

## PROSPECTIVE PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHER VIEWS ON PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL QUALITIES

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*Teacher competences and teacher qualities are widely discussed topics in scientific literature. There are large scale projects dealing with teacher competences carried out at a European level. TUNING, one of the best known projects, lists generic teacher competences and classifies them as: instrumental, interpersonal and systemic competences. OECD's project Teachers Matter (2005) finds that it is necessary that initial teacher education does not only provide basic training in subject-matter knowledge, pedagogy and general pedagogical knowledge, but also develops the skills required for reflective practice and research on-the-job. Teachers need to be aware of their competences as well as their personal and professional qualities. The paper presents the results of the research carried out with the first (N = 90) and the fifth (final) year (N = 90) students currently studying at the Faculty of Teacher Education, the University of Zagreb. They are all prospective primary school teachers. The main goals of the research were to identify student perception of the key personal and professional teacher qualities and to determine whether student perception of these qualities changes with the level of the initial teacher training. A questionnaire constructed out of two open-ended questions was used to examine student perception of the five most important qualities that a teacher should possess. These qualities were further ranked by the students depending on the level of importance and the level of acquisition. The results show common teacher qualities identified by both groups of students and differences in rank according to the level of the initial teacher education.*

**Keywords:** prospective teachers, personal teacher qualities, professional teacher qualities

Teacher education research usually falls into two broad categories labelled "research on teacher education and teaching practice" and "research in teacher education and teaching practice" (Vizek Vidović & Domović, 2008:305). Research on teacher education and practice involves large scale as well as small scale research whose results impact education policies. Although there are different approaches in the research on teacher education, Floden (2008) argues that such studies make valuable contribution to the stake holders' understanding of practice.

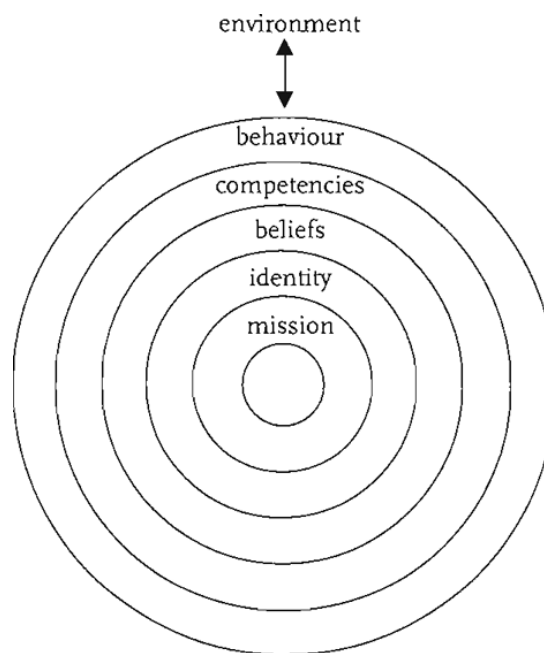
In the last two decades an emphasis in the international *research on teacher education* was put on acquiring teacher competences. TUNING is one of the major international projects that started in the year 2000 with the

aim to develop new approaches in curriculum planning. TUNING (2006) offered a general definition of competences stating that they represent a dynamic combination of cognitive and metacognitive skills, knowledge and understanding, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills, and ethical values. TUNING (2009:45-46) offers a list of teacher competences common to both teacher education and education sciences/studies at a master level: capacity to learn; communication skills; team working skills; information technology skills; problem solving; autonomy; reflection skills; interpersonal skills; planning and time management; problem solving; decision-making; appreciation of diversity and multiculturalism; ethical commitment; critical and self-critical abilities; capacity to improve their own learning and performance, including the development of study and research skills; ability to analyse, synthesize, evaluate, to identify problems and work out solutions; firm knowledge of the profession in practice, research skills; leadership skills; communication skills, including ability to communicate in advanced professional registers; ability to reflect upon and evaluate one's own performance; development of advanced cognitive skills associated with knowledge development and creation. Teacher competences that were stated in *Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications* (2005) were classified in three categories: work with others, work with knowledge, technology and information and work with and in society. That classification now represents a reference point for creating educational policies in initial teacher education and also for curriculum development for institutions that educate prospective teachers.

