Original scientific article

WHAT CHARACTERISTICS MAKE THE BEST AND THE WORST TEACHER COLLABORATORS? A CASE STUDY IN SERBIA

Stefan Stajić[A], Smiljana Đukičin Vučković[A*], Tamara Jovanović[A], Ljubica Ivanović Bibić[A]

ABSTRACT

Teaching is one of the most demanding but also one of the most important jobs. Apart from the students who are the main focus of this professional occupation, certain factors can make this job better, or even worse: colleagues. For this reason, professional collaboration between teachers is very important. Teacher collaboration involves teachers working together to lead, instruct, and mentor students to improve student learning and achievement. Effective collaboration is established when teachers work together, which helps boost staff morale and provides teachers with a supportive and enriching working environment. The objective of the research was to detect and analyse the teachers' perception of what is a "good" and a "bad" teacher they would like/dislike to collaborate with. The research methods used in the preparation of the paper were: analytical, synthetic, descriptive, comparative, statistical (SPSS 23.0), and critical. The paper was written based on data obtained from a survey conducted among teachers in October 2021 during a workshop within the Mentor training project in Serbia. The paper shows the characteristics of teachers that make them good for cooperation. Collaborators who do not possess favorable traits are also clearly defined. The data are in line with previous research. The results of the study will be significant for further research that will concern cooperation among teachers, their likeable and dislikeable qualities and the good results they should achieve.

Keywords: *best teacher, worst teacher, collaboration, personal characteristic, Serbia.*

INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant groups in society, teachers serve as role models and inspiration in a variety of ways, including by fostering an atmosphere that encourages critical thinking, knowledge and skill acquisition, goal-setting and feedback, curiosity, hands-on training, teamwork opportunities, and education tailored to each student's needs (Clement & Poland, 2020).

Although interest in teacher collaboration is not new, its goals and focus have evolved over the past 25 years. Empirical research has disproved early hopeful assertions and aspirations. These days, the notions of "professional learning communities" or "communities of practice" frequently include the ideas of teacher collaboration (Bolam & McMahon, 2004; Kelchtermans, 2006).

[A]   University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Sciences, Department of geography, tourism and hotel management, Novi Sad, Serbia
[*]   Correspondence: smiljanadjukicin@gmail.com

Additionally, teacher collaboration is influenced by the school's structural environment, including administrative guidelines, school positions, and structural elements that either promote or hinder teacher collaboration, such as designated contact persons, time and space for exchange etc. (Schuster et al., Wangrieland et al., 2021; 2021; Coburn & Russell, 2008). Mazur (2019a)

In addition to practicing and comprehending the challenges of teaching and learning, a competent teacher can also articulate and defend professional decisions to others (Shulman, 1986; Wendell, 2022; Županec et al., 2022). Teachers can develop collective knowledge through collaboration, which has been demonstrated to be a successful strategy for improving student learning (Berry, Daughtrey & Wieder, 2009). According to Shulman (1986), sharing collective expertise helps teachers gain more pedagogical and pedagogical subject knowledge, which is necessary for them to be competent and skilled educators (Wendell, 2022).

Vangrieken et al. (2015) reviewed the potential advantages and disadvantages of teacher collaboration. Their study's findings demonstrated that teacher collaboration benefits students, instructors, and the entire school, underscoring the significance of encouraging more research on the topic. For instance, their summary demonstrated that teacher collaboration improved students' academic performance.

Developing the necessary traits of a successful teacher takes time. There is a wide range of backgrounds among good teachers. Some are serious, some are playful, some are youthful, and some are elderly. Even though teachers have a diverse range of traits, some traits are shared by all of them. There are countless opinions about what it means to be an effective educator. Teachers who are excellent at imparting knowledge can be created or born that way, or inherited (Hamza et al. 2010).

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective and purpose of the research was to detect and analyse the teacher's perception of what constitutes a "good" versus a "bad" teacher in terms of their willingness or reluctance to collaborate with.

