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Being a teacher in post-modern times: a comparative study in Italy, Slovakia, Turkey

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Abstract

This project is developed in Italy, France, Turkey and Portugal as socio-anthropological research on teachers, with samples drawn from infant to higher secondary schools. Teachers in service describe their work practices and procedures, and their feelings, inside and outside of school. They are asked to describe their relations with other teachers, headmasters, parents, students in the frame of their professional status. We looked for a strong feeling of being a teacher at each level of schooling. We found that the social identity of teachers is greater in secondary school than in infant and primary school, depending on the level of social expectations.

Previous surveys in Italy and in other countries; the cultural impact on comparative studies

The decision to conduct international research on the professional status of teachers originated during the CiCe Conference on *The Experience of Citizenship* in Krakow in 2004, as a result of the interaction between Italy and Poland (2005) and then Belgium (2006). In 2007, Slovakia and Turkey were added. Other survey work-ups are in progress in France that participated in the research and are proceeding with the collection of data.

The questionnaire consists of 42 questions and was initially produced by an Italian interdisciplinary research group, which included colleagues from the United States and post-graduate students specialising in Teaching from Libya and Cyprus, who spent a post-university training year in Italy.

Translation of the questionnaire into English, Arabic, Greek and Dutch facilitated the dissemination of this tool among teachers in kindergartens, elementary and secondary schools. Nonetheless, it should be pointed out that not all of the questions on the original questionnaire, written in Italian, were easy to understand in the very different cultural contexts of application. In the various countries involved in the research, the contact person was the researcher who had to read, understand, translate and distribute the questionnaire, starting from the English text, it being the language for international communication. Any knowledge of Italian by the researcher was definitely of great help in verifying the questions posed by the questionnaire.

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Questionnaire as a common tool for collecting data

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:

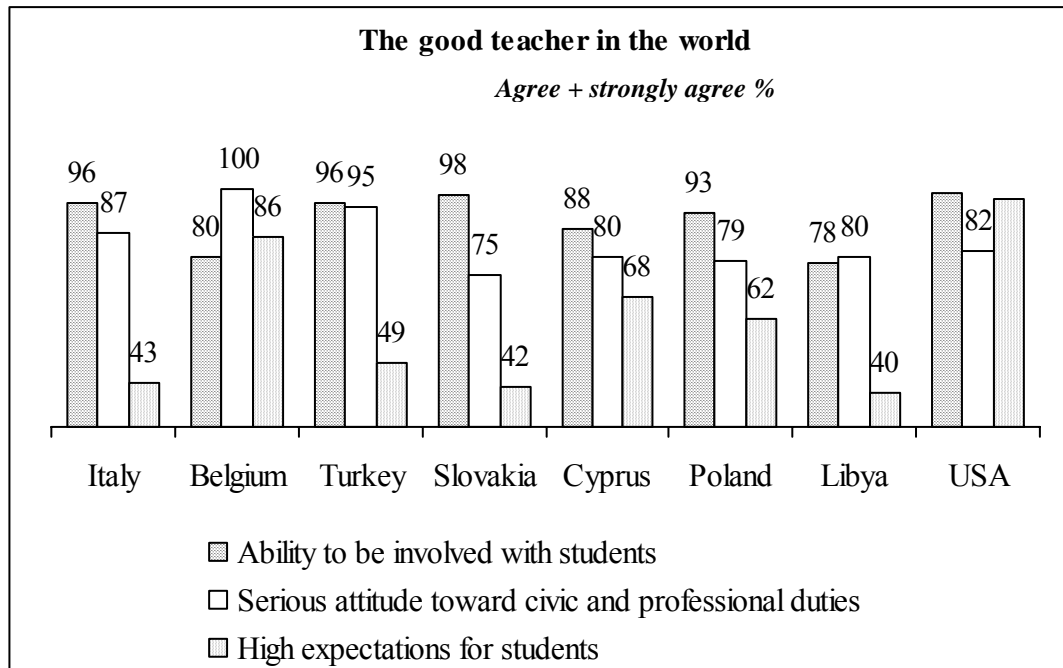
- The linguistic structure of the questions;
- Comprehension of the true meaning of the questions;
- The awareness that changes must be minimal so as to guarantee comparability of the results.

