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The image of teachers in selected studies. An international and Polish perspective

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): This article presents important issues related to knowledge about teachers that are not always connected to the teaching process but can play a significant role in the teaching profession. Furthermore, it aims to fill a gap in research on teachers by referring to several different issues in a single text.

Research methods: The method used is primarily a comparative analysis of existing data from international, large-scale quantitative studies and works derived from official national studies. A social desirability scale is also provided, aimed at verifying the opinions and responses of the surveyed teachers.

Process of argumentation: The article consists of four main parts and a summary. The introductory part refers to methodological issues in teacher research. Relevant findings from studies using the social desirability scale are quoted to examine whether teachers' opinions may be distorted to align more closely with social expectations. The second part is a socio-demographic characterisation of teachers. The third part presents teachers' beliefs and attitudes. These relate to the most important elements of professional preparation and to teachers' sense of self-efficacy in their work. The fourth part completes the image of teachers based on public opinion of the profession in Poland.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: Among the issues discussed are the feminisation and ageing of the teaching staff, teachers' perceptions of their preparedness for teaching, the importance of teachers' self-efficacy, discrepancies between public opinion of teachers and what teachers think

about themselves, and how society values them. The research indicates that it is worth observing the teaching profession not only from the perspective of the classroom.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: Given that teachers are leaving the profession, government policies should introduce changes in their professional status. The issues most frequently raised by teachers are the salary situation and the need to increase their ability to influence politicians' decisions regarding education. An equally important issue – in light of the analyses and postulates cited – is the effective attraction of young candidates to the teaching profession.

Introduction – methodological remarks

Knowledge about teachers and school principals comes primarily from two basic sources: the teachers and headteachers themselves, based on their statements and opinions (rather than tests, as is the case with students in projects such as PISA and TIMSS), and public opinion, also derived from the statements of those surveyed. It is predominantly on this basis that the image of teachers is shaped in educational research environments and in society. In this case, is there any reason to believe that teachers' responses may be distorted or untruthful?

For over 60 years, various groups (primarily psychologists) have been studying people's tendency to respond to questionnaires in accordance with social expectations, using social approval scales constructed by researchers. One such study on social approval was conducted specifically for TALIS 2013, covering almost 77,000 teachers (almost 3,700 in Poland) at ISCED 2 schools¹ (Van de Vijver & Ha, 2014). Of the 34 countries participating in the TALIS survey, 18, including Poland, volunteered to participate in this verification of teachers' responses. Such research was not conducted for either the previous (TALIS 2008) or subsequent (TALIS 2018) editions. The basis for this research was an analysis of 10 statements (five positive and five negative) that formed a scale of social approval. Each statement was rated on a 7-point scale, ranging from 7 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). Positive statements included 'I always

¹ Equivalent to lower secondary schools or schools with grades 7–9.

listen carefully to my students; 'I help students and teachers if they have problems; and 'I admit when I don't know something if a student asks a question in class'. Negative statements included 'I have doubts about my ability to succeed as a teacher; 'I say things that hurt my colleagues' or students' feelings; and 'I get angry when colleagues express views that differ from mine' (Van de Vijver & Ha, 2014, p. 13).

It is worth noting that none of the 77,000 teachers selected the answer 'strongly disagree' (rank 1), while only 140 teachers selected the answer 'strongly agree' (rank 7) – in Poland, there were nine such answers (Van de Vijver & Ha, 2014, pp. 10–11). The averages calculated for individual countries indicate that, for positive statements, the ratings were close to 'strongly agree' (ranging from 5.25 in Malaysia to 6.34 in the UAE; Poland scored 5.91). Ratings for negative statements were further from the extreme ('strongly disagree') (ranging from 1.69 in the UAE to 2.97 in Korea; Poland scored 2.76). Higher ratings of positive statements indicate a stronger tendency to attribute positive traits and behaviours to oneself, while negative ratings indicate a stronger tendency to deny them (Piwowski, 2023).

Subsequently, 17 constructs/modules were identified, representing various aspects of teachers' work and beliefs (e.g. cooperation with other teachers, relationships with students, sense of effectiveness and job satisfaction, and professional development). These 17 constructs were correlated with the previously described ratings of positive and negative statements. Correlations at the country level were generally much stronger than at the individual level; moreover, they were positively correlated for positive statements and negatively correlated for negative statements. This was especially true for teachers' sense of effectiveness, which related to classroom management, teaching, and student engagement (Piwowski, 2023). These calculations were then corrected using the effect size. However, this did not result in any measurable changes in the correlation values relating to the two groups of (positive and negative) statements, which were used as the basis for determining the social approval scale.

