

Factors influencing the choice to study Physical Education Teaching: a qualitative study

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Abstract

Introduction: Choosing to study Physical Education Teacher Education is a complex process shaped by personal experiences, intrinsic motivations, and contextual conditions that contribute to the construction of a teacher's professional identity during initial training. **Objective:** To understand the factors influencing the vocational decision-making of students at the beginning of their training in this degree programme. **Methods:** A qualitative approach was employed with a purposive sample of 80 first-semester students from a public university in the Valparaíso region, Chile. Data were collected through an online survey consisting of six open-ended questions validated by experts and analysed using a hybrid reflexive thematic analysis. **Results:** Six key factors were identified: family support, which provides emotional security and legitimises the decision; sporting experience, which fosters affinity and a sense of belonging; the direct influence of Physical Education teachers, associated with guidance and mentoring; and indirect influence, linked to observing teaching practice as a meaningful role model. In addition, negative school experiences emerged, which in some cases became a source of motivation to challenge and transform pedagogical practices perceived as inadequate. **Discussion:** Teaching vocation emerges as a dynamic process that is associated with the enjoyment of teaching and working with children. Career choice reflects a progressive identity construction in which personal trajectories, significant role models, and affective experiences converge to shape one's identity. It is recommended that teacher education institutions strengthen vocational guidance and provide reflective spaces during the early stages of initial teacher education.

Keywords: Identity construction; vocational choice; sports experience; teacher education; motivation.

Factores que influyen en la elección de estudiar Pedagogía en Educación Física: un estudio cualitativo

Resumen

Introducción: La elección de estudiar Pedagogía en Educación Física es un proceso complejo, influido por experiencias personales, motivaciones internas y condiciones contextuales que configuran la identidad docente en formación. **Objetivo:** Comprender los factores que influyen en la decisión vocacional de estudiantes que inician su formación en esta carrera. **Métodos:** Se empleó un enfoque cualitativo con una muestra intencionada de 80 estudiantes del primer semestre de una universidad pública de la región de Valparaíso, Chile. Los datos se recolectaron mediante una encuesta online de seis

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preguntas abiertas validadas por expertos, analizadas mediante análisis temático reflexivo de carácter híbrido. **Resultados:** Se establecieron seis factores clave: el apoyo familiar, que aporta seguridad emocional y legitima la decisión; la experiencia deportiva, que genera afinidad y sentido de pertenencia; la influencia directa de docentes de Educación Física, asociada a orientación y acompañamiento; y la influencia indirecta, vinculada a la observación del quehacer docente como modelo significativo. También surgieron experiencias escolares negativas que, en algunos casos, se transforman en motivación para cambiar prácticas pedagógicas consideradas inadecuadas. **Discusión:** La vocación docente aparece como un proceso dinámico asociado al gusto por enseñar y al trabajo con niños. La elección profesional responde a una construcción identitaria progresiva donde convergen trayectorias personales, referentes significativos y experiencias afectivas. Se recomienda que las instituciones formadoras fortalezcan la orientación vocacional y ofrezcan espacios reflexivos en las etapas iniciales de la formación docente.

Palabras clave: Construcción de la identidad; elección vocacional; experiencia deportiva; formación docente; motivación.

Introduction

Teacher training constitutes a strategic axis for improving the quality of education systems and plays a decisive role in achieving equitable and relevant education (Darling-Hammond, 2017). In Chile, this process has undergone transformations aimed at strengthening initial teacher training (ITT) through professional standards, curricular adjustments, and the strengthening of pedagogical practices more consistent with cultural and social changes (Bastías Bastías & Iturra Herrera, 2022; Peña-Troncoso et al., 2023).

Motivation to teach is recognized as a key predictor of teacher commitment, continuity, and performance (Klassen & Chiu, 2011; Watt & Richardson, 2007). In the literature, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations converge and influence the decision to study pedagogy (Alvariñas Villaverde et al., 2022; Htang, 2019; Șerbănescu & Popescu, 2014), generating tensions between aspirations for public service and the low social status of the profession (González et al., 2023).