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.



Problematic questions and data interpretation

An example of a problematic question in our questionnaire is the one regarding the educational qualifications that a teacher possesses after secondary school. In Europe, post-secondary school training of teachers varies from country to country and the qualifications are still difficult to compare. In Italy, one can become a pre-school or elementary school teacher after four years of university, whereas secondary school teachers require four years of university plus two years of teachers' training school. Teachers may add further qualifications and specialisations as permanent training towards the profession. Questions such as those noted below met with difficulties in application due to the different structures of teachers' training in the various countries:

Type of degree:

1. Bachelor's in (please specify)
2. Master's in (please specify)
3. Other (please specify)

Other course work beyond current degree:

1. Yes
2. No

If yes, indicate which one(s)

1. Additional Bachelor's Degree (please specify)
2. Additional Master's Degree (please specify)
3. Other Coursework/Additional Credits (please specify)

4. Other Specializations or Certificates (please specify)
5. Other Specialized Training (please specify)
6. Other (please specify)

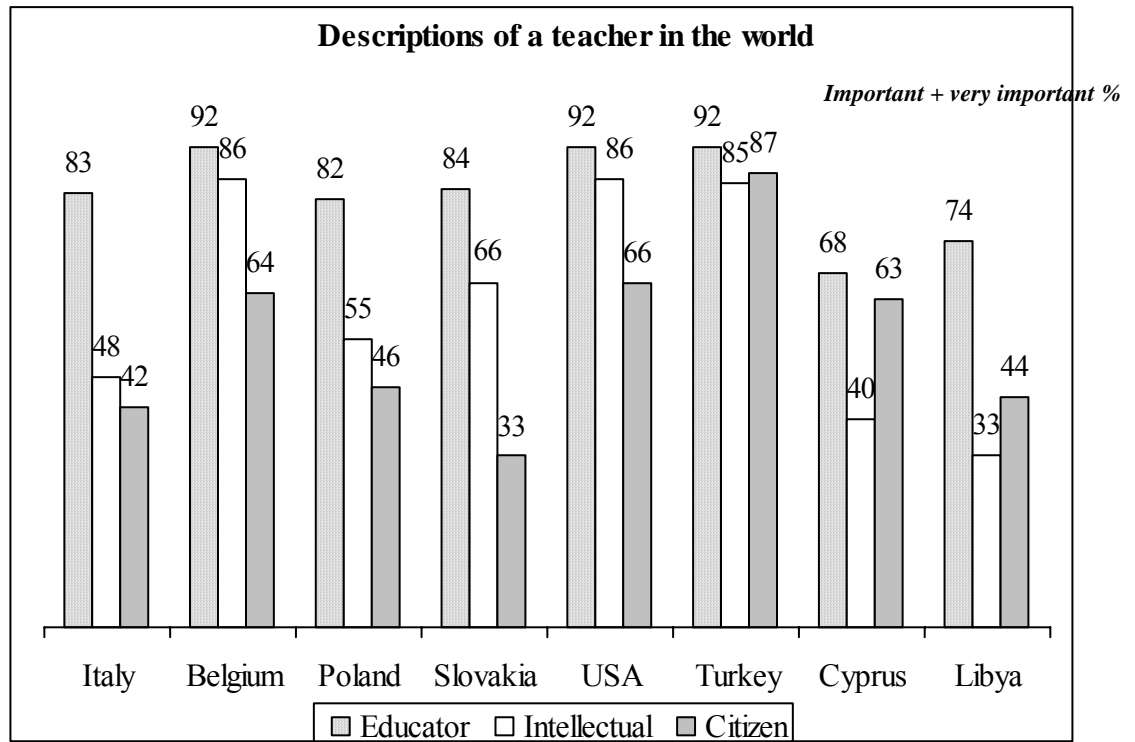
Another problem question on our questionnaire was the following:

Why did you decide to be a teacher?

