Successful Teacher Representations and Professional Self-Projections at Entry into Psychopedagogical Training: A Descriptive Thematic Study

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Abstract

The present study examines the aggregate thematic patterns through which candidates describe a successful teacher and their own perceived qualities for a teaching career at the beginning of psychopedagogical training. The research was conducted within the admission process for the Level I Psychopedagogical Training Program at Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu and analyzed responses provided by 360 candidates from five faculties. A qualitative thematic analysis, complemented by descriptive quantification, was used to compare two dimensions: the image of the successful teacher and the candidates' professional self-portrait. The frequencies reported in the study represent coded mentions rather than individual respondents. The findings indicate a descriptive correspondence between the aggregate thematic distributions of the two sets of coded mentions. In both cases, socio-emotional and relational resources, including empathy, patience, understanding, calmness, and willingness to support students, emerged as prominent characteristics. Organized professionalism and communicative competence were more visible in the successful teacher model, whereas personal commitment and motivation were more visible in candidates' self-descriptions. These patterns may be interpreted as preliminary indicators of early professional self-positioning, rather than as evidence of individual-level thematic correspondence or fully formed professional identity.

Keywords: ***teacher professional identity; preservice teachers; initial teacher education; successful teacher representations; professional self-projections; descriptive thematic study***

1. Introduction

Training future teachers means more than developing pedagogical knowledge and technical competencies. Initial teacher education is a process of formation in which individuals begin to understand the teaching profession, reflect on their personal characteristics, and imagine themselves in relation to possible future professional roles. In this light, the construction of professional identity has emerged as a major theme in research on teacher education. Teachers'

professional identity is generally conceptualized as a dynamic, flexible, and changing entity rather than a fixed attribute. It is shaped through the interplay of personal biography, social expectations, institutional factors, and future practice as it is envisioned. Therefore, initial teacher education is not only a space for acquiring pedagogical knowledge and skills; it is also a formative context in which candidates reinterpret previous educational experiences, reconcile idealized and realistic conceptions of teaching, and start to imagine themselves as future professionals (Flores, 2020). At the beginning of teacher preparation, candidates may still see themselves mainly as students while beginning to consider the teaching role, occupying a transitional space of uncertainty, expectation, and comparison with remembered teacher models. Representations of what makes a successful teacher may serve as relevant identity-related resources in this process. The qualities and competencies candidates associate with teaching success provide normative reference points against which they may evaluate their perceived suitability for the profession. In the present study, however, professional identity is approached indirectly, through aggregate thematic representations and self-projections at entry into psychopedagogical training.

2. Literature Review

Research shows a close relationship between professional identity and perceptions of successful teaching. Traditional models refer to the teacher as a moral example, an authority figure, a lifelong learner, and a role model for students, emphasizing optimism, punctuality, dialogue, and initiative (Prachum & Skalinski Junior, 2020). More recent literature has re-conceptualized teaching success as an expanded professional role, representing teachers as facilitators of learning, participants in curriculum development, counselors, communicators, reflective practitioners, and lifelong learners (Voinea & Pălășan, 2014). Teacher professionalization involves psychopedagogical training, the development of didactic competencies, and the use of interactive strategies in the educational process (Crețu, 1999, 2013; Crețu & Nicu, 2009). These perspectives suggest that the idea of teaching success is not neutral, but is shaped by social, cultural, and professional expectations, becoming both a source of possible identification and a potential source of pressure for future teachers.