On the other hand *research in teacher education* enables an inside view into the educational practice. This research emphasizes the importance of "research *in* teacher education" since all the findings will be discussed and analyzed with students and colleagues in order to improve the quality of prospective teacher education. This research was carried out with prospective primary school teachers, the first and the fifth (final) year students currently studying at the Faculty of Teacher Education, the University of Zagreb. It was conducted during their initial teacher education and it will have a direct impact on the academic staff and students.

This research was driven by one of the crucial questions in teacher education: "What makes a "good" teacher?". Many authors and many studies have tried to answer that question but still there is not a unique answer. Although, there is a consensus that good teachers must possess pedagogical knowledge as well as mastery of various disciplines, and have the ability to relate them to one another (Cochran, DeRuiter & King, 1993; Ormrod & Cole, 1996) a "good teacher" is not a given category. Rather, it depends on the perception of the evaluator. Students involved in this research have their own perception of what a good teacher should be like and that perception was used as a research base. The development of a good teacher starts with an appropriate education that is based on building teacher competences. In accordance with the competences that were mentioned in the text above, the competent teacher is often described as an intelligent, socially adequate, personally desirable and professionally able individual.

Instead of focusing on competences only, Korthagen (2004) uses a more holistic approach when trying to define what it is that makes a good teacher. His onion model of levels of change includes six different layers that contribute to the development of a good teacher.

Figure 1. *The onion: a model of levels of change* (Korthagen, 2004)

The environment from the onion model indicates the institutions of initial teacher education that have a direct influence on students' knowledge as well as on their behaviour. At the same time student behaviour has an impact on the institutions of initial teacher education, and more precisely on the academic staff who create the subject content and choose the appropriate teaching methods. The deeper layers in the onion model refer to the components of teacher identity. They are developed during the initial teacher education process. It is clear that the acquisition of competences is not enough for one to become a good teacher, and that personal belief and qualities have to be taken into account, too. Ofman (2000) claims that the distinction between qualities and competences lies in the fact that qualities come from the inside, while competences are acquired from the outside. Stronge (2002) emphasizes that teacher's affective characteristics or social and emotional behaviour influence teacher efficiency even more than the pedagogical practice. He identifies these key teacher characteristics: caring, fairness and respect, interaction with students, enthusiasm, motivation and dedication to teaching, reflective practice. Yeh (2006) found that teaching efficacy is a reliable predictor in the improvement of the personality characteristics of teachers. The findings suggest that personality types such as intrapersonal intelligence, critical thinking dispositions, and a judicial thinking style results in a more reliable outcome in reflective teaching and mastery performance (which is self-efficacy). Feldman (1976:243) reviewed over 70 studies of effective teaching at the college level. He found the following characteristics to be consistently associated with superior college teachers or teaching:

- ❖ Stimulation of interest
- ❖ Clarity and understandableness
- ❖ Knowledge of the subject matter
- ❖ Preparation for, and organization of the course
- ❖ Enthusiasm for the subject and teaching
- ❖ Friendliness (concern and respect for students)
- ❖ Helpfulness (availability)
- ❖ Openness to the opinions of others

Personal as well as professional development of teachers complement each other. Placing personal (self-related) issues up front at the start of one's career as a teacher, is a path to recognizing what it means to be a "good teacher".

This article will present the list of qualities that students consider crucial for becoming "good teachers" and their level of acquisition. The differences and similarities in the perception of the first (beginners) and the fifth (final) year students will show whether the study and the development of teacher competences has changed their views on what a good teacher should be like. This research will attempt at contributing to the discussion on what it takes to become a good teacher from a prospective teacher's point of view.

## Research Methodology

*Research aims.* This research had two aims. The first one was to determine what the qualities of a "good teacher" are from a prospective teacher point of view. The second aim was to determine whether the education level of prospective teachers influence their perception of what a "good teacher" should be like.

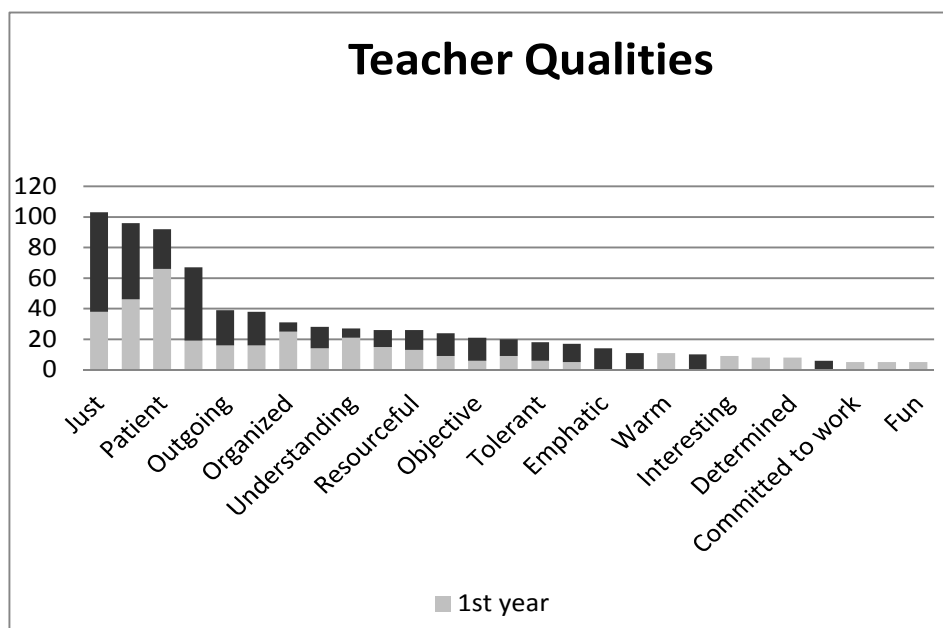
*Sample.* The research was undertaken on a sample of students currently attending the first (beginners) and the fifth (final) year at the Faculty of Teacher Education, the University of Zagreb. The sample included 90 first year students (68% of all first year students) and 90 fifth year students (78% of all fifth year students). The total of 180 students (prospective primary school teachers) participated in this research.

*Procedure and instruments.* A questionnaire was created. It consisted of two open-ended questions designed in accordance with the research aims. In the first question the students were asked to list five key teacher qualities that make a good teacher and to rank them by their importance. The most important teacher quality was ranked 1, and the least important out of the five qualities was ranked 5. In the second question the students were asked to take a few moments to reflect on the listed qualities and then to rank them according to the level of their own possession of these qualities. A questionnaire was given out at the beginning of the winter semester of 2011.

## Results and Discussion

The first year students named 63 different teacher qualities, while the fifth year students named 35 different teacher qualities that they thought made a good teacher. Considering the large number of listed qualities, the results show only those listed five times or more.

Graph 1. List of the most frequent teacher qualities identified by the prospective teachers



### Teacher qualities classification and frequencies

During data analysis and data reduction processes, the qualities provided by the students were organized in 2 subgroups: professional qualities and personal qualities.

*Personal Teacher Qualities.* The first year students' list of personal teacher qualities that make a good teacher consists of 12 qualities, while the fifth year students' list has 11 qualities. (Considering the large number of teacher qualities that students brought up in the first step of the research, the results show only those listed five times or more.) The personal qualities refer to the way teachers communicate, their behaviour, personal features and skills.

