

Zuzanna Sury

Jagiellonian University, Krakow

Barbara Ostafińska-Molik

Jagiellonian University, Krakow

Małgorzata Steć

Jagiellonian University, Krakow

Teachers' Attitudes towards Evaluation Research and Their Identity Processing Styles

Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to present the preliminary findings of the research focused on the relationship between teachers' identity processing styles and their attitudes towards external and internal evaluation, as well as teachers' self-evaluation. This goal allowed for formulating the following research questions: (1) What are teachers' attitudes toward the three types of evaluation? (2) What are their identity processing styles? and (3) What relationships between the above variables exist? The average was highest on the informational style scale and lowest on the diffuse-avoidant style scale. The study demonstrated a clear differentiation of teachers' attitudes: from a negative attitude towards external evaluation to a positive one towards self-evaluation. Although the study did not find statistically significant relationships, it contributed to some conclusions on how to study teachers' attitudes towards evaluation in the future. The research is a step towards finding the factors that positively and negatively influence teachers' perceptions of evaluation research in their work.

Keywords: *evaluation, educational evaluation, teacher, attitudes, identity processing styles*

Introduction

1. Theoretical Background

Identity and how people identify themselves play an essential role in self-evaluation as an employee of a specific profession (Flores & Day, 2006; Barbour & Lammers, 2015; Johns, 2010). It also can be assumed that a teacher's professional identity influences how self-awareness is built (Hoff, 2000). One of the possible elements of this process can be evaluation, which might help create a teacher's adequate self-esteem.

The most relevant theoretical and practical reference to the theory of identity within the scope of the social-cognitive paradigm is *the identity processing style (the identity style/ the identity orientation) theory* (Berzonsky, 2013). Identity processing style 'refers to relatively stable differences in how individuals construct and reconstruct their sense of identity' (Berzonsky, 2005, p. 137). Each style is associated with the strategy used by an individual coping with making vital decisions about oneself. It can also raise the question of the relationship between the preferred identity style and how evaluation and self-evaluation are considered.

Berzonsky distinguishes three types of identity processing orientation (styles): *informational*, *normative* and *diffuse-avoidant*. The first one is based on self-reflection, an active search for information about oneself, and openness to feedback and values. Informational style-oriented individuals are sceptical self-explorers, open to new ideas and alternatives. They deliberately seek out, process and analyse relevant information. People who define themselves by their goals and values will probably be more likely to represent the informational identity processing orientation. The *normative style* is based on compliance with group norms, regulations, and standards. Normative style-oriented individuals focus on norms and regulations adopted from significant others. The *diffuse-avoidant style* is defined as avoiding confrontation with information about oneself and being unwilling to deal with oneself regarding values and ideals. The diffuse-avoidant processing style involves a reluctance to deal with identity conflicts and other identity-related issues. Individuals with this style avoid thinking about their own life. They often make insufficiently thought-out choices based on momentary impulses (Berzonsky, 2013).

In the work of a teacher, their identity is particularly important, especially in the context of their professional activity – the coherence between the personal and professional identity of the teacher seems to be indisputably necessary to ensure consistency of all taken actions. It could be said that only a teacher for whom professional identity has become an integral part of personal identity will implement the

standard they recognise as obligatory in their professional activities. For a teacher for whom an essential aspect of the sense of identity as a person is the role and function of a teacher, the values associated with this professional role will be central and, therefore, will profoundly impact their actions (Alsup, 2005; Bourke & Stets, 2009). It shows its importance in professional development, which should be a priority for each teacher. A significant part of this development is the attitude towards being assessed and evaluated for personal and professional growth. Only then can the teacher simultaneously make their work objectively effective and subjectively satisfying (Kiely & Richard, 2014; Yazan & Rudolph, 2018). From this point of view, it also seems to matter what identity processing style the teacher presents and what it means for them and their sense of being a teacher to be confronted with evaluation, i.e., the possibility of being assessed and critically judged. In this context, a stable relationship between a teacher's feeling of being a person of a certain kind and being a teacher at the same time can be crucial for establishing an open attitude toward the professional evaluative process and becoming aware of the need of own further education and training (Schutz et al., 2018). Teacher learning and professional development is becoming an increasingly important topic. Hence, there is a growing popularity of processes such as tutoring or mentoring. A growing number of teachers are increasingly aware that being a teacher is not only simply a profession but also part of their identity as persons (Otman & Senom, 2019).

