

## The Perception of Teaching as a Profession by Turkish Trainee Teachers: Attitudes towards Being a Teacher

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### Abstract

*Attitudes are formed as a result of learning and experiences which develop in a certain period of time. Since attitudes are bound to an individual's set of values, there are several factors which have an influence upon the construction or changes in the already existing attitudes. This study is an attempt to investigate the perception of teaching as a profession by trainee teachers. 80 trainee teachers studying at a state university's Faculty of Education, English Language Teaching Department in Turkey were asked about their attitudes towards teaching as a profession. A 30-item Likert type scale was used to gather data and the results indicate that these students have clear positive attitudes for their future profession.*

**Keywords:** Teaching, attitudes towards teaching, teaching as a profession.

### 1. Introduction

*..... as many lead and draw them in willing obedience, inflamed with the study of learning and admiration of virtue-stirred up with high hopes of living to be brave men and worthy patriots dear to God and famous to all ages...[their teachers] with mild and effectual persuasions and what with the intimation of some fear, if need be, but chiefly by his own example, might in a short space gain them an incredible diligence and courage, infusing into their young breasts such an ingenuous and noble ardor...Milton, of Education (1644)<sup>1</sup>*

The effects of a teacher on the nation and the future of the nation are unquestionable. As it was stated by the philosopher Henry Adams "a teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops". In addition, Smith (1986) adds that "[teaching] is a profession that profoundly affects the lives of every individual, and ultimately the strength and well-being of the nation." (p. 39). According to Parkay and Hardcastle (1991), people who love teaching are generally attracted by the process and the spontaneous aspects of teaching. They take full advantage of every teaching moment and make the most out of it. The fascination of discovering knowledge is still another attraction of teaching. One can learn any subject in depth just by teaching it since teaching is also a learning process. Difficult, wonderful, exhausting, fun, stressful, enlightening, and rewarding beyond compare: That's what you hear when you ask veteran teachers what their job is like. Then, when you ask veteran teachers if they would choose the same career if they could live their lives over, the answer is usually "Yes" (LaCour, 2005). No matter at what level and to which group of learners they are dealing with, teachers have always been expected to devote themselves to the profession they are doing.

In almost all societies, teachers are often considered the backbone of schools; without them there would be no school. Thus, understanding teachers' roles is a key to understanding the educational system (Ballantine & Spade, 2007). According to Ballantine & Spade, professionalization has long been a source of both hope and frustration for teachers. Maybe even before going further, the definition of a profession should be given. A profession is an occupation that seeks to regulate itself by (a) developing a consensus concerning what its practitioners must know and be able to do and (b) developing an accreditation and licensing system to ensure the transmission of that knowledge and skill. An occupation becomes a profession when organizations such as universities, states, and the public accept that system (Wise, 2005). Since early in the 20th century, educators have repeatedly sought to promote the view that elementary and secondary teaching is a highly complex kind of work, requiring specialized knowledge and skill and deserving of the same status and standing as traditional professions like law and medicine.

*"It is important that an individual chooses the right profession, especially if they choose teaching. Many don't realize how responsible and demanding the teaching profession is. I think you cannot perform it well without a real wish and interest. (Second-year pedagogy student, a future teacher)"<sup>2</sup> (p 265).*

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Bunting, J. (1998). *An Education for Our Time*. Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Krecic, M. J. & Grmek, M. I. (2005). *The Reasons Students Choose Teaching Professions*. *Educational Studies*. Vol. 31. No. 3. p. 265-274.

The above quotation from a student in the Faculty of Education reveals the importance of the reasons for choosing the teaching profession (and professions in general). We have to be aware, however, that the teacher is not only teaching, but also personally influencing the students: that is why besides professional education, a teacher's human qualities are also important. Teaching, in a word, is inevitably based on notions about the nature of the learners' mind. Beliefs and assumptions about teaching whether in a school or in any other context, are a direct reflection of the beliefs and assumptions the teachers hold about the learner and themselves. Of course, like most deep truths, this one is already well known. Teachers have always tried to adjust their teaching to the backgrounds, abilities, styles and interests of the learners. However, they also bring their own beliefs and assumptions to the classroom (Leach and Moon, 1999). Papanastasiou & Papanastasiou (1997) in their study compare the reasons of entering the teaching profession by two different student groups. The purpose of the study is to identify and compare the factors that had influenced students at the Pennsylvania State University and the University of Cyprus to major in elementary education. A questionnaire was completed by 157 students from PSU and by 176 students from UC.

