

Socio-educational characteristics and motivational factors of students in Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education – an exploratory profile

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Abstract

Keywords:

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This study explores the profile of students within the Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education (PPPE) study program by analysing the characteristics of the socio-demographic and educational background, their motivations for choosing the specialization, self-appreciated qualities and skills, and their career intentions. The study is based on a mixed approach, a questionnaire being applied primary to a sample of 124 students, and also using a secondary data set of 215 students from another study. Among the most common reasons for choosing the specialization are the love or desire to work with children (over 60%) and the contribution to their education (25%). Students consider that they have various qualities and skills that recommend them to be a teacher for primary or preschool education, or to work with children, such as patience and calm/gentleness (>60, respectively 30% of cases), empathy (>35% of cases), creativity (>30% of cases), ability to communicate effectively with children, organization and planning, etc.. Career intentions indicate a majority orientation towards positions of educator (56%) or teacher (30.4%). About 60% of respondents are employed, some of whom are already working in the educational field.

1. Introduction

This study proposes to explore the socio-demographic, educational and motivational profile of students within the Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education (PPPE) study program in a group of students at Univeristy of Oradea, by analysing the characteristics of the socio-educational background, aspects of the motivation for choosing the specialization, self-appreciated qualities and skills that recommend them for the profession and for working with kids, and their career intentions.

2. Theoretical foundation

The pedagogy of primary and preschool education is a specialty chosen by students who have a number of common traits and characteristics, such as pedagogical vocation, empathy, creativity and interest in child development. “The image of the “ideal” teacher varied according to the epochs of society’s development”, but “from all times, regardless of the degree of civilization and welfare of a society, the pedagogue, educator, and, lately, the preschool group or class manager, the one that had educated and is educating the young generation was and is still considered as role model for his/ her pupils, developing various of their character and behavior traits, way of thinking, as well as teaching the normal amount of knowledge” (Florescu, 2015).

“Student motivation has long been a major focus of research in educational psychology. One might have expected to see corresponding interest in motivation for teaching, but until very recently there was almost no systematic, theory-driven research on teacher motivation. Rather, the approach to teachers, rather like that for many years to mothers, seemed to be that they are of interest because they influence the young, not always for the better, but are of little interest in their own right” (Richardson, & Watt, 2014).

Richardson, and Watt (2006) found, in three Australian universities, “the highest rated motivations for choosing teaching included perceived teaching abilities, the intrinsic value of teaching, and the desire to make a social contribution, shape the future, and work with children, while lowest rated motivation was choosing teaching as a “fallback” career, followed by social influences of others encouraging them to undertake teaching as a career. Other motivations were rated in between for the desire to enhance social equity, having experienced positive prior teaching and learning experiences, job security, job transferability, and time for family”.

As Szontagh (2022) attentions, in line with several other researches, their 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)".

3. Research methodology

3.1 Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

- To describe the socio-demographic, educational, and occupational profiles of students enrolled in the PPPE program, and compare FT and BL formats.
- To explore students' motivations and intentions for choosing the PPPE speciality.
- To identify self-perceived personal qualities and skills that students consider relevant and recommendatory for working with children.
- To analyze potential differences in motivations and perceived qualities between students aiming to become preschool vs. primary school teachers.

3.2. Participants

Participants at the current study are a considerable percentage of the population of undergraduate students enrolled at Educational Sciences Department at University of Oradea, at Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education (PPPE) specialization, in full-time [FT] and blended learning [BL] study format.

For the current study we will use two datasets, a secondary one for better describing the population. Set 1 will be the main for the current study: formed from 124 participants, students at PPPE FT Oradea, Beiuș and BL format, 53% in the 1st year, 24% in the 2nd year and 20% in the 3rd year of study. Set 2 will be the secondary, also used in another larger study (different parts, in Barth et al., 2025, still in press), formed of a total of 215 participants, 89 in the 1st year, in FT

education (54 Oradea, 35 Beiuș) and 126 in BL form (in the 1st and 2nd year). For the characteristics described using both datasets we will present them separately or estimate a media, while there are cases of participants in Set 1 that also answered to Set 2.

