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PROFESSION OR VOCATION: TEACHERS OF PRESCHOOL AND EARLY SCHOOL ON THEMSELVES AND THEIR OCCUPATION

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Abstract

This article refers to selected narrative axes surrounding the teaching profession. Against the background of organisational and legal aspects as well as the social perspective, the opinions of preschool and early school teachers about their professional work are presented. In order to gain insight into teachers' points of view, in 2022 a diagnostic survey was conducted in which 63 teachers of preschool and early school education participated. For the purposes of this research, hypotheses were formulated relating to the level of teachers' satisfaction with their work, remuneration as one of the key factors of job satisfaction, the phenomenon of professional burnout and teachers' perception of their profession in terms of social mission. The results did not confirm the dominance of low professional satisfaction among teachers. They also indicated that the remuneration is not a factor determining its occurrence. The assumption that professional burnout is a common phenomenon among teachers was not confirmed, and furthermore, it is not a problem that only affects teachers with great professional experience. At the same time, most of the teachers surveyed agreed with the statement that their profession was a vocation.

Key words: teacher, preschool education, early school education, profession, vocation

Introduction

When considering the teacher profession, we can distinguish several characteristic narrative axes. One of them is closely related to the organisational and legal aspects of the functioning of this professional group. To illustrate this approach, one should refer to legal acts that are generally applicable, such as acts or regulations of the minister responsible for education and upbringing, as well as to acts of internal law in force in individual educational institutions, with particular emphasis on the most important of them, i.e. the school statute. The Education Act (*ustawa Prawo oświatowe*) specifies teachers' duties, for example, in the following way: "In his/her teaching, educational and caring activities, a teacher is obliged to be guided by the good of pupils, concern for their health, moral and civic attitude, with respect for the pupils' personal dignity."¹ Detailed regulations regarding the professional status of teachers are set out in the Teacher's Charter Act (*ustawa Karta Nauczyciela*), which contains a more detailed description of teachers' duties. These include the reliable implementation of tasks related to the position entrusted to him or her and the basic functions of the school, namely, teaching, education and caring, including tasks related to ensuring the safety of pupils, supporting each pupil in his or her development, striving for full personal development and professional development. The legislator also draws attention to the obligation to educate and raise young people with a love for Poland, with respect for the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, and in an atmosphere of freedom of conscience and respect for every person. No less important is the attention to shaping pupils' moral and civic attitudes in accordance with the idea of democracy, peace and friendship between people of different nations, races and worldviews.²

The Teacher's Charter also contains provisions regarding the qualification requirements necessary for the position of a teacher, including grades and conditions for professional promotion³, as well as other detailed regulations relating to the establishment and termination of employment, the remuneration system, and pension rights, etc.

The second fundamental axis of the narrative surrounding the teaching profession is created by the social ideas and expectations that are formulated towards its representatives. The strength of persistent stereotypes is especially visible in relation to teachers of kindergarten and early education (years I–III). This is confirmed by research such as that by Ewa Sosnowska-Bielicz, who asked parents about their preferences regarding the gender of their children's teacher. The vast majority chose women, justifying their choice by saying that "the matter concerns

¹ Ustawa z dnia 14 grudnia 2016 r. Prawo oświatowe, tekst jedn. Dz.U. 2024 poz. 737 [consolidated text, Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland 2024, item 737], art. 5.

² Ustawa z dnia 26 stycznia 1982 r. Karta Nauczyciela, tekst jedn. Dz.U. 2024 poz. 986, art. 6.