In this context, the choice to study Physical Education Pedagogy (PEP) is often linked to meaningful experiences with sports and an interest in promoting active lifestyles (Castillo Retamal et al., 2020). At the same time, the subject has moved towards approaches focused on wellbeing, inclusion, and comprehensive

training (Zhou, 2024), supported by pedagogical innovations and educational technologies that expand its formative possibilities (Fierro Saldaña, 2024; Schilling Lara et al., 2023). However, these developments coexist with traditional visions centered on play and performance, as well as with historical tensions over the subject's disciplinary status (Casey & Kirk, 2020) in a scenario still marked by structural limitations—such as restricted infrastructure, low curricular status, and disciplinary fragmentation—that continue to challenge its consolidation (Mujica, 2019).

The literature argues that initial motivations are not static, but evolve during training, in dialogue with practical experiences in school contexts (Flores & Day, 2006). In physical education, this evolution is especially important given that pedagogical practice requires articulating disciplinary knowledge, communication skills, socioemotional competencies, and a solid ethical orientation (Fernández Gavira et al., 2022; Kårhus, 2010); personal experience and ties to sports (Zhang, 2021); and contextual factors linked to the family environment, socioeconomic level, public policies, and labor market conditions (Mizala & Ñopo, 2011; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2021).

In response to this scenario, ITT has incorporated active methodologies, competency-based models, early internships, and reflective

accompaniment devices that allow students to explore interests, evaluate motivations, and strengthen their professional identity (Alsup, 2006; Vaillant & Marcelo, 2021; Wang & Ha, 2008). Likewise, learning communities help generate a sense of professional belonging and to access meaningful pedagogical models (Goodyear et al., 2019; Patton & Parker, 2017), and, in PEP, this implies overcoming individualistic or technocratic approaches to promote practices based on equity, inclusion, and critical reflection, which reinforces the need to understand the initial motivations.

Despite progress, there are still gaps in understanding the decision process for studying PEP. Evidence has privileged explicit factors, leaving behind implicit dimensions such as vocational conflicts, social pressures, and gender and class mandates (Matus Castillo et al., 2023; Tinning, 2009), as well as non-linear journeys marked by uncertainty or resignifications (Gil del Pino & García Segura, 2019). Little is also known about the influence of institutional factors, previous school experiences, and admission conditions (Schilling et al., 2019). These gaps reinforce the need for intersectional, longitudinal, and specific approaches to capture the complexity of this career choice in changing social contexts (Kårhus, 2010; Richmond et al., 2011).

In this context, this study seeks to explore personal, motivational, and contextual factors that influence the decision to study PEP among university students in Chile. From a qualitative approach, it seeks to understand how future teachers construct and re-signify their initial motivations, generating useful evidence to guide training policies that are more sensitive to their experiences.

Method

Design

The study is framed within an interpretive qualitative approach, aimed at understanding the meanings that participants attribute to their experiences in a specific social context (Flick, 2018). A design based on thematic analysis (TA) with a hybrid approach was adopted, following

the framework put forward by Swain (2018), who proposes the integration of inductive and deductive reasoning to interpret narrative data, which favors a flexible, open, and contextual reading of it (Mayring, 2000).

Participants

The study sample was selected purposively (López, 2023; Palinkas et al., 2015), considering those cases accessible to the researcher and guided by previously defined inclusion criteria (Bengtsson, 2016): a) students of the PEP program, b) of any gender, c) in their first semester of 2025. All participants belonged to a public university in the Valparaíso region. Most of them came from public schools and were studying at the university under the free tuition regime, reflecting mostly lower-middle socioeconomic profiles. In total, the sample consisted of 80 students (20 women and 60 men), aged between 18 and 20 years.

Ethical Aspects

The study complied with the ethical principles for research involving human subjects, following the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki on bioethics, while guaranteeing anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. The entire process was formalized by means of a single informed consent whereby participants agreed to participate in the study (Cañete et al., 2012) and authorized the use of the data for scientific purposes (Keats, 2009).

Technique and Instrument

An online survey was used for data collection through the Google Forms platform, a self-administered technique that allows obtaining information from the participants (Braun et al., 2020). This technique was relevant as it allowed access to a variety of experiences and to obtain brief but sufficiently dense accounts to identify thematic patterns.

