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Research Paper

Specifics of defense and coping behavior among teachers experiencing a professional identity crisis

Nadezhda O. Sadovnikova *, Tamara B. Sergeeva, Svetlana S. Kotova, Irina I. Khasanova, Valeriya A. Domoratskaya

Russian State Vocational Pedagogical University, Yekaterinburg, Russian Federation
**Corresponding author E-mail: nosadovnikova@gmail.com*

Abstract

The issues addressed in the article are of particular relevance due to the necessity to provide research background for creating the system of psychological and pedagogical support for the professional development of teachers in the conditions of permanent changes in the system of education. The aim of the article is to describe specific interrelations between the reflection and the parameters of the teacher's axiological sphere (in particular, life-purpose orientations). The following research methods were used: theoretical analysis of psychological and educational literature, phenomenological method, questionnaires, and methods of mathematical and statistical data processing (descriptive statistics, comparative analysis (the Mann-Whitney U test). The results of the theoretical and empirical research provide adequate grounds for the conclusion that there is a definite interrelation between the parameters of reflection and the parameters of life-purpose orientations. It is proved that in the conditions of a professional identity crisis the teachers experience a significant reduction in the levels of life-purpose orientations, which in turn leads to intensification of reflection processes. At the same time, the obtained results suggest that the teachers can successfully overcome their professional crisis in case of formation of the cognitive component of the biographical reflection, aimed at the analysis of actions and means of understanding and organizing their life events. Implications of the research results. The research results expand our understanding of the essence and emotional experience of the professional identity crisis. They can be used in the designing the process of psychological support for the activities and professional development of teachers.

Keywords: *Teacher; Professional Identity Crisis; Psychological Defense Mechanism; Coping Behavior.*

1. Introduction

Such factors as the transformation of existing social institutions, changes in all spheres of public life and a serious reassessment of the system of social relations lead to stress, tension increase in personal sphere and decline in the well-being of a contemporary individual [1-3]. This fully applies to the system of education. A number of processes (including a permanent reform of the education system, changes in the educational paradigm and in approaches to the organization of the educational process, etc.) lead to changes in the content and technological aspects of the educational process, challenging the teachers' professional competence. The teacher's personality today becomes a decisive factor in the successful transformation of the education system and achievement of the goals set by the government and the public. Therefore, of special importance for teachers – both for their daily activities and professional development – is the ability to demonstrate continuous self-determination and professional self-development, with the constant search for new trajectories of such development and means to overcome psychological barriers in this process.

One of the psychological barriers in the process of teachers' professional development is the professional identity crisis. The crisis is accompanied by stress, increased internal dissatisfaction, loss of perception of the work importance and lack of a professional pespective.

Such foreign psychologists studied the issues related to the crisis experience as [4-6].

Thus, J. Caplan states that the crisis is a period of imbalance, limited in time and accompanied by unpleasant mental and physical reactions (feelings), which sometimes greatly exhausts the ability of a person to competently overcome problems or cope with the situation. Such violation of mental balance occurs when an individual faces an important inescapable problem for which there is no immediate standard solution achieved by the currently available mechanisms of response regulation.

In [7] describes the crisis as "an unexpected event or experience which cannot be 'processed' by the person and which interrupts the life continuity and contains the danger of an impending catastrphe". S. Graf notes that the state of the crisis can be hard for a person, but it has a huge evolutionary and healing potential. Being a difficult situation of natural development, a crisis can lead to healing of various emotional and psychosomatic disorders, positive changes in personality and to resolving important life problems.

The notion of the "professional identity crisis" has long been widely accepted in the Russian psychology.

Thus, in [7], [8] define the crisis in the professional formation as comparatively short (up to one year long) period of fundamental restructuring of the professional consciousness, activity and behaviour of an individual and changing the professional development vector. The crises result in reorientation to new goals and correction and revision of the social and professional position, prepare for changes in the ways of performing activities, lead to adjustment in the relationships with the people around, and in some cases result in change of profession.

