

## TEACHERS TODAY - PROMOTERS OF SOCIAL CHANGE?

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**Abstract:** *This article discusses the problem of teachers' formative impact on the development of specific psychosocial competences in nowadays world: tolerance, cooperation, intellectual courage, critical thinking, etc. Nowadays there is a gap between the students' and teachers' psychological profiles: students are digital, and teachers are analogue. In these circumstances, the question arises: Can teachers be promoters of social changes for students in the digital society? In what way? The psychosocial competence, understood in a constructivist way as anticipated by Dewey, can be found in contemporary professionals in social sciences and educational sciences: teacher as agents of change (Fullan, 1993), teachers as facilitators of learning (Siebert, 2001), teachers as "public intellectuals" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1997). Are teachers aware of their role as agents of social change? The main goal of this study was to analyse the teachers' perception on their role as promoters of social values in the digital society. A questionnaire regarding students' and teachers' perceptions on teachers' role as agents of social changes and focus-groups were used. A number of 160 participants were included in the study, teachers and students, from Transylvania University of Brasov. Conclusion: One of the main conclusions to be drawn is that teachers must adopt a new mentality about their role in education, their pedagogical practice and professional identity. To develop the new digital citizenship and to promote social values, the new communication technologies are helpful. Teachers can be promoters of social values only if they use the new communication technology in a critically and constructive way.*

**Keywords:** *social changes; teachers; teaching; digital society*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The large-scale use of new communication technologies has increasingly changed people's lifestyle, starting with paying billing to relating to each other. In this context, of the digitalized society, teachers must be able to cope with the demands and opportunities of new information and communication technologies. We cannot talk about school without making any reference to the type of society in which it exists, because, on one hand, changes in society are reflected in the educational environment, and on the other hand, school is or should be the main factor of supporting and promoting change in society. Knowledge of social conditions, of the current culture and civilization and of the evolving trends is a must for any teacher who forms the citizens of tomorrow's world.

Moreover, the teacher himself must be an example who promotes social values, who practices democracy, who practices, together with students, freedom and responsibility for decisions making. But, nowadays, are the teachers prepared

for developing in their students the social competences necessary for the digital age? This question becomes more interesting as the generation of postmodern students, characterized as "Homo zappiens" (Veen, Vrakking, 2011) because of growing up while using modern technology (mobile phone, computer, iPod, MP3 player) since early childhood, is attracted by the visible aspect of the learning experience.

The use of new communication technologies by students induced major changes in play, networking and learning, sometimes creating huge discrepancies between generations, especially between parents and children, children and teachers. This is because "Homo zappiens is digital, whereas school is analogous" (Veen, Vrakking, 2011:11). They learn and play in a global and digital culture. If we add to these characteristics of society the values that dominate postmodernism (hedonism, individualism, etc.), we will have a clearer picture of the challenges of education today. So the postmodern student's psychological and pedagogical portrait is different:

the postmodern student is the product of the globalized, super-tech society, based on consumption, on the power of image, on creativity and adaptation, focusing on efficiency / utility and pleasure. In a digital society, knowing these students' characteristics is a prerequisite for designing authentic learning experiences for developing social competences and promoting digital citizenship.

### 2. TEACHERS AS PROMOTERS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

#### 2.1. Teachers and teaching in digital age.

One of the greatest challenges for teachers in the digital age is the use of new information and communication technologies in designing teaching, learning and assessment and in promoting the values of digital society: connectivity, responsibility, critical thinking, creativity, digital citizenship.

The teaching profession is associated with several fundamental categories of roles, supported by most systems of teacher training: design, management and organization of learning activities, psycho-educational counselling, classroom management, communication with students, parents and colleagues, lifelong professional development, participation in the improvement of the educational process and innovation in school, providing educational services to the community, etc. (Potolea, 2003). Within these "classic" roles and competences, sub-competencies that reflect new roles and responsibilities required by new generations of students and the demands of a changing society have appeared: use of a variety of educational strategies and particularly those centred on the student; capitalizing on methods of learning about one's personality in order to identify students' individual profiles and to provide appropriate support during their development in school, selecting contents and methods that will stimulate students' interest and motivation, promoting a system of values specific to a democratic society; supporting local community involvement in school and extracurricular activities; involvement in action research, etc. In the digital age, the teachers' role must be redefined according to the new demands of society/community and students. We need a new definition for "the competent teacher" or good teaching. The International Society for Technology in Education has developed standards for teachers in order to meet the students' needs and to improve the learning environment teachers should:

1. Facilitate and inspire student learning and creativity;
2. Design and develop digital age learning experiences and assessments;
3. Model digital age work and learning;
4. Promote and model citizenship and responsibility;
5. Engage in professional growth and leadership ([https://www.iste.org/docs/pdfs/20-14\\_ISTE\\_Standards-T\\_PDF.pdf](https://www.iste.org/docs/pdfs/20-14_ISTE_Standards-T_PDF.pdf).)

