

## The Students' Perceptions and Attitudes to Teaching Profession, the Case of Estonia

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### Abstract

The general ageing of population is reflected at schools similarly to the society as a whole. The average age of teachers is growing and young people do not find the teaching career attractive enough to pursue. This is leading to the situation where the schools may lack teachers in 10-15 years' time. The aim of the current study was to explore the 18-19-year-old students' perceptions and attitudes to the teaching profession in the case of Estonia. 275 students were questioned to explore the popularity of the teaching profession. The results revealed that although the students value teachers' job highly, they consider it a hard, underpaid and low-challenging job.

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**Keywords:** Teaching profession; students; perceptions; questionnaire.

### 1. Introduction

The rapidly ageing teaching workforce is considered problematic in many parts of the world (OECD, 2014). Similarly to many other countries, Estonia may be facing the shortage of teachers in ten-fifteen years' time. Today, the teachers' average age in Estonia is 48. Almost 30% of all teachers are in the age group of 50-59 years, and 16% are in the group of over 60 years whereas teachers under 30 years make only 7.5% of the whole teacher population (TALIS, 2013). According to the report of OECD (2014), Estonia is one of the two countries with the oldest and still ageing teacher population. The small number of young teachers in Estonian schools is caused by young people's little interest in the teaching profession which in turn may be the result of low prestige of the profession in the society. This may lead to the situation where the large numbers of retiring teachers are difficult to replace with

new recruits which may worsen teacher shortages even further (OECD, 2014). To prevent the complicated situation at schools and raise students' interest in the teaching profession, a study was launched to explore students' attitude towards the profession. Knowing students' perceptions of the teaching profession enables to take measures for popularizing the profession among young people and encouraging them to pursue the teaching career. In this paper we focus on exploring the students' perceptions of the teaching profession with the aim to find out which are their attitudes towards the job. The following subsection gives an overview of earlier studies on the topic. At the end of the section, the research questions are posed.

### *1.1. Theoretical framework*

So far, many studies have explored student-teachers' and teacher candidates' career motivations and commitment (Heinz, 2015). There are much less studies concerning the students' attitudes towards teaching career. However, these two aspects – students' perceptions of the teaching profession and teachers' reflections and attitudes towards their job are closely connected (Egwu, 2015). The way how teachers feel and perceive their role and how they behave in this role, is reflected in their interactions with students which in turn, affects the students' attitudes towards the profession and their readiness to pursue the teaching career.

Young people who are starting their professional life, want to build up the career which is respected and valued. Public attitude has an important role in forming the occupational prestige (Hayes, 1990). Teachers' reputation may differ greatly in different societies depending on their traditions, historic, cultural and religious background. Researchers from different countries have reported the decline of respect for teachers (Hammet, 2008; Scott et al, 2001; Sokolova, 2011). The main reason brought out is the inappropriately low rating of the teachers' work expressed in pay level (Sokolova, 2011). According to Hammet (2008), younger generations assert their notion of respect through economic capital instead of cultural. Another reason for the declining respect is the status of teacher as an employee in the service sphere (Sokolova, 2001). Civic identities (including the respect with which teaching is regarded) are declining under the challenge of increasingly commercialised identities (Barber, 2001). In Estonia, the teaching profession is considered valuable but at the same time, undervalued (Õpetajaameti kuvand, 2016). According to the results of the study *The Image and Attractiveness of the Teaching Profession* (Ibid), the reputation of teachers' job was estimated good or satisfactory by different stake- holders while teachers and gymnasium students were most critical about it.

Apart from reputation and public attitude, students' motivation and interest in teaching play an important role when choosing a career. Most motivations why young people may or may not consider pursuing the teaching career can be distinguished as intrinsic, altruistic and extrinsic (Heinz, 2015). According to the Self-Determination Theory (Deci, & Ryan, 1985), intrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting and enjoyable for the individual, whereas extrinsic motivation refers to doing something in order to attain a desired outcome, e.g reward (Ryan, & Deci, 2000).

