

INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION IN ROMANIA - OVERCOMING OR SUCCUMBING TO PAST WEAKNESSES AND THREATS?

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Abstract

In the light of the new Education Act dedicated to preuniversity education that came into force in Romania in 2023, prospective teachers are to be offered two alternative pathways to enter their profession: a twelve-month or eighteen-month master's degree. Timewise, those determined to embrace the teaching career will have to comply with these provisions starting with the 2027-2028 school year. Considering these specific regulations belonging to the recent legal framework governing education in Romania, our paper aims at investigating the advantages and disadvantages of the options given to future teachers, so as to tentatively predict whether past obstacles might be overcome. By briefly outlining both the tendencies and realities of initial teacher education at international and European levels and by presenting the evolution of initial teacher education in Romania in the post-communist era, we lay the basis for our small-scale investigation. The responses of our interviewees (school inspectors, school principals, experienced teachers, academics) point not only to the imminent threats and inherent weaknesses, but also to the long-term prospects of this educational reform, as professionalising the teaching industry advances the profession as a whole and goes a long way to create better opportunities for student success.

Keywords: *Education Act, initial teacher education, educational reform, teaching profession, professionalisation.*

1. Introduction

Teacher education is important because of its impact upon teacher quality. To teach is a complex and demanding intellectual work, one that cannot be accomplished without adequate preparation. Teacher education not only ensures that teachers are and remain

competent, but it also allows to assure that they stay motivated through time¹. Research shows that most effective way to raise educational quality is to modify initial teacher education and recruitment, and to develop the means to train teachers that are already in-service².

A „complete” teacher education combines strong subject-matter and pedagogical knowledge, the ability to collaborate with diverse actors (students/colleagues/administrators), and the capacity to continue developing these skills and to understand the in-depth context of the schools in which they teach. Teacher education programmes should be designed as an incentive to bring the right people into teaching and to make it adequate to a country’s specific needs.

Starting with the 1990s, Romanian initial teacher education has undergone successive reforms, each new Education Act struggling to redefine teaching as a high-level profession. This paper delves into the provisions of the latest Romanian Preuniversity Education Act, asking education specialists’ opinions on the success of its enforcement. In point of structure, the first part of our paper provides current trends on initial teacher training as they are depicted in reports drafted under the auspices of OECD and EU Commission. In part two, we give a diachronic perspective on the initial teacher training regulations in Romania between 1990 and present time. Part three covers the methodology employed in our study and in part four we discuss the findings of our small-scale research. The final part deals with the conclusions of our investigation.

2. Setting Current Trends in Initial Teacher Education: OECD and EU

2.1. OECD Perspective on Initial Teacher Education

Teacher quality is undoubtedly an essential trait of any sound educational system and developed countries around the world have constantly attempted to enhance the quality of the educators within their systems. Relying on data and analyses generated by seven countries, the 2019 OECD study³ dedicated to improving initial teacher preparation

¹ See European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice, *The teaching profession in Europe: practices, perceptions, and policies*. Publications Office of the European Union; 2015, <http://doi/10.2797/031792>.

² See P. Musset, *Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Training Policies in a Comparative Perspective: Current Practices in OECD Countries and a Literature Review on Potential Effects*; 2009, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/initial-teacher-education-and-continuing-training-policies-in-a-comparative-perspective_5kmbphh7s47h-en, last consulted on 23.03.2024.

³ See OECD, *A Flying Start: Improving Initial Teacher Preparation Systems*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2019, <http://doi.org/10.1787/cf74e549-en>.

(ITP) aims at identifying the challenges that characterise ITP at present and to suggest possible strategies that might be used to address them.

Initial teacher education (ITE) structure differs across and within countries. The two most widespread models are concurrent programmes, which provide pedagogical training and practicum at the same time as courses in subject matter, and consecutive models in which pedagogical and practical training follow courses in subject matter. The ITE reviews in the OECD study suggest that independently of the model, countries seem to struggle with finding the balance between subject and pedagogical knowledge. Establishing strong links between theoretical and practical training has long been on the teacher education agenda and one way to achieve this is through aligning teacher education to professional standards. Nevertheless, such alignment is not straightforward due, in part, to the different conceptualizations of professional knowledge. For example, teacher education institutions with strong academic traditions often reflect a knowledge and research-based conceptualization, while standards would often have stronger emphasis on practice and a more restricted understanding of what professional knowledge is⁴.

There are three traditions in teacher education: (1) an academic knowledge tradition (the content is structured in classical disciplines: educational psychology, sociology, history and philosophy); (2) a practical knowledge tradition (based on teachers' tasks such as lesson planning, classroom management, evaluation); and (3) an integrated tradition (clinical practice model). The 2019 OECD study adopts *the Teacher Education Pathway Model* developed by Roberts-Hull, Jensen and Cooper⁵, thus doing away with the traditional view of the teacher as a 'product' endowed with a degree and a certification, and embracing the 'process'-oriented perspective in which ITE comprises selection into ITE, acquisition of knowledge and skills across ITE, entrance into teaching, as well as the first years of teaching. Hence, initial teacher preparation is no longer seen as an isolated component of the teaching profession, it is a complex system resulting from the continuous interactions between different agents (human actors, organisations, material artefacts).

The study pinpoints to the 4 main challenges that ITP is currently experiencing: (1) ensuring an evidence-informed, self-improving initial teacher preparation system; (2)

⁴ *Idem*, pp. 78-79.