The instrument consisted of a script of six open-ended, non-dichotomous questions that addressed three main topics: a) personal experiences related to sports and physical activity; b) family, school, and social influences on the vocational decision; and c) motives, expectations, and meanings

attributed to the choice of studying PEP. Each question was formulated with broad conceptual openness to favor context-specific narratives, which prompted accounts that were sufficiently dense and diverse for a qualitative thematic analysis in line with the study.

To ensure the content validity of the instrument (Robles & Rojas, 2015), it was submitted to expert judgment (Jalal & Hussein, 2023). The evaluators had to meet specialization criteria related to qualitative research, experience in PEP, and previous participation in validation processes. Three experts met these requirements and gave an average score of 4.67 out of 5.0. No additional piloting was performed, given that, in qualitative studies, validation by experts is sufficient to ensure the semantic and functional adequacy of the questions (Flick, 2018).

Quality Criteria

In order to strengthen the transparency and methodological rigor of qualitative studies, the COREQ guidelines (Tong et al., 2007) were considered: a) characteristics of the researcher [C]—academics specialized in teacher training in PEP; b) Researcher-participant relationship [O]—there was no prior relationship between researchers and participants; c) Collection context [R]—it was conducted with online survey in March 2025; d) Data saturation [EQ]—saturation was reached at analysis unit number 65.

Data Analysis

The analysis was performed following the hybrid thematic analysis approach proposed by Swain

(2018), which integrates inductive and deductive procedures for the progressive construction of meanings. In the first phase, a thorough reading of the corpus was carried out to become familiar with the narratives and to recognize initial units of meaning. Subsequently, these units were coded inductively, allowing meanings to emerge directly from the student discourse. In the second phase, the categories were iteratively refined, reorganized, and compared, incorporating deductive elements from the literature on teacher motivation, vocational choice, and formative experiences. Finally, in the third phase, the categories were integrated into interpretative thematic patterns through a reflective process that ensured consistency between the data, the study objectives, and the conceptual framework. The entire process was conducted with the software MAXQDA 24.

Results

Descriptivos

First, a word frequency analysis was carried out to identify the most recurrent terms in the corpus. This procedure provided a first descriptive approximation of the themes present in the texts analyzed (Table 1).

These descriptive results guided the analysis, since the recurrence of terms such as teacher, teach, sports, and children anticipated the subsequent interpretative axes. The frequencies functioned as an initial approximation to the dimensions later developed in the thematic analysis.

Table 1.
Frequency (f) of Words From the Data Corpus

Word	f	Word	f	Word	f
Teacher(s)	119	Career	26	Children	18
Sport(s)	65	Decision	25	Support (supported, support [v])	18
Physical education (PE)	55	Motivation (motivated, motivate, motivating, motivate myself)	24	Coach	17
Teach(ing)	44	Study	21	Family (relative)	14

Interpretative

The second phase of the analysis focused on systematizing and interpreting the emerging meanings to identify patterns that would account for the phenomenon studied. The selection of quotes was carried out by means of discovery-in-progress techniques (Taylor & Bogdan, 2000). Based on the observed recurrences, broad categories and their respective operational delimitations were defined (Braun & Clarke, 2006) along with associated codes, which allowed us to estimate the relevance of each category within the corpus analyzed (Table 2).

The FS category shows that family support decisively underpins the choice to study PEP. The participants described this accompaniment as affective support and value orientation that reinforce individual confidence and legitimize the decision to train as teachers: *“My parents always supported me, and that became a good thing since I felt the trust and support for my decision”* (S8:3).

This support not only strengthens vocational conviction, but also counteracts external pressures associated with prestige or expectations linked to more profitable professions: *“My family in general has given me full support... and did not*

put pressure on me to choose a professional career where professionals are paid better” (S69:1).

Overall, FS acts as a net that provides emotional security and a sense of belonging, favoring an educational project of its own. Although it varies among participants, this support continues to be key to reinforcing the vocational decision and attenuating tensions in the training process.

The SE category shows that the practice of sports shared with parental figures acquires a formative meaning that strengthens identification with physical education and motivation to work as a teacher: *“... My father always supported me to do physical activity. ... that made playing sports very special and, I think, pushed me to see this activity as something positive”* (S32:2); *“My family always made me interested in sports, so they supported this career choice”* (S62:1).

