CONCEPT OF TEACHER PROFESSIONAL AGENCY

Summary. The purpose of the current article is to explore the usage of “teacher professional agency” concept and explore the perspectives of the concept usage through creation of different modelling cases. The concept analysis method was applied in order to collect the recent literature and explore the concept of teacher professional agency. The results indicate that the concept of teacher professional agency is viewed from diverse perspectives, depending on theoretical foundations of authors. The implications for further theoretical research on teacher professional agency are provided.

Keywords: agency, teacher professional agency, intentional action.

Introduction. Nowadays teachers are seen as main actors of school improvement who are expected to go beyond their prescribed roles and act within the structures of professional environment. Teachers are required to make professional decisions, implement innovations, negotiate personal, professional and social requirements and cope with different situations and challenging environments in their daily practices, and, as a result, provide better learning environments for their students [12], lead own learning and personal development [5]. Thus, the topic of teacher professional agency gets attention in recent educational literature. According to Wenner and Campbell [16], the criteria of literature selection for teacher professional agency include intention and action [7]. Professional agency refers to professional actors (employees and leaders) who are able to exercise control and make an impact on their work and work environment [9], and manifested in making choices, influence and decisions, negotiating, and taking stances at the professional environment [12].

Problem statement. The research is aimed at investigation of teacher professional agency concept (TPA). The research questions are what are the main attributes of the concept? What are the model and contrary cases of teacher professional agency?

Methods. The research process was comprised of two stages:

1) Systematic literature review, including scientific sources selection, abstract and article review.
2) “teacher professional agency” concept analysis applying Walker and Avant [15] methodology. Stage 1. Conducting the literature review According to Wenner and Campbell [16], the criteria of literature selection for teacher professional agency concept analysis should be based on several practical criteria, inclusive and exclusive. The in-
Their work and/or professional identities. Teacher choices, take stances, and have an influence on professional subjects and/or communities make pose cannot be perceived as teacher professional actions performed accidentally or without any purpose professional agency can be manifested through and execution of strategic actions [5]. Thus, teacher professional agency is viewed as intentional action and teachers are able to elaborate on reasons behind those actions [10]. When perspective teachers are being involved into professional environments [11] and spread agentic actions beyond their classrooms [3]. Teacher professional agency plays an important role in student engagement into learning, enhancement of student achievement and learning results [7].

Antecedents and consequences of teacher professional agency

The notion of professional identity is crucial when speaking about agency. Identity is formed through the particular interaction of the individual and the context and so it is unique for each individual teacher [1]. The impact of the policy environment with increased accountability, international comparisons and policy emulation on teachers' work can challenge teachers' understanding of what it means to be a teacher and their identity as a teacher [4]. Therefore, teachers compare their professional identity with increased accountability, international comparisons and policy emulation on teachers' work can challenge teachers' understanding of what it means to be a teacher and their identity as a teacher [4]. Therefore, teachers compare their own pre-existing beliefs and expectations of what it means to be a teacher to interpret, evaluate and appropriate the conditions of professional environment [5]. Teacher professional agency can be developed during pre-service teacher training practice when perspective teachers are being involved into emancipatory dialogue towards positive change [8]. The most salient and expected consequence of teacher agency is change. Teachers act and bring change into school life in terms of better student learning [7], influence school policy and make it more favorable for marginalized groups of students [11] and spread agentic actions beyond their classrooms [3].

Model, borderline and contrary cases of teacher professional agency

Model case

The construction of the model case requires a real-life example in order to demonstrate all possible aspects and attributes of the central concept [15]. These key attributes were addressed in order to seek for a real-life example and illustrate the notions of teacher professional agency. The following examples were taken from the real-life experiences of in-service teachers; however, names and teaching subjects were changed.

"Anna had been working as a Biology teacher at school for ten years. She noticed that her students..."
are not motivated to learn. Some of them have problems with attention, others are not interested in lessons. Earlier, being a student at university, Anna imagined her teaching differently: interested students, who listen the meaningful information, and engage into learning (attitude). Thus, she decided to change the way lessons were held in order to engage her students (intentional action). She decided to teach differently, so the next lesson was organized outdoors (act differently). Anna read the relevant literature on a topic (professional learning). She knew that school administration would support her decision, and indeed, the school principal approved this novelty (autonomy). Together with students they went to the schoolyard and had a lesson there. The students were investigating the symbiosis of plants and insects. Anna noticed that student involvement significantly increased. Later, together with colleagues Anna initiated the “Outdoor school” (collaboration), where teachers could organize their outdoor lessons.

Thus, the teacher professional agency was triggered by the internal attitude of teacher, so Anna wanted to bring her aspirations into reality. Thus, the intentional influence of a single teacher and later developed into a collective effort. Teacher professional agency manifested through intentional effort of teacher aimed at improvement of student learning and assurance of student and teacher well-being at school. The teacher had a choice to act or not to act, therefore, the outdoor school would not appear without Anna’s intervention. The action was a volunteering in nature and teacher devoted her personal time. Teacher professional agency is dependent on external conditions and resources available. The resources may encompass school’s material conditions, relationships within school community, attitudes and beliefs of teachers. The current case demonstrated the availability of different resources and favorable material conditions for teacher agency to appear and develop.

Borderline case

The borderline cases demonstrate the examples which include almost all defining attributes of the concept.

Rita is a novel in-service teacher working about 6 months as the Primary school teacher-assistant. She had a very helpful mentor, officially assigned 6 months as the Primary school teacher-assistant. She had a very helpful mentor, officially assigned by the school principal, as this was her first year by the school principal, as this was her first year on the job, as this was her first year of teaching. Rita’s teaching style was rather monotonous and lacking variety, and sometimes her students were bored and disobedient. Her mentor noticed this problem and suggested Rita to review her teaching style and bring more gamification into teaching process. Rita agreed and for the next lesson she brought some board games to teach numbers. This innovation was positively accepted by students and by the mentor, so Rita continued to develop her teaching involving games and their elements into learning process.

Although, the current example demonstrates the action of teacher to change the existing order, the action is not intentional in nature, but rather a reaction of teacher to external stimulus (the mentor’s request). Thus, the significant characteristic of agency is intentional character of action.

Contrary case

The contrary case, conversely, requires showing the opposite side of the concept, what the concept is not [15]. In order to demonstrate the contrary case, the real-life example from interview with teacher was taken.

Tomas has been working as a History teacher for almost two years. He enjoyed his work; however, he faced the issue that his teenage students did not want to read a historical literature and refused to think critically about history of humanity. Tomas was very upset, when one of the students could not name the reasons of industrial revolution and its consequences in our everyday life. Instead of searching for some other ways of action, Tomas started to blame students’ parents and saw their fault in absence of interest in History. Tomas did not quit his job, he remained at school extremely dissatisfied and demoralized.

The current case demonstrates the acceptance of failure by the teacher, and, as a result, he experienced dissatisfaction and anxiety. Absence of intentional action to influence the situation, to motivate students for learning, but instead blaming others (students, their parents) show teacher’s humility and acceptance of own incapability to impact. Thus, the current example does not contain any of the defining attributes of teacher professional agency.

Conclusions.

Teacher professional agency is related to teacher’s professional identity, expertise and experience and depends on sociocultural conditions of certain period of time and availability of resources. Teacher professional agency depends on teacher professional beliefs and attitudes, whether the desired aims and outcomes were achieved and correspond to teacher’s value system. Intentional action and striving to change the existing situation evoke agentic capacity of teacher.

References: