

# Personality Traits Attributed to Estonian School Teachers<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

*The aim of the article is to find out what personality traits are attributed to Estonian school teachers by members of society compared with the teachers' own personal assessments and the characteristics of the entire Estonian population. Data was collected between 2003 and 2010 from 460 members of the general public and 467 teachers in 67 Estonian schools. The results showed that in general the public perceive teachers' personality traits similarly and in accordance with the teachers' self assessment, but there are also some differences in opinions on the basis of the year respondents graduated from school and the nationality of the respondents. These results can be used to improve communication between stakeholders and to prepare training programmes for teachers.*

**Keywords:** *school leadership, teachers' personality traits, communication of school stakeholders*

**JEL classification:** I20, M12

## **Introduction**

In this article, the research object is the personality traits of general educational school teachers. Pupils, their parents, colleagues and school principals expect many characteristics in teachers such as emotional stability, stress tolerance, good interpersonal and conflict resolution skills, the ability to adapt well and consider the needs of others etc. The question here is to what extent are teachers' personality traits actually in accordance with these high expectations. The aim of the article is to find out what personality traits are attributed to Estonian school teachers by members of society compared with the teachers' own personal assessments and the characteristics of the entire Estonian population. This knowledge will make it possible to construe a picture of personality traits that may

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influence how the general public and school personnel in particular understand teachers' jobs.

The personality traits are characterized using the Five Factor Model of personality, distinguishing five domains: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness to experiences (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Data about teachers' own assessment of their personality traits were collected from 467 respondents in 67 schools. The standard sample representing the Estonian population includes 1050 individuals over 20 years old. The perception of teachers' personality traits in the general public was collected from a sample consisting of 460 individuals, and different socio demographic groups according to gender, school graduation year and nationality were questioned.

The results of the study give us valuable information about how Estonian teachers are perceived by members of society, how they perceive themselves and how these perceptions compare with personality traits in the entire Estonian population. The results can be considered as useful when organizing school life, communicating to stakeholders, preparing new teachers and developing training initiatives for teachers.

### **1. Theoretical background**

School teachers are universally known as an occupational class, and every adult member of society has personally experienced teachers in their studies in school, or also through the studies conducted by and impressions about teachers among their children, other family members or acquaintances. In order to process such a wide range of complex and disparate stimuli, people tend to make generalizations about such groups of people (in this case teachers), where a defined set of characteristics are attributed. This saves time and effort because treating people belonging to one occupational group as a whole, means diverse and detailed information that is associated with each individual can be ignored. In this article the personality characteristics attributed to one occupational group – teachers – will be analysed.

How crucial role teachers' personality plays in the effectiveness of their work was already actively researched as much as 50 years ago (e.g. Barr, 1960; Peck, 1959 etc.). The idea that a teacher's personality is of paramount importance for the total social and emotional growth and adjustment of his or her pupils was also discussed (Del Popolo, 1965). Considering the importance of personality traits among teachers, society members have high expectations of teachers. For example, they should be calm, stable, positive, warm, sociable, orderly, disciplined etc. Therefore, it is important to know the extent to which teachers' personality traits are in accordance with these requirements.

Previous research shows that some personality traits are more suitable for certain occupations (Dakin, 1994; Brody & Ehrlichman, 1998) and this is true also for teachers (Talbot, 2005; Beishuizen, et al., 2001). What is more, individuals with some personality characteristics are more attracted to certain occupations

(Rubinstein & Strul, 2007; Tokar, et al., 1998). This kind of predisposition is also noticed by teachers (Harris, et al., 2006). Consequently, according to their personalities, individuals first find an occupation that they consider suited to them; secondly, their personality may influence whether they are selected to the position they desire; finally, their personality may influence their behaviour and their work effectiveness (Spector & O'Connell, 1994). In the end, individuals who do not fit in a certain job or organisation leave under their own volition or they are fired (Schneider, 1987).

This indicates that teachers as an occupational group may possess personality traits that are suitable for teaching pupils compared to the average members of society. The intention is firstly to find out how Estonian teachers perceive their own personality and whether their personality traits are different compared to the Estonian standard sample, which represents the average member of society. Secondly, it will be analysed how members of society perceive Estonian teachers' personality traits and whether there are any differences compared to teachers' own self-assessment.

## 2. Sample

Three datasets are used in the analysis. The first is about the perception of teachers' personality traits among the general public, and was collected from a sample consisting of 460 individuals between 2003 and 2010. Sixty four percent of the participants were female, 33 percent male and 3 percent did not indicate their gender. The average age of the participants was 24.1 years (Standard Deviation henceforth SD = 6.8). Most of the participants were Estonians (90 percent), seven percent were Russians<sup>2</sup> and three percent did not indicate their nationality. About fourteen percent of the participants graduated from secondary school in 1991 or earlier, seven percent graduated between 1992 and 1995, twelve percent graduated between 1996 and 1999 and 67 percent 2000 or later.

The second dataset is about teachers' personal assessments of their personality traits and was collected from 467 respondents in 67 schools in 2003. To create a more homogeneous sample, elite schools and schools in the capital of Estonia, Tallinn, were not included. About nine percent of teachers were male and 91 percent female. The average age of the participants was 44.2 years (SD = 11.7). Most of the participants were Estonians (99 percent) and one percent were Russians. Forty-eight percent of the teachers were working in secondary schools, 30 percent in basic education schools, 5 percent in primary schools and 17 in schools for children with special needs. Teachers from schools of various sizes and locations were represented in the sample. Finally, the standard sample representing the Estonian population in 2003 included 1050 individuals over 20 years old. About 69 percent of them were female and 31 percent male. The average age of the standard sample members was 33.5 (SD = 13.8).

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<sup>2</sup> In 2000, Estonians formed about 68 percent of its population, whereas 25–26 percent of the populations belonged to the Russian-speaking minority.

### 3. Method

The Five Factor Model of personality was selected to measure the teachers' own personal assessment of their personality traits (Costa, McCrae, 1992). The questionnaire consists of 81 questions and the answers can be given on a 5-point scale (i.e. from 0 – “completely disagree” to 4 – “completely agree”). The factors comprising the Five Factor Model are: 1) neuroticism which represents anxiety, angry hostility, depression, self-consciousness, impulsiveness and vulnerability; 2) extraversion representing warmth, gregariousness, assertiveness, activity, excitement-seeking and positive emotions; 3) openness to experiences characterized by openness to fantasy, aesthetics, feelings, actions, ideas and values; 4) agreeableness which can be described by trust, straightforwardness, altruism, compliance, modesty and tender-mindedness; 5) conscientiousness meaning competence, order, dutifulness, achievement striving, self-discipline and deliberation.

In order to compare how much the results resemble the standard sample used in Estonia, the results are presented as T-scores of the standard sample, which are calculated on the basis of the raw test score, its standard deviation and the average standard sample. The T-scores provide results on a scale where 50 corresponds to the average in the standard sample. The results are considered to be below the average when the T-score is less than 45 points and above the average when the T-score is higher than 55 points. The scores for men and women are calculated separately. In terms of reliability, the Big Five scales were as follows: neuroticism 0.86, extraversion 0.84, openness to experiences 0.81, agreeableness 0.69 and conscientiousness 0.83. Thus, the reliability of the Big Five model scales in this sample is acceptable. The KMO test statistic is 0.86 which shows that the factor solution is stable.

For finding out how the general public perceive the personality traits of teachers the students at the University of Tartu were questioned. The students were taking the Basic Management and Organisational Behaviour courses and almost all the faculties of the university were represented, for example, economics, mathematics, physics, law, philosophy, psychology, sociology etc. Sixty eight percent were full time students and 32 percent were studying through the Open University. All the students were familiar with the Five Factor model of personality for three reasons: firstly, they had to become acquainted with written material about Five Factor model of personality; secondly, at the beginning of the seminar the instructor gave a short oral overview of the method; and thirdly, all the students taking part in the seminar had to resolve a case scenario in which they should understand the content of the model. After having completed these three steps, all students were asked to give their opinion about which personality traits characterize teachers in general. For all five traits – neuroticism extraversion, openness to experiences, agreeableness and conscientiousness – they expressed their opinion on a three point scale 1 – not characteristic, 2 – on average characteristic, 3 – very characteristic.

#### 4. Results

Firstly, it was analysed how Estonian teachers perceive themselves and how these perceptions compare to personality traits in the Estonian population as a whole. The T-scores based on the sample of teachers are presented in Table 1. We can see that the Estonian female teachers analysed are slightly more agreeable and conscientious and less neurotic compared to female members of the standard sample. However, the result is not significantly different because the T-scores are not less than 45 or higher than 55. However, the results for men indicate that Estonian male teachers are significantly more agreeable and conscientious (T-scores higher than 55) and less neurotic (T-score less than 45) compared to the average Estonian man.

**T-scores for personality traits in Estonian teachers**

**Table 1**

<b>Personality traits</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>
extroversion	48.56	48.15
agreeableness	53.47	56.14*
conscientiousness	52.91	55.74*
neuroticism	46.66	43.97*
openness to experiences	48.00	54.18

**Notes:** \* T-scores are statistically significantly different from Estonian standard sample

**Source:** author's calculations

Secondly, it was discovered how members of society perceive the personality traits of teachers. The results are presented in Table 2. We can see that in general Estonian teachers are seen as above average on the extrovert, agreeable and conscientious scales. More than half of the respondents think that extroversion is on average characteristic for teachers. Also, more than half of the respondents think that agreeableness and conscientiousness are very characteristic for teachers. Therefore, very few respondents think that extroversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness are not characteristic for teachers. The standard deviation is the lowest for these three traits meaning that there was most consensus in these matters in terms of the respondents opinions. These results are in accordance with Estonian male teachers' perception of themselves. As we saw in Table 1, Estonian male teachers are rather more agreeable and conscientious compared to the Estonian standard sample, and are on average extroverted. The results for Estonian female teachers show the same tendency, but the results are not significantly different from the standard sample.

## The perception of the personality traits of teachers by members of society

**Table 2**

Personality traits	Mean	SD	Not characteristic (%)	On average characteristic (%)	Very characteristic (%)
extroversion	2.34	0.60	7	53	40
agreeableness	2.59	0.56	4	34	62
conscientiousness	2.48	0.56	3	46	51
neuroticism	1.52	0.67	57	33	10
openness to experiences	1.85	0.75	36	42	22

**Notes:** SD-standard deviation, scale 1–3, 1 – not characteristic, 2 – on average characteristic, 3 – very characteristic

**Source:** author's calculations

Members of society in general perceive teachers as being below average neurotic. More than half of the respondents think that neuroticism is not characteristic of Estonian teachers. This result is in accordance with the perception Estonian male teachers have about themselves because their neuroticism score is lower than the males in the standard sample. The results for women again show the same tendency, but the differences from the standard sample are not statistically significant.

The results for openness to experiences are quite contradictory. Thirty six percent of the respondents think that openness to experiences is not characteristic of Estonian teachers, 42 percent think that openness to experiences is on average characteristic and 22 percent are of the opinion that openness to experiences is very characteristic of Estonian teachers. There was the highest standard deviation for openness to experiences, and so we can conclude about this trait that there is no clear prevailing opinion about Estonian teachers' personality.

Thirdly, it was analysed whether there are any differences between the perceptions of teachers' personality traits among society members on the basis of socio-demographic variables such as gender, year the person graduated school and nationality. The Analysis of Variances (ANOVA) results show that male and female members of society perceive personality traits in teachers similarly (see Table 3).

However, the results indicate that there are some differences among society members' perceptions of teachers' levels of neuroticism according to the year they graduated from secondary school (see Table 4). More precise analysis between the groups using an LSD test showed that those who graduated in 1991 and earlier and in 1992–1995 see teachers as statistically significantly more neurotic than those who graduated in 1996–1999 and 2000 and after. There are no statistically significant differences for the other four personality traits according to the year of graduation.

**Perception of personality traits in teachers according to gender  
of society members**

**Table 3**

Personality traits	Female		Male		F-stat	P value
	mean	SD	mean	SD		
extroversion	2.33	0.59	2.36	0.58	0.22	0.64
agreeableness	2.56	0.57	2.63	0.53	1.52	0.22
conscientiousness	2.50	0.55	2.45	0.57	0.81	0.37
neuroticism	1.55	0.67	1.49	0.65	0.79	0.37
openness to experiences	1.81	0.73	1.95	0.78	1.53	0.21

**Notes:** SD-standard deviation, scale 1–3, 1 – not characteristic, 2 – on average characteristic,  
3 – very characteristic

