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Problems of Professional Identity of Modern Teachers: Comparative Analysis of Research Data of Russian and Latvian Teachers

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Abstract

The relevance of the research is explained by the contradiction between the needs of the society and the state in teachers with a high level of professional identity capable to create a convincing, positive, socially significant image of modern person, and the lack progress in a number of theoretical, methodological, ontological and structural aspects of the problem of motivation of a modern teacher for professional self-improvement. The article analyzes the accumulated information about professional identity in the national and foreign Pedagogy of the late XX – early XXI centuries and the empirical data obtained during the Russian-Latvian project in 2013-2017 in the field of structural components of teachers' professional identity. The leading method of the research of this problem was a questionnaire survey, conducted among 721 teachers of secondary schools of Smolensk and Riga, which allowed identifying the components having a statistically significant impact on the teacher's professional identity. The article presents data indicating that, generally, the professional identity of both Russian and Latvian teachers, regardless of the years of their teaching experience, is characterized by a democratic style of work. Among the alarming indicators revealed in the course of the Russian-Latvian survey is a psychological and emotional state in their professional activity and value orientations in the profession. The practical usage of the results will contribute to the formation of professional identity not only of young teachers but also of students of pedagogical universities.

Keywords: teacher; professional identity; style of work; psychological and emotional state; values.

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Introduction

We proceed from the thesis that the teacher should remain the key personality in the pedagogical process, the knowledge holder, the embodiment of moral values, norms, and rules of behavior. After all, it is the teacher who influences the personality of a child, "creates it", by her or his own personality, thereby confirming that professional development of the teacher is inseparable from personal development.

The profession of a teacher has always enjoyed public recognition, and at the same time, this work has been considered very difficult. This is especially true today, which confirms the relevance of our study. The situation at school reflects the increasing complexity of the modern world; at work the teacher faces many problems and situations that require immediate, accurate, compassionate and effective response on her or his part, because, as Professor Shpona, Vidnere, & Ermolaeva (2015, p. 375) notes, "The XXI century entered our life with a humane understanding of a person as the highest value and goal of the society". At the same time, starting out from the rapidly changing situation in the field of education, the teacher must confront the professional danger of emotional burnout associated in particular with the fact that "in the world of current, changing, publicly available information, adults have ceased to be authoritative guides for children through the maze of knowledge. As electronic media wash out the line between them, curiosity is replaced by cynicism or arrogance. Children begin to focus not on the authority of adults, but on information coming from "nowhere" (Feldstein, 2010). It is not easy to solve this problem. It requires joint efforts of schools, families, public organizations and the scientific community.

Research methods

The following methods were used in the research: theoretical (analysis; synthesis; generalization), diagnostic (questionnaire; interviewing), empirical (the study of the experience of educational institutions; pedagogical observation), methods of mathematical statistics and graphical representation of results.

The experimental study base was secondary schools of Smolensk (Russia) and Riga (Latvia). 721 teachers (376 people in Smolensk and 201 in Riga – using the method of Rezapkina, G. V. & Rezapkina Z. V. (1999); 144 teachers of both cities – using the method of Ermolaeva (2012)) were interviewed.

The study of the problem was carried out in three stages:

At the first stage, the theoretical analysis of existing methodological approaches in philosophical, pedagogical and psychological scientific literature, as well as in the theory and methodology of scientific and pedagogical research was carried out; the problem, purpose and methods of research were identified, the research plan was drawn up, including the development of a hypothetical model of the teacher's professional identity.

The second stage was the work on selection, adaptation and creation of methods for the study of the teacher's professional identity. The proprietary technology of the international team of researchers has been tested for validity and reliability.

At the third stage, data on professional self-perception of modern school teachers in Russia and Latvia were obtained and analyzed. In this case, several techniques were used: 1. The technique "Psychological portrait of a teacher" (by Rezapkina, G. V. & Rezapkina Z. V., 1999), which allowed to identify the following characteristics of the personality of a modern school teacher: preferential values, teaching style, level of subjective self-control, self-esteem, emotional state. In order to trace the influence of teaching experience on the selected parameters of identity, all respondents were divided into three groups: work experience up to 5 years, from 6 to 15 years, more than 16 years. The data were compared between groups with different experience and between groups of respondents from Smolensk and Riga; 2.

The technique “Positive and negative aspects of the teaching profession” (by Ermolaeva, 2012). It is aimed at emphasizing advantages (benefits, conveniences, “pluses”), it allowed to determine the structure of the identified advantages and disadvantages of the profession, to figure out the quantitative relationship of mentally and socially important evaluation criteria of the profession for the respondents.

Results

The essence and structure of the professional identity of the teacher

Based on the analysis of scientific works of both Russian and foreign scientists (Erickson, 1996; Shneider, 2001; Mitina, 2003; Povarenkov, 2008; Woo, 2013) we have identified six components in the structure of the professional identity of a teacher: 1) the philosophy of the profession (values and beliefs, goals of the professional activity, professional ethics, most significant ideas related to the profession; 2) professional expertise in the field of pedagogy, psychology, physiology, etc. and the ability to use this knowledge; 3) performance of professional roles (teacher, educator, teacher of supplementary education, tutor); 4) professional attitude to work, implying involvement and motivation, professional honesty, tolerance, respect and trust in themselves, students, parents; 5) interaction with colleagues; 6) the behavior of professional representation, understood as active involvement of a teacher in the life of the society, carried out outside direct professional duties (pedagogical education, participation in solving social problems with a pedagogical aspect, selfless pedagogical assistance to those who need it).

Based on them, we have identified the key characteristics of the professional identity of a teacher. Notably, they are supported by the never-ending process of interpretation and re-interpretation of pedagogical experience, constantly high level of reflection of their professional activity, the increased activity of a teacher which leads to big expenses of energy and risk of emotional “burnout”. Therefore, the ability of self-regulation, allowing resisting stress, has great importance for the teacher.

Thus, the personality of a teacher develops and manifests itself, first of all, in the process of pedagogical activity and communication, and each of the spheres makes special requirements to the teacher’s personal qualities. It is obvious that these qualities directly affect the professional sphere of a teacher and her or his becoming a professional. Professional identity and understanding oneself as a subject of educational process play a decisive role in the formation of professional identity.

The concept of identity is being actively developed in both Russian and foreign pedagogy and psychology, but public dissemination of this term and its introduction into scientific use is associated with the name of Erickson (1996), who defined identity as the internal continuity and similarity to personality, the most important characteristic of its integrity and maturity, as the integration of human experience of his inseparable connection, identification with certain social groups (Erickson, 1996). This determines the system of values, ideals, projects of life, the social role of an individual, their needs and ways to implement them.

Identity of the adult personality involves to a large extent understanding oneself as a professional. A person does not merely “choose a profession”, but largely determines his entire future lifestyle.

According to the Russian researcher Povarenkov (2008), “distinguishing professional identity is a natural process of sequential differentiation of the concept of “identity” because the basis of this process is in the specificity of its elements”.

We note that professional identity is the leading characteristic of a person's professional development, which indicates the degree of acceptance of the chosen professional activity as a means for self-fulfillment and development. But understanding and feeling that one belongs to the profession are not

fixed once and for all. They are dynamic components, which may change, strengthening or weakening in the continuous process of interiorization, validation, and correction of professional values in teaching practice. Terminal values or goal values are of particular importance for professional identity. The teacher is guided by these values in her or his work, however, he supports and develops them in her or his activity. At the same time, he treats professional values as advantages (“benefits”) that his work gives him.

An important indicator of professional identity is its self-esteem, which is largely formed in the field of professional activity. Self-esteem indicates the degree of self-acceptance as a professional, the degree of activity, the initiative in the profession, the acuteness of response to the complexity of work, the strategy of professional plans, the anticipated standards for personal achievements and expectations in the career.

The most important criterion of professional identity is the content and hierarchy of value orientations. The essence of professional identity centers around those for whom and for what purpose this activity is carried out by the person.

Numerous studies conducted by Mitina (2003, 2005) and her laboratory staff made it possible to identify three integral characteristics of the teacher's personality and work: orientation, competence, and flexibility.

According to Mitina (2005), pedagogical orientation is a system of value orientations that encourage a teacher to implement it in teaching and communication. The optimal (“desirable”) hierarchical structure of the teacher's pedagogical orientation (dominant personality motives) is presented as follows: 1) focus on the child (and other people), associated with care, interest, love, development of a child's personality and highest possible self-fulfillment; 2) focus on themselves, associated with the need for self-improvement and self-fulfillment in the field of pedagogical work; 3) focus on the subject of the teaching profession (the contents of the subject).

