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Strengths and weaknesses of the Romanian pre-service training system in prospective secondary-school teachers’ view

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the current Romanian pