

MOTIVATIONS FOR THE PROFESSION AND CAREER ADVANCEMENTS AMONG TEACHER CANDIDATES IN THE CARPATHIAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract

We suppose that today, the motivation for the career of a pedagogue (including its existential, organizational and infrastructural conditions) is different from the level of commitment to the profession of an educator (which can be experienced informally, or outside of the public education system). In our research, we made efforts to address the widest possible range of student elementary teachers and to interpret their responses using different filters. In the first phase of our study, we analyzed first-year kindergarten teacher students' career motivation and commitment to the profession, and in the second phase, that of final-year kindergarten teacher candidates. In the third phase, we conducted surveys to explore students' motivation for the profession and the career path of a pedagogue in four countries of the Carpathian Basin (Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and Serbia). The surveys were conducted in 17 campuses of 11 Hungarian teacher training colleges and universities. Finally, we extended the survey to practicing graduates preparing for their on-the-job rating examination. Based on our results, in all breakdowns, regardless of age group, training institute or - in part - geographical location and nationality, it is proven that lack of social- and financial esteem of the profession poses serious risks for recruitment and retention of teachers.

Keywords: *career motivation, career socialization, professional motivation, teacher training*

Introduction

The attractiveness of the educator's career path, the number, quality and motivation of candidates starting this profession have been in the focus of domestic and international professional discourse for decades now. At this point, public awareness of the issue of scarcity of teachers and the need for young candidates are starting to take hold. Though the fact that the quality of education strongly depends on the personality, qualification and motivation of the educator is proven by several, widely known and recognized studies (Barber-Mourshed 2007; OECD 2007), this did not prevent unfavorable tendencies of the past periods to continue or even intensify. In Hungary, unfavorable perception of the educator's career is nothing new: starting in the 90s, several types of research suggest the unattractive career advance- and income opportunities the profession offers (Kocsis 2002; Veroszta 2015). "In comparison with other professions, the profession of teaching is perceived by students as a profession with low social and financial recognition" (Veroszta 2015:49). This is supported by a shortage of educators, becoming more obvious by the year. In 2017, 41 percent of teachers were aged 50 or older, with only 6 percent of them below 30. The dropout rate in teachers' bachelor's programs is high, and less than half of the graduates take an actual job in the profession (European Commission, 2020:38). The number of entry-level teachers does not cover the number of their retiring colleagues. Teachers' starting salaries are one of the lowest in the EU (Eurydice 2018/2019). By 2019, the level of teachers' salaries compared to the national median wage had decreased to the level of wages before the gradual wage correction starting in 2013.

As per the Hungarian Central Bank's competitiveness report for 2020, "like in the rest of the EU countries, financial recognition of the profession of educators is lower than that of other professions requiring higher education. In Hungary, despite the introduction of a career development model, the average wages of public education workers only amount to 64-74 percent of the wages of other workers with higher education degrees. (...) In Hungary, in the wake of the implementation of the educators' career development model in 2013, teachers' salaries saw a significant raise, however, since that time, those wages failed to keep up with the dynamic wage increases experienced in other industries. Wages below expectations push back interests in the profession and give rise to career

changes” (MNB 2020). This relative wage situation awaiting entry-level colleagues affects graduates’ decisions to whether start their career as a teacher/remains in the profession. “ The salaries of teachers between the ages of 25-34 working in kindergartens and elementary schools are the lowest in comparison with higher education graduates of the same age, but working in other European countries (with adequate data)” (Varga 2019: 115). *Máthé* argues that “the guarantee of setting up and maintaining high-quality education is to ensure that teachers who enter the profession form a high-quality educators’ base, and they are motivated to stay in the career field. The prerequisite of the latter is the implementation of an adequate motivation system. If competent people enter the profession, this could start a positive upward spiral” (2018:18).

The study was conducted to explore students’ motivation for the profession and the career path of a pedagogue in four countries of the Carpathian Basin

Methods

We suppose that today, the motivation for the *career* of a pedagogue (including its existential, organizational and infrastructural conditions) is different from the level of commitment to the *profession* of an educator (which can be experienced informally, or outside of the public education system). In our research, we made efforts to address the widest possible range of student elementary teachers and to interpret their responses using different filters. In the first phase of our study, we analyzed first-year kindergarten teacher students’ career motivation and commitment to the profession, and in the second phase, that of final-year kindergarten teacher candidates. In the third phase, we conducted surveys to explore students’ motivation for the profession and the career path of a pedagogue in four countries of the Carpathian Basin (Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and Serbia). The surveys were conducted in 17 campuses of 11 Hungarian teacher training colleges and universities. Finally, we extended the survey to practicing graduates preparing for their on-the-job rating examination.