Another important source of identity-related positioning is the motivation to be a teacher. Previous research has consistently pointed to the importance of intrinsic, altruistic, and extrinsic motives, even though the relative importance of these motives changes depending on the context. Intrinsic and altruistic motivations are especially salient among prospective teachers and include love of working with children, desire to contribute to society, interest in a subject area, personal fulfillment, and the aspiration to support students' learning (Bakar et al., 2014; Korshunova & Beresneva, 2021; See et al., 2022; Turra-Díaz & Rivas-Valenzuela, 2022). Research further suggests that individuals may choose teaching because they perceive it as compatible with their personality, educational interests, and desire to contribute to society, but also because of practical considerations, including working conditions, holidays, job security, or its status as an alternative career option (Herman, 2019; Prada Núñez et al., 2021). The quality of these motives appears to be related to later satisfaction, persistence, and well-being. In particular, intrinsic motivation fosters learning orientation and professional satisfaction, whereas predominantly extrinsic motives may be related to lower satisfaction and higher intentions to quit the profession (Janke, 2020). The literature also suggests some instability between early interest and actual entry into the teaching profession. Large-scale research reveals that many young people are interested in becoming teachers, but few of them transition into teaching careers (MacLeod et al., 2025; Sikora, 2021). Teaching may therefore function as a possible future self, an alternative professional orientation, and a socially available projection rather than a firmly established professional commitment. This is particularly important for candidates starting their psychopedagogical training, as admission to such programs does not mean that they have already formed their teacher identity. Alternative career options, partial identifications, and conditional commitments may influence self-projections, based on perceptions of status, salary, workload, and employment prospects. Self-concept variables also act as mediators of identity development. Özokcu (2021) found that professional self-esteem, self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and amotivation predict preservice teachers' attitudes toward the teaching profession. Similarly, image, respect, sense of duty, motivation, and future perspectives are factors that affect teachers' professional self-understanding, while social status and emotions influence whether the profession is perceived as attractive or discouraging (Yağan et al., 2022). Longitudinal evidence shows that professional identification predicts the intention to stay in the profession and that autonomy-supportive training environments foster this identification, while autonomy-thwarting contexts undermine it (Weiß et al., 2023). The present study does not measure identity development directly; rather, it uses thematic patterns in short written responses as exploratory indicators of early professional positioning.

3. Research Gap and Justification for the Study

While the literature has provided insights into the motivations for choosing the teaching profession (Bakar et al., 2014; See et al., 2022), professional identity development (Flores, 2020; Weiß et al., 2023), and the characteristics of successful teaching (Prachum & Skalinski Junior, 2020; Voinea & Pălășan, 2014), the relationships between these dimensions have received relatively little attention, particularly in the early stages of teacher preparation. Furthermore, qualitative studies have provided rich descriptions of identity-related tensions and developmental processes, but they have usually focused on individuals who have already entered teacher education or accumulated relevant formative experiences (Flores, 2020; Yağan et al., 2022).

The start of psychopedagogical training has received relatively little attention, despite the fact that candidates' ideas about the successful teacher may not correspond to their future professional selves. Therefore, this study aims to examine the aggregate thematic patterns through which candidates describe a successful teacher and their own perceived qualities for a teaching career, and to identify descriptive similarities and differences between these two sets of coded mentions at the beginning of psychopedagogical training. This descriptive comparison can offer useful insights into early professional self-positioning, the visibility of relational and professional resources, and the distance between an idealized teacher model and candidates' self-descriptions.

4. Methods

4.1 Research Context

The research context is the admission process for the Level I Psychopedagogical Training Program at Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu. This context is relevant because admission represents the first step in a candidate's relationship with the teaching profession, preceding formal psychopedagogical training. At this stage, candidates express their initial perceptions of the teacher's role, the requirements of the profession, and their own resources relevant to a teaching career.

The Level I Psychopedagogical Training Program provides the institutional framework for initial training, equipping participants with the competencies necessary for entry into the pre-university teaching profession. Therefore, the admission process offers a valuable opportunity to analyze how candidates articulate their motivations, expectations, and self-assessments in relation to choosing a teaching career.

The present article uses this empirical framework to focus on the descriptive relationship between candidates' representations of a successful teacher and their professional self-projections. These self-projections are interpreted cautiously as possible markers of early professional self-positioning at the outset of psychopedagogical training.

4.2 Methodological Design

This research is exploratory and interpretative, aiming to understand the meanings candidates attach to the teaching profession and to their own role within it. The study does not seek to test hypotheses, establish causal relationships, or measure intra-individual correspondence between responses; instead, it identifies key aggregate thematic patterns in how future psychopedagogical program participants describe professional ideals and self-related resources at the beginning of their training.

The methodological approach is primarily qualitative, complemented by descriptive methods to quantify coded responses. This approach enables both in-depth analysis of response content and the identification of the relative significance of specific thematic categories within the data set.