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In [9] notes that the process of professional development is accompanied by a career crisis, characterised by the person's dissatisfaction with oneself and the achieved professional status; such revision of the "self-concept" is associated with rethinking of oneself and one's place in the world. In the course of experiencing such crisis, a new dominating professional value is formed in the individual; some people "suddenly" find new meanings in the very content and process of their work (instead of old meanings, often external to the work.

Like foreign authors, Russian psychologists emphasize the stressful nature of the professional identity crisis in their works. The crisis affects the sphere of the personal professional orientation (motives, needs, values, and meanings), makes the person reconstruct the axiological sphere limits and actualizes the process of emotional experience. The key features of the process of experiencing a professional identity crisis are the following: 1) localization in time and space; 2) instability of images and thoughts about oneself as a professional, loss of professional identity; 3) unclear temporal professional perspective or its total absence and, as a consequence, actualization of the need to choose a further scenario of professional life; 4) actualisation of life-purpose emotional experiences, manifested in a reduced desire for self-development, self-assertion and self-fulfilment and in a feeling of the own uselessness and worthlessness; 5) presence of persistent affective reactions and tension.

In view of the above, it should be noted that the process of experiencing the professional identity crisis has to "trigger" defence and coping behaviour [10-15].

As the teacher' professional identity crisis is a highly stressful situation, it is very important to study specifics of the defence and coping behaviour among teachers in order to suggest the most constructive and effective strategies for them.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Research methods

In our research, we used a theoretical approach (analysis of psychological and educational literature) and the empirical method of questionnaires, as well as methods of mathematical statistics (descriptive statistics and comparative analysis (the Mann-Whitney U test)).

2.2. Experimental base of the research

Questionnaire surveys were carried out in the general education institutions located in Sverdlovskaya Oblast of the Russian Federation. The surveys totally involved 125 teachers. The group of teachers experiencing a professional crisis included 38 persons. The rest of the teachers (87 persons) were assigned to the comparison group. The average age of the respondents is 36 years, and their average working experience is 15 years. All respondents have a pedagogical education.

2.3. Research stages

Our research into the specifics of the defence and coping behaviour was organised in 3 stages:

At the first stage, we performed a theoretical analysis of the studies into the issues related to experiencing the professional identity crisis by teachers and specifics of their defence and coping behaviour.

The second stage was dedicated to the collection of empirical data.

At the third stage of our research, we performed a mathematical analysis of the collected data.

3. Results

3.1. Experimental research techniques

The research into the specifics of the defence and coping behaviour among teachers experiencing a professional identity crisis was carried out with the use of questionnaires. In particular, we used the following techniques:

1) In order to identify specifics of the coping behaviour, we used the "Coping Behaviour in Stressful Situations" questionnaire developed by Norman S. Endler and James D.A. Parker, and further adapted. This questionnaire reliably measures three main coping styles: orientation to solving the problem (problem-focused style, or coping), emotion-focused style, and avoidance.
2) In order to study the psychological defence mechanisms, we used the Plutchik-Kellerman-Conte Life Style Index developed in 1979 on the basis of Plutchik's psychoevolutionary theory and Kellerman's structural theory of personality.

Another research method used in our empirical studies was the phenomenological method. The phenomenological method is "a special method of description and analysis of one's own experiences, based on the principles of evidence and presuppositionlessness; this method, developed within the frames of the traditional phenomenological philosophy, is used today in a transformed form as a strategy for qualitative research". The phenomenological method uses the words and expressions of natural language, which reflect the richness and depth of the human experience. It is focused on describing experiences of the subject rather than openly observable actions and other aspects of the behaviour. Based on the phenomenological method, the authors' questionnaire "The Experience of a Professional Identity Crisis" was developed. The questionnaire covers several aspects of experiencing a professional identity crisis by teachers: "general attitude and experiences before the emergence of a professional crisis", "experiences accompanying the professional identity crisis", "transformation of the axiological sphere", "coping with the professional crisis". The questioning was conducted with the aim of forming a group of teachers experiencing a professional identity crisis. The grounds for inclusion of a teacher in the first or second group were as follows: own assessment of the current professional situation by the teacher himself/herself as critical or non-critical; the general emotional background of the self-assessment; the pattern of the professional activity evaluation; the pattern of self-assessment as a professional teacher.

