The social status and educational role of the teacher in the digital age. Implications for students' motivation for their teaching careers

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Abstract

The development of technology, culminating, in recent years, with the immersion of AI in the formal educational space, has undoubtedly generated a number of notable, positive outcomes as a result of the use of these tools in teaching. On the other hand, access to such technologies, as well as the specific, student-focused nature of many of them, has created a wave of doubts and concerns: do students still need teachers, what happens to the role and responsibilities of the teacher if information has become so easy to access and artificial intelligence seems to have capabilities that can substitute this role in its traditional exercise? Given the other factors that may affect students' decisions to pursue a teaching career - the depreciation of the social status of the teacher, the alternative of better paid professions, the prospect of the effort required by continuing education and professional development - we wondered whether all this can have enough influential power. What makes them convinced or doubtful about this professional perspective? Therefore, we carried out a fact-finding research in which students of the study program for psycho-pedagogical training were challenged to reflect on: motivation for the teaching career, perception of the social status of the teacher in the present day, the educational role in the "competitive" relationship with AI.

Keywords: *Teacher career; motivation; social status; artificial intelligence; educational role;*

1. Introduction

The teaching profession, one of the most respected over time due to its significant role in individual training and social development, has been generating more and more concern in recent years. One of the reasons is the shortage of teachers, which affects the education system not only in Romania. A recent UNESCO (2023) report shows that teacher shortages are a global problem, widespread not only in developing countries, but also in high-income regions such as Europe and North America. The report says that factors such as teacher motivation, welfare (better pay), training and social status need attention. The data presented and the possible repercussions of this shortage call for a mobilization to identify the causes of young people's reluctance to consider a teaching career. On the one hand, there are some discouraging influences at social level (beliefs such as "teachers are no longer respected", "teachers can never have a good standard of living because of low salaries"), on the other hand there is individual subjectivity. In addition, the transformative effects of technology in

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formal education have added further cause for concern. Increasingly, there is talk of the dilution of the teacher's importance or even his or her replacement by digital entities. This raises the question of job security, whereas not so long ago the teaching profession was one of the most stable. While the reasons for distrust of this career path may still be uncertain, important in addressing this issue is the answer to the question: why do some young people still want to pursue a career in education?

2. The social status of the teacher in the digital age. Motivation for a teaching career

Currently, one of the challenges regarding the teaching career is the following: while expectations and demands for the profession are increasing, the recognition and support for teachers' efforts do not always reflect the importance of the mission they have. S. Cristea (2020) explains from a historical perspective this perception of the status of the teacher through an inferiority complex as a result of the fact that the practicing pedagogue uses more the pedagogical art practiced through tradition and routine than a (pedagogical) science. E. Zubenschi (2021) summarizes, on the basis of a study, a number of causes that have contributed to the erosion of the social status of the teacher, among which we mention: the contradiction between the priorities of educational policies, the opportunities of technologization and the system of training and integration of young specialists; the contradiction between the bureaucratic requirements and the quality of student-centred education; the modest interest of the media in successful educational experiences; the aging of the teaching staff; the contradiction between the expectations of society and the quality of education. Of course, there are a number of societal demands and expectations regarding the quality of education, but teachers sometimes feel a gap between these and the resources they have. In the digital age, for example, role consistency is seen not in transmitting information, but in guiding the management and interpretation of information from the myriad of sources with which students come into contact. In these circumstances, there is another gap between the type of training teachers received in the pre-digital period and the reconfiguration of the educational role today. If this reconfigured role is not implicitly assumed through the development of a different set of competences, the teacher is perceived as anachronistic, outdated and incompetent. Such situations can contribute to a generalized social perception. On the other hand, young people have the advantage of experience in the use of technology, so the acquiring of digital pedagogy skills should not be a problem for future teachers. A study on the integration of artificial intelligence in education (Dantas, Estrela, & Yuan, 2022), conducted in four countries of the European Union, reveals the need to use technology to make learning more meaningful. Teachers participating in this research emphasize the need for technical resources and training, given that there is a gap between technological development and pedagogical knowledge to use AI. We acknowledge that the use of flexible and inclusive pedagogical models has become an imperative in today's education, and