³ *Ibidem*, art. 9, 9a and 9b.

small children who need a woman's warmth."⁴ Only 23% indicated a preference for a man, arguing that "men are more assertive and will not let themselves be walked all over."⁵ These trends go hand in hand with the image of a teacher, which is created in the context of the natural role of mother, caregiver and housewife. In this perspective, the academic path, professional internships, diploma examinations and professional advancement are just an accessory to women's nature.⁶

When it comes to the social image of teachers, it is worth referring to the results of research conducted by the Public Opinion Research Center. Research from 2012 shows a relatively high level of social respect for teachers. The respondents pointed out the high competences of teachers, their diligence and willingness for self-development, and emphasised the responsibility and vocation that they consider indispensable in this profession. Despite the positive perception of the teacher, over half of the respondents (54%) did not want their children to become teachers.⁷ In the case of research from 2019, carried out after the end of the nationwide teachers' strike, teachers took seventh place, which was relatively high (out of 31), behind representatives of professions that traditionally enjoy the greatest social respect, such as firefighters and healthcare workers or academic staff. 77% declared that teachers enjoy the respect of society. Furthermore, 43% of respondents expressed the opinion that teachers have a sense of mission.⁸ This confirms that a large part of society tends to perceive the teaching profession as a vocation.

The third axis can be created on the basis of the perspective of teachers themselves and the statements they formulate about the specificity of their profession. To achieve this goal, research conducted in 2022 gathered the opinions of 63 teachers of preschool and early school education.

Teachers' opinions about themselves and their profession

The research problem focused on how teachers perceive themselves and their profession. Their statements, as well as their preference for specific formulations

⁴ E. Sosnowska-Bielicz, *Nauczyciel(ka) edukacji wczesnoszkolnej – czy zawód nauczyciela edukacji wczesnoszkolnej ma płęć?*, "Edukacja – Technika – Informatyka" 2019, nr spec. 1, p. 97, see also pp. 95–96, 98.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 97.

⁶ D. Klus-Stańska, *Infantylizujący stereotyp nauczycielki wczesnej edukacji. W poszukiwaniu kontekstów i źródeł ukrytego dyskursu „naszej pani”*, "Kultura i Edukacja" 2010, nr 2(76), pp. 19–20.

⁷ *Wizerunek nauczycieli*, oprac. M. Feliksiak, Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, Warszawa 2012, p. 3, https://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2012/K_173_12.PDF [accessed: 17.11.2023].

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 2; Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, *Które zawody poważamy?*, oprac. M. Omyłka-Rudzka, Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, Warszawa 2019, p. 3, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2019/K_157_19.PDF [accessed: 22.11.2023].

used in the questionnaire, allow us to trace how this group creates a narrative around their profession. Areas that are worth paying special attention to have also been identified, as their analysis allows for a more multidimensional characterisation of members of the teaching profession. Therefore, the following elements were considered necessary for constructing the image of a teacher, namely, factors motivating people to work as a teacher, factors determining job satisfaction or lack thereof, and difficulties and limitations that teachers encounter in their work. The hypotheses that were formulated for the research are as follows: teachers experience a low level of satisfaction with their work, which is associated with a low level of earnings; remuneration is one of the key factors of job satisfaction; teachers with extensive work experience observe the effects of burnout; teachers treat their work as a kind of vocation and social mission.

The research was conducted using the diagnostic survey method, and the tool was a questionnaire, with one of the questions being open-ended. The questionnaire was addressed to preschool and early school teachers. 63 respondents took part in the study, including 61 women and two men. Such proportions clearly confirm that at the stage of preschool and early school education we are dealing with the phenomenon of feminisation of the teaching profession, which is strongly rooted in Polish society. To complete the characteristics of the research sample, it should be added that 31 respondents were employed in kindergartens, and 32 in primary schools as early stage teachers (years I–III). The age breakdown was such that the group of people aged 30–39 was most represented (21 people), 14 people belonged to the youngest group (up to 25 years of age), and 11 respondents were in the age group of 25–29 years old. A more experienced group of teachers also took part in the study: 40–49 years old (eight people) and over 50 years old (nine people). The work experience of the respondents was quite diverse: 24 people declared work experience in education of less than five years, 15 stated that they had between five and nine years' experience, ten people – more than 20 years, eight people stated they had between 10 and 14 years' experience, and only six, between 15 and 20 years. The largest number of participants in the study were teachers living in rural areas (33 people), 17 people stated a town with a population of up to 50,000 inhabitants as their place of residence, four people stated a town of 50 to 150,000 thousand, two people – a city of 150 to 500 thousand inhabitants, and seven teachers were from large cities with over 500,000 inhabitants.