It turned out that the strongest correlations (calculated at the national level), indicating the greatest susceptibility to social approval, concerned

satisfaction with the current work environment ($r = 0.77$), sense of effectiveness in teaching ($r = 0.73$), and overall job satisfaction ($r = 0.72$). These results show that not all modules are equally susceptible to social approval and that teachers' response styles also have different effects on the modules. 'There is evidence that response styles are most evident in questions about personal matters, when fear of evaluation may be strongest' (Van de Vijver & Ha, 2014, p. 35). Teachers react more emotionally, with greater personal involvement in assessing their effectiveness in teaching, and less emotionally towards their own professional development.

It is also worth noting that although the selection of countries surveyed cannot be considered representative (voluntary participation in the study of susceptibility to social approval), the authors of the report (Van de Vijver & Ha, 2014) conclude that the sample proved successful in demonstrating cultural differences in the assessment of the 10 statements. The response styles from Central and South America and East Asia differed significantly from those in other regions of the world. Furthermore, teachers from countries with higher levels of social development (measured by the Human Development Index) and student performance (measured by PISA) are less susceptible to social approval. However, the most important conclusion is that, despite some differences in susceptibility to social approval, there is no basis for claiming that the picture of teachers' responses is distorted.

It should be added that information about teachers, which is generally derived from research, is not always collected repeatedly over time. In some cases, such information is valuable, but nevertheless, it remains based on a single data collection point. This applies even to large-scale studies such as TALIS, which include and assess certain questions or statements only once. Furthermore, this article addresses only some of the issues related to the image and perceptions of the teaching profession. It omits, for example, a discussion of teachers' earnings and their pay compared to other professions, which also significantly shapes their image both in society and among teachers themselves. A number of reports, articles and statistical studies have been published on this subject (including Arnold & Rahimi, 2024; OECD, 2024b; Piwowarski, 2024).

Socio-demographic characteristics of teachers

It seems that the OECD's comprehensive reports provide a fairly accurate picture of teachers in terms of simple demographic and professional characteristics. These are TALIS reports on teachers and headteachers. The data contained therein are significant due to the large number of teachers surveyed (currently several dozen participating countries, with several hundred thousand teachers and headteachers), but they are only representative of more developed and wealthier countries. Teachers of lower secondary schools, covering grades 7–9, are the most numerous group in these studies; for this reason, the following characteristics will be limited to this group of teachers (and headteachers).

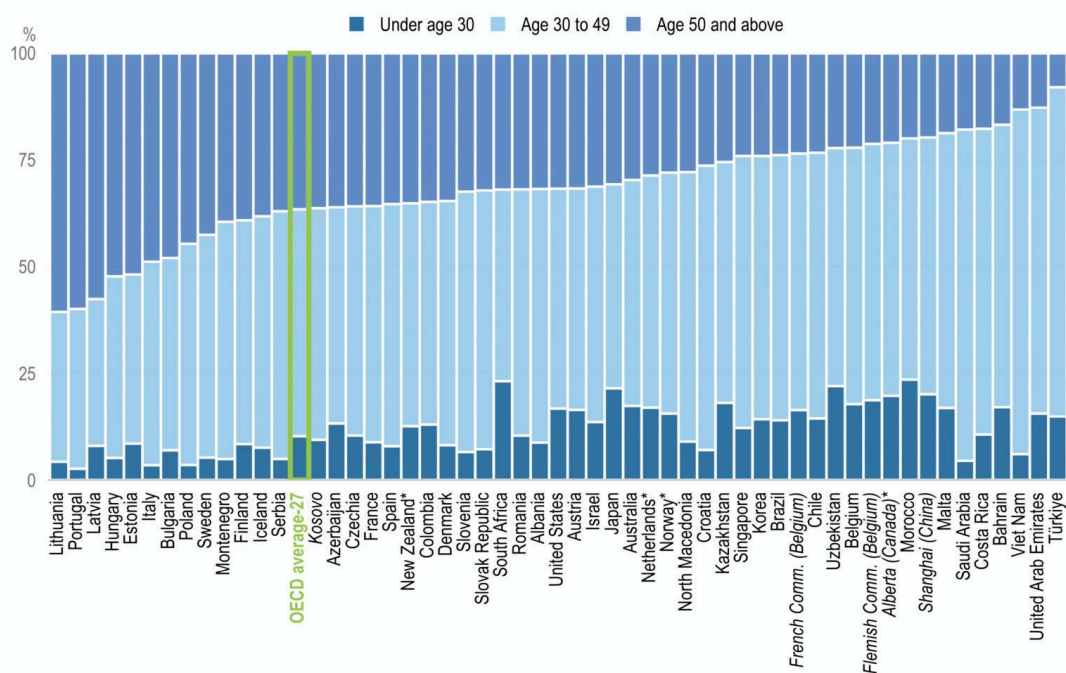
The level of feminisation among teachers is characterised by two key features. First, the higher the organisational level of an educational institution, the lower the level of feminisation (highest in kindergartens, lowest in schools that grant access to higher education). The second feature that can be observed is the stabilisation of this indicator over at least the last 10 years. According to TALIS data, women accounted for an average of 68–69% of teachers in lower secondary schools (in Poland, this was slightly more, approximately 75%). Female headteachers in the same countries and period averaged 46–48% (in Poland, 67%). However, significant differences can be observed across the indicators in individual countries. First, female teachers accounted for 40–50% of all teachers in Japan, Mexico and the Netherlands, while in Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, they accounted for 84–89%. The level of feminisation of headteachers also varied: in Japan and Turkey, female headteachers accounted for only 7–9% of the total, while in Latvia, they accounted for 84%.

