Factors that Affect Occupational Choice for Future Teachers in Estonia

Inge Timoštšuk[a]*, Aino Ugaste[b], Lea Kallas[c]

* Corresponding author: Inge Timoštšuk, inget@tlu.ee

[a]*Associate Professor, School of Educational Sciences, Tallinn University, Tallinn 10120, Estonia*
[b]*Professor, School of Educational Sciences, Tallinn University, Tallinn 10120, Estonia*
[c]*Master Student, School of Educational Sciences, Tallinn University, Tallinn 10120, Estonia*

Abstract

The popularity of the teaching profession in Estonia is low: the increase of the number of young teachers is modest and staff is ageing. The aim of our study was to find out and describe what motivates young people to become a teacher and to highlight meaningful personal and social factors of the job. Our study involved students (n-67) from the most popular at university teacher specialties (primary teachers and early childhood pedagogues). A questionnaire and interview was used for collecting data. The result was that the choice of teaching specialty was decided by a combination of factors - the more essential ones being social utility value factors based on internal motivation and altruistic reasons. These respondents wished to contribute to social development in a child- and youth-centered environment. They see teachers as a professional group with high-level knowledge assume that a teaching job entails continuous professional development.

In spite of the fact that the teaching profession is not popular, student teachers see themselves as active, influential members of society. They perceive teachers as specialists able to develop children's' and adolescents' values and foster their development. The perception of the meaning and future influence is clearly forward in popular specialties but less popular specialties need more detailed attention.

1. Introduction

In recent years increasing interest has been shown in the study of the motives that affect choice to teach. According to an OECD study (Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development 2005, 2011) all OECD countries, including Estonia, have problems with ageing teachers and recruitment and retention of new staff (Voltri, Luik & Taimalu, 2013). The European Commission (2012) found that

more than 40% of Estonian upper-secondary school teachers are 50 years old or over. Thus the need for young teachers is increasing. The 2013 TALIS (International Study of Teaching and Learning) report on Estonia pointed out that the average age of an Estonian teacher was 48 whilst school heads highlighted a lack of qualified and/or teachers who worked effectively (Übius, Kall, Loogma & Ümarik, 2014). Teachers themselves, however, do not perceive that their job is missed or valued in society: the TALIS 2013 Estonian report found that only 14% Estonian teachers thought teaching was valued in our society (Übius et al., 2014). The Estonian indicator was significantly lower than the TALIS average (ibid).

The teachers' low assessment of the popularity and value of their job could influence a students' choice of future career and motivation to become a teacher. This is reflected in fewer applications than expected for teacher education courses: several places were unfulfilled (Kallas, 2016). Having said this, there is still competition for primary teacher and early childhood teacher places (in the last two years there had been an average of four people for one place) (ibid.).

The difference between the popularity of learning levels indicates the depth of the problem. Young people are subject to different motivation factors and a clearer description and better introduction could enable an increase in the popularity of teaching. A matching of actual learning with expectations could enable a better focus on learning and actual enjoyment (cf. Watt & Richardson, 2007). We used a questionnaire and an interview to study which factors motivate students to learn to teach and how students perceive personal and social motivation factors. We also used Expectancy- Value theory and Factors Influencing Teaching Choice (FIT-Choice) (Watt & Richardson, 2007).

2. Teacher training motives

According to Brophy (2013), motivation is a construct that helps to explain initiation, direction, intensity and stability of the behaviour. A wish to become a teacher is influenced by persistence, effort readiness and professional development plans (Fokkens-Bruinsma & Canrinus, 2014). Williams and Forgaszi (2009) posit that people choose the teaching profession most on personal and altruistic grounds although pragmatic reasons (e.g. longer holidays or more flexible working time) might be an influence. Voltri et al (2013) point out that people who start work as teachers are those whose personal motivation and perceived teaching skills are high and who connect the suitability of teaching to a family life. Remaining in the job is the result of many more factors – the perceiving or the meaning of teaching is reflected in professional identity (cf. Hong, 2010; Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2010). The professional identity of student teachers i.e. the students' understanding of themselves as a teacher has been studied in recent decades but there is little detailed information about the motives for choice of profession. Watt and Richardson (2007) have, however, developed a scale that leans on expectancy- a value theory (cf. Eccles, 2005) that describes and enables the study of motives for choice of the teaching profession (FIT-Choice scale) indicating the role of ability and ability beliefs or expectancies for success. The role of values is emphasized and the intrinsic value, utility value, and attainment value have been differentiated (Watt & Richardson, 2007).