Table 1. Frequency of personal teacher qualities

PERSONAL TEACHER QUALITIES	FREQUENCY	
	1 <sup>st</sup> Y	5 <sup>th</sup> Y
patient	66	26
creative	46	50
understanding	21	6
outgoing	16	23
communicative	16	22
positive	14	14
resourceful	13	13
warm	11	-
interesting	9	-
tolerant	6	12
caring	5	-
fun	5	-
altruistic	-	6
honest	-	10
emphatic	-	14

Results show that the first and fifth year students mainly agree that the two most important personal qualities that characterise a good teacher are patience and creativity. However, patience was pointed out 66 times by the first year students, while the fifth year students mentioned it only 26 times. This shows that beginners find patience to be more important than the final year students. Both groups of students agree on the same level on positive thinking and resourcefulness but do not share views on some personal features of a good teacher.

*Professional teacher qualities.* Prospective teachers listed a smaller number of professional than personal qualities. The first year students listed 11, while the fifth year students listed 9 qualities. (Considering the large number of teacher qualities that students brought up in the first step of the research, the results show only those listed five times or more.) The professional qualities refer to work habits, professional behaviour and the willingness to achieve desired results.

Table 2. Frequency of professional teacher qualities

PROFESSIONAL TEACHER QUALITIES	FREQUENCY	
	1ST Y	5TH Y
Just	38	65
professional	19	48
reliable	9	15
objective	6	15
hard working	5	12
authoritative	15	11
motivated	9	11
open to new ideas	-	11
organized	25	6
persistent	8	-
determined	8	-
committed to work	5	-

Being just is the most frequently mentioned professional quality, but is more often recognised by the fifth than the first year students. Professionalism is the second quality on the fifth year students' list while first year students think that good organisation skills are more important than professionalism. It is interesting that beginners have listed more common professional qualities than the more experienced students. However, it is important to state that, although they have a longer list of qualities, the frequencies are predominantly lower. The reasons for those results could be the lack of professional awareness that beginners still have not had a chance to develop at the beginning stage of their study.

### Ranking of teacher qualities

After listing the qualities that make a good teacher, students were asked to rank them by importance. The most desirable teacher quality on the list was ranked 1, and the least important quality was ranked 5. Afterwards they were asked to reflect on the listed qualities that make a good teacher and to rank them in accordance with their personal acquisition level (1-highest level of

acquired qualities, 5- lowest level of aquired qualities). Their answers for each teacher quality were added and ranked according to the mean value on the scale from 1 to 12 (1- highest level of aquired qualities, 12- lowest level of acquired qualities).

Table 3. Rank of personal teacher qualities

Personal teacher qualities	1 <sup>st</sup> Y - rang		5 <sup>th</sup> Y-rang	
	desirabl e	possessed	desirabl e	possessed
creative	1	7	1	2
patient	2	4	6	3
understanding	3	8	5	10
tolerant	4	2	2	6
communicative	5	6	8	11
resourceful	6	11	4	9
positive	7	5	9	5
outgoing	8	10	10	7
warm	9	1	-	-
caring	10	9	-	-
fun	11	3	-	-
interesting	12	12	-	-
altruistic	-	-	3	8
honest	-	-	7	1
emphatic	-	-	11	4

The first year students stayed consistent in their answers regarding the most desirable qualities. They have ranked the three most frequent qualities as the most important ones. The difference between the desirable qualities and the qualities they acquire shows the level of honesty and realistic reflection on their work. It would be unrealistic to expect that they have reached the highest level of the acquired qualities of a good teacher at their first year of study. The fifth year students named creativity as the most desirable quality of a good teacher, which is in accordance with its initial frequencies. Other qualities do not follow the frequency criteria. The most desirable ranked qualities are those listed the fewest number of times. This shows that the majority of students do not find those qualities to be important. However, the few students who do list them, believe them to be crucial in forming a good teacher. The level of acquired qualities indicates the need for the improvement of communication skills and some personal features.

