Factors Determining the Choice of the Teacher's Career among the Applicants of Pre-service Teacher Education Programmes

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ABSTRACT

A report of the European Commission (201t) states that a teacher's career has lost the capacity to attract the most promising future professionals. As the teaching profession is no longer as attractive as before, Latvia is already experiencing a serious shortage of qualified teachers, and in turn, the declining prestige of this profession is having a negative impact on the enrolment of highly qualified candidates in teacher education programmes.

The aim of the present article is to identify the factors determining the choice of the teacher's career among the applicants of pre-service teacher education programmes. The main emphasis and research question in relation to career activities is based on the development of the concept of "career readiness". Therefore, the content of applicants' answers to entrance examination questions received for the last three years have been explored. The criteria for the analysis are based on the subjective and objective career factors, often mentioned words in their goals and features in describing their suitability for the profession.

The research findings give the evidence that a majority of teacher education programme applicants choose their future career based on the subjective career factors (values, job stability, challenges, work-life balance, goal fulfilment, etc.), however in the society they are judged by objective career factors (promotion, salary, economic situation, etc.) and the lack of congruence between them might make teachers leave their profession. Besides the factors influencing and shaping professional development of pre-service teacher career have been explored and suggestions for the improvement of the admission and study process in pre-service teacher education programmes are put forward.

Keywords

Attractiveness, Entrance Examination, Pre-service Teacher Education Programmes, Teacher's Career

Introduction

Changes in education bring changes to teachers and their careers. Consequently, a high-quality and engaging (attractive) teaching career is a prerequisite for a good education. It is important to recognize the crucial role of teachers for the quality of school education. As a cornerstone of the school learning process and the new reform, teachers are also an educational policy priority that has received support at European level. European Commission (2017) emphasizes the need to improve teacher education, continuous professional development and raise the status of the teaching profession.

The perception of teacher's profession in society has changed. It reveals new career perspectives, continuous self-improvement, co-operation with colleagues, personal responsibility for one's decisions, the ability to take risks, etc. The teaching profession becomes more dynamic, creative and complex and promotes motivation to become and remain a teacher (Heijnen 2018).

Choosing a profession and entering the labour market is a process of learning and development where the participants themselves must be actively involved, constantly taking individual responsibility for the development of their careers (Baltic Institute of Social Sciences and Organization Development Academy 2015).

However, despite these positive trends, it is still difficult to attract new candidates to teaching profession. There are mentioned various reasons: lack of career prospects, relatively low salary, high workload. Sometimes pedagogy is considered as a "trap" or a "mission" – once having entered it, it is not possible to leave it and

switch to another profession (Heijnen 2018, Lāce 2014).

There are also heard provocative statements in society that pedagogy is chosen by those who are unable to study something else (LIZDA 2016), that outstanding pedagogical work is not particularly valued or that the teaching profession has become a consumer good. Anyone who pays for studies in teacher education programmes can become a teacher which ends in graduates who choose to work in another field.

Thus, the questions arise both about the organization process of the selection of applicants, focusing on how to attract better educated candidates to teaching profession, and about the organization of the higher education process, which not only provides the necessary knowledge and skills in terms of relevant qualifications, but also facilitates the development of abilities, attitudes and habits appropriate to individual needs.

The need to attract better educated candidates to the teaching profession is growing day by day, especially in the context of the new education reform towards competence-oriented teaching and learning in Latvia. It is therefore important that there are enough high-quality applicants in teacher education programmes and that it is possible to select suitable candidates for a teaching career during the admission process.

This specific study examines the process of selecting applicants to identify the factors that determine a teacher's career choice and how this choice relates to subjective career factors (values, job stability, challenges, work-life balance, achievement of goals, etc.) and objective career factors (promotion opportunities, salary prospects, economic situation, etc.). The Faculty of Education, Psychology and Art, University of Latvia has got the experience of organizing the entrance examinations in pre-service teacher education programmes for four years. The article deals with a part of a larger scale action research to explore the factors influencing and shaping professional development of pre-service teacher career and improve the admission process of pre-service teacher education programmes, as well as the study process. The review of career theories reveals the process of career choice and development, which helps to understand an individual's career choices and career decisions. They are applicable to different groups, cultures and different socio-economic contexts, and provide a multifaceted focus on the interpretation of career choice data.

