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## **THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND ACHIEVEMENT OF EDUCATION MAJORS IN THE CROSS-BORDER REGION OF HUNGARY, ROMANIA AND UKRAINE<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

Recent studies show that students with lower secondary school performance<sup>2</sup> apply to teacher training programs; moreover, teacher training graduates showing poorer academic performance are more likely to become teachers. However, fulfilling the role of a successful teacher involves having complex knowledge and skills, such as co-operation, self-understanding and good problem-solving skills. This complexity is interpreted differently by experts. Some claim that it leads to deprofessionalization while others empathize the crucial role of teacher training development and renewal, which would compensate for the loss of prestige in the teaching profession.

Although it is not common in Hungary, Paszkál Kiss and his research group have recently carried out a competence-based assessment of students studying in higher education. Their results confirm that academic success alone does not predict competence-based achievement. Our analysis was based on two data collections performed in 2010 and 2012 on students studying in the higher-education institutions of the cross border regions of Hungary, Romania and Ukraine. Our results support the claims in literature that the academic performance of education majors is poorer than the academic performance of other students while, in some areas, other indicators of achievement demonstrate the advantage of education majors.

### **Introduction**

The status loss of the teaching professions, the decreasing social recognition and the related phenomenon of negative self-selection have been an integral part of today's professional dialogue. We use the plural following Fónai since teachers of all levels of education (pre-primary, primary, secondary and higher education) are often put into the same category. Besides, it is evident that teachers of different levels of education not only need different education but also different knowledge and skills (Fónai, 2012). It was two decades ago when a comprehensive study was carried out to assess the social recognition of intellectual professions. Less comprehensive studies conducted in the meantime indicate either no change or drop in the prestige of the teaching profession. According to the 1994 results, secondary school teachers are on the sixth place and primary school teachers are on the seventh place preceded by doctors, lawyers, economists, chemists and mechanical engineers (Szabó, 1998). Nevertheless, some studies also note that besides academic performance, there are other factors, such as institutional embeddedness and

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of simplicity, 'achievement' and 'performance' is used as synonyms.

satisfaction with both the training and teaching practice, that influence teacher attrition. Consequently, even though the statement that better performing students leave the teaching profession is valid, it is undoubtedly simplified (Bruinsmaa & Jansena, 2010; Pusztai, 2012). In addition, the interpretation of achievement is also problematic: does it exclusively refer to academic performance or we should take into consideration other academic activities and certain competences, as well?

In the following, we present an overview of the academic achievement of education majors compared to other majors, as well as, the knowledge and skills that can be significant to assess in relation to academic achievement.

Furthermore, we demonstrate the different representations of the complexity of the teacher's role: some claim that it leads to deprofessionalization while others empathize the significance of teacher training development and renewal, which would compensate for the loss of prestige in the teaching profession.

We analyze the academic achievement of education majors compared to performance of other majors. Moreover, we examine the image that we can create about education majors based on other achievement indicators. Furthermore, we also elaborate on the relationship between achievement and the intention to remain in the teaching profession.

### **A complex role: deprofessionalization or a new professional identity?**

In the last decade, Hungarian studies show that low earning and the loss of prestige result in negative self selection. Hence, student with lower secondary school academic performance apply to Teacher Training Programs, moreover, teacher training graduates showing poorer academic performance are more likely to become teachers *nyújtottak* (Polónyi & Tímár, 2001; Polónyi & Tímár, 2006; Varga, 2007; Sági & Ercsei, 2012).

At the turn of the millennium, studying the academic performance of secondary school students, Varga concludes that lower ability students and students valuing their possible earnings lower than others are more likely to choose a college-level Teacher Training Program. It is a general tendency that lower achieving secondary school students choose to apply to colleges rather than to universities, "but the lower abilities one has, the more likely that they apply to a Teacher Training Program" (writers' translation, Varga, 2007: 315). Regarding applications to university level Teacher Training Programs the differences in abilities/achievement were not traceable compared to students choosing other majors. At the same time, there are more college graduates choosing to become a teacher, thus ultimately students showing poorer achievement are more likely to enter the teaching profession than students showing better performance.

Since for those having a university education have more favorable alternative career possibilities outside the field of the teaching profession, they more likely to choose another career area (Varga, 2007). A Swiss study draws a similar conclusion when it states that typically women form nonintellectual families having little academic interest and preferring colleges to universities choose teaching as a profession.

