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Teachers: Identity and Ethics of the Profession in Eight Countries A Comparative Research

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Introduction

Aims of this paper is to present the results of the international research on the professional status of teachers from a comparative point of view. The first Italian workgroup, which met to discuss this subject in the summer of 2001, was progressively joined by groups of scholars from other countries, who were interested in giving a sense to teachers and value to their profession.

The year 2004 saw the publication of data from the Italian and United States sides and, in 2005, the results from Poland were made known. Thoughts from Belgium, Cyprus and Libya were added in 2006 and joined by those of Slovakia and Turkey in 2007.

The participants in the research provided for the translation of the questionnaire into their national languages, starting from the original English draft, prepared in the United States.

The data collected is more indicative, than statistically representative and able to be generalised, of what was felt by the teachers in contexts within which an identity of professional belonging was detected. We understand that *the teacher* is such within any context and that the phenomenal differentiations that characterise the various situations examined expand the viewpoint of the study without eliminating the mutual identifying features of the profession.

Teachers as universal professional profile

In any case, teachers are recognised as just this. At times they feel it is a mission, at others a vocation. They start enthusiastically when they are young, and slowly they become de-motivated towards the middle of their careers and are completely exhausted upon reaching retirement.

This appears to be a inflexible trend of the professional cycle and all countries detect second thoughts and exceptions. However, not all younger teachers are enthusiastic and not all teachers of retirement age stop teaching. The element that persists in all working and living situations is the proof of being an agent of social change and, in this being for innovation, one discovers the ethics of a profession that find a vital environment of an own, irreplaceable identification in schools and universities.

The strong, common note is undoubtedly responsibility towards alumni balanced out by the weak, common note of regret of the scant social prestige of being a teacher. There seems to be a lack

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of communication between the personal and social aspects that the education towards being cannot manage to reconcile with educating towards having. *We are responsible, but have no prestige.* This image of teachers weighs heavily on their professional status due to the inevitable political implications it results in and the considerable effect on institutional behaviour. Teachers listen, but they are not heard; teachers are committed, but remain unrecognised; teachers assess, but are exploited.

Problems of using the questionnaire in international research

Researchers face many different problems in the use of a questionnaire produced in a country other than their own and written by a scientific group, with whom they are only in touch through e-mail. Some of these problems can be easily overcome within a short period of time; others can be overcome within a reasonable period of time; while still others cannot be overcome within the brief period in which the survey is carried out and become a hindrance to the research itself.

Among the problems that are easily overcome within a short time are:

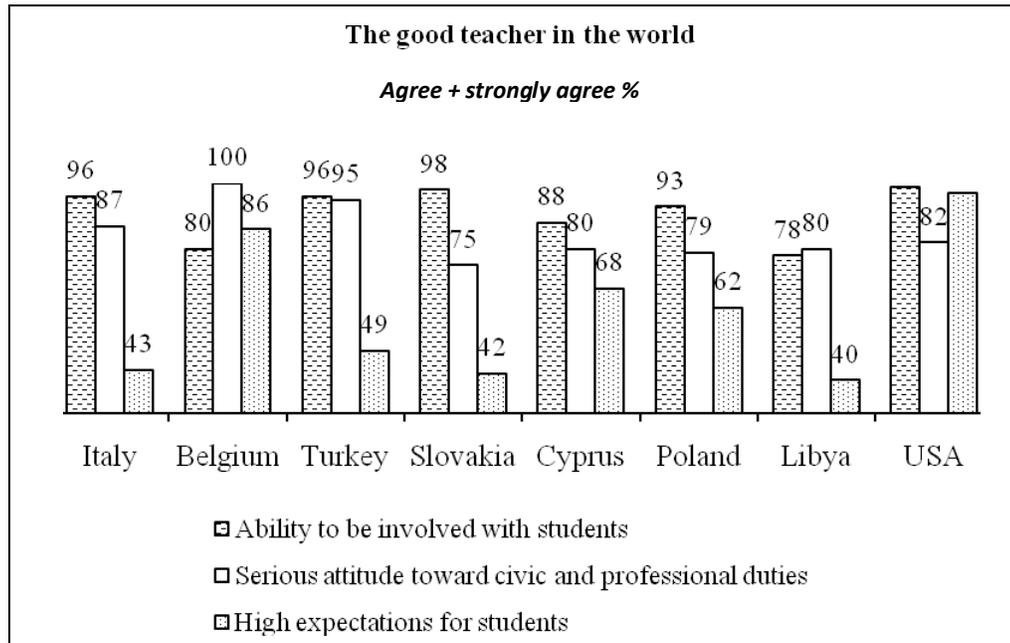
- the linguistic structure of the questions;
- comprehension of the true meaning of the questions;
- the awareness that changes must be minimal so as to guarantee comparability of the results.