The respondents were asked about the motivation that guided them in choosing their profession (table 1). The vast majority answered that the key factor that influenced their decision was their passion for working with children. Several people also marked the answer indicating teaching traditions that existed in their families.

Table 1. Reason for choosing the profession

Reason for choosing the profession	Number of responses
Personal inclinations to work with children	55
Family tradition (a family of teachers)	4
Chance	2
Interest in humanities and working with people	1
Curiosity	1

Source: own research.

It is worth noting that personal inclination to work with children may have an effect on the greater likelihood of actual involvement in working with children and motivate effort more than chance or curiosity. Taking into account this answer, we are also dealing with a reflective approach to choosing one's career path and a better thought-out decision in this respect. Following family traditions, although they should not be disregarded, may suggest imitation and a lack of one's own vision of individual professional development. This approach may result in low effectiveness in professional work or limited satisfaction with the tasks performed. This, in turn, is not a good prognosis when it comes to contact with pupils and relationships between teacher and pupil, and may ultimately lead to faster burnout.

The next question concerned how teachers perceive their profession and what aspects of their professional work they pay attention to (table 2). They were presented with a choice of several elements associated with professional activity and asked to what extent they confirmed the existence of a relationship between being a teacher and a specific characteristic that can be attributed to professional activity. The respondents perceived the greatest degree of consistency with the teaching profession in relation to such elements as the large scope of responsibility, compliance with moral principles, high personal standards and having specific personality predispositions. A significant number of respondents (27) mentioned great satisfaction with the work performed. The respondents firmly rejected the suggestion that their profession goes hand in hand with a large amount of free time or high earnings and the possibility of quick promotion. The respondents also did not agree with the statement that their profession is associated with a high level of prestige. This should be a cause for concern due to the social importance of this profession. It can be said that the relatively low salaries of teachers are still an obstacle to achieving the status of a prestigious profession.⁹ Significantly, none of the respondents agreed with the statement that the teaching profession offers the possibility of quick promotion.

⁹ Załącznik do rozporządzenia Ministra Edukacji i Nauki z dnia 24 lutego 2023 r. zmieniającego rozporządzenie w sprawie wysokości minimalnych stawek wynagrodzenia zasadniczego nauczycieli, ogólnych warunków przyznawania dodatków do wynagrodzenia zasadniczego oraz wynagradzania za pracę w dniu wolnym od pracy, Dz.U. 2023, poz. 352.

This is justified by the provisions of the education law specifying the pace of promotion and its stages. Although the provisions of the Teacher's Charter changed in 2022 and the number of promotion levels was reduced, one should remember that it is necessary to work for the period specified in the act in order to apply for promotion to the next level.

Table 2. The teacher's job is connected with...

The teacher's job is connected with...	Number of responses				
	I strongly disagree	I tend to disagree	I have no opinion	I tend to agree	I totally agree
observance of moral principles	2	3	4	16	38
high earnings	38	17	3	3	2
high prestige of the profession	23	25	4	7	4
the possibility of quick promotion	26	22	6	9	0
great satisfaction with the work performed	4	4	3	25	27
a threat of professional burnout	6	12	13	22	10
great responsibility	4	1	0	11	47
ease of qualifying (relatively easy training course)	18	24	11	9	1
high personal standards	5	3	1	17	37
specific personality predispositions	4	3	3	18	35
self-directed learning	5	0	4	26	28
a large amount of free time	40	14	4	3	2

Source: own research.

An interesting supplementation to these results was the answer to the question as to how the authority of the teaching profession has developed over the years. It was assumed that the period of interest to the researchers was the first two decades of the 21st century. It is significant that all respondents (63 people) gave the unanimous answer that we are dealing with a decline in the authority of the teaching profession. No one provided an answer indicating not only an increase in authority, but also doubts in this regard ("It's hard to say" – 0 people). Researchers point out in this context that the strike of education staff that began in April 2019 was an event as a result of which "the image of the teacher suffered serious damage, and his or her work was deprived of the previously assigned ethos and respect."¹⁰ The economic demands formulated during the strike dominated the coverage in the public media, and the authorities themselves emphasised the demanding attitude of the striking teachers.