Altruistic motivation is comprehended as something socially worthwhile and important enabling to contribute to the wellbeing of society and mankind (Heinz, 2015). The impulse to teach has been considered fundamentally altruistic as it represents an individual's desire to share what he/she values and to empower other people (Kohl, 1984). Several studies suggest that the teaching career is attractive above all for those who desire intrinsic rewards and who approach teaching as a calling (Hayes, 1990). Earlier research (e.g. Köning, & Rothland, 2012; Wong et al, 2014) has shown that intrinsic motivation has the biggest influence on decision-making in this domain. Interest in the subject matter and wish to give on their knowledge are the main intrinsic factors that urge youngsters to choose the teaching career (e.g. Flores, & Niklasson, 2014; Hayes, 1990).

Extrinsic reasons, like status, pay and job security do not usually prevail as the main motivations for work compared to intrinsic and altruistic ones (e.g. Hayes, 1990; Heinz, 2013; Watt et al, 2012). However, there are several exceptions like China, Turkey or Malaysia where extrinsic reasons such as salary or job security, are even more influential reasons for choosing the teaching career than intrinsic or altruistic ones (Heinz, 2015). These findings were supported by Frusher & Newton (1987) who listed extrinsic reasons (low salary, discipline problems and lack of classroom equipment) as the most influential aspects of teaching. Heinz, in his comparative analysis (2015), brought out several subdivisions for extrinsic motivations: the compatibility of the teaching profession with family responsibilities, teaching profession as a —springboard, teaching profession as a —fallback, influence of family members and socio-cultural influences.

Teachers are important role models to students. Their role has become even more important due to weakening family units and working parents (Stiegelbauer, 1992). The closer contacts people have, the bigger impact they have on each other. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to observe how they reflect their feelings and satisfaction with their job, and which messages they forward to students about their job. This in turn, may influence students' perceptions and interest in the teaching career. The current research aimed to explore the 18-19-year-old students' perceptions of the teaching profession, and to find out their attitudes towards it. Proceeding from that we posed the following research questions:

1. How do students rate the teaching profession by its reputation in the society?
2. How do students perceive the positive and negative aspects of the teaching profession?
3. Which are the reasons why students consider/don't consider the teaching profession?  
Does a teacher in the family have an impact on students' consideration to become a teacher?
4. What kind of change would make students consider becoming a teacher?

## **2. Research methods**

### *2.1. Participants*

Data were collected from the final-grade students of 5 gymnasia of Pärnu (a middle-size town in Estonia). The data were collected from the students who were present at school on that day.

275 students participated in the survey (72% of all final-grade students). There were 129 boys (47%) and 146 girls (53%) in the final sample. The average age of the students was 18.1 (SD=0.41).

## 2.2 Data collection and analysis

In order to assess the popularity of the teaching profession among the gymnasium students a questionnaire was developed by the authors of the paper. The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions, which were mostly open-ended questions enabling the respondents to express their opinion. Two questions included rating the items on a scale.

After receiving the consent to participate in the survey from the administrations of the gymnasias, it was carried out in November – December 2013. The time of the survey was agreed on and fixed with the administrations. The paper versions of the questionnaire were delivered to the gymnasias at a fixed time. Students filled in the questionnaires in pencil. Filled questionnaires were collected after completion.

The collected data were analyzed in January 2014. To analyze the data mixed method was used, descriptive analysis, correlation analysis and t-tests for quantitative data, and thematic text analysis for open questions. Many students used a possibility to leave comments to the questions which are used below to illustrate their viewpoints. The survey was anonymous and the data were used in a generalized way, only for this specific study.

## 3. Results

The results of the research will be presented according to the research questions.

### 3.1 How do students rate the teaching profession by its reputation in the society?

To estimate how students rated the reputation of the teaching profession, they were asked to assess it on a scale of 1 to 5 [*To my mind, the reputation of the teaching profession in Estonia is...* (1 – very low, ... 5 – very high)]. The respondents estimated the reputation of the teaching profession 3.14 (SD=0.68) which is above average.

Next, the students were given a list of twelve professions (Table 1) which they had to order according to their reputation in the Estonian society (1 – most reputable, ... 12 – least reputable). According to the students' rankings, *manager* occupied the highest position (M=3.91; SD=2.76) and *shop assistant* the lowest (M=9.79; SD=3.32). *Teacher* was positioned to the third place from the bottom (M=7.75; SD=2.27).

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of the order of professions according to their reputation (lower mean stands for higher rating).