⁵ *Idem*, p. 18.

ensuring a balanced teacher workforce; (3) ensuring updated and high-quality teacher preparation; (4) ensuring and integrated early professional development. The strategies proposed to deal with the first challenge are to support rigorous and relevant research on ITP and to introduce accreditation that incentivizes ITP institutions to build their own evidence and implement a continuous improvement approach. As for the second challenge, three ITP-related strategies are suggested: using ITP data in forecasting workforce needs; raising the status of teacher education through building a solid knowledge base for teachers and ensuring quality teacher education, and attracting, selecting and hiring candidates who are likely to be committed to improving their professional competences through their career. Addressing the third challenge involves ongoing reflection on teachers' knowledge, strong ITE-school partnerships and supporting teacher educators. The strategies proposed to respond to the fourth challenge include strengthening practical experience in engaging in critical reflection and evaluation of teaching, ensuring effective mentoring schemes with competent mentors, and securing continuity in professional support throughout the early career years.

One should underline the importance of the ideas put forward by this OECD study since it might have a positive impact on its readership. Thus, it might prove its actual value if taken into consideration by policy makers specialised in educational matters, employed by national governments to develop educational strategies meant to improve initial teacher training; by university staff who would like to either design or update their bachelor or master programmes dedicated to initial teacher training, so as to attune them to the latest research findings; or by researchers who are interested in exploring issues, solving problems, and predicting trends related to initial teacher training.

2.2. EU Perspective on Initial Teacher Education

The goal of the Eurydice report on EU teachers' careers, development and wellbeing⁶ is to provide a detailed insight into the current national policies, regulations and practices that are intended to enhance and support the teaching profession in EU member countries, as well as in several other European countries accepting to be part of this research. Data describing the legislative provisions in each country is combined with data on teachers' practices and perceptions from the *OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey* (TALIS) in order to allow various stakeholders to understand the

⁶ European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, *Teachers in Europe: Careers, Development and Well-being. Eurydice report*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021.

impact of national policies on teachers' behaviours and, possibly, to evince the necessity of reforms.

When it comes to ITP, the EU report indicates that more than half of the European education systems offer both concurrent and consecutive training routes for lower secondary teachers, whereas in nine education systems mainstream ITE is provided exclusively and in eight systems the consecutive route is the only one available. In the majority of the European education systems, ITE programmes for lower secondary teachers lead to master's degree, while in others, the minimum qualification is the bachelor (as a rule, ITE programmes leading to the bachelor's degree last four years). According to TALIS 2018, in the EU, 54.9 % of teachers report holding a master's degree, while 38.0 % of teachers stated a bachelor's degree as their highest qualification. Nevertheless, TALIS 2018 data suggests that the highest educational qualification achieved by in-service teachers tends to correspond to the minimum requirement in top-level regulations to ITE.

In nine education systems, where the duration is regulated, the workload of professional training is 60 ECTS corresponding to around a year of full-time training. In Ireland, France, Malta (consecutive programme) and Portugal professional training is twice as long. In Bulgaria, Romania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia, the minimum duration of professional training does not exceed 40 ECTS, while the shortest durations are in Italy (24 ECTS), Montenegro (23 ECTS) and Turkey (25 ECTS). Moreover, when looking at the share of professional training as a part of ITE programmes, big cross-country variations can be observed. The share of professional training ranges from 50 % of the total duration of ITE in Belgium (French Community), Ireland (concurrent programme) and Malta (concurrent programme) to 8 % in Italy and Montenegro. The share of professional training is 15 % or less in Bulgaria, Italy, Romania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey where the duration of professional training is also the shortest. While the duration of in-school placements as part of professional training is regulated in about half of the European education systems, in others it is a matter left to the discretion of the ITE institutions or it is not regulated. Where regulated, the minimum length of in-school placement shows considerable cross-country variations. It ranges from 60 ECTS in Ireland (concurrent model) to five ECTS in Romania. In eight education systems, practical training takes up around half of the time dedicated to professional training.

The content of ITE is one of the key factors impacting its quality. Subject knowledge, pedagogical theory and sufficient classroom practice are the core elements of effective ITE. Although almost all education systems require professional training to be included in ITE programmes alongside academic subjects, its duration varies considerably across countries. In-school placement is regulated in around half of the European education systems.

According to the TALIS 2018 results, in the EU, nearly 70 % of all teachers report that they were trained in all three core elements (subject content, general and subject related pedagogy, and classroom practice). The new generation of teachers (less than 35 years old) seems to benefit more from a comprehensive teacher education compared with the overall teacher population. In the EU, 75 % of young teachers completed formal education or training including all three core elements.

Supporting teachers during the early stages of their career is crucial not only to enhance the quality of teaching but also to reduce exit from the profession. In most European education systems, teachers new to the profession have access to a structured induction that usually lasts one year. In almost all of them, induction is compulsory. Mentoring and professional development activities are the two most widespread compulsory elements of structured induction. Evaluating novice teachers at the end of the induction period is a widespread approach across Europe. It aims at confirming employment when induction occurs during a probationary period or contributes to certifying the teaching qualification when induction is part of the qualification route.

The Eurydice report contains valuable data which offer a comprehensive view on the current realities depicting ITE in Europe, so that future prospects might be envisaged by various stakeholders. As teacher education matters for quality teaching and for students' learning outcomes, having a wider perspective when deciding national policies and regulations might prove more than useful. The report places great importance on the fact that quality ITE and effective support to new teachers not only help to prevent teacher attrition, but also have a positive impact on the attractiveness of the teaching profession in general.

3. Past and Present in Initial Teacher Education in Romania

Over time, compulsory education in Romania first comprised the primary and lower secondary school cycles, and, subsequently, also included upper secondary education. As a result, our diachronic overview will focus on teacher preparation for primary, lower and upper secondary education, considering the legal provisions regulating this domain and their impact on the initial training of teachers. In post-communist Romania, at least at the declarative level, ITE has always been an important concern for education reform.