These standards reflect the evolution of the teaching profession through a new approach. The traditional model of learning and teacher training must be changed with an "open" model of education (open education in its various guises can help people benefit from learning, for those who may not have otherwise had the opportunity) (Blessinger & Bliss, 2016:46). According to Sandholtz *et al.* (1997), teachers must use the technologies at stage 5- invention, which means that teachers have integrated the potential of technology with their personal vision of teaching and learning. Teachers cannot promote values of the digital age if they don't understand their own role in a technological age and don't assume a digital citizen identity.

#### 2.2 Teachers as promoter of social change.

Can teachers be promoters of social changes for students? Are teachers aware of their social role in the global, changing and communicated world? Are teachers prepared for their complex social role? What are the teachers' beliefs about this role? An interesting answer is given by recent studies on teachers' beliefs about technology (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010; Ertmer *et al.*, 2012): the alignment among pedagogical beliefs and practices:

teachers were able to enact technology integration practices that closely aligned with their beliefs. For example, teachers who believed that technology was best used for collaboration purposes, described interesting projects in which students collaborated with local and distant peers. Teachers who believed that technology provided more opportunities for student choice, described examples in which students chose to demonstrate their learning using a variety of technology tools (Ertmer *et al.*, 2012:432)

Other studies (Hattie, 2014; Voinea & Palasan, 2014; Voinea & Bota, 2015; Senge *et al.*, 2016) on teachers' beliefs and teacher identity demonstrated that it is necessary to know the teacher's mental structure in order to change the educational system.

Teachers need to change their own mental structure and system of values according to the new social responsibilities in order to become a promoter of social change and psychosocial competences. The psychosocial competence, understood in a constructivist way as anticipated by Dewey, can be found in contemporary professionals in social sciences and educational sciences: teachers as agents of change (Fullan, 1993), teachers as facilitators of learning (Siebert, 2001), teachers as "public intellectuals" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1997).

Dewey has the merit of highlighting the teacher's role as a community member and as a trainer of social life and, thus, social progress. First, Dewey emphasizes the social dimension of education and the major social role of the teaching profession which is to help the child (the future adult) to live in society. Significant in this regard is the statement expressed in his pedagogical belief, "education is a process of life" and this process must respect and adapt to the social conditions in which the school operates. Dewey demonstrates that education cannot be analysed outside the complex interaction between the individual and society because

if we eliminate the social factor from the child, we only have an abstraction; if we eliminate the individual factor from society, we have an inert and lifeless mass (Dewey, 1992:48).

Adjusting Dewey's point of view to the digital society becomes a great challenge for teachers (who are digital immigrants!): to promote and develop a new culture of learning and teaching based on values such as: creativity, responsibility, critical thinking, etc. Therefore teachers must change own mind set and see themselves and be seen as a social values promoter. Teachers must practice together with students the social values of digital society and use creative and responsible learning methods. It is about the methods most liked by students, involving interactions with colleagues, exchanging views, which affectively contaminate in a positive way but whose formative effect is minimal.

The false modernity of methods and teaching aids (power-point presentations which require students to be passive) may be counteracted by the teacher's competence, who can decide which method is best for his students in terms of learning experiences. The teacher's ability to reflect on their own teaching behaviour, critical thinking, objective self-assessment, pedagogical creativity that allows him to adopt authentic teaching

approaches, etc. are professional qualities indispensable for any teacher. As promoter and trainer of active and responsible social behaviour, the teacher can train only the social skills that he has got, is aware of and develops on a daily basis in relation with the students and the community members.

Moreover, teachers have to assume and promote digital citizenship that implies responsible behavior with regard to technology use.

### 3. CAN THE TEACHER BE A PROMOTER OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE DIGITAL AGE? - AN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The main goal of this study was to analyse the teachers' perception on their role as a promoter of social values in the digital society. A questionnaire regarding students' and teachers' perceptions on teachers' role as agents of social changes and focus-groups were used. A number of 160 participants were included in the study, 80 teachers (54,76% teachers with less than 10 years of experience and 45,24% teachers with an experience of over 10 years in the field) and 80 students, from Transylvania University. The statistical analysis of the results of the questionnaires revealed the following:

Teachers see themselves as having an important role in promoting school change: 53,1% of teachers and 39,1% of students consider that "Teachers have an important role in promoting change in school."

The perception on how they are prepared to face the challenges of the digital society is more nuanced: 43,1% of teachers are undecided, 6 % are strongly disagree and 7,1% are strongly agree with the statement "Teachers are ready to face challenge of digital society".

