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UNIVERSITY-BASED TEACHER EDUCATORS' COMPETENCES

Introduction

Teacher educators support both new and experienced teachers, who need to acquire and develop knowledge, skills and values in order to be effective in the classroom, throughout their careers. Teacher educators are thus key players in supporting teachers in raising student attainment (European Commission, 2013). However, as stressed by Murray and Male (2005) a great number of empirical research has been done on teacher education, yet, there is little empirical research focused on teacher educators themselves. This omission means that teacher educators are an under-researched and poorly understood occupational group (Murray, 2003). In the present paper we thus try to answer the following questions: who are teacher educators, what is their identity, what competences they have and what is students' perception about teacher educators.

Who are teacher educators

The profession of teacher educators was in the past labelled as “the hidden profession” (European Commission, 2010), but recently more attention has been paid to it and different alliances have put some effort in trying to define who teacher educators are. One of the first definitions was outlined by Association of Teacher Educators (The Teacher Educator Standards, 2008, 5) who suggested teacher educator can be:

- Academic staff in higher education who are teachers of education;
- Supervisors of practice in schools;
- School staff who provide continuous professional development for teachers;
- Others who provide various in-service trainings for teachers.

They also wanted to point out that not everyone educating (prospective) teachers is a teacher educator. European Commission (2010, 3) accepted the working definition that teacher educators are “all those who actively facilitate the (formal) learning of student teachers and teachers, which includes those involved in the continuing professional development of teachers as well as those involved in initial teacher education.”

As noted by European Commission (2012) in most European Union countries there is little explicit policy provision either to define what quality means in the work of a teacher educator, or what are academic and professional development requirements. Few countries have set standards for teacher educators or defined the competences required to be allowed to work as a teacher educator. However, the coherent definition of the role and competences of quality teacher educators has the potential for huge impact upon the quality of teachers' teaching, as well as upon developing knowledge, research and innovation on how to achieve the shift to learning outcome-based systems and assess learning appropriately. The question of defining

teacher educators was also addressed by researchers (e.g. Caena, 2012) who determined teacher educators are higher education academics responsible for teacher education, research, subject studies or didactics, teaching practice supervisors, school mentors, induction tutors and those in charge of teaching staff's continuous professional development. Mc Mahon et al (2015) proposed for a broader definition which includes all teachers, all school leaders and emphasised the importance of experienced practitioners. *European Trade Union Committee for Education* (ETUCE 2008, 3) outlined the various profiles of teacher educators:

- supervisors of practice in schools linked to initial teacher education institutions;
- trained and experienced teachers supervising practice in other schools;
- tutors (counsellors, coordinators, mentors, guides etc.) supervising
- prospective teachers during the qualifying phase in the workplace;
- networks of supporters in the qualifying phase in the workplace;
- higher education academic staff, who teach education;
- higher education academic staff, who teach school subjects;
- other higher education academic staff, who teach didactics or general courses,
- and education researchers.

Considering the above definition and the Slovenian educational context we can outline the profiles of teacher educators in Slovenia as following:

- higher education academic staff who teach and research at faculties of education;
- higher education academic staff who teach and research at other faculties education prospective teachers (e.g. Faculty of Arts);
- educational researchers;
- mentor teachers;
- professionals lecturing within formal in-service trainings.

Teacher educators' competences

According to European Commission (2013) in European countries there seems to be little explicit policy to define to define the formal education and professional development required of teacher educators. Swennen and van der Klink (2009) point out that teacher educators should act in direction that other stakeholders, including policy makers and education

authorities, recognise their professionalism. But in order to act in this way their competences and roles should be defined. Murray (2003) stated teacher educators should be able to deploy competences non two levels: *first-order* and *second-order* knowledge, skills and attitudes.¹

The first-order competences concern the knowledge base about schooling and teaching which teacher educators convey to student teachers, as related to subjects or disciplines. The second-order competences concern the knowledge base about how teachers learn and how they

¹ The definition of competences encompasses three important areas of capabilities (attitudes, knowledge and skills) and it supports the understanding that "certain attitudes and beliefs demands knowledge or level of understanding and then skills in order to implement this knowledge in a practical situation" (Watkins, 2012, p.11). Baráth (2013) defined these three broad headings as descriptors, giving to attitudes the motivational value, knowledge the informational value and skills the operational value.

become competent teachers. They focus on teachers as adult learners, the associated pedagogy, and organisational knowledge about the workplaces of students and teachers.

In addition (European Commission, 2013) there are also other key areas of competence which can include:

- knowledge development, research and critical thinking competences;
- system competences (managing the complexity of teacher education activities, roles and relationships);
- transversal competences (e.g. decision making, initiative taking, entrepreneurship, team work);
- leadership competences (inspiring teachers and colleagues; coping with ambiguity and uncertainty) and
- competences in collaborating, communicating and making connections with other areas

The above competences and areas of knowledge provide a general overview of professional qualities, the requirements of individual teacher educators might vary, according to their roles and working contexts (Smith 2005). For instance (European Commission, 2013), in some countries, school-based teacher educators (e.g. mentors) might not be as much involved in research as those employed in universities. The fact that teacher educators are very diverse group (Key data 2013) different requirements of subgroups teacher educators could lead to different competence profiles for teacher educators working in different contexts. Diversity of teacher educators, their competences, roles and requirements is also the reason why we focus only on one of them, i.e higher education academic staff.