1.1. Teachers' Work Evaluation

The theory behind the concept of our research embraces evaluation 'as the collection and use of information to make decisions about an educational program' (Cronbach, 2005, p. 235). Under the Polish law, which was in force at the time of the research data collection, we decided to research teachers' attitudes towards three kinds of evaluation occurring in schools: *external evaluation*, *internal evaluation*, and *individual self-evaluation* (MacBeath, 2003). *External evaluation* is applied to research conducted by an external entity not associated with a school. External evaluation includes a variety of methods, e.g., interviews, surveys, and observations with various people associated with the school (students, parents, teachers, and institutions cooperating with the schools). In Poland, where our research was conducted, evaluation was carried out using the statutory criteria for teaching and educational work with students. The external evaluation criteria concerned the transfer of knowledge and skills, social norms, students' involvement in active learning, parental involvement in school life, and cooperation with the local community (Education Evaluation System, 2021).

The mentioned statutory criteria are also used in the *internal evaluation*. However, in internal evaluation, it is also important to construct standards adapted to the individual situation of schools. Typically, internal evaluations focus on learning outcomes and educational issues. *Internal evaluation involves* activity organised and evaluated by the institution itself (MacBeath, 2003, pp. 767–780).

The last kind of evaluation is teacher *self-evaluation* – a “process in which teachers make judgments about the adequacy and effectiveness of their own knowledge, performance, beliefs, and effects for the purpose of self-improvement” (Airasian & Gullickson, 2006, pp. 186–211). It is a reflective process of individual analysis of one’s own work using thoughtful research methods inspired by social science. Teachers may analyse many aspects of their work. For example, their teaching methods, how students are assessed, the relationship between students and school staff, or their professional development.

The research shows a positive attitude of teachers towards evaluation, while the phenomenon of a lack of full trust in external evaluation and the people carrying out this type of research has been observed (Paufler & Sloat, 2020). External and internal evaluations are carried out differently, which often results in a mismatch between the results of the external and internal evaluation (Vanhoof & Van Petegem, 2010) and conflicting perspectives between school administrators and teachers (Paufler & Sloat, 2020). Typically, the results of internal evaluations are more positive than the results of external evaluations.

Despite the abolition of compulsory evaluation in the Polish education system in September 2021, evaluation, especially internal evaluation, is still used in some schools. However, it should be noted that the current system of pedagogical supervision differs from the one before 2021. Pedagogical supervision has then been reduced to the control and support of schools.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and Design

The goal of the study was to determine:

- (1) What are teachers’ attitudes toward three types of evaluation (external evaluation, internal evaluation and teachers’ self-evaluation)?
- (2) What are their identity processing styles (*informational*, *normative*, and *diffuse-avoidant*)?
- (3) What relationships between the above variables exist?

204 teachers from primary schools in Polish Małopolska Province participated in the study. Participants were invited to the study between September and December 2018 via group random selection. The sampling was done on the official list of schools from the school board of education. Both public and private schools were included in the sample. Most teachers in the research group were women ($N = 176$). The group included teachers of all school subjects with varying seniority. The study involved teachers of all subjects (humanities and social subjects = 26%; general and natural science = 20.1%; early school education = 26.5%; other subjects = 13.7%; more than one group of subjects = 4.4%; missing data = 9.3%). The participants were of an average age of 44.04 ($SD = 9.26$) and had been teaching for an average of 20 years ($SD = 10,76$). Their ages ranged from 24 to 64 years old, and teaching experience from 1 to 38 years. The distribution of sex, age, and seniority in the group of respondents was typical for the distribution of these variables in the general population of Polish teachers, in which women with longer careers and seniority dominate. Although the study included a more complex (quantitative and qualitative) analysis of three aspects of teachers' attitudes towards school evaluation: the cognitive, behavioural, and affective aspects of the attitude, only one part of the more complex study is presented in this article.

2.2. Materials

The study to determine the psychometric values of the *Teachers' Attitudes Towards Evaluation Questionnaire* was previously conducted on a sample of 286 primary school teachers throughout Poland. Respondents were invited to participate in the study via the "Me – the Teacher" Internet group. Teachers of all subjects in primary schools, with various years of experience, were involved.

In creating the TATEQ, five binary pairs of adjectives were developed. The same pairs of adjectives were used to describe three different types of evaluation: external, internal and individual self-evaluation. Thus, the scale includes 15 items. Among the opposing terms assigned to the evaluation were the following: useless–useful, unprofitable – profitable, inhibiting development – enhancing development, maintaining appearances – improving practice, waste of time –productive effort. The respondents were asked to rate their opinions on a five-point scale (1 = negative adjective, 5 = positive adjective) (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Osgood et al., 1957).

