

# Teacher Candidates' Motivations for the Profession and Career Advancements in the Carpathian Basin

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## ABSTRACT

Attractiveness of the educator's career path, the number, quality and motivation of candidates starting this profession has been in the focus of domestic and international professional discourse for decades now. 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's 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 motivations, profession motivation, teacher training

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## 1. Introduction

Attractiveness of the educator's career path, the number, quality and motivation of candidates starting this profession has 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 is 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, 2011), 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 researches suggest the unattractive career advance- and income opportunities the profession offers. In comparison with other professions, the profession of teaching is perceived by students as a profession with low social and financial recognition (Veroszta, 2015).

This is supported by a shortage of educators, becoming more obvious by the year. In 2017, 41 per cent of teachers were aged 50 or older, with only 6 per cent of them below 30. Dropout rate

in teachers' bachelors programs is high, and less than half of the graduates takes an actual job in the profession (European Commission, 2020). The number of entry-level teachers does not cover the number of their retiring colleagues. Teachers' starting salaries is one of the lowest in the EU (Eurydice, 2018/2019). By 2019, the level of teachers' salaries compared to the national median wage has 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 of introduction of a career development model, the average wages of public education workers only amount to 64-74 per cent of the wages of other workers with higher education degrees. In Hungary, in the wake of 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 affect graduates' decisions to whether start their career as a teacher/remain 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)

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 (Máthé, 2018).

## 2. Materials and 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's 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 FIT-Choice Scale (Factors Influencing Teaching Choice Scale) (Richardson & Watt, 2006; Watt & Richardson, 2007, 2012, 2014). Use of an unified measurement tool allows comparison of different breakdown groups.

We based our study on the following hypotheses:

- a) Students' commitment for the profession is stronger than their commitment for the career.
- b) Students of religious higher education institutes have a stronger commitment for the profession than their non-religious counterparts, because here we can count on the phenomenon of transcendent calling.

- 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, because many of them choose the teaching career because of the maintenance of minority culture and not because of a personal career desire.
- d) Career motivation of senior students is stronger than that of first-year students, which serves as an indirect proof of higher education institutes' successful career socialization efforts.
- e) 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.

### 3. 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* (N=123), 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 family-friendly and versatile nature of this career is more attractive for first-year kindergarten teacher correspondence students (Szontagh, 2021, A).

Table 1.

*Arguments for and against a teaching career according to the factors of the FIT-Choice Scale*

| FIT-CHOICE FACRORS       | FOR                                                                                                                           | AGAINST                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                          | Full-time students<br>Correspondence students                                                                                 | Full-time students<br>Correspondence students                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Intrinsic career value   | love of children; preserving a childlike spirit<br>love of children                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Fallback career          |                                                                                                                               | failed to get into the preferred university; his parents forced him/her<br>return to the original career plan; acquiring the professional knowledge necessary to keep your current profession (dance teacher, coach) |
| Job security             | secure workplace                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Time for family          | freedom; family-friendly schedule<br>family-friendly workplace                                                                | no time left for your own family                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Job tranferability       |                                                                                                                               | career-correction due to burnout                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Shape future of children | creating a happier childhood than his/her; support and protection of entrusted persons; personalized education, education for |                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