Literature Review on Career Choice and Development

Significant changes have taken place in the labour market, forcing people to reassess and adjust their career development and choice. These changes are characterized by the employee's self-responsibility (taking responsibility for himself/ herself) for the development of their career (Janasz, Forret 2008; Colmen 2012; Fidler 2016; Maier, 2018). The understanding that the job may not be guaranteed and long-term (Kuijpers, Schyns, Scheerens 2006; International Labour Organization 2016; Davidson 2020) requires employees to continue learning and become competitive. The employees themselves are also responsible for their entry into the labour market, job mobility, self-presentation, as well as there is a free opportunity to move from one employer to another, there is the so-called "career without borders" (McDonald, Hite 2008; Matulcikova & Brevenikova 2014).

Today, career development is influenced by an individual's subjective career perception, which is expressed by the concept of "subjective career". If the term "objective career" means promotion, salary, number of certificates, length of service, i.e., factors that are objectively visible and measurable, then "subjective career" means an individual's reaction to his or her career (Judge et al. 1994; Heslin 2005; Ozolina-Pese 2013; Liangtie, Fuhui 2016). The success factors of subjective career are personal values, such as job stability or challenges. Subjective career success is determined not only by measurable, but also personal criteria, which can be – the balance between work and life, achievement of goals, etc. (Ozolina-Pese 2013; Dyke & Duxbury 2011; Shockley, Ureksoy, Rodopman, Poteat & Dullaghan 2015).

The objective criteria of career success (salary and promotion) do not always determine whether a person feels satisfied with one's career, because they do not expect only promotion or salary from work. Objective criteria are influenced by the economic situation, when, for example, in crisis many people lose their jobs or their wages are reduced, but this does not mean a decline in the

subjective sense of career success (Heslin 2003). So, the sources of success can be not only salary or position, but also other ones: the satisfaction with the work done, the opportunity to combine work with family, the opportunity to realize one's talents, etc.

Thus, when choosing their career, prospective students (applicants) in a way reveal their preferences for an objective or subjective career (Gu & Su 2016).

In turn, the identification of factors influencing career choice and making career decisions based on the concept of "career readiness", is facilitated by the study of career theories.

Career choice and its development can be explained by Trait-and-Factor Theory, the basic elements of which are: self-awareness, awareness of profession and decision-making skills (Spenser, Haris-Bowlsbey 2012). More broadly, it can be interpreted as "person – environment fit" which deals with relationship between a person's physical abilities, education/ achievement, intelligence, special talents, interests, self-belief, and circumstances (Rounds, & Tracey 1990; Rayman & Gottfredson 2020). Career Development Theory (Ginzberg et.al. 1951; Patton, McMahon 2014) considers career choice as a process of finding a compromise between what one wants to be and what is possible.

The Theory of Professional Choice (Super, Thompson, Lindeman, Jordaan, Lindeman, Myers 1988) defines 4 stages of career development: Exploration, Establishment, Maintenance, Decline. Super, Savickas, Super (1996) point at the cycles of development tasks and their repetition in various ways throughout life. This is an important aspect, as not only young people having obtained secondary education enrol in teacher education programmes, but also people with higher education in science or humanities, teachers of all ages who want to requalify or pursue further education and aim to advance their careers both horizontally and vertically. So, career development is not a one-way and linear process.

In connection with the choice of profession, Vroom (1964) created the Expectancy Model – belief that increased effort will lead to increased performance, i.e., if one works harder, he/ she will be better. It is important to decide in favour of a higher result.

The Social Learning Theory of Career Choice and Counseling (Krumboltz 1996) substantiates the notion that career decisions are made based on social learning or environmental conditions and events, genetic heritage and learning, work experience. Professional growth is the result of learning and imitating other people's behavior. This theory substantiates the relationship between career choice and decision making.

Understanding the development of these theories, it can be stated that career development does not only mean profession, but person's changing life context and personality. Environmental conditions, their limitations and opportunities, connections with other people, different responsibilities influence and determine the choice of profession. It can be said that career development and personality development converge in choosing a profession (Wolf, Kolb 1980).