**Source:** author's calculations

**Perception of personality traits in teachers according to the year society members  
graduated from secondary school**

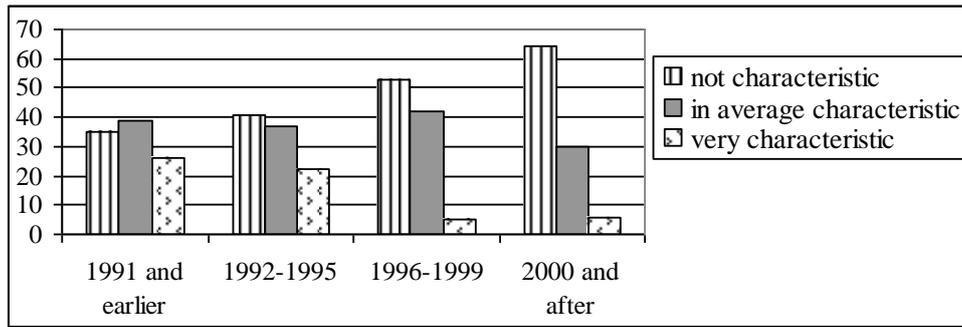
**Table 4**

Personality traits	1991 and earlier		1992–1995		1996–1999		2000 and after		F-stat	P value
	mean	SD	mean	SD	mean	SD	mean	SD		
extroversion	2.30	0.62	2.26	0.63	2.23	0.62	2.34	0.59	1.28	0.28
agreeableness	2.56	0.53	2.41	0.61	2.50	0.67	2.63	0.54	2.28	0.78
conscientiousness	2.59	0.53	2.50	0.51	2.53	0.64	2.45	0.55	0.99	0.30
neuroticism	1.91	0.79	1.81	0.78	1.51	0.59	1.42	0.60	11.88	0.00*
openness to experiences	1.81	0.74	1.81	0.78	1.88	0.74	1.88	0.75	0.10	0.90

**Notes:** SD-standard deviation, scale 1–3, 1 – not characteristic, 2 – on average characteristic,  
3 – very characteristic

**Source:** author's calculations

From among those society members who graduated from secondary school in 1991 and earlier, 26 percent think that neuroticism is very characteristic of teachers (see Figure 1). Consequently, about a quarter of the older respondents perceive teachers as rather neurotic. Similarly, 22 percent of the respondents who graduated from school in 1992–1995 are of the opinion that neuroticism is very characteristic of teachers. Therefore, more than one fifth of these respondents perceive teachers as rather neurotic. However, only very few of those who graduated from school in 1996–1999 and 2000 and after see neuroticism as very characteristic of teachers (percentages respectively 5 and 6). Therefore, recent graduates do not perceive teachers as very neurotic.



**Figure 1 Perception of teachers' level of neuroticism according to the year society members graduated from secondary school (%)**

According to the nationality of the respondents, there are differences among Estonian and Russian members of society about the perception of teachers' level of agreeableness (see Table 5). We can see that Russians perceive teachers as more agreeable than Estonians. There are no statistically significant differences for the other four personality traits according to the nationality of the respondents.

**Perception of teachers' personality traits according to the nationality of society members**

**Table 5**

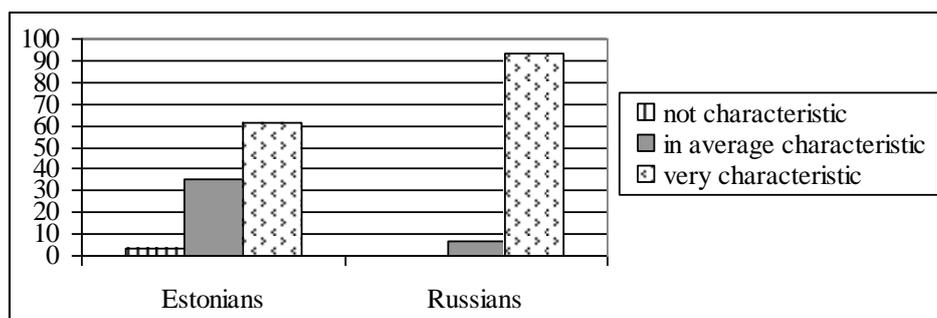
Personality	Estonian		Russian		F-stat	P value
	mean	SD	mean	SD		
extroversion	2.33	0.59	2.50	0.58	1.94	0.16
agreeableness	2.57	0.56	2.93	0.26	10.87	0.00*
conscientiousness	2.48	0.56	2.43	0.57	0.26	0.61
neuroticism	1.53	0.67	1.48	0.58	0.11	0.74
openness to experiences	1.85	0.74	1.96	0.88	0.60	0.44

**Notes:** SD-standard deviation, scale 1-3, 1 – not characteristic, 2 – on average characteristic, 3 – very characteristic

**Source:** author's calculations

More than ninety percent of the Russian members of society perceive teachers as very agreeable (see Figure 2). None of the Russian respondents thought that agreeableness is not characteristic of teachers. From among the Estonian respondents, about sixty percent perceived teachers as very agreeable.

To sum up, we can say that teachers are perceived quite similarly by society members and teachers themselves. Teachers are and are seen as being rather agreeable, conscientious but not neurotic. However, those who graduated from school before 1996 see teachers as more neurotic than those who graduated from school in 1996 and more recently. Russian respondents perceived teachers as more agreeable than their Estonian counterparts.