Mitina (2005) proposes to consider pedagogical competence as a harmonious combination of knowledge of the subject, methods and didactics of teaching, skills experience (culture) of pedagogical communication, as well as methods and means for self-development, self-improvement, self-fulfillment. The optimal (“desirable”) hierarchical structure of pedagogical competence includes the following elements: 1) active (knowledge, abilities, skills and individual ways of independent and responsible implementation of pedagogical activity); 2) communicative (knowledge, abilities, skills and ways of creative implementation of pedagogical society); 3) personal (need for self-development, as well as knowledge, abilities, skills and experience for self-improvement).

To obtain empirical data on the problem of professional identity of a modern school teacher, the Department of Pedagogy and Psychology of Smolensk State University (the head of the task group from the Russian party was the author of the article, professor N.P. Senchenkov) and the Centre for Pedagogical Research of Riga Teacher Training and Educational Management Academy (headed by Professor A. Shpona from the Latvian party) conducted a number of surveys in educational institutions of Smolensk and Riga (currently the Academy is a part of the University of Latvia) from 2013 to 2017.

Based on the analysis of the data obtained, we have discovered that such components as the philosophy of the profession, professional knowledge and skills, performance of the professional role, professional attitude to work, interaction with colleagues, behavior of professional representation have a statistically significant impact on the professional identity of a teacher, i.e. they all find their place in the structure of the model of professional identity of both Russian and Latvian school teachers.

In addition to these components of the model, the Russian party considered such qualities of a

teacher as viability and tolerance, her or his information culture, which also turned out to correlate with professional identity.

On the whole, the professional identity of Russian and Latvian teachers, regardless of years of teaching experience, is characterized by a democratic style of work. According to the average number of points, the choice two or more times with Smolensk teachers, three or four times with Riga teachers exceeds the number of choices made in favor of the liberal and authoritarian styles. Moreover, the last two are approximately equal in all age categories of Smolensk teachers (group 2 (experience 6-15 years) – 1.8 points “liberal”; 2.1 points “authoritarian”; group 3 (experience more than 15 years) – 1.8 points “liberal”, 2.2 points “authoritarian”. At the same time, for teachers with experience, deviation from the democratic style is possible for the benefit of dominance and authoritarianism rather than for liberality and lack of control. Only with young Smolensk teachers from the 1st group (0-5 years of experience) the democratic style (5.4 points) slightly yields the positions in comparison with other age groups in favor of a strict order rather than freedom of expression in the pedagogical process (Figure 1).

Data on Riga teachers give a similar picture (Figure 2). The variables in the second group of Smolensk and Riga teachers are almost identical. The average points of liberal and authoritarian approaches among Riga teachers are also close to each other in all the groups. In 1st and 2nd groups, a slight dominance of the authoritarian approach over the liberal one has been recorded; in the 3rd group of Riga teachers, the average number of points of the liberal style exceeds the authoritarian and this excess is statistically insignificant (Bogdanova & Ermolaeva, 2016).