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Manager	1.0	12.0	3.91	2.76
Medical doctor	1.0	12.0	4.01	3.17
Lawyer	1.0	12.0	4.12	2.74
Public official	1.0	12.0	4.83	3.17
Politician	1.0	12.0	6.10	3.26
Real estate agent	1.0	12.0	6.40	2.39
Actor/actress	1.0	12.0	6.74	2.49
Nurse	1.0	12.0	6.98	2.67
Bank cashier	1.0	12.0	7.25	2.49
Teacher	2.0	12.0	7.75	2.27
Manicurist	1.0	12.0	9.59	3.22
Shop assistant	1.0	12.0	9.79	3.32

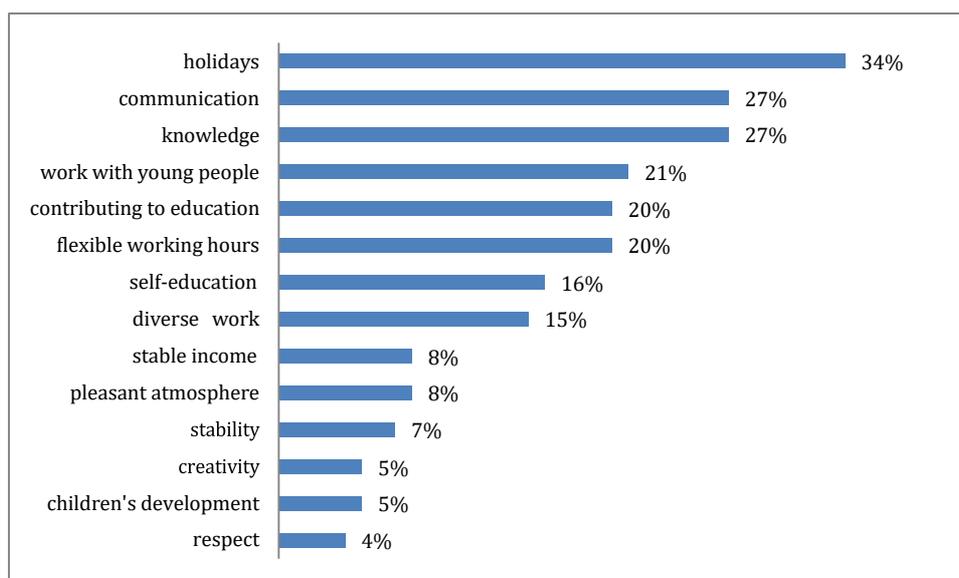
To be sure that the differences between the means of different professions were significant, the paired-samples t-test was conducted. The only statistically significant differences revealed between *lawyer* and *public official* ( $t=-3.54$ ;  $p<.000$ ), *public official* and *politician* ( $t=-7.14$ ;  $p<.000$ ), *bank cashier* and *teacher* ( $t=-2.37$ ;  $p<.019$ ) and *teacher* and *manicurist* ( $t=-8.36$ ;  $p<.000$ ).

The findings indicate that the reputation of the teaching profession is rather low as perceived by Estonian 18-year-old students outracing manicurist's and shop assistant's only. However, having close contacts with their teachers on a daily bases, students recognize good teachers and value them –  
 —*Teacher's job is extremely complicated and their contribution should be more valued and respected.* Another comment – —*More recognition and higher salary for the teachers, because teacher's job is actually one of the most important ones* shows that students realize that the teaching profession should be more recognized and valued in the society.