An analysis of the age of teachers and headteachers (who are also generally teachers) shows that the proportion of teachers over 50 is increasing. Since 2008, this group of teachers has grown on average from 27% to 34% across the countries surveyed. In Poland, this change was even greater, rising from 14% in 2008 to 35% in 2018. The TALIS survey also accounted for the percentage of headteachers over the age of 60,

and an increase was noted there as well. Thus, there is an ageing of teachers and a certain stabilisation in terms of the feminisation of the teaching profession. In many environments, teachers, especially younger ones, are leaving the profession. According to a report compiled by 204 experienced teacher union activists from 121 countries, almost 50% of teachers are considering leaving the profession within the next five years (Arnold & Rahimi, 2024). This issue is increasingly being addressed by important, opinion-forming organisations. This is evidenced, for example, by the OECD webinar on September 30, 2025, devoted to the shortage of teaching staff (OECD, 2025b). This process, combined with an ageing teacher population, may cause complications in the functioning of schools.

Figure 1

Percentage of lower secondary teachers, by age group



Note: *Estimates should be interpreted with caution due to higher risk of non-response bias.
 Source: OECD, TALIS 2024 Database, Table 1.3.

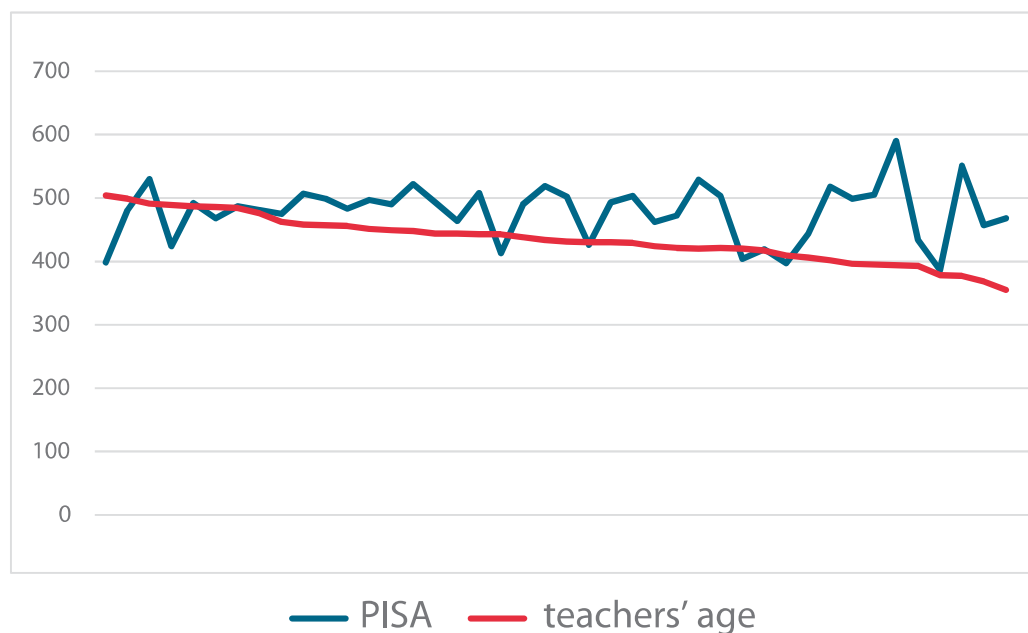
Source: OECD, 2025c, p. 36

Figure 1 shows the age structure of teachers in the countries surveyed. The left side of the chart shows countries where teachers over 50 years of age account for more than 40% or even 50% of all teachers (including Lithuania, Portugal, Latvia, and Hungary). The right side shows countries where the percentage of the oldest teachers is small (less than 10% in Turkey and the United Arab Emirates). In 2024, teachers' average age was around 45 (in 2018, it was around 44). In Lithuania and Portugal, the average age is 51, and in Latvia, it is 50 (OECD, 2025c, p. 34). Teachers aged 50 and above are more likely to teach in publicly managed schools (5 pp more than privately managed schools, on average) and in urban areas (2 pp more than rural areas) (OECD, 2025c, p. 36). In the context of this data, it is worth asking whether there is a relationship between teachers' age and students' results. It is commonly believed that older teachers are more experienced and better at solving various school problems, but they are also more prone to routine and burnout, which often leads them to leave the profession. Younger teachers are more positive about introducing changes in teaching and curricula and are more proficient in ICT.

