

THE PERCEPTION OF THE CAREER PROGRESSION MODEL FOR EDUCATORS BY TEACHERS OF AGRICULTURAL STUDIES IN HUNGARY

HORVÁTH SZILÁRD*¹

¹ *Kaposvár University, Doctoral School in Management and Organisational Sciences, Hungary*

*Corresponding author's e-mail:hszilard79@gmail.com

Abstract: *The quality of education in Hungary is significantly below average compared to other OECD member countries. Agricultural studies are not excluded from this tendency. It was hoped that the career progression model for educators, which was introduced in September 2013, would incentivise teachers and prevent career change. This study demonstrates that these expectations have not been fully met. It appears that not only does the new model fail to motivate educators but it also overburdens them. For this reason, provided that the career progression model remains unchanged, it is unrealistic to expect any improvement in students' performance in schools.*

Keywords: *agricultural education, motivation, teacher career model*

INTRODUCTION

The contribution of agriculture to the GDP of Hungary is slightly higher than the European average. This is also true for other commercial activities which depend directly on this sector. Consequently, agriculture plays a crucial role in the Hungarian economy. Considering the overall productivity of agriculture in Hungary, it is only a fraction of the levels measured in some western European countries. Economists argue that both the insufficient number of skilled workers and the inadequate supply of active agricultural professionals can be held responsible for this fact. A range of studies have claimed what is also often said by agricultural workers, namely that a degree in agricultural studies is not particularly popular among undergraduates and that the social status and prestige associated with agriculture is considered low. The number of students in agricultural studies in Hungary is negligible in relative terms. 779 students in trade schools, 3`355 in vocational schools and 1`113 students in vocational high schools were enrolled in the 2016/17 academic year. This does not mean that this area of agricultural education does not need any attention. On the contrary, with regard to its relatively small size, it may well be worth focusing on this area separately. It is a universal problem in Hungary that the quality of education falls behind the average level of OECD countries on all competences. In the PISA reading comprehension survey conducted in 2015, Hungary was ranked 30th among the participating 35 OECD countries. Hungarian students demonstrated a similarly poor performance in mathematics, where their score of 477 ranked them 28th. On a par with mathematics, Hungary was also ranked 28th in science [14]. Based on the test result among Hungarian adults taking the last place the ones' performance with diplomas is almost equivalent of the other countries population having certificate of secondary education. Further problem, as Balazsi put the education system was not able to compensate for the time being socially disadvantaged students lagging behind and it was unable to establish equal opportunities for everybody [2].

Figure 1 illustrates the scores of Hungarian students compared to the average scores achieved by OECD countries in mathematics in the triennial international PISA surveys.