The analysis was based on responses to two open-ended questions included in the admission procedure: (1) "What qualities, in your opinion, characterize a successful teacher?" and (2) "What personal qualities do you think make you a suitable fit for a teaching career?". The first question was designed to capture candidates' perceptions of what constitutes a successful teacher, and the second question was designed to explore how candidates articulate their own relevant qualifications for the teaching profession.

The analysis focuses on descriptive similarities and differences between the qualities attributed to a successful teacher and those that candidates ascribe to themselves. At the same time, it considers the gaps between the ideal professional model and the self-portraits described by candidates, as these discrepancies may reveal areas of uncertainty, aspiration, or possible professional development.

4.3 Participants and Analyzed Corpus

The analyzed corpus included 360 admitted candidates who fully completed the mandatory admission procedure form, of whom 84 came from the Faculty of Letters and Arts, 82 from the Faculty of Sciences, 76 from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, 68 from the Faculty of Engineering, and 50 from the Faculty of Economic Sciences. The inclusion of these faculties allows for capturing perspectives from different academic fields, some with a more evident proximity to the teaching path and others with initial professional orientations less traditionally associated with a teaching career. The analyzed material is relevant to the article's objective because it captures an early moment of engagement with the teaching profession, prior to the actual completion of psychopedagogical training. Because the responses were produced within a mandatory admission procedure, they are interpreted as context-bound self-presentations rather than as unrestricted personal narratives.

Thus, the candidates' responses provide clues about their initial representations, perceived personal resources, and possible professional positioning at the beginning of psychopedagogical training.

4.4 Data Collection

The data were collected during the admission process for the cohort corresponding to the academic year 2025–2026. The admission session took place in September 2025, within the Level I Psychopedagogical Training Program of the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu.

The data come from the responses provided by candidates to open-ended questions included in the admission procedure form. The open format of the questions allowed candidates to express, in their own terms, their perceptions of a successful teacher and the personal qualities they consider relevant to the teaching profession. For this article, two axes of analysis were selected. The first refers to the image of a successful teacher by identifying the traits and competencies that candidates associate with teaching performance. The second focuses on the professional self-portrait of the candidate, specifically the qualities through which they describe their resources in relation to the teaching profession.

By comparing these two axes, the research aims to highlight descriptive correspondence and contrast between a valued professional model and candidates' perceived resources for teaching.

For all 360 candidates included in the corpus, responses to both analyzed questions were available, with no missing data at this level, as the complete filling out of the form was a mandatory condition of the admission procedure.

The questions addressed to the candidates and the answers they provided were formulated in Romanian, and the coding and thematic analysis process was carried out on the original texts to preserve the contextual meanings and semantic nuances. Subsequently, the names of the codes and clusters used in the article were translated into English.

4.5 Analysis Strategy

The textual material was processed through a thematic analysis approach inspired by the six-step model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The coding process included repeated reading of the responses, delimiting units of meaning, formulating initial descriptive codes, examining relationships between codes, grouping semantically similar codes, and organizing them into broader thematic clusters. The coding was carried out manually, with priority given to categories emerging from the empirical material. Although the analysis was guided by an interest in early professional self-positioning, the coding labels were formulated based on the content of the responses rather than imposed exclusively from a prior theoretical framework. As working units, fragments of responses expressing qualities, traits, competencies, values, or forms of self-evaluation relevant to the two analyzed dimensions were retained.

The four researchers independently coded the entire corpus of responses in Romanian. The unit of coding was a meaningful segment expressing a quality, trait, competence, value, or self-evaluative statement relevant to one of the two analyzed dimensions. Because responses could contain several distinct ideas, more than one code could be assigned to the same response. The codes were not mutually exclusive, so the same candidate could contribute multiple mentions, categorized within one or more thematic clusters. After independent coding, the researchers compared their interpretations and discussed disagreements until a shared consensual coding version was established. No formal inter-rater reliability coefficient was calculated; consistency was pursued through independent coding followed by consensus discussion. Therefore, all reported frequencies refer to coded mentions, not to unique respondents. Following the coding process, the recurring elements were organized into six thematic clusters.

Their delimitation was carried out progressively by examining the empirical material, based on the semantic proximity between codes, the internal coherence of the resulting groups, and their relevance to the study's objective.