However, recent research shows declining correlation between personality traits and occupation, life stage and career stage (Drodge 2002, Pryor & Bright 2003). There is a discrepancy between theory and practice (Di Fabio, Esbroeck 2016) because many professions, including teacher's profession, require constant change, which does not allow to create a certain characterization of the work environment, i.e., the pandemic COVID 2019 situation. It has given the floor for the development of research into the Chaos Theory of Career (Drodge 2002, Pryor & Bright 2003) which is based on two assumptions – nonlinearity and recursion.

Based on career development as a process that takes place in a variety of, not always predictable, conditions Savickas (2013) has introduced the term "life planning" and talks about life planning in the career construction process. He outlines the term "life planning" as the third paradigm after professional career guidance and education (Savickas 2015), where these three paradigms move from test results essential in career guidance to stages in career education and further to stories in life planning. "Life planning" is much broader and deeper concept than "career construction", so in this study, in order to understand applicants' choice and the readiness for teaching profession in broader context, entrance examinations consisted of questions that allowed to reveal the discourse of their life planning story, interpersonal relationships, experience, emotional attitude, assumptions, and clichés.

Thus, the choice of the profession being a logical part of life planning is a dynamic, self-organizing process that involves the individual, the environment, interaction and change. Bauman (2001) outlines the uncertainty of individual's choice as to whether the chosen path will lead to the expected results, whether today's losses will turn into future benefits, or the rejection of options that seem undesirable right now does not hide painful losses in future. It is not clear who and what can be trusted, as it is not evident who controls the overall course of events – there is no guarantee that everything will go in the expected direction. Living in a state of insecurity is a life of risk, and the person who makes the decision is forced to pay for the risk.

Research methodology

As it has been mentioned above, the Faculty of Education, Psychology and Art, University of Latvia (FEPA, UL) has got the experience of organizing the entrance examinations in pre-service teacher education programmes for four years. The research data analysed in the article contribute to a larger scale action research which aims to explore the factors influencing and shaping professional development of pre-service teacher career and improve the admission and study process in pre-service teacher education programmes. The aim of the present article is to identify the factors determining the choice of the teacher's career among the applicants of pre-service teacher education programme "Teacher" where graduates obtain professional bachelor's degree in education sciences, qualification of a teacher and competence to teach the content of the chosen school subjects at the general, optimal and higher level according to the National Standard for General Secondary Education. Every year the entrance examination for the enrolment in teacher education programme "Teacher" is passed by 270 – 320 applicants, so far 1100. Most applicants (75%) are graduates of general secondary education and secondary vocational education establishments who have acquired secondary education. 10% of applicants are already holding a university degree, 15% have got some higher education experience, but they are not satisfied with their previous choice and choices therefore they are changing the programme to get teacher's qualification. Based on the data analysis of four years, 17% of applicants that have passed the entrance examinations have not enrolled to study in teacher education programme. There have been about ten applicants in four years that have not received minimum points in the entrance examination to qualify for the enrolment in the programme.

The average age of applicants is 19 or 20 years, but there are also 20% of applicants over 30 years and 5 % are older than 40, on average male applicants are older than female applicants.

Due to the transformations taking place in teacher education organization and provision and initiatives on state level during the last three years, the research focus of this article has been narrowed down to the applicants of five subject teacher qualifications (due to the reason they have been open for enrolment all three years) namely: Latvian Language and Literature Teacher, English Language Teacher, Design and Technology (used to be Home Economics and Technology, Household) Teacher, German Language Teacher and Computing (used to be Computer Science and Programming) Teacher comprising 77 (21 male and 56 female) applicants in year 2018, 97 (22 male and 75 female) applicants in year 2019 and 73 (20 male and 53 female) applicants in year 2020. Comparatively the most popular qualification has been the English Language Teacher (average 40 applicants a year), Latvian Language and Literature Teacher (average 20 applicants a year), Computing Teacher (11 applicants a year), Design and Technology Teacher (average 10 applicants a year), and German Language Teacher (4 applicants a year).

From all the 247 exam papers were randomly chosen the papers and oral responses of 90 students for in-depth analysis, every year 10 male students' papers and 20 female students' papers, in total 30 male students and 60 female students.