3.2. Experimental research results

Let us consider the analysis of the obtained results.

In order to analyse the specifics of the defence and coping behaviour among teachers experiencing a professional identity crisis, we performed a comparative analysis (the Mann-Whitney U test) of the results obtained in two different groups: the group of teachers experiencing a professional crisis and the group of non-affected teacers.

The results of the comparative analysis show that it is more typical for the teachers experiencing a professional identity crisis to use such defence mechanisms as denial and repression. Let us describe these defence mechanism.

The repression (mean value of 3.26+2.06) is a defence strategy based on exclusion of an idea or a personal experience and the associated emotions from the consciousness. Repression is one of the key concepts of psychoanalysis. Repression is understood as a conscious effort of a person to forget frustrating memories by transferring attention to other forms of activity and non-frustration phenomena, and so on. In other words, repression is actually an intentional suppression, and it can lead to ordinary, or true, forgetting of the corresponding mental contents. The role of repression can be described as follows: anything contradicting the desires, passionate aspirations and ideals of the individual or potentially changing the good opinion that the person has or would like to have about oneself

can be repressed. Experiencing a professional identity crisis, teachers find themselves in the situation when their views of themselves as professional educators are challenged and criticised (many teachers noted that the emergence of a professional crisis was preceded by a period when they began experiencing self-doubts, their social environment criticized the style of their pedagogical interactions and professional activities, and so on), and the only possible way to cope with negative emotions is to force them out of the consciousness. This allows the teacher to preserve the integrity of personality and psychological well-being for some time.

Denial (mean value of 4.29+2.26) is another psychological defence mechanism that is typical for teachers experiencing a professional identity crisis. Denial implies insufficient awareness of certain events, experiences and feelings that would cause pain if the person recognized them. It is ontogenetically the earliest mechanism of psychological defence and the most primitive of them. It is characterized by the desire to avoid any new information that could be incompatible with the established views. Denial manifests itself in ignoring and evading any potentially disturbing information. The affected teachers cease to perceive potentially troublesome events that could upset them. Denial leads to the fact that a person tries not to think about some things and to avoid situations that could result in failure or defeat. Facing difficulties, the person activates the denial filter, trying to keep the inner world from deformation and destruction. Unlike other types of psychological defence, denial selects information rather than transforming it from unacceptable to acceptable. Denial leads to re-orientation of the teacher's attention, so that the person becomes particularly inattentive to those spheres of professional activities and life in general which are potentially troublesome. As a result, the detailed information about the dangerous event is completely excluded from further processing. Denial can be triggered not only by external hard events, but also by the "I believe" attitude. The sincere and strong belief of the teacher that the used educational measures are adequate organizes such attitude to all incoming information that everything coming into conflict with the object of faith tends not to be perceived at all. The person unconsciously carries out a careful sorting of information, selecting only those parts of it that help to preserve self-confidence.

Let us consider the results of our research into specifics of coping behaviour.

The results of our descriptive statistical analysis provide adequate grounds for the conclusion that the teachers experiencing a professional identity crisis are more inclined to problem-focused coping (mean value 56.93±10.92). The emotion-focused coping is the second in importance (mean value 44.19±7.88). Summarizing the results, we can come to the following conclusion: in the situation of a professional identity crisis, when teachers have to cope with tension, stress and negative emotions, they prefer to look for ways of resolving a difficult situation and responding to the complexity constructively. This can be explained by the fact that teacher's activities are connected with the fulfilment of an important social function – to be a "mentor" for younger generations, therefore, the teacher should not communicate own negative emotions to children. Another factor explaining the dominance of problem-focused coping may be that the collection of empirical data was carried out within the frames of advanced training courses and master's programs. The teacher's decision on the need to increase the competence level (in the form of advanced training or master's program) is an indication of constructive overcoming of the crisis.

An important aspect of our research into the specifics of coping with the professional identity crisis was the analysis of teachers' answers to the questions of the phenomenological questionnaire, which disclose the process of coping with the professional crisis. We should mention that the content analysis was used to process self-assessment reports.