4.6 Thematic Comparison and Descriptive Quantification

The responses to the two questions were analyzed separately to avoid the automatic transfer of interpretations from one dimension to the other. After the coding was completed, the resulting thematic structures were descriptively compared to identify similarities, differences, and areas of aggregate correspondence between the successful teacher model and the candidates' self-projections. The analysis compares coded mentions aggregated by thematic cluster; it does not test whether the same individuals used the same themes across both responses.

To address the central objective of the article, the themes resulting from the two dimensions were compared descriptively. The analysis aimed to identify areas where the image of a successful teacher and the candidates' self-attributions showed thematic similarity at the aggregate level. At the same time, discrepancies between the two aspects were examined as possible indicators of the distance between the professional ideal and self-image, as well as of potential directions for training, clarification, or professional development. The qualitative component was supplemented by counting the mentions categorized within each thematic grouping. The frequencies had an exclusively descriptive role, contributing to highlighting the most frequent themes and supporting the comparative interpretation. These frequencies were neither used to test statistical relationships nor treated as explanatory measures of the investigated phenomenon. Through this methodological strategy, the article approaches early professional self-positioning as a process of relating to a valued teaching model, evaluating one's own resources, and imagining professional development, while avoiding claims about individual-level thematic correspondence.

5. Results

The analysis of the responses aimed to identify the thematic structures through which candidates describe, on one hand, the personality of a successful teacher and, on the other hand, their qualities considered relevant for a teaching career. The results are presented at the level of coded mentions, as each participant was able to list multiple traits. Therefore, the frequencies indicate how often each thematic category occurred in the corpus, not the number of participants who exclusively adhered to a particular category. All percentages refer to coded mentions within each item and faculty. They should not be interpreted as percentages of individual respondents or as independent observations, and no inferential tests were conducted.

5.1 The Image of a Successful Teacher

For the item regarding the qualities associated with a successful teacher, 1,163 coded mentions were recorded. The distribution of these mentions (Table 1) indicates the predominance of cluster C1—the socio-emotional and support dimension—with 433 mentions, representing 37.2% of the total corpus related to this item. Within the coded mentions for the successful teacher item, relational availability, empathy, patience, calmness, and the ability to understand the student were the most visible thematic elements.

Table 1. Distribution of clusters for Item 1 by faculty, frequency, and intra-faculty percentage

Cluster	Total	Faculty of Sciences n=251	Faculty of Economics n=136	Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities n=181	Faculty of Letters and Arts n=339	Faculty of Engineering n=256
C1 – Socio-emotional and support	433	121 (48.2%)	56 (41.2%)	43 (23.8%)	108 (31.9%)	105 (41.0%)
C2 – Communicative and explanatory competence	223	43 (17.1%)	21 (15.4%)	44 (24.3%)	80 (23.6%)	35 (13.7%)
C3 – Professional learning and training	108	18 (7.2%)	7 (5.1%)	13 (7.2%)	24 (7.1%)	46 (18.0%)
C4 – Vocational commitment, passion, and creativity	118	25 (10.0%)	11 (8.1%)	19 (10.5%)	28 (8.3%)	35 (13.7%)
C5 – Emotional self-regulation and interpersonal calm	35	6 (2.4%)	4 (2.9%)	5 (2.8%)	9 (2.7%)	11 (4.3%)
C6 – Organized professionalism and pedagogical conduct	246	38 (15.1%)	37 (27.2%)	57 (31.5%)	90 (26.5%)	24 (9.4%)

The percentages refer to the total number of coded mentions within each faculty, not to the number of respondents. Therefore, the table describes the distribution of thematic codes/mentions across faculties. The percentages are calculated within each faculty by dividing the frequency of each cluster by the total number of coded mentions in that respective faculty. These faculty-level patterns should be read as observed variations in the distribution of coded mentions; no inferential tests were conducted and the mentions are not independent respondent-level observations.