SE also includes experiences marked by systematic participation in sports from an early age, which generates affinity with physical activity and a sense of belonging linked to the educational environment: *“... from a very young age I was in sports. ... Since then I liked physical education and how each teacher and their classes can be molded”* (S9:1); *“... as I mentioned before,*

Table 2.
Category, Definition, Codes, and Quotes

Category	Operational definition	Codes
Family support (FS) 13 quotes	Emotional support provided by the family to the student with a teaching vocation.	Identity validation; freedom of choice; absence of economic/family pressure.
Sports experience (SE) 24 quotes	Personal experiences linked to the systematic practice of sports.	Early involvement; participation in clubs; active sport role; identification with sports.
Teacher influence (direct) (TId) 24 quotes	Physical education teacher who inspired vocational choice with their messages in class.	Affective accompaniment; vocational guidance; didactic advice; exposure to the professional role.
Teacher influence (indirect) (TIi) 49 quotes	Inspiration arising from observation of a physical education teacher in the school system.	Observation of teaching role model; teacher motivation; observed pedagogical style; admiration for vocation.
Bad experiences (BE) 4 quotes	Negative experiences with physical education teachers in school.	Unadjusted physical demands; mistreatment or humiliation; gender discrimination; subsequent re-signification.
Teaching vocation (TV) 34 quotes	Deep sense of purpose toward teaching others.	Early teaching experiences; working with children; satisfaction in accompanying; altruistic sense.

the acquired taste for sport and the subject of physical education" (S69:2).

Likewise, this experience is not limited to individual performance, but extends to leadership and organizational roles in community sports spaces: *"... Apart from being a player, I started to work as a coordinator of sports events... helping to bring together different clubs that would participate in these sports days"* (S14:1). This involvement broadens the sense of responsibility and socialization associated with sports, reinforcing identification with PEP. Along with this, the figure of coaches and teachers associated with sports emerges as a decisive component, representing role models that inspire vocational choice: *"In my third year of high school, I decided to study physical education pedagogy thanks to my physical education teacher at school and for the love of sports"* (S34:1).

The TId category evidences the decisive role that some physical education teachers play in the vocational configuration of those who opt for this career. It is expressed in the affective accompaniment, the orientation towards teaching, and the clarity of the professional role: *"I felt sure and confident to choose this career... I always had their support and their advice"* (S16:1); *"They helped me to decide and to want to study what I like"* (S27:1). This accompaniment also includes deeper forms of guidance to understand the meaning of the profession and see a career path: *"in 2023, I made the decision thanks to the advice and accompaniment of my head teacher. ... he instilled an interest in almost all kinds of sports"* (S44:1).

The direct influence is also manifested in the daily pedagogical interaction, where teachers offer advice, methods, and concrete learning strategies: *"I always asked them for advice and methods to learn new exercises"* (S22:2). This pedagogical relation guides vocational exploration: *"At the end of my third year of high school, I made the decision ... thanks to the motivation from my teacher. ... He guided me a lot"* (S75:1). In several accounts, teachers showed what the profession really is like, sharing specific knowledge of the work reality: *"Because my physical education teacher showed me what this profession is like ... I am studying*

this degree" (S34:2); *"My dance teachers showed me what the career really is like ... but you will like it and things like that"* (S40:1).

The TII category shows that the simple observation of the teacher's actions—without direct interaction—can play a decisive role in vocational choice. The way in which the teacher organizes the class, relates to the students and expresses commitment becomes an internalized model that guides the construction of the future teacher's identity: *"I always saw my physical education teacher in a positive way... and I wanted to be like him"* (S16:2); *"There were teachers who taught well, which made me want to see myself reflected in them ... their way of teaching, with so much enthusiasm and love"* (S21:1).

The teacher's enthusiasm is also recognized as an element that inspires and awakens the desire to teach: *"There was a teacher who always motivated me. ... I want to follow her example, motivate others..."* (S57:1). Likewise, admiration for teacher vocation and commitment is observed: *"My teachers ... are teachers with a strong vocation and love for what do"* (S51:1); *"Very good teachers ... motivated me a lot. ... I would like to teach and give the same motivation to children"* (S60:1).