|                                         |                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                      |
|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                         | independence; can be a part of children's development                                                                                                            |                                                                                      |
| Enhance social equity                   | education of disadvantaged and disabled children                                                                                                                 | behaviorally disordered, difficult-to-educate children; cannot be fair and impartial |
|                                         | helping children's social integration                                                                                                                            |                                                                                      |
| Make social contribution                | voluntary service among children                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                      |
|                                         | social utility; socially useful activity                                                                                                                         |                                                                                      |
| Work with children                      | immediate feedback; knowledge that can also be used in raising your own children;                                                                                | education level of children                                                          |
|                                         | after the birth of one's own child, the desire to raise children; a group of children whose age matches his personality;                                         | education level of children                                                          |
| Prior teaching and learning experiences | work with children in your own environment; church, scout, camp experiences; learning experiences (positive, negative); teacher role models (positive, negative) |                                                                                      |
|                                         | kindergarten experiences (positive, negative); family role models; own teacher role models; colleagues as role models                                            |                                                                                      |
| Social influences                       | social utility                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                      |
|                                         | the importance of personal relationships; cooperation with the social environment                                                                                | cooperation with parents                                                             |
| Expert career                           | methodological freedom                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                      |
|                                         | methodological freedom                                                                                                                                           | lack of methodological autonomy                                                      |
| High demand                             |                                                                                                                                                                  | organizational difficulties; administration; fear of making mistakes                 |
|                                         |                                                                                                                                                                  | excessive administration; risk of burnout;                                           |
| Social status                           |                                                                                                                                                                  | cooperation with parents; lack of social prestige                                    |
|                                         |                                                                                                                                                                  | cooperation with parents                                                             |
| Salary                                  |                                                                                                                                                                  | financial difficulties, low salary                                                   |
|                                         |                                                                                                                                                                  | low salary                                                                           |
| Social dissuasion                       | family support, environment, encouragement from friends                                                                                                          | dissuaded by family, environment and friends                                         |
|                                         | the need for a workplace community; local community support; family encouragement                                                                                |                                                                                      |

Table 2.

*Mention of profession and career motivational arguments in pedagogical essays (N=123)*

|                                                          |                       | PROFESSIONAL<br>MOTIVATIONAL<br>ARGUMENTS | CAREER<br>MOTIVATIONAL<br>ARGUMENTS |
|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR<br/>KINDERGARTEN<br/>EDUCATION</b> | <b>FULL-TIME</b>      | 49 mentions (75%)                         | 11 mentions (15%)                   |
|                                                          | <b>CORRESPONDENCE</b> | 48 mentions (67%)                         | 24 mentions (33%)                   |
| <b>ARGUMENTS AGAINST<br/>KINDERGARTEN<br/>EDUCATION</b>  | <b>FULL-TIME</b>      | 11 mentions (20%)                         | 43 mentions (80%)                   |
|                                                          | <b>CORRESPONDENCE</b> | 4 mentions (19%)                          | 17 mentions (81%)                   |

However, among senior kindergarten teacher students (N=50), 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 per cent of full time students and 65 per cent of correspondence students) and 78 per cent of them intends to start a job as kindergarten teacher after graduation.

The two researches (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 remains unaffected by the insights they gain in terms of workload and academic- and practical requirements associated with the profession.

*Elementary teacher students'* (N=589) commitment for the profession is stronger than their commitment for the career. The aggregate evaluation of professional motivation items indicates a value of nearly one increment (0,9446) higher than that of the career motivation, on a scale from 1 to 4. Deviations measured within the two surveys were largely the same (0,34087 and 0,36148).

Table 3.

*Results of professional and career motivation items among all respondents*

|                    | PROFESSIONAL<br>MOTIVATIONAL<br>ITEMS | CAREER<br>MOTIVATION<br>ITEMS |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Mean               | 3,2323                                | 2,2877                        |
| Standard deviation | ,34087                                | ,36148                        |
| Number of elements | 589                                   | 589                           |

#### 4. Discussion

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, 2021, B).

Table 4.

*The difference in professional and career motivation between students of religious and secular institutions in Hungary*

|                         | STUDENTS OF CHURCH UNIVERSITIES |                    | STUDENTS OF STATE UNIVERSITIES |                    |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|
|                         | MEAN                            | STANDARD DEVIATION | MEAN                           | STANDARD DEVIATION |
| Professional motivation | 3,2456                          | ,3245              | 3,1983                         | ,3744              |
| Career motivation       | 2,1986                          | ,3371              | 2,2255                         | ,3583              |
| Number of elements      | 222                             |                    | 343                            |                    |

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.

Table 5.