### 3.2 How do students perceive the positive and negative aspects of the teaching profession?

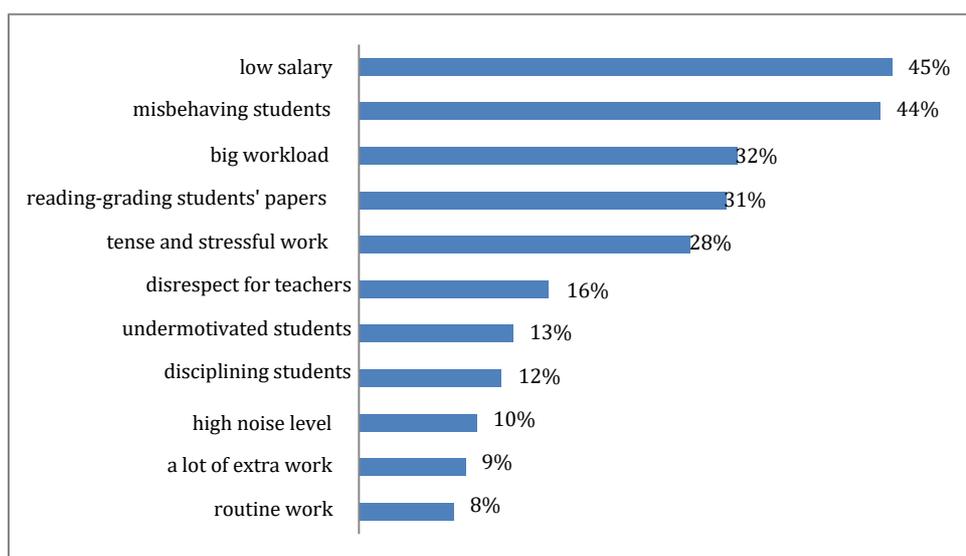
To answer the second research question students were asked to put down three most positive things and three most negative things about the teaching profession that came to their mind. These were open questions and students were not guided or provided with options. The answers were coded and analyzed according to the topics.

The most positive aspect that more than a third of the students brought out was long holidays (Figure 1). In Estonia the summer holidays last for three months for students (June, July and August) and 56 days for teachers, plus three shorter holidays in autumn, winter and spring. Holidays as an advantage was followed by a possibility to communicate with people and being knowledgeable (both 27%). It could also be noticed that students named a couple of altruistic reasons about the advantages of the teaching profession such as contributing to education and children's development.



**Fig. 1.** Positive aspects about the teaching profession.

When listing the negative aspects of the teaching profession, students predominantly named external reasons (Figure 2). As many as 45% of the students found that the salary paid to teachers was too low. Another factor that made teachers' job unpleasant was misbehaving students (44%).

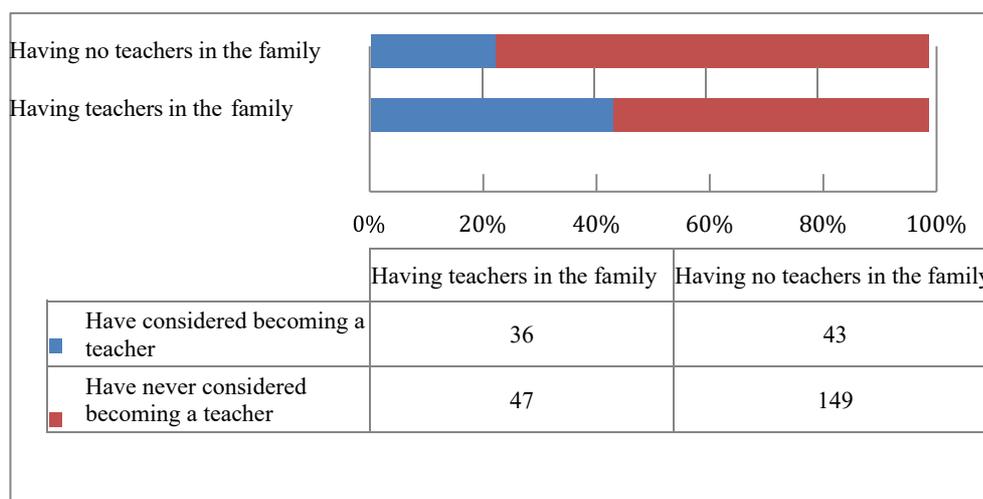


**Fig. 2.** Negative aspects about the teaching profession.

The students' list of negative aspects reflects the everyday life and atmosphere at school that students daily perceive. However, it was interesting that students had noticed teachers' big workload and admitted the presence of misbehaving and disrespectful peers – —*This is one of the most difficult jobs in reality, full of responsibility, so much in your future depends on a teacher.*|| —*Not many choose to become teachers because it's stressful and low salary doesn't compensate it.*||

### 3.3 Which are the reasons why students consider/don't consider the teaching profession? Does a teacher in the family have an impact on students' consideration to become a teacher?