The author conducted a statistical analysis of the average age of teachers (teaching grades 7–9) and the results in mathematics of students participating in the PISA project in 42 countries. To ensure that the data came from the same year, information from 2018 (TALIS and PISA) was used. This is only a snapshot of teacher characteristics and an incomplete picture of the achievements of 15-year-olds, but the results are worth considering. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to determine the strength of the relationship between the analysed data. It turned out that the relationship between teacher age and student performance is extremely weak ($r = 0.14$) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

2018: The average age of teachers and PISA results in mathematics



Note: The values 300, 400, and 500 points (PISA) correspond to teachers' ages (30, 40, and 50 years old).

Source: Calculations by R. Piwowarski.

While Georgia has the highest average age (50.4 years) and low student performance (398 points), Lithuania and Estonia have an average teacher age exceeding 49 years and high student performance, especially in Estonia (530 points). The situation is similar on the right side of Figure 2, where age does not correspond to performance (Singapore: 37.7 years, 551 points; Turkey: 35.5 years, 468 points). Thus, based only on these 'flattened' data (country averages), it is impossible to conclude that there is a relationship between student performance and the age of their teachers (all teachers, not just mathematics teachers).

However, it cannot be ruled out that if data relating to individual students and teachers of individual subjects, or even average values for schools, were taken into account, the strength of the relationship (the correlation coefficient) could be different. Research conducted among teachers across different environments, countries, and subjects taught may

reveal a stronger correlation (positive or negative) between teacher age and student achievement. This has been demonstrated, for example, by a study of all teachers in Iceland, which found that older teachers were more effective in teaching Icelandic (Aðalsteinsson et al., 2013).