Among the problems that can be overcome within a reasonable period of time are:

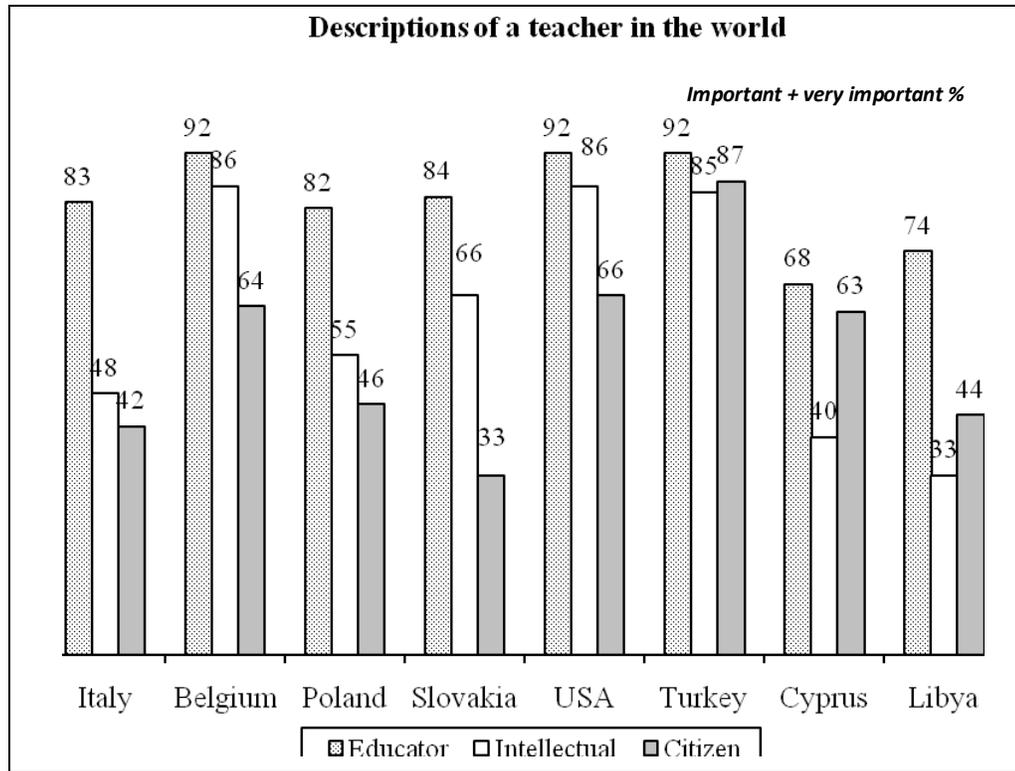
- non-familiarity with comparison as a pedagogic research method;
- the adjustment of questions to the context in which they will be applied;
- negotiation and agreement within the new international research group.

Among the problems that cannot be overcome within the brief period in which the survey is carried out and that become a hindrance to the research itself are:

- an uncooperative attitude towards international research;
- mistrust of the possibility of creating dialogue between cultures through use of the questionnaire;
- the preference accorded to qualitative rather than quantitative surveys.



Another problem on our questionnaire was about the understanding of the following question: *Why did you decide to be a teacher?* This question emphasised that the teacher is driven to reply according to what others expect of her/him, avoiding the true reason that led to teaching. In some countries it is known that people decide to teach because they cannot find other jobs, but it is also known that no one would write the truth about this in a questionnaire. Thus, we are faced with a *true* question that generates a *false* reply. It follows that only the interpretation of a researcher who knows the teaching situation in those countries could supply a suitable interpretive reading of the result.



