

HOW MUCH PERSONALITY IS IMPORTANT IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT?

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Summary

The main aim of this review article is to emphasize the discourse about contemporary role of personality within different educational settings. Even though competence approach is very dominant, the research findings from the field of implicit cognition and implicit pedagogy highlighted the importance of personality role in the process of learning and teaching. So, an overview of significant studies about teachers' and children personality in two educational settings: kindergartens and primary schools is presented. Overall, it was determined that teachers are highly extraverted, agreeable, conscientious, open to new experiences and emotional stable, what was expected. On the other side, children personality/temperament traits are rather various, so the main question is how to respond appropriately to their different temperaments in order to obtain high level of learning outcomes. Finally, this article set significant future research guidelines regarding teachers' personal development within relevant study programs and their professional development programs.

Key words: *children, education, kindergarten, personality, primary school, pupils, teachers*

Introduction

Although the significant role of personality in educational settings has been recognized for a long time ago, to redirect dominant competence perspective into personality perspective is not an easy task at all. This is reasonable, due to an argumentative significance of relevant competences that teachers should possess in their educational work. Besides, discussions among respectful scientists more than once resulted with a question: *“So, what will happen when we determine certain personality traits in teachers – if these traits are not appropriate for educational settings’ needs, what should we do – should we change our teachers, should we change their personalities?”*. There are clear answers to both research obstacles within personality approach in education. The first one could be found in relevant personality studies in educational settings that results have clearly demonstrated equal importance of teachers’ competences and personality in their work (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2012). The second one is related to the fact that the main aim of personal development is not directly modifying personality but rather learning how to better and more successfully apply one’s own personality in a certain context (Brajša et al., 1999). This does not mean that one should deny his/her own nature, but rather to embrace and totally accept his/her individuality. This means that one should be able to recognize his/her “strong sides” for to be used in educational setting and identify his/her “weak sides” for to be controlled or overcome (Slunjski 2003). Only

personality traits that are suitable for teachers' professional identity (Tatalović Vorkapić, Vujčić & Čepić, 2014) are those that have the power of facilitating the best application of acquired competences. Therefore, relevant teachers' knowledge and skills could be able to be dominant in the classroom only if teachers' personality structure and dynamics support them (Cartwright, 1999). If this is the case, then there is a very positive impact on the teacher-child interaction, and the overall class climate in the kindergarten or school. This is very important, since contemporary research findings demonstrated that children would only learn in those environments where they feel safe and well (Bauer, 2008). So, the levels of children involvement and well-being as the main indicators of the quality of learning and teaching are influenced by teachers' sensitivity toward children teaching needs (Leavers, 2003). In addition, that sensitivity is moderated by teachers' acquired competences and personality structure.

Regarding the importance of personality approach, the presented overview of the relevant research findings and related discussion are structured by three main parts: theoretical background of the personality approach in educational context; teachers' personality; and children personality. Therefore, with the aim of better understanding of the process of learning and teaching complexity, it is crucial to present major theoretical models, such as personality-job fit theory (Holland, 1985) and contemporary identity models (Hogan & Roberts, 2000). After that, the main research findings will be presented briefly.

Theoretical background of personality approach in educational context

The personality-environment fit theory or personality-job fit theory (Holland, 1985) has emphasized the significance of personality fitness to specific educational setting. Therefore, for quality teaching and learning process it is crucial to obtain a certain level of congruence between teachers' individual and environmental characteristics (O'Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell, 1991). In the case of high level of congruency, Holland (1985) stated several protective factors emerged higher level of job satisfaction, higher level of work enjoyment and success, more positive job interactions and less stress and burnout (Edwards, Caplan & Harrison, 1998; Nikolaou, 2003). To conclude, the greater the overlap in the similarities between the personality of the person and his/her job environment the greater the work success and satisfaction. In addition, Holland (1985) has determined six major personality types regarding job characteristics: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising and conventional.