During the communist period, the initial training of teachers was carried out either by means of compulsory psycho-pedagogical training courses, within the framework of various (short and long term) university programmes for those teaching in secondary education, or by means pedagogical high schools (also known at that time as *Normal Schools*) for primary school teachers. The first education act of the post-communist period, the *Education Act no. 84/1995*, together with *Act no. 128/1997 on the Status of the Teaching Staff*, introduced psycho-pedagogical training, as a standalone programme, which was to be offered by special Teacher Training Departments (set up in 1996) operating in universities, as a condition for filling teaching positions for lower and upper secondary teachers. Primary school teachers were given an alternative: apart from graduating from pedagogical high schools, they could also enrol in teacher training colleges (three-year programme, i.e. short-term higher education).

In 2004, Romania adhered to the Bologna process, and *Act no. 288 on the Organisation of University Studies* provided the legislative framework for the changes. Accordingly, the certification for the teaching profession could be obtained through two levels of psycho-pedagogical training: Level I, whereby graduates with a bachelor's degree who earned the 30 ECTS allotted to the psycho-pedagogical training programme and passed the graduation examination, corresponding to Level I certification for the teaching profession, obtained the certificate of completion of the psycho-pedagogical training programme Level I, which entitled them to hold teaching positions in compulsory secondary education; Level II, whereby graduates of a master's programme in the field of the bachelor's degree who completed the 60 ECTS psycho-pedagogical training programme and passed the graduation examination corresponding to Level II certification for the teaching profession obtained the certificate of completion of the psycho-pedagogical training programme Level II, which entitled them to occupy teaching positions in post-compulsory education. The training of primary school teachers was also reformed by

introducing a new bachelor programme: Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education (undergraduate studies, Bologna I cycle). The new context generated by the Bologna Process has marked a substantial reform at organisational and curricular level, and the new measures have been applied since the 2005-2006 academic year.

The *National Education Act 2011* did not change the initial training in the case of primary school teachers, but it introduced the obligation of the master's degree in teaching for the lower and upper secondary school level, which was meant to replace the former provisions (*i.e.*, the training for the teaching profession through the two levels of psycho-pedagogical training) starting with the 2015-2016 school/academic year. Thus, in the light of the 2011 regulations, initial training for teaching positions included:

- initial, theoretical, specialist training carried out by universities in programmes accredited by law;
- 2-year master's degree in teaching;
- practical training for one school year in an educational establishment under the supervision of a teacher (practicum supervisor).

The master's degree in teaching seemed to give shape to the much-desired (since 2001⁷) professionalisation of the teaching career, which could have been achieved through a 'school' especially designed to produce teachers, very much like a law or medical school. Hence, if, at primary level (through vocational high school, university college, bachelor's degree in primary and preschool pedagogy), initial training had come substantially closer to professionalisation, the master's degree in teaching could have finally legitimised the teaching profession at all levels of education discussed here, to define its identity, to make 'the transition from the artisan teacher to the expert teacher'⁸.

The 2011 moment, with the introduction of the compulsory teaching master's degree, represents an even stronger change than the Bologna reform. However, it has generated many uncertainties and has led to positions for and against: 'It is a turning point that can orientate the field of initial teacher training either towards correlation with the objectives of the European Union in terms of investing in human resources and skilfully exploiting these resources so as to increase quality, or towards the breakdown of a functional

⁷ The strategy for the development of the initial and in-service training system for teaching staff and managers in pre-university education (2001) promoted and implemented specific lines of action aimed at professionalising the teaching career, <http://arhiva.gov.ro/upload/articles/100024/stratform.pdf>, last accessed on 23.04.2024.

⁸ See E. Păun, *Profesionalizarea activității didactice*, in L. Gliga (coord.), *Standarde profesionale pentru profesia didactică*, Consiliul Național pentru Pregătirea Profesorilor, proiectul de reformă a învățământului preuniversitar, Ministerul educației și cercetării, Bucharest, 2002, p. 21.

system, obviously without any pretence to its being perfect, which, for more than fifteen years, has strived to make the teacher training departments develop continuously'⁹. Surprisingly or not, the following year, a new provision came into force, setting forth that 'until the graduation of the teaching master's degree provided for in art. 154 para. (1) letter (c) of Act no. 1/2011, as subsequently amended and supplemented, by the first class of bachelor students admitted under the terms of this act, training for a teaching career is provided by the specialist departments in the higher education institutions'¹⁰.

Debates continued, and the lack of consensus among those in a position to implement the change led to an amendment to the *National Education Act* in 2014, through GEO no. 49, making the teaching master's degree optional. The new legislative text looks like this:

'Initial training for occupying teaching positions in preuniversity education shall comprise:

- a) initial, theoretical, specialist training, carried out by universities, within the framework of programmes accredited in accordance with the law;
- b) completion of either a two-year master's degree in teaching or psycho-pedagogical training programmes Levels I and II carried out by specialist departments in higher education institutions;
- c) a practical traineeship of one school year, carried out in educational establishments, usually with a practicum supervisor.'

The wave of changes and their postponements generated further waves of questions: What is the best route for initial teacher training? Which one provides the most solid preparation for future teachers? What kind of preparation provides the best teachers in a system? etc. As a matter of fact, these are timelessly relevant questions to be asked in any society that wants a high-performance education system. In 2016 Romania, they seemed all the more legitimate because the results of the national and international assessments of Romanian students were not at all encouraging. In the PISA tests, in which Romania has participated since 2000, 15-year-old students have consistently obtained some of the lowest scores in Europe¹¹.