As a measurement tool, we used the adapted version of the FIT-Choice Scale (Factors Influencing Teaching Choice Scale) (Richardson–Watt 2006; Watt–Richardson 2007, 2012). The use of a unified measurement tool allows the comparison of different breakdown groups.

We based our study on the following hypotheses:

- a) Students' commitment to the profession is stronger than their commitment to their careers.
- b) Students of religious higher education institutes have a stronger commitment to the profession than their non-religious counterparts, and in the former group, the gap between the motivation for the profession and the career is also wider.
- c) Participants of Hungarian (minority) teachers' training beyond Hungary's border have a stronger commitment for the profession than students of institutes within Hungary's territory, and the gap between the motivation for the profession and the career is also wider for the former group.
- d) The career motivation of senior students is stronger than that of first-year students, which serves as indirect proof of higher education institutes' successful career socialization efforts.
- e) The career motivation of correspondence students is stronger than that of full-time students. More naive, primitive ideas about the pedagogue's career are present in the latter group. We suppose that this is because the family-friendly and versatile nature of the career is more attractive for correspondence students, who already have experience in the workforce, and in many cases, they also have families.

Results

Generally, the responses of various respondent groups are only slightly different. In a few cases, our analyses revealed differences in the responses of individual respondent groups that are worthy of further exploration.

Our research has proven that for *kindergarten teacher candidates*, motivation for the profession is a determining factor. When choosing the specialization, the most determining factors fall within the scope of professional motivation, both for correspondence- and full-time students. Career motivation of first-year kindergarten teacher correspondence students has proven more versatile and mature than that of full-time students; more naive, primitive ideas about the pedagogue's career are present in the latter group, and the family-friendly and versatile nature of this career are more attractive for first-year kindergar-

ten teacher correspondence students (Szontagh 2021a). However, among senior kindergarten teacher students, the differences of professional commitment- and career motivation results between that of full-time- and correspondence students were not proven by the total average of the two groups. The majority of senior kindergarten teacher students would choose kindergarten teacher specialization again (70 percent of full-time students and 65 percent of correspondence students) and 78 percent of them intend to start a job as a kindergarten teacher after graduation.

The two types of research (among first-year and senior kindergarten teacher students) of different methodologies but with the same content clearly show that students don't just choose to be kindergarten teachers as plan "B", or because they simply couldn't come up with a better idea, but out of intrinsic professional motivation, which remains with them even after graduation. Career socialization reinforces their professional self-image, and their intention to enter the workforce as kindergarten teachers remain unaffected by the insights they gain in terms of workload and academic- and practical requirements associated with the profession.

Elementary teacher students' commitment to the profession is stronger than their commitment to the career. The aggregate evaluation of professional motivation items indicates a value of nearly one increment (0,9446) higher than that of career motivation, on a scale from 1 to 4. Deviations measured within the two surveys were largely the same (0,34087 and 0,36148).

Based on the results of *state- and church-run school students*, we established that students of church-run schools are slightly more motivated for the profession than their counterparts studying in state-run schools. The gap between Hungarian church-run school students' professional- and career motivation is also wider than that of state-run school students. This is particularly true for elementary school teachers' training (Szontagh 2021b).

Our findings show that professional motivation is not affected by the (*successor*)state the student is studying and living in. In this profession, the values shared by the Carpathian Basin's Hungarian student teachers are a lot stronger than the differences inherent in their life situations. However, in terms of career motivation, the differences between the answers of the two groups are more significant. On a scale from 1 to 4, all differences exceeding (!) or nearly reaching 1 increment are related to the financial and

social recognition of teachers. The virtual gap in how these questions are perceived on the two sides of the Hungarian border is huge - being a lot lower within Hungary.

In analyzing the responses of *first-year- and senior students*, it becomes obvious that despite partial results confirming training institutes' career socializing efforts (e.g. the results of the items "possesses the qualities of a good elementary teacher" or "had positive learning experiences"), low social prestige and financial frustrations increasing as the training goes forward and as the cutoff for decision closes in make students more and more insecure in their decisions. Training institutes professional motivation efforts are not sufficient to offset these external factors present outside of the scope of teachers' training

Correspondence students' professional- and career motivation is lower than that of *full-time students*, and also, remains below that of the full sample. Though it is a proven fact that correspondence students' professional motivation entails more mature and less naive ideas about the profession, and more realistic considerations lead to their career change, they are even more skeptical regarding the career awaiting them as their full-time counterparts.