The students were also asked whether they had ever considered becoming a teacher. Their answers were compared to the answers to another question – Does any of your family members or close relatives works/has worked as a teacher? The results indicated that 38% of the girls had considered becoming a teacher whereas the percentage for boys was only 19%. The ratio of students who had considered becoming a teacher was bigger in the case of students who had a teacher in their family compared to those who did not have a teacher in their family (Figure 3), 43% versus 22% respectively.



**Fig. 3.** The students considering the teaching profession compared to their contacts with teachers in their family.

Proceeding from this ratio, we checked whether the students' interest in the teaching profession was correlated with having a teacher in the family. The Pearson correlation test revealed a significant positive correlation ( $r=.229$ ,  $p<.000$ ) indicating a weak correlation between the two measures. The possible explanations will be given below.

Next, the students' motives to become a teacher were explored. Almost a quarter of the respondents, who had considered the teaching profession, named the possibility to pass on their knowledge and experience first (24%) (Figure 4). It is also interesting that 8% of the students said that they had had a positive role model, a good teacher or a family member who had worked as a teacher, and he/she had encouraged them to consider the job.

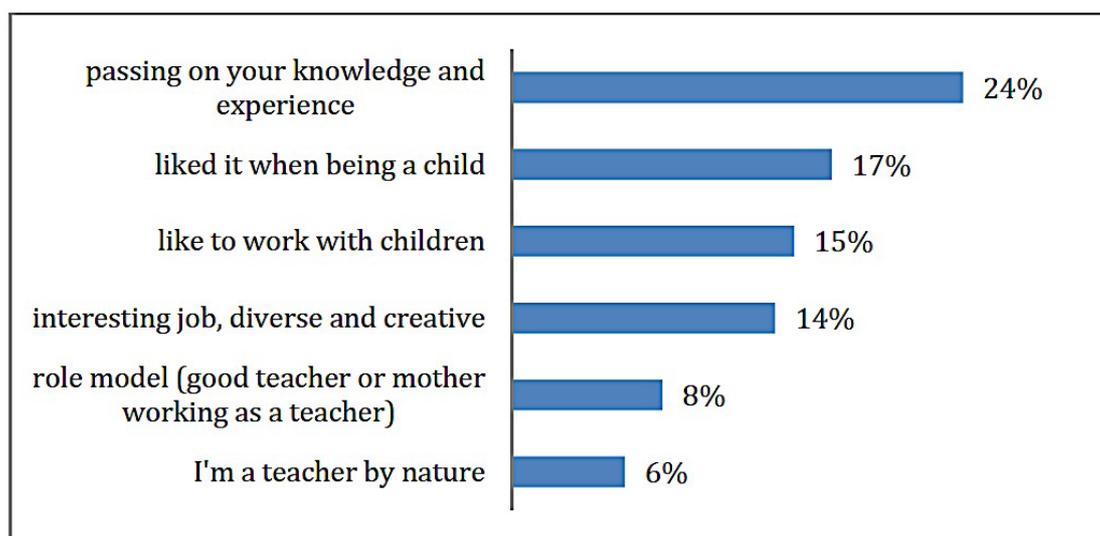


Fig. 4. Reasons for becoming a teacher.

The students who did not think of the teaching profession as an option gave the following reasons (Figure 5). The most dominant one was that the students had different interests (20%). This was followed by the facts that the job was not suitable for them (19%), and it was too tense and stressful (18%). It is interesting that low salary came only forth as the answer to this question.