(Each possible reason to be checked as wither not at all, a little, somewhat, agree, strongly agree)

1. Enjoy working with children
2. Personal improvement
3. Public service
4. Believe in the profession
5. It was the only job I could find
6. It was a good opportunity
7. Convinced of the social value of the profession
8. It provided me with additional free time
9. It allowed me to dedicate time to my family
10. Other people in my family were teachers
11. Other (specify)

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.



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 people can discuss together and reach 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, Belgium, Slovakia, or 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.

Analysis of the research on teacher's perception of teaching in the Slovakian national context

Teachers and educators in Slovakia represent one of the largest subgroups of intelligentsia. In socially stratified Slovak society they are in the position of lower middle class (Ondrejko, Verešová, 2003, p. 202). The social importance of teachers' work in Slovakia is scarcely reflected in its professional prestige and social ranking. Teachers' position within the society is determined by the social mission and expectations articulated, with respect to the teaching profession, by the society itself. It is just the area in which it is possible to observe discrepancy between the position (status) and the social role of teacher (ibid, p. 202). However, a new momentum has emerged regarding societal, social and professional standing of teachers and the perception of this standing by teachers themselves as well as the rest of the society, since Slovakia as an OECD member has joined the project *Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers*. As a consequence, Slovakia is obliged, following the unified methodology, to collect and process the statistical data which gives a whole and objective picture of complex trends and strategies of attracting, retaining and developing effective teachers (Rosa, 2003, p 216). Slovakia thus entered the territory of comparative research of teachers' profession. From the methodological point of view, the research on teaching profession can generally be divided into two main groups: 1. *theoretical analysis providing prescriptive (normative) data* focusing on the following issues: *what is the ideal teacher like, which way should teachers teach, what should teachers' duties include*, 2. *empirical research based on inductive, explorative and explanatory research methods* searching for the answer on the following question: *What is in fact the teaching profession?*

Methodology

The objective of our study was to investigate themes and concepts relevant to teachers in Slovakia and their views on:

- Social status and perceived attractiveness of their profession
- Being a teacher with respect to school and society.

Procedure

This study employed a quantitative research approach. For the sake of *data collecting* the questionnaire was administered. It contained 42 main items, some of which were subdivided into ranged sub-items, of both close-ended and open-ended forms. In the phase of *data processing* statistical analysis of the data, descriptive statistical analysis and analysis of variance (data analysis ANOVA) were adopted.

Research sample

The participants were recruited from different types of schools that exist in the Slovak Republic. The respondents were chosen after personal discussion with the teachers falling within some of the following categories:

- In/service teachers, currently undergoing (part-time) teacher training in the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Arts at the University of Prešov,
- Employed teachers hired by the Faculty for the position of supervising teacher during undergraduate students' practicum in associated schools,
- Other teachers - volunteer participants of the survey.

The final number of participants, *97 teachers*, reflects balanced proportion in terms of the corresponding type of school (pre-school, primary and secondary). The research sample also differed in the years of experience parameter (beginning teacher, experienced professional, pre-retiring teacher). 29 of the participants (30%) were 'beginning teachers' (according Prucha, 1997, p. 198 – teachers beginners in the phase of their professional stabilisation have 0-5 years of practice). 63 of the participants (65 %) were experienced professionals. 5 participants (5%) belonged to the category of pre-retiring teachers (see also Alan, 1989).

Results

As we mentioned above, the questionnaire administered in our survey consisted of 42 items, subdivided into ranged sub-items. For the purpose of this report we have chosen 5 items focusing on the following areas:

- Membership and active participation in Teachers Union / other associations, professional organisations
- Respondent's stimuli for becoming a teacher
- The level of teachers' perceived dependence on public appreciation of teaching
- Teachers' view on what makes a good teacher in the light of the length of experience.

The essential part of our interpretation is in establishing connections between the above areas and (a) years of experience and (b) type of school.

Data analysis enabled us to make generalisations over the obtained figures and formulate the characteristics of a 'typical' representative in our research sample – 'model teacher'.