digital technologies can support these models. Despite this support, there is a growing fear that, in a few years, the teacher's time in the classroom will be gone. Therefore, in addition to the erosion of the teacher's social status, job insecurity may be another factor influencing young people's career decision. However, another study (Lucas et al., 2021), using a self-assessment tool based on DigiCompEdu, highlights that personal factors are significant predictors of digital competence. Of the factors discussed in the study, young age and confidence in the use of technology are two conditions that are commonly found in the population of potential aspiring teachers. It seems that a paradox has been created in the current context: although young people are experienced and confident in using technology, they may fear that in the future the world will no longer need real teachers. This can be addressed if they are helped to understand that it is about flexibility in the exercise of the role, not the disappearance of the profession. Reisoğlu and Çebi (2020) highlight the need for digital training modules through the lens of DigiCompEdu for prospective student teachers and beginning teachers. Formative programs should incorporate practical applications, collaboration and continuous feedback. We believe that such programs could reframe the projection of the future from a more optimistic perspective.

The reality of the future, as it emerges against the backdrop of the current context, is an image that can influence motivation for a teaching career. On the other hand, even initial psycho-pedagogical training programs may in turn generate uncertainties or reserved attitudes. For example, Bargmann, Thiele and Kauffleld (2022), show that the perception of learning tasks at a high level of difficulty directly influences students' intentions to drop out. If, however, interest in the profession and self-perception of the required skills are at a high level, dropout intention decreases. The authors of the research recommend improving information on the conditions of study and counselling first-year students, especially where lack of certainty about a teaching career is identified. We are of the opinion that systematic counselling, including ways of dealing with the fears about the future highlighted above, has the potential to positively influence students' motivation and keep them in the psycho-pedagogical training program. Moreover, through counselling, prospective teachers can be guided in the process of self-discovery and awareness of the personality traits needed for the profession. Ivanec and Defar (2023) explore factors that impact on students' motivation for a teaching career, with a focus on personality traits, emotional intelligence, and life satisfaction. The findings of the study highlight a number of positive and negative predictors, and recommendations focus on the importance of addressing individual differences and vocational counselling in initial teacher education. Because initial teacher education programs implicitly include practical activities in educational institutions, the image that students create in direct relation to the profession is important. V. Stratan (2023) advocates for capitalizing on motivational support strategies for teachers that include: baseline physical and psychological comfort, self-efficacy and self-esteem. These two conditions contribute to the creation of a stimulating psychosocial environment and a professional environment that practicing students can perceive as favourable,

positive. It is essential that the mentoring of pedagogical practice includes encouraging and motivational attitudes towards a teaching career.

3.   Research aims, objectives and methodology

Given: the shortage of teachers in Romanie, the social perception of a risk of disappearance of the traditional teaching profession, the corrosion of the social status of teachers, we set as the aim of our research *the investigation of the perception of students enrolled in the psycho-pedagogical training program on the role and status of the teacher in the digital age*. In the research, we focused on three aspects: the motivation for teaching career of the respondent students, the perception of how artificial intelligence influences the educational role and the image of the social status of the teacher in the present day. Therefore, we derived three research objectives from the proposed aim:
1. Highlighting the frequencies in the main reasons that prompted the respondent students to attend the psycho-pedagogical training program.
2. Testing the assumption about concerns in relation to the role loss through AI dominance.
3. Research group analysis of the image of the social status of the teacher in the digital age.

The fact-finding research was carried out by means of a questionnaire that comprised two sections with simple-choice items, some of which also left open-ended options. We aimed to identify the answers with the greatest relevance to the students surveyed, choices that allowed the analysis of trends and priorities. The third section consisted of linear numerical scales with labels on the start and end points. The questionnaire was administered in the Google Forms application with the support of the Microsoft Teams educational platform.

3.1.   Research sample

The invitation to participate in the study was accepted by 53 students attending the psycho-pedagogical training program at the "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galati, Romania. It should be noted that this program is optional and the enrolment in the courses is based on the intention to obtain a compulsory certificate for graduates who decide to become teachers. According to the variable "year of study", the research sample is as follows:
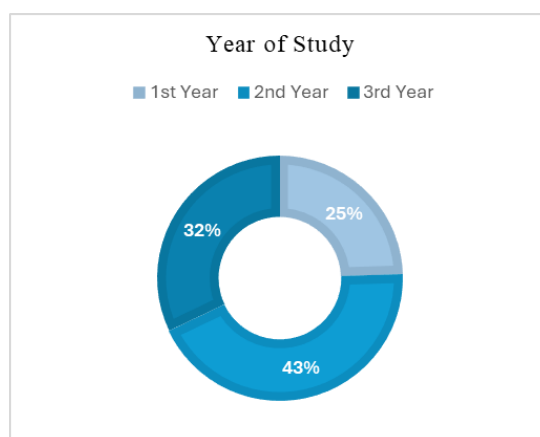
Fig. 1. Distribution of respondents by years of study

Involvement in the study was voluntary and anonymous, at the beginning of the questionnaire the intention was explained and honesty in the answers was recommended, thus respecting research ethics. Although the student respondents were at different levels of study, no important trend in responses correlated with any of these three levels was noted.