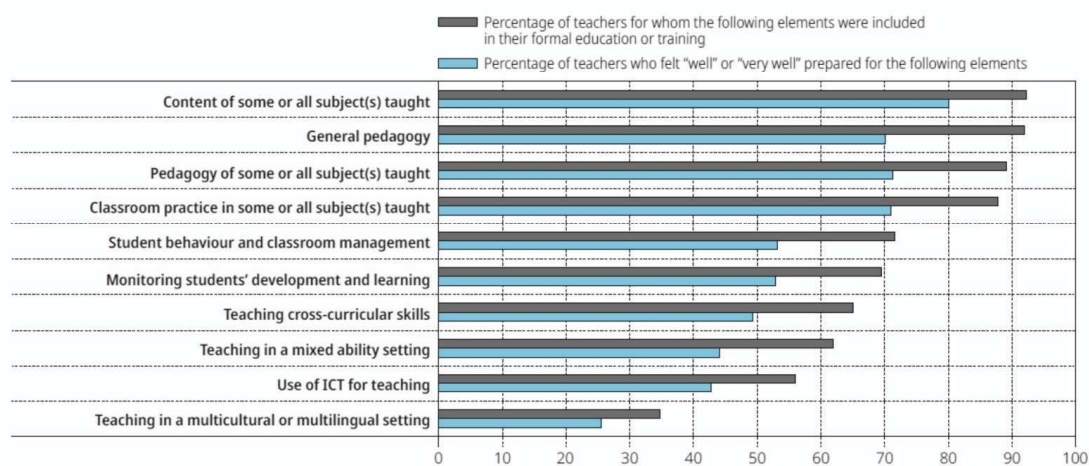
Teachers' beliefs and attitudes

One of the key issues in a teacher's job is their preparation for the various areas necessary for teaching. Figure 3 illustrates what was included in their professional training during their studies and how teachers assessed this preparation.

Figure 3

Figure I.4.4 **Content of teacher education and sense of preparedness for teaching**


Results based on responses of lower secondary teachers



Note: ICT: Information and communication technology.

Values are ranked in descending order of the percentage of lower secondary teachers for whom the following elements were included in their formal education or training.

Source: OECD, TALIS 2018 Database, Tables I.4.13 and I.4.20.

StatLink  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933932532>

Source: OECD, 2019, p. 129

Based on Figure 3, it seems that around 90% of the teachers surveyed received formal training covering topics such as teaching content, general pedagogy, subject-specific pedagogy (teaching methods), and classroom practice in their field. To a lesser extent, the following aspects

were included in teacher training: the ability to control student behaviour, monitoring students' learning progress, and interdisciplinary teaching. Only 35% of teachers were prepared to work in a multicultural and multilingual environment, but 26% felt that they were well/very well prepared for this.

Notably, across the 10 elements considered, the percentage of teachers who felt well prepared to work in a specific area was much lower than the percentage who said the element had been included in their professional training. These discrepancies were generally significant. In many countries/economies, there were also large differences in the perceived preparedness between experienced and new teachers. This was particularly true for pedagogical preparation in the subjects taught: 30 pp in Israel, 29 pp in Estonia, and 27 pp in Romania. In Finland, France and Japan, however, these differences were small (6 pp) (Schleicher, 2018, p. 62). The size of these differences suggests that new teachers may need more support in developing effective pedagogical strategies for teaching content.

For many years, attention has been drawn to the fact that the quality of work performed and the results achieved by pupils/students depend to some extent on their sense of self-efficacy. Furthermore, low self-efficacy can lead to higher levels of stress (Masoom, 2021; Reilly et al., 2014). The creator of social learning theory also devoted part of his scientific activity to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). The PISA 2012 project showed that a higher sense of efficacy among 15-year-olds in mathematics corresponds positively with their results in mathematics (OECD, 2014a, p. 93).

In a growing number of studies on teacher effectiveness, references to teachers' sense of self-efficacy occupy an important place. For example, it has been found that low self-esteem and low overall self-efficacy led to low teacher effectiveness and, consequently, to poorer student performance (Khan et al., 2015). Khan and colleagues conclude that there is a positive correlation between teacher effectiveness and their self-assessment ($r = 0.38$). No impact of self-efficacy on decision-making or the ability to influence authorities and school bodies was found. However, these interesting results should be interpreted with caution, primarily due to their relatively low representativeness. It should also be added

that it is easier to study effectiveness, or effectiveness alone, than to determine with a high degree of certainty what factors influence it.

The results of the TALIS 2018 survey on the relationship between teachers' self-efficacy, their preparation in classroom management, and their ability to manage students (primarily classroom management) indicate that, apart from the varying strength of this relationship in individual countries as measured by the linear regression coefficient, they depend more on what is taught at university (stronger correlation) than on the induction programme (mainly for young teachers) (OECD, 2019, pp. 132, 142). Furthermore, the results show that in 37 countries and economies, teachers who have been trained in teaching cross-curricular skills (e.g., creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving) are more likely to report higher levels of self-efficacy. Training in teaching in a multicultural environment also contributes to higher self-efficacy in 20 TALIS countries and economies (OECD, 2019, table I.4.46 available on line). However, regression results should be interpreted with caution, as the explanatory power of the estimated models is usually limited (as evidenced by the low R^2 values) (OECD, 2019, p. 133).

