

The prestige of the teaching profession in the perception of teachers and former teachers

MAGDALENA SMAK, DOMINIKA WALCZAK

Educational Research Institute*

Teaching is ranked as a prestigious occupation in national opinion polls. However, teachers themselves, when asked about problems at work, reported low wages and the lack of respect from students. The discrepancy between research findings about the social hierarchy of the profession and the perceptions of teachers themselves raises questions about the factors influencing the social image of the teaching profession. This article describes the influences on teachers' social position, based on individual interviews with current and former teachers.

KEYWORDS: prestige; social position of teachers; respect; social image of teachers.

The prestige of the teaching profession is a rather complex subject. According to studies on this subject conducted since 1975 by the Public Opinion Research Centre (Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, CBOS), teachers invariably occupy a high position. In 2013, teachers were among the seven professions most respected by Poles, which included university professors, skilled workers, miners, engineers working in factories, nurses and firefighters (CBOS, 2013).

However, 60% said that the profession does not provide them with prestige or satisfactory remuneration (Federowicz et al., 2013). Also, in the TALIS 2013 international study of teaching and learning (Hernik, 2015), more than 80% of Polish teachers indicated the lack of prestige, and slightly less than half mentioned low authority as a problematic issue when dealing with students. In "The study on the time schemes and working conditions of teachers", when

asked about the advantages of their work, teachers most often responded that it allows them to have contact with people (96%) and enables personal development (85%; Federowicz et al., 2013).

The public perception of the profession is, therefore, different than the image of the profession among teachers themselves. The mass media present a negative image of teachers, describing cases of fraud or trade union protests. Newspaper articles mostly refer to such problems as redundancy, the imperfections of the educational system and teacher training. Information about "super-teachers" or finalists of best teacher competitions is presented less frequently.

Types of prestige

According to Henryk Domański, prestige is a socially convertible value: members of certain groups perceive other groups as prestigious. Due to their functions, they can

* Address: ul. Górczewska 8, 01-180 Warszawa, Poland.
E-mail: m.smak@ibe.edu.pl

© Educational Research Institute

also be perceived as prestigious. It is, therefore, a feature formed on the basis of perceptions and assessments of the re-enacted roles and positions taken in social relations (Domański, 2012). For this reason, there are many types of prestige.

In everyday thinking, we usually refer to personal prestige – a value assigned to individual characteristics. It manifests itself in direct contacts between friends, neighbours, the family circle. The second type is prestige related to social position, profession, wealth or social role. Situational prestige, on the other hand, is characterised by temporality and dependent on specific circumstances. Temporality is the feature distinguishing it from the last type – institutionalised prestige, characterised by customary or legally established rules on how it is shown to others, and the existence of specific rules to enforce these principles in practice. Institutionalised prestige includes a set of behaviours that require showing respect and is aimed at persons, positions, social groups, nations, roles and situational context (Domański, 2012). Due to the fact that there are many types of prestige, we will reconstruct those reflected in current and former teachers' statements about their profession.

In seeking answers to the question about the determinants of prestige of the teaching profession, we must also consider that the hierarchy of prestige does not correspond to the hierarchy of earnings. Professors, doctors and teachers enjoy the highest respect. At the same time, society accepts the high salaries of entrepreneurs, located in the middle of the prestige hierarchy, and senior civil authorities (e.g. ministers, members of parliament, political party activists), who belong to the least respected professional groups. Over the years, adequate earnings of teachers were perceived as those equal to the wages of skilled workers (Domański, 2013) and civil authorities. The low remuneration of the intelligentsia was a characteristic of

the Polish People's Republic (PRL), therefore, persons in this group enjoyed greater prestige in society, somewhat compensating for the low salaries. It turns out that after 1989, the perception of a fair salary hierarchy has not changed. Moreover, in recent years, studies have shown the devaluation of higher education and the lack of a capital bonus related to education (Domański, 2013). Let us consider the extent to which these phenomena relate to the teaching profession.

The role of the teaching profession

The prestige of the profession and the role of teachers is influenced by the historical and social context. Anna Radziwiłł (1991) indicated that the reasons for changing prestige are to be found in the early creation of the profession. At a time when education was for the elites, tutors were accountable to parents for the level of education of their children. In the interwar period, there were two types of teachers. The first group consisted of academics who simultaneously taught in schools. Due to their high level of competence in the subjects taught, they enjoyed a high social position. The second group consisted of rural teachers, who taught in primary schools and were perceived as lacking a high level of expertise. They also had lower earnings (Jaroszuk, 2005).

With the generalisation and equalisation of the education system, the teacher became a functionary accountable to the state. In the Polish People's Republic (PRL), being a teacher provided the opportunity for rapid social advancement because of the great demand for persons to work in this profession. However, the quality of work and the meritocratic selection of people for teaching positions was not always respected, and the teaching staff was expected to be first and foremost loyal to the government (Kwiatkowska, 1991). The party leadership expected teachers – who at that time were members

of the state apparatus – to shape the “new socialist human being”. This limited open criticism of the performance of teachers. Contacts between parents and teachers were marked with fear and a lack of trust.

At the time of the PRL, the profession, previously regarded as one for the intelligentsia, became a profession of the masses. This was not accompanied by the introduction of appropriate mechanisms to verify the quality of the work. As a result, in the late 1980s, the number of teachers claiming that the profession was associated with a vocation decreased (Kwiatkowska, 1991). Teachers are one of the few professional groups that have not been subjected to the principles of competition, even after 1989. (Marody, 2007).

Currently, there are over 600 000 persons in the teaching profession, including 479 231 “blackboard” teachers, those teaching general subjects in schools for children and youth (Federowicz and Sitek, 2014). The mass nature of the teaching profession and the diversity of people performing it enables a hypothesis to be formed about the uneven prestige of the profession. The different expectations of various groups regarding the role of the teacher: students, parents, the school or local authorities, are also significant. These expectations may be contradictory and impossible to fulfil simultaneously.

The image of the teacher is also shaped by the activities of trade unions. Representatives of the so-called independent professions, e.g. lawyers and doctors, are usually affiliated in organisations which focus on the interests of the profession, selection to the profession, and maintaining its ethical standards. For this reason, we decided to examine the opinions on the role of teacher unions and their influence on the prestige of the profession. We asked teachers about the *Teacher's Charter* – a document which gives the profession special rights, regulating, among others, their hiring, dismissal and promotion.