Data collected using the TATEQ were subjected to an exploratory analysis. Two methods were used: exploratory graph analysis (EGA), factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory analysis (CFA) (Brown, 2015). The EFA analysis used CF-Parsimax

rotation, recommended for testing new research tools (Schmitt, 2011). The goodness of fit of the models was assessed based on analyses, including RMSEA, where values < 0.08 indicated an acceptable fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999); CFI and TLI, where values > 0.95 indicate a good fit (Bentler, 1990; Brown, 2015). The purpose of their use was to verify the theoretical validity of the tool. The group of teachers was not large enough ($N=286$) to use Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), which requires dividing the research group into two parts – one for the EFA/EGA and the second for the CFA. The authors decided to conduct a study with a new group to collect data for the CFA ($N=147$). Teachers in both groups ($N=286$ and $N=147$) completed the TATEQ questions using the online survey (CAWI).

In the analyses conducted, both the classic Cronbach's α coefficient and the ω (omega) coefficient were used to test the reliability of the tools (packet *psych* from R). The reliability was calculated using polychoric correlations and omega only with the polychoric correlations (without thresholds) (Revelle, 2017). The analyses were performed using professional software: Mplus8.3 and RStudio 4.0.2.

Analysis of the reliability (alfa/omega) of TATEQ showed the following scale parameters: External evaluation ($\alpha = 0.91/\omega=0.92$), Internal evaluation ($\alpha = 0.87/\omega=0.88$), Teacher self-evaluation ($\alpha = 0.83/\omega=0.83$) for first group ($N=286$) and External evaluation ($\alpha = 0.94/\omega=0.93$), Internal evaluation ($\alpha = 0.95/\omega=0.95$), Teacher self-evaluation ($\alpha = 0.95/\omega=0.96$) for second group ($n=117$) (Cronbach, 1951; McDonald, 2013).

To explore teachers' identity processing styles, the fifth edition of the Identity Style Inventory (ISI-5) was used (Berzonsky, 2013). The ISI-5 questionnaire comprises 48 statements defining the respondent, including 36 diagnostic items. In addition to the statements used to diagnose the three identity styles/orientations: informational, normative, and diffuse-avoidant (each style/orientation corresponds to 9 items), the questions about commitment – a variable that determines a sense of purpose and direction – was also included in the tool. Nevertheless, only the items related to identity styles/orientations were considered in the study.

Analysis of the reliability of the ISI-5 ($N = 204$) showed the following scale parameters: informational orientation ($\alpha = 0.79/\omega=0.81$); normative orientation ($\alpha = 0.76/\omega=0.77$); diffuse-avoidant orientation ($\alpha = 0.74/\omega=0.75$); commitment ($\alpha = 0.82/\omega = 0.83$).

3. Results

The research carried out on the research sample $N = 204$ obtained the following results on all three scales – informational, normative, and diffuse-avoidant style (Table 1):

Table 1. Identity processing styles – descriptive statistics; obtained on ISI-5; $N = 204$

	Informational	Normative	Diffuse-avoidant
M	36.48	27.27	18.14
SD	4.73	5.952	5.45
Variance	22,37	35.43	29.75
Median	37	28	17
Dominant	36	26	14

The distribution of the informational style shows that many scores are concentrated around the mean, so the respondents' answers were the most homogeneous compared to the other two styles. This feature is also indicated by the smallest standard deviation observed for the informational style.

The strength and direction of attitude were determined based on the arithmetic mean obtained on the scale of attitudes towards 3 different kinds of evaluation: external, internal evaluation, and self-evaluation (Table 2).

Table 2. Teachers' attitudes towards evaluation – descriptive statistics; obtained on TATEQ; $N = 204$

	Attitude towards		
	External evaluation	Internal evaluation	Self-evaluation
M	15.62	19.65	22.03
SD	4.50	3.66	2.94
Variance	20.27	13.37	8.64
Median	16	20	23
Dominant	15	20	25

The respondents' attitudes towards external evaluation were mostly neutral. In the case of the results on the scale of attitudes towards internal evaluation, an increase in the number of positive attitudes can be observed.