3.2. Discussions

The first section of the questionnaire focused on motivation for a teaching career, with the following items and response options:

- *I am attending the psycho-pedagogical module because*: I have already decided that I want to be a teacher; I am also considering the teaching profession among other things (I have yet to decide); I have not set out to become a teacher, but an extra certificate might be useful some day; my colleagues have also enrolled or I have been advised to do so.
- *In the teaching profession I am most attracted by*: the importance of the mission to educate people ("the nobility of the profession"); autonomy, creativity in work; the pleasure of working with children; the possibility of vacation at good times of the year; the passion for the subjects I can teach; the opportunity for continuous self-development; I am not yet clear if anything attracts me.
- *To increase the attractiveness of the teaching profession, what is needed most is*: a mentoring system to support beginners in their professional adaptation; motivating remuneration from the beginning of their career; reconsidering the social status of the teacher (more respect for the teaching profession).

The frequency distribution for the first item is as follows:

Table 1. Motivation for psycho-pedagogical training

Reason for studying the psycho-pedagogical module	Percentage
Firm decision to become a teacher	70%

The option to become a teacher, among other things	21%
The possibility of an extra certificate	9%
Uncertain reasons	0

We found that the majority of respondent students are already decided to pursue teaching as a career, while, we believe, a significant percentage are undecided students who do not reject the possibility of becoming teachers. Only 9% have become students of the module in order to obtain a certificate that, perhaps, will be of use to them someday. We believe that the motivation to attend the psycho-pedagogical module is the basis of motivation for a teaching career, and the study program can either strengthen or dilute this motivation. With appropriate counselling, the transfer of percentages from option to firm decision may become possible.

Frequency analysis for second item led to the following statistical summary:

Table 2. Motivation for teaching career

Attractiveness to the teaching profession	Percentage
The importance of the formative mission	42%
Autonomy and creativity	17%
Working with children	11%
Convenient leaves	8%
Passion for the field	13%
Permanent self-development	9%
Uncertain reasons	0

We noticed in the research sample a high percentage of attractiveness in terms of the social importance of the teaching profession. Therefore, these future teachers may contribute to the reconsideration of their social status. Also, in a thought-provoking percentage, students believe that this profession will allow them to be autonomous and creative. It is also worth reflecting on how passion for the academic field can be combined with teaching skills, which need to be trained to an optimal level. A relatively small percentage, some students are attracted by the structure of the school year which allows leaves at good times such as summer or Christmas. Although the percentage is not worrying, it still reveals a superficial view of the profession, and therefore remedial interventions are needed at this level.

The third item concerned students' views on factors that might increase the attractiveness of the teaching profession. Because the frequently mentioned social problems are low pay, low respect for teachers and fear of professional maladjustment, we offered three response options which were chosen as follows:

Table 3. Attractiveness for the teaching profession

Factors	Percentage
Salary	19%
Social status	43%

Early career mentoring	38%

This percentage is interesting because the fewest respondents would be motivated to work in the education system, first and foremost, by salary. Even though the remuneration of beginners is relatively low, most students in the surveyed group consider that the priority is to regain the social status that teachers deserve. Also, a significant percentage of the respondents grant to the professional insertion mentoring an important role in their decision to enter the profession. It is evident that students are aware of the need for support and guidance in the first years of their careers, and the Romanian education system has taken important steps in this regard.

Through the second section of the questionnaire, we investigated how students relate to the so-called competition with artificial intelligence. Also, whether AI is perceived as a threat to the educational role of the teacher or is part of a natural course of technological evolution. We have developed the following items for this section, with these response options:

– *I believe that the continued development of AI is* an opportunity to work adaptively with students in the digital age; a threat to the traditional teaching profession (the activity with a teacher in the classroom).