International studies

In Poland, as in other countries, society places the teaching profession relatively high in the hierarchy of professional prestige. At the same time, teachers themselves are convinced of the declining prestige of their profession (Fuller, Goodwyn and Francis-Brophy, 2013; Pérez-Díaz and Rodríguez, 2014; Verhoeven, Aelterman, Rots, and Buvens, 2006). This is reinforced by negative media coverage of teachers and their work. International studies from the late 1990s found that many teachers in European countries have a sense that their profession is underestimated by the public (Eurydice, 2004). Such beliefs do not help in building confidence in one's professional role and do not increase the attractiveness of the profession itself. In contemporary Western societies, the promotion of values unrelated to public sector work (e.g. the focus on financial success, using material goods to build one's position, entrepreneurship and highly specialised knowledge) influences the perception of the teaching profession as not particularly prestigious.

In studies conducted in Flanders (Belgium), Jef C. Verhoeven and colleagues (2006) did not report a decline in the esteem (defined as respect for individuals pursuing a profession and satisfaction with their work) of the teaching profession, although in the public debate, there was a common opinion about the lack of public respect for the profession. They pointed to the influence of various characteristics of the respondents on the evaluation of teachers: the greater the interest in education, good experiences in school, satisfaction with teachers of their own children, a lower the degree of utilitarian individualism, the greater the respect for teachers. According to researchers, teachers have the potential to change the way their profession is perceived by others – particularly due to an improved approach

to students and their parents (Verhoeven et al., 2006). The Belgian study also showed that despite the high esteem of teachers, their social status (defined as: remuneration, knowledge, responsibility, social utility and prestige) was not always perceived unambiguously. The teaching profession in comparison to the professions of: police officer, librarian, cashier in a bank, social worker, secretary, manager and pharmacist, has, in the opinion of society, greater utility, but lower earnings. The knowledge and prestige of teachers was rated slightly lower than for other professions, whereas responsibility was positioned at various levels, depending on the profession it was compared to (Verhoeven et al., 2006).

A study on redefining the professionalisation of the teaching profession conducted in the UK showed the ambiguity of the role of the teacher. On one hand, teachers have expertise, responsibility, autonomy of action – when conducting lessons. At the same time, teachers as a mass profession, have very specific responsibilities, working schedules and methods of accounting for performed tasks, which makes them feel that they are not fully independent (Fuller et al., 2013). Moreover, the study also emphasised the complexity of the responsibilities of teachers – they were accountable both to the government, local authorities, media, parents and students.

Information about the study

The information presented in this article is from qualitative research on “The socio-professional position of teachers and their opportunities in the school and non-school labour market” conducted at the Educational Research Institute between October and December 2014. The main objectives of the study were to reconstruct the mechanisms of the formation of the socio-professional position of teachers, identify opportunities

for teachers in the school and non-school labour market and describe and analyse the perception of the position of the teaching profession by both teachers and members of their social environment.

We looked for answers to question about the factors affecting the high or low prestige of the profession in the statements of teachers who either worked in schools or left the profession. A summary of the opinions of the respondents from both groups allowed us to better understand the determinants of the prestige of the teaching profession in contemporary Poland. We assumed that the comparison of present and past work experience will allow us to better understand the benefits and costs of performing the teaching profession and its perceived prestige. In order to draw the reader’s attention to the differences in the statements, we emphasised the status of former and current teachers. In cases where their opinions were consistent, we used the term “respondents”.

We are fully aware that the data we obtained is qualitative in nature, and, therefore, does not allow us to draw conclusions about the prestige of all teachers in Poland. However, the collected material can be used to identify the determinants of the prestige of the profession, the factors that differentiate it and above all – inspire further research questions.

Problem

The observed discrepancy between the results of research, media coverage and what teachers think about themselves, was the reason we asked questions about the place of teachers in the professional hierarchy from their own perspective, the diversity of prestige within the profession, and the factors that weaken and build prestige. We also looked for an explanation of the discrepancy between the social perception of the teaching profession as a prestigious profession and the lack of the sense of prestige

felt by teachers themselves. We were also interested in the importance of the *Teacher's Charter* and trade unions in terms of the socio-professional position of teachers.

Study subjects

The study included: teachers of primary and lower secondary schools in rural areas, teachers of primary and lower secondary schools in cities, as well as teachers of all types of upper secondary schools (general, vocational and basic vocational schools), former teachers, who for various reasons no longer work in the profession, but have not yet reached retirement age; school principals; representatives of local government units responsible for the area of education; students; parents of students in the last classes taught by the teacher-respondent; employers operating in the local education market (with the exception of schools for children and adolescents) and non-education market. The selection of schools was intentional – the study covered institutions with an average level of education as measured by the educational value added (EVA) indicator.

Study method

The study was qualitative in nature, using the case study method with the use of the triangulation of methods and sources from four locations in the Mazowieckie Voivodship: one village, two small towns (up to 20 000 inhabitants) and a metropolitan area. Because of the need to take into account contextual factors determining the socio-professional position of teachers, the criteria for the selection of cases included:

- the size of the city in which teachers work (divided into: a village of up to 5 000 inhabitants, a small town up to 20 000, a large city of over 500 000 inhabitants),
- the remuneration of teachers,
- the amount of the community's own revenues per capita,
- the unemployment rate in the community.

Materials for analysis

The study was carried out in the following manner: 103 individual in-depth interviews were carried out with teachers, former teachers, school principals and representatives of local governments and employers, as well as 23 focus group interviews with students, students' parents and employers. The respondents included, among others, 52 teachers (41 women, 11 men) and 29 former teachers (15 women, 14 men). The collected research material was encoded using the Maxqda qualitative analysis program and subjected to qualitative analysis. The key code had 397 positions, with 121 relating to the prestige of the profession.

The position of the teacher as compared to other professions

In undertaking the topic of prestige in the teaching profession, we wondered where in the hierarchy of prestige the respondents would place themselves. In their opinion, teachers should be respected because they perform responsible work contributing to social development. Their responses indicate that there are many analogies between the teaching profession and other professions. When asked about comparisons with other professions, the respondents indicated medical doctor, and then priest, nurse, psychologist or psychiatrist, social worker, lawyer, sculptor, academic professor, official, librarian and military worker. According to the respondents, the teaching profession requires many competences, readiness to render assistance, ability to solve students' problems, ensuring safety and supervision, transferring knowledge and empathy. The respondents were referring here to positional prestige.