Table 1

Main characteristics overview of principal and secondary datasets participants

Category	Dataset 1	Dataset 2
	<i>Main Dataset for Current Study</i>	<i>Complementary Dataset (used for additional research questions and in another study)</i>
Study Format	Mixed: Blended and Full-Time Studies (Year 1, 2 & 3)	Blended Learning (Year 1 & 2) and Full-Time Studies (Year 1)
Group Size	124 students	126 students (BL) – 58.6% 89 students (FT) – 41.4%
Average Age	27 years (range 18–49)	BL: 28 years FT: 21 years
Median Age	21 years	BL: 25 years FT: 19 years
Marital Status	40% married	BL: 52% married FT: 14% married
Parental Status	33% have children	BL: 40% have children FT: 10% have children
Employment Status	41.6% not employed	BL: 20% not employed FT: 68.5% not employed
Participant Profile Summary	A mixed group that combines characteristics from both BL and FT students: diversity in age, employment, family status, and study format.	BL: Working adults, often married with children FT: Younger, mostly single, residing in Oradea, fewer work commitments.

Participants from Dataset 1, the principal one for current study (124 students) display a mixed profile, combining characteristics from both groups in Dataset 2: their average age was 27, with 40% married and 33% having children, with varied levels of employment, 42% not working.

As presented in Table 1, the dataset 2 participants is formed of two well represented subgroups:

- BL group (126 students): primarily consisted of older, working adults with an average age of 28, a significant portion married (52%) and parents (40%), most employed (80%)

- FT group (89 students): mostly younger, with an average age of 21, largely single (only 14% married), just 10% having children. The majority (70%) lived in Oradea and had limited employment commitments, 69% not working.

3.3. Instruments

3.3.1. *The questionnaire for collecting socio-demographic, personal and academic background data* contains predominantly quantitative items

expressed in age, kilometers, number of hours, grades or appreciations on a 1-7 Likert scale. The questionnaire has been widely described in Răcășan, 2024 and comprises items designed to measure the following variables related to socio-demographic and personal variables that are relevant for the current study:

- age and gender,
- residence distance from Oradea,
- relational/ marital and parenthood status (number and ages of children),
- occupational status and occupation
- employment status and hours/ week spent on paid work,
- hours/ week spent on household tasks and caregiving,
- previous educational background variables:
 - pedagogical high school graduates (yes or no),
 - approximate baccalaureate grades (average and grade at the discipline Romanian Language and Literature),
 - years of other university studies and formation courses.
- year of study at PPPE.

3.3.2. *The motivations, qualities and intention items are related to:*

- intentions after graduating from college:
 - to become a teacher for primary education,
 - to become a teacher for preschool education,
 - other or not decided.
- reasons for choosing PPPE specialization,
- self-appreciated qualities or skills that recommend them to be a teacher for primary or preschool education, or to work with children in general.

3.4. *Procedure*

The study is cross-sectional, based on data collected in february, academic year 2024–2025 in two questionnaires applied using Google Forms platform, comprising both quantitative and open-ended questions to capture students' opinions and intentions. Procedure is very similar, for the principal dataset was simpler, based on voluntary and anonymous participation, in the context of gathering data related to PIP specialization, while for the secondary dataset procedure was more complex, not

completely anonymous, rewarded with bonus points (widely described in Barth et al., 2025, in press).

4. Results

4.1. *Participants socio-demographic characteristics*

As there are complementary relevant data in dataset 1 and 2, we will extensively present these characteristics for both, in dataset 2 comparing BL and FT characteristics.

4.1.1. *Participants socio-demographic characteristics in dataset 1*

Additionally to the characteristics presented in the participants section, we will describe here more in depth aspects regarding geographic distribution, marital and parental status, for Dataset 1.

Geographic distribution of participants residence is Oradea and its metropolitan area for approximately 60% of participants, 20% living at 10 to 50 km from Oradea, and the others 20% at more than 50 km from Oradea (or Beius in the case of PPPE Beius group).

Around 75% of the participants live in Bihor County (Romania), approximately 20% in other counties around (Sălaj, Satu-Mare, Arad, Cluj), and the other 5% at a greater distance.

The majority of respondents live either with their parents or with their own nuclear family (spouse and/or children), few living with extended families or alone. Most respondents live in households of 2 to 4 persons and a small number reported living alone (4%) or in households with 6 or more members (5%).

Regarding their marital/ relationship status, 40% are married, followed by those unmarried, but in a stable relationship (30%), and unmarried and not in a stable relationship (29). From the entire group, 64% are not parents, while 8% have one child, 20% have two children, 5% have three or more, and 3% did not answered.