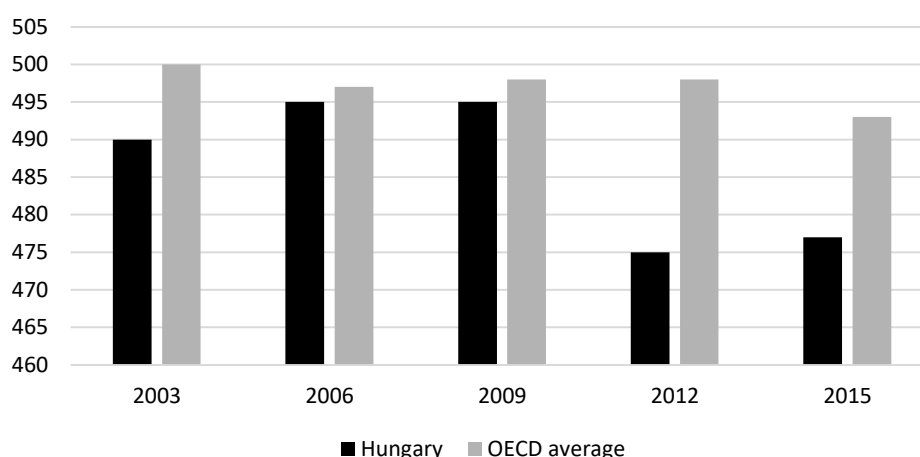


Figure 1. PISA scores in mathematics 2003-2015

Indeed, there is no reason why agricultural studies would be any different from this pattern. According to Lázár [7], provided that the capacity of agriculture to support the population does not increase, non-urban areas are expected to deteriorate and become impoverished. Agricultural education is the key factor for the development of this sector and its main objective is to equip students with current theoretical and practical knowledge, which are also internationally competitive. Furthermore, it should also provide the agricultural workforce with training opportunities in order to learn about new technology, regulations and get up-to-date market information [15].

A common aspect among the best performing education systems is that they have become aware of the impact the quality of teaching has on the quality of learning. Studies aimed at investigating the quality of teaching and the effectiveness of teachers have confirmed that students learning from good teachers grasp the material more rapidly than those learning from teachers with weaker abilities. Research carried out in the USA has also identified measurable differences between students' scores depending on how competent and able their teachers were. Analysing the performance of 8-year-old students with average skills, this difference in scores could amount to 50 percentage points in favour of those students whose teacher was more competent [16]. Arguably, the value of human capital is predominantly determined by the level of education. Various prognoses about the level of education place the population of Hungary in an embarrassing position. According to Sági and Varga [9], among those factors that can be influenced by education policy, it is the quality of teaching that affects students' performance the most. Other aspects of the learning-teaching environment, such as funding, class size and technical equipment, play a much smaller role in students' achievements. Based on interviews, Bander et al. [3] have found that teachers' efforts, professional competence, ability and motivation make a meaningful contribution to the accomplishment of students in Hungarian secondary schools. The 'teacher factor' i.e. the importance of the added value created by teachers has been highlighted by all interviewees along with the numerous difficulties related to the improvement of the quality of education. It is virtually impossible to achieve high standards of education without an adequately qualified workforce of teachers, the quality and success of which is influenced by two factors. Firstly, it depends on the motivation and skills of students and secondly, on how teacher training institutions prepare educators, with what purpose and how effectively. In countries with successful and thriving education systems, applicants are screened during their registration for a teacher training course. The main reason is to allow entry to only those with the best skills, who show the highest motivation and those who are generally more suited for a teaching career.

Undeniably, this is only possible if there is no shortage of prospective candidates. Teacher training and ultimately a teaching career therefore need to be attractive enough to be able to compete with alternative career paths. With regard to Hungary, Varga [13] has found that a major point of consideration when choosing a teaching career during and after graduation is the level of earning potential compared to graduates of other disciplines. Evidently, earning potential is a key driving factor for undergraduates when making career decisions. On one hand these results are due to that the teachers were under motivated on the other hand basic education had no importance at all. The former prestige of teachers' has been over, their social reputation and financial situation have all brought them to the low level of white collar workers [12].

Public education in Hungary is revised and amended regularly, nevertheless, there is no noticeable improvement in the quality of education. One main goal the recently introduced career progression model for educators is trying to achieve is to motivate teachers with the help of a performance appraisal system, with more attractive earnings and by restoring the reputation of teaching. Decision makers have announced that the primary goal of the new career model is to provide well performing teachers with higher remuneration, higher prestige and more opportunities for personal and professional development. The intention is to enable every teacher to benefit from a personal appraisal, which in turn, other than acknowledging their efforts, will positively influence the standard of individual and institutional performance and therefore the quality of public education as a whole. As Sági and Varga [8] said: the quality of the students' academic performance is mainly determined by teachers' practice and can also be influenced by factors of educational policy. Heneman and Milanowski [6] claim that the teacher salary scale categorizes teachers based on the basis of time spent in teaching and qualifications not on their daily practice and performance. The different educational – economical studies show that there is hardly any connection between the level of teachers' qualifications and performance because the negative impact of teachers' on students' performance can be detected only at the beginning of trainee career in some cases. Performance-based pay is used mainly in the private sector, but many people believe that a noticeable improvement in efficiency can be achieved in education as well if you apply similar methods to motivate employees as in the case of the private sector . [1]. The other problem is even if the improvement of students' performance can be observed it is not clear to everyone associated with reward, since the education is a group work the results can be contributed to many teachers not only one of them [4].

The development of the recent teacher appraisal system in Hungary was preceded by a thorough examination of international practices. These investigations researched ten countries (Great Britain, Finland, France, Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Romania, Spain, Sweden and the USA) and compared their practical application of such systems and their experience thereof, on the basis of which the most suitable and effective appraisal standards could be assembled for the Hungarian public education and teaching culture [13].

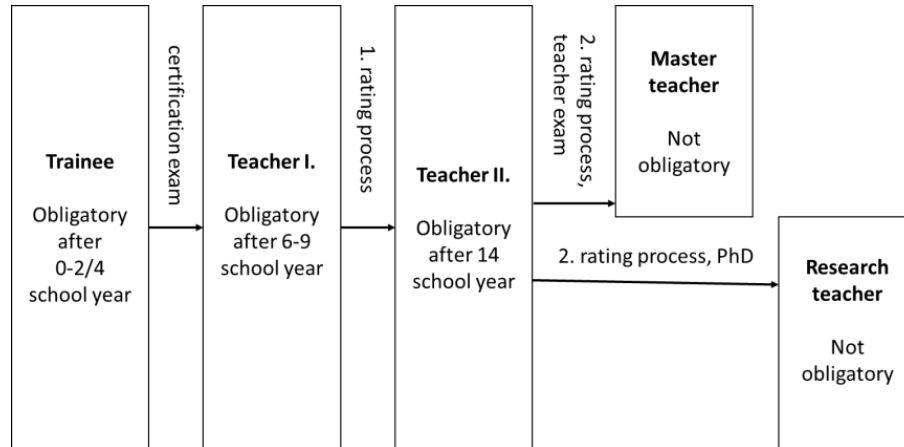


Figure 2. Teacher career progression model structure

Following the introduction of the career progression model, a large crowd of teachers started taking action: they acquired new skills, restructured their approach to teaching and started prioritising differently - all in an effort to prepare for future changes or continue to take the first steps in the right direction.

It is known from the career progression model that all teachers in employment today need to take part in an appraisal process. In case the end result of an appraisal does not meet the required standards, the teacher's employment contract may be terminated. The appraisal process is based on formal academic assessments and lesson observations. Given that most of the appraisal criteria are subjective, this process allows employers to fabricate reasons in order to dismiss those teachers whose performance does not comply with the official guidelines [12].

Now that the career progression model can be deemed complete, it is worth analysing whether – based on the opinion of educators – it has accomplished its intended purpose. The ultimate question this study is looking to answer is whether the new model is capable of motivating teachers who work in agricultural education, together with how teachers feel about the appraisal process, what their opinions are about the system and whether it can affect the quality of teaching and students' performance. In the crossfire of political and professional debates, education as a career path has attracted more attention than ever before. In spite of this (or perhaps because of this), those who are already active in this field generally have a gloomy view of their future career prospects. These teachers are unable to withstand the ever increasing pressure and the number of new challenges facing them, which can eventually result in a career change.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The career progression model for educators, together with the ancillary appraisal processes, has come into effect and it has undergone a number of amendments over the past years. Accordingly, my goal was to assess how teachers feel about the new career progression system and what the general sentiment is. The media is full of success stories giving the impression to ordinary people that teachers are in an enviable position as a result of increasing earnings. I sent out online anonym questionnaires, highlighting that participation was voluntary, to leaders of various educational institutions, whose details were available on the Public Education Information Portal (KIR). By April 2017, more than 3'000 teachers had responded. My survey included questions about the profile of the participants' workplace, which enabled me to isolate answers from agricultural institutions. The online questionnaire was still open for answers at the time of writing this study and I have received a total of 236 responses from teachers working in agricultural trade schools,

vocational schools or vocational high schools. On the basis of the answers I received, it is evident that the introduction of the career progression model and appraisal system is clearly not a success story for the majority of teachers working in agricultural education.

RESEARCH RESULTS

In the following section, I will only be focusing on the questions and answers that are most relevant to this study. All of the additional questions and their relation to the subject matter will be evaluated separately.

Figure 3 shows the answers to the question asking teachers that on a scale of 1 to 5 how useful they believe the new career progression model is.

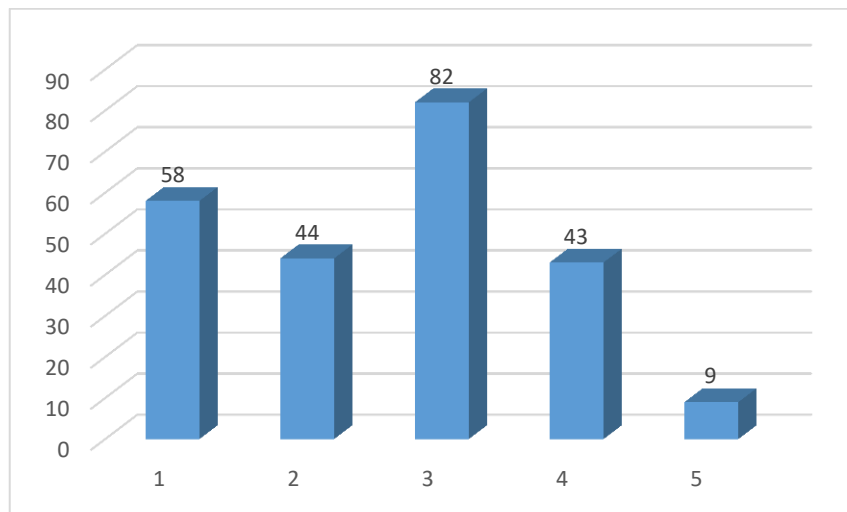


Figure 3. Perceived usefulness of the career progression model

As it can be seen in Figure 3, most participants have given the recently introduced career model a middle (i.e. satisfactory) rating. However, it is important to note that the results tip the balance in favour of those who are unhappy, given that the number of poor ratings is 58 while only 9 people awarded the new system with an excellent rating.

In addition to the above, I investigated the motivating power of the system, due to the fact that one of the main goals of the career progression model is to acknowledge the work and achievements of teachers and provide motivation at the same time. The range of answers provided by participants to the question of motivation can be seen in Figure 4.

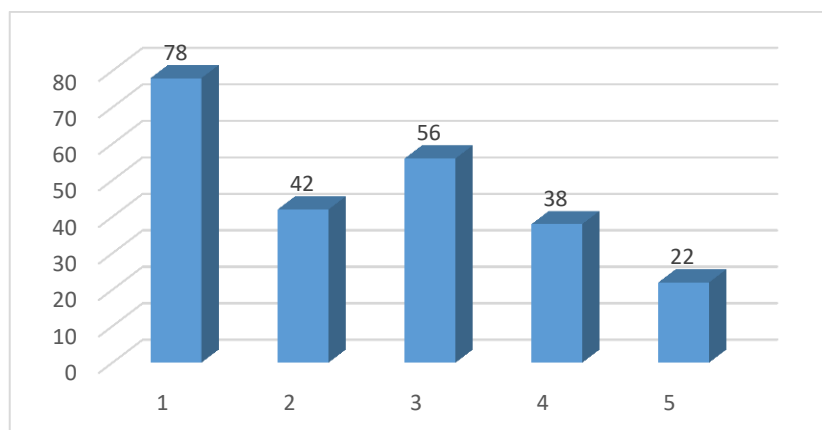


Figure 4. The motivating power of the career progression model

Evidently, as Figure 4 indicates, the career progression model does not motivate teachers well enough. The number of poor ratings awarded is remarkably high. There is a close link between motivation and another one of the career progression model's key objectives, namely to keep teachers on their chosen career path and not to lose them either to the public or to the private sector. Figure 5 reveals the answers to the question whether the career progression model is able to effectively retain teachers.

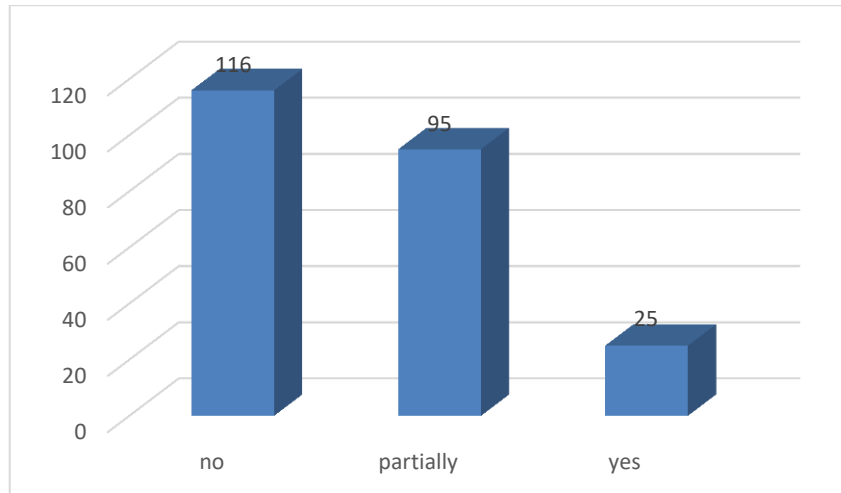


Figure 5. The effect of the career progression model on teacher retention

As it is shown in Figure 5, nearly half of respondents believe that the model does not have any ability to retain teachers and to minimise the likelihood of giving up a teaching career for another type of occupation. Nonetheless, almost one hundred respondents presume that the model does have some capacity to prevent career change.

One of the components of the appraisal system is lesson observation, which – as it is commonly known – is hardly ever a true reflection of the regular daily activities of a classroom. In reality, it frequently shows a fabricated and distorted image of class dynamics and, in turn, of the teachers and their efforts. In the questionnaire, I asked for the opinion of teachers, who are generally well accustomed to this method of appraisal, and whether, in their experience, it causes any problems.

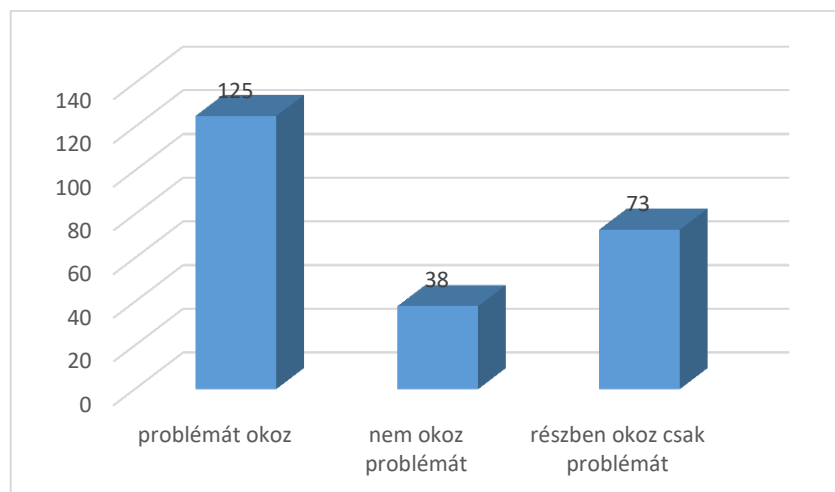


Figure 6. Teachers' views on lesson observation

Apparently, even those teachers who are regularly assessed by this method admit that the observation of one or two lessons is not necessarily the best approach for a fair and proper evaluation.

In my opinion, provided that an appraisal system is supposed to evaluate a teacher's yearlong efforts while influencing their career and remuneration, the system should include components which are practical and can be reused in other areas of work. While it is not within the scope of this study to discuss the appraisal process in detail, it is worth mentioning that my questionnaire investigated how stressful it is for teachers, in their view, to prepare for appraisals and to go through the entire process. The vast majority of respondents feel that the mandatory appraisal system is a burden to their working life. Figure 7 demonstrates the proportion of 'yes' and 'no' answers to the question whether the mandatory documentation (or any part of it) teachers prepare for the appraisal process could be used again at a later time in their daily work.

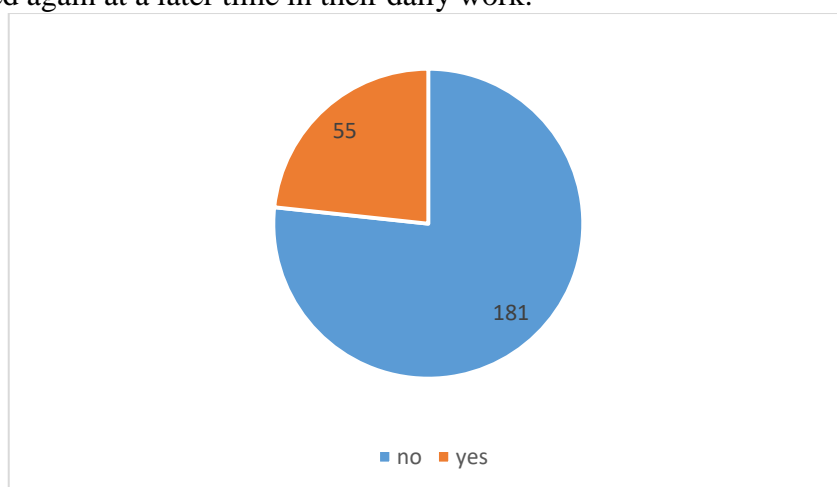


Figure 7. The reusability of material prepared for the appraisal process

The above figure clearly suggests that despite the fact that the entire appraisal process is a burden for teachers and that it requires significant additional work, it contains no elements (or very little) that has any value for future use.

CONCLUSIONS

The answers to the questions featured in this study indicate that while the opinion of teachers of agricultural studies is divided, in almost all cases it tips the scales in favour of a more negative sentiment. The career model, its structure, categories and its transparency have only been rated medium by teachers. With regard to the appraisal system and its methodology (e.g. class observations and mandatory preparation of records), teachers are highly dissatisfied. The implication is that it is not necessarily the construction of the career progression model itself, but it is primarily the appraisal process which causes a widespread discontent, even though receiving feedback on their work is welcomed and appreciated by teachers. In fact, most teachers who have already completed an appraisal are in favour of the process. The replacement of scheduled class observations with more suitable methods, such as surprise visits so that teachers and students are unable to rehearse for an appraisal event, is well worth considering. Naturally, teachers ought to be accountable for their activities, however, it appears to be a waste of time and resources to create appraisal documentation which has no future relevance and usability. It is highly likely that, in most cases, the apprehension caused by the appraisal process not only fails to motivate teachers, but – as it has been shown in Figure 4 – it has a strong adverse effect. If we ignore these concerns, teachers will hold on to the perception that the career

progression model is a burden and the probability of career changes may well increase. This could potentially be disastrous in agricultural education, concerning teachers of engineering for example, who generally have no difficulty finding employment in the private sector. It is an important aspect of the career progression model that earnings of virtually all teachers have increased. A pay increase took effect recently on 1st September 2017. This trend must not stop, since teaching had been the lowest paid white collar occupation before the introduction of the career progression model. Apparently, the majority of young teachers leave the education sector in search for better paid jobs. Educators aged between 41 and 50 show the most reliable adherence to teaching, while all other age groups are more likely to change careers or become unemployed. In this fashion, it is not possible to safeguard the existence of an adequately competent teaching community. Finally, we must not forget that the main goal is for students in agricultural studies to graduate with the level of expertise, skills and practical knowledge comparable to those in leading European countries. Specialists abroad echo the views of ‘The Chamber of the Wise’, appointed by László Sólyom the former president of Hungary, which has been published in a study entitled *Szárny és teher* [8]. The key to the success of education is a well-respected, motivated and accomplished teacher. Those teachers who are passionate about their career and their subjects are capable of performing miracles, which is unimaginable without proper encouragement and a more consistent career progression model.

REFERENCES

- [1] **ALLAN ODDEN, CAROLIN KELLEY**, 1997, *Paying Teachers for What They Know and Do*. Thousand Oaks, Ca. Corwin Press
- [2] **BALÁZSI ILDIKÓ, OSTORICS LÁSZLÓ, SZALAY BALÁZS, SZEPESI ILDIKÓ, VADÁSZ CSABA**, PISA 2012 Összefoglaló jelentés, OH Budapest p.13-47
- [3] **Bander Katalin, Galántai Júlia, Györkös Eleonóra, Jancsák Csaba, Nagy Zoltán, Széll Krisztián, Szemerszki Marianna, Varga Eszter**, 2015, *Eredményesség az oktatásban Dimenziók és megközelítések Szerkesztette: Szemerszki Marianna, Oktatáskutató és Fejlesztő Intézet, Budapest pp.115*
- [4] **BELFIELD C. R.– HEYWOOD J. S.**, 2008, *A tanárok teljesítmény alapú bérezése: meghatározók és következmények (Performance pay for teachers: Determinants and consequences.) Economics of Education Review, 27. 243-252*
- [5] **Falus Iván** (szerk.), 2011, *Tanári pályaalakalmasság –kompetenciák – szttenderdek. Nemzetközi áttekintés. Eger: Eszterházy Károly Főiskola*
- [6] **HENEMAN, H. G. ÉS MILANOWSKI, A. T.**, 1999, *Teachers Attitudes about Teacher Bonuses Under School-Based Performance Award Programs. Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education. 12.4. 327-341*
- [7] **Lázár János** (2015): *Miniszterelnökséget vezető Miniszter Makói Nemzetközi Hagyma és Gasztronómiai Fesztivál Mezőgazdasági fórumbeszéd*
- [8] **SÁGI MATILD, VARGA JÚLIA**, 2010, *Pedagógusok. In: Jelentés a magyar közoktatásról. <http://www.ofi.hu/kiadvanyaink/jelentes-2010/18-pedagogusok>*
- [9] **Sági Matild, Varga Júlia**, 2010, *Pedagógusok. In: Jelentés a magyar közoktatásról. <http://www.ofi.hu/kiadvanyaink/jelentes-2010/18-pedagogusok>*
- [10] **Szüdi János**, 2014, *Az oktatás az állam szolgálatában, Esély 2014/6, pp.39-63*
- [11] **Szárny és teher**: mek.oszk.hu/07900/07999/pdf/szarny-teher-oktatas-hatteranyag.pdf
- [12] **VARGA JÚLIA**, 1998, *Oktatás – gazdaságtan, Közgazdasági Szemle Alapítvány, Budapest*

- [13] **Varga Júlia**, 2007, Kiből lesz ma tanár: a tanári pálya választásának empirikus elemzése. Közgazdasági Szemle. 2007. július-augusztus pp. 609-627.
- [14] *** **OECD PISA 2015 Results in Focus** <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa-2015-results-in-focus.pdf>
- [15] *** **KSH**, 2015, A mezőgazdasági képzettségűek társadalmi jellemzői.
- [16] *** **MCKINSEY&COMPANY** 2007, Mi áll a világ sikeresebb iskolai rendszerei teljesítményének a hátterében?
http://www.onfejlesztoiskolak.hu/2008/mckinsey_magyar.pdf