Last but not least, based on the findings of surveys among *practicing teachers* preparing for their on-the-job rating examination, it can be established that the time spent in the profession doesn't affect professional motivation to a significant extent; the joy and opportunities inherent in dealing with children still motivate practicing teachers. At the same time, answers show that after a certain time, the strongest demotivating factor is not the low salary, much rather the lack of social recognition. The career motivation of practicing teachers is lower than that of any students' subgroup, and this is even though samples only entail subjects preparing for their rating examination and engaging in continuation pieces of training, who are positioned relatively high in the teachers' career ladder.

As a summary, we searched for significant differences between the professional- and career motivations of the three respondent groups (kindergarten teacher students, elementary teacher students and practicing teachers), i.e. the motivation factors that change the most with education and/or with the time spent on the job.

Responses of final-year kindergarten teacher students (N=50), final-year elementary school teacher students (N=109) and practicing teachers preparing for their on-the-job rating examination (N=20) were subjected to a single-factor variance-analysis, using the

method Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). In our analysis, we found that a total of nine items show significant differences between the given respondent groups.

Significantly more practicing teachers stated to have had good teacher role models than respondents of any other students' subgroup. This shows that the significance of role models in the training and during the career is substantial. This also indicates the importance and significance of a formal and informal mentoring system in public education. (Nagy 2004, Paksi et al. 2015). "Those, who, despite a low social esteem and insufficient wages or alternative opportunities on the labor market, still choose to remain in the profession (...) base their decision to do so on experiences from a few specific jobs.' (Halász 2015: 27).

In terms of positive learning experiences, the differences between the responses of practicing teachers and kindergarten teacher-students are also significant (with various deviations). This is presumably resulting from the low admission requirement level of kindergarten teacher specialization, and the "life-long learning" attitude of practicing teachers preparing for the rating.

Student and practicing elementary school teachers find teaching and education of children a lot more emotionally exhausting than kindergarten teacher students, which suggests a difference in their approach towards educational tasks and their professional attitudes.

In terms of career motivation, it didn't come as a surprise that entry-level teachers or senior students value the mobility motivation of the profession significantly more than practicing teachers, many of them with families.

Students' responses accurately reflect significant variations of teachers' incomes: kindergarten teacher students perceive the expected lucrative in the career as significantly lower than elementary school teacher students (both values are extremely low)

While kindergarten teacher students are held back from exercising the profession by the expected low income the most, the main demotivating factor for practicing educators is lack of social prestige. In this field, their results are significantly lower than that of student elementary school teachers.

As expected, external factors of career perception (i.e. Where acquaintances try to dissuade respondents from becoming a teacher) impact students' groups more than they impact practicing teachers about to take their rating examination. Part of this may be caused by the international trends, i.e. that in older times, family and friends encouraged

candidates- or practicing teachers, while today, they rather discourage them from their profession (Richardson–Watt 2006).

Conclusions

Based on our results, in all breakdowns, regardless of age group, training institute or - in part - geographical location and nationality, it is proven that lack of social- and financial esteem of the profession poses serious risks for recruitment and retention of teachers. Furthermore, it is also true that “the most common argument against the educators’ profession is lack of recognition; in addition to, or rather as part of the social esteem entailing complex social attitudes and professional elements, the career’s lack of “creativity” is another factor weighing against it” (Chrappán 2013:236).

We found that in the long run, these disadvantages override all internal motivations and render the career socialization mission of teachers’ training greatly difficult, if not impossible. In line with several other types of research (e.g. Veroszta 2015), our results also show that students’ choice of profession is not supported by a favorable career perception. As per the professional discourse, the choice of teachers’ training mostly refers to a choice of higher education institute only, and it is not to be considered as a commitment for the career field. (Hajdú 2001). Nowadays, it might as well be true that “when enrolling to teachers’ training colleges, students are highly motivated, but are less conscious. Their motivation comes from their own school experiences, their teachers’ impacts, and more often than not, their unrealistic pictures of the career field” (Hajdú 2001:35). Our study shows that throughout the training and internships, part of this naive professional motivation transforms into a conscious career perception, and at the same time, experienced teachers’ work- and life conditions often discourage students.

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