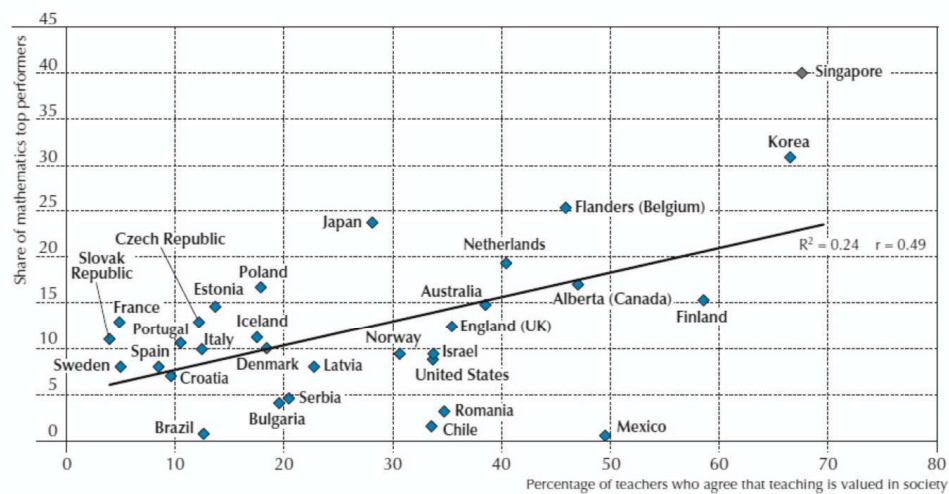
Teachers' perceptions of how valued they are (or not) by society can influence their image and performance. Although teachers generally enjoy relatively high status in public opinion compared to other professions, in many countries, they feel that they are not valued by society. This is evidenced, among other things, by research conducted as part of the TALIS 2013 project, which asked teachers from 32 countries to respond to the statement 'I think that the teaching profession is valued by society' (they could agree or disagree). Only in five countries did at least half of all teachers agree with the statement (in Europe, only in Finland – approx. 58%). In many European countries, the percentage of teachers who felt that they were valued by society was less than 20% or, in Slovakia, France, Spain, and Sweden, even less than 10% (OECD, 2014b, pp. 187, 408).

The feeling that teachers are generally not appreciated by society is also linked to the theme of teachers' sense of professional satisfaction. Comparing the results of the TALIS 2013 and 2024 surveys, it can be concluded that there was a decline in positive assessments of the profession

during this period. For example, in Finland, the percentage of teachers declaring that they would choose this path again decreased by as much as 16 pp, and in Croatia by 13 pp (Paczuska, 2025, p. 86). Moreover, teachers with a higher sense of job satisfaction are much less likely to plan to leave the profession within the next five years (Paczuska, 2025, p. 88). According to Schleicher (2018), there is a correlation between the percentage of teachers who feel appreciated by society and the share of top mathematics performers in PISA 2012. This is illustrated by Figure 4 and by the correlation coefficient ($r = 0.49$).

Figure 4

Relationship between the value of the teaching profession and the share of top mathematics performers
Relationship between lower secondary education teachers' view on the value of their profession in society and the share of top mathematics performers in PISA 2012



Source: Schleicher, 2018, p. 91.

The teaching profession in the public eye

Some of the analyses presented earlier provide convincing evidence that teachers generally feel underappreciated by society. Therefore, it is interesting to consider how the teaching profession is assessed and perceived by 'non-teachers'. This will be done primarily using the results

of representative studies conducted in Poland, which are a direct or indirect assessment of teachers' work (e.g. the profession planned for one's children).

Since 1993 respondents have been asked several times how much respect/prestige the teaching profession enjoys among dozens of professions subject to public evaluation. For many years, it has ranked between sixth and eighth in Poland (in 2025, it was ranked ninth). Teachers are outranked by doctors, miners, university professors (who once held the top position for a long time), skilled workers, nurses, and firefighters, who have held the top position for over a decade (CBOS, 2019, 2025). The least respected professions are those related to the exercise of power (ministers, members of parliament, political party activists, etc.). Furthermore, there is a trend towards 'appreciating common professions, often based on physical labour, whose recognition does not necessarily go hand in hand with socio-economic status. It seems that the prestige of individual professions is to some extent shaped by the situation on the labour market' (CBOS, 2019, p. 9). This is also evidenced by data showing that, as of 2024, Poland has the highest percentage of respondents who would like their children to obtain secondary vocational education since the 1990s (CBOS, 2024b). Teachers ranked even higher (fourth place) when respondents assessed professions in terms of honesty and reliability. The top three positions were taken by scientists, nurses, and ICT specialists, while politicians and MPs once again came last (CBOS, 2016, p. 2). Teachers also ranked fourth in a survey on trust in individual professional groups (firefighters ranked first, politicians last) (Ariadna, 2019).