Finally, the emotional impact that teachers have on the development of a vocation is highlighted, expressed as motivation, confidence, and sense of belonging: *"They always made me feel good and safe ... even using their days off to take us to competitions"* (S55:2); *"Teachers who marked me ... helped me become the person I am today ... a factor that helped me to make the decision"* (S47:1).

The category BE emerges as a factor that influences both motivation and the construction of professional identity. The analysis shows that negative experiences with physical education teachers—such as unadjusted physical demands, gender discrimination, and practices perceived as humiliating or aggressive—influence vocational orientation towards pedagogy: *"... I never had a good PE teacher. ... The teacher was humiliating; she would yell at you to correct you. ... In high school, the teacher would come in yelling, it was said that many ended up vomiting and that he did not care"* (S64:2).

At the same time, these experiences can awaken the intention of becoming teachers who transform what was experienced as harmful: *"There began the idea of being better at all that. ... I began to like teaching and sports"* (S8:1); *"Bad experiences with physical education teachers ... that led me to think that I can change things in the future as a teacher"* (S76:2). In these cases, the discomfort experienced is re-signified in a motivation to improve the educational conditions of others.

The TV category evidences a sustained commitment to teaching and the development of others, constituting a central axis in the decision to study PEP. First, early teaching experiences—even in informal contexts—act as the central driver of teaching vocation. The accounts show that assuming support or leadership roles in sports activities generates satisfaction in accompanying the learning process of others, configuring an initial identification with the act of teaching: *"I have had small experiences teaching other people in the field of sports"* (S5:5); *"I realized that I wanted to be a physical education teacher when I went to volleyball training sessions or other physical activities that involved people younger than me"* (S19:1). These experiences reveal that the initial pedagogical interaction contributes to shape professional identity and to guide the decision to choose this career.

Direct work with children is also presented as a decisive factor, since early experiences of guidance and support in children's sports contexts generate a purpose linked to the desire to positively influence their development: *"... Since I was very young, I liked sports, and, at 15, my coach asked me if I wanted to help the younger ones. There I knew that this is what I wanted for myself"* (S41:1); *"I realized that I liked teaching young children what I like about sports"* (S7:1); *"the desire to teach sports in an attractive way to young children to enhance their development..."* (S55:3). Taken together, these accounts show that the teaching vocation is a dynamic process where personal motivations and early formative experiences are articulated with the influence of meaningful teaching role models.

Discussion

The results show that FS is decisive when choosing to study PEP. This support is expressed in the form of trust and freedom of choice, consistent with research that highlights the parental role in developing a vocation ([Kniveton, 2004](#); [Whiston & Keller, 2004](#)) and with emotional support processes associated with self determination ([Dietrich & Kracke, 2009](#)). In Chile, this support acquires importance in the face of the low social status of the teaching profession, coinciding with findings that place family influence as a key factor in decisions linked to pedagogy ([García Poyato et al., 2018](#); [Gómez & Castillo, 2019](#); [Mizala et al., 2011](#)). SE appears as a fundamental formative axis in the configuration of a vocation towards physical education. Early involvement in sports generates affinity with the discipline, a sense of belonging, and opportunities to develop social and leadership skills, elements widely described in the literature ([Beni et al., 2016](#); [Pereda et al., 2022](#); [Richards & Padaruth, 2017](#)). Interaction with coaches and referents in sports strengthens this identification, consolidating motivational role models that influence the orientation towards teaching ([McGaha & Barney, 2014](#); [Shanmuganathan-Felton et al., 2022](#)).

On the other hand, the results indicate that TI from physical education teachers is manifested through significant affective bonds, explicit vocational guidance, and accompaniment during the school process. The literature highlights the relevance of these interactions in contexts of strong emotional involvement, where the teacher becomes an identity referent ([Amerstorfer & Freiin, 2021](#); [Wang, 2023](#)). Likewise, the pedagogical dimension of the bond contributes to students developing a real understanding of teaching, consistent with research that addresses learning through guided practice ([Marstrander & Aggerholm, 2023](#)). Reflective accompaniment and the visibility of the profession enhance the development of an informed and committed vocation, as posited by studies focused on initial teacher trainer ([Kalyar et al., 2018](#); [Kern & Patton, 2024](#); [Singh, 2021](#)).

TII is related to the sustained observation of the physical education teacher as a role model, without the mediation of explicit orientations. Participants describe how the teacher's attitude, commitment, and manner of teaching generate personal identification and professional aspiration.