The main emphasis in relation to career activities is based on the development of the concept of "career readiness". As a result, not only clear and unambiguous text was analysed, but also different levels of text content – primary content (topics, main ideas) and latent content (contextual information) were pointed to in relation to the entrance examination questions: what determined applicants' choice of the teacher's career and how informed they were about teacher's work. The

criteria for the analysis were based on the subjective and objective career (Judge et al, 1994) factors, often mentioned words in their goals and features in describing their suitability for the profession. Each of the focal constructs was defined using multi-item, in 6 categories: emotions, interaction, societal stereotypes/ clichés, family advice or tradition (the teacher dynasty), formal factors, experience.

Findings and Discussion

For several years the State Education Development Agency of Republic of Latvia (VIAA 2018) has been conducting a survey, which reflects young people's choice of profession and readiness for the chosen profession. The data of year 2018 survey show that only one third of the secondary school students in their last year of school have chosen what they will do after graduating from secondary school, and more than 40% of respondents have not yet decided about their future professional career.

Concerning the factors of career choice, for 68.14% of young people, it is important to understand what interests them and choose a profession that corresponds to their interests and understanding. This serves as the evidence of career readiness. The prestige of the profession is important only to 1.97% of respondents and demand in the labour market – 4, 32%. This can explain the surprise experienced later when the status of the profession is questioned. For (50.75%) of young people interesting and exciting content seems to be the most important factor in future work and profession, ranking salary as the second in importance (37.69%), followed by the opportunity to apply their knowledge and talents at work (28.85%), and 26.41% have marked good and responsive colleagues which is really essential also for teacher's profession.

57.51% of young people also point out that no one has helped them in choosing a profession, they have made the decision independently. Family and parents have provided support in decision-making for 35. 67% of young people, friends – 5.01% and teachers – 1.8%. The impact of teachers in decision making process is surprisingly low here, as according to the data analysis of entrance examination interviews teachers have been quite important players in choosing teacher education programme.

In addition, only one third (28%) of young people value their "strengths" and which sector or profession they can best use their talents. Thus, it can be said that young people at the beginning stage of career are quite "illiterate" and not aware of very many factors. This is also present in the interview responses of teacher education programme applicants' entrance examination.

In total from 90 (30 male students and 60 female students) randomly chosen applicants' papers, 110 response items have been used for in-depth analysis. Several respondents gave more than one answer to the question and the responses revealed different notions, so they were analysed separately. The analysis was based on the subjective and objective career factors, often mentioned words in their goals and features in describing their suitability for the profession.

The highest number of responses (29 responses out of 110) goes into the category of emotions where mostly is expressed "liking to work with children, willingness to help children". In the category of subjective reason "enjoyment of specific school subject, one's own children" 26 responses can be placed. Next in the succession of frequency are assumptions of what it is to teach – 23 responses; followed by experience "having taught someone something and family traditions" – 14 responses. Nine responses were linked to the categories of interaction and outside factors, like regulations and pressure. Most often mentioned words in applicants' responses are teacher – 58 *times*, *children* – 48, *I like* – 34, *to teach* – 33, *to perform* – 30, *to work* – 22, 21 – *profession*, 18 – *emotions* and 18 – *inspiration*, 14 – *to help*, 13 – *abilities* and 13 – *knowledge*. Thus, it can be stated that applicants' readiness for the career is more based on the emotional assumptions than exploration and knowledge about the profession.

After the analysis of the respondents' answers to the questions of the entrance examination, five sets of thematically related responses can be pointed out: 1) understanding of the meaning of teacher's profession; 2) experience and recommendations; 3) external requirements – the qualification is necessary to continue work at school; 4) external manifestations of teacher's profession – enjoyment to work with children; 5) like of the subject. The classification of responses provides an opportunity to reformulate the

entrance examination evaluation criteria, as well as recommendations for individualized further student career support in the study process.

In the set of responses (No.1) to the question why the student has chosen to become a teacher, the applicants reflect their understanding of the **meaning of teacher's profession**, mentioning both socio-pedagogical and content goals, and the adequacy of their abilities:

"I want to become a teacher because I think it is a respectable profession because it is the teacher who introduces the student to the world, forms his personality. I am social and very communicative, I love children and young people, I want to help as many students as possible, not only as a teacher, but also as a friend, supporter, trustworthy person. I want each of my students to know that I can be trusted because I know that not all young people have such a person. I have also enjoyed being a teacher "on my own skin" and it was great."