LITERATURE BACKGROUND

An overview of the current state of research on teacher collaboration and its attributes was obtained by reviewing earlier works on the subject.

"Teachers need to be able to survive the demands, threats, and challenges within the diverse circumstances of teaching," states Gibbs (2002, p. 1). According to Gibbs (Gibbs, 2002, as referenced in Moreno Rubio, 2010), an effective teacher possesses the ability to be persistent, adaptable, and creative while implementing new teaching strategies. They also need to be ready for failure.

University students' opinions about the qualities of their favorite instructors, from whom they learned, were examined in the study on the attributes that all teachers should possess (Thompson et al. 2004). According to data gathered from the students, twelve common features were identified. The theme of caring is at the heart of these twelve traits: fairness, optimism, organization, a personal touch, a sense of humor, creativity, humility in admitting mistakes, forgiveness, respect for students, high standards, compassion, and fostering a sense of belonging. Students had favorable memories of school when teachers exhibited these qualities (Thompson et al. 2004). Four categories pertaining to the qualities of effective Chinese teachers were identified in the study by Liu and Menget (2009): student test scores, professional development, professional skills, and teacher ethics. On the majority of the issues, that study similarly revealed no variations in the opinions of parents, students, and teachers regarding the qualities that define a good teacher in China.

Students listed attributes including friendliness, forgiveness, respect, compassion, justice, attitude, and comprehension as characteristics of excellent teachers, according to Scrivner's (2009) research. Walker (2008)

uses a quasi-retrospective longitudinal study to identify twelve qualities that children need in an effective teacher. According to Walker (2008), as mentioned in Lupascu et al. (2014), these characteristics include meticulous planning, a positive outlook, high standards, inventiveness, equity, a personal touch, building a sense of community, embracing mistakes, humor, respect for students, a forgiving attitude, and compassion.

In contrast to the overall ranking, Jacob and Lefgren (2005) take into account particular teacher attributes. According to Jacob and Lefgren (2005), as cited in Harris et al. (2009), their metrics for evaluating teachers include their commitment to their work, classroom management skills, role modeling for students, positive relationships with administrators and fellow educators, and the number of parents' requests for the teachers.

According to Singh et al. (2013), subject-matter expertise, zeal, and excellent communication are the top three attributes of a successful teacher. Compared to their less experienced peers, teachers with more teaching experience gave higher ratings to classroom behavior and instructional delivery.

METHODOLOGY

The sample consists of 41 teachers from elementary and high schools in Serbia. Most of them are female (73.2%) with more than 9 years of work experience (75.6%). They teach physics (36.6%), chemistry (19.5%), geography (14.6%), biology (12.2%), informatics and computer sciences (7.3%), environment (4.8%) and English (2.4%) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Gender	N (%)	Work experience	N (%)	Subject	N (%)
Male	11 (26.8%)	3 years or less	4 (9.8%)	physics	15 (36.6%)
Female	30 (73.2%)	3-8 years	6 (14.6%)	chemistry	8 (19.5%)
		9-15 years	10 (24.4%)	geography	6 (14.6%)
		16-20 years	4 (9.8%)	biology	5 (12.2%)
		21-25 years	10 (24.4%)	informatics	3 (7.3%)
		more than 25 years	7 (17.1%)	environment	2 (4.8%)
				English	1 (2.4%)