It is worth noting the respondents' belief that all persons performing jobs characterised by high social utility, with a special commitment to the development of society and

the performance of public service, deserve particular social respect, because their work is often done at the expense of their private lives and includes sacrificing personal happiness. In addition, the responses of teachers and former teachers also included parallels to the artistic professions, e.g. the profession of an actor and sculptor. Like an actor, the teacher must play different roles in the theatre of school, and is constantly observed, which can be very stressful.

Despite several analogies to the independent professions, the work itself has much in common with the work of a bureaucrat, particularly in terms of monotony, its time consuming nature, over-regulation, and limited freedom of action. The TALIS 2013 international quantitative study showed that Polish teachers spend a similar amount of time on activities relating to bureaucratic requirements as teachers in other countries (Hernik, 2015). As a result, teachers in many countries feel that they are part of a complicated bureaucratic machine, and like clerks, produce successive reports instead of focusing on teaching. Teachers are also required to educate children and youth in accordance with the norms, values and patterns of conduct applicable in a given society.

What came to my mind was the job of a bureaucrat. A functionary, or maybe a military job. Professions which are associated either with a certain monotony or with some kind of authority over someone who requires honing.

[lower secondary school teacher, small town]

Teachers feel that their autonomy at work has been limited by the introduction of external exams. It has forced them to change the style of teaching – it limits opportunities for discussions with students, asking questions and seeking answers. Many of them said that the school curricula require less and less from students and, therefore, the

learning process has become less interesting. As a result, teachers have ceased to perceive their work in the category of being specialists – professionals.

The analysis of comments revealed a discrepancy between the image and reality, which makes teachers feel less satisfied with their jobs, perceive their profession as less creative and less valuable than they assumed it would be when they made their career decisions. However, according to Polish law, this profession has quite a high level of autonomy – the curriculum can be taught using teachers' own teaching programme.

When asked about who is perceived as a successful person today, and why, teachers had no doubt that such a person is one who has achieved financial success. High social status is also determined by popularity in the media – this is why, according to teachers, football players, music and movie stars are respected more than others today. Respondents also believed that society has less recognition for teachers than for politicians or middle administration personnel. Such an opinion differs from the results of research on the prestige of occupations in which government officials and politicians are in last place in the hierarchy (CBOS, 2013). This may result from a feeling of dependence on local politicians.

Some of the practising teachers complained about the fact that the prestige of their profession is decreasing, but they tend to blame external factors for this – the poor education of youth, the role of media in creating a negative image of the teacher, too many students' rights. As for internal professional causes, they mentioned the worse training of younger colleagues. On the other hand, former teachers associated the decline in the prestige of the profession with the methods of work. They pointed out that while there are not many persons suffering burn-out among teachers, many lack passion and commitment to the job.

It seems to me that today we don't have real teachers; those who are entering the profession, they aren't those teachers, the ones who were passionate about it.

[lower secondary school teacher, rural area]

I think, I mean I have the impression, that the bell curve describes this group of people in an objective way; the average dominates.

[former teacher, large city]

that such teachers do not need a master's degree also affects the lower prestige of early childhood education teachers.

This refers to the subjects that teachers teach, because, unfortunately, in our country people think that anyone can be a preschool teacher, in contrast to someone who teaches mathematics or Polish, which are considered subjects that really have to be learnt.

[basic vocational school teacher, large city]

Differentiation of the prestige of teachers

The respondents stated that it is unfair to treat all teachers as a homogeneous group: "We are treated *en masse*, but teachers differ from one another" [vocational upper secondary school teacher, small town]. The question therefore arises: Which teachers enjoy greater or lesser prestige, and why? The analysis of the collected material showed that the prestige of teachers is determined by both institutional factors relating to the education system (e.g. the importance of individual subjects, the specific stages of education), as well as factors associated with the style of school management (relationships with the school principal, atmosphere among teachers). Personal qualities are also important.

Stages of education and the subjects taught

Respondents explain the different positions of teachers in terms of the subjects taught or educational stages: working to prepare students for a difficult exam or subject competitions is socially more respected than working with small children. The respondents also stated that teachers of matriculation subjects are closer to academic staff, whereas early education or preschool teachers are closer to the role of a parent or guardian. The former must have high qualifications in the subject area and the ability to communicate complex knowledge, the latter – should be able to take care of small children, which apparently every adult is able to do. The fact

Meanwhile, teachers themselves emphasised that those working in early childhood education, who have a huge responsibility for preparing children for further studies, should be particularly recognised. They form the foundation for teachers at subsequent stages of education.

A preschool teacher is certainly an absolute authority for children, regardless of who he/she is, what he/she represents, the teacher is most important. Then it changes. But my principal always said that the class is like its teacher, like its tutor. He believed that if a teacher-tutor was disciplined, the class was also disciplined. If the teacher is chaotic, the class is chaotic.

[former teacher, small town]

The differences in the level of prestige among teachers also result from the type of subjects taught. According to some, "a math teacher has a much better chance of enjoying respect than a PE teacher." [lower secondary school teacher, small town]. However, physical education teachers claimed the opposite. They think they have an advantage over teachers of Polish or history, because physical education classes are not held in classrooms, they are more dynamic and diverse, and the methods used in working with students favour the formation of closer ties. In their statements, PE teachers referred to the characteristics that make up for personal prestige. The respondents ranked teachers of science, humanities or the arts differently – usually

favouring the former. They said that teachers of vocational subjects ranked at the end.

In addition, the differences in prestige perceived by teachers are also linked to the length of time in teaching. Some respondents indicated the higher prestige of people working in the profession for many years, due to their broad experience and skill in working with students.

Relationships among teachers

The differences in the perception of personal prestige among teachers may also result from their relationships with the school principal and other teachers. Determinants of a high position among the teaching staff, however, may be different from those that apply, e.g. when dealing with parents. The respondents pointed out that teachers who cared about communication with parents frequently were highly recognised by them, but were disapproved by their colleagues, who do not view school as a place for parents and do not treat parents as equal participants in school life.