"Proper, accurate and good use of the Latvian language is important to me."

"I chose to become a teacher because I want to give children/ young people the opportunity to acquire knowledge in a modern, creative way, and to convince them that even complex things can be solved, they just need their own way."

Next set of responses (No.2) refers to **experience and recommendations**. All applicants have met teachers during learning process and refer to this both as positive and negative (could also be called passive) experience. Applicants also mention that teachers have recommended choosing teacher's profession.

"I have studied with exceptional teachers who have motivated and convinced me about this career direction. I also have had bad experience that motivates me to be better, to make changes so that others do not have to experience it."

"I chose to become a teacher because I was motivated by my first teacher."

"I was very inspired by my high school teachers as well as acquaintances who recommended it to me. I want to be the kind of teacher I wanted to have for me."

Some applicants describe their experience of pedagogical activity, which has been positive.

"The choice to become a teacher was only made at the end of the 12th grade, when I had the opportunity to teach mathematics to younger students in lower grades during pandemic lockdown, and the feeling of reward I gained was indescribable."

"I have been teaching private math lessons for five years. I want to learn to teach at school as well. I have got high interest in pedagogy, especially modern methods."

The further career support of such students should be focused on the analysis of their needs and challenges, the development of an individual plan for professional development, so that students do not overestimate their initial success and do not stop at their professional development.

Some applicants base their choice on the experience of their parents – teachers.

"To continue the choice of teacher's profession for generations – when I start my studies, I will be the third generation of teachers in our family."

"I really like the school environment. There are other teachers and educators in my family – that have played a role in choosing a profession."

"My mother is a teacher and, of course, I have experienced all the years at school myself, so the teaching profession is very familiar to me. Unlike other professions, I am clearly aware of my responsibilities as a teacher and I feel good in the school environment. The teaching profession provides an opportunity to be versatile, precise and creative, and I would like to teach the same to others."

"I chose to become a teacher because it is one of my dreams, as well as that of my grandparents."

In the theoretical literature, inclusion in the dynasty, inheritance of the profession from generation to generation is evaluated differently. Vondracek and Skorikov (1997) refer to this as deprivation of rights, which restricts career choice (the child follows the path of habits), but it is explained as the prestige of the profession, social status. The position of a teacher is a stable profession that parents recommend to their children. This justification is related to the student's personal values (it can be stated that the student comes from an environment where education is a value), and the recognition of the social status of the profession. It is also interesting to link the written responses of this group of students to their understanding of the professional field (education sector) in the interview part of the entrance examination. It could be expected that such applicants would be more knowledgeable in the questions of the education sector, but surprisingly the applicants' awareness is

comparatively narrow. There are even such shocking cases that the applicants that are already working at school are very little informed about the novelties in the field. This ignorance is rather hard to explain. What is more during their studies, students often choose to do their teaching practice in "their" school – the school they have graduated from, with well-known teachers – mentors. They support their choice by "*I know everyone there, I will get help there, it will be easier for m*e". To support the career of the future teacher, it is strongly recommended to get acquainted with as many different schools with different working conditions as possible during the studies in teacher education programmes of FEPA, UL.

Another set of responses (No.3) can be outlined as the group of applicants who justify their choice with **external requirements**, they are already working at school and the qualification is compulsory required to continue the work.
"*I like to communicate with young people, I want to share my knowledge. And I need education in pedagogy to become the instructor of cadet force.*"
"*I am already working as a teacher and I want to continue this work, accordingly teacher's qualification is needed.*"
The above-mentioned considerations regarding the necessary support for the students' conscious professional development are applicable also to this group. Besides, during the interview of entrance examination attention should be paid to applicants' communication skills and speech quality, not to accept clichés, phrases and pathos, but ask in-depth questions.