One of the content-analysis categories we identified was that of the "actions to overcome the crisis" (4th category in the questionnaire). The category included such sub-categories as the use of social resources, personal resource actualisation, hobbies and interests, job place changing, profession changing, and changing nature of work.

Results of the quantitative analysis showed that the highest share of answers (33%) is in the subcategory "personal resource actualisation". The teachers' self-assessment reports included such answers as "patience and calmness", "I realized that if I cannot change the situation, I should change my attitude towards it, "self-confidence", "optimism", "confidence in my knowledge and abilities", "stress-resistance", "confidence that the crisis will end, motivation", etc.

Social resources also play an important role in overcoming the professional crisis (this subcategory included 26% of responses). The teachers' self-assessment reports included such statements as "I interacted with other specialists", "I addressed my family members and senior teachers, we had discussions to clarify the situation", "I contacted the person who well knows the specifics of my job", "I addressed the management and they supported me with encouraging words".

The personal resource actualisation and applying for social support are, in our opinion, rather constructive ways of coping with the crisis, because they allow the teacher to retain the professional status and stay in the profession.

Another constructive way out of the crisis is, in our opinion, the subcategory "changing nature of work" (11%). This subcategory encompasses such answers as "at that time I submitted documents to enter a higher education institution", "I understood that I have to do something and find a way out of the crisis", "I was offered an interesting side job", "I changed the area of activity", "I participate in contests and win them", etc.

So, our analysis of the results of our research into the defence and coping behaviour among the teachers experiencing a professional identity crisis provides adequate grounds for the conclusion that the teachers mainly use non-constructive mechanisms of psychological defence (as both denial and repression are non-constructive mechanisms). This leads to an increase in internal tension and reduced resistance to stresses of educational activities. However, a positive result of our studies is the proof that the teachers also use the problem-focused coping. Denial and repression may be used by teachers for a short period of time in order to have a "break" in the stressful situation, subconsciously reducing the stress intensity (albeit at the expense of growing unconscious internal tension), and to redistribute internal resources to find ways to resolve the crisis.

4. Discussion

Depending on a theoretical position of a particular scholar, the defence and coping behaviour has been also referred to as "coping", "overcoming", "coping behaviour", etc.

Today the scholars studying the issues related to the resolution of critical, difficult or stressful situations use such concepts as psychological defence, coping, overcoming. In fact, a large body of knowledge about these issues has been already accumulated in psychology. We have analysed the treatment of psychological aspects of overcoming (coping with) difficult or critical situations and development barriers in the works of Russian psychologists.

The notions "coping", "overcoming" and "coping behaviour" have the same semantic content: ensuring the maximum adaptation of a person to the challenges of the situation by adequately responding to difficulties and overcoming them.

The most common model for understanding defence and coping behaviour are the models related to the research into psychological stresses, where the defence and coping behaviour is defined as a strategy of actions undertaken by a person in situations of psychological threat, in particular in the context of adaptation to a disease as a threat to physical, personal and social well-being.

R. Lazarus identified three types of strategies for coping with a threatening situation: Ego-defence mechanisms; direct action – attack or flight, which is accompanied by anger or fear; and coping without affect, when there is no real threat, but it potentially exists. According to the scholar, there are five main tasks of coping as a specific adaptive behaviour: 1) to minimize the negative effects of circumstances and increase prospects for restoring normal activities; 2) to tolerate, adjust to, regulate or transform life situations; 3)

to maintain a positive self-image and self-confidence; 4) to maintain emotional balance; 5) to establish and preserve close enough contacts with other people.

According to R. Moss and J. Schaefer, there are five types of tasks that a person faces in a critical situation, including the task of establishing the meaning and significance of the situation for the person. As the initial reaction of a person to a stressful situation is usually expressed in confusion, another task, which is of a special interest for our research, is to maintain a reasonable emotional balance and restrain the negative feelings caused by adverse events.

Moreover, since the crisis usually defies human abilities, reduces self-confidence, casts doubt on identity, etc., one of the most important tasks of the defence and coping behaviour is to preserve and maintain self-image, social identity and self-confidence.