The presentation of the obtained data follows this form: 1. Using 'the italics', the typical teacher, representative of our research sample is depicted. The characteristic features of the typical teacher were produced by qualitative analysis of statistical data using the methodology of 'modelling', 2. Our comments and interpretations are presented in the brackets consequently.

Setting and characteristics of the sample's representative

Our model teacher is a woman, between the ages of 31-50, she is married with children and lives with her family, she is a bearer of 'magister' degree in the field of Education.

(There were no bachelors present in the sample since 'magister' is equivalent to bachelor in western higher education tradition. This fact is connected with the differing concept and tradition of teachers' preparation in the Slovak Republic. Until recently, kindergarten teachers were prepared on the level of specialist secondary school, moreover, university training of teachers for primary education did not consist of 2 phases so students after their 4th or 5th year graduated automatically with a 'magister' degree).

Status and attractiveness of the profession

She does not have an extra job apart from teaching (Only 13 % of participant respondents have another paid job apart from teaching. It is not common in Slovakia that the teachers on pre-school and primary level have an extra job as the result of workload and lack of opportunities to find another suitable part time occupation).

Until now she likes teaching, she is not considering a change of career; she would choose this profession again, however, she is not sure whether in the light of experience thus far in her career she would advise her friend to become a teacher. If she would consider going into another profession other than teaching she would choose to be a psychologist, social worker or nurse. (It is interesting that all the chosen professions belong to the group of 'administration or assisting or helping professions that are essentially very closely associated with teaching (concerning the nature of work)).

Being and feeling of teachers in school and society

She is quite passive in the social engagement, she is not a member of any community group, teachers associations, religious organisations connected with education, more over, she does not belong to any professional education organisations. (Data presented show that the majority of respondents of all types of schools are not involved or do not work for any of the indicated organisations. Type of school is not the factor influencing the level of active participation of the respondents. The age of teachers as well as the years of teaching experience do not influence the level of social participation in the professional bodies - the teachers of all type of school are equally 'passive').

...Despite being passive - she would have much appreciated had the public perception of teaching profession improved. (The same consistence and homogeneity of teachers is evidenced in the following item. For the majority of respondents it is very important to raise the public's perception of teaching, though we did not register a statistically significant difference in the opinions among the teachers of the different age groups and the type of school).

*Irrespective of type of the school she is employed at (pre-school, elementary school, secondary school or another) **the main stimulus** in her deciding to become a teacher is enjoying working with children.* (In the case of our research results - 87% of the respondents during their studies considered working as a teacher).

She is strongly convinced of the social importance (value) of the teaching profession. She admits that motives like 'personal development', 'public service' or 'belief in the

profession' were only secondary stimuli to become a teacher. Neither is the provision of additional free time that could be dedicated to the family in her view among the primary advantages for taking up the teaching profession.

In the questionnaires section on 'characteristics of good teachers' our model teacher **strongly agrees** that the teachers:

- *Should be adequately trained in specific subject areas,*
- *Should possess a serious attitude towards civic and professional duties,*
- *Has to be able to motivate and engage students in learning processes.*

However:

- *Does not necessarily need to have high expectation for students.*

In the opinion of our model teacher:

- *The teacher's interest in the students and parents and degrees of satisfaction with their school is only of partial importance for 'good teacher's behaviour',*
- *Our model teacher **agrees** that the 'quality of teacher' is connected with the student's performance in both state and standardised tests (even this fact deserves further analysis as Slovakia has not developed enough tradition of state or national standardised testing). She only **partially agrees**, that in order to achieve the status of 'good teacher' it is necessary to dedicate extra time to students, above the routine teaching duties. Our model teacher **agrees** that a good teacher is one capable of team work with colleagues and recognition of each students potential to meet students' individual needs, but she only **partially 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).*

Our model teacher considers from time to time changing career, however not frequently. Reasons for changing a job are:

Primarily and urgently:

- *She needs greater monetary support,*
- *She feels a lack of gratification on professional and cultural level,*
- *She misses better carrier possibilities.*

Partially:

