

Executive summary of the research “The status of teaching profession and ways to improve it as perceived by various target groups”. Project “Creating a methodological network of teachers’ in-service training”.



The study commissioned within the framework of the project “Creating a methodological network of teachers’ in-service training”
(Contract Nr.2006/0129/VPD1/ESF/PIAA/06/NP/3.2.5.1./0001/0001/0504)
of the National European Structural Funds programme

Executive Summary

THE STATUS OF TEACHING PROFESSION AND WAYS TO IMPROVE IT AS PERCEIVED BY VARIOUS TARGET GROUPS

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Executive Summary

The State Agency of General Education Quality Monitoring (VIKNVA), on the basis of the tri-partite contract between the Ministry of Education and Science (IZM) (1st level ESF intermediary institution), the Agency for Development of Vocational Education (PIAA) (2nd level ESF intermediary institution) and VIKNVA of 28 July 2006, is implementing the project “**Creating a methodological network of teachers’ in-service training**” (Contract Nr.2006/0129/VPD1/ESF/PIAA/06/NP/3.2.5.1./0001/0001/0504) of the National European Structural Funds programme „**Creating a network for teachers’ in-service training**”.

The overall aim of the project is to improve the quality of education through creating conditions for the development of a methodological network for teachers’ in-service training that should ensure a targeted and coordinated development of teachers’ professional skills necessary that meet the needs both of the education system in general and each teacher in particular.

The objective of the project is to create methodological, human resource and institutional bases for teachers’ in-service training.

The project’s objectives will be achieved through **four activities**:

1. developing the system of content modules for the in-service training;
2. developing criteria and methodology to evaluate the content of the in-service training of teachers;
3. developing a system of organising and monitoring of the content of teachers’ in-service training;
4. preparing recommendations for a model of teachers’ professional career development according to the newly created system of the in-service training.

The study „*The status of the teaching profession and ways to improve it as perceived by various target groups*” was commissioned in the framework of the project and supports the project activities aimed at creating a model of teachers’ professional career development.

The study explored the views of various target groups about the status of the teaching profession in Latvia as well as about the effect of various factors on the development of the status and possibilities to improve it.

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Based on the findings of the study, the researcher team developed recommendations to the policy makers and other institutions that are interested in raising the status of the teaching profession.

First, the study reviewed the findings of similar studies in other European countries. The data was then collected through interviews and from the mass media. Based on the previous studies of the status of the teaching profession and existing definitions of status and prestige, the researchers of the study have developed and used the following definition:

The status (in Latvian, the notion is closer to „prestige”) of the teaching profession is a complex concept that characterises a socially significant profession among other accepted professions in the state and includes a set of teachers’ education and competences; working conditions; remuneration adequate to the tasks; professional autonomy (authority); and the ability to influence decision making.

International studies underscore the importance of raising the status of the teaching profession to those who are responsible for provision of education. These studies show that very few teachers choose teaching as profession only because of high status. Most teachers choose this career to work with children, prepare the pupils for life or to contribute their knowledge and skills to society. Some teachers consider vocation most important. According to some studies, this sense of vocation helps teachers in their work even at times, when rewards are not adequate and the status of the profession is not very high. This does not mean, however, that teachers would not like their profession to have a higher status in society.

In recent years, the role of teachers has changed – teachers have to perform more varied tasks and responsibilities, to work with pupils from various multicultural backgrounds. This variety of tasks in a way hinders the understanding of society of teachers’ work, but narrow specialisation of tasks was traditionally characteristic of high status professions. The main identified problems of the status are related to the working environment, especially with more complicated responsibilities and an increased load of teachers.

Teachers are not usually over-concerned with the status of their profession. However, they feel very positive about it if they feel being trusted, valued and respected by parents and if they have opportunities to cooperate with other professionals. The decrease in the workload, the allocation of time for cooperation with colleagues, and a greater social role are also likely to improve the status of the profession.

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As to Latvia, this study’s respondents did not demonstrate a unanimous opinion what the status of the teaching profession is. Some part of the respondents thinks that the status of the teaching profession is high. As one of the respondents put it, *„sense that this is a good profession has sustained”*. Some respondents think that the status of the profession is high in society at larger. The profession of a teachers is still one of the most demanded and a teacher remains *„an important figure in a particular society, particular environment”*. Teachers have big influence on the young people and consequently on society.

According to all groups of respondents, the fact that many pedagogical school graduates do not go to schools or leave them soon after start is not related to the low status of the profession; they sooner explain it with the existing situation in the education system and state policy in regard to teachers. These findings are in line with other studies that found that the status is not the main reason for teachers to enter the profession.