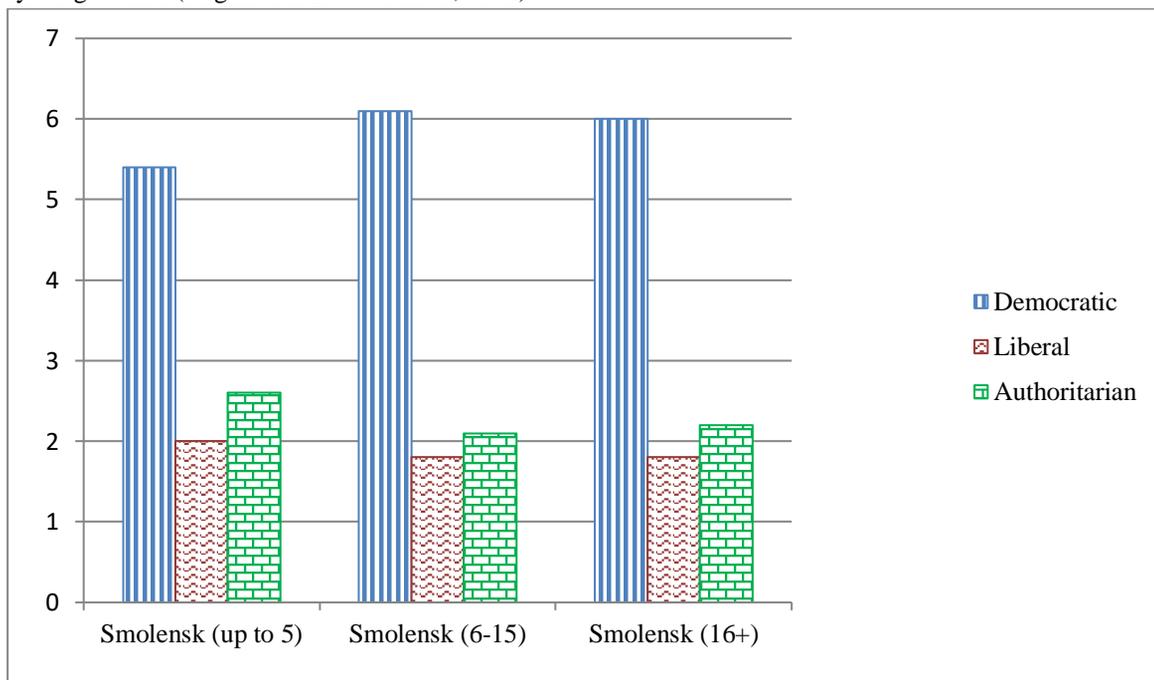


Figure 1. Teaching style (average). Smolensk

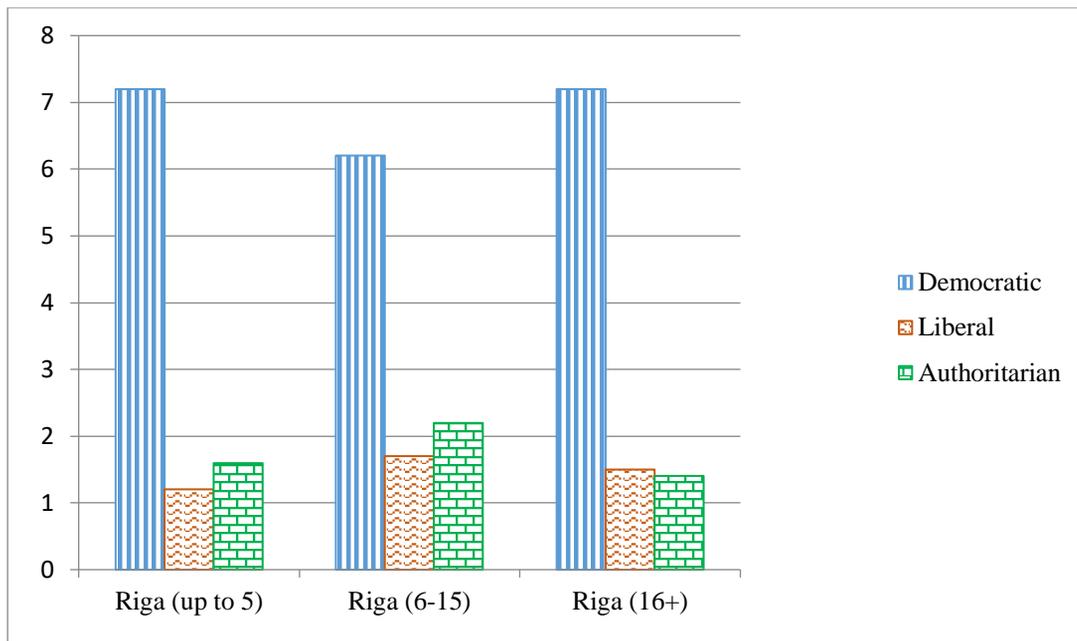


Figure 2. *Teaching style (average). Riga*

Teachers in Russia and Latvia continue to be conscious of high personal responsibility for the results of their activity and the causes of failures (internal locus control). The self-esteem of the teacher's personality in the field of professional activity depends to a certain extent on the acquired experience, work experience, but throughout life, it remains strongly dependent on an integral evaluation of oneself as a personality in different spheres of life.

Among the alarming indicators revealed in the field of the professional identity of a modern teacher, recorded in the course of international research, are the psychological and emotional states in professional activity and value orientations in the profession. As it turned out, emotional self-perception of a modern teacher cannot be called satisfactory. Its predominant characteristic is “instability”, in which emotional breakdowns, destructive forms of response to psycho-traumatic factors, states of neuropsychiatric stress that reduce the effectiveness of work are possible. Thus, in general (picture 3) in Smolensk young teachers (average 1.5) and teachers with long experience (average 1.4) are more likely to be in an unfavorable emotional state for work. The results of group 3 show another confirmation for the growth of emotional burnout syndrome over the years. Young teachers do not have enough experience; some situations seem hard-to-solve to them. The 2nd group of Smolensk teachers experiences negative emotions about and in the process of their professional activity (average 1.0).