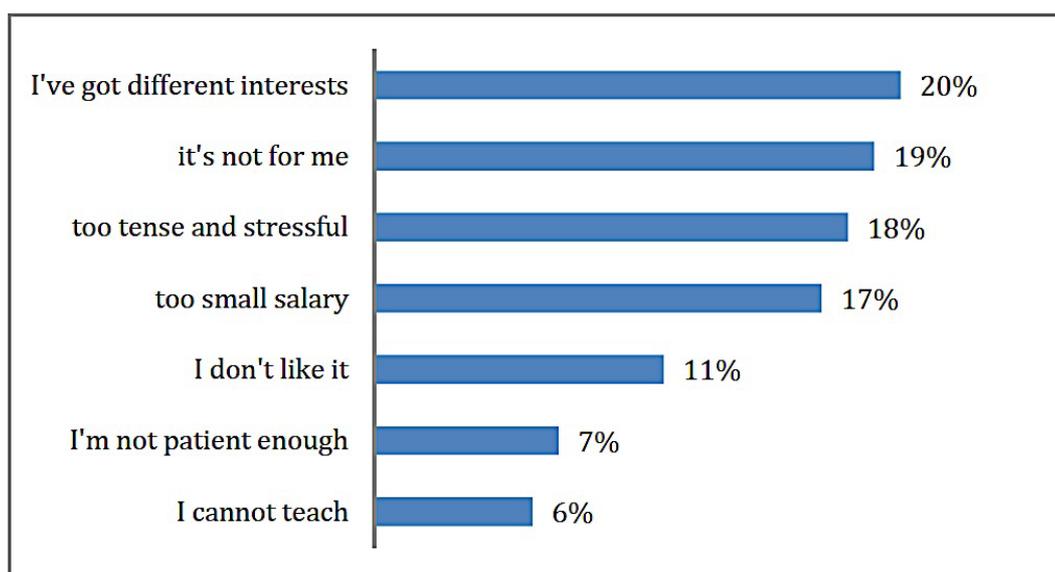


Fig. 5. Reasons for not becoming a teacher.

When boys' and girls' answers were compared considering their intrinsic, extrinsic and altruistic reasons separately, it appeared that boys slightly outperformed girls on intrinsic and altruistic scales, whereas girls' answers revealed slightly more extrinsic motivations (Figure 6).

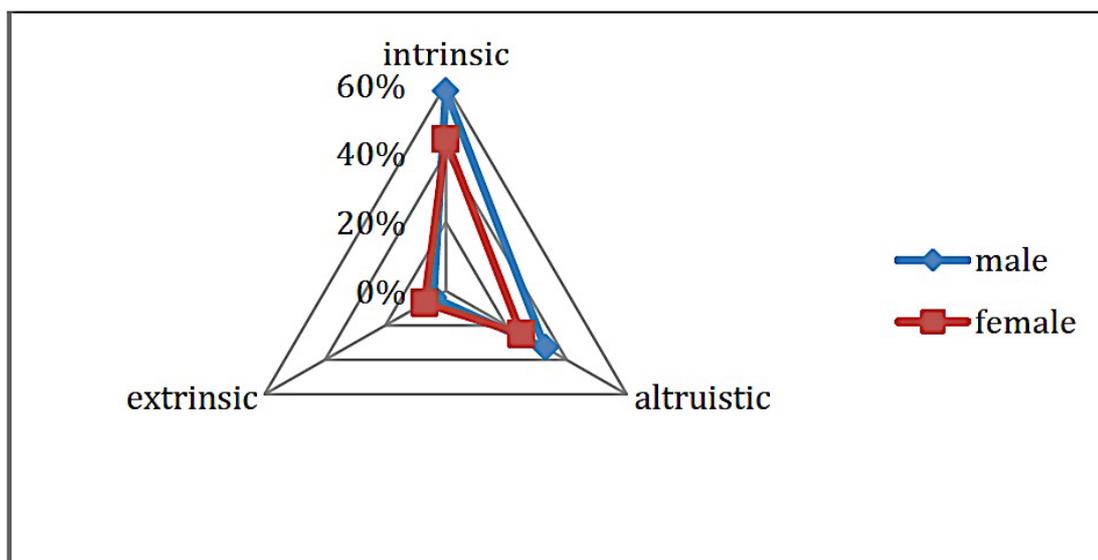


Fig. 6. The ratio of three forms of motivations for boys and girls.

A student's comment – *—Some people are born to be teachers. Teaching involves much more than just passing on the knowledge. Teacher's role in guiding the young person's future is enormous.*

### 3.1 What kind of change would make students consider becoming a teacher?

When students were asked about the measures which could make them consider the teaching profession, almost half of the respondents named rise in salary (Figure 7). All the other changes – students' attitudes, teachers' workload, valuation of the teaching profession etc – had a smaller proportion.