At the same time, a large part of respondents evaluate the status of the teaching profession as low. They think that the society has developed a stereotype that those who choose teaching as profession simply fail to find a better job. Higher work load and higher responsibility are more associated with teaching than with other professions, while teachers also receive greatest criticism.

In the last three years, Latvia’s mass media have been dominated by the theme of teachers’ salaries. Some part of society considers that teaching is one of well-paid professions; there are different opinions as to the work load, time, and vacation of teachers. It is perceived as a norm that teachers work several loads. Teaching is also considered as poorly-paid profession in which mainly women are employed as it is not prestigious for a man to work as teacher. Parents consider teachers as service personnel whom they can teach or scold. The attitude to school is cultivated in the family. If parents in the presence of their children discuss teachers and show disrespect, this consequently affect the children’s attitudes that later may lead to conflicts in the classroom.

The low status of the teaching profession is considered as one of the main reasons of the increasing lack of teachers. It prevents to attract young specialists to schools while makes those already in schools who are exhausted of social indifference and negative attitude consider changing the job. That is

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why the Ministry of Education and Science plans to organise a campaign to improve the status of the teaching profession.

Conclusions

Based on the analysis of interviews and articles in Latvia’s newspapers, the study has concluded:

1. The respondents did not demonstrate a unanimous opinion what the status of the teaching profession in Latvia is. This might be explained by the fact that a status of a profession is a complex concept; its perception depends on how the respondent group relates to the teaching profession, thus, using different criteria to evaluate its status.
2. The teachers interviewed for the study maintained the sense of working in a socially significant and respectful profession. To a large extent, the teachers feel their responsibility for upholding the status of their profession specifically in the eyes of pupils and parents. However, they feel little valued by the government and society at large.
3. All respondents noted that in the last 10 years the status of the teaching profession has decreased. Respondents relate this to: 1) the overall changes in education system that impact the role of schools, teachers and society in the process of education; 2) insufficient awareness raising of society on these changes; 3) a very slow development of education as compared to other areas; 4) an inadequate education policy of the state.
4. The respondents do not relate the fact that most pedagogical school graduates do not go to schools or leave them soon after start to the low status of the profession. They sooner explain it with the existing situation in the education system and the policy of the government in regard to teachers. These findings are in line with other studies that found that the status is not the main reason for teachers to enter the profession.
5. The respondents believe that the prestige, the status of the teaching profession in society is related to the motivation of new and experienced teachers to enter and stay in the profession. The status develops through various measures that promote the profession and raise motivation. Up to now, motivation has not been in the focus of attention of policy makers. The respondents think that the reasons why teachers leave the profession

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6. have not been studied in depth; consequently, many education policy measures do not achieve their objectives to the fullest extent.
7. The analysis of interviews and newspaper articles revealed the fact that very often teachers cannot combine teaching and educating tasks. As a class educator, a teacher has to fulfil the tasks of a psychologist, a social worker, extra-curricular activities organiser as well to consult parents on various issues. Teachers, especially young, very often lack training and also time to fulfil these functions professionally. As a result, the status of teachers in the eyes of the society is negatively impacted. Thus, a suggestion to create a special institution that would train professionals in this field is often voiced.
8. Both young and experienced teachers feel sure about their knowledge of the subject they teach, however, they feel lack of communication skills and knowledge of how to deal with various groups of pupils, how to cooperate with parents and solve conflicts. Teachers still find it difficult to accept the fact that today’s pupils are more advanced in information and communication technologies. It should be taken into account, though, that even if pupils are better acquainted with technologies, it is teachers who know how these technologies can make teaching and learning more interesting and manifold.
9. Dealing with bureaucratic requests (of the Ministry of Education and Science, municipalities, school administration) negatively affects the quality of teaching work, is not included in reward systems, creates conflicts and decreases the attractiveness and prestige of the profession.
10. All respondents underscore that the state and the government should play the main and decisive role in improving the status of education and the status of the teaching profession in society. The government’s attitude to education and related issues is translated into the society’s attitude to teachers. The state support to education is regarded as inadequate.
11. The respondents acknowledge that the government has been doing much to increase the teachers’ salaries and ensure teachers’ in-service training; nevertheless, it is not enough and has not impacted the status of the teaching profession. It is necessary to create systems of professional and social support to teachers, which is extremely necessary specifically to young teachers who are just entering the schools.