The picture is to some extent opposite (picture 4): it is the 2nd group that has the maximum points in terms of a dysfunctional emotional state (in the 1st group – 0.9; in the 2nd group – 1.3; in the 3rd group – 1.1), but at the same time this group has the highest rate of a stable positive state and the lowest “instability” (Bogdanova & Ermolaeva, 2016).

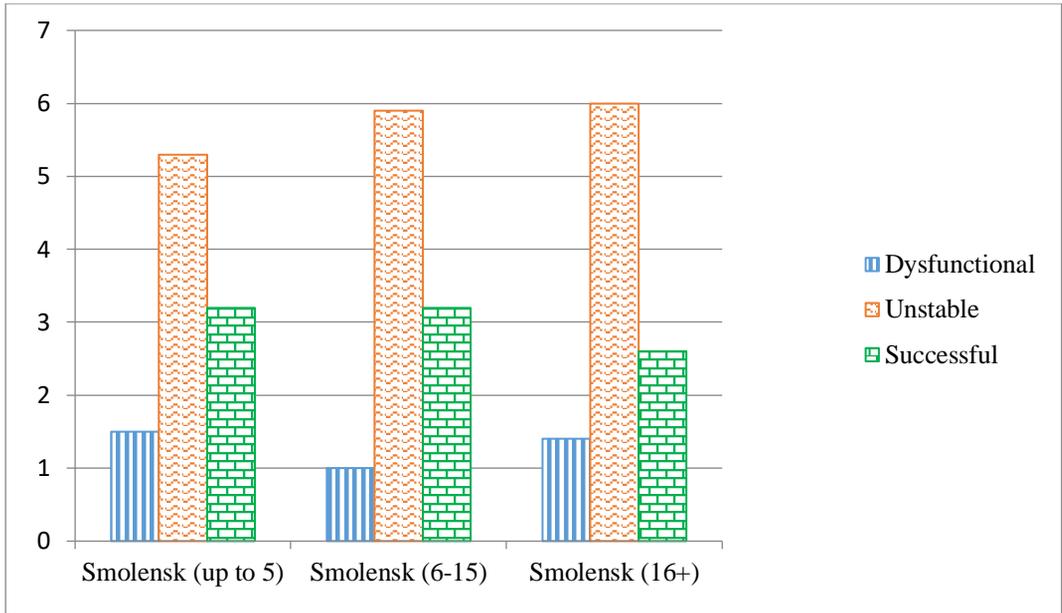


Figure 3. Psychological and emotional state (average). Smolensk

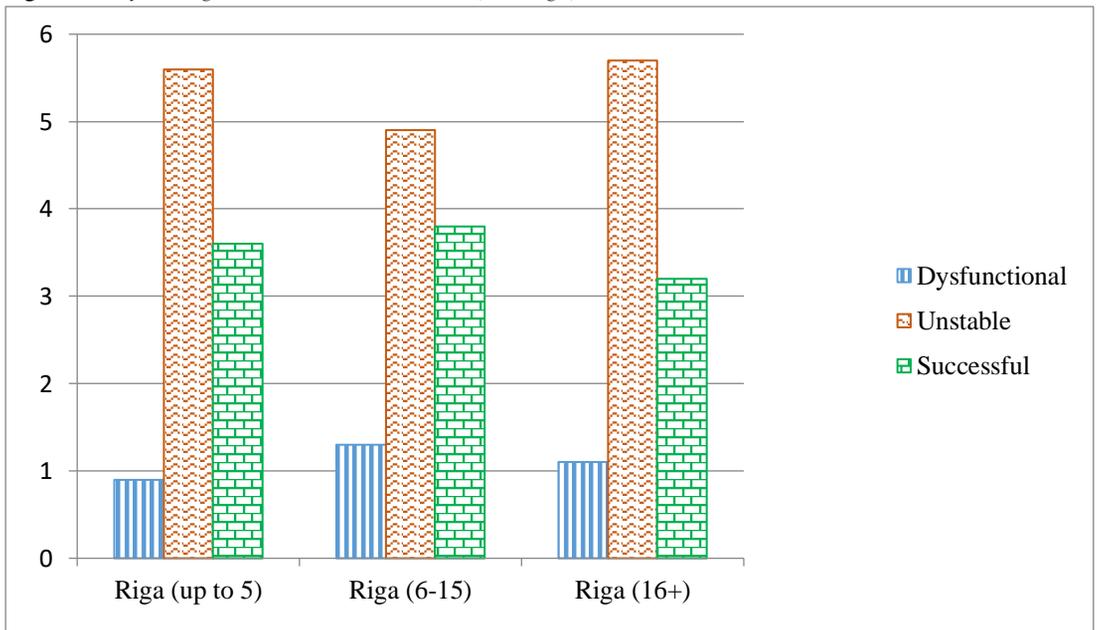


Figure 4. Psychological and emotional state (average). Riga

Because of “instability” of a teacher’s psychological and emotional state the system of interpersonal interaction of the teaching staff and the atmosphere in the classroom, the style of teaching and extracurricular communication with pupils can “be taken hostage”. Teachers with more than 16 years of experience, who on the whole prevailed in the sample groups in both modern Russian and Latvian schools, happened to reveal “burnout syndrome”.

Arrangement of priority values for teachers (“relations with children”, “relations with colleagues”,

“own emotional experience”) is of particular concern: in the groups of teachers with experience from 5 to 16 years and more who participated in the international questionnaire, they ranked first “their own emotional experience”.

Global reforms in the educational system and in the society, on the whole, have affected the emotional state of a teacher, instability in the context of changing programs and requirements deflects attention, takes strength and time, which should be given to children. The criteria for the reports and evaluation of the effectiveness of teachers’ professional activity in modern society do not sufficiently stimulate their value orientation to the child’s personality as the main subject in the educational process. As the research members of the Russian-Latvian project Bogdanova and Ermolaeva (2016) note “in the period of global changes in education, the instability of the teacher’s position is reflected in many categories identified by the test: “instability of the psychological and emotional state”, “immature level of personal control”. All this led to the fact that the teacher is absorbed in her or his own emotional experience, concerned about his own position and role in the pedagogical system more than in the child’s state in it”.

The interviews with teachers to assess positive or negative aspects of their profession allowed us to identify four main categories in the structure of advantages of teaching activity mentioned by teachers: 1) communication with students and love for them; 2) self-fulfillment, self-improvement, creativity; 3) teaching as a mission; 4) external, “everyday” peculiarities of professional activity (long vacation, regular payment of salary, etc.).

The obtained data show that remote value advantages of the profession – categories 1, 2 and 3 – certainly prevail in the eyes of most teachers over the “routine” factor: the amount of points scored for the first three categories is several times higher than the indicator of “working conditions”. However, the category “self-fulfillment, self-improvement, creativity” scored the greatest number of answers to the question about the “advantages” of teaching. The wording in this category is the most diverse.