**Figure 2 Perception of teachers' level of agreeableness according to the nationality of the society members (%)**

## 5. Discussion

Teachers' personality traits were analyzed from three perspectives: the teachers' own perceptions of their traits, those of a random selection of the local population and finally those of members of society in general. Comparing results of these three groups provides an interesting picture and the main conclusions are summarized in the following section.

Firstly, comparing the teachers' own assessment of their personality traits with those of the Estonian population revealed some differences in male teachers. We can say that on the one hand, male teachers show more compliance, straightforwardness, trust, modesty etc. (characterizing agreeableness) and also the tendency to be more orderly, dutiful, self-disciplined, deliberate etc. (characterizing conscientiousness) compared to the average Estonian man. On the other hand, Estonian male teachers are less neurotic, meaning that they are less anxious, vulnerable, depressed etc. compared to the average Estonian man. These are all qualities that are favourable for working in schools. In Estonia, only about 13 percent of teachers are men (Homepage of...), and therefore, men who have chosen to become a teacher have certain favourable personality traits for schoolwork. Estonian female teachers are also slightly more agreeable, conscientious and less neurotic compared to the Estonian female population, but the difference was not statistically significant.

Secondly, the results showed that members of society in general perceive Estonian teachers as above average agreeable and conscientious and below average neurotic, which is in accordance with the teachers' own assessment. However, a closer examination on the basis of socio-demographic variables highlights some different opinions. Namely, those respondents who graduated from secondary school in 1991 or earlier and in 1992–1995 see teachers as more neurotic than those who graduated from school in 1996 or more recently. Those who were in school entirely or predominantly in the Soviet era see teachers as more impulsive, vulnerable, depressed etc. compared to society members who were at secondary

school in the period of Estonian independence<sup>3</sup>. The fact that about a quarter of those who graduated earlier see teachers as highly neurotic is an interesting phenomenon that needs further and deeper analysis; for example, via in-depth interviews. In author's opinion, the reasons for this may be related to how teachers communicate with pupils and discipline pupils. These skills in teachers may have been improved over time because more attention is given to these matters in their training and every day work compared to during the Soviet era.

There were differences in the perceptions of agreeableness in teachers on the basis of the nationality of the respondents. Russians see teachers as being considerably more trusting, straightforward, compliant, modest and tender-minded compared to the way Estonians see teachers. Although, all respondents live in Estonia and study in University of Tartu in the Estonian language, presumably these two groups are a little different according to their cultural/ethnic background (e.g. values, traditions etc.). Previous research shows that Russians believe about themselves that they are friendly, obedient, untroubled and patient (Stephan, et al., 1993). These traits are characteristic of an agreeable individual. Therefore, we can say that Russian teachers are or are believed to be more agreeable than Estonian teachers.

Implications:

- Personality traits should be considered when designing new teacher preparation programmes and training programmes for teachers. More agreeable and conscientious and less neurotic individuals tend to be more suitable for the teaching profession. Teachers can exhibit an average level of extroversion.

- By the communication of different school stakeholders, it should be noted that society members of different ages may perceive neuroticism levels in teachers differently. Arising from this, for example, parents and pupils may have different expectations and perceptions of teachers.

- By the communication of different nationalities, it should be noted that Russians perceive the level agreeableness in teachers as being much higher compared to how Estonians perceive the level of agreeableness.

### Conclusion

School teachers' personality has crucial role by their work effectiveness and the total social and emotional growth and adjustment of his or her pupils. Therefore pupils, their parents, school principals and other stakeholders have quite high expectations to teachers' personality.

The results of this study indicate that in general Estonian male teachers are more agreeable, conscientious and less neurotic compared to the Estonian standard sample. Female teachers showed the same tendency. Therefore by new teacher preparation programmes and teacher training programmes development and expression of mentioned traits should be accentuated.

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<sup>3</sup> Estonia regained its independence in year 1991.

In general Estonian school teachers are perceived by members of society as above average agreeable, conscientious and below average neurotic which is in accordance with the teachers' own assessment. However, older respondents viewed teachers as significantly more neurotic compared to the younger respondents. Consequently pupils and their parents and grandparents can perceive teachers quite differently and this fact should be considered by communication of different school stakeholders.

Some differences about perception of teachers' personality were found also according to the nationality of respondents. Namely, although all respondents live in Estonia and study in University of Tartu in the Estonian language, they may have different cultural/ethnic background and experiences. Russian respondents perceive teachers significantly more agreeable compared to the Estonian respondents. This knowledge could be considered by communication of school stakeholders with different nationality.

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