The second cluster by weight is C6 – organized professionalism and pedagogical conduct, totaling 246 mentions (21.2%). The frequent presence of this cluster shows that teaching success is associated not only with affective traits but also with responsibility, organization, seriousness, and professional conduct. C2 – communicative and explanatory competence follows, with 223 mentions (19.2%), highlighting the importance of the teacher's ability to explain, communicate clearly, and adapt the message to the interlocutor. The other clusters have lower weights: C4 – vocational commitment, passion, and creativity total 118 mentions (10.1%); C3 – professional learning and training, 108 mentions (9.3%); and C5 – emotional self-regulation and interpersonal calm, 35 mentions (3.0%). These values suggest that the vocational dimension and the professional development aspect are present in the candidates' representations, but they do not constitute the dominant core of the successful teacher's image. The analysis by faculties indicates descriptive variations in thematic emphases. Cluster C1 has the highest share in sciences (48.2%), economic sciences (41.2%), and engineering (41.0%), suggesting that, in these groups, the image of a successful teacher is especially oriented toward the educational relationship and emotional support. In the social sciences, the highest proportion belongs to cluster C6 (31.5%), followed by C2 (24.3%) and C1 (23.8%), indicating a more balanced distribution between professionalism, communication, and socio-emotional resources. In the Faculty of Letters, C1 remains the main cluster (31.9%), while C6 (26.5%) and C2 (23.6%) have similar weights, suggesting a descriptively more distributed understanding of teaching success, where the relationship with the student is complemented by communication skills and professional conduct.

5.2 The Professional Self-Portrait of Candidates

For the question about personal qualities that recommend candidates for a teaching career, 1,210 coded mentions were analyzed. As shown in Table 2, the most frequently cited cluster was C1 – socio-emotional and relational resources, which accounted for 507 mentions, or 41.9% of the total. Candidates often described their teaching potential using qualities similar to those associated with successful teachers, such as empathy, patience, calmness, understanding, sensitivity, openness in relationships, and a willingness to provide support.

These findings highlight the importance candidates place on interpersonal and emotional skills in the teaching profession. At the aggregate level, this emphasis suggests descriptive parallelism between aspiring teachers' self-perceptions and the qualities considered essential for effective teaching.

The following formula was used to calculate percentages: cluster frequency / total mentions per faculty × 100.

Table 2. Distribution of Thematic Clusters Across Faculties

Cluster	Faculty of Economics n (%)	Faculty of Engineering n (%)	Faculty of Letters and Arts n (%)	Faculty of Sciences n (%)	Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities n (%)	Total Corpus n (%)
C1 – Socio-emotional and relational resources	52 (39.1%)	69 (44.8%)	143 (42.7%)	138 (38.8%)	105 (45.3%)	507 (41.9%)
C2 – Communicative and interactional competence	14 (10.5%)	18 (11.7%)	50 (14.9%)	65 (18.3%)	35 (15.1%)	182 (15.0%)
C3 – Willingness to learn and professional development	8 (6.0%)	6 (3.9%)	11 (3.3%)	15 (4.2%)	1 (0.4%)	41 (3.4%)
C4 – Personal commitment and motivation for the teaching role	19 (14.3%)	25 (16.2%)	69 (20.6%)	51 (14.3%)	52 (22.4%)	216 (17.9%)
C5 – Self-regulation and personal balance	7 (5.3%)	6 (3.9%)	12 (3.6%)	13 (3.7%)	4 (1.7%)	42 (3.5%)
C6 - Practical professionalism and responsibility	33 (24.8%)	30 (19.5%)	50 (14.9%)	74 (20.8%)	35 (15.1%)	222 (18.3%)
Total coded mentions	133 (100%)	154 (100%)	335 (100%)	356 (100%)	232 (100%)	1210 (100%)

Each cluster represents a thematic category identified in participant responses. Percentages are calculated by dividing the number of times a cluster was mentioned within a faculty by the total number of coded mentions in that faculty. These percentages describe thematic distributions of coded mentions and should not be read as respondent-level proportions.
In second place is C6 – practical professionalism and responsibility, with 222 mentions (18.3%). This cluster indicates

that organization, responsibility, seriousness, discipline, and adaptability are frequent components of the professional self-portrait. Close in proportion is C4—personal commitment and motivation for the teaching role, with 216 mentions (17.9%), which suggests that motivation, involvement, perceived vocation, and the desire to work with students are relevant components of the professional self-image. C2—communicative and interactional competence accumulates 182 mentions (15.0%), being a visible but less frequent cluster than socio-emotional resources. C5 – self-regulation and personal balance (42 mentions, 3.5%) and C3 – willingness to learn and professional development (41 mentions, 3.4%) have low weights.