Besides the personality-job fit theory, it is important to mention the identity models that have tried to conceptualize the complex relationship between personality and job characteristics. At some point, the identity models have been created when contemporary personality theoretical models failed in their attempts to explain the personality stability and/or changes in relation to their environment (McAdams & Pals, 2006). The socio-analytical model of maturity is defined as the forerunner of today's model of identity (Hogan & Roberts, 2004). It has emphasized four aspects of human personality: identity, reputation and interactive roles, and their mutual interaction (Hogan & Roberts, 2004). The development of our identity provides an answer to how we see ourselves through our own success, advancement in life and achieving objectives through agreement with others and adapting to the environment, as well as the ability to better anticipate changes that occur in the environment. In addition, the reputation points out what others think of us. Interactional roles show in what way we interact with other people. Finally, the evaluation of the way our identity, reputation and interaction strategies affect our overall ability to get along with others and achieve our goals in life, presented the fourth aspect. Human identity is defined in terms of our values, motives, objectives and intentions (Hogan & Roberts, 2000). Furthermore, the neo-socio-analytical model of personality represents a structural and integrated personality

model that had the most success in explaining the effects of context on patterns of continuity and change in personality (Roberts, 2006). This model has described the four basic domains that form the foundation of human personality and the most important categories of individual differences: personality traits (usually with the background in the Five-factor personality theory), motives and values (goals, interests, life tasks and desires), skills (verbal, numerical and spatial intelligence) and biographies (life histories, significant memories and memories). All these elements strongly influence each other, as well as the identity (self-evaluation that represents a conscious subjective experience) and reputation (evaluation by others, and reflects the unconscious processes), which are the two psychological and methodological entities. Formed identity and reputation directly affect the four key elements of personality, culture, and social roles that reflect status and belonging, which explicitly implements the social environment (Hogan & Roberts, 2000). This model on the one hand takes into account the factor of culture, which is closely associated with identity, reputation and social roles, and on the other the important role of genes in the stability of personality traits. The main problem of both identity models is in the fact that they do not have an objective and reliable variable operationalization, what at the end resulted with the lack of relevant measurement instruments.

Considering the fact that there is a significant overlap between personality traits and some models of learning styles, it is very important to briefly describe them. In the contemporary literature, five models of learning styles are dominant (Felder, 1996; Montgomery & Groat, 1998). Each of them actually shows certain personality dimensions of the individual in the context of learning and teaching – so, they are named as special learning styles. The first one is called as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and it is based on Carl Jung's concept of archetypes (Myers & McCaulley, 1986). The profile of each person can be identified based on four dimensions: orientation to life (extraverted/introverted); perception (sensing/intuitive); decision-making (thinking/feeling); and attitude to the outside world (judgment/perception). The Kolb-McCarthy learning cycle (Kolb, 1981) has postulated that the whole learning process represents a circle of four means of learning, and each individual feels best in only one of them. The four learning styles are the result of the combination between two dimensions: perception and processing. Besides, they are characterized by specific questions: Why?, What ?, How? and What if?, with which each of them feels the best. Furthermore, five dimensions (perception, processing, input type, organization and understanding) are used for determining major learning styles within Felder-Silverman Learning Style Dimensions (Felder, 1993, Felder & Silverman, 1988). The least overlap between learning styles and personality traits could be observed in the fourth and fifth models. The fourth one is the Grasham-Riechmann Learning Style (Felder & Silvermann, 1988). Six learning styles: competitive, collaborative, avoidant, participant, dependent and independent, are described by behavioural patterns and classroom preferences. These learning styles are the results of specific students' reactions that are specific due to a certain situation rather than a certain personality or cognitive characteristics. Finally, the fifth model is called the Hermann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI; Hermann, 1990). This model classifies students according to their preferences in thinking and in relation to the task-specialized functioning of the brain.

Empirical findings on children and teachers' personality in educational settings

Even though competence approach in educational context is an indispensable, when trying to define a good teacher, very small number of answers would be related to their competences. Moreover, it is very important for teacher to create the relationship with his/her pupils (Milner, 2010), what highlights the personality characteristics of teachers. Therefore, in defining a good teacher, teachers have mostly used personality properties such as empathetic,

flexible, creative, open, fair, etc. (Čepić, Tatalović Vorkapić & Kalin, 2014; Tatalović Vorkapić, Čepić & Mulc, 2014). Vasconcelos (2002) emphasized that personality has a major role within the preschool educational context, especially in the terms of teacher-child interaction and group climate. In addition, the relevant contemporary literature in the field of educational psychology (Vizek Vidović, Rijavec, Vlahović-Štetić & Miljković, 2014) discuss about personal characteristics in the education process that are relevant for teachers and pupils, such as extraversion-introversion, anxiety and stress.