Indirectly, society's attitude towards the teaching profession and its image were reflected in a 2012 survey that asked respondents whether they would like their children to work as teachers in the future. The majority of respondents answered negatively (54%), while only 34% of respondents answered 'yes' (CBOS, 2012, p. 7). Interestingly, the highest level of approval was expressed by the most religious people (51%), while the lowest was expressed by people from large cities (19%) and by those with the highest per capita income who were self-employed. Additionally, only 27% of students and pupils answered 'yes'. This may indicate

that more than a few students and pupils are aware that the teaching profession is not always easy or well paid. Although the distribution of teachers' responses to the same question was not as clear-cut, the majority still answered 'no' (48%); 46% responded positively to their children's potential future as teachers.

Several years later, a similar, more extensive study asked an open-ended question about respondents' dream profession for their daughter (regardless of whether they had children or how old they were). The most popular option was medical professions, followed by legal professions and professions related to education, social-political, or humanistic fields (such as teaching). Poles most often wanted their sons to pursue a profession requiring technical studies, followed by medical studies. However, the desire for a son to become a doctor is much less common than the desire for a daughter to become one. In third place, respondents believe that the ideal profession for their son is an ICT specialist or a lawyer (CBOS, 2024a, p. 7).

However, it is worth noting the percentage of respondents indicating particular occupational groups. While 30% of respondents wanted their daughter to enter medical professions, only 4% wanted their daughter to become a teacher or educator. For their sons, while 17% wanted them to pursue a profession requiring technical university studies or technical education and 11% a medical profession, only 1% of respondents indicated the profession of teacher or educator (CBOS, 2024a, pp. 8–9). The preferred professions for children therefore differ by gender. However, most importantly, they indirectly show the public's attitude towards teachers when it relates to their own families.

Conclusions

What we are seeing is a society that values the teaching profession. However, when we ask members of that society what profession they would like their children to pursue, only a few consider teaching to be a dream job for their children. The biggest influence may be teachers'

salary situation, about which society is well informed. While this article has not addressed the issue of teachers' salaries, such data is quoted in many statistical reports and publications (see, e.g., OECD, 2024b, 2025a; Piwowarski, 2024). It is well known that teachers generally earn less than workers in other professions with a similar level of education. Despite this, it is not always possible to explain the discrepancy between teachers' perception of being undervalued and the teaching profession's relatively high status in terms of respect and esteem. Data from OECD programmes – PISA and TALIS – indicate that 'the most effective education systems are found in countries/economies where society values the teaching profession' (Schleicher, 2018, p. 91).

Research conducted under the auspices of teacher trade union activists points to Korea as an example of good practice, where teachers enjoy both competitive salaries and job stability (Arnold & Rahimi, 2024). The report also mentions Finland, where teachers enjoy professional autonomy and high social prestige (as confirmed by the TALIS study cited earlier). It is worth recalling that students from both countries rank high in school achievement rankings (e.g., PISA). However, it should be emphasised that some of the studies analysed in this article were conducted only once (some more than 10 years ago), but they are still relevant and likely up to date (it is not always possible or advisable to rely solely on the results of current studies).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had an impact on the image of teachers. The enforced, different way of teaching, communicating with students and assessing them has made it necessary for teachers to better master the ICT techniques necessary for online teaching and contact. In Poland, the image of a teacher will certainly have been influenced since 2022 by the growing number of students from Ukraine in Polish educational institutions.

The analyses and conclusions presented certainly do not provide a full understanding of the image of teachers. The data taken into account mainly come from large international studies and smaller, representative studies relating mainly to the situation in Poland. However, even this partial knowledge is necessary in order to be able to propose

changes to the recruitment and professional training of teachers, as well as to their professional status. The issues most frequently raised by teachers are their pay and increasing their ability to influence politicians' decisions on education. An equally important issue, in light of the analyses and proposals presented, is effectively attracting young candidates to the teaching profession.

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Conflict of interest: The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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