This distribution may indicate that, at the beginning of psychopedagogical training, candidates formulate their self-portrait mainly through personal qualities already perceived as stable, while the dimension of continuous professional development is less explicitly stated. The distribution by faculties shows that C1 is the dominant cluster in all groups: Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (45.3%), Faculty of Engineering (44.8%), Faculty of Letters and Arts (42.7%), Faculty of Economic Sciences (39.1%), and Faculty of Sciences (38.8%). This consistency suggests that socio-emotional resources are a transversal theme in candidates' self-assessments across the analyzed faculties. In contrast, C6 has a descriptively higher proportion in economic sciences (24.8%) and sciences (20.8%), which may indicate a more visible emphasis on responsibility, organization, and practical efficiency in those sets of coded mentions. C4 is more visible in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (22.4%) and the Faculty of Letters and Arts (20.6%), suggesting a more pronounced aggregate emphasis on the vocational and motivational dimension of the teaching profession. These differences should be interpreted as observed variations within the corpus, not as statistically established faculty effects.

5.3 Aggregate Thematic Correspondence between the Two Analyzed Dimensions

The comparison of the two aggregate thematic distributions shows that socio-emotional and relational resources occupy a leading position in both sets of coded mentions. This pattern suggests a descriptive thematic correspondence between the successful teacher representation and candidates' professional self-projections, without allowing conclusions about individual-level convergence. The successful teacher is frequently described as empathetic, patient, and available, and candidates' self-portraits also include a frequent socio-emotional repertoire. However, this correspondence is not complete. In the case of a successful teacher, organized professionalism and communicative competence occupy more visible positions, while in the self-portrait of candidates, personal commitment and motivation for the teaching role appear more prominently. This difference suggests that the ideal professional model is more strongly associated with observable performance and pedagogical conduct, while the self-image is formulated mainly in terms of availability, intention, vocation, and personal resources.

5.4 Synthetic Results Overall

The results indicate three main directions. The first consists of the centrality of socio-emotional resources, which are prominent both in the representation of the successful teacher and in the professional self-portrait of the candidates. The second refers to the importance of practical professionalism and communication, especially in the description of the ideal teacher. The third concerns the role of personal commitment and motivation, more visible in the way candidates build their own professional projection. These results support the idea that, upon entering psychopedagogical training, candidates already express a relatively coherent set of representations about the teaching profession. These representations, however, are more oriented toward the relational and moral dimensions of the profession than toward the technical, curricular, or institutional dimensions of teaching activities. Taken together, the findings point to early professional self-positioning structured around relational and moral dimensions of teaching, while remaining preliminary and limited to short admission responses.

6. Discussion

The results should be interpreted in relation to previous studies that conceptualize teacher professional identity as a dynamic construction shaped by the interaction between personal biography, social expectations, institutional contexts, and imagined future practice (Flores, 2020). In line with this perspective, the present findings show that, even before systematic psychopedagogical training, candidates organize their understanding of teaching around a valued professional model and a self-image perceived as broadly compatible with that model. This interpretation remains exploratory: the study identifies aggregate thematic correspondence between two sets of coded mentions, not individual-level thematic

correspondence or a demonstrated process of professional identity formation.

The most visible area of descriptive overlap at the aggregate level is represented by socio-emotional and relational resources, which occupy a dominant position both in the description of the successful teacher and in the professional self-portrait of the candidates. This finding confirms previous research showing that teaching is often associated with personal, relational, and altruistic dimensions, such as the desire to support students, contribute to society, and engage meaningfully in educational relationships (Bakar et al., 2014; See et al., 2022; Turra-Díaz & Rivas-Valenzuela, 2022). At the same time, the results nuance this literature by showing that these relational resources appear not only as motives for considering teaching, but also as self-related resources through which candidates describe their perceived suitability for the profession.

This dominant orientation toward the relational dimension of the profession indicates that participants do not reduce teaching success to technical skills, content delivery, or strictly instructional performance. On the contrary, the successful teacher is portrayed as an educational actor capable of building a supportive relationship with students and managing pedagogical interaction in an empathetic and balanced manner. This result is consistent with broader perspectives that describe the contemporary teacher not only as a transmitter of knowledge but also as a facilitator of learning, communicator, counselor, reflective practitioner, and participant in students' personal and social development (Voinea & Pălășan, 2014).