In our research studying new entrant teachers, we found that based on their grades, there is no difference between the academic achievement of education major graduates and non-education major graduates finishing their studies in 2007, 2008

and 2010. However, a particular tendency was displayed, namely that regardless of their gender, education majors seem to follow a feminine career strategy. More specifically, in the education major sample, both the percentage of graduate students and students planning to acquire an additional degree were higher, whereas, significantly fewer students intended to continue their studies in a PhD program (Kovács, 2012/a; 2012/b) which is a tendency typically characterizing women. According to Fényes (2009), women prefer acquiring additional degrees in order to have more cultural capital, however, they do not intend to continue their studies on a higher level of education, namely in a PhD Program.

Despite that the need for student-centered learning was already formulated at the Leuven ministerial meeting in 2009 (Leuven Communiqué, 2009), other indicators of achievement are usually overshadowed in Hungarian Teacher Training Programs, as well as, in higher education in general (Radó, 2011). This might be the reason why few attempts were made in Hungary to assess the complexity of student achievement. In other countries, for example in the United States, competences of undergraduate students are assessed by several means mostly involving the assessment of the value-added by the higher education institutions. One of the most widely used and accepted assessment instruments is the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), which was also taken over by International Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) to assess students' general competences. The CLA assesses critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem-solving and written communication competences. The students have to solve real-life situations based on some sources (articles, records, maps and letters) (Klein et al., 2010). The research group of Paszkál Kiss studied competence acquired in higher education with relatively similar, own developed reading comprehension, text construction, logic and calculus tasks. According to the first results, competences considered to be crucial by the students – practical proficiency, communication skills, learning skills, and the skill to be able to achieve one's aims – only slightly developed during their undergraduate years. Interestingly enough, the directly assessed competences show no relationship to their self-reported academic performance and efforts. These results can be explained with the following two factors: students' self-image is unrealistic and performance in terms of grades alone does not predict competence-based achievement (Kiss, Lerner & Lukács, 2010).

In the case of education majors, the development of further indicators of achievement, such as competence, clearly has a major role since the knowledge and skills necessary for the teaching profession are complex. Based on some studies, this complexity includes, for example, cooperative skills, self-understanding and determination. Fónai claims that this strengthens the process of deprofessionalization. He refers to Etzioni's interpretation that as for feminized professions in general, but helping professions in particular, the attributes of typical female activities were transmitted to the profession itself. Besides, the traditional subjection is presented with the phenomenon that in this dimension, the given profession is classified only as a semi-profession not as a profession (Fónai, 2012). This can be an explanation for the status-loss of the profession since though founded in a different perspective, the relevant literature consistently claims that the core value and expectation of the teaching profession is caring, which is also perceived as a general expectation during teacher training. However, in Ireland, caring as a

core value of the profession is even included in the Codes of Professional Conduct. Caring is often presented as an ethical dimension and/or interpreted as responsibility for the quality of relationships. In addition, reflected in traditions and stereotypes, caring is rather identified with the female gender (Drudy, 2008; Weiner, 2001).

Corresponding to that, our study results depict that the feminization of the profession is only partly the result of the growing number of women in the profession; the emergence of expectations and attributes traditionally identified with the female role are also contributing factors. It is supported not only with the already mentioned strong presence of the feminine career strategy, but also with the tendency that in terms of their aspirations and occupational position, the new entrant teachers remain below the average, which means that few of them continue their studies in a PhD program and work in a leading position. According to a study performed among education majors, paying attention to the emotions and problems of students is equally important for teacher candidates irrespectively to their gender (Kovács, 2012/a; 2012/b).

Emerged in the last few years, a professional discourse has drawn an entirely different conclusion from the complexity of the competences necessary for the teaching profession. Hargreaves and Fullan created a new concept to describe the professional knowledge of teachers, according to which, the professional capital of teachers is a composite of *human capital* referring to the individual education and qualifications of the teacher, *social capital* needed for handling social relations measured by the number of interactions, *decisional capital* consisting competences, intuition, judgment and on-the-spot problem-solving skills. The writers emphasize that decision capital can only develop during several years of professional practice in a supportive professional atmosphere (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Studies approaching the question from the direction of teacher training come to a similar conclusion that problem-centered approach should be emphasized during teacher training and further trainings. Writers interested in the profession's complexity draw a parallel between the work of the expert-researcher and the teacher since both are a certain problem-solving roles: the participants analyze individual situations being unsure and often presenting value conflicts, at the same time, applying academic theories and models is necessary to solve problems in their complexity. In addition, during knowledge-based training, the participant create knowledge on the professional field, moreover, they consciously experience their role as a student. These all contribute to the fact that knowledge transfer is not considered as a linear process, but as a collectively created and frequently renewable extension. Studies analyzing the professional development of teachers underscore that teachers who have already encountered the above mentioned approach during their studies were able to understand better students' thinking and the development of their subject-related concepts. Thus, this encounter could improve their teaching (Borko, 2004; Szabó, 2001; Niemi, 2008).