¹⁰ P. Ziółkowski, *Strajk nauczycieli w 2019 r.*, "Zeszyty Naukowe WSG. Edukacja – Rodzina – Społeczeństwo" 2020, nr 5, p. 264. See also: A. Mierzyńska, #DworczykLeaks. *Fala hejtu na strajk nauczycieli była zaplanowana i sterowana przez PiS. Są dowody!*, OKO.press, 14.01.2022, <https://oko.press/dworczykileaks-fala-hejtu-na-nauczycieli-kierowana-przez-pis> [accessed: 11.10.2023].

What comes as quite a significant surprise, however, is the respondents' clear belief that the general public does not associate their profession with authority. This position can be considered quite shocking, especially considering the professional role and tasks that a teacher has to fulfil. A question to pose here is whether the approach to their profession perceived by teachers themselves among the adult part of society affects the attitude of children and young people to teachers' work and pupil-teacher relations. An affirmative answer would significantly call into question the effectiveness of the teaching and educational activities of the contemporary Polish school.

The authority of the profession is probably not enhanced by the fact that pedagogical courses are now widely available. Combined with the decision to train as teachers declared by individual respondents based solely on curiosity or chance, this may result in students not selecting this profession. As a result, through their attitude, these people may contribute to creating a negative opinion of the teaching community.

The previously mentioned financial aspect of the teaching profession was also included in the study as a factor potentially reducing motivation to work in the profession. The respondents agreed that in Poland teachers are a professional group whose earnings are not sufficient in the context of the responsibility of their profession and its social importance. The overwhelming majority of teachers are not satisfied with their earnings. Of the 63 responses, only two people said that salaries in education are too high. Such a sparsely represented position may be a consequence of working in non-state institutions, where the level of remuneration does not have to be determined in accordance with the regulations of the minister responsible for education and upbringing. It is also possible that the respondents marked this answer option incorrectly.

However, the results obtained directly indicate the impossibility of achieving financial success in the education industry. This relationship becomes even more striking when we realise that a feature of the teaching profession in Poland, but in other countries too, is its strong feminisation. This is due to the specificity of the tasks performed by teachers, especially in preschool and early school education, which is generally associated with the "natural" role of a woman. It includes caring and educational functions, which in professional work are considered to be a kind of extension of the mother's role and its transfer from the home environment to the environment of an educational institution. Stereotypes accompanying the social perception of women and their professional activity are confirmed by research. The results indicate that professions characterised by a high level of feminisation are lower paid.¹¹ In the education sector we are also dealing with the "glass escalator" phenomenon, consisting in privileged treatment of men

¹¹ *The gender pay gap situation in the EU*, European Commission, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/equal-pay/gender-pay-gap-situation-eu_en [accessed: 22.10.2023].

employed in professions traditionally considered as feminine, which results in an easier and faster path to promotion to higher (managerial) positions. This *status quo* may be confirmed by the overrepresentation of men in management positions in education, which is disproportionate to the actual number of regular employees of a given institution.

The next point of analysis concerned the most important attribute that a teacher should have in the opinion of the respondents (table 3). The response pool contained five options. Most people considered involvement in working with pupils to be necessary (two people did not provide an answer to this question). The importance of the teacher's high level of knowledge and personality traits was also significant.

Table 3. Essential in the teaching profession

Essential in the teaching profession	Number of responses
High level of general and methodological knowledge	12
Completion of a Master's degree	2
High self-discipline and systematic work	6
Involvement in working with pupils	32
Personality predispositions	9

Source: own research.

It follows that, although the respondents are aware of the importance of the level of substantive knowledge, they attach much greater importance to the element of involvement in working with pupils. Perhaps this is related to the belief that knowledge can be acquired at various stages of professional development by participating in the many forms of professional development available to teachers. However, involvement in working with pupils should be treated more as an attitude that is difficult to shape at a mature age if a given person does not manifest this type of predisposition.

Interesting information was also provided by the answers to the question that required respondents to identify the social and interpersonal skills that should characterise a teacher (table 4). This question made multiple choices possible by allowing participants to tick a maximum of three items. Among the seven answer options presented, there was an "Other" option, the selection of which allowed the addition of an element that was necessary in the respondent's opinion but omitted from the proposed list. One person took advantage of this opportunity, adding "Consistency in actions" as the most important skill in her opinion. Patient, kind and endowed with a great deal of empathy: this is the image of the teacher that emerges when analysing the respondents' answers. Education practitioners attach great importance to the ability to build pupils' self-esteem. The respondents also indicated the leader's attitude, managerial and organisational skills, which certainly make teachers' work easier. It is significant that those

elements that are helpful in the development of pupils come to the fore, and those, such as organisational skills that facilitate the daily work of teachers themselves, recede into the background.

Table 4. Preferred characteristics of teachers

Preferred characteristics of teachers	Number of responses
Patience and kindness	47
Sense of humour and ease of establishing contacts	23
The ability to motivate others	23
Authenticity	23
The ability to build self-esteem in pupils	25
Empathy	29
Leader's attitude and organisational skills	11
Consistency in actions	1

Source: own research.

The respondents were also asked about the factors that determine professional satisfaction (table 5). They could tick a maximum of two options out of four variants, and an "Other" option was also available. Mentioned here were "Contact with children and awareness of the impact on people's life" and "Pupils' successes and their educational and upbringing progress". These answer options mentioned by the respondents themselves indicate how important the phenomenon of feedback in contact with the pupil is in the teaching process, which translates into the teacher's sense of professional satisfaction. The answer that received the most responses was that the highest degree of professional satisfaction is determined by a personal sense of fulfilment. Far fewer respondents mentioned the prestige of the profession and the financial aspect as the source of their satisfaction, from which, as already noted, the respondents maintain a great distance.

Table 5. Actors determining professional satisfaction

Factors determining professional satisfaction	Number of responses
Earnings	7
A sense of accomplishment	51
The prestige of the profession and the respect of society	8
Professional success and appreciation	28
Contact with children and awareness of the impact on people's lives	2
Pupils' successes and educational and upbringing progress	5

Source: own research.

For a more comprehensive analysis of the sense of professional satisfaction, the questionnaire included a question in which teachers could indicate

factors determining a lack of this in their profession (table 6). It is not surprising that the main reason for this lack of satisfaction turns out to be low earnings. The lack of respect from the immediate environment, i.e. parents and pupils, is equally acute. It is worth noting, however, that this does not go hand in hand with the level of social respect for the teaching profession declared in the 2019 study by the Public Opinion Research Center. A significant group of respondents also struggle with excess responsibilities and an atmosphere of competition among colleagues at the establishment. The results obtained also indicate teachers' readiness for professional development. This is not treated as an element of pressure from the institution's management or a burdensome obligation, but is treated as an element of teachers' everyday life. It also allows us to see the readiness of teachers to expand their professional horizons, extend competences and acquire new skills.

Table 6. Factors determining the lack of professional satisfaction

Factors determining the lack of professional satisfaction	Number of responses
Earnings	41
Lack of respect from society (pupils, parents)	34
Excessive demands of superiors	7
Too many responsibilities	18
Constant pressure of development	5
Competition among teachers	9

Source: own research.

When asked about their sense of level of professional satisfaction, understood broadly, the overwhelming majority marked the option "Definitely yes" (28) or "Probably yes" (25). Several people (seven) chose the answer "It's hard to say"; perhaps these are teachers whose working conditions, e.g. employment instability, result in variable levels of satisfaction. There were also individual responses from teachers who did not feel satisfied with their work. This aspect is worth relating to the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The answer "Probably not" was given by two young kindergarten teachers (up to 25 years of age and between 30 and 39 years of age). Both of them had worked in their profession for a relatively short time; their work experience did not exceed five years. One kindergarten was located in the countryside, the other in a town with a population of up to 50,000 inhabitants. In their case, the lack of satisfaction may result from difficulties caused by limited experience, which temporarily obscures the positive aspects of their work. The answer "Definitely not" was given by just one person, an experienced teacher (over 50 years old and over 20 years of work experience) from a primary school located in a town of 50,000 inhabitants. This case can be considered a manifestation of professional burnout, especially since the respondent reported physical ailments and a general reluctance to do her job.