At the same time, similar socio-emotional qualities appear frequently in candidates' self-descriptions, indicating a thematic proximity between the aggregate professional ideal and the aggregate self-portrait. From the perspective of identity-related interpretation, this pattern can be read as a preliminary indication of early professional self-positioning at the group level. It should not be read as evidence that the same candidates necessarily made the same thematic attribution in both responses. Thus, the aggregate distributions suggest that the representation of a desired professional role and the self-evaluation of personal qualities considered relevant to that role share several themes, especially in the relational domain.

However, the descriptive correspondence between the two analyzed dimensions is incomplete. The results indicate that organized professionalism, pedagogical conduct, and communicative competence are more visible in the aggregate distribution describing a successful teacher than in the aggregate distribution of candidates' self-portraits. In contrast, personal commitment and motivation for the teaching role appear more prominently in candidates' self-descriptions. This difference shows that certain professional dimensions are more visible in the aggregate successful-teacher representation than in the aggregate self-portrait. In other words, the data indicate a descriptive difference between the professional ideal, which includes more references to role-specific requirements, and the self-portrait, which is formulated mainly through personal dispositions, motivation, and relational resources.

This difference is particularly relevant from the perspective of teacher professionalization. Previous studies emphasize that becoming a teacher involves not only personal motivation or relational availability, but also the gradual development of didactic competencies, pedagogical judgment, reflective practice, and professional conduct (Crețu, 1999, 2013; Crețu & Nicu, 2009; Voinea & Pălășan, 2014). Therefore, the aggregate distribution referring to the successful teacher contains more coded mentions related to professional conduct, communication, and pedagogical competence than the aggregate distribution of candidates' self-portraits. This descriptive gap may represent an important starting point for teacher education programs, which can support candidates in transforming personal dispositions into articulated professional competencies.

This discrepancy should not be interpreted as a deficit, but rather as an indication of the preliminary nature of professional self-positioning at the beginning of psychopedagogical training. At this stage, it is understandable that the professional self-image is constructed mainly based on personal traits accessible to immediate reflection: empathy, patience, calmness, responsibility, involvement, or the desire to work with students. The more specialized dimensions of the profession, such as lesson planning, assessment, classroom management, curricular adaptation, or systematic pedagogical reflection, are likely to become more visible during the training process.

The findings also resonate with research showing that professional identification develops progressively and is influenced by the extent to which training environments support autonomy, competence, and recognition (Weiß et al., 2023). In the present study, candidates' self-projections appear to function as preliminary indicators of professional positioning, but not as evidence of a stable commitment to teaching. This interpretation is also consistent with studies suggesting that interest in teaching may operate as a possible future self rather than as a firmly established career choice (MacLeod et al., 2025; Sikora, 2021). Thus, the aggregate thematic correspondence identified in this study should be understood as an exploratory identity-related pattern that requires further consolidation through psychopedagogical training, practical experience, and reflective professional development.

The results should be interpreted with caution. On the one hand, the corpus comes from a specific institutional context, namely admission to the Level I Psychopedagogical Training Program at Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu. On the other hand, the centrality of socio-emotional resources across the analyzed faculties suggests that this representation may have relevance for candidates at the beginning of their teacher training journey. Therefore, the findings may be transferable to similar contexts of initial teacher education only if they are examined in other institutions and with other cohorts of candidates.

From an applicative standpoint, the conclusions of the study provide useful benchmarks for organizing psychopedagogical training activities. Training programs can leverage the resources that candidates already consider defining for the teaching profession, especially empathy, patience, relational availability, and responsibility. However, these resources must be gradually articulated with more complex professional dimensions, such as the design of learning activities, didactic communication, assessment of student progress, classroom management, and reflective analysis of one's own practice.

In this sense, it would be useful to include reflective activities as early as the initial stages of the psychopedagogical program. Candidates could be invited to compare their own professional self-description with broader models of teaching competence, identify areas of closeness and distance, and formulate personal professional development objectives. Such a practice would contribute to transforming initial representations of the profession into explicit benchmarks for training.