2.1. Teacher`s abilities and belief in their abilities

High requirements and an understanding of a specialist career constitute part of a teacher's professional identity (Forde et al, 2006). Eltis (1988) notes that it is possible to assess a students' ability if a student has worked with teachers and children and has understood the complexity of the teacher's role. At the same time, the students imagine what their abilities are like. The following questions were switched in the study: "Do you think that teaching requires high-level knowledge?" "Do you think that teachers need high technical skills?", "Do you think that teachers have a heavy workload?", "Is teaching emotionally demanding in your opinion?" and "Is teaching hard work in your opinion?"

Fokkens - Bruinsma and Canrinus (2012) in their study of Dutch teacher education students using FIT- Choice scale found that teaching skills were the most important factor for becoming a teacher. Thus the following statements were included for reaction in the questionnaire: "I have the characteristics of a good teacher." "I have good teaching skills.", "Teaching is a job that matches my abilities."

2.2. Personal and social values of teaching

Values are powerfully highlighted in making choices (Eccles et al, 2005). Watt and Richardson found that intrinsic career value; personal utility value and social utility value can be differentiated (2007) in choice of the teaching profession. The first category describes generally the value of teaching is as a career.

Personal utility value is described generally as connected with job security; there is time for family and there is job transferability – the acquired skills can be applied in several other occupations (ibid).

The possibility to shape the future of children/adolescents is seen as a social utility value, an opportunity to enhance social equality and make one's contribution to society (Watt & Richardson, 2007). On the basis of this the following statements for reaction and questions were included in the questionnaire: "Teaching offers confident career pathway." "Teaching guarantees a reliable income.", "Teaching is a steady job.", "Work schedules suit family responsibilities.", "School holidays suit family responsibilities.", "Teaching is a good job if I intend to travel.", "A teaching qualification is known and respected everywhere.", "A teacher's job enables me to choose where I would like to live.", "Is teaching in your opinion well-paid?" and "Do teachers, in your opinion, earn a good salary?".

If values reflect our preferences and wishes, a teacher's morale indicates what is perceived as right and what is perceived as wrong (Ryan, 1988). Therefore the question – "Do you think that teachers have a high morale?" and "Do you think that teachers feel themselves as valued in the society?" were included in the questionnaire.

Biddle (1988) has highlights several aspects of concern for society as motivation to become a teacher: a wish to work with young people, a wish to render services for other people, a wish to contribute to cultural continuity through the next generation. On these grounds the following statements were included in the questionnaire: "Teaching enables me to shape the values of children and adolescents", "Teaching enables me to influence the next generation.", "Teaching allows me to raise the ambitions of underprivileged adolescents.", "Teaching allows me to do good for the socially underprivileged.", "Teaching enables me to contribute society.", "Teaching enables me to give back to

society.", "Teaching makes a significant social contribution.", "I want to work with children and adolescents." and "I want to work in a child- and adolescent-centered environment.".

Watt and Richardson (2007) have also studied the value of teaching in society adding the following to their questionnaire: "Do you think that teachers feel that their job has a high social status?"; "Do you believe that teachers are perceived as professionals?"; "Do you think that teaching is perceived as a job with a high status?" and "Do you think that teaching is a respected job?", "Do you think that teachers feel that their job has a high social status?".

The described aspects and the respective questions enable the measurement of the teacher education students' higher order factors such as self, value, and task perceptions that comply with the expectancy-value theory (Watt and Richardson, 2007).

3. Methodology

In this chapter an overview of the study design is given with sample, study instrument and methods of data analysis.