The study used some factors for comparing the reasons of becoming a teacher by these two different populations. The factors identified were variety of benefits, internal motives, status of the profession, interpersonal influence and academic ability. The factor "internal motives" was the strongest factor that influenced students from the PSU to major in elementary education. The factors which were highly influential for the students of the UC to enter the same major were the "variety of benefits" and the "status of profession". In another study by Krecic & Grmek (2005), they wanted to present the reasons students at the Faculty of Education in Maribor, Slovenia, chose pedagogy for their study direction, and therefore becoming a teacher. A total 237 second-year students of the academic year 2003/04 were included in the research. Of the five groups of reasons for choosing this program (altruistic, material, self-realization and alternative, and reasons arising from aspiration stereotype), students most often asserted self-realization, including: teaching provides a useful public function for the whole society; as a teacher, "I can be an example to children and young people; this profession will give me a chance for professional development during my whole career; and teaching will enable me to use all my abilities (and talents—for example, music, verbal, dancing, etc.)" Important differences were found to exist between students of different disciplines.

Schutz, Crowder & White (2001) in their study investigated how the goal of becoming a teacher emerges. The study used interviews to develop goal histories for 8 pre-service teachers. There tended to be 4 sources of influence for their goal to become a teacher: (a) family influences, (b) teacher influences, (c) peer influences, and (d) teaching experiences. The categories developed from the interviews to describe the types of influences those sources provided were (a) suggesting that the person become a teacher, (b) encouraging the person to become a teacher, (c) modeling teaching behavior, (d) exposing the person to teaching experiences, and (e) discouraging the person from becoming a teacher. In addition, influences such as critical incidents, emotions, and social-historical factors, such as the status and pay of teachers, were prominent in the goal histories of the participants. Saban (2003) in his study explores the characteristics and perceptions of students' currently entering elementary teacher education in Turkey.

A questionnaire consisting of fixed-response, Likert-style and open-ended questions was administered to all entry level elementary teacher education students (n=381) enrolled in the Faculty of Education of Selcuk University during the 2001–2002 academic year to seek information about their background characteristics, past and preferred elementary schooling experiences, reasons for choosing elementary teaching as a career, and perceptions of elementary teaching as a profession. Results indicate that significant differences exist between male and female prospective elementary teachers' preconceptions of the teaching profession. In the light of the above mentioned studies, the study in hand is an attempt to investigate the value the prospective teachers give to their future profession. What they believe and feel about teaching is in the core of the study. 80 future English Language Teachers from Turkey were given a questionnaire to learn about their attitudes towards teaching. As a next step of the same study, the researcher is planning to give the same questionnaire to prospective teachers of English in European context and compare these two groups' attitudes.

## **2. The Study**

Using the Turkish context Saban (2003), explores the background characteristics of those currently entering elementary teacher training, their past and preferred elementary schooling experiences as a student, their personal reasons for choosing elementary teaching as a career as well as their implicitly held beliefs about the teaching profession. With the same motive, but taking it one step further, this study investigates the attitudes towards being a teacher. 80 prospective teachers of English Language Department studying at Buca Faculty of Education, İzmir, Turkey volunteered to participate. In order to help the reader to understand the investigated concept, it is better to define the term "attitude" first. The term "attitude" has been defined in many different ways by numerous people for years.