Someone gave their phone number, which was great for parents and showed that you are a normal, nice person, but colleagues were threatened by this, because someone could come and ask: why don't you do the same?

[former teacher, large city]

The social position of teachers is lowered by the relationships among the teaching staff, especially the relationship between the school principal and teachers. This was pointed out particularly by former teachers. Divisions among the teaching staff reduce the comfort of work and adversely affect self-efficacy. Teachers can be humiliated by colleagues or superiors, which significantly reduces the level of satisfaction with their work. The feeling of underestimation and unjustified criticism means that teachers see themselves in a negative light, complain about their work environment, rather than

try to change the situation, to have greater autonomy and a greater influence on decisions concerning the school. Former teachers said that an important reason for leaving their jobs were the poor relations among the teaching staff.

This hasn't happened to me [in my new job – ed. author.], for example, for the director to shout at me as if I were a child. And, unfortunately, this happened at school when, for example, the principal was in a bad mood.

[former teacher, rural area]

The size of the community

Finally, the responses of the interviewed teachers indicate that the perception of the teaching profession and those performing it is different in small and large communities. In a small village, the teacher is widely recognised, and thus far more exposed to evaluation by the residents than in a large city. On one hand, he/she is treated as a member of the local elite, a person occupying a high social position, and as such enjoys the respect of others. On the other hand, his/her mode of work and financial situation frequently become the object of criticism and envy. In small communities, an open exchange of opinions between teachers and residents in public areas is not uncommon. Teachers do not tolerate such criticism and may react sharply to opinions about their work.

For example, during the summer I go to the store, I do the shopping and I hear: "Oh, you're so lucky". Because I'm on holiday. I say: "I'm not on holiday, I'm on leave." I say: "And do you take into account that I cannot take leave in May or June, when for example, lodgings at the seaside are much cheaper?" So they look at me and I say: "Well, don't look at me like that." And then I add: "And another thing, who prevented you from studying?" And then the conversation stops. But most often I hear: "You're so lucky, because you're on holiday."

[lower secondary school teacher, rural area]

In communities with high unemployment rates and low per capita incomes, teachers are seen as a particularly privileged group, enjoying a well-paid job performed in a comfortable environment that takes up relatively little time. For this reason, the relationship between residents and teachers often includes jealousy concerning social security. It is, therefore, difficult for teachers to gain the sympathy of the local community, and any kind of involvement in non-governmental organisations arouses suspicion. Additional activities undertaken by teachers are treated not so much as a manifestation of their willingness to work for the local community, but rather as actions that are to additionally benefit the teachers themselves. Whereas in large communities, according to the respondents, personal prestige resulting from personal traits is much more important, and not the characteristics of the occupied position, re-enacted roles or institutions where they work. In this context, the public perception of how a teacher works is particularly significant.

Teachers in urban general upper secondary schools are definitely more distanced from the negative image of their profession. This is because they usually have contact with people who appreciate their work and who understand that teachers have a special place in society. And these are the opinions they value. Such insights are confirmed by CBOS research on the prestige of professions – people with college degrees appreciate teachers more and support their demands for increased salaries.

The perception of the position of the profession can also be mediated by the assessment of the socio-economic status of their own family. Husbands of the interviewed teachers (in two of the four villages) performed simple physical work – so the low perception of their own professional prestige may have resulted from the assessment of the status of the family as a whole. When

asked to describe a successful person, the respondents usually thought in moral categories: a successful person was described as one who is satisfied with their own life, enjoying personal freedom, autonomy, who attained internal harmony, is fulfilled especially in the area of family life, who performs a rewarding job. This type of argument may point to an attempt to rationalise their socio-professional position and separate it from the economic context.

Since we know how current and former teachers perceive the prestige of their profession, it is worth looking at the determinants of this state of affairs in their statements. It is noteworthy that when asked about the social image of the teaching profession, the respondents themselves mentioned factors lowering their social position, which is why we decided to present them in the first place. Then we will describe the factors that the respondents believe increase its prestige and present the postulated role of trade unions in the context of strengthening the prestige of the teaching profession.

Factors lowering the prestige of the teaching profession

Among the factors lowering prestige, the respondents mentioned social, cultural, institutional and personal factors. According to teachers, the perception of the teaching profession is mostly affected by the social changes taking place in the modern world. Most often they realise that the higher level of education of Polish society is accompanied by a reduction in their social role – they are no longer the few people who in the past could be proud of their college degree and they cease to be the main source of information for students. It seems that the educational and guardian function of the school is more important than teaching today, but this does not provide the profession with high prestige.

The decomposition of the elements of prestige

Definitions of prestige include several of its components: money, power, knowledge, social utility. However, along with social change, the determinants of social status have been decomposed. According to teachers, only those who achieve financial success are recognised today, while the way in which people perceive teachers' remuneration is complex. Teachers themselves believe that they earn little. They believe that society perceives their earnings in the category of net earnings, not gross value, which results in misconceptions about their salaries. What is significant, former teachers had a different opinion concerning their remuneration and believed that their wages were satisfactory, especially in small towns. In addition, they said that their salaries as teachers were higher than the remuneration they are receiving in their current jobs – working outside the education system.

I think that the salary of young teachers, in the first year of their work, isn't that low. It depends where you live, where you work, if it's Warsaw, or if it's a village, like ours. It all depends on the cost of living. I think that it's a well-paid job in our area.

[former teacher, rural area]

A teacher's salary consists of a base sum guaranteed by the government and several bonuses, including a motivational incentive. However, interviewed teachers said that incentives and bonuses should be allocated in an egalitarian manner, because "everyone does their best". The category of different abilities or work results does not appear in their statements frequently.

I also think it is very unfair that management makes incentive payments and no one knows what for. It's done secretly and one person has, for example, I don't know, twenty percent – another has nothing. So, for example, someone who's been teaching for twenty years has

never received any salary supplement. This is very unfair, like the supplement for tutoring a class. This is very unfair, because ... it's not like one person is a better teacher and someone else is worse. This isn't the case. Everyone is trying to the best of their abilities.