These theories do not present the complexity of the teacher role as a factor that strengthens deprofessionalization, but as a new professional identity. On the one hand, some experts highlight that the novel approach towards the teacher role would have a positive effect on the prestige of the profession; on the other hand, others rather emphasize that it would contribute to the quality improvement of education.

### **Achievement indicators of education majors**

During our analysis, we focus on the achievement of education majors in relation to non-education majors. For our analysis, we used the databases of two research projects entitled “Effects of Tertiary Education on Regional Development” (TERD) funded by the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund and “Higher Education for Social Cohesion – Cooperative Research and Development in a Cross Border Area” (HERD). Both data were collected in the higher-education institutions of the cross-border regions of Hungary, Romania and Ukraine in 2010 and 2012. In 2010, the entire sample consisted 1722 students including 491 education majors. In 2012, altogether 2728 students were asked, among them 204 filled the ‘teacher inset’ and were added to the subsample. In both cases, stratified group sampling was used, the teacher sample is not representative though. Hence, our statements cannot be generalized to the education major of the region, yet we consider that they support a more thorough understanding of the topic.

The questionnaires contained the same or similar questions, but certain variables were assessed either by the first or the second. We could analyze academic achievement in terms of grades only in the TERD database, while the other indicators of achievement, for example, possessing a language exam certificate, participating in academic competitions or being a member of a college for Advanced Academic Studies could be analyzed using both the TERD and HERD databases. These types of questionnaires are not suitable for competence assessment, but the 2012 data collection contained questions related to differences of reading habits.

We also analyzed the demographic variables that may explain the differences, such as parents’ education, the family’s financial status and how many books the parents and individual students possess. The ‘teacher inset’ attached to the HERD questionnaire asked students about their intentions related to entering the profession and remaining in the profession; besides, how education majors perceive the prestige, recognition and possibilities of the profession. Hence, this database made it possible to analyze the correlation between achievement and commitment to the teaching profession.

In terms of their cultural capital, there is no difference between education major undergraduates and other undergraduates. Parents highest level of education shows a similar tendency: two-third of the students entered higher-education as a first generation student. The 2012 data demonstrate a significant difference between novice kindergarten teachers and other education majors: more than three-fourth of the parents of the novice kindergarten teachers have a secondary school leaving exam. In the TERD project, the number of books that parents possess was examined. The differences are not significant yet show a tendency. 52,4 percentage of the parents of non-education majors have more than 100 books, whereas, the percentage is only 46,7 in the case of the parents of education majors. This does not seem to determine the number of books students possess since 25,4 percentage of education majors possess more than 100 books, whilst only 18,9 percentage of the non-education majors were put into the same category.

Both questionnaires used several indicators to student achievement. Only the TERD questionnaire asked school-leaving exam outcomes, though. The results show that the performance of education majors are much poorer than that of the non-education majors. Significantly more non-education majors graduated from

secondary school with excellent and good results than education majors. Furthermore, the school-leaving exam outcomes of kindergarten teachers are significantly poorer than the results of teacher training undergraduates. Only 41,9 percentage of education majors graduated with an excellent or a good result including the 36,6 percentage of kindergarten majors and 50 percentage of teacher training majors. In contrast, nearly two-third of the non-education majors achieved excellent or good results (significance: 0,000).

The 2012 survey did not shed light on the secondary school-leaving exam outcomes, however, it did ask students whether they have ever get any academic awards and/or scholarships during their secondary education. These results also support the lower achievement of education majors: 39 percentage of non-education majors got a scholarship, while only 31,9 percentage of education majors can tell the same thing about themselves (significance: 0,000).

In the 2010 database, there is no difference between students with respect to the number of intermediate language exam certificate they have: slightly more than one-third of the students acquired at least one. The 2012 data show a similar percentage in the case of education majors; in contrast, half of the none-education majors have an intermediate-level language exam certificate. Other indicators of achievement, however, display a very different tendency. Relatively few students have been members of any College for Advanced Studies, similarly, only one-tenth of them have participated in academic competitions. Among these students there are more education majors than non-education majors though.

According to the 2012 data, the percentage of teacher candidates having participated in the National Secondary School Academic Competition (so called OKTV) is significantly higher, double than of non-education majors. Nevertheless, it seems that this special interest was not maintained in higher-education since there is no difference in the percentage of education and non-education majors participating in the National Conference of Young Scholars.

However, based on the 2010 data, the OKTV participation also indicates a similar percentage, but the advantage of education majors is less considerable (7,6%). Correspondingly, the 2012 data show that more education majors have their own research topic (40 percentage in contrast with the 25 percentage of non-education majors), which tendency is also reflected in their publication activity.

In both samples, around twice as many education majors as non-education majors are members of a College for Academic Studies (significance in both databases: 0,000). Hence, it can be perceived – though with varying intensity – that more education majors have a special interest and their own research topic. As it was already mentioned, in general, education majors have more books; moreover, they read more often books of their choice, literature that is not compulsory than non-education majors: 41,6 percentage of the education majors read more than five books that are not compulsory in the given academic year as opposed to the 34 percentage of the none-education majors (significance: 0,009).

The ‘teacher inset’ of the HERD questionnaire allowed us to analyze the factors that influence whether the education majors are planning to work as a teacher and committed to the profession in the long run. The results show that neither the intention to enter the profession, nor the intention to remain in the profession correlates with indicators of student achievement such as obtaining a language exam

certificate, advanced-level secondary school-leaving examination certificate and other indicators of achievement.

Students' views on the teaching profession also affected their commitment to the profession. The status of the profession was assessed by nine items; in all cases, students were asked to indicate their opinion on the extent to which society values a given aspect. Only the prestige perception of the profession correlates with students' intention to teach: if one ranks the prestige of the profession high, it is more likely that they intend to teach.

Even so, whether one remains in the profession correlates with a factor which is the aggregate of the items. In other words, those ranking – in addition to prestige – professional autonomy, social recognition and career prospects higher are more likely to remain in the profession. Neither students' perception of income opportunities, nor their gender seem to impact on attrition.

We also asked our subjects whether they have preferences for specific working conditions. Most of them would work in elite schools and foundation schools. Furthermore, the majority of teacher candidates would not refuse to work in small towns, disadvantaged regions, or among students with special educational needs. However, the percentage of those, who would not undertake the task under the latter two conditions are relatively high (40 percentage) regardless of their gender. A factor created from these three disadvantage variables shows a specific relationship to the intention to enter the profession, as well as, to remain in the profession. A high percentage of students being sure that they will enter the profession want to work under more favorable conditions. Besides, those being concerned that they will not leave the profession can imagine working anywhere, while those assuming that they might abandon the profession might be encouraged to leave by less favorable circumstances.

## Conclusion

During the time of the data collection, education majors had been already studying in the Bologna system, thus the previously made distinction between students attending college-level and university-level teacher training disappeared. A higher percentage of kindergarten teachers are first generation graduates and their academic performance is significantly poorer than that of other majors. The underlying reason for that can be that the kindergarten profession is ranked four places lower than the secondary school teacher profession in the hierarchy of intellectual professions. Moreover, as a result of its low prestige, it attracts students with lower achievement and cultural capital. Comparing non-education majors to education majors, we find that – except kindergarten teacher candidates – the parents' level of education shows a similar tendency. The families of teacher training majors possess less books and have less favorable financial background. However, it has to be noted that the difference can be assessed only with the subjective indicators in one of the databases and only with objective indicators in the other.

The academic achievement of education majors in terms of grades is poorer, moreover, education majors get significantly less scholarships and academic awards than non-education majors. According to the 2010 data, the percentage of education and non-education majors possessing an intermediate level language exam

certificate is similar, in contrast, the 2012 data reveals that significantly less education majors possess inter-mediate and advanced level language exam certificates.

A different tendency emerges if achievement is assessed with other indicators. Education majors have more books and read significantly more than students majoring in other programs. Besides, compared to non-education majors, the percentage of education majors participating in academic competitions, being a member of a College for Advanced Studies and having their own research topics is higher. Although the databases analyzed was not designed to assess competences, the above mentioned differences in grade-based achievement and other indicators might anticipate that we would come to a similar conclusion as the research group of Paszkál Kiss, namely, that academic achievement in terms of grades by itself does not predict competence-based achievement.

In connection with major choice, it turned out that the intention to enter the teaching profession and to remain in the profession are influenced by the initially chosen major and the perception of the anatomy, social recognition and the career prospects of the profession.

In conclusion, students applying to education majors have poorer academic achievement in terms of grades, however, they read more, participate in academic competitions in higher percentage and have their own research topics. Consequently, it is possible they view higher education in a more traditional way than other students. It would go well with the practical application of those theories, according to which the complexity of the teacher role is reflected in a new professional identity. The strengthening of the latter could make the teaching profession attractive to students with higher academic achievement since – as it is highlighted by some experts – the new approach will have a positive effect on the prestige of the profession.

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