Lindzey and Aronson (1985:37 cited in Yavuz, 2004) define this concept as “the most distinctive and indispensable concept in contemporary American social psychology”. They state that:

*No other term appears more frequently in experimental and theoretical literature. It is a concept which escapes the controversy concerning the relative influence of heredity and environment. Since an attitude may combine both instinct and habit in any proportion, it avoids the extreme commitments of both the instinct theory and environmentalism. The term likewise is elastic enough to apply either to the dispositions of single, isolated individuals or to broad patterns of culture (common attitudes) ...*

## 2. 1, Objectives and Significance of the Study

Following the idea that the teachers are the backbones of the educational system, to investigate their attitudes towards their future or current profession is as important as why they prefer to study this major, or continuing to do it. In the literature there are many studies (Schutz, Crowder & White, 2001; Saban, 2003; Krecic & Grmek, 2005; Papanastasiou & Papanastasiou, 1997) which attempted to reveal the reasons why prospective teachers choose this field. However, there are still unanswered questions in the literature in terms of the attitudes towards teaching. This study may make some contributions to the field of teacher training in the sense that the possible beliefs and attitudes found in the study can both contribute our teacher training process and even lead professors working in the field to overview their perceptions of teaching. Besides, the study might motivate further research investigating the same concept in different settings and therefore leading us to compare the results.

## 2.2, Research Question

The research question posed for the study is based on the results of the prior empirical research. The main research question posed for the study is as follows:

1. What are the attitudes of prospective teachers studying at Dokuz Eylul University, Buca Faculty of Education, English Language Teaching Department towards teaching?

## 2. 3, Participants

In order to answer the research question stated above, the researcher decided to distribute the questionnaires to the students studying at Dokuz Eylul University, Buca Faculty of Education, English Language Teaching Department. In total 80 students studying their first and third years in the department were chosen. The students who participated in the study aged 17 to 23 and all were native speakers of Turkish Language. The participants of the study were in the Fall Term of 2008-2009 academic year. At the time of data collection, all students were in the mids of the first semester.

## 2. 4, Instrument

The questionnaire designed for the study has been developed by Semerci (1999). The statements used on the questionnaire were based on the results of the prior empirical research. The questionnaire was a five-item-Likert Type scale with 30 statements. The language of the questionnaire was Turkish and it was decided to use the instrument without translating it into English even though the students who participated were advanced level learners, mainly because the meaning loses that may arise after translation. The participants were told to choose only one of the five choices listed as: Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. Below is an example of the statements listed on the questionnaire:

Example: Teaching is a prestigious occupation.

## 2. 5, Data Analysis

For the study, all 80 students were given a questionnaire, the results of which were used to decide on the participants' perceptions of their future occupation. All of the questionnaire data were scored by giving points from five to zero depending on the choice of the participant. The analysis of the data started by the grading the questionnaire items. Twice the researcher herself, to account for the intra-rater reliability (at one week intervals), did the analysis for each of the statements on the instrument. The results of these two analyses indicated no change. All the analyses were calculated with SPSS version 13, 0 for Windows.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The present study has investigated a group of prospective teachers' attitudes towards their future occupation.

**Table-1** Teaching is an enjoyable job

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid SD	1	1,3	1,3	1,3
D	3	3,8	3,8	5,0
U	11	13,8	13,8	18,8
A	35	43,8	43,8	62,5
SA	30	37,5	37,5	100,0
Total	80	100,0	100,0	

SA: Strongly Agree, A: Agree, U: Undecided, D: Disagree, SD: Strongly Disagree

The results will be presented in tables to make it easier for the readers to interpret. Below are the results for some of the items on the questionnaire.

**Table-2** Teaching is a prestigious job

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	D	3	3,8	3,8	3,8
	U	7	8,8	8,8	12,5
	A	22	27,5	27,5	40,0
	SA	48	60,0	60,0	100,0
	Total	80	100,0	100,0	

SA: Strongly Agree, A: Agree, U: Undecided, D: Disagree, SD: Strongly Disagree

As can clearly be seen from the above two tables, most of the students agreed or strongly agreed with the ideas that teaching is both an enjoyable and prestigious job. These clearly states that the students have positive attitudes for these two items. The total number of the students who stated to “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” with the statement for the first question is 65 with a percentage of 80,3. As for the second question the results are not very different. 70 students said either “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” to the statement with a total percentage of 87,5. Other than these positive statements there were some negative statements on the questionnaire as well to test the reliability of the instrument. Following are some of these statements.