4.1.2. *Participants socio-demographic characteristics in dataset 2, comparing BL and FT subgroups*

The group of participants consists of 215 students in PPPE (89 in the 1st year, in Full-Time [FT] education and 126 in Blended Learning [BL] education, in the 1st and 2nd year). As regards to the gender, the distribution is representative of the field of Educational Sciences, so that 98% are female and only 2% are male. From the entire population of first year undergraduate students at educational sciences,

Romanian sections (230 students), at University of Oradea, 171 participated to the study, representing 74% of the total population. This could be considered a highly representative sample for active students, with lower risk of abandoning studies.

The average age is 24.7, and the median age is 20, with a minimum of 18 and a maximum of 51 years. In the case of the subgroup of students in the BL program, the average age is significantly higher (mean = 28, median = 25 years) as compared to those in the FT program (mean = 21, median = 19 years).

Age differences are also reflected in marital and parental status, with a significant percentage of BL students being married (52%) and 40% having children (10% – one child, the other 2, 3, or 4 children), unlike FT students, of whom only 14% are married and 10% are parents, respectively.

As regards the distance from the school, 48% of the total participants are from Oradea, 70% from the FT group and 30% from the BL group (the others living at more than 50 km from Oradea). These differences are specific to the BL group, indicating that the group is predominantly composed of people with family and professional responsibilities, who choose the Blended format for flexibility.

The main differences between the Blended Learning (BL) group and the Full-Time (FT) group relate to (see Table 1):

- Demographic Differences
- Age: The average age of BL students is significantly higher (mean = 28, median = 25 years) compared to FT students (mean = 21, median = 19 years).
- Marital Status: A significant percentage of BL students are married (52%) compared to FT students (14%).
- Parental Status: 40% of BL students have children, whereas only 10% of FT students are parents.
- Residence in Oradea/ Beiuș: 30% of BL students reside in Oradea, while 70% of FT students live in Oradea/ Beiuș.
- Reside >50 km away: 70% of BL students live more than 50 km away from Oradea/ Beiuș, compared to 30% of FT students.

Program characteristics show considerable differences between the BL and FT students. While the BL group consists of working adults, the majority with families, many parents, living at a distance from

Oradea, choosing the blended format for its flexibility, the FT group consists of younger, mostly single, local students with fewer working hours. These differences highlight the distinct profiles of the two groups, with BL students balancing work, family, and study, while FT students are generally younger and more focused on their studies without the added responsibilities of work and family.

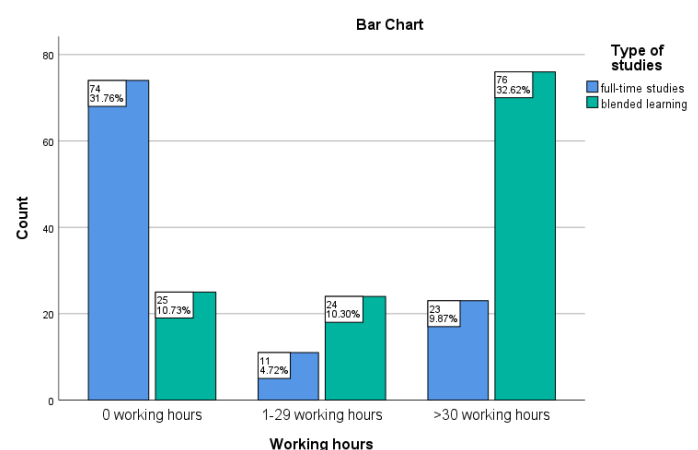
4.2. Work participation and occupation

A relevant aspect regarding the characterization of the group is related to the involvement in paid productive activities (work), domestic (casnic), and caregiving activities, the *dataset 1* reveals varied levels of engagement. A significant portion of participants (41.6%) reported reduced or absent involvement in such activities, while 13.6% indicated a reduced workload ranging between 5 and 20 hours per week. About 26.4% reported a medium level of involvement (20–40 hours weekly), and 14.4% were highly engaged, spending over 40 hours per week on these activities. Notably, 0.8% of students reported a very high level of involvement, combining full-time employment with more than 10 hours per week of domestic or caregiving responsibilities. Data was missing for 3.2% of the participants.