Therefore, in the personality research that was relevant for educational settings, the main contribution could be recognized from the findings of Eysencks' studies and his well-known dimensional personality typology (1967). Extraverts are known by learning best through conversation and discussions with others. They prefer learning in a group. At home, they create their own learning space. They do not like to work just on one thing for a long time, because they like variety and a high level of activation. Talking with others presents the modus in which they gain the best learning outcomes. So, they should be provided with such a place in the class/classroom where distractions have been minimized. In addition, interactive learning, learning in pairs, through discussion and debate are optimal for extraverts and their learning (Myers, McCauley, Quenk, & Hammer, 1998). On the other hand, introverts prefer quiet and calm learning environments. A high level of activation, noise and similar conditions present the learning obstacles for introverts. Therefore, they like learning in small groups, connecting only with one individual or a small number of people. Focusing on just one thing with the opportunities just to observe present the conditions in which they show the best learning outcomes. They are oriented toward independent learning and mentoring, i.e. learning one-on-one (Myers, McCauley, Quenk, & Hammer, 1998).

On the other hand, there have been a very small number of studies in which teachers' personality traits and their effects on the process of learning and teaching have been studied. Regarding that a solid amount of that kind of methodological and research studies approach has been used in Croatia. Mostly, a rather dominant personality model has been used, such as Big Five model. This model postulated that human personality is structured by five major dimensions: neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness to experience (McCrae and Costa, 2008). Investigating these five personality dimensions, relevant Croatian studies on samples of preschool and primary school teachers showed higher levels of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience and low levels of neuroticism among teachers (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2012; Tatalović Vorkapić & Lončarić, 2013; Jančec, Tatalović Vorkapić & Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2014; Tatalović Vorkapić, Vujičić & Čepić, 2014; Tatalović Vorkapić & Jelić, in press; Tatalović Vorkapić, Šekulja & Čepić, in press; Pelozo, 2015). These findings are definitely expected. However, what remains unanswered is the fact that we still do not know does individuals with these personality traits choose this profession or congruent study program and profession modify those individuals to become people with these personality traits. So, this could definitely be one of the future research guideline.

Furthermore, investigating the preschool teacher identity with colleagues (Tatalović Vorkapić, Vujičić & Čepić, 2014), it was determined that teachers could be described from three different aspects. The first one is the changing role of teachers in the context of contemporary changes in the study programme of the Faculty of Teacher Education in Rijeka. The second one is a significant role of personality traits and temperament of teachers in the context of the contemporary identity model. Moreover, the third one is the teachers' biographies through interviews. The study emphasized that the context in which a person is located and developing as an extremely important aspect of professional identity development.

Besides, some other studies revealed that preschool teachers possess higher levels of empathy, defined as multidimensional construct (Mlinarić, 2014). In the study that was run on the students' sample, it was determined that fantasy (one of the cognitive aspect of empathy)

is significantly decline with age, what was very important from the perspective of relevant study programs for future preschool teachers (Tatalović Vorkapić & Ružić, 2014). Similarly, Martić (2013) and Mlinarić (2014) have determined significant inclination of personal distress (one of the emotional aspects of empathy) with preschool teachers' age and work experience, what was very important from the perspective of working conditions of preschool teachers and their programs of professional development.

In the research of mediating effect of burnout on the effects of personality traits on the preschool teachers' life satisfaction (Tatalović Vorkapić & Lončarić, 2013), it was found that there were significant direct effects of extraversion and neuroticism on the preschool teachers' life satisfaction, which was anticipated given that these are two dimensions of personality that are strongly genetically determined unlike the emergence of the three remaining traits (conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness to experience) which are more influenced by the environment and thus change throughout life. Traits of openness to experience and conscientiousness have only an indirect positive effect on life satisfaction by reducing the feeling of small personal accomplishments of preschool teachers within the testing of professional burnout.