These teachers were also asked about the difficulties they perceive in their professional work, with the option to indicate a maximum of three answers and use the “Other” option. Most teachers admitted that they found administrative activities and maintaining extensive documentation to be the most problematic thing (39 people). This shows that there are some gaps in the teacher education process. Study plans definitely lack courses that would practically prepare graduates in the field of constructing work plans, filling in diaries or preparing professional development plans. Many respondents admitted that difficulties, especially at the beginning of their professional path, resulted from the lack of experience in being an educator and conducting classes themselves (37). This is, to some extent, natural, but in order to minimise the feeling of uncertainty of young teachers in direct contact with pupils, a modification of the student teaching practice programme could help, for example by extending their duration or changing its formula to a continuous one.

Some teachers indicated problems related to pupil discipline (24) and contacts with their parents (22). The specificity of the profession somehow requires such skills since it seems that they can be developed over time as they acquire professional experience, personality predispositions also being important. Planning your own work can also be problematic (12), which is probably related to limited administrative and organisational experience. A small group of respondents (6), thinking about the difficulties, indicated establishing contact with the rest of the teaching staff at the beginning of their professional career. Only four people indicated a complete lack of difficulties.

An important topic of the study was the phenomenon of professional burn-out, mentioned previously. Respondents were asked to characterise how they understood this concept (table 7). The largest number of people chose the phrase “Lack of willingness and motivation to work with pupils”. Other respondents indicated “A lack of willingness and motivation to work with pupils”. Some of the respondents also indicated a lack of satisfaction with their work: “despite the high demands I set for myself and the goals I achieve, I no longer feel happy and satisfied with it”, writes one of the respondents. One of the symptoms of burnout in the opinion of teachers is the feeling that “when they go to work in the morning they are doing something against their will”. As one of the respondents notes: “It’s a state where I don’t even want to go to work because it makes me unhappy”. There is also a feeling of stagnation: “I feel a lack of willingness to work, a lack of motivation to improve my qualifications. I am stuck in a state of immobility and this has a negative impact on the people in my care”. It is worth quoting here the statement of the kindergarten teacher, mentioned above, with considerable teaching experience: “Not only do I understand the definition of the phenomenon, but I have experienced it myself. It was a moment in my professional life when I came to the conclusion that there was nothing more I could do. Work and children had overwhelmed me and my further actions could have harmed someone.

Me or, worse still, the children.”¹² The teacher also added that at that moment she decided to retire and sign up for therapy. After a year, she gained new strength and to this day she works part-time in a kindergarten, conducting art classes with children once a week. It is also worth emphasising the awareness of the problem among these teachers and their knowledge of the potential symptoms of its occurrence. In turn, the statement quoted above can be considered a tip for other teachers in a similar situation. Recognising the problem in one’s own case may be the most difficult, but also the most important step from which the process of solving the problem of burnout may begin, and examples of individual strategies and exchanges of experiences may encourage one to take action.

Table 7. Professional burnout is...

Professional burnout is...	Number of responses
To be tired of one’s job (mental and physical)	4
A lack of satisfaction with your profession	8
A lack of willingness and motivation to work with pupils	10
Performing one’s duties automatically, without paying attention to the pupils’ needs	4
Reluctance to go to work	6
A feeling of being dissatisfied with the actions taken	3
A lack of ideas	5
A lack of work efficiency	4
A lack of willingness to develop yourself and professional routine	3
Increased stress and decreased empathy for pupils	5
Looking for a different career path	6
A feeling of uselessness and pointlessness in doing work	5

Source: own research.