Overall, the results indicate that the initial phase of psychopedagogical training involves a process of professional self-positioning. At the aggregate level, the two sets of responses share several themes, especially in the relational domain, without allowing conclusions about how each candidate connects the successful-teacher model to their own self-description. Psychopedagogical training, therefore, can play the role of transforming these initial resources and intuitive representations into a more articulated professional orientation, supported by pedagogical competencies, critical reflection, and an understanding of the complexity of the teaching role.

6.1 Study Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, it compares aggregate distributions of coded mentions and does not measure intra-individual agreement between the two responses. Therefore, it cannot demonstrate convergence between each candidate's representation of a successful teacher and that same candidate's professional self-projection. Second, the data are based on two short self-reported responses collected at a single point in time, within an admission context that may encourage socially desirable self-presentation. Third, coded mentions are not independent respondent-level observations and should be interpreted descriptively rather than as explanatory statistical indicators. Fourth, the study was conducted in a single institution, which limits the direct generalization of the findings to other teacher education contexts. Finally, the cross-sectional design does not allow conclusions about the development of professional identity over time.

7. Conclusions

The study aimed to examine the aggregate thematic patterns through which candidates describe a successful teacher and their own perceived qualities for a teaching career at the beginning of psychopedagogical training. The results show a descriptive correspondence between the two aggregate thematic distributions, especially around the socio-emotional and relational dimension. Empathy, patience, calmness, understanding, and willingness to support students emerge as central markers of how the aggregate responses describe the teaching profession and the perceived resources associated with it. This correspondence should be interpreted as thematic similarity at the aggregate level, not as evidence that individual candidates produced the same themes in both responses. At the same time, the results indicate relevant descriptive differences between the two dimensions. The successful teacher is more visibly associated with professionalism, organization, and communicative competence, while the candidates' self-portrait remains more strongly anchored in personal qualities, motivation, and affective dispositions. This difference supports an exploratory interpretation of early professional self-positioning at the onset of psychopedagogical training. The data provide preliminary indications of early professional self-positioning but do not permit an assessment of the stability or developmental maturity of candidates' professional identities. Psychopedagogical training may help transform these initial representations into articulated professional competencies by integrating relational dimensions with didactic, curricular, evaluative, and reflective ones.

The contribution of the study lies in highlighting the fact that candidates enter psychopedagogical training with a set of representations about a successful teacher and with a self-assessment of their resources. The descriptive relationship between these two aggregate thematic patterns can serve as a useful indicator of how early professional self-positioning is articulated before systematic contact with pedagogical training. The results have practical relevance for psychopedagogical training programs. Introductory activities can leverage the initial representations of candidates, especially the emphasis on empathy, patience, and relational availability, to gradually build a more complex understanding of the teaching profession. At the same time, it is necessary to orient the training toward the development of competencies that are less present in the initial self-portrait, such as lesson planning, classroom management, assessment, pedagogical communication, and professional reflection. In conclusion, the beginning of psychopedagogical training represents not only a moment of institutional selection but also a stage at which representations of the teaching role and self-descriptions of relevant personal resources can be examined as aggregate thematic patterns.

This approach constitutes a valuable starting point for training, but it requires development, clarification, and consolidation through the subsequent psychopedagogical journey. Teacher education begins before the formal curriculum, in the aggregate patterns through which candidates imagine the profession and describe the personal resources they associate with the teaching role.

8. Acknowledgment

8.1 Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Ethics Commission of Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, through the Subcommittee for Ethics in Scientific Research. The research file no. 3788/3 July 2025 was evaluated by the Analysis and Approval Commission appointed by Decision no. 37/7 July 2025, which approved the conduct of the research activities in accordance with the principles and norms of ethics in scientific research. The ethics documentation reviewed for the study included the admission interview form, provisions on data use and record keeping, and provisions on confidentiality and personal-data protection. The available candidate declaration confirms agreement for the processing of personal data. The data used in the article were analyzed and reported only in aggregate, non-identifiable form, without identifying individual participants.

8.2 AI Use Statement

We declare that OpenAI ChatGPT was used during the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, it was used for language editing, grammar correction and improvement of clarity. We confirm that the intellectual content, research design, data analysis, interpretation of results, and final approval of the manuscript remain entirely our responsibility.

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