To measure the desirable and undesirable collaborators, the authors created prototypes of six teachers, each exhibiting unique characteristics. Three of the prototypes were male and three were female, with generic names assigned so that respondents can relate to them more easily. The first teacher was named **Marija**, described as someone who likes working with people who pursue the same goal. Also, her preferences are a pleasant working atmosphere and effective management. She is interested in the well-being of others and respects their needs (empathetic). The second teacher was named **Jovan**, and his characteristics were that he likes to take the initiative, prefers action leading to the fulfilment of his interests, likes when his co-workers acknowledge him and likes to win (competitive). The third teacher was named **Nikola**, and his defining traits were that he prefers clearly stated tasks, transparent work management, based on precise descriptions and well-defined goals. He has no problem working with great dedication; he is loyal and assumes that he will be adequately rewarded for his work (conscientious). The fourth teacher was named **Andrea**, and the description of her was that she prefers an independent style of work, is active at work and is a strong individualist. She is often impulsive and has a problem following predetermined fixed rules (impulsive and individualist). The fifth teacher was named **Svetlana**, and her list of characteristics is that she is friendly, helpful, likes stable work, repetitive work, expects stable working hours and clearly defined job requirements (hardworking). Finally, the sixth teacher was named **Đorđe**, and his traits were that he has his own work system and his own

pace of work, prefers tasks he has chosen himself, likes to fulfil tasks separately and considers the achievement of set goals to be crucial (systematic).

As a part of the teacher seminar (workshop) held in October 2021, respondents were given a task to read and decide which three of the six fictitious teachers they would like to collaborate with. Also, they had to decide which three they would not like to collaborate with. For each of the choices, respondents had to justify why. Finally, they had to choose their favourite collaborator. Respondents had 25 minutes to complete the task.

RESULTS

Data were analysed using SPSS 23.0. Frequency analysis showed that the three favourite collaborators are Marija (70.7%), Nikola (36.6%) and Đorđe (34.1%) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Three favourite collaborators

Collaborators	First collaborator		Second collaborator		Third collaborator	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
None	2	4.9	2	4.9	3	7.3
Marija (empath)	29	70.7	5	12.2	3	7.3
Jovan (competitor)	3	7.3	9	22.0	1	2.4
Nikola (conscientious)	5	12.2	15	36.6	12	29.3
Andrea (impulsive and individualist)	0	0.0	3	7.3	0	0
Svetlana (valuable)	1	2.4	6	14.6	8	19.5
Đorđe (systematic)	1	2.4	1	2.4	14	34.1

As for the reasons why they chose these three teachers, most of the respondents mentioned quality teamwork, agreeableness, loyalty and a pleasant work atmosphere. They like that they are hard-working, disciplined and dedicated and that they set a good example for others. This was especially emphasised for Nikola and Đorđe. As for Marija, many have said that she is warm empathic and dedicated to others. Respondents have also stated that they see these teachers as like-minded and can easily identify with them.

In the case of disliked collaborators, three teachers stood out – Andrea (34.1% as first and 31.7% as second place), Jovan (31.7%) and Svetlana (22%). Many respondents (over 40%) opted not to name the second and third least favourable collaborators (see Table 3).

Table 3. Three undesirable collaborators

Collaborators	First collaborator		Second collaborator		Third collaborator	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
None	4	9.8	18	43.9	20	48.8
Marija (empathic)	1	2.4	0	0	0	0
Jovan (competitive)	13	31.7	1	2.4	3	7.3
Nikola (conscientious)	2	4.9	2	4.9	0	0
Andrea (impulsive and individualist)	14	34.1	13	31.7	1	2.4
Svetlana (valuable)	3	7.3	5	12.2	9	22.0
Đorđe (systematic)	4	9.8	2	4.9	8	19.5

The main rationale for choosing these three teachers was that they are strong individuals who put their own needs in front of others. It would seem that respondents believe that a good collaborator must take into account other people's wishes before their own. Individuality is generally observed as a negative trait, equated with impulsiveness, selfishness and self-centeredness. Other negative traits that were mentioned were competitiveness and rigidity. Svetlana is seen as a rule follower who likes repetitive work, which is perceived as undesirable for a teacher. One answer was that Svetlana is like a programmed robot. Andrea was described as impulsive and prone to conflicts. Finally, Jovan was chosen because he is too pushy and competitive.