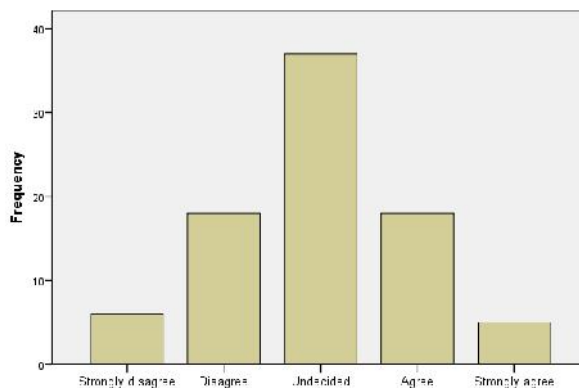


Fig.1 Teachers are prepared to meet the demands of digital society

Comparing teachers' perceptions to students' perceptions, we notice a small difference between the two categories of subjects: 54,3% of students are undecided, strongly disagree 4,3%, agree 10,9%, disagree 28,3% and strongly disagree 4,3%. These answers demonstrate that the skills, values, and behaviors specific to a changing society are not yet visible. Teachers are not perceived as promoters of digital age values. The first three values that students notice in teachers' behaviour and teachers values are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' and teachers' values

Teachers' values	Percent	Students' value	Percent
Cooperation	39,3	Cooperation	26,1
Creativity	44	Rightness	23,9
<b>Rightness</b>	<b>41,7</b>	<b>Empathy</b>	<b>13</b>

These values correlate with students' preference for teaching and learning methods. The teaching methods that students want teachers to use and that which they actually use are the following: project (43%), debate (23%) critical thinking methods (17%) and methods based on new technology (34%). This demonstrates that students prefer methods that allow expression of opinions, creativity and cooperation.

All of the above-mentioned data demonstrates that although teachers perceive and are perceived by students as striving to face the challenges of the digitized society, there is a discrepancy between perceptions and behaviours. On one hand, the distance between statements / perceptions and behaviours is natural, on the other hand, the difference between the effective behaviour and its perception (how visible it is to the others) indicates that the behaviour has not yet been effectively consolidated, it has not become a routine, a characteristic of the person.

A possible explanation for this discrepancy may be that the teachers in the research are not digital natives, and 45% have experience of over 10 years in the field and have still intern barriers (self-efficacy, pedagogical beliefs) as Ermet & Ottenbreit-Lefwich (2010) demonstrated. These conclusions are underlined in the focus groups analysis. The analysis of the focus groups held with teachers has highlighted the fact that teachers make a great effort to meet the needs of new student generations. This effort is reflected not only in the perception of their role in school and society, but also in their classroom behaviour: using teaching methods and evaluation that promote cooperation, critical thinking,

encouraging the expression of different opinions, using new technologies in the communication with students.

Even if teachers use the technologies in teaching, they still have a traditional behaviour: "it is a technology trap", says a teacher (L.B) with an experience of over 10 years in the education field:

To put the old knowledge in power-point is not a pedagogical innovation, but it is a new approach to understand that the students need to analyze and select the information, and teachers have to motivate students to work together and search information in order to create a personal point of view on a problem"

Referring to Sandholtz et all (1997) typology of using ICT by teachers, (entry, adoption, adaptation, approbation, invention) we noticed that most of the teachers which participated on focus-group are in stage 3 adaptation (teachers adapt their style to new technologies demands and students learning needs) or 4 approbation (teachers have confidence in using technology and develop new teaching methods). The teachers which are in stage 4 approbation have less than 10 years of experience in education field.

The analysis of the focus group with students highlighted the fact that students particularly appreciate the teachers which use the new technologies ("speaking on their own language") which are active in the virtual environment and promote digital citizenship. An example in this sense is the opinion of a student describing the portrait of a "digitally updated" teacher as "a teacher who knows how to use social media and Internet resources in teaching and assessing, who encourages the use of these tools and discusses about the advantages and disadvantages of technology with the students". (N.D-student). Students have stated that teachers with less than 10 years of experience in education field are comfortable with technology and motivate students to use it in professional and personal life with responsibility and creativity. Teachers which can maximize the technologies' advantages and keep the balance between personal and digital life, are social models for students.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS & ACKNOWLEDGMENT

One of the main conclusions to be drawn is that teachers must adopt a new mentality about their role in education, their pedagogical practice and professional identity. In order to develop the new digital citizenship and promote social values,

the new communication technologies are helpful. Teachers can be promoters of social values only if they use the new communication technology in a critically and constructive way. They have to integrate the technology with their pedagogical beliefs about teaching, learning and assessment and in their professional development.

Another important conclusion is that students need to see that the teacher is a model of the digital citizen and promoter of social values: a teacher who searches and selects relevant information on websites, who asks and creates new questions/challenges for students; a teacher who has pedagogical beliefs and promotes these values/beliefs in his classroom practice; a teacher who believes in his socio-professional role and believes in his students' creativity.

This teachers who are "digitally updated" are still a minority. The difference between teachers' and students' perceptions is normal, but at the same time, this difference must become a concern for teacher training programs.

Although the present study does not have a great power of generalization, it outlines valuable research directions of research on teachers' training. A practical recommendation that can be made based on this research is that teacher training programmes should include successful learning experiences based on information and communication technologies. Teachers need to successfully test the usefulness of new communication technologies to build confidence in their ability to form social competences for students who are digital native. They must begin to develop new learning environments for students who are digital natives.

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