After the respondents had defined the phenomenon of burnout, they were asked to state whether they had ever observed any symptom indicating professional burnout. Of the three answer options, “Yes”, “No” and “It’s hard to say”, most respondents (28) indicated the occurrence of symptoms that could be interpreted as a manifestation of professional burnout. This group also included people with only a small amount of work experience, which means that a simple relationship between the length of work in the profession and undesirable symptoms should be ruled out. Of course, a group of teachers who have been working longer and are more experienced is theoretically more vulnerable, but this fact itself is not crucial, and the occurrence of burnout symptoms or their frequency is not directly related to age, experience or even place of work. This proves the complexity and unpredictability of the phenomenon of burnout. At the same time, 21 people gave

¹² Source: own research.

a negative answer, declaring that they had not observed any disturbing symptoms (compared to a group of 14 people who were unable to clearly state this), which may be a bit of optimism, considering the difficulties indicated by teachers in their professional career, for example their unsatisfactory remuneration or low level of social prestige.

The final part of the questionnaire included a question as to whether, if you could choose your profession again, but with your current knowledge and experience, you would become a teacher. The majority of respondents (34 people) gave an affirmative answer, 19 were hesitant (“It’s hard to say”), and ten would definitely not take up a job as a teacher. Therefore, it is noticeable that many teachers accept their professional career path with all its advantages and weaknesses. Thanks to this, their passion for their work and its specificity allow them to overcome the everyday difficulties they have to face. At the same time, a significant number of teachers consider their choice to be completely appropriate and hesitate in assessing the validity of their professional choice. This shows that in their case, moments of satisfaction from their profession are not able to eliminate difficulties or increase the motivation to work. This state of affairs is undoubtedly influenced by the threat of burnout and the symptoms of this phenomenon experienced by active teachers.

Conclusions

As research has shown, teachers associate their work with a high level of professional satisfaction: the overwhelming majority strongly or mostly agreed with this statement. Significantly, most respondents did not consider the financial aspect to be a key factor in job satisfaction. It is clearly visible here that the narrative that appeared in the media in the context of the teachers’ strike in 2019 and which highlighted the financial claims of the protesters is not reflected in the opinions of the teachers surveyed. They consider the sense of fulfilment resulting from the work performed as a much more important factor that determines professional satisfaction.

The phenomenon of burnout from the respondents’ perspective also turned out to be interesting. It would seem that the problem is common among teachers, especially in the context of the difficult situation in the education sector related to the reforms carried out in recent years and the above-mentioned financial situation. The high level of responsibility in working as a teacher and the social expectations associated with this profession may also be a factor that contributes to the symptoms of burnout. The teachers surveyed are aware of the threat of this phenomenon, although a relatively large part of this group clearly indicated that they did not experience symptoms of burnout, and the rest did not provide a clear answer. It is also worth noting that the problem is also observed among teachers

with relatively little work experience. Perhaps this is due to the disappointment that novice teachers feel when confronted with a professional reality that does not match their expectations and ideas about their chosen profession.

Finally, it is worth quoting the respondents' answers to the question posed in the title of this study: Teacher – profession or vocation? The hypothesis that teachers tend to treat their profession in terms of a social mission was clearly confirmed. This position is consistent with the research results of the Public Opinion Research Center from 2019, quoted in the Introduction. The vast majority of teachers chose the “Vocation” option, no fewer than 55 people. The remaining eight selected the “Profession” option. The perception of the profession as a social mission may be important at the stage of choosing an educational path and then taking up one's first job. Young people may idealise their chosen profession and thus try to increase its status in their own eyes. Seeing one's career path as something more than just a profession can also be a significant motivator at the start. It may also be a mechanism that helps reduce cognitive dissonance resulting from, for example, unsatisfactory remuneration in a given profession or its low social prestige.

In connection with the research topic and in relation to the future of the teaching profession, an interesting thread would be to extend its scope to include a group of students training to be preschool and early school teachers. They would have the opportunity to formulate their expectations regarding their future profession. Confronting expectations with reality could also provide interesting material for formulating conclusions regarding possible changes in teacher education or creating systemic solutions expected by pupils, parents and teachers themselves.

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