3.1. Sample

The targeted sample is (cf. Cohen et al, 2007) from people that belong to a certain group. Our sample consists of primary teacher specialty students and early childhood pedagogues at Tallinn University. Those students were chosen because primary teacher specialty and early childhood pedagogues have been the most popular teacher education specialties at the University for many years. The total sample involved 67 full time students, 26 primary teacher specialty students and 41 early childhood students. All the students were female and the respondents' age was 19 to 24 (average age 22).

3.2. Study instruments

Data collection was carried out in two parts: first a questionnaire among the students of   primary and early childhood education teachers and focus group interviews within the groups with those students who agreed to participate.

The questionnaire was divided into four parts.   1) Background details: age, ongoing course, specialty and prognosis for starting to teach. 2) Abilities and skills questions about teaching to find out the respondents' rating of their prerequisites for teaching. 3) Personal utility factors to measure the importance of personal benefits. 4) The importance of social utility in teaching.

Responses were rated according to Likert scale, in which 1 means No, definitely not and 5 means Yes, definitely.

The questionnaire was based on the scale developed by H. M. G. Watt and P. W. Richardson (2007) for measuring motivation factors for teaching choice (FIT- Choice scale). The original version is in English and consists of 57 statements. Our study modified the scale according to circumstances in Estonia: several factors were linked and the questionnaire involved 27 statements.

In addition to the questionnaire a focus group interview was used. The interview questions were divided into three areas: 1) the background for deciding on the teacher's profession was studied more

precisely, 2) the students' motivation for working as a teacher and 3) issues concerning professional development.

3.3. Data collecting procedure and methods of analysis

A combined study design was used for data collection: a questionnaire, in order to find out the reasons for learning to become a teacher and an interview, in order to find out the students' motivation factors for choosing their specialty. Combined qualitative and quantitative method is used enabling a better understanding of integration and an increase in the validity of the study (Creswell, 2013).

Reliability of our study was also enhanced by a pilot study with 20 students. After the pilot some corrections were made and a study carried out. Questions were sent electronically through Google Forms environment to the Tallinn University email addresses of the participants. The completing of the questionnaire took 20 minutes on average. The results were analyzed by using qualitative content analysis but most significant answers to the questions were presented by percentage in the results section also. The answer considered to be significant in this study when 4% or more of respondents expressed this opinion.

Focus group interview was done with 14 students: the size of the interviewee group was 3-4 people: interviews lasted 15- 35 minutes (average time 20 min). All the interviews were recorded and transcribed word for word.

The interviews were analyzed using the theoretical framework of the present study. The received texts were read repeatedly, codes were formed and the unit corresponding to the theme block was chosen from the interviews. The units were coded into categories according to Watt and Richardson's factors influencing teaching choice and the results rated either into the factors' group of personal benefit, social benefit or teaching abilities and skills. The received results were then compared with the questionnaire results.

4. Results

4.1. Teaching abilities and-skills

The statement that teaching is first of all connected to a high level of knowledge received the highest rating from primary teachers and students of early-childhood education. 60% of respondents found that teaching definitely requires high-level knowledge. 31% thought that it is preferable to have a high-level knowledge. A similar result was given by the students of both specialties in answer to the statement about the heavy workload of teachers: 39% of students responded that teachers definitely have a heavy workload and 39% thought that teachers have a heavy workload rather than not. About 15% of respondents thought that teachers might have a heavy workload.

Ratings were also similar in responses to the statement that teaching is emotionally complicated. 36% of the respondents answered that teaching is definitely emotionally complicated and 36% thought that teaching is emotionally complicated rather than not. 19% students believed that teaching might be emotionally complicated and 7% respondents found that teaching is not rather than is, emotionally complicated.

The difference in opinions became evident in the statement that teachers have a high morale. 24% students of primary teacher specialty students and 16% of early childhood education students totally

agreed with the statement. 28% of early childhood education students and 9% of primary teacher students found that teachers a have high morale rather than not. It is interesting that 15 % of early childhood teacher students thought that this might be so.

The difference between the groups also became evident in response to the statement that teachers need high technical skills. 45% students of both specialties thought that teachers need high technical skills. 6% primary teachers and 16% early childhood education students thought that the teachers definitely need high technical skills. 19% of early childhood education students and 6% of primary teacher students believed that teachers might need high technical skills. Only 4% of future primary teachers thought that teachers did not need high technical skills.