The Coalition for Education¹² drew attention to the fact that the successive postponement of the application of the National Education Act provisions on the teaching

⁹ See L. Șerbănescu, *Formarea profesională a cadrelor didactice – repere pentru managementul carierei*, Printech, Bucharest, 2011, p. 146).

¹⁰ See GEO no. 92/2012.

¹¹ See <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/>, last accessed on 23.03.2024.

¹² *The Coalition for Education* is an organisation created in 2015 by various NGOs active in this field and has had as its mission the coagulation of energies and resources to achieve a bold vision for learning in Romania. The organisation was formed by NGOs having more

master's degree, a condition for the initial training of teachers, was a cause for moving education in Romania away from finding the best solution for 'increasing the quality of human resources', a public priority at the declarative level, but not a long-term decision at the political level. 'Romania needs teachers who are competent, motivated, autonomous, respected and encouraged to learn', argued the Coalition for Education, and this required a clear position from the majority of co-interested actors. As a result, this group initiated a broad public consultation (May-August 2016) to find the answer to the question 'Master's degree in teaching or psycho-pedagogical modules (Levels I + II): which type of initial training will increase the quality in the Romanian education system?'¹³ Of course, the aim of this debate was not to point to the saving solution for initial teacher training based on the respondents' preferences. Surprisingly, though, the answers received from the respondents (representatives of the teacher training departments, heads of university departments, deans, rectors, principals of state and private schools, school inspectors, teachers, researchers from relevant institutions, non-governmental organisations working for education and related sectors, trade union representatives), tipped the balance in favour of the master's degree in teaching: 40.36% (44 answers) of the respondents gave their endorsement to the master's degree in teaching; 21.10% (23 answers) opted for maintaining training through Levels I+II psycho-pedagogical modules; 22.01% (24 answers) proposed a mixed model (Level I module + master's degree in teaching). In addition to these, other proposals were put forward: alternative training and certification routes, bachelor's degree in teaching, unspecified form of organisation with recommendations for content reform, etc. (18 answers, 16.51%)¹⁴. It is interesting that the option for a master's degree in teaching was the most preferred one by those involved in preuniversity education, whereas the preference for training through the psycho-pedagogical modules was equally embraced by preuniversity and university teachers. The mixed model, consisting of the Level I psycho-pedagogical module followed by a master's degree in teaching, was supported by most university respondents.

than 10 years of experience in the field and thousands of beneficiaries, on different levels of education, be they preschoolers, pupils, students, educators or parents.

¹³ *Formarea inițială a profesorilor - raport audiere publică – Motivație*, <http://coalitiaedu.ro/formarea-initiala-profesorilor/motivatie/>, last accessed on 23.03.2024.

¹⁴ *Formarea inițială a profesorilor - raport audiere publică – Raport*, <http://coalitiaedu.ro/formarea-initiala-profesorilor/bibliografie/>, pp. 9-10, last accessed on 23.03.2024.

Apart from raising new questions, the participants' responses not only highlighted the pluses and minuses of the two training models under discussion and outlined possible solutions¹⁵, but they also formulated proposals and suggestions regarding the central aspects to be considered for the significant improvement of the education system, such as its objectives, its way of functioning, or the way of collaboration between the co-interested parties.¹⁶

The next stage was marked by the launch of the project called Educated Romania¹⁷, carried out along 2016-2021, which started with a public debate, resulting in a strategic vision for Romania, comprising not only specific objectives for national education and research to be achieved by 2030, but also a set of proposals for public policies stemming from areas labelled as priorities¹⁸ according to the project, and ended with the publication of Educated Romania Report. The Project of the President of Romania (2021). Its priority areas included both the teaching and career paths and among its objectives it is highlighted the restructuring of the initial teacher training system through the gradual expansion of the master programme for teachers, based on the evaluation of the pilot phase¹⁹ (with a focus on analysing the impact of this training route on teacher training) and subject to the provision of the necessary resources and conditions at the level of training institutions. The report also put forward the idea that: 'from a legislative point of view, it is important to draw up a new Education Act or to revise National Education Act 2011, so that the provisions of the legal framework are correlated with the Project and at the same time provide coherence and predictability to the system. The current form of the Education Act 2011 has undergone an impressive number of changes, taking on different meanings from the original ones.'²⁰

At this very moment, even if we have tried, we have not been able to find any report on the impact of the piloted master's degree on the preparation of future teachers in the eight universities which participated in this stage of the project. It must also be added that such a report would be hasty and inconclusive right now, given the short period of time

¹⁵ *Idem*, pp. 11-18.

¹⁶ *Idem*, pp. 18-21.

¹⁷ Educated Romania is a national project initiated by the President of Romania, <https://www.romaniaeducata.eu/despre/>.

¹⁸ The teaching career is at the top of the list, envisaging the development of a competence framework, the reform of initial training, increased quality and flexibility.

¹⁹ Through the POCU project „*Start a career through a teaching master's degree*” (the beneficiary was the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research, in partnership with eight Romanian universities), the teaching master's degree programme was to be piloted for the first time in Romania, starting with 2020-2021 academic year, in accordance with *the Order of the Minister of Education and Research No 4524/2020 of 12 June 2020 on the establishment and organisation of the teaching master's degree programme*.

²⁰ See *Raportul proiectului România educată*, <http://www.romaniaeducata.eu/rezultatele-proiectului/>, p. 124, last accessed on 23.03.2024.

since the pilot project was initiated, especially as this period of time has overlapped with the pandemic. In order to be relevant, it would take a longer to show the effects. Anyway, new education legislation came into force in 2023, in the form of Preuniversity Education Act 2023 and Higher Education Act 2023.

