fourth and occupies a somewhat better position among Slovenian teachers compared to Croatian teachers ( $M = 6.45 : M = 6.23$ ). Both Croatian and Slovenian teachers rank theatre actors and journalists in the middle of the scale of reputation, whereby Slovenian teachers rank journalists slightly better ( $M = 5.26 : M = 5.01$ ), which may be surprising given that Slovenian teachers largely agree that the media usually show teachers in a negative light.

As it was expected, the following professions can be found in the bottom part of the scale: high-school teacher, nurse, and elementary school teacher with the preschool teacher in the last place. It is interesting that Croatian teachers ranked the reputation of nurses higher than high-school teachers ( $M = 4.76 : M = 4.55$ ), while Slovenian teachers, contrary to this, on average ranked high-school teachers higher than nurses ( $M = 4.89 : M = 4.00$ ). Due to this, there are statistically significant differences between the two subsamples. Croatian and Slovenian teachers ranked on average the reputation of preschool teachers the lowest, while they ranked their own profession second, with the occupation of elementary school teachers as having a slightly better average ranking in the Slovenian subsample compared to the Croatian subsample ( $M = 3.94 : M = 3.61$ ). In accordance with the results of other studies, it is not surprising that Croatian and Slovenian teachers ranked preschool teachers and elementary school teachers the lowest. The lower status is perceived more often in the field of early childhood education and care, as well as vocational training, and the work of additional teaching staff (Monteiro, 2015). Preschool teachers, teachers in vocational education, and additional teaching staff are associated with a lower professional status compared to other sectors, especially higher education. It is known that preschool and the elementary school education is dominated by women, but research has found connections between professional status and salary as well as the existence of a connection between the feminisation of the teaching profession, low reputation, and reduced salaries.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Analysed questions about the reputation of teachers in society are connected to questions about teaching professionalism. However, they are sufficient to establish that the centre of educational priorities is the improvement of the generally low economic status and situation of the teaching profession in society, the recognition of teachers as equal partners in the creation of educational policies, and the improvement of the quality of the initial and continuing professional education of teachers.

If we want to have a positive impact on the improvement of teachers' reputation in society, it is necessary to take measures to improve the level of the attractiveness of this profession. This means motivating the most talented to enter the profession and remain in it, including the attractiveness of the workplace, and adequate care for the career, professional advancement, and continuous professional development. In particular, the question arises concerning the quality of teachers' work in the context of creating educational policies that stimulate further development of the teaching profession. Many of these policies are focused on the definition and development of the indicators that promote quality teachers and their education, as well as their social status. Most analysts (e.g. Sahlberg, 2012) note that excellent teachers play a key role in this. From successful Finnish practices the following should be mentioned: the development of teacher education programmes; significant financial support for teacher education and professional development; reasonable and fair salaries and stimulating working conditions; the creation of an esteemed profession in which teachers have considerable authority and autonomy, including the responsibility for determining the curriculum and assessment of students, which leads them to continuous analysis and improvement of practices. Teachers should become an example of professional excellence which, according to Monteiro (2015), should be understood as the embodiment of quality, value, and knowledge. Undoubtedly, a certain degree of responsibility for the reputation in society is on teachers themselves, and they can certainly contribute to a greater respect of students and parents for them and their work through the quality and excellence in their professional activity. It should be expected that the dynamic changes taking place in our environment will impose the need for action in the direction of improving teachers' reputation in society.

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