4.2. Factors of personal benefit

 The results of the personal benefit factor analysis highlight two responses to statements from the primary and early childhood teacher students. 64 % of students thought that teaching would definitely enable them to influence the next generation and 28% students thought that teaching would enable them rather than not, to shape the next generation. 7% of early childhood teacher students thought that it might be so. About 63 % of all students found that teaching would definitely enable them to shape the values of children and adolescents and 31% students thought that teaching would enable them rather than not to shape the values of children and adolescents.

The statement that teaching is a secure job received high ratings by both specialties. 43% of respondents thought that teaching is a secure job rather than not and 73% considered teaching definitely a secure job. About 18 % thought that it might be so.

A large number of respondents agreed with the statements about the matching of the teacher's work, family life and holidays. The students found that definitely or definitely rather than definitely not that there would be time for family life outside of work: holidays also favor family life. Some respondents thought that it might be so. Responses to the statement that a teacher's job enables me to travel, showed 16% thought that teaching definitely enables them to travel. 34% of respondents were of the opinion that teaching might enable them to travel and 24% thought that teaching might enable them to travel rather than not. 21% respondents believed that teaching does not rather than does enable them to travel

The ratings of both specialties were similar in terms of salary and remuneration. 52% found that teaching isn't rather than is well paid, 27% thought that it might be well paid. 10% thought that teaching definitely is not well paid. Only a few respondents found that teaching definitely is or is rather than isn't well paid. Thus all thought that teachers' salary is low. However, in rating the statement about guaranteed reliable income the students were more optimistic. 36% of respondents reported that teaching guarantees rather than does not guarantee a reliable income. 24% of students believed that teaching might guarantee a reliable income and 19% thought that teaching definitely guarantees a reliable income.

We analyzed the statement that teaching offered a secure career. 24 (36%) of students thought that teaching offers rather than does not offer a secure career, 22 (32%) believed that teaching might offer that and 11 (16%) respondents were of the opinion that teaching does not offer rather than offers a secure career. 9 (13%) respondents found that teaching definitely offers a secure career.

We studied to what extent the respondents thought that teachers earn a good salary. The variability of the responses is considerable here. 43% of students thought that teachers do not earn rather than earn a good salary and 28% respondents were of the opinion that teachers might earn a good salary. 16% respondents found that it is definitely not so and 9% students believed that it is rather so than is not so. Only 4% future teachers found that it is definitely so.

In response to the statement about teaching qualifications it turned out that 32% students thought that a qualification might be similar everywhere. 25% of both groups reported that a teaching qualification is rather than isn't similar and isn't rather than is similar everywhere. 13% respondents were of the opinion that it definitely isn't so.

We analyzed the statement that teaching would allow students to choose a place to live. 34% thought that a teacher's job would allow them rather than not allow them to choose a place to live, 32% respondents found that teacher's job might allow them to choose where they wish to live. 18% students believed that teaching job definitely lets them choose a place to live and there were 10% of those who thought that a teaching job lets them rather than does not let them choose a place to live.

4.3. Social benefit factors

A large percentage (75%) were of the opinion that they definitely wanted to work in a child- and adolescent-centered environment and 21% students thought that they wanted rather than did not want to work in such an environment.

The response to the statement that teaching enables me to contribute to society also indicated a high factor. 64% respondents thought that teaching would definitely enable them to contribute to society and 22% thought that teaching would enable them to contribute rather than not to contribute to society. 12% respondents were of the opinion that teaching might enable them to contribute.

The statements that teaching enables them to do well and increase the self-esteem of underprivileged children and adolescents also resulted in a positive response. 42% thought that teaching would enable them to do good rather than not to do good for underprivileged pupils and 33% future teachers rated that teaching would definitely enable them to do good to this group. 24% respondents thought that teaching might enable them to do good to underprivileged pupils.