The respondents who express an emotional attachment to the **external manifestations of the teacher's profession**, i.e., their enjoyment of working with children, communicating, helping, teaching, etc. will fit in the set of responses No.4.
"*I have loved children since childhood, helping them to learn, develop and become smart and kind people.*"
"*I have always enjoyed working with children. During lessons I have always imagined how I would feel in the teacher's place. I also think that my job as a teacher would give me a sense of satisfaction.*"
"*I like working with children (have got four children myself).*"

The responses (Set No. 5) reveal the choice made because they like the subject, and this indicate even more insecure career planning.
"*During school I liked and did very well in these subjects.*"
"*I want to become a teacher of Latvian language and literature because I like to read, interested in culture.*"
This motivation for choosing a profession is not stable, because when confronted with everyday work, getting into problem situations, positive emotions can quickly be replaced by frustration, dislike, rejection. Similarly, emotional evaluation traditionally continues to dominate in the evaluation of the first teaching practice. In the career support of such students, the orientation should be on the studies of educational psychology, planning and evaluation of the expected outcomes of one's performance, analysis of education case studies.

Concerning male and female applicants' responses, the responses given by male applicants are livelier, there are fewer clichés.
"*At first, as a joke, my friends said that I should become teacher, because I am good at explaining computer issues. Joke by joke – here I am.*"
"*Seeing the misery of those who do not know history, I followed the thought "if not me, who, if not now, when?" I like to tell stories, and there is no more interesting story than history!*"
"*I want to earn well, maybe not money, but a feeling of happiness and satisfaction, I want to understand and improve, inspire and excite.*"
Another conclusion about male student applicants is that their choice is more based in experience gained and external requirements, as for female student applicants – subjectively emotional experience and assumptions. The applicants with previous teaching experience are more specific in their responses and provide support to their statements.

To sum it up, the features of the following theories (*Trait-and-Factor Theory, Career Development Theory, Theory of Professional Choice, Social Learning Theory of Career Choice and Counseling and Chaos Theory of Career*) can be noticed in the responses of the applicants, but the applicants are quite unaware of them and reveal chaotic understanding of the chosen career.
Finally, the choice of the profession is a logical part of a dynamic, self-organizing process of life

planning that involves the individual, the environment, interaction and change.

Conclusion

The research findings give the evidence of state of the art of the teacher education programme applicants "career readiness". The intention was to reveal career readiness through the understanding of objective and subjective career factors.

Majority (79 out of 90) of teacher education programme applicants choose their future career based on the subjective career factors (values, job stability, challenges, work-life balance, goal fulfilment, etc.), however in the society they are judged by objective career factors (promotion, salary, economic situation, etc.) and the lack of congruence between them might make teachers leave their profession. On the other hand, probably this is very selfish to expect that exactly teachers, especially when in Latvia they are not state officials, should stay in their profession for all the life if there exists "career without borders" and there is a free opportunity to move from one employer to another. Leaving teacher's profession might also be explained by the urge to continue learning and become competitive. However, work at school would expect more cooperation and interaction instances which were mentioned seldomly in applicants' responses.

Environmental conditions, their limitations and opportunities, connections with other people, different responsibilities influence and determine the choice of profession.

The data make it possible to judge the applicants' understanding of their chosen profession, reveal the points that are considered relevant in the chosen profession and that identify them as "good teachers" or people "who can apply for the position of teacher". The data also reveal applicants' values, ambitions, e.g., "*Do you want to change something important in education in general, or plan some career development, improvement (objective career)*?"

The analysis of the answers of entrance examinations also provides feedback for the improvement of the entrance examination questions. To avoid empty phrases and "loud words", the question for the written entrance examination should be reformulated: "*Why is it important for you to be in this profession?"* Besides, being aware that the teacher should be able to tell stories, use examples, allegories to address students' emotions, the assessment criteria should be improved by valuing descriptive language, humor, non-standard answers or creative solutions.

Concerning the interview part question how informed they are about teacher's work, the following evaluation criteria could be defined: 0 – name the keyword(s), know the fact (*likes work*); 1 point – have an idea and is able to communicate it (*must cooperate with parents*); 2 points – explain and give one's personal opinion, vision (*I will cooperate with parents because only common requirements will allow the initiative to be implemented…*); 3 points – possible actions/ behavior is expressed (*for working with parents I will develop a plan for monthly afternoon meetings where…*).

As to the study process improvement, the needs analysis of the students should be carried out in order to design individual plan for professional development, educational psychology and socio-emotional learning should be fostered, the development of story-telling skills should be focused on, planning and evaluation of the expected outcomes of one's performance should be modelled, and teaching practice in variety of schools should be gained during the study years.

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