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12. The implementation of the education policy influences teachers’ self-esteem, self-perception, understanding of the mission, which are important indicators of the status. When developing education policies, the government should take into account the teachers’ opinion. This would also demonstrate to the society at large the importance of teachers in the education process. All respondents, but mainly, experts and policy makers, think that it is necessary to prepare a detailed development strategy and policies for the education system, involving teachers, especially teachers of highest qualifications and experience, in this process.
13. All respondents emphasise that it is possible to improve the status of the teaching profession through developing a concrete teachers’ policy that would cover all aspects: teacher education and in-service training, professional activities, responsibilities of teachers and other actors of the education process, attracting new teachers, support systems, and other. It is necessary to apply a centralised and comprehensive approach to the personnel development. It is necessary to organise various actions that are targeted at specific groups of teachers.
14. Both interviews and discourse analysis reveal the same themes related to the status of the teaching profession: teachers’ salaries, lack of teachers, the rights of pupils and teachers and their different interpretations that lead to conflicts as well as the attitude of the government and of the society to the teachers. The interviewed teachers do not consider salary as the main factor that affects the status of the profession. However, the issue being constantly sustained by the media “artificially” brings it forward as the most important factor of profession prestige (or status), thus, making teachers feel as representing a low prestige profession who do not deserve decent pay.
15. In the respondents’ view, the media tend to present the information about education in confronting formats, giving a disproportionate preference to negative information. Taking into account the big impact of the media on the public opinion, this creates a negative background for the status of teachers. At the same time, the discourse analysis revealed that newspapers give greatest attention to the issue of raising teachers’ salaries, which is not at all presented in a negative way.

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16. Some respondents consider that in case of conflicts taking mainly the side of parents and pupils, the media increase the teachers’ sense of lack of rights, thus, decreasing the status of the profession. This in a way corresponds to the results of discourse analysis that shows that it is usually parents who bring the conflict to the press.
17. The respondents expressed certain reservations regarding the negative attitude of the media. However, the discourse analysis showed that the mass media had relatively positive attitudes to teachers and, in fact, covered a wider and more positive set of themes (teachers’ achievements, support to teachers, and other) than it was mentioned in the interviews and focus group discussions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, recommendations were developed to policy makers, organisations and associations of education employees, providers of in-service teacher training on how to improve the status of the teaching profession and how to communicate with the mass media. Most important of them are as follows:

- In the future, planning policies and measures, it is necessary to apply a centralised and comprehensive approach to increasing the status of the teaching profession that is targeted at the motivation of the working and potential teachers. The decision making process should be based on research and regular policy evaluation.
- Awareness raising activities should not simply inform the public; they should be understandable, be clear and easily accessible for all target audiences. Awareness raising should not only take the form of campaigns, but should be targeted, coordinated and planned for longer periods of time.
- It is necessary to bring the social support to teachers provided by the municipalities in synergy to the one provided by the state, with the state assisting small municipalities that cannot ensure any support to their teachers.
- When negotiating teachers’ salaries issues with the government, trade unions (and other organisations) of education and science employees

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of Latvia should discuss them in combination with creating social support systems for teachers – health insurance, financial support to studies and in-service training, compensation for transport and other expenses, support with housing, tax relieves, and other. Social support policy should be urgently implemented together with salary increase.

- When planning in-service training programmes, more attention should be paid to the knowledge and skills that teachers consider important for the status of the profession in society (cooperation with parents, conflict resolution, working with various social and multi-cultural groups, and others).
- One of the means for achieving a long-term effect would be to develop certain messages aimed at raising the status of the teaching profession that policy makers could systematically deliver in communication with media.
- When policy makers meet teachers, it is advisable to have informal discussions with regional media, explaining policy decisions, and giving insights into teachers’ work. Regular informal meetings with national media would give a possibility to explain education policies in a “less sensational” format and would decrease negative stereotypes of the journalists. It is necessary to accomplish not only informative, but also explanatory formats for the coverage of education policy decisions.

In the future, in order to better understand how the status of the teaching profession evolves, it is recommended to research not only the issues of teachers’ motivation, paying special attention to the views of young teachers and male teachers, but also the impact of bureaucratic requests on the quality of teachers’ work and the attractiveness of the profession from the point of view of various target groups. It is also recommended to examine in more depth the causes of conflicts, namely, define the rights and responsibilities of pupils and teachers; assess the adequacy of the requirements set by parents to schools and teachers; and to define the framework of teachers’ responsibilities. Conflicts are one of the factors that decreases the status of the teaching profession, thus, such a study could give a better understanding of the causes of tension and might help to develop better conflict resolution strategies.