We explored issues of teacher status and the value of a teaching job in society. 40% found that teachers might feel themselves valued in society, 30% thought that teachers do not feel rather than do feel themselves valued in society and 20% thought that teachers feel themselves valued in the society rather than not. Only 6% of students found that teachers definitely feel themselves valued in society and 4% respondents were of the opinion that they definitely did not feel so.

In response to what extent teachers feel their job to have a high social status, 37% respondents found that teachers might feel that their job is of a high social status. 28% found that it is not so rather than is and 22% thought that it is so rather than is not so. Only 7% students were totally sure that teachers feel their job to be of a high status.

Responses to the statement that teachers are perceived as professionals rather than not and that teachers might be perceived as professionals were equal (36% and 36%). 15% of students thought that

teachers were not perceived rather than were perceived as professionals. Only 12% of students thought that teachers definitely were perceived as professionals.

The study of the extent that teaching is perceived as a job with a high status and to what extent teaching is a respected job resulted in 43% of students responding that teaching might be perceived as a high-status job. 22% and 22% of respondents thought that teaching was not perceived as a high-status job rather than was and that it was perceived rather than was not perceived as a high-status job. 7% of respondents found that teaching definitely was perceived as a high-status job and 4% respondents were of the opinion that teaching definitely was not perceived as a high-status job.

The respondents' opinion about teaching being a respected job showed that 37% thought that teaching might be a respected job, 28% respondents mentioned that teaching is respected rather than isn't a respected job and 18% students thought that teaching is not rather than is respected. 12% students in their turn thought that teaching definitely is not a respected job.

4.4. Interview findings

4.4.1. Reasons for choosing the profession

In their interviews the students of the primary teacher specialty and the students of early childhood education indicated a wish, willingness and the pleasure of working with children. In the interviewees' opinion the target group was important i.e., elementary school pupils or preschool children who are easy and good to work with.

One primary teacher student explained: *As a primary teacher you are always together with one class and the relationship is personal.*

Early childhood specialty students thought that children are sincere and candid and that this suits their own character, even if children could sometimes be difficult and complicated situations arise. It was possible to get to know the children more in the course of work, learn about their joys and sorrows and solve problems that arise.

A firm early commitment or positive school experience was indicated in choosing the profession: a primary teacher student said: *my own elementary school experience was very positive. The primary teacher was great and I thought that I might be able to give what she gave– positive school experience.*

The main reason for studying these specialties was contributing to the future of children and shaping children's values. An early childhood student emphasized: *I work for children and for a sustainable society.*

Unlike early childhood students, primary teacher students thought that a broad-based education in all subjects gave them a good chance to work later as a subject teacher, thus increasing future career opportunities. While regard to the advantages of the chosen specialty it was thought that there was an opportunity to get a Bachelor's degree and Master's degree within five years at university.

4.4.2 Interviewees' motives for working in the profession

Both groups expressed the conviction that they intend to work as teachers after graduation and work in the job. Several students said that they would like to be a teacher for all their working life. Only one student of both group had doubts about their choice of profession. An early childhood student said that

after teaching practice she started to think very seriously whether she wanted to become a teacher or if job suited her.

A teacher's job was described as a routine-free occupation: every day is different and varied and there is no repetition or platitude. The students wanted to work with children because children are cheerful and lively, they have a lot of positive emotions and give off energy. Thus the teacher's job is the right job of the students.

One primary teacher stressed: *This is a job that suits me. I think that everyone should do the job that is right for him or her.*

Both specialties cited a long holidays as a positive factor in choice of career.

The interviews explored attractive how a teaching job is in today's Estonia. The primary and early childhood teachers thought that the teaching profession was not attractive in Estonia and pointed out that teaching is not valued by society and the pay was very low. *... I only recently looked at some OECD information about salary and read that Estonia was rated last in the salary table, both in terms of initial salary and where you can get to.*

Early childhood future teachers thought that parents do not understand what a teacher's job is really about and that teachers (especially young teachers) are often not really professionals for them.

One primary teacher thought that teaching was attractive only for those people who felt a vocation: for the rest of the people it was not attractive.