– *I believe that AI applications can be, to a large extent*: formidable competitors to the teacher's knowledge; allies in the teaching-learning activity; risks for the intellectual development of students; I do not yet know their functionality in the teaching activity, so I cannot give an opinion.

– *To manage the impact of AI in education, I believe that the teacher's role is to*: integrate AI technologies into teaching-by-teaching students to use them intelligently; highlight the risks of AI technologies and keep a large share of traditional activities, control the use of AI applications in homework and projects by firm limits.

Responses for the first item of this section are reflected in the following frequencies:

Table 4. Impact of IA on teaching activity

AI vision for the future	*Percentage*
An opportunity	77%
A danger	23%

The group surveyed confirms a relatively high percentage of the fears about the impact of AI technologies on teaching. We do not know, however, whether the choice of answer was influenced by the voices opposing the absorption of technology in education, which are - paradoxically - strong enough even in online environments, or by their own convictions. However, we found that young respondents are, for the most part, open to taking up these technologies in the school of the future. This seems the only viable way of adapting to the effects of change.

In terms of the teacher's relationship with the IA, the response frequencies look like this:

Table 5. Teacher interaction with AI

Perception of the role and effects of AI technologies	Percentage
Teacher's tough competitors	13%
Teacher's allies	62%
Risks to students' development	17%
Uncertain perception	8%

This item, which offered some concrete insights into the influence of AI in education, generated a dispersion of responses with less emphasis on the appropriateness of these technologies. However, a majority of respondents agreed that they should be allies of teachers. But the answers to the next item show that those who consider them risky for students or competitive, do not necessarily reject them, but support their judicious use.

Table 6. Managing the impact of AI in education

Role of the teacher	Percentage
Smart integration of AI technologies	59%
Highlighting AI risks and high weight of traditional lessons	23%
AI control through firm limits	18%

We also noted through these responses, that there is some reluctance to use AI technologies in education, possibly driven by concerns about the effects. Also, as some students recognized in the previous item that they are not fully aware of the functionality of these technologies, an attitude of comfort may be the traditional paradigm or firm control. On the other hand, integrating AI into the educational process and helping students to use such applications intelligently is a solution accepted by a high percentage of respondents. The processing of the answers associated with the three items in this section leads us to increase our interest in organizing digital training modules in which the students of the psycho-pedagogical training program shall be included.

The third section of the questionnaire was designed in the form of linear numerical scales, and students expressed their total/partial agreement/disagreement related to their perception of the social status of the teacher in the present day. The values assigned to the labels were 1 - total disagreement; 4 - total agreement. We obtained the following results:

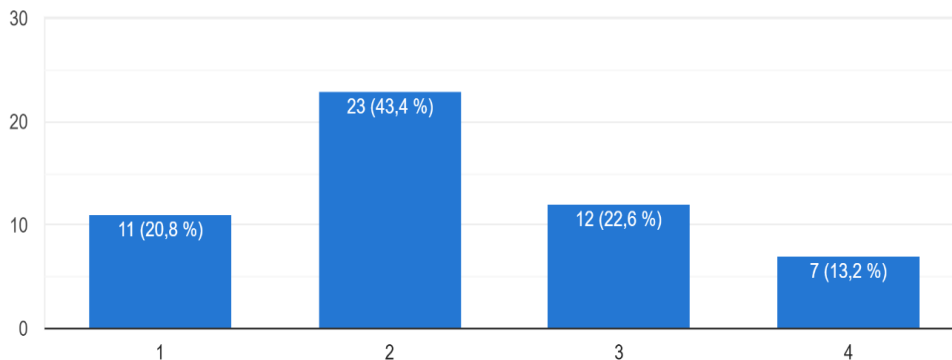*In my opinion, the teaching profession is still very respected:*