University-based teacher educators

As noted by European Commission (2013) in most European countries there are no specific requirements for teacher educators, but only general academic requirements for working in higher education contexts, also in Slovenia teacher educators-higher academic staff in Slovenia have to acquire the same requirements as all the other academic staff, they have no special status. According to Standards for habilitation at University of Primorska (2014) they need to:

- have the appropriate education;
- do research and publish its findings on regular basis;
- have educational qualification;
- be fluent in at least one world language.

As far as appropriate *education* is considered, professors need to have a PhD, their assistants BA or MA.

Carrying out *researches and publishing the findings* in scientific journals or monographs is also an important requirement teacher educators must fulfil. They are expected to produce knowledge about education and educating.

Educational qualification is measured through organisation of educational work, the clarity of lectures, seminars, exams (assessed via students' evaluation), development of laboratories or other units that support educational work, commitment and success in induction students in scientific, artistic and professional work, mentoring BA, MA and PhD diplomas, attitude towards students, inducting colleagues in scientific work etc.

Cochran-Smith (2005) points out at different roles of university-based teacher educators, e.g being a practitioner, researcher, policy analyst, editor, commentator, mentor, assessor, critic, debater, lobbyist, lecturer, collaborator, and administrator. Similarly, Swannen et al. (2010) suggest that teacher educators, unlike members of other professions, have multiple professional identities: they may think of themselves primarily as school teachers, as teachers in higher education, as researchers, or as teachers of teachers - or they may identify with several of the roles simultaneously. Many of those who teach teachers might not consider themselves to be teacher educators at all.

Consequently, teacher educators can have varying levels of commitment to teacher education. For example, teacher educators in a faculty of education may devote their whole working time to student teachers, and research on teaching or learning. On the other hand, it is possible that professors of chemistry in the same institution may spend much less working time with future teachers, and may not think of themselves as teacher educators, despite exercising an influential role over beginning teachers by the example they set.

Research problem

Teacher educators are the key players in the endeavour to improve the quality of teacher education. They are also role models from whom many (prospective) teachers acquire competences that they deploy in the classroom (European Commission, 2010). At the same time teacher educator is still in a way »hidden« profession, mainly due to the fact that there are many roles incorporated in this profession and many of them are not known to other professions, including the students who are in contact with teacher educators on daily basis. This is why we wanted to determine what students' perception of teacher educators is.

Participants

In the research study, we included 30 second year (1st Bologna cycle) students of University of Primorska, Faculty of Education.

Data collection procedure

Data was collected via 3 focus groups (10 students in each group) which took place at Faculty of Education in school year 2015/2016. Each focus group discussed questions that were prepared by the author who moderated the debate.

Data processing

The students' answers were written down and the qualitative analysis was employed. We first coded the data and then generated (as suggested by Creswell, 2014, 199) descriptors. Descriptors were then organized in two ways: (i) according to *dimensions* (knowledge, skills, attitude) *of competence* with added category *personal characteristics* and (ii) according to the list of *areas of competences* as proposed by Murray (2003) and European Commission (2013).

Results

As it is evident from the Picture 1, students listed items of all three dimensions and they also added some personal characteristics. At this point it is also important to stress out the four categories (knowledge, attitude, skills and personal characteristics) should not be treated as isolated, in opposite there is interaction among them. Students also conveyed that competences and personal characteristics are connected and influence one another. They pointed out university-based teacher educators should be well educated, be good lectures and they also very much stressed the importance of practical experience. Within the dimension of attitude they highlighted the importance of good contact with students, the empathy and respect. They also expect the teacher educators to be skilful with various teaching aids, with special emphasis on ICT. They also listed some interesting personal characteristics (e.g. humour, creativeness, sincerity, etc.) for which they claim to be important in building competence as well. Nevertheless, students pointed out teacher educators are their role models and they should be aware of that and act according to it.