In the light of the latest provisions, teacher training continues to be a priority for Romania's education legislators, as the results of international assessments (PISA) of Romanian students have shown no improvement. The 2022 PISA report points out to the stability of the Romanian educational system between 2018-2022 (considering not only the crisis due to the pandemic, but also the results obtained by other countries, which scored lower than before)²¹, only that this stability keeps Romania at the level indicated by previous evaluations: below the OECD and EU averages²², respectively. Moreover, by analysing the resources invested in education and their positive correlation with school performance, demonstrated in numerous specialist studies, the OECD report states that human resources represent a strength of the Romanian education system²³.

Under Preuniversity Education Act 2023, article 176 (e) stipulates the conditions for occupying teaching positions in preuniversity education. Once again, the changes are mainly aimed at post-primary education, reverting to the provisions of Education Act 2011 and thus imposing the obligation of obtaining a master's degree in teaching, as follows:

- d) for teaching positions in lower secondary, upper secondary and non-university tertiary education, [...], at least one of the following conditions:
- holding a bachelor's degree in the field of the desired position, the psychopedagogical training module totalling 30 ECTS credits, and a one-year master's degree in teaching;
 - holding a bachelor's degree in the field of Educational Sciences and a one-year master's degree in teaching;
 - holding a bachelor's degree in the field of the desired position and a one-and-a-half-year master's degree in teaching.²⁴

²¹ See G.N. Noveanu (coord.), *PISA 2022. România. Raport național PISA 2022*, Centrul Național de Politici și Evaluare în Educație. Unitatea de cercetare în educație, Bucharest, 2023, p. 116.

²² The average score obtained by Romanian students in 2022 is 428 in any of the areas investigated - mathematics, reading or science. Both the OECD and EU average in mathematics is 472; in reading, the OECD average is 476, whereas the EU average is 469; in science, the OECD average is 485 and the EU average is 481.

²³ See G.N. Noveanu (coord.), *op. cit.*, p. 119.

²⁴ Important changes also occur in the case of other categories of teachers: those that are to hold a bachelor degree in special and special-integrated education. They are required to complete a master's degree in the field of their specialisation. Although this aspect is not covered by our paper, we believe that this measure is beneficial for the professionalisation of all teachers.

Alongside bachelor's and master's degrees in the various subjects, universities are to organise two types of master's degrees in teaching: '(1) The master's degree in teaching totalling 60 ECTS which comprises the teaching practice, carried out by the organising higher education institution in collaboration with the preuniversity educational establishment where the teaching practice takes place, amounting to 48 ECTS, and specific activities carried out within the higher education institution, representing 12 ECTS. (2) The integrated master's degree in teaching, totalling 90 ECTS, organised by higher education institutions for bachelor's degree graduates who have not obtained 30 ECTS by completing the psychopedagogical training programme. The master programme includes, in addition to the teaching practice and specific activities carried out in the higher education institution, 30 ECTS for psychopedagogical training programme.'²⁵

Of course, the law will apply progressively²⁶. However, if the legislative provisions are maintained, at some point all teachers in Romania will be able to be called education professionals. It is our hope that this path will not be interrupted by other changes, as it happened in the period following the entry into force of *Education Act 2011*, so that the teaching profession will regain its former status and attract highly qualified graduates, and *Educated Romania* project will become an undeniable reality.

4. Research Methodology

Our small-scale investigation stemmed from the assumption that the new provisions regulating the teacher profession in Romanian preuniversity education might entail both opportunities and threats. 20 interviewees (5 academics belonging to Teacher Training Departments in the University of Bucharest, the University of Ploiești, University of Brașov, University of Suceava; 15 teachers from Prahova county; 3 school inspectors, 2

²⁵ See *Higher Education Act 2023*, art. 102.

²⁶ Art. 176 (*Preuniversity Education Act 2023*) provides that: (6) In situations justified by the lack of qualified personnel at the level of the preuniversity education institutions, higher education graduates who have not completed their initial training in accordance with the provisions of the Higher Education Act or master students enrolled in the teaching master's programme may be hired as associate teachers for a fixed period of not more than one school year, on an hourly basis, with the approval of the institutions governing preuniversity educations in Romania, in accordance with the provisions of a methodology approved by order of the Minister of Education. (7) In situations justified by the lack of regular staff at the level of the preuniversity education institutions, graduates holding a bachelor's degree in the field of the position and having accomplished the psycho-pedagogical training programme, may be hired as substitute teachers for a fixed period, with the approval the institutions governing preuniversity educations in Romania, in accordance with the provisions of a methodology approved by order of the Minister of Education. (8) In situations justified by the lack of qualified personnel at the level of the preuniversity educational institution, graduates holding a bachelor's degree in a field other than that corresponding to the position and having accomplished the psycho-pedagogical training programme, may be employed as substitute teachers without the required qualifications for a fixed period, with the approval of the institutions governing preuniversity educations in Romania, in accordance with the provisions of a methodology approved by order of the Minister of Education.

school principals, 3 expert teachers²⁷, 7 teachers) accepted to answer our questions: (1) *Do you consider that the new training route will be superior to the previous one (through the level I and II psycho-pedagogical training modules offered by the Teacher Training Departments), in the sense that it will increase the quality of teaching?* (2) *Do you consider that this formula for initial teacher training will materialise or there are risks that threaten its implementation? If so, which are they?* Our respondents' teaching experience ranges between 7 and 25 years for the academics, and between 12 and 37 for the rest of our group. The interviews were conducted in February 2024.