Discussion

The analysis of psychological and pedagogical literature allows us to acknowledge the great interest of scientists to the problem of the teacher’s professional identity in the context of constantly changing conditions in the sphere of education. It was E. Erikson who offered to define identity as inner orientation and similarity to personality in the middle of the 90s of the 20th century and connected this phenomenon with contradictory phenomena of the post-industrial society, which is characterized by expansion of info-sphere and contemporaneous breach in relations of social groups. Determining professional identity as a process of subsequent differentiation of the notion “identity” was extensively considered by Povarenkov (2008), the problems of a teacher’s personal identity and work were studied by Mitina (2003, 2005) and the staff of her laboratory. New issues that require a detailed approach were discovered by Shpona, Vidnere, & Ermolaeva (2015) who cooperated in the Russian-Latvian research group to explore the transformation of a teacher’s personal identity in post-Soviet countries. There is a disputable point concerning the impact of modern pedagogical, social and political factors on the personality of a teacher capable of solving complex social problems and having an influence on value orientation of the younger generation as an important marker of the prosperity of the society and the state. Further elaboration is needed for the structural elements of the model of a teacher’s professional identity with an account of its key characteristics: permanent interpretation and re-interpretation of teaching experience, high level of reflection of professional activity, advanced level of a teacher’s social activity and the risk of emotional “burnout”.

Conclusion

The received data have confirmed our observations: on average modern teachers are rather oriented to themselves than to their students; self-fulfillment, self-improvement, and opportunities for creative work attract teachers more than the possibility of close contacts with students.

The research into a teacher's professional identity and principles to develop it conducted by a group of scientists from Smolensk State University and Riga Teacher Training and Educational Management Academy will contribute to the evolution of Pedagogy and Didascology in particular. Practical application of these results will encourage the formation of the professional identity of students of teacher training universities in the first place, as well as of teachers and university professors. It is important to note that a teacher with a high level of professional identity meets the vital requirement of a modern state and society: a compassionate ambitious creative professional can make a convincing positive socially important image of a person who would serve as a good example of generosity for the modern and future young generation.

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