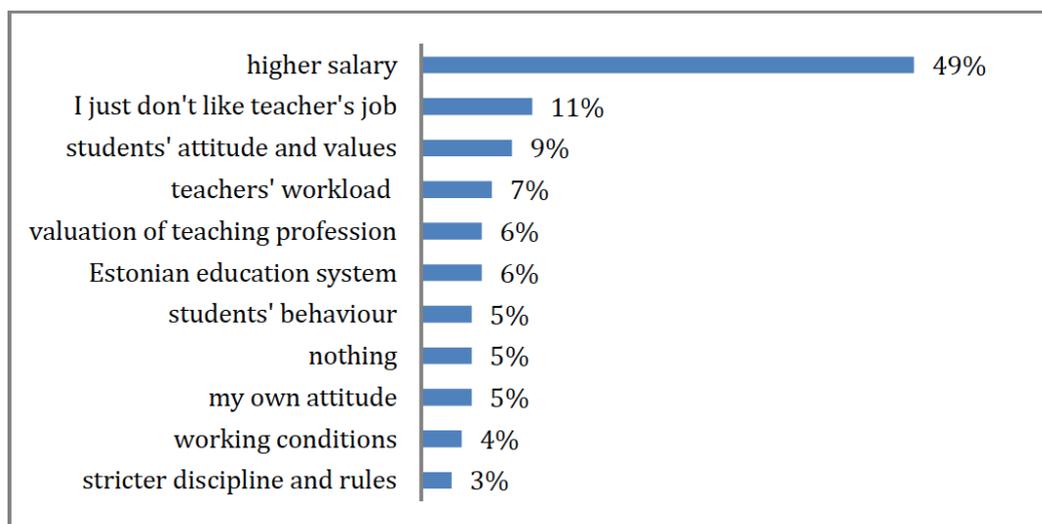


Fig. 7. The changes that could make students consider the teaching profession.

However, 11% of the youngsters answering *they just don't like teacher's job*, and 5% saying *nothing*, would probably never pursue the teaching career despite the changes that could be made. It is also interesting that 5% of the people admitted that their own attitude towards the teaching profession should change first.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that students seem to have a rather adequate understanding of teacher's job, but realizing its difficulties and problems does not inspire many of them to follow this path and pursue the teaching career.

The positive factors that influenced students to consider the teaching profession – passing on knowledge and working with children – went in line with other altruistic reasons reported in earlier studies (e.g Frusher & Newton, 1987; Hayes, 1990; Horton & Summers, 1984; Stiegelbauer, 1992). Unlike earlier findings, altruistic as well as intrinsic motivations were slightly dominating in males' responses.

Another distinctness which revealed in the current study was connected with positive role models in students' families. While other researchers have not reported any relations between students' interest in the teaching profession and having a teacher in their family (Frusher & Newton, 1987), the current findings indicated to a weak correlation between these measures. Having a role model as a teacher-family member creates the desire to resemble these people and contribute to the development of children in the similar way. Unlike several studies conducted in the US (Teaching as a career, 1985), the Estonian students admitted that positive experiences with their teachers at school as well as having teachers in their own families worked as a positive role model, which might encourage them to become a teacher. This finding leads to the recognition that the reflections and messages that teachers forward about their job when working with students are very important as they may influence students' future career choice.

Students understand that the requirements set to teachers and the salary paid for their work are not in balance. These findings support Frusher & Newton (1987) and Book et al (1984) who found that concern about salary is a major factor in deciding whether or not to choose teaching as a career choice.

Similarly to the same authors (Book et al, 1984; Frusher & Newton, 1987; Teaching as a career, 1985), the students in the current study also referred to the increase in salary as the most important change to be made. Another reason which discourages students to consider the teaching profession is a big workload (similarly to Teaching as a career, 1985). Notably much attention was paid to the drawbacks in students' behaviour and disrespect for teachers.

The study was limited by the absence of validity test of the questionnaire used for the study. However, the statements of the questionnaire were piloted with a small group of educational experts to check the unequivocality of the utterances. Another limitation lies in the fact that for some analyses the sample appeared to be too small which did not enable to make generalisations for the differences between boys and girls.

As to the ideas for further research it could be investigated how many people from this cohort continued their studies in teacher training and whether any of them started their teaching career at school. Considering students' low interest in the teaching profession and their low estimates of teachers' reputation, it would also be interesting to investigate teachers' perspective – how they feel as teachers, which messages they forward to their students about their profession, and how they reflect their well-being and satisfaction with their job.

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