5. Findings and Discussion

As our group of subjects is a homogeneous one, made up of *school people*, with consistent teaching and/or managerial experience, we are not surprised by their unity of vision on the problem in question. Thus, the answers of our interviewees converge on several points, highlighting both ideas specific to the topic under discussion, the initial training of teachers, and as well as other points, more general, which might be considered old and still unresolved when it comes to education-related issues in Romania. These ideas outline a radiography of the present, on the basis of which a picture of the future of initial teacher training in Romania is tentatively sketched.

On the whole, the vast majority of our interviewees are in favour of the initial training of teachers through a master's degree in teaching, but their realistic, objective and well-reasoned responses identify many variables and risks that, if ignored or treated superficially, will constitute obstacles, even roadblocks to the implementation of the latest legal provisions in this domain. Cumulated with their previous experience (post 2011), our research subjects, although optimistic, are cautious about the future.

The answers of our interviewees evinced similar thoughts and we grouped them accordingly.

5.1. Motivation for a teaching career

The strongest idea that emerges from our interviewees' answers is that of motivation/lack of motivation for the teaching profession, a profession that is totally

²⁷ According to the Romanian regulations in force, an expert teacher is a teacher who cumulatively meets general criteria (regarding the level of studies, the professional status - tenured position, career development - certified teacher Level 2, the quality of teaching activity - very good annual evaluation, experience in carrying out mentoring or methodology-related activities) and specific criteria (*e.g.*, scientific activity, participation in in-service training, etc.), appointed after successfully passing the competition organised by the school inspectorates to temporarily or periodically carry out guidance, control and evaluation activity through teaching inspection.

unattractive at the moment because of the difficulties related to this profession and the reduced rewards available. According to 19 of the 20 persons we interviewed, before debating initial training routes, it is necessary to reconsider the status of the teaching profession in society, because, regardless of the training route, it is absolutely mandatory to increase the attractiveness of the teaching career in Romania, so that this particular feature could lay the basis for choosing this profession. Directly stating or just suggesting, our respondents' opinion is that, in order to really increase the quality of the teaching act, our educational system badly needs candidates who are truly motivated for embracing the teaching career. Thus, motivation should be an absolutely necessary condition for becoming a teacher, as, at present, more often than not, this choice is rather a plan B for the majority of those who are at the beginning of this professional path:

- Over the years, we have noticed that students participating in the psychopedagogical module (and we cannot see why it should be any different in the case of the master's degree in teaching, we add) choose this type of training as a backup plan, an interviewee with 25 years of experience in higher education tells us. The quality of teaching is an independent variable in my view. It is not the form that determines the substance!

- [...] a bachelor programme graduate opting for a master's degree dedicated to preparing him/ her for a teaching career implies a clear decision to follow this professional path, which could lead to increased retention of teaching staff in the education system. Therefore, the quality of teaching would increase not only due to potential teachers being exposed to a higher number of training hours, but also due to the implicit selection of people for whom being a teacher is an ideal (pre-university teacher, 20 years' experience);

- It can bring along a good selection of those who want a teaching career (university teacher, 25 years' experience);

- Perhaps one of the reasons for which we can estimate an increase in the quality of teaching for those graduating with a master's degree in teaching could be their motivation to follow the courses of this particular master's degree, adds another interviewee (university teacher, 20 years' experience). If future candidates for a teaching position choose to follow a master's degree in teaching (only this degree or simultaneously with a master's degree in the field of their specialisation), this could indicate a higher motivation for choosing a career in teaching. The new form of training might prove valuable for

master students who are really aiming for a teaching position, believes another university teacher with 19 years' experience;

- I think that - at a time when fewer and fewer students are enrolling in the psychopedagogical module, even though it is tuition free for those who get a subsidised place in the university undergraduate programme of their choice, and, at a time when many of those who enrol want to quit after they deliver their first teaching practice performance, saying that "it's hard" (or as one student put it: "For the 50 minutes' teaching time, I studied as if I had had to pass a midterm exam, I prepared for 2-3 days and spent almost 100 RON of my own money on teaching material for students!"), as they are rather interested in the "generous holidays" they know teachers have - the biggest risk is that students will not enrol for this master's degree in teaching to the extent we might expect (university teacher, 7 years' experience).

In very concrete terms, it is the level of teacher salaries in Romania (a notorious problem), which appears in 13 of our interviews as a major risk to the implementation of a teacher training route that would increase the quality of teaching: *the level of salaries is the first threat*, says a teacher who agreed to participate in our interview-based research, a school principal with 36 years of teaching experience. *As long as this variable is not controlled, master's degrees in teaching will continue to attract weaker candidates than master's degrees in science, and teachers will continue to be considered inferior to those in other professions.*

5.2. Insufficient data

The majority of our interviewees (17) believe that more data is necessary to establish the superiority of one training route or another. Indeed, we do not currently know enough about how the master programmes in teaching, piloted in the eight Romanian universities, have been run, or about how their potential graduates' skills might reflect in the quality of teaching. When asked whether the new training route is superior to the previous one (*i.e.*, the psychopedagogical training modules Levels I and II, carried out by the Teacher Training Departments), more precisely whether it is likely to have a positive impact on the quality of teaching, the teachers interviewed expressed reservations:

- I don't know if the quality of teaching will increase or not, research is needed in this respect (university teacher, 20 years' experience);
- From my point of view, at this very moment, we cannot say for certain whether the

new training route is superior or inferior to the previous one. A comparative evaluation of the two training routes will be relevant at least 4 years after the entry into the preuniversity education system of the graduates who are to study under the new provisions (pre-university teacher, 35 years' experience, school principal);

- For comparison purposes, it would be desirable to know the conclusions of the experiment with the master's degree in teaching in the eight pilot universities (pre-university expert teacher, 36 years' experience).

5.3. Important advantages

A main advantage, which can be deduced from what has been presented so far, is that the master's degree in teaching could benefit from a better selection of those who might enrol in this programme, in the sense that those who really want to take up a teaching position will opt for training through the master's degree in teaching. This idea is stated more or less explicitly by the overwhelming majority of those interviewed (18 teachers). It is especially the university teachers participating in our research who see the new form of initial training as a way of combating the hitherto negative selection of those who apply for the psycho-pedagogical training modules Levels I and II: *Yes, I believe that the new training route is likely to be superior to the previous one, as there are students who do not intend to pursue a career in teaching and, nevertheless, enrol in the psychopedagogical module so as to take advantage of this training opportunity (for some, it is tuition-free), and who do not turn out to be motivated students, not giving due importance to training through the psychopedagogical module, a shortcoming that could be overcome by the new regulations (we assume that only those who really want to pursue a teaching career will enter the master's degree!)* (university teacher, 7 years' experience).

Another important advantage, which is directly or indirectly mentioned by 16 of our respondents, would be that the master's degree in teaching, a concept discussed and analysed since 2011, when it was first included in the legal provisions regulating the teaching profession, then piloted in 8 of the largest universities in Romania, *has many chances to increase the quality of the teaching act because it is the result of a needs analysis of the educational reality* (pre-university teacher, 29 years' experience, school inspector); in the same vein, our interviewees have also pointed out to the fact that the master's degree in teaching can take up and subsequently either maximise the positive aspects characterising the old training route, or minimise its negative facets: *one could propose*

courses and/or content to develop teaching competences that might take into account the shortcomings/problems encountered in the previous psychopedagogical modules and the challenges of new learning contexts. Those forms of teacher training which have proved their effectiveness and ability to adapt to change should also be maintained (pre-university teacher, 35 years' experience).

The curriculum of the master's programme for teachers could also represent an advantage. If completed in a consistent, coherent and undivided period of time, this postgraduate degree could provide thorough training, according to 16 of the teachers in our research group. Particularly, the new master's degree in teaching (12 or 18 month programme) is to dedicate more hours to both the methodology of the specialisation subject (so far more weight was placed on acquiring knowledge in the students' specialisation area) and the teaching practice, considered essential by all the teachers who accepted to be interviewed: *the new training route, through the substantial number of hours and credits allocated to practical work, can foster a range of interactive approaches (project-based learning, experiential learning, collaborative learning) and link these activities to a coherent mentoring programme (university teacher, 19 years' experience).*

The emphasis on the importance of the teaching practice, as one of the strengths of the new route of initial teacher training, is a constant in our respondents' answers: *a balance is achieved between the teaching of a subject or subjects in a certain curricular area and the teaching of other curricular areas, correlated with the teaching practice (pre-university teacher, 28 years' experience).* Moreover, according to another interviewee (pre-university teacher, 12 years' experience), *allotting one year / one and a half years to teacher training could ensure the acquisition of sound theoretical notions of pedagogy and educational psychology and, above all, the participation in more hours of teaching practice, because, as another respondent points out, emphasising the same idea, being a teacher is not only about sharing your knowledge, but knowing how to do it (pre-university teacher, 35 years' experience, school principal).* Another teacher strongly supports the idea of thorough practical training by mentioning some weaknesses characterising the activity of those trained through the former route: *There are many teachers in preuniversity education who are very well trained in terms of the subject they teach, but who do not have the necessary teaching skills to transmit the desired knowledge to the younger generation. There are people who know a lot but only for themselves, who do not make themselves understood by students and who do not manage to overcome the obstacle of successfully*

using those teaching strategies that might facilitate the transmission/reception of knowledge. Many are unable to get emotionally close to the direct beneficiaries of the teaching process because they are unaware of the psychopedagogical aspects that characterise various groups of students. Thus, their teaching discourse is not in line with their students' age and individual characteristics, being either too sophisticated and therefore incomprehensible to them, or too childish and therefore uninteresting. At the same time, without proper psychopedagogical training there is no way of knowing the students' interests, aspirations and abilities. It is therefore impossible to provide quality teaching that is differentiated and adapted to the group and/or the individual (pre-university expert teacher, 37 years' experience).

The strengths of curriculum of the master's programme in teaching also emerge from the responses of the teachers we interviewed: *this curriculum includes pedagogical disciplines, educational research concepts derived from practical examples, recommendations and suggestions for making teaching, learning and assessment activities more effective, as well as teaching practice modules with social and ethical impact, from a mono- and transdisciplinary perspective. In this way, according to our interviewee, the student-teacher learns how to use teaching methods reflectively and creatively, and the teaching practice activities, organised in accordance with the structure of the school year, give the student-teacher the opportunity to gain an in-depth perspective of the school environment and to design more complex teaching projects, which may take more time to implement. The longer time dedicated to the teaching practice entails a variety of learning contexts/school environments, with positive effects on the student teacher's ability to evaluate and adapt their methods (pre-university teacher, 36 years' experience, school principal).*

Therefore, such a curriculum *can be a very good link between the competences acquired during the bachelor's degree and the future teaching activity in a school*, says a pre-university teacher, 30 years' experience, school inspector. Last but not least, according to a university teacher with 7 years of experience, another important advantage might be that, *from the perspective of training for the teaching profession, the master's degree in teaching is an opportunity to harmonise what is happening in our country with what is happening in other educational systems around the world.*