[vocational upper secondary school teacher, small town]

When explaining the lack of respect for teachers, the respondents pointed to insufficient public awareness about the specifics of their work. The public does not know about the actual responsibilities of teachers, and therefore does not understand the complexity and responsibility of their work. Teachers are perceived as people working a few hours a day, having free weekends, a long vacation and holiday breaks. Teachers have no doubt that the public perceives them as people whose remuneration is too high in relation to their actual workload. Meanwhile, in the perception of the respondents, the teacher's job does not end when they leave the school building. It is particularly difficult to separate work from personal life. Preparing for lessons, checking students' papers, filling out the paperwork for school is socially depreciated, or even unnoticed, also because most often these activities are performed at home, not at school. Moreover, sometimes even persons in the respondents' immediate environment do not understand the specifics of the profession. This is what one mother of an interviewed teacher said:

My mum says: Well you don't really do anything. You either teach your courses, or you play with the children. So? Christmas is coming and you'll be on holiday again.

[primary school teacher, small town]

People who are not in a close relationship with a teacher have no idea what a hard job it is. Because it's not just work with students. It is also work with parents. And it's becoming more difficult, because parents have more and

more rights. And we have less. There's a huge amount of paperwork. And it really takes up a lot of time. I, for example, am always taking a big bag full of exercise books or notebooks or tests for the weekend. [...] It is very time consuming and it's a big problem. It's a hard job.

[lower secondary school teacher, big city]

Above all, the respondents blame the media (both traditional and electronic) for the negative opinions of teachers, as they believe that the media maintain and reproduce a false image of the profession. The media often inform about sensational, negative or scandalous events that happen in the school environment.

The low prestige of the profession also results from the social context of the role of the modern teacher. The respondents argued that a teacher performs a "subservient role" in the society. He/she is required to teach and educate the young generation. The performance of educational, care and teaching roles, according to the teachers themselves, is not a determinant of status, it does not provide teachers with a high place in the social hierarchy. This results in low self-esteem and the more frequent assumption of the role of a victim, deprived of one's own opinion and one's own voice in relationships with parents.

Teachers today perform a subservient role in society, in the sense that they have to be there, have to serve, have to teach children, share their knowledge and also educate, but they are no person of importance.

[primary school teacher, small town]

Former teachers indicate that the lower prestige of the profession may also result from the fact that teachers stopped performing important functions in local communities. Whereas previously, this was an important aspect of their activity, today, this function has been dispersed – it is performed by library directors, leaders of non-governmental organisations or cultural centres.

It is no longer a profession where the teacher is the guru, the leader. The leaders are completely different now. In the past, teachers were the leaders of local communities, they were often members of municipal councils, they undertook various initiatives. Because in the past the teacher was someone important. This is not the case now. Now it is just one of many professions.

[former teacher, rural area]

Student subjectivity

Former teachers also note that the prestige of the profession has decreased due to an increase in the subjectivity of the individual. Today, it is no longer possible to build authority on imbalance, using methods based on fear and the punishment of students. Despite this, some teachers cannot give up resorting to the argument of force and use it to maintain discipline in the classroom. There is an apparent longing for traditional education methods, although contemporary pedagogical trends propose an increase in active engagement, subjectivity and cooperation between teachers and students. This is due to the spread of the constructivist approach in which the learning process is seen as the formation of knowledge, rather than mere transmission, as well as democratic parenting, where the child is treated as an equal partner and more attention is paid to his/her needs. Although the results of the TALIS 2013 survey showed that the constructivist approach is supported by almost every Polish teacher, they fail to use the techniques of more actively involving students (Hernik, 2015). Some teachers have negative opinions about the increase of the subjectivity of students, the changing nature of the relationship in the classroom, accusing students of a lack of respect for authority. Others try to build their position by closing the distance between themselves and students. Such teachers become idols for young people, but are not respected by their colleagues.

We used to treat students with respect and they trusted and respected us. It worked both ways. But when I hear teachers addressing students “Hey, dude”, “Hey, you” and whistling to them, I feel offended. A teacher cannot drop to the same level as the student.

[former teacher, small town]

The issue of increased students’ rights is also problematic. The respondents indicate that not only their privileges are important, but also clearly defined policies and procedures making students responsible for violations of generally accepted school rules, but there are few tools to enforce them. Former teachers even postulated that teachers should have a greater impact on the fate of undisciplined students, because today even the most unruly students are not deprived of their rights. This is proof of the weakness of the standards currently in force in schools.

Contrary to beliefs, it is very difficult to expel a student from school. It is impossible to expel even the worst hooligans. And it shouldn’t be like that. I think that the teacher should have more say in such matters.

[former teacher, big city]

On the other hand, former teachers pointed out that professional prestige is not raised by talking about “bad and disobedient students”, who are impossible to work with. Respondents stressed the need to take more responsibility for relationships with students.

If at parent–teacher meetings, the teacher is constantly repeating: “Your child is so and so... He gets into trouble all the time, he doesn’t study, etc.”, I think respect decreases. Because we should start by judging ourselves and see what we are doing wrong, and only then can we go and say that the child doesn’t study and is constantly getting into trouble.

[former teacher, rural area]

Relations with students’ parents

The respondents explained the declining prestige of the teaching profession also by the way the profession is perceived by students’ parents. Teachers reminisced about the time they went to school, when the teaching profession was respected. In particular, they referred to the time when parents taught their children respect for those who practiced the profession giving their own example: they emphasised the uniqueness of teachers, required their children to respect and obey them – educated people, who were authorities for themselves and their children, with knowledge, skills and social competences.

When I went to school, I was taught, and my parents told me, that the teacher is a very important person, educated, and is always right. We would never say that the teacher was stupid or wrong. Only that I should always listen to the teachers, because he/she is a wise person and always says the right things. And I left home believing this.

[lower secondary school teacher, rural area]

Among the factors lowering the prestige of the profession, teachers mentioned the lack of professionalism in relationships with parents. Parents who spontaneously (e.g. on the school corridor) initiate a conversation with the teacher about the progress of their child or about his/her problems, are seen as those who do not respect the work of teachers. Teachers, on the other hand, do not know how to require parents to make appointments for such discussions, so that both parties can talk in a more conducive atmosphere and focus on matters concerning the student.