This phenomenon has been documented as a type of unintentional learning based on the observation of pedagogical behaviors and dispositions (Bandhu et al., 2024; Fryling et al., 2011). The teacher's visible behavior—their motivation, their way of relating to the students, and their active lifestyle—acts as a referent that inspires vocational decisions (Cheung, 2019). Recent studies indicate that this professional modeling can significantly influence the construction of competencies and expectations during initial training (Krause & O'Neil, 2024). Thus, indirect influence complements the affective dimension of direct influence, showing how different levels of exposure to teachers impact career choice.

Although it may seem contradictory, BE with physical education teachers can also act as a motivating factor for career choice, since experiences of mistreatment, unadjusted demands, or negative emotional climates generate in some cases the desire to transform these practices. This process of resignification, identified in studies on problematic school environments, can reinforce ethical commitment and pedagogical sensitivity (Saiz González et al., 2025). From a broader perspective, the literature on socioemotional development highlights the importance of providing students with tools to manage tensions and build meaningful learning from adverse experiences (Fernández et al., 2022; Garner, 2010). In this sense, bad experiences not only have an impact on vocational choice but also contribute to strengthening the conviction of becoming a teacher that is more empathetic, closer and committed to student welfare.

TV is configured as a progressive process that integrates experiences, emotions, and meaningful learning. The findings show that early participation in teaching activities, working with children, and the satisfaction derived from

pedagogical accompaniment generate a sense of purpose that guides the decision to study physical education. These experiences align with research that highlights the role of initial self-efficacy and enjoying teaching as key predictors of teaching commitment (Sharif et al., 2016; Wang & Wang, 2022). Likewise, in physical education, vocation articulates disciplinary, ethical, and affective elements, where sports operate as a formative vehicle that enhances the connection with teaching (Barrera & Hinojosa, 2020; Mujica & Orellana, 2018; Mujica, 2019; Yıldırım & Gürpınar, 2023). From an international perspective, research has evidenced similar motivational patterns in future teachers, reinforcing the multidimensionality of vocation (Fokkens Bruinsma & Canrinus, 2014). In the Chilean context, these results dialogue with studies that show the importance of teacher impact and the ethical component in pedagogical training (Castillo Retamal et al., 2020; OECD, 2021; Ow & Madrid, 2018; Ramírez, 2015; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2006).

Considering this body of evidence, it is possible to move towards an interpretative synthesis that allows us to understand how these factors do not operate in isolation but are articulated in a broader vocational tapestry. In this sense, the findings should be interpreted considering certain limitations, especially the use of an open ended survey, which provides brief and less contextualized accounts. Purposive sampling and the specific nature of the responses also restrict its scope. Future research could incorporate longitudinal designs and complementary qualitative-quantitative or mixed techniques to follow the evolution of vocational motivations, as well as intersectional perspectives to understand how gender, socioeconomic level, geographic location, professional projection, and ethnicity influence the decision to study PEP.

From this analytical integration, it is possible to derive broader conclusions about the configuration of vocation towards PEP as a dynamic process that integrates experiences, emotions, and meaningful relationships. The findings show that family support is key, providing security and legitimacy to the decision, while the experience in sports—

understood as a formative space that articulates belonging, affinity, and personal development—reinforces early identification with this discipline. Likewise, the influence of significant teachers—both direct and indirect—contributes to modeling expectations, guiding decisions, and offering a real understanding of the profession, consolidating ethical and pedagogical references that influence career choice.

Bad school experiences—although this may seem contradictory—also influence this process through the resignification of adverse situations, strengthening the commitment to practices that are more humane, critical, and sensitive to student welfare. Together with this, early teaching experiences and contact with children generate a sense of purpose oriented to pedagogical accompaniment and care, reaffirming the affective dimension that characterizes the teaching vocation in physical education.

Taken together, these factors reveal that the decision to study PEP emerges from the articulation of personal motivations, formative experience, and significant relationships, rather than from isolated or linear elements. These findings challenge training institutions to implement strategies of reflective accompaniment, early practices, and spaces for socioemotional development that strengthen professional identity from the beginning of training, in coherence with the tensions and challenges identified in this study.

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