For dataset 2, participants' involvement in productive activities is: of the total participants 42.5% do not work, 15% work less than 30 hours per week, and the remaining 42.5% work more than 30 hours per week. As expected, there are significant differences depending on the type of study program, so that among students who follow FT studies, 68.5% do not work, while in BL subgroup only 20% do not work. As regards the time spent working, 60.8% of BL students and only 21% of FT students work more than 30 hours per week (Figure 1).

Figure 1

FT versus BL students working hours (dataset 2 participants)



As regards the occupied participants and their occupation, both datasets include a total of 162 responses regarding participants occupation, 49 from the main dataset and 113 participants from the secondary dataset. The analysis focused on the distribution of occupations across four main professional domains: Education and Childcare, Health and Social Assistance, Commercial and Economics, and Services/Freelance/ Other, as follows (also see Table 2):

- Education and Childcare domain had the highest overall representation, with 74 individuals (45.7%). The most common roles were teachers, private tutors, educators, and childcare assistants. Set 2 had a significantly higher concentration in this field (51 individuals) compared to Set 1 (23 individuals),
- Services, Freelance, and Other: a total of 52 individuals (32.1%) were employed in various service-related roles such as hospitality staff, call center operators, beauty and cleaning services, manual labor, and digital/creative jobs. This domain also includes atypical or transitional statuses such as volunteers, military staff, and those on childcare leave.
- Commerce and Economics sector included 29 individuals (17.9%), with occupations such as sales representatives, economists, and economic managers. The majority were in Set 2, suggesting a slight growth in economically oriented roles.
- Health and Social Assistance domain was the least represented, with only 7 individuals (4.3%) working as nurses or social workers.

Table 2
Occupational domains and occupations of working participants

Domain	Occupation	Set 1	Set 2	Total
Education and childcare	Primary school teacher	5	15	20
	Preschool educator	3	11	14
	Teacher/ private teacher	4	15	19
	Child Caregiver	5	3	8
	Nursery caregiver	2	4	6
	Children's supervisor / nanny / animator	4	3	7
Health and Social Care	Nurse	1	2	3
	Social worker	1	3	4
Commercial, economy, business	Salesperson / Representative / Advisor / Cashier	6	11	17
	Economist	1	4	5
	Economic directory / manager	3	4	7
Services, freelance and others	Waiter / Bartender / baking / restaurant	1	7	8
	Specer / call center / interview operator	1	4	5

Computer operator / office / secretary / xerox	1	4	5
Handmade / Manicure / Cosmetic / Cleaning / Gardening	3	3	6
Factory/Production/Construction	2	4	6
Fine Mechanical Engineer	0	1	1
Digital marketing	0	1	1
Journalist	1	0	1
Military Cadre	1	1	2
Volunteer	0	1	1
Parental leave (CIC)	1	6	7
Other occupations	3	6	9
TOTAL	49	113	162

The analysis reveals a dominance of occupations in the Education and Childcare domain, followed by a diversified range of service-related activities. Set 2 consistently shows higher participation in nearly all domains, especially in Education and Services. Health-related occupations were underrepresented in both sets.

4.3. Educational background and reasons for choosing the specialization

As regards participants admission/ starting grades at the beginning of faculty (as rounded if the participant did not remember the exact one), we could observe that they were having rather bimodal distributions (the approximate averages obtained at the baccalaureate exam closer to a normal one), with a clearer negative asymmetry for the approximate grades obtained at the baccalaureate exam in the discipline Romanian Language and Literature (the media for both distributions was around 8.15 value). As it relates to the field of study, we mention that approximately a quarter of them, 23%, are graduates of pedagogical high school.

The motivations expressed by students for choosing their field of study reflect a strong orientation toward working with children and contributing to their development. The most frequently cited reasons were related to:

- love for children, mentioned by 54 participants,
- followed by the pleasure of working with children (33 responses).
- 21 students indicated a desire to contribute to education and child development,
- 8 were influenced by personal models such as parents or friends.
- practical considerations like flexible schedules, job stability, or benefits (7 responses),
- professional reorientation (6),
- or personal growth and self-improvement (6),

- 5 students described their choice as a childhood dream,
- and 10 mentioned various other personal reasons, such as having their own children or valuing creativity.