The best collaborators were Marija (43.9%) and Đorđe (26.8%) (see Table 4). This is in line with the results of the top three collaborators.

Table 4. The best collaborator

Collaborators	Frequency	Percent
Marija (empathic)	18	43.9
Đorđe (systematic)	11	26.8
Svetlana (valuable)	3	7.3
Nikola (conscientious)	2	4.9
Jovan (competitive)	1	2.4
Andrea (impulsive and individualist)	1	2.4
None	5	12.2

More detailed analysis revealed that there are no significant differences in the choice of favourite collaborator depending on the respondent's gender, school subject and work experience.

DISCUSSION

The results regarding the three favourite collaborators are in accordance with some previous studies. In their study, Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) highlighted that teachers who have responsibility and those who share responsibility have been more favourable collaborators than others. Teachers, such as Marija, who are always ready for a dialogue, are highly ranked on the scale of good collaborators (Ninković et al., 2022; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Exchanging experiences between colleagues, which implies not only the exchange of information and teaching materials but also participation in the discussion about ways to improve teaching practice, are very favourable ways of cooperation (Lomos et al., 2011). Marija and Nikola nurture these types of collaboration, which probably makes them favourite collaborators. In the study of Korthagen (2004), a teacher's good behaviour was presented as a very important characteristic of a collaborator. Regarding Marija, Nikola and Đorđe, it can be easily noticed that their interest in the well-being of others, their respect for others' needs, great dedication and loyal behaviour made them favourite collaborators.

Opposite to favourite collaborators, prototype teachers Andrea, Jovan and Svetlana are in the group of undesirable colleagues. Their individuality, self-centeredness and impulsiveness are characteristics that are not desirable. Those characteristics are not beneficial regarding open dialogue and exchanging experiences that make good collaborators (Lomos et al., 2011; Ninković et al., 2022; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Colleagues such as Andrea, Jovan and Svetlana are usually not warm, empathic, and dedicated to others. Previously mentioned characteristics were highly ranked on the scale of good traits of collaborators in some studies (Meyer et al., 2022; Hargreaves, 2019). In particular, cited studies found a relationship between teacher collaboration and teacher interaction (e.g. appreciating teachers who work together). According to this, Andrea, Jovan and

Svetlana do not possess favourable traits of collaborators. They belong to the group of undesirable collaborators.

CONCLUSION

One of the main aims of this research was to explore what traits are appealing for successful cooperation between teachers. Also, it was important to identify the criteria for the selection of collaborators to increase the efficiency and quality of the tasks arising from the teaching profession. Respondents with different years of work experience completed the task individually first, after which, through collective discussion, conclusions were reached as to which colleagues are likeable/dislikable for cooperation.

The traits that the participants mentioned as desirable are quality teamwork, agreeableness, loyalty and a pleasant work atmosphere. Therefore, the best collaboration is achieved with the same goal, a pleasant working atmosphere, good management, etc. This kind of person we named an empath.

As for the collaborators who are not desirable, of all those mentioned, the respondents mentioned those who prefer an independent style of work, who are active at work and are strong individualists, who are impulsive and who have a problem following predetermined fixed rules, who are competitive and rigid. The research showed that there were no significant differences in the choice of favorite collaborator depending on the respondent's gender, school subject and work experience.

This study confirmed the most desirable qualities of a good teacher from the point of view of other teaching colleagues, as well as previous research on this topic. However, teachers are not always in a position to choose their colleagues with whom they will cooperate, so it is necessary to find a way to still have professional cooperation with those who possess some negative qualities. All teachers have the necessary competencies to perform their activities, and no matter how much someone likes them or not, a way must be found to make cooperation pleasant, successful and productive.

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ORCID   Stefan Stajić: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2710-2974
Smiljana Đukičin Vučković: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0415-7665
Tamara Jovanović: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2899-9544
Ljubica Ivanović Bibić: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2409-3729