Fig. 2. Perception on the respect for the teaching profession at societal level

The teaching profession is more important than ever, given the multiple information and dangers of the modern world:
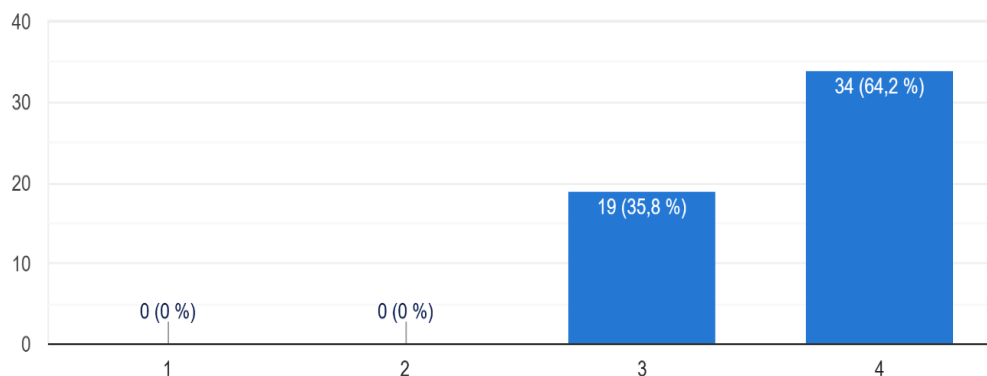

Fig. 3. Perception on the importance of the teaching profession nowadays

If the teaching profession will be reconfigured from the perspective of technology, teachers will be more respected:
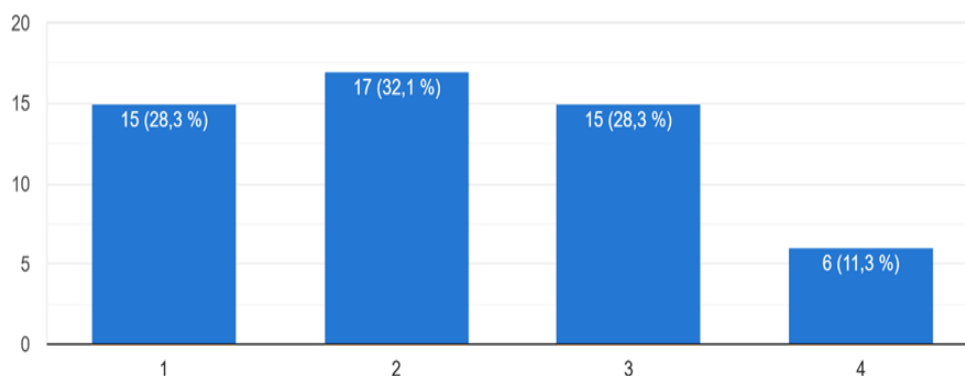

Fig. 4. Perception on the relationship between educational role reconfiguration and respect

Analysing the students' responses for this section of the research instrument, we found that their perception on the depreciating social status of the teaching profession is confirmed. Most expressed partial disagreement with the statement that the profession is still highly respected. Combined with the percentage of total disagreement, it appears that some of the students enrolled in the psycho-pedagogical module will enter the education system assuming a not so favourable image. This may affect their motivation for a teaching career so, as this study has shown, social reconsideration is needed. Of course, an in-depth investigation of the causes leading to the depreciation is also needed. One cause is rumoured to be the low adaptability of some teachers to the challenges of the digital age. However, the respondents do not see a significant increase in the level of respect if the educational role of the teacher is reconfigured and assumed in line with these challenges. However, all respondents fully or partly agree that teachers today have a more important mission than ever before. It is precisely the challenges of the digital age and the dangers of the modern world that make this so.

3.3.   *Research limitations*
The study was conducted with a relatively small sample and the research instrument was non-standardized. Non-standardization leaves more room for the subjectivity of the researcher, who can formulate items and questions experientially. On the other hand, the researcher can focus on concrete aspects of interest and identify more specific pain points in the phenomenon under investigation. In our case - motivation for a teaching career that can be positioned in relation to the challenges of the digital age. However, there is a need for further research and formative-improvement programs to validate solutions for optimal motivation.

4. Conclusions

A positive aspect of the study is the following: the majority of the respondent students enrolled in the psycho-pedagogical training program because their decision to become a teacher is firm. This determination provides a solid foundation for motivation for a teaching career. Despite the declining respect for the profession, many students are aware of its importance and are motivated by the noble mission to educate people. Although the infusion of technology into the educational space and the perceived competition with AI raise fears, most respondents accept the help of these technologies. They see them as opportunities for learning tailored to digital native learners. The social concerns about the dilution or disappearance of the educational role of the teacher are confirmed, but partially and in a relatively small percentage. We believe that, although society has gone through and is going through rapid transformations, vocation is important for career success and can be harnessed at all times. Teacher educators should do more to support young people in getting to know their personality traits and developing their vocation. Education policy decision makers should create opportunities to diversify initial training, including by facilitating training programs in digital pedagogies.

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