Meanwhile, in the respondents' declarations, internal evaluation evokes attitudes closer to the attitude towards self-evaluation. Among the teachers surveyed, the proponents of self-evaluation were the most numerous. However, it is worth

noting that even regarding this type of evaluation, the respondents expressed middle-ground opinions.

There are no significant correlations between three identity processing styles and attitudes towards external, internal, or teacher self-evaluation.

4. Discussion

Firstly, the responses to the TATEQ items included in 'attitudes towards external evaluation' clustered around the central category. It may indicate several possible phenomena, among which the most likely seem to be a lack of sufficient experience with the object of the measured attitude or reluctance to express more extreme assessments that could expose respondents to a negative opinion.

The data reflect more favourable self-evaluation and internal evaluation assessments than external evaluation. It can be concluded that there is an analogy between the evaluator's location and the attitude towards evaluation: the more positive the attitudes, the closer the evaluator is to the action. This result supports earlier research findings (Vanhoof & Van Petegem, 2010). The surveyed teachers more highly valued the types of evaluation that consider their subjectivity and self-governance and less those in which the research is carried out in a centrally-imposed manner (Harris et al., 2014; Tuytens & Devos, 2017). Consequently, it is necessary to strengthen the appreciation of the role of self-evaluation and internal evaluation by supporting teachers' competencies in carrying them out (Belvis et al., 2013).

The survey results inspire a more complex discussion on setting up external evaluation in the Polish education system and fostering positive attitudes towards external evaluation among teaching staff. Perhaps removing compulsory evaluation in Polish schools by the Minister of National Education and Higher Education in 2021 may encourage voluntary external evaluations of schools. If so, it is worth discussing among practitioners and academics what the future of external educational evaluations should look like after removing compulsory evaluation.

4.1. Limitations of the Study and Proposals for Further Research

Our doubts primarily concern the impact of the social approval variable and how it is controlled during the study. The problem has already been widely discussed (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960; Faddar et al., 2018; Helmes & Holden, 2003; Holtgraves, 2004), and its importance is particularly high in studies with self-reporting tools. It is likely that supplementing the study with additional research methods,

such as an interview or observation, could broaden the scope of data and deal, to some extent, with the problem of socially desirable responses. The second issue is the limited research sample, making generalising the results impossible. It would require a separate study. Although the study's results should not be generalised due to the limited research sample, some conclusions can be drawn.

Conclusions

The research shows a positive attitude of teachers towards evaluation, while the phenomenon of a lack of full trust in external evaluation and the people carrying out this type of research has been observed. At this research stage, no correlations could be found that would indicate the dependence of teachers' attitudes towards evaluation on individual identity processing styles. The possible explanation for this could lie in different motivations influencing teacher's attitudes towards evaluation (Donaldson & Papay, 2015; Liu et al., 2019). They do not necessarily have to be related to the main identity processing styles of the respondents but may come out of a complex background based on a great variety of experiences. It can be assumed that the attitude towards evaluation expressed by the teacher results from more than one factor and the contextual compound of personal and institutional experiences, as well as individual motivations. Beyond teachers' personality, many other factors influencing their attitudes toward evaluation in education remain to be explored. These include the professional preparation of education staff to conduct applied research such as evaluation, the quality of the evaluation culture in society, the schools and the educational system management strategy. Depending on the presence of educational management in a high – or low-stakes approach (Grissom & Loeb, 2017), the interpretation of evaluation results by teaching staff may be different. It requires research through methods that consider the subjective and democratic participation of teachers. Strategies such as participatory research, action research, and case study research can show more and give a deeper insight into the evaluation process in schools. It is worth considering that perhaps evaluation, democratic in nature, requires democratic forms of research on attitudes toward evaluation, devoid of rigid boundaries between researcher and researched.

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Declaration of interest statement

We declare that we have no conflicts of interest to this work.

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AUTHORS

DR ZUZANNA SURY

corresponding author
Jagiellonian University, Institute of Education
Batorego Street 12, 31-135 Krakow
E-mail: zuzanna.sury@uj.edu.pl
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0986-9370>

DR BARBARA OSTAFIŃSKA-MOLIK

Jagiellonian University, Institute of Education
Batorego Street 12, 31-135 Krakow
E-mail: b.ostafinska-molik@uj.edu.pl
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5093-3069>

DR MAŁGORZATA STEĆ

Jagiellonian University, Institute of Psychology
Ingardena Street 6, 30-060 Krakow
E-mail: malgorzata1.stec@uj.edu.pl
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1841-9542>