

# The Profile of a Teaching Assistant in the Context of Personality Traits in the Olomouc Region

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## **Abstract**

The paper focuses on teaching assistants and their profile in the context of personality traits. The aim of the study is to describe and examine the distribution of personality traits among teaching assistants in the Olomouc Region. Their personality traits were examined using the NEO Personality Inventory. The inventory was part of an online battery which was sent by email to all elementary schools in the Olomouc Region. We obtained a research sample of 159 respondents. The result is a description of personality traits among teaching assistants in the Olomouc Region. Compared with the standard, a statistically significant difference was confirmed in the dimensions of openness to experience, neuroticism, conscientiousness and agreeableness. In terms of extraversion, no statistically significant difference was observed. In the conclusion section, the results are put into context with other professions.

**Keywords:** teaching assistant, personality traits, Olomouc Region.

## Profil asistenta pedagoga v kontextu osobnostních rysů v Olomouckém kraji

### Abstrakt

Príspevok sa zameriava na asistenty pedagoga a jejich profil v kontextu osobnostních rysů. Cílem studie bylo popsat a prozkoumat rozložení osobnostních rysů u asistentů pedagoga v Olomouckém kraji. Osobnostní rysy jsme zkoumali prostřednictvím Osobnostního inventáře NEO. Inventář byl součástí online baterie, kterou jsme nasdíleli emailem všem základním školám v Olomouckém kraji. Získali jsme výzkumný vzorek o velikosti 159 respondentů. Výsledkem je zjištění osobnostních rysů u asistenta pedagoga v Olomouckém kraji. Ve srovnání s normou byl prokázán statisticky významný rozdíl v dimenzích otevřenosti vůči zkušenosti, neuroticismu, svědomitosti a přívětivosti. Z hlediska extravertze nebyl shledán statisticky významný rozdíl. V závěru tyto výsledky dodáváme do kontextu s dalšími profesemi.

**Klíčová slova:** asistent pedagoga, osobnostní rysy, Olomoucký kraj.

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### Introduction

The recruitment of teaching assistants and their involvement in education is a difficult process. In the process of selection, the first precondition is educational attainment. The person must comply with the applicable law on teaching assistants. Another essential part of the selection process is a personal consultation during which the candidate's suitability is assessed according to the so-called professional profile. Other necessary components include the definition of job description and expectations, identification of the scope of children's support as well as the definition of the form of cooperation between the teacher and teaching assistant (Viktorin, 2018).

The perception of the teaching assistant position in the system of education differs across countries (Giangreco a Doyle, 2007; Devecchi et al., 2012). As far as teaching assistants' educational attainment is concerned, this is defined by the Act on Educational Staff. In extreme cases, this may be a person with a university degree in education or a person with elementary education and a qualification course for teaching assistants. Teaching assistants' educational attainment should reflect their activities – the so-called 2 types of teaching assistants depending on their educational attainment (MŠMT, 2016). According to Němec, Šimáčková-Laurenčíková and Hájková (2016), the activities of teaching assistants are determined by the school administration. It should be added

that non-compliance with this definition was also observed in the present research. For details see respondents' characteristics.

Ďulíková (2022) conducted an interview with Mgr. Lenka Filipová, in which they analysed the position of teaching assistants in schools. Teaching assistants are considered as the right-hand person to the teacher and these two should form a tandem. They dislike the idea that teaching assistants' job is to copy handouts which is the case in some schools. All of this requires thorough training of teaching assistants and cooperation with teachers which is not only about education. As mentioned above, education is the primary precondition but there are further requirements for the professional profile of teaching assistants (Viktorin, 2018). Regarding the fact the teaching assistants are in close contact with children with special educational needs, they should also understand the importance of inclusion. Teaching assistants should also be capable of good communication and should have a positive attitude to children, patience, empathy, should be able to cope with stressful situations and should have specific personality qualities (Kendíková, 2017, Ďulíková, 2020; Hájková et al., 2019). Morávková Vejrochová et al. (2015) define the following general personality qualities of teaching assistants: civic integrity, active attitude to work, social awareness, natural and positive attitude to life and people, willingness to help. Specifically, teaching assistants' personality characteristics should include natural behaviour, interest in their work and the ability to cooperate. In terms of openness to new methods, their qualities should include independence and expertise, organizational skills and other competences. The authors state that this is not a template but rather a combination of certain characteristics that allow a better performance in the field.

In the present research, the context of personality traits is defined by the five-factor model of personality by P. T. Costa and R. R. McCrae applied in the conditions of the Czech Republic according to Hřebíčková and Urbánek (2000). The five-factor model of personality consist of five personality dimensions – openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. Each of the dimensions will be defined according to Hřebíčková and Urbánek (2001):

- Openness to experience relates to discovering the unknown, searching for new experiences, tolerating the unknown and new. A person with a high score is creative, curious, progressive, has general interests and is original. On the contrary, a person with a low score may appear as uncreative with minimal interests.
- Conscientiousness is understood as reliability, endurance and motivation for the goal of focused behaviour. The quality is related to a system of individual organization. A person with a high score is hard-working, reliable, accurate, disciplined, orderly and has high demands on himself/herself. On the contrary, a person with a low score may seem unreliable, negligent, without a goal and will, pleasure-seeking and indifferent.

- Extraversion is explained by the unipolar model defined by P. T. Costa and R. R. McCrae (as opposed to C. G. Jung whose interpretation is different). This area is dedicated to interpersonal interactions and the necessary stimulation and activation. A person with a high score is considered as social, active, social, optimistic, entertaining, talkative and people-oriented. On the contrary, a person with a low score tends to be quiet, serious, withdrawn and task-oriented.
- Agreeableness is related to the quality of interpersonal relationships in the sense of sympathy, friendliness or hostility. A person with a high score is considered as kind, trustworthy, helping, honest, trusting and warm-hearted. On the contrary, a person with a low score tends to be uncooperative, unsympathetic, rude, vengeful and suspicious.
- Neuroticism is related to emotional stability or instability, adaptation and susceptibility to mental exhaustion. A person with a high score is described as uncertain, tense, restless, unstable or nervous. On the contrary, a person with a low score tends to be calm, balanced, stable, self-confident, contented and relaxed (Hřebíčková & Urbánek, 2001).

According to Howard, Howard (2000, in Hřebíčková, 2001), *“an ideal personality profile of the teacher is a medium or high score of neuroticism, a high score of extraversion and agreeableness and a medium score of openness to experience.”* Below are selected reflections of some authors on personality traits. Vévodová et al. (2016) analysed the personality profile of non-medical students in healthcare fields of study. They observed that the values of extraversion were higher among non-medical students compared with students of exact fields of study whose values were lower. They also claimed that social science graduates had higher values of extraversion than, for example, graduates of natural science. Křivohlavý (2003) considered conscientiousness as a good precondition for stress management. Hřebíčková (2001) identified conscientiousness as an indicator of work success.

Based on the above, we expect higher values of extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness and agreeableness. On the contrary, low neuroticism values are expected. It should be added that there are no research studies on teaching assistants in the context of personality qualities. Some recent studies on teaching assistants focus on their competences and job description. However, this is still insufficient taking into account how many teaching assistants are in schools and what activities they perform with regard to their educational attainment, etc.

According to national statistical data, the total number of teaching assistants in the Czech Republic is 29,188. The total number of teaching assistants in elementary schools is 22,460. As of 30 September 2020, the number of teaching assistants in the Olomouc Region was 1,888. As of 30 September 2021, the number of teaching assistants increased to 2,061, of whom 1,556 were in elementary schools.

Table 1 shows an overview of the number of teaching assistants in the Olomouc Region (MŠMT, 2021).

**Table 1**

*Number of teaching assistants in the Olomouc Region as of 30 September 2021*

	Persons		Full-time equivalent		
	Total	Of whom female	Total	Of whom female	Of whom in special class
Nursery school	422	418	338.72	336.27	47.16
Preparatory class of special elementary school	1	1	1	1	1
Preparatory class of elementary school	4	4	2.31	2.31	0
Elementary school	1556	1473	1098.85	1037.66	194.77
Secondary school	80	75	70.46	66.38	39.88
Total	2063	1971	1511.34	1443.62	282.81
Total from the source used	2061	1969	1511.13	1443.41	282.45

(MŠMT, 2021)

## 1 Methodology

The aim of this study is to deepen the knowledge concerning the profession of teaching assistants from a psychological and educational perspective. Specifically, the study focuses on the personality traits among teaching assistants in the Olomouc Region using a personality inventory. The authors also identified the level of personality dimensions among teaching assistants compared with the reference values of this standardized inventory.

The following research questions were formulated for the present study:

1. What is the degree of openness to experience in relation to the standard of the NEO Personality Inventory?
2. What is the degree of conscientiousness in relation to the standard of the NEO Personality Inventory?
3. What is the degree of extraversion in relation to the standard of the NEO Personality Inventory?
4. What is the degree of agreeableness in relation to the standard of the NEO Personality Inventory?

5. What is the degree of neuroticism in relation to the standard of the NEO Personality Inventory?
6. What is the personality profile of the teaching assistant compared with the teacher?

## 1.1 Description of the research sample

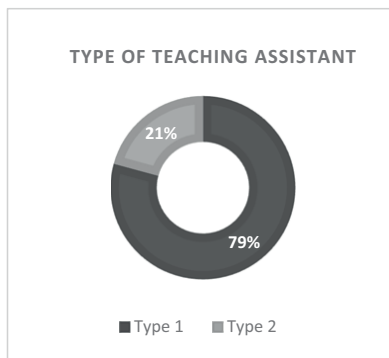
The research sample was composed of 159 respondents ( $M=44.24$ ;  $SD=10.08$ ) aged 20–67 years (151 women, 8 men). Each respondent generated a unique identification code that no one else knew. In the course of the study, all relevant ethical aspects were observed.

Figure 1 shows that 81% of teaching assistants completed a teaching assistant qualification course. These results are consistent with Table 2 which shows participants' educational attainment. 71% of respondents completed secondary school with school leaving qualification, 4% of respondents completed secondary school with certificate of apprenticeship and 1% of respondents completed elementary school.

Figure 2 shows the two types of teaching assistants according to Act No. 563/2004 Coll., Section 20: type 1 teaching assistants are allowed to perform direct educational work in the sense of pupil education, while type 2 teaching assistants are allowed to perform direct educational work in the sense of auxiliary work. Of the 159 respondents, 7 respondents were qualified as type 2 teaching assistants. A detailed analysis revealed that 4 persons with elementary education or secondary education with a certificate of apprenticeship combined with a teaching assistant qualification course worked as type 1 teaching assistants which is contrary to the law. The remaining 3 persons worked as type 2 teaching assistants in compliance with Act No. 563/2004 Coll., Section 20.

**Figure 1**

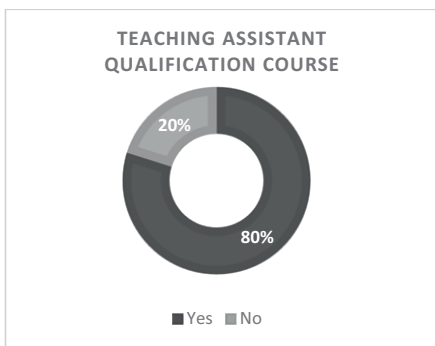
*Completion of a teaching assistant qualification course*



*(Source: authors' interpretation)*

**Table 2***Teaching assistants' educational attainment*

Educational attainment	N	%
Elementary school	1	1
Secondary school – certificate of apprenticeship	6	4
Secondary school – school leaving qualification	113	71
Higher vocational school	12	7
University – Bachelor's degree	11	7
University – Other	16	10
Total	159	100

*(Source: authors' interpretation)***Figure 2***Types of teaching assistants in compliance with Act No. 563/2004 Coll., Section 20**(Source: authors' interpretation)*

## 1.2 Data collection

Data collection was performed by means of an online battery made in Google Forms. The sampling procedure consisted of several stages.

- In the first stage, respondents were addressed by means of self-sampling and the snowball method. Respondents were also addressed through their social group on Facebook called *Teaching Assistant* with about 5,500 members. As a result, a total of 25 respondents were recruited, of whom only 4 were from the Olomouc Region.

- In the second stage, the Lifelong Learning Centre at Palacký University Olomouc was asked to share the research battery with students enrolled in the *Teaching assistant qualification course*. However, this method of data collection was unsuccessful and none of the students or graduates joined the research.
- In the third stage, all elementary schools in the Olomouc Region were asked to participate in the research. Table 3 shows the number of elementary schools in the region addressed. In total, 301 elementary schools (100%) were addressed. A total of 301 emails were sent to all elementary schools in the Olomouc Region. A total of 163 questionnaires completed by teaching assistants were received of which 4 were removed due to incomplete answers.

**Table 3**

*Olomouc Region and the number of elementary schools addressed*

Olomouc Region	N
Olomouc	104
Jeseník	20
Prostějov	48
Přerov	63
Šumperk	66
Total	301

(Source: authors' interpretation)

## 1.3 Research method

Data collection was performed by means of a questionnaire battery. For the purposes of this study, a sociodemographic questionnaire and the NEO Personality Inventory were used. Further data processing was performed in Microsoft Office Excel 16 and Statistika SPSS 23.0.-

### *Neo Personality Inventory*

Hřebíčková and Urbánek (2001) introduced in the Czech Republic an inventory that uses five personality dimensions according to the five-factor model by P. T. Costa and R. R. McCrae. The inventory contains a total of 60 items; each personality trait has 1 scale with 12 questions. The following scales are included: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism. The standards were developed for persons aged 15–75 years (men, women) on a sample of more than 2,000 participants (Hřebíčková, Urbánek, 2000).



## 2 Results

Given that the sample included only 8 men and 151 women, it was not assessed in terms of gender. It was investigated how each personality dimension is close to the reference values of the population of the same age. Table 4 presents an overview of statistically significant results in the dimensions of openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness and neuroticism. It was observed that teaching assistants showed a statistically significantly lower score in the dimensions of openness to experience (20.90) and neuroticism (18.46) than the reference values of the population of the same age. On the contrary, they showed a statistically significantly higher score than the standard values in the dimensions of conscientiousness (37.44) and agreeableness (35.79). As far as the score in the extraversion dimension is concerned, no statistically significant difference was observed between the standard and the group of teaching assistants.

**Table 4**

*Comparison of personality dimensions of teaching assistants with standard values*

	N	Standard	Mean	SD	P
Openness to experience	159	27.68	20.90	4.271	.000
Conscientiousness	159	28.67	37.44	5.641	.000
Extraversion	159	31.89	32.48	6.842	.280
Agreeableness	159	30.03	35.79	4.820	.000
Neuroticism	159	22.42	18.46	7.293	.000

*(Source: authors' interpretation)*

## Conclusion and discussion

This study focused on the personality profile of teaching assistants in the context of personality traits according to P. T. Costa and R. R. McCrae. A total of 6 research questions were defined. The first question related to conscientiousness, while the second focused on agreeableness. A statistically significant difference was observed between the standard and the group of teaching assistants. Teaching assistants showed higher values in conscientiousness and agreeableness compared with the standard values in the standardized NEO Personality Inventory. This is explained by the fact that teaching assistants should be capable of good organization and planning, be reliable, supportive and empathetic, should have the ability to prepare for classes in cooperation with the

teacher and should know the specifics of children with special educational needs (Kendíková, 2017; Ďulíková, 2020; Hájková et al., 2019; Morávková Vejrochová et al., 2015).

Extraversion was the subject of the third question. This study did not confirm any statistically significant difference. Teaching assistants showed similar values as the standard in the NEO Personality Inventory. The extraversion values are not consistent with the results of other studies according to which teachers should achieve high values (Howard & Howard, 2000, in Hřebíčková, 2001). It should be noted that teaching assistants do not have the same function as the teacher and therefore, by the nature of the profession (attention on a single student, assistance provided to the teacher), the average value of extraversion is not surprising.

Neuroticism was included in the fourth research question. Its values among teaching assistants were statistically significantly lower than the standard value of neuroticism in the NEO Personal Inventory. We believe this is due to the emphasis on emotional stability, adaptation capability, balance, confidence and calmness on the part of teaching assistants (Kendíková, 2017).

The fifth question focused on the dimension openness to experience; the values among teaching assistants were statistically significantly lower than the standard value of openness to experience in the NEO Personality Inventory. This could mean that teaching assistants do not tend to discover the new and unknown and generally show lower curiosity. This is also related to low creativity. Uzlová (2010) understands creativity as a personality quality of teaching assistants. In his examination of the effect of personality traits on the development of students' creativity, Sahin (2021) observed openness to experience to be very important. If the teacher has high values in this dimension, it is a supportive factor for high values of creativity among students.

Taking all of the above into consideration, a general profile of a teaching assistant in the Olomouc Region in terms of personality traits according to the present study is a woman aged 44 years with secondary education with school leaving qualification and a teaching assistant qualification course who works as type one teaching assistant. This person can be characterized as reliable, hard-working, supportive, balanced, empathetic, emotionally stable and adaptable. The individual is rather active and likes both being with other people and being alone. However, curiosity is somewhat lower as well as the desire to search for new experiences and exploring the unknown. This decrease may be related to the possibilities and setting of the school and the teaching assistant's age and gender. In short, teaching assistants should be active in supporting the teacher as well as the children in the process of learning.

The last sixth research question focused on a comparison of the profile with the teaching profession. Perera, Granziera and McIlveen (2018) defined 4 teacher profiles – rigid, ordinary, well-adjusted and excitable. The first type – rigid – typically had an increased value of neuroticism and a decreased value of conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion and openness to experience. The second type – ordinary – was

characterized by a close average of all five dimensions. The third type – well-adjusted – was defined by a low value of neuroticism, medium value of extraversion and a high value of openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness. The last, fourth type – excitable – had a slightly above-average value of neuroticism, below-average value of conscientiousness and a high value of extraversion, agreeableness and openness to experience (Perera et al., 2018). A comparison of our values and the third type – well-adjusted – showed a difference in the degree of extraversion and openness to experience. On the contrary, a common feature was a lower degree of neuroticism and a higher degree of agreeableness and conscientiousness. As far as extraversion is concerned, Hartmann and Ertl (2021) in their research on students of teaching and non-teaching courses observed a difference in the dimension of extraversion. Students of teaching courses had a higher value in this dimension compared with students of non-teaching courses.

An analysis of this study suggested a requirement to perform a further qualitative research study by means of interviews, narration, observation of teaching assistants in practice, etc., which would certainly contribute to a deeper understanding of the needs of this profession. We also believe that this result may be related to the setting of the school and its functioning, which may also be reflected in the selection of employees or the length of employment of these persons. An equally important factor may be the age and gender of the teaching assistant.

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