The low prestige of the profession is not only a consequence of unreasonable expectations towards teachers, but also of blaming each other for students’ failures. Teachers feel that they are blamed for poor exam performance, as well as the behavioural and personal problems of youth. They stress that

the responsibility for the learning process, care and education does not rest exclusively with them. Former teachers emphasise that parents and children themselves are to blame for their failure and lack of motivation. Confrontational attitudes rarely lead to common corrective actions taken by teachers and parents.

Institutional factors

Preparation for the profession

Public opinion perceives teachers as lacking sufficiently high competence to be able to practice the profession. Respondents frequently pointed out that teachers are viewed as not performing their work well enough or engaging students in the subject matter. Former teachers were more critical. They believed that the majority of people working in the profession were not able to equip students with key competencies, especially the soft skills necessary to function well in society.

Unfortunately, I think this is still a big problem that affects teachers themselves, that they have no clue about civil society, which we are to co-create and be its core. I have a big problem with this. The level of ignorance and the approach is frightening.

[former teacher, small town]

According to the respondents, teachers who are beginning their careers are insufficiently prepared for the job. To a large extent, this is the result of opinions about the current education system, whose quality was evaluated as worse by the respondents when compared to the 1980s and 1990s. Many of them said that their trainees were people who had difficulty in expressing themselves, preparing lesson scenarios or filling out school paperwork. Moreover, pedagogy studies are perceived as fairly easy, in contrast, for example, to medical school or law.

The majority, really, are people who cannot express themselves properly, who have certain gaps in elementary knowledge. [...] These are young people, like I said, who haven't the faintest idea, anyway, like me – when they enter the profession – about administration, filling in a log, filling in forms, and so on.

[primary school teacher, small town]

The system of promotion

The respondents also saw the reasons for the changing prestige of the teaching profession in the system of promotion. It is difficult for public opinion to view the occupation in terms of professional success when a teacher's career path is fairly short – the highest professional level can be reached within ten years of beginning work. Respondents see the existing system of promotion not so much as a mechanism confirming one's qualifications for the job, but rather as a way to increase one's salary. In addition, according to teachers, the prestige of the profession is also decreased by formalism and control – present in their daily work.

The career path is quite short. I believe there is no chance for promotion. For example, someone in a corporation starts by being a telephone operator, and later may become a member of the board. As for teachers, this is not the case. In fact, you are constantly at the same level. All you can do is achieve a higher degree of advancement, which is, so to speak, pure paperwork, and you get higher pay.

[lower secondary school teacher, small town]

When discussing the topic of the teaching's prestige, the fact that it is a feminised profession must be mentioned, which may mean that it is less prestigious. However, the statements of the interviewed teachers do not mention this. Although teachers are convinced that a salary increase would translate into an increase in the number of men employed in the profession, the sex ratio is less important to them than attracting the best people.

*

It is significant that among the factors lowering the prestige of the teaching profession, several result from the transformation of Polish society, such as: universal access to knowledge (possible thanks to computerisation and digitisation), the massification of higher education, increased consumerism, increased individualisation and the need to express subjectivity. The respondents also mentioned institutional factors relating to the educational system in Poland, which may lower the prestige of the profession: teacher training, the promotion system and the democratisation of school life. While explaining the relatively low social prestige of the profession, teachers noted the role of the media in creating a false image of teaching. The analysis of the research material allowed a mechanism to be identified, consisting of removing responsibility for the lack of prestige from the people who perform the profession and transferring it to external factors, especially macro-social factors. The declining prestige of the teaching profession was rarely explained by the respondents as being caused by a lack of professionalism, poor work quality or bad relationships with students or their parents.

Factors building the prestige of the teaching profession

Despite a long list of conditions affecting the decline in the prestige of the teaching profession, statements made by respondents also include factors that enhance it. A key role is played by personality traits. An open, listening, understanding, empathetic teacher is more respected by students and parents. The style of work is also important. According to the respondents, a teacher who is involved and involves students in the life of the school, who is able to develop a fuller relationship with students and maintain

good relations with their parents is much more respected.

For me, this is my whole life. It is a challenge, it is a passion, it is love for what I do, it is a sacrifice for sure.

[general upper secondary school teacher, small town]

What is more, a reliable teacher, consistent in words and deeds, honest and fair in assessing students, inspires respect among students. Students value those teachers who present their subject in an interesting way and encourage them to learn. Those who are able to develop a master-student relationship, who guide students not only in the area being taught, but also in other aspects of social life, e.g. human relations and moral values, gain particular respect. Demanding teachers, who transfer knowledge that is useful in the later stages of education or in adult life, are also particularly valued. Sometimes, it takes time for students to recognise the huge commitment of teachers to their personal development.

I think students quickly recognise dull people. Because such people are unable to apply appropriate pedagogical techniques in contacts with students. If students see that teachers are passionate about what they are doing, that they have other interests outside the school, they quickly gain respect.

[former teacher, large city]

And on the other hand, it may take some time for a teacher to gain respect. Students who finish school here and go on to secondary school only then understand why the teacher was demanding. They think: I'm attending secondary school, and I don't have a problem with this subject, I am praised. Such a student will return, talk to and thank the teacher for what they did.

[lower secondary school, rural area]

Respondents stressed the need to make the public aware that for a large group of

teachers, their professional work is part of a lifestyle, based on strong internal motivation. Teachers approaching their professional duties in such a way were described as those who love their job and do it with dedication and commitment. They demanded respect for their sacrifice, rather than for their knowledge.

The analysis of teacher responses allowed us to distinguish two types of persons who were active and engaged in their work: social activists and professionals. The first group supports the ethos of the intelligentsia, sees their mission as the disinterested action to benefit students, helps them in situations not related to the transfer of knowledge, especially in dealing with personal and family problems. The second group includes experts in their field, with high professional and didactic competence. They place great emphasis on the quality of the lessons, both in terms of the transfer of knowledge, skills, as well as the style of working with students. They promote active methods of teaching and constantly strive for further professional development. Both groups are greatly respected by students.

In the eyes of the respondents, the social prestige of the profession and persons performing it could be increased by more autonomy, decision-making and participation in school management. This is especially true of younger teachers, who usually feel overlooked and excluded from the process of managing the school (Grzęda, 2010). It should be noted, however, that this postulate is directed primarily to representatives of local governments or school principals, as current Polish law presents opportunities to promote such activities. The responses of the interviewed teachers suggest that even though legislation provides such solutions, too little attention is paid to their implementation.