Table 4. Rank of professional teacher qualities

Professional teacher qualities	1st Y - rang		5th Y-rang	
	desirable	possessed	desirable	possessed
open to new ideas	-	-	9	5
professional	1	11	1	9
persistent	2	1	-	-
just	3	2	3	3
motivated	4	4	5	2
organized	5	5	2	1
determined	6	6	-	-
authoritative	7	10	4	8
committed to work	8	8	-	-
objective	9	3	6	7
reliable	10	9	7	6
hard working	11	7	8	4

When discussing professional teacher qualities, the first and fifth year students agree that professionalism and the quality of being just are at the top of the desirable qualities rank. The fifth year students do not find persistency to be one of the desirable qualities, while first year students ranked it as the second most important quality. They consider organisational skills to be far more important, which is also recognized by the first year students. The difference between the desirable and acquired qualities is surprising. While students distinguish between the desired and acquired personal qualities, the distinction between those two categories in professional qualities is not that high. The greatest difference is prominent in the area of professionalism. Such a disharmony was expected as that is one of the qualities that cannot be fully developed during the course of study. The sense of professionalism depends on a greater number of factors which are influenced by work experience and professional development.

## Conclusion

The students involved in this research were asked to list the five qualities they thought made a good teacher. Due to the fact that they were not offered a list of categories, the first year students dispersed their answers and listed 63 qualities. The fifth year students were more coherent in their answers with the list of 35 qualities. One of the possible reasons for this difference between the two groups of students lies in the fact that the first year students are at the very beginning of their higher education, so they still have not had the majority of study courses, and have not developed the basic teacher competences. This difference could also be perceived as criteria reduction for the fifth year students who are now at the end of their initial teacher education and have more realistic expectations of what a good teacher could be like instead of encouraging an idealistic image of what a good teacher should be like. One of the presumptions is that the first year students have created their vision of desirable teacher qualities based on their observation of their own teachers during their primary and secondary education. Unlike them, the fifth year students have had an opportunity to continuously reflect on their personal and professional development in the course of their initial teacher education and practice in schools. In other words, they have had the



opportunity to build an image of a good teacher based on their own experience as teachers in training.

The students' list of qualities is in correlation with some previous researches. Thompson et al. (2004) identify the eight qualities that match with the findings of this research and they list four additional characteristics: personal touch, willingness to admit mistakes, high expectations and a sense of belonging. The qualities that the prospective teachers have listed are in accordance with some competences listed in TUNING (2009). Some of them, for example communication skills, overlap in terminology but more importantly they overlap in content. Content overlapping could be perceived as evidence that qualities and competences are undistributable and should be considered in conjunction.

The prominent difference between the desirable and acquired qualities presented in this article could be used to monitor students' personal and professional progress in the future years of their study and teaching careers. It could also be useful to academic staff at the institutions of initial teacher education. They could use these results to monitor whether the qualities that they aspire to develop in prospective primary school teachers are truly developed and acquired by students at the end of their study. It could also help start an academic debate on the development of teacher professional identity and the role of the institutions of initial teacher education in it. Professional identity is part of one's own personal self that provides answers to the self-debate in the process of self-actualization. It is a key term in human development during the various stages of life; the portrait individuals construct of themselves that provides meaning to their life (Erikson, 1968). The professional identity of teachers is their sense of belonging to the profession and identification with it. It includes two symbiotic components:

- the ways teachers perceive themselves as teachers,
- what they see as important in their work and life, based on personal experiences and background.

Hunt (1987) suggested that "beginning with ourselves" and gaining personal insight is the first and most important step in the issue of teacher empowerment. This kind of research with prospective teachers could help them reflect on their actions and attitudes at the early stage of the study and prior to the point of starting their independent teaching careers. This research could be expanded to other groups of research participants (e.g. primary school students, secondary school students, parents...). That way the presumptions made in the discussion part of this research could either be acknowledged or rejected in order to improve the teaching practice of primary school teachers at the university level. Questions that could be raised when the research expands are:

1. On what basis do prospective teachers form an image of a good teacher?
2. How significant is the influence of a study program to a prospective teacher's perception of a good teacher?
3. How can the institutions for initial teacher education contribute more to the development of desirable teacher qualities?

The process of building teacher competences through study courses and teaching practice helps to provide development of a teacher as a person and a professional being. That could lead to maintaining the open circle between university teachers, primary school teachers, prospective primary school teachers and pupils.

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