5.4. Many variables, many risks

Assuming that the main purpose of any initial training route that prospective teachers might embark on is to ensure quality education, our research subjects have identified many unknown variables, which might translate into risks, threats, dangers or possible blockages. The teachers we interviewed have drawn attention to some categories of variables:

(1) methodological variables:

- the accreditation standards laid down for the master's degree in teaching and the structure of the curriculum; the similar manner of providing practical training in all institutions involved; the institutional capacity to organise, monitor and evaluate psychopedagogical practice activities; the manner in which these programmes will actually be organised at university level depends on the capacity of the universities to provide qualified teaching staff, material resources (university teacher, 19 years' experience);
- the organisation and conduct of teaching practice with particular reference to the type of school, number of students assigned to a practicum supervisor, number of hours, etc. (pre-university teacher, 35 years' experience, school principal);
- there might exist a lack of collaboration between trainers at university and pre-university levels (pre-university teacher, 36 years' experience, school principal, underlining the need for a common vision);
- Does the time factor for initial and continuing training have equal, standardised units of measurement? For example, if I follow a master's degree in teaching, after how long am I invited to participate in continuing training for the teaching profession? (university teacher, 25 years' experience, in an attempt to signal it is crucial for the initial and continuing training to closely attune);
- the risks are also linked to the concentration of teacher training only in certain universities (university teacher with 25 years' experience).

(2) material variables, formulated by both university and preuniversity teachers:

- How do I receive funding to participate in training for a professional master's degree and how do I receive it for participation in a master's degree in teaching? Do I have the freedom and certainty that participating in this type of training will have a direct connection to my future employment/tenure in teaching? (university teacher, 25 years' experience);

- How will young university graduates be incentivised to do two more years of schooling with the aim of becoming teachers? Will they be given incentives (e.g. scholarships)? (pre-university teacher, 35 years' experience, school principal).

(3) political variables (inconsistency, instability):

- I don't know if it will materialise. I think the main risk is the lack of coherence of the legal provisions (pre-university teacher, 12 years' experience);
- one of the risks is that people in key positions do not carry out their projects (pre-university expert teacher, 36 years' experience).

(4) legislative variables, in the sense of clarifications, which both university and pre-university teachers consider absolutely necessary:

- *clear, objective criteria are needed, linked both to the economic factors and the social context* (school principal, 35 years' experience, referring to being admitted to the master's programme in teaching);
- *another necessary condition for increasing the quality of teaching could be clear regulation of the conditions for teaching practice (as well as an increase in the number of hours of teaching practice) and mentoring during practice and the start of a career, which could underpin the development of the preprofessional identity of candidates/starters; if there are clear regulations and full support from the authorities for the implementation of these regulations, there is a chance that these measures will materialise* (university teacher, 20 years' experience).

(5) psychological variables: *the resistance to change* characterising both teachers and universities (mentioned twice, by two university teachers, 17/20 years' experience), *the reluctant attitude of some bachelor's degree graduates, their lack of seriousness or commitment* (mentioned four times, by preuniversity teachers with 36, 35, 12, 37 years' experience, including two preuniversity expert teachers).

Alongside these variables, those who participated in this research have also expressed their concerns as to the possibility that the new regulations for the two master's degrees in teaching may not bring any change at all, that they might *comprise the same activities/ content under different names/ different courses* (pre-university teacher, 35 years' experience, school principal), or, to put it bluntly, as one of our interviewees did, *same meat, different gravy*, i.e. it is only a change of form, the substance remaining untouched (pre-university teacher, 17 years' experience).

We agree with our interviewees that not only the prestige of the teaching profession, but also the awareness of its social importance have to be raised. In our opinion, any of the two master's degrees in teaching can be a step forward from this perspective, as it is a path towards professionalisation, which could transform the teaching profession into a highly qualified profession, a profession that can regain its former status.

6. Conclusions

Acknowledging the limits of our paper (small number of respondents - 20; four universities in Romania; preuniversity teachers from only one county - Prahova) and hoping to widen the scope of our research (by asking novice teachers what they could have benefited from/ what they may have lacked during their ITE stage), our findings suggest that there are both opportunities and threats when it comes to assessing the impact of the recently adopted legal provisions on ITE in Romania. Internationally, the trend is to view ITE as a process at the end of which the prospective teacher is fully equipped with knowledge, experience through extensive practice hours, as well as provided with support during the so-called induction period, by means of well-qualified teacher-mentors. So, not only more studying time is necessary for someone who would like to embrace this profession, but also more exposure and the ability to benefit from thorough practical training. Thus, the improved quality in teachers' initial training may be directly proportional with the competences acquired by their students.

To some extent, the findings of our qualitative research has shown that the new provisions regulating ITE in Romania follow the international trend, at least for the theoretical (related both to the teaching subject and pedagogy) and practical aspects, as any of the master programmes in teaching that might be chosen by future teachers will probably include disciplines meant to endow them with the appropriate teaching skills and competences in a way that may be superior to the prevailing concurrent model used so far, in terms of the teaching quality to be subsequently delivered. Nevertheless, according to our interviewees, more data is necessary to prove the superiority of the new model. In addition to that, there are many obstacles to be overcome, the biggest of them being the lack of motivation, as for many of those who take this career path at present, this is, more often than not, their second choice. Moreover, considering that recent regulations represent the second attempt to professionalise teaching by means of a

dedicated master's degree, our respondents expressed their concern, pointing to the need of consistency, objectivity and transparency in the legislative process, as well as to the appropriation of the necessary funds that might pave the way for success.

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