I think teachers should have more freedom in terms of how to conduct a lesson, how to manage the class. I'm not only talking

about issues related to teaching, but also to tutorship.

[lower secondary school teacher, small town]

The responses of teachers lead to a conclusion that the prestige of the profession is also related to the role of the school itself. As a socially responsible institution, occupying a central place in the life of the local community, it teaches, educates and cares for students. This is what determines the high prestige of teachers who work in schools and who build their position in the local community and in cooperation with it.

The role of trade unions

Representative organisations could refute stereotypes about the teaching profession. Teacher unions are among the strongest in Poland, and their representatives often speak out in the media, thus shaping the image of the profession. When reflecting on the actions the trade unions could take in order to strengthen the prestige of the teaching profession, the respondents pointed to the dissemination of information about the specifics of a teacher's job, its complexity, responsibility and time-consuming nature. In the opinion of interested parties, it is essential that the trade unions stop defending only the privileges of teaching and begin to develop a positive image of the profession.

I wish they would refute the lies, those about the nature of our work. Show what the work is really like every day, that it's not such an easy thing to do, it is a responsible job, above all, we are responsible for young people and not a simple machine that needs to be handled.

[vocational upper secondary school teacher, large city]

Another activity that could and should be performed by such organisations is an attempt to limit the changes being introduced. Trade unions should ensure that

policy makers listen to teachers, that the introduction of regulations is preceded by a discussion with teaching staffs. One example of a bad practice was the lack of protests by the Polish Teachers' Union (Związek Nauczycielstwa Polskiego, ZNP) when private universities were opened and offered low-quality teacher training courses, making the teaching profession available to everyone.

It is worth emphasising that critical voices were also heard among the responses of current and former teachers on the role of trade unions in building and strengthening the prestige of the teaching profession. In the opinion of those surveyed, by striving to maintain the privileges granted to teachers by successive governments, union activists contribute to lowering the position of the profession. All the respondents believe that ZNP should break away from the infamous image of an organisation operating in the communist era, and talk about its history and genesis more often¹.

Trade unions should change their mentality, because, unfortunately, they have the mentality of the early 1990s. Their philosophy is to preserve the past. They want to defend, not to violate anything, not one step further, not to change even one amendment to the *Teacher's Charter* or implementation rules. Because all of this is seen as an attack on the "golden freedom of the nobility" – in quotation marks, of course. They harm teachers by restricting them with the chains of the *Teacher's Charter*.

[former teacher, small town]

Differences were expressed by present and former teachers on the role of trade unions in the issue of salary increases. Teachers who called for an increase in the prestige of the profession by raising

remuneration believe that unions have the capacity to lead to such changes. In contrast, those who do not believe that an increase in teacher salaries is a major factor in building the profession's prestige (mainly former teachers among them) did not expect the unions to raise this issue.

I don't want unions to fight for teachers. I want the unions to fight for good schools, and I don't think they are doing this. They are fighting to keep the *Teacher's Charter* so that teachers can keep their jobs. I don't think this is a good direction. We don't need so many teachers.

[former teacher, large city]

All the respondents stressed that unions should no longer limit their support only to teachers belonging to the unions. Moreover, they demanded that the voice of the whole community and its real needs be taken into account.

Someone who is a trade unionist, belongs to the Polish Teachers' Union comes to the principal and says: "I am a protected employee" and there is nothing anyone can do, even if there are complaints from students, parents or other people. They will stay, even if they are doing a poor job.

[former teacher, large city]

From what I observe in the media, the unions are virtually invisible and their demands do not always coincide with the actual demands of teachers, with what teachers really need.

[lower secondary school teacher, small town]

There were also opinions that increasing the prestige of the teaching profession is not the role of trade unions, but of teachers themselves. This strengthens the already mentioned postulate for every teacher to build personal prestige with his/her attitude and work, which may contribute to the growth of the prestige of the entire profession.

¹ Polish Teachers' Union dates back to the interwar period, as the result of a merger of the Association of Polish Teachers of Common Schools and the Trade Union of Polish Teachers of Secondary Schools.

The prestige of the teaching profession in the context of the provisions of the *Teacher's Charter*

Teachers, as one of the few professions, are employed by the local government on the basis of the *Teacher's Charter*. This law, regulating the rights and responsibilities of teachers, takes precedence over the Labour Code. How does this type of employment translate into the prestige of the profession? The answers to this question depend on the professional status of the respondents.

Teachers did not offer clear proposals for changes to the *Teacher's Charter* in terms of increasing the prestige of the profession. Some respondents admitted that they are not familiar enough with the contents of the document to be able to propose anything. A few noted that the Charter defends the interests of both the teachers who perform their work well, as well as those who do it poorly – and this is why it should be changed.

Former teachers provided many arguments for the abolition of the privileges in the law. They saw the provisions of the *Teacher's Charter* as unfavourable in terms of increasing the quality of work, agreeing with the opinion that it protects poor employees. The present system of the promotion, assessment and recruitment of teachers does not motivate the continuous improvement of professional skills. Moreover, the provisions of this Charter perpetuate false beliefs about the work of teachers and reinforce negative opinions about them as a privileged group. Former teachers stated that schools should be operated like private companies. Such a management style would favour competition and value the best employees. Moreover, the *Teacher's Charter* is, in their opinion, contrary to the idea of the democratisation of school life and the equitable functioning of its various actors, as it defends the privileges of teachers, not the school as a whole.

If a teacher is employed by appointment, the Charter protects him/her so that even in the case of serious shortcomings, a disparaging approach to the taught subject, responsibility, scope of activities, the principal cannot dismiss such a person. Of course, there are some possibilities, but they are very radical, you need to have evidence and even then, the person can appeal the decision to the labour court, and probably has to have some serious backup there.

[former teacher, small town]

The Charter is not realistic. You see, the school should serve the student. According to the *Teacher's Charter*, the school is for the teacher. [...] For example, you have to give the teacher a salary supplement, an incentive, because the *Teacher's Charter* says that teachers should receive incentives. This isn't normal.