4.4.3. Interviewees' professional development

The last part of the interview addressed issues of professional development. First it was investigated how much the students intended to contribute to their profession and to the promotion of teaching. The students of both specialties were certainly enjoying the opportunity to become a teacher and were already proud of their job. A primary teacher mentioned: *if you enjoy your job, it shows and this can send a real message that it is great to be a teacher.*

Students also said that they planned to create unconventional and interesting lessons in order to give pupils a positive school experience and hoped that this would influence pupils to choose a teacher's career in the future.

The students were asked to say how they intended to develop their teacher skills further. Both groups were certain that they would try to improve their professional skills, because a teacher needs up-to-date knowledge and must be innovative and creative. University studies are not enough because society is constantly changing and developing due to teaching policy, new information technology and other issues. The students definitely intended to accept refresher trainings on offer from schools and to exchange information and ideas with their colleagues.

The interviews explored to what extent the future teachers intend to take leadership responsibility in their job. Among the students of both specialties there were those who admitted that they did not think about that as they did not have the experience to judge. On the other hand they said that a teacher is a leader to some extent because he or she leads the class or children's group and he or she must lead the children's schooling and education. Several interviewees saw themselves as future leaders either as head teachers or even headmasters or headmistresses.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The aim of our study was to explore and describe what motivates young people to become a teacher. Our objective was, on a larger scale, to indicate meaningful personal and social factors in career choice. The students from the most popular teacher specialties at university participated in the study (future primary teachers and early childhood pedagogues). A questionnaire and interview were used for data collection and compiled in a way to the highlight and understand influential factors of motivation such as self-worth and task perceptions.

The results showed that the motivation factors of the popular teacher specialties were very similar. Factors of social utility value were clear. Similarly to other studies (cf. Fokkens-Bruinsma & Canrius, 2014) the primary teachers as well as early childhood pedagogues indicated that they wanted to work with children and adolescents. More exactly: they saw an opportunity to contribute to the development of society and the shaping of social values through supporting the development of children and adolescents. The future teachers thought that they could profoundly support the development of all children and thus decrease social inequality and increase the ability of each child according to their abilities. Child welfare orientation can be interpreted as an altruistic attitude also evident in the Williams and Forgaz (2009) study.

The interviews made it clear that students perceive the role of teacher in terms of their own educational development. Being a role model was important for possible future career choice of their pupils. Personal pragmatic benefit and intellectual challenge motives are less noticeable. Students did not consider pay or high in society: they value a teacher's job highly but do not think that other members of society do so. Such disparity shows perception of the changing role of support for teachers and a confidence in ones abilities to cope with the situation that outweighs the relatively low pay and complex workload. This outcome targets issues in pre university vocational guidance: an overwhelming majority among the teacher students believe in themselves, are ready to improve themselves and learn in order to contribute to positive changes in society. These are people who believe that they are changing the world. This result is considerably different from the findings of Watt and Richardson (2007) - that social context has a weak impact on teacher's career choice.

There were differences in the motivation factors of the future primary teachers and early childhood pedagogues. The primary teacher students saw teaching as requiring many teaching skills but the learners of early childhood education are not so sure of that. As an additional motive, the primary teachers saw diverse development opportunities: continuous professional training and an opportunity to learn a subject thoroughly in order to teach it in secondary school. The primary teachers saw an opportunity after taking the 5-year curriculum to acquire a Bachelor and Master's level education. Early childhood education students do not have this possibility. Their education is equivalent to Bachelor level. The differences confirm diversity and context-specificity of the motivating factors (cf, Watt & Richardson, 2007).

The study also showed factors that, in the students' opinion, undermine the popularity of teaching. These were low pay, unpleasant personal experience of teachers and a display in public of school and teachers' negative experience. This indicates a need to pay attention to a teacher's dignity and public relations issues during the teachers' initial learning.

There are limitations to the present study. The students of only the two most popular teacher specialties of one university (Tallinn University) were studied: in the interest of data generalization the number of participants might be extended. As the social implications of teaching were clearly indicated in the results. An international comparison is planned for the next stage: it is essential to differentiate more clearly in the future which motivation factors are more professional specific and which are social context specific.

Acknowledgements

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