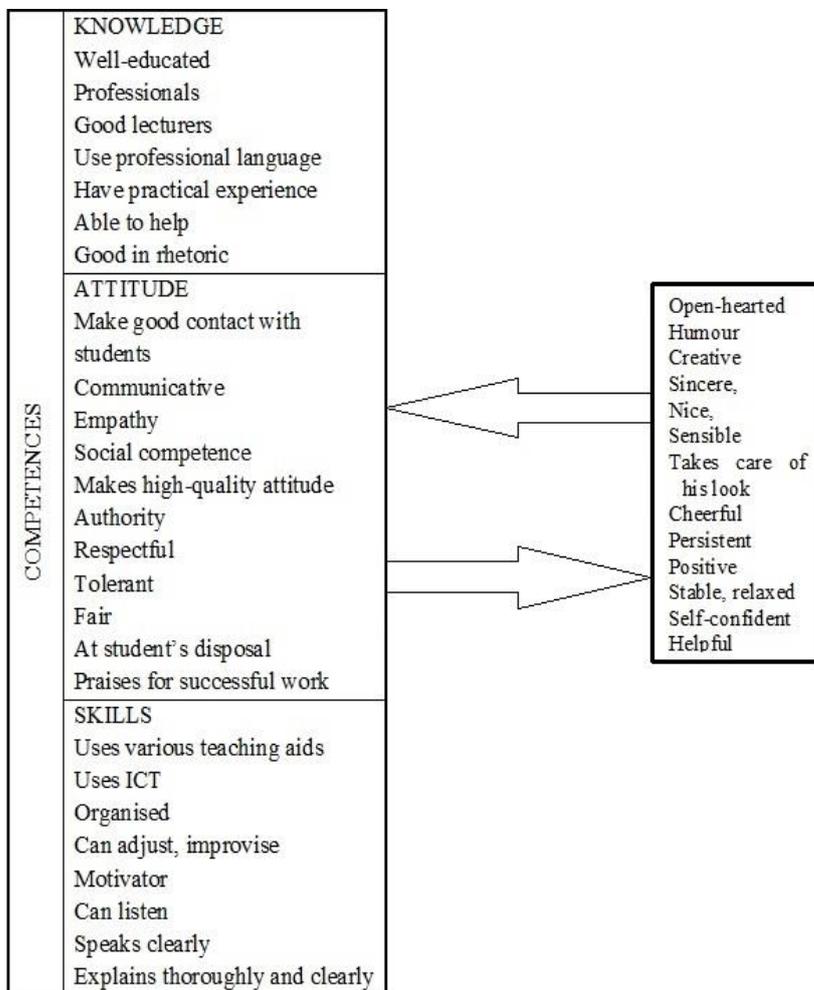


Figure 1. The three dimensions of competence and personal characteristics

The second analysis which was based on *areas of competences* as proposed by Murray (2003) and European Commission (2013) showed (Picture 2) students mostly highlighted the »second order« competences (Murray, 2003) which include knowledge about how teachers

and students learn. If we put it in another way, they mainly outlined competences they are now, as students, mostly exposed to. Participants also reported teacher educators should have “first order” competences, i.e. knowledge about subject or discipline. They also mentioned some transversal competences (social and communicative competences), leadership competences and competences in collaborating, communication and making connections with other areas. However, no knowledge development, research and critical thinking competence or system competences emerged in the interview. These results thus clearly indicate teacher educator still is a “hidden profession” (European Commission, 2010), since many of his competences and roles remain unknown to students (who they work close with) and to public in general.

The knowledge base about schooling and teaching.	Well educated, professionals.
The knowledge base about how teachers learn and how they become competent teachers.	Good lecturer, practical experience, able to help, good rhetoric, empathy, at students disposal, praises, uses various teaching aids, uses ICT, organised, can adjust, improvise, motivator, can listen, speaks clearly, explains thoroughly and clearly
Knowledge development, research and critical thinking competences.	/
System competences.	/
Transversal competences.	Social competence, communicative respectful, tolerant.
Leadership competences.	Authority.
Competences in collaborating, communicating and making connections with other areas.	Good contact with students, communicative, social competence, high quality attitude, respectful, tolerant, organized.

Figure 2. Areas of competences (comparison)

Conclusion

The paper aimed to discuss the definition of teacher educators, their competences, roles, identities and the students’ perception of university-based teacher educators. Overviewing different documents and researches in the field, we can conclude the situation of teacher educator is a unique situation in each individual country which certainly leads to different definitions and different lists of competences. However, the research study which included student teachers showed the profession of teacher educator is still a “hidden profession”, since students mostly outlined the competences which are directly connected with teacher educators’

work in the classroom, with his educational work. A very important role, research the educational field and thus building the knowledge about teaching and learning seems to be overlooked by the students. These results indicate students are not fully aware of their educators' competences or roles, so teacher educators should act in a way to raise the awareness about the complexity, multidimensionality and responsibility of their profession, which would consequently lead into better opportunities for continuous professional development. The possible generalizations based on this study are limited as the study included only one specific group of students. In the future, the reasonable direction seems to be to enlarge the size and the heterogeneity of the participants and also to include the perspective of teacher educators, possibly through their life stories.

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Abstract

In the paper we focus on teacher educators who play a key role in supporting new and experienced teachers, yet they are under researched. We first try to define who teacher educators are, what are their roles and competences, we highlight the great variety of this group and focus we focus on university-based teacher educators. Further on, we present the results of a research study in which we wanted to establish what students' perception about teacher educators was. The results indicate students mostly expect teacher educators are well educated professionals who are able to teach the prospective teachers effectively and it seems they are not aware of the multiple roles (e.g. teacher, researcher, organizer, leader) teacher educators take.

Keywords: teacher educator, definition, competence, students