[former teacher, small town]

Summary and conclusions

The responses of both present and former teachers provided answers to the questions about the prestige of the teaching profession – its conditions and diversity. When asked to determine the position of the teacher among other professional groups, it was placed in a high position by the respondents. When asked, however, about daily manifestations of respect, they said that their profession is not respected by society. This discrepancy is related to the types of prestige the respondents referred to. In the context of the hierarchy of professions, respondents evaluated positional prestige. They appealed to social norms, according to which the teacher deserves prestige, as he/she performs a responsible function and contributes to the socialisation of future generations. Meanwhile, when asked about the signs of prestige, they admitted that they enjoy lower social esteem than those who achieve financial success. Teachers also believe that persons who teach at higher levels of education (e.g.

in secondary schools) enjoy greater prestige than those teaching in other types of schools. However, teachers from smaller towns rarely enjoy prestige – they are rather the object of local residents' misunderstanding and jealousy.

Teachers attributed the reasons for the few signs of social respect primarily to the attitudes of parents and media coverage. They blamed the former for a lack of interest in their children and the use of indulgent behavioural methods. The media, on the other hand, were accused of disseminating an untrue and unfair image of the teaching profession. Reflections on the faults of teachers themselves and social changes influencing the public perception of the profession were not commonly stated. Among them, the most important concerns related to the devaluation of higher education. Teachers are seen less as professionals and more as clerks, and this is how they characterise their profession. Teachers highlight the importance of their vocation, rather than knowledge and competence, which does not help their image. According to the respondents, the particular social role of the profession supports the argument in favour of retaining their privileges or raising remuneration – performing socially useful roles deserves special treatment. Substantive arguments or those in support of the effectiveness of their work were not mentioned.

The profession is currently performed by a large group of people, which implies individual differences among teachers themselves. At a professional level, this results in different motivations, degree of engagement, working styles, including a particular approach to students, parents and colleagues. The respondents had no doubt that teachers are not a homogeneous group, and as such, some of them enjoy more and others less respect among students, parents, colleagues and authorities. Based on the comments of respondents, we can conclude that those who

noticed the changing role of the school and the new tasks waiting for teachers, are more respected by society. Teachers who build their relationships with students and parents, ensuring respect for the individual, dialogue, mutual understanding, and who try to be guides in building knowledge together with the student, have much higher prestige. For such teachers, the teaching profession is an element of lifestyle, and living in a society based on knowledge requires continuous professional development. However, teachers who do not see, who do not want to or cannot meet the demands of a changing school, who yearn for the tools enabling their professional position to be built on power, strength and fear, are also not lacking.

While searching for factors strengthening the social status of the teaching profession, the respondents attributed the greatest importance to personal characteristics. Sometimes, however, the teacher is respected by students and parents, but does not feel respected by colleagues, or the principal, which significantly reduces job satisfaction.

Trade unions could be a factor supporting the professionalisation of the profession. They should not defend privileges, but rather disseminate information about the specifics, complexity and responsibility of the teacher's work, change the negative image of teachers, act not only in the interest of a diverse group of professionals, but also for the quality of the staff, the selectivity in accepting candidates at universities and their elite character. In the end, it would be important to introduce the principle of competition. This would allow the best people to be attracted and retained in the profession.

The research results also revealed the diversity of understanding the word "prestige". For some respondents, it was synonymous with respect, for others – authority, while still others saw it in terms of success in life. This observation opens the door to further research on the decomposition of prestige

of the teaching profession, as well as its components. It may turn out that a more functional category describing the position of the teaching profession would include the concept of authority or respect rather than prestige.

Literature

- Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej (2013). *Prestiż zawodów*. [Working paper no. BS/164/2013.] Warszawa: Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej.
- Domański, H. (2012). *Prestiż*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika.
- Domański, H. (2013). *Sprawiedliwe nierówności zarobków*. Warszawa: Scholar.
- Eurydice (2004). *The teaching profession in Europe: profile, trends and concerns. Report IV. Keeping teaching attractive for the 21st century. General lower secondary education*. Brussels: Eurydice.
- Federowicz, M. (ed.). (2014). *Raport o stanie edukacji 2013. Liczą się nauczyciele*. Warszawa: Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych.
- Federowicz, M., Haman, J., Herczyński, J., Hernik, K., Krawczyk-Radwan, M., Malinowska, K., Pawłowski, M., Strawiński, P., Walczak, D. and Wichrowski, A. (2013). *Czas pracy i warunki pracy w relacjach nauczycieli*. Warszawa: Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych.
- Fuller, C., Goodwyn, A. and Francis-Brophy, E. (2013). *Advanced skills teachers: professional identity and status*. Reading: University of Reading.
- Grzęda, M. (2010). *Nauczyciele matematyki w Polsce – raport z badania TEDS-M*. Warszawa: Instytut Filozofii i Socjologii PAN.
- Hernik, K. (2015). *Polscy nauczyciele i dyrektorzy w Międzynarodowym Badaniu Nauczania i Ucznia się TALIS 2013*. Warszawa: Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych.
- Jaroszuk, T. (2005). *Świat w szkole. Twórczość wspomnieniowa nauczycieli polski odrodzonej (1918–1939)*. Olsztyn: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego.
- Kwiatkowska, H. (1991). *Etos zawodowy nauczyciela i jego przemiany*. In A. Nowak (ed.), *Przemiany zawodu nauczycielskiego*. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich.
- Marody, M. (2007) *Kulturowe aspekty transformacji ekonomicznej*. Warszawa: Instytut Spraw Publicznych.
- Pérez-Díaz, V. and Rodríguez, J. C. (2014). Teachers' prestige in Spain: probing the public's and the teachers' contrary views. *European Journal of Education*, 49(3), 365–377.
- Radziwiłł, A. (1991). O etosie nauczyciela. *Znak*, 436(9), 10–15.
- Verhoeven, J. C., Aelterman, A., Rots, I. and Buvens, I. (2006). Public perceptions of teachers' status in Flanders. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 12(4), 479–500.
- Wallerstein, L. (2009). 25 years of factorial surveys in sociology: a review. *Social Science Research*, 38(3), 2009, 505–520.

This article is based on data gathered in research carried out within the systemic project “Quality and effectiveness of education – strengthening of institutional research capabilities” implemented by the Educational Research Institute and co-financed by the European Social Fund (Human Capital Operational Programme 2007–2013, Priority III High quality of the education system). A preliminary version of this article was published in Polish in *Edukacja*, 133(2), 2015.