- *She has lost motivation and sometimes she feels fatigue and burnout.*

Teachers Professional Status in Turkey

Almost one-third of all civil servants in Turkey are teachers. This number does not include part-time teachers. Teachers represent middle class values in Turkey as is the case around the world. The status of teachers and the teaching profession has always been discussed. There have been some developments to increase the status of teachers recently in Turkey. For example, following the 2001 economic crisis, the teacher training institutions raised their admissions and started admitting more qualified

students. Students were taught that there is a relatively higher job security in the teaching profession. Secondly, as the race to get in to universities becomes harder, teachers are more likely to benefit from this race. The reason is that out of pocket private spending (not public) in Turkey is among the highest in Europe. The World Bank reports point out this reality. Moreover, Turkey reformed teacher training in 1998. As a result, students who would like to be teachers trained for one, or one and a half years more. It meant that they have to go to school five or five and a half years and receive a masters' degree. This also raised the status of the teaching profession in Turkey. It will be interesting to see the status of the teaching profession and teachers after these changes took place since late 1990s.

The Turkish Educational System

Turkey is a candidate country currently negotiating for full membership to the European Union with a population of about 70 million. Thirty percent of the population is between the ages of 1-14. There has been a relatively high migration from rural areas to urban areas. Population grows at a rate of 1.8 % based on the 2000 census. Migration and population growth create issues of access and quality. The highly centralised formal educational system provides education to a total of 15 million students in 67 thousand schools with 710 thousand teachers and administrators.

There are 10.5 million students in 35,581 schools with a total of 400 thousand teachers in Primary Schools. Secondary schools provide training to a total of 3 million students in 3,800 schools with 168 thousand teachers. The higher education system has about 2 million students at 79 universities with some 80 thousand faculty members (MONE, 2005).

Sample

The age distribution of the 202 teachers in the sample was as follows: Almost one fourth of the teachers are 23 years old and younger, 40% of them between 26 to 35 years old, approximately one fifth of teachers between the ages of 36-45 and the last one fifth are 46 years and higher. These figures point out that almost two-thirds of teachers in the sample are 35 years and younger. The gender distribution of teachers indicates that almost one-fifth of teachers are male and the rest are female in the sample. This figure is consistent with the female (78%) domination of teaching profession in Turkey as it is the case around the world. Almost one-third of teachers in the sample are in pre-schools and kindergardens while almost 40 percent of them are in elementary (grades 1-5), while another 13 percent are still in primary school (grades 6-8). Overall, half of the teachers in the sample are in primary schools (grades 1-8). This distribution is consistent with overall distribution that a great majority of teachers in Turkey are in elementary schools. While ten percent of teachers in high schools, only three percent of teachers are in some type of specialised schools.

Why did you decide to be a teacher? (Please answer all choices)

Reasons	I Agree				
	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Enjoy working with children	4.5	3.0	3.5	35.6	49.5
2. Personal improvement	3.0	9.4	8.4	51.5	18.3
3. Public service	5.9	27.2	8.9	39.6	11.4
4. Believe in the profession	5.4	2.0	5.0	34.7	46.5
5. It was the only job I could find	43.1	29.2	6.4	9.9	3.5
6. It was a good opportunity	3.5	13.9	13.9	47.0	13.9
7. Convinced of the social value of the profession	4.0	5.0	6.4	44.1	33.7
8. It provided me with additional free time	34.2	36.6	5.9	13.4	3.0
9. It allowed me to dedicate time to my family	21.8	37.1	14.4	17.8	1.5
10. Other people in my family were teachers	23.3	34.7	3.0	20.3	8.9
11. Other (specify)	0.5				5.9

Professional Profile of the Turkish Teachers

The Turkish teachers teach because they seem to enjoy working with children, believe in the profession and are convinced of the social value of the profession. These three questions received the largest participation rate among all questions. Agree and strongly agree options received almost 80% of the responses. Teachers in Turkey seem to choose teaching because their concern is primarily related to personal feelings and beliefs. There is also a social value of the profession as well. However, personal feelings and beliefs seem to be more important.