In the study of Tatalović Vorkapić, Šekulja and Čepić (in press) the main difference determined between personality traits of future preschool teachers and primary school teachers was in, conscientiousness, which was significantly increased in future primary school teachers as opposed to future preschool teachers. This finding was not confirmed in the study of Pelozo (2015), since she determined that only difference in personality traits between preschool teachers and primary school teachers is in significantly higher level of openness to experience in preschool teachers as opposed to primary school teachers. So, the previous finding determined in a sample of students could be definitely explained by the influence of the study program – when study program is longer, the conscientiousness in students significantly incline, what was the case with the study program of the future primary school teachers (5 years) as opposed to the study program of future preschool teachers (3 years).

Moreover, Sindik (2014) emphasized that there is probably no universal “recipe” for the ideal profile of a good preschool teacher, but that there are number of important characteristics that allow virtually anyone to handle a difficult situation. From the perspective of parents and their evaluations of real and ideal teachers' personalities, Lisjak (2015) confirmed prior results about real personality evaluations. However, parents' evaluations of an ideal personality evaluations of teachers showed significantly higher levels teachers' extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness to experience and emotional stability.

Regarding the role of children personality in the process of learning and teaching, there is an evident lack of research that investigate the moderating effects of the children personality at educational setting (Vizek Vidović et al., 2014), especially in Croatian cultural context. Zentner and Bates (2008) emphasized that the reactions of significant others are the most significant moderator in the relationship between children personality and educational outcomes. Kochanska and colleagues (2007) elaborated that previous statement with the relation between different parenting styles and children development and learning outcomes. For example, the tender (as opposed to rough) educational methods are extremely effective as a parenting style with very shy children.

Within Croatian cultural context, two validation studies have been run regarding the measurement and construction of children temperament measures. The first one present the validation of the Croatian version of Pavlov's Temperament Survey for Children (PTS-C) based on Strelau's temperament model (Tatalović Vorkapić & Lučev, 2014). This study revealed three-factor solution that explained 36.84% of the total variance and high levels of their reliabilities. Based on these findings, three subscales have been confirmed: Strength of excitation, Strength of inhibition and Mobility. The second one presents the validation of an EASI Temperament Questionnaire for preschool children (Tatalović Vorkapić & Lončarić,

2015). In this research, again, a three-factor solution has been determined which explained 57.43% of the total variance. The theoretical model of EASI has been partially confirmed, since only three subscales were confirmed: Emotionality, Activity and Sociability. As it was expected, the Impulsivity dimension was not replicated since the research was run on a sample of preschool children. Both studies resulted with objective, valid and reliable instruments for measuring children temperament, which could be efficiently applied in educational settings.

Attempting to scientifically relate children and teachers' temperaments, and their perception of the satisfaction with the process of learning and teaching, Žagar (2015) has run research in the kindergarten context. It was interesting that results showed that preschool teachers with a higher level of openness to experience evaluated the children as significantly less emotional. In addition, teachers with a high neuroticism evaluated the children as less active and sociable. Also, preschool teachers with a high extraversion evaluated the children as significantly more emotional, as well as the ease of work is much higher with children who are low in emotionality and less active, but highly sociable. Finally, it was determined that children prefer those preschool teachers with a higher level of conscientiousness and agreeableness. This study revealed that the evaluation of the children's temperament directly depends on the evaluation of teachers' own personalities, and that the rose-coloured lenses through which the preschool teachers observe children are largely determined by the teacher's own personality. Therefore, an important question arises: how to educate a preschool teacher in objective evaluation of children with regard to the established existence of distorted perceptions of children's temperament in relation to their own personality?

Conclusion

At the end, it could be concluded that this overview of personality research in educational settings clearly has the possibility to answer the title question: "*Does personality matter in education setting?*". Without any hesitation, the answer is YES, it does matter. Therefore, the postulate of Brunello and Schlotter (2011) that the non-cognitive factors of preschool and primary school teachers are crucial within the process of learning and teaching is clearly proved. In addition, presented studies showed that temperament properties of children are very significant in relation to their learning outcomes. Finally, what is rarely investigated, but more than important is the fact that interaction between teachers' and children personalities is the significant moderator of the quality of learning process and learning outcomes in general. Therefore it is of utmost importance to develop further research designs for investigating the role of personality in education, since it is obvious that some personality traits have facilitating role regarding the learning outcomes.

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