Participants with the intention to become preschool educators (56%, 70 participants), predominantly emphasized affective and emotional motivations. The most frequent theme was love for children, mentioned in various forms for over half the responses. Many also referred to their personal or maternal experiences, such as being mothers or having direct care responsibilities. A strong desire to nurture, emotional fulfillment, and the dream of becoming an educator since childhood were also recurring motives. Others appreciated the balance between work and personal life, referring to the flexible schedule. Additionally, some participants wished to combine this career with previous one. Overall, these responses reflect a calling-driven and care-oriented motivation, with emphasis on emotion, attachment, and personal meaning tied to early childhood development.

Participants aiming to become primary school teachers (30%, 38 participants) expressed more cognitive, developmental, and academic motivations. While love for children remained a frequent theme, it was often connected with the desire to teach, to guide intellectual growth, and to support academic and personal development. Some participants referenced professional aspirations like career advancement, specialization, or transition from other fields, while others were inspired by role models or positive experiences with teachers from their own schooling. A few cited practical considerations such as job stability, income, or advantageous schedules, but these were less frequent. This group showed a stronger focus on education, highlighting themes of pedagogical mission, self-realization through teaching and having an impact on children development.

4.4. *Self-appreciated qualities and skills that recommend them for the profession and for working with kids*

When asked to identify the personal qualities and skills that recommend them for the teaching profession and for working with children, participants highlighted a wide range of qualities and skills.

The most frequently mentioned quality was *patience*, with approximately 70 respondents referencing it in various forms, such as “I have a lot of patience” or “Patience and empathy”, closely

following was *empathy*, cited by about 45 individuals, who emphasized care, understanding, and concern for children’s development.

Creativity also featured prominently, mentioned by around 35 participants who described themselves as imaginative and passionate, often linking this trait with involvement and enthusiasm. Approximately 30 respondents emphasized their *love for children*, expressing a genuine affection and *joy in working with them*. Another commonly cited attribute was *calmness*, mentioned by about 25 individuals, often associated with patience and a composed demeanor in educational settings.

Other notable qualities included *effective communication skills* (about 20 mentions), *organization and responsibility* (15 mentions), and *involvement or devotion to the field* (around 12 responses). A smaller number of students emphasized *gentleness and understanding* (10 responses) and cited previous *experience* or training in teaching or volunteering roles as important assets.

Additionally, a few participants mentioned other qualities more rarely, such as adaptability, team spirit, perseverance, discipline or seriousness, emotional intelligence, and artistic skills (like music or theater), which further enriched the profile of those aspiring to work in education and child development.

The ideal profile for this profession, as evidenced by the participants, involves a combination of character traits (*calmness, empathy, patience*), practical skills (*communication, organization, creativity*) and a deep intrinsic motivation: sincere love for children and the desire to contribute to their development.

The qualities that respondents consider essential to work with children in preschool and primary school have both common points and differences according to the intention to work with preschool and primary school children. In both cases, patience and empathy stand out as the most important traits. Patience is constantly mentioned, being considered a fundamental quality to be able to manage the needs and behaviors of young or older children. Empathy, equally, is perceived as a crucial skill for understanding and emotionally supporting children.

As for participants with the intention of working in preschool (70), the responses reflect a more pronounced orientation towards affective aspects, emphasizing more frequently qualities such as calmness, gentleness, dedication and willingness to

understand young children's emotions. There are formulations indicating a concern for both the emotional component and the harmonious development of children. In addition, traits such as organization, professionalism, team spirit and adaptability are mentioned as relevant skills to face the daily challenges of the preschool environment.

Participants with the intention of working in primary education value their qualities in a slightly different way. Although patience and empathy also prevail here, the emphasis is more frequently placed on pedagogical skills, effective communication, organization, discipline, previous experience gained (e.g. in volunteering, social work or extracurricular activities). Some mention the ability to inspire confidence, the desire to actively contribute to the intellectual development of children, perseverance, creativity.

5. Discussions

The aim of this study was to explore characteristics, motivations, self-perceived qualities and intentions of FT compared to BL undergraduate students at Oradea university, PPPE specialty.