To what degree are you satisfied with your relationships to the following: (Respond to all)

Rapport	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
1. Principal or direct supervisor	10.9	13.9	7.4	51.5	15.3
2. Grade level colleagues as related to professional aspects of the job	5.4	11.9	15.8	55.0	8.9
3. Grade level colleagues as related to personal relationships	4.0	13.4	16.8	50.5	13.4
4. Parents of students	9.4	22.3	13.9	44.6	5.9
5. Students and their level of active participation in education	7.4	18.3	11.4	51.0	9.4
6. Students as it relates to their academic achievement	7.4	20.3	9.9	46.0	11.4
7. Students on a personal level	2.5	21.8	9.9	53.0	8.9
8. Social services and other outside support services	13.9	16.8	18.3	37.1	9.4
9. Teachers' Union	15.3	15.8	35.6	16.3	2.5
10. Local Board of Education	14.4	18.3	30.2	21.3	4.0
11. Child-study team	5.0	14.9	13.4	51.5	7.9

Teachers are satisfied with their principals and colleagues. More than half of teachers are satisfied with the achievement level of their students. Teachers seem to be unsatisfied with parental involvement and their relationship with students on the personal level. This may indicate that the relationship between teachers, parents and students are formal. Teachers in Turkey are not very satisfied with teachers unions. This may be a reason because teacher unions are ideologically and politically oriented. Unions divide teachers into camps and there are many unions. Teachers are not very satisfied with Local Education Authorities. This may be as a result of the highly centralised educational system.

In your opinion, how important is it that a teacher is defined by the following descriptions? (Rate each choice)

The teacher is:	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Important	Very Important
1. A highly qualified professional who supplies services on the basis of specialized training	1.0	3.5	6.4	52.5	33.7
2. A person who carries out a public function to the best of his/her ability	3.0	15.3	11.4	42.6	22.3
3. A person who executes the tasks he/she is assigned	1.0	8.4	6.9	45.0	34.2
4. A person who earns a living instructing others	9.9	23.3	19.3	35.6	7.4
5. A socially conscience person working to promote the equality of opportunities		1.5	2.5	39.6	53.0
6. A citizen who has chosen the profession in order to give something back to society	0.5	1.5	5.0	41.6	47.0
7. An intellectual person dedicated to spreading knowledge	0.5	3.5	5.0	46.5	38.6
8. An expert dedicated to creating a highly skilled workforce	1.0	5.0	10.4	48.5	28.7
9. A person who contributes to the education of the new generations	0.5		2.0	31.2	60.9
10. Other (specify).....					

For teachers in Turkey the social function of education is the most important factor to define a teacher. A Teacher is also considered as a socially consciousness person working to create equality of educational opportunity. So, the social value of education is more important than the others.

In your opinion, rate the importance of the following characteristics for good teaching

Characteristics	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Important	Very Important
1. Love for students		0.5	1.0	27.7	67.3
2. Critical attitude toward standards of what to teach		2.5	3.0	46.5	43.6
3. Ability to communicate effectively			0.5	19.8	76.7
4. Pedagogical competence		1.0	1.5	26.2	68.8
5. Effective classroom management and appropriate instruction		0.5	1.5	19.3	76.7
6. Awareness of social problems		0.5	2.0	45.5	48.0
7. Organizational skills		2.0	4.5	47.5	42.1
8. Being a role model for students			4.0	30.2	63.4
9. The ability to work in professional groups		1.0	2.0	42.1	51.5
10. The ability to organize student learning groups effectively			0.5	46.5	49.5
11. Lesson planning and preparation		2.0	0.5	24.8	69.8
12. The ability to reflect upon and self-assess one's teaching		0.5		28.7	67.3
13. Common sense		0.5	4.5	36.6	55.4
14. Willingness to sacrifice for others		2.0	10.9	41.6	41.6
15. A sense of responsibility toward students	0.5	2.0	2.5	31.7	60.4
16. A sense of responsibility toward the school	1.0	3.5	7.4	36.6	48.5
17. Other (specify)					

Teachers in Turkey consider the ability to communicate effectively, effective classroom management and appropriate instruction, lesson preparation, and pedagogical competence as very important for good teaching.

Conclusion

Teachers in Turkey emphasise 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 centralised educational system.

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