*The biggest differences between the results of Hungarian students living in Hungary and those living abroad in the field of career motivation*

| ITEMS                               | MEAN (SD) AMONG STUDENTS LIVING IN HUNGARY | MEAN (SD) AMONG STUDENTS LIVING ABROAD |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Teaching is a well-paid profession. | 1,358 (,5636)                              | 2,566 (,7695)                          |
| Teachers are well paid.             | 1,355 (,5675)                              | 2,490 (,7523)                          |
| Teaching is a respected profession. | 1,841 (,8041)                              | 2,677 (,7912)                          |
| Teachers feel valued by society.    | 1,742 (,7177)                              | 2,495 (,7455)                          |

In analyzing the responses of *first-year- and senior students*, it becomes obvious that despite of 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. Apparently, training institutes' professional motivation efforts are not sufficient to offset these external factors present outside of the scope of teachers' training (Szontagh, 2020).

*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. Career motivation of practicing teachers is lower than that of any students' subgroup, and this is despite of the fact that samples only entail subjects preparing for their

rating examination and engaging in continuation trainings, 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.

Table 6.

*Significant differences in the analysis of variance of the questionnaires of the graduate kindergarten teacher and teacher candidates, as well as of the teacher examiners*

| ITEMS                                                                            | RESPONDENT GROUP                | MEAN  | RESPONDENT GROUP   | MEAN  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------|--------------------|-------|
| They were role models of good teachers.                                          | Graduated kindergarten teachers | 2,460 | Qualified teachers | 3,250 |
|                                                                                  | Graduate teachers               | 2,761 | Qualified teachers | 3,250 |
| He/she had positive learning experiences.                                        | Graduated kindergarten teachers | 2,340 | Qualified teachers | 3,000 |
|                                                                                  | Graduated kindergarten teachers | 2,840 | Graduate teachers  | 3,358 |
| The profession of teaching/kindergarten teacher is emotionally taxing.           | Graduated kindergarten teachers | 2,840 | Qualified teachers | 3,650 |
|                                                                                  | Graduated kindergarten teachers | 2,040 | Qualified teachers | 1,350 |
| A teaching degree allows you to decide where you want to live.                   | Graduate teachers               | 1,991 | Qualified teachers | 1,350 |
|                                                                                  | Graduated kindergarten teachers | 1,120 | Graduate teachers  | 1,440 |
| Teaching is a well-paid profession.                                              | Graduate teachers               | 1,771 | Qualified teachers | 1,350 |
|                                                                                  | Graduate teachers               | 2,688 | Qualified teachers | 1,900 |
| Teachers feel valued by society.                                                 | Graduate teachers               | 2,670 | Qualified teachers | 1,900 |
|                                                                                  | Graduate teachers               | 2,670 | Qualified teachers | 1,900 |
| He/she was encouraged to choose a career other than teaching/preschool teaching. | Graduate teachers               | 2,670 | Qualified teachers | 1,900 |
|                                                                                  | Graduate teachers               | 2,670 | Qualified teachers | 1,900 |
| He/she was told that teaching/preschool pedagogy was not a good choice.          | Graduate teachers               | 2,670 | Qualified teachers | 1,900 |
|                                                                                  | Graduate teachers               | 2,670 | Qualified teachers | 1,900 |

Note. Significance level  $p < 0.05$

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. (Paksi et al., 2015). Those, who, despite of 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.

In terms of positive learning experiences, the differences between the responses of practicing teachers and kindergarten teacher students is 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 in 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 lucrativity 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 candidate- or practicing teachers, while today, they rather discourage them from their profession (Richardson & Watt, 2006).

## 5. Conclusion

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 "lucrativity" is another factor weighing against it (Chrappán, 2013).

We found that on the long run, these disadvantages override all internal motivations and render the career socialization mission of teachers' training (Pavin-Ivanec, 2020) greatly difficult, if not impossible. In line with several other researches (see, 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, 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. 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' personal impacts, and more often than not, their unrealistic pictures of the career field. Our study shows that over the course of the training and internships, part of this naive professional motivation transforms into a conscious career perception, and at the same time, experiencing teachers' work- and life conditions often discourages students (Szontagh, 2022).

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