Considerations about the results of the eight countries

In the USA sample the results suggest that the types of professional growth opportunities teachers respond are important go beyond the workshop topic and transcend grade levels and years of experience. Teachers responded positively that a *climate for growth* must exist in the school building to compliment the actual training topics and training structures. The data also suggest that teachers think professional growth can occur outside of the constraints of the formal workshop; Growth can be *job-embedded*. The data demonstrated that teachers want ongoing administrative and collegial support. Teachers responded that the opportunity to work with a principal that buffers environment pressures, sets expectations, understands and discusses instructional issues is an important growth opportunity.

The Polish teachers seem to focus on their school activity: they are well-prepared to teach their subjects, have a high opinion of their teaching skills and techniques, but they do not consider their profession to have a high social status and they seldom get involved in social activities. The survey reflects the way teachers see their profession in the conditions of continual transformation of the educational system in Poland. It indicates that it is necessary to implement projects designed to educate teachers and help them become autonomous, reflective and pro-social individuals, apart from merely being good school class managers.

Italy is the country showing the least appreciation in the social sense of the profession. Within the margins of the inquiry, the reason for this can be attributed to a low degree of attention paid to extended social relations with colleagues, families and local organisations. Italian teachers invest in their qualification and, if well prepared, do not concern themselves enough with showing, outside the school, what they are capable of doing. However, this fact also lends itself to another interpretation. Perhaps Italian teachers are not interested in showing their abilities outside the school, which does not help society in deciphering the skills of teachers enclosed within their faculties.

Libya and Cyprus are revealed as two countries that are particularly interested in reading the profile of the teacher. In Libya, a teacher, mostly male, is principally considered an intellectual engaged in shaping critical awareness and a citizen who is open to the social responsibility of his role; in Cyprus, a teacher is, first of all, a person who contributes to the education of upcoming generations and a citizen who has chosen to teach in order to perform a relevant social function. In Libya, criticality stands on public recognition as content stands on appreciation on Cyprus. The perspective of a socialist State is compared to the perspective of a State that is still strongly idealistic. In Libya, a person has a social value before an individual value, whereas on Cyprus, the political situation of the split of a small country in two can only be sustained by cultivating the idea of a change to come that will bring families together again. The idea of a better future bolsters the hopes of younger generations. From this point of view, Italy and Belgium find themselves in two opposite situations. The realism in Italy corresponds to certain conservatism in Belgium.

The model of teacher in Slovakia agrees that the “quality of teacher” is connected with the student’s performance, and in order to achieve the status of “good teacher” it is necessary to dedicate extra time to students, above the routine teaching duties. The model of teacher agrees at all that good teacher is the one capable of team work with the colleagues and recognition of each students potential to meet students individual needs, only partially the model agrees that a “good teacher” must believe in the school for which one works, this item could be a matter of discussion, due to the fact that the teachers in Slovakia have not developed yet the strong feeling of belonging to the school community as a result of the past socialist regime.

Teachers in Turkey find very important to describe what good teaching means as the ability to communicate effectively, effective classroom management and appropriate instruction, lesson preparation, and pedagogical competence; emphasize the importance of classroom management skills and training in educational sciences. Teachers see themselves not only educationally but also socially responsible for students. While teachers have been satisfied with their colleagues in their immediate surrounding, they are not happy with the local and central educational authorities. This may be a result of the highly centralized educational system.

International research on teachers concerns mutual understanding

Despite the doubts and perplexities, international research on teachers, through the use of the questionnaire, represents a valid contribution towards developing a scientific community, in which one discusses together and reaches agreements that are indispensable for analysing, understanding and disseminating data relative to different cultural contexts.

The function of the research is certainly not to demonstrate that all people use the same language and meanings to describe their professional status. On the contrary, the research points out the multiple modes of individual perception and social standing of the teacher.

Who is the teacher in Italy, USA, Belgium, Slovakia, and Turkey? This is the question we tried to respond to, perhaps triggering other questions that may be better investigated and specified over time. The original idea was to set up a questionnaire in each country, talking to teachers in the country and allowing them to participate in formulating the questions. However, proceeding in this manner would have led to years of work, huge financial commitments and great reservations about the results. Then again, nothing prohibits starting from the results of each country in our sample group in order to generate widespread debate among the teachers and invite them to be the authors of a new qualitative survey.

In comparative pedagogy, researchers highlight how the survey among teachers is a means of training towards citizenship within the profession. The discussion about one’s own identity allows for taking a step forward in the social recognition of the teaching role.

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