As regards predominant age and almost exclusively female gender of the PPPE students, there is a well-known characteristic in literature especially for preschool teacher education. For example, Richardson, and Watt (2006) also found far “greater numbers of females than males enrolled in teacher education, and this was most marked for early childhood teacher education which had almost exclusively female enrolments, followed by primary teacher education, and then by secondary teacher education. Should the lack of males in teacher education be considered a problem in In general, pre-service teachers were quite young, the median age for undergraduates was the age of 19 to 20, while for graduates it was 25 to 26 years old”.

BL students were older (mean age = 28) than FT students (mean age = 21), with significantly higher rates of marriage and parenthood. A larger proportion of BL students were employed, many full-time. This supports the idea that BL programs attract adult learners balancing education with family and work.

Nearly half of the employed students worked in education or childcare, suggesting both prior experience and vocational alignment. This was more pronounced in the BL group, aligning with their older age and employment status. Prior training in pedagogy

(e.g., pedagogical high school graduates) also featured prominently, reinforcing vocational commitment.

A relevant clarification of this study is related to the demographic and experiential gap between FT and BL students. While FT students are generally younger, with limited life or teaching experience, BL students are often older, actively working, and sometimes already engaged in pedagogical roles. These differences align with Knowles (1980) theory, which emphasize that adult learners are self-directed, goal-oriented, and motivated by practical relevance.

The dominant motivation for choosing the program across participants was love and affection for children and a desire to support their development. These intrinsic motivations, including educational calling and personal fulfillment, strongly outweighed extrinsic factors such as flexibility or career reorientation. Participants intending to work in preschool education described their motivations in highly emotional and relational terms, such as maternal experiences, emotional connection, and affective care. Those who preferred primary education leaned more toward developmental and cognitive motivations, such as contributing to children's academic growth, pedagogical impact, and career advancement.

Motivations of PPPE students that refer to the opportunity for shaping personalities of the educated have been previously found in other groups of students, for example in Glava (2019), remarking the disposition of the candidates to undertake the major responsibility of impacting the lives of the educated, some mentioning “the will to change the society by working with the little ones”.

Patience and empathy were the most frequently cited personal qualities. Preschool-oriented students more often emphasized calmness, gentleness, flexibility, and emotional intelligence. Primary education-oriented students more frequently cited communication, organization, responsibility, experience, and teaching enthusiasm. These qualities reflect expectations, as in a study conducted by Florescu (2015), the managers described the educator should be a well trained person, able to professionally guide the children's activity in all the curricular areas, orientation of the educators towards spiritual values, love to the youngest, possibility of further development/ improvement, and the vocation/ determination for performing this profession.

This study is limited by its sample size and reliance on self-reported data. Future research could employ

structured instruments, eventually validated and theoretically anchored, regarding motivations for choosing specialty and self-appreciation of personal qualities and skills reported to the the ideal teacher profile and also to realistic practice-based requirements. Also, longitudinal designs or mixed-method approaches to track changes in student motivation and identity over time would be relevant for a better career counseling in career choice. Moreover, comparative studies across different cultural or institutional contexts would help determine the generalizability of these findings.

6. Conclusions

The study presented a diverse group of adult learners, who are in different stages of their academic journey, with a mix of undergraduate and already graduate students of other study programs and specialties. The demographics include a variety of age groups, as the reduced frequency model attracts individuals with varying levels of prior education and professional experience. In terms of gender, the sample includes 98% female students, which is representative for the study program (due to reduced interest for PPPE in general in male candidates). The participants are from various socio-economic backgrounds, which may influence their academic and personal experiences. Many of the participants are also engaged in full-time or part-time employment, balancing their academic responsibilities with professional duties and familial roles.

This study offers a detailed portrait of the current cohort of students in the PPPE program at the University of Oradea, revealing key socio-demographic, motivational, and professional traits relevant for their preparation as future educators.

- The heterogeneity of the student characteristics, especially between FT and BL formats, shows the necessity of tailored pedagogical strategies to meet the needs of both young full-time students and mature, working adults.
- Students predominantly enter the PPPE program with intrinsic motivations and a strong affective disposition toward children, suggesting a solid foundation for a career in early education.
- Self-perceived personal qualities align well with professional expectations in the field, particularly in terms of patience, empathy, and dedication.
- Differences between those intending to work in preschool vs. primary education reflect nuanced

vocational orientations, with implications for career counseling and curricular specialization.

Overall, the findings reflect a committed, emotionally engaged future workforce in early education, requiring support systems that recognize their varied backgrounds, motivations, and strengths.

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