**Table-3** Teaching is the last thing I would like to do

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	SA	1	1,3	1,3	50,0
	A	4	5,0	5,0	75,0
	U	15	18,8	18,8	93,8
	D	20	25,0	25,0	98,8
	SD	40	50	50	100,0
	Total	80	100,0	100,0	

SA: Strongly Agree, A: Agree, U: Undecided, D: Disagree, SD: Strongly Disagree

**Table-4** Even hearing the name of teaching irritates me

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	SA	2	2,5	2,5	71,3
	A	4	5	5	88,8
	U	3	3,8	3,8	92,5
	D	14	17,5	17,5	97,5
	SD	57	71,3	71,3	100,0
	Total	80	100,0	100,0	

SA: Strongly Agree, A: Agree, U: Undecided, D: Disagree, SD: Strongly Disagree

When we analyze the negative statements on the questionnaire, we see that the positive attitude towards teaching is still clear. The above two statements; “Teaching is the last thing I would like to do” and “Even hearing the name of teaching irritates me” have low percentages for “Strongly Agree” and “Agree”. Only two students strongly agreed with the statement number 3 with a total percentage of 2,5 and only four out of 80 students said they agreed with not even hearing the name of teaching with a percentage of 5. All these data give us strong conclusions about our participants’ positive attitudes towards teaching. Another negative statement was “I cannot think of myself as a teacher.” This was important for us since the participants were going to become teachers their answers to this statement manifested their thoughts towards teaching clearly. Among the 80 students who participated, only ten students could not think of themselves as teachers. On the other hand, 58 students stated that they “Strongly Disagreed” or “Disagreed” with the statement meaning that they could think of themselves as teachers. The number of the students who were undecided were 12 with 15 %.

**Table-5** I cannot think of myself as a teacher

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	SA	3	3,8	3,8	41,3
	A	7	8,8	8,8	72,5
	U	12	15,0	15,0	87,5
	D	25	31,3	31,3	96,3
	SD	33	41,3	41,3	100,0
	Total	80	100,0	100,0	

SA: Strongly Agree, A: Agree, U: Undecided, D: Disagree, SD: Strongly Disagree

Some of the statements on the other hand, were neither negative nor positive statements. A statement like “Teaching is a boring job” was related with an assumption and we wanted to learn what our participants think about that.

**Table-6** Teaching is a boring job

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid SA	1	1,3	1,3	43,8
A	6	7,5	7,5	77,5
U	11	13,8	13,8	91,3
D	27	33,8	33,8	98,8
SD	35	43,8	43,8	100,0
Total	80	100,0	100,0	

SA: Strongly Agree, A: Agree, U: Undecided, D: Disagree, SD: Strongly Disagree

The results to the statement reveal that in general the participants did not agree with this statement. Only one student teacher states that teaching is a boring job and six students agreed with the statement. While 11 students were not decided, in total, 62 students with a total percentage of 77,6 think teaching is not a boring job.

### 3. Conclusions

The study in hand was an investigation of the future teachers' perceptions towards teaching. Among the 30 items on the instrument, used for the study, we were able to analyze only some of them here. However, not only the items discussed above but as a whole, the study reveals clear positive attitudes towards teaching by the 80 students of Dokuz Eylul University, Buca Faculty of Education, English Language Teaching Department. This was the same in Saban (2003). When the students participating to the study were asked whether they thought they had made the right decision to enter elementary teaching and whether they planned to remain in it for the rest of their lives, most of the teacher candidates had a positive attitude towards becoming a classroom teacher. Overall, the majority of the participants thought that they had made the right decision to enter elementary teaching (77,2%), plan to take it as a lifelong career (81,9%) and display very high level of professional enthusiasm towards their chosen profession (85,9%). The results of this study strongly point positive attitudes towards teaching; however, it also points that the teacher candidates' implicitly held images of teaching and teaching as a profession need to be made more explicit and given voice in the preservice teacher training process so as to promote a deeper understanding of the teaching profession.

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