In the Russian psychology, coping is actively explored in the context of stress and adaptation problems (and the professional identity crisis is undoubtedly a stressful situation for a teacher); the scholars consider the coping essence, patterns and dynamics, as well as decisive factors for choosing the ways to cope with stress in different life and age periods.

The first work in Russia that examined coping behaviour through the prism of psychological defence mechanisms was V.A. Tashlykov's article, the main idea of which was the treatment of coping behaviour as one of the mechanisms of psychological defence.

The notion of the "defence and coping behaviour" is analysed in the research works by G.S. Korytova and her co-authors, who define it as a structurally multi-level system consisting of a large number of components (psychological defence mechanisms, behavioural coping strategies, personal and social coping resources). These components are hierarchically related to each other and are systems of a lower order in relation to the integrative system of psychological defence and coping. The defence and coping behaviour is part of the system of determinants of self-regulation in an educational activity subject, being one of its internal factors together with other personal constructs (self-consciousness, emotional characteristics and basic personality traits). B.A. Gunzunova notes that the mental self-regulation in educational activity is closely related to the psychological defence behaviour. The inner personal defence mechanisms have their specific properties depending on both the degree of conscious regulation and the individual structure of the regulatory profile [16], [17].

In our study, the psychological defence mechanisms and coping strategies are considered as mutually complementing components of the defence and coping system of the teacher's personality, defining the strategies of action and the emotional and rational regulation of teacher's behaviour. The defence and coping behaviour, in turn, is related to experiencing the professional identity crisis unfolding in the external activity of the teacher. It is represented, first of all, by the strategies of coping behaviour, ensuring adaptation to the stress typical for the situations of professional crisis. The main task of the defence and coping behaviour is to preserve the psychological well-being and an optimal level of life-sustaining activity in the situation of a professional crisis. Being an individual, unique way of interacting with the situation of a professional crisis, the defence and coping behaviour allows the person to adapt to the situation as much as possible, thereby reducing the level of stress. Conscious and unconscious strategies of the defence and coping behaviour, represented by the psychological defence mechanisms and the coping strategies triggered in the situation of professional crisis, can be differentiated into constructive and non-constructive, depending on the nature of the ways of interacting with the crisis and their influence on the personal development, while also taking into account the criterion of preserving the socio-psychological well-being of the individual.

The non-constructive strategies of coping with the professional identity crisis are associated with psychological defence mechanisms and avoidance strategies. Their intensive sustained use leads to the person's "blocking" in the crisis, in spite of its generally successful resolution. As a consequence, the trajectory of professional development can be distorted, with stagnation, deformation or, in general, professional deadaptation of the person.

The constructive coping with the crisis leads to accumulation of the experience of a positive resolution of the professional crisis, helps in professional self-realization and promotes an increase in the level of personal activity.

Our research results show that both constructive and non-constructive coping strategies are characteristic of the teachers experiencing a professional identity crisis. On the one hand, teachers react with repression and denial, trying to preserve their well-being through the reality suppression or distortion. On the other hand, teachers are also characterised by constructive coping with the professional identity crisis through problem-solving. This duality can finally result in an increase in internal tension and anxiety rather than a successful resolution of the professional identity crisis.

5. Conclusions

In this article we present results of our research into specifics of the defence and coping behaviour among teachers experiencing a professional identity crisis.

Our research has revealed that both constructive and non-constructive strategies of coping with the professional identity crisis are characteristic of the teachers. The teachers mainly use non-constructive mechanisms of psychological defence (denial and repression), which leads to an increase in internal tension and reduced resistance to stresses of educational activities. Denial and repression may be used by teachers for a short period of time in order to have a "break" in the stressful situation, subconsciously reducing the stress intensity (albeit at the expense of growing unconscious internal tension), and to redistribute internal resources to find ways to resolve the crisis. Therefore, on the other hand, teachers are also characterised by constructive coping with the professional identity crisis through problem-solving. This duality can finally result in an increase in internal tension and anxiety rather than a successful resolution of the professional identity crisis.

The research results expand our understanding of the essence and emotional experience of the professional identity crisis, but this subject remains open to further research. However, the obtained results can be used as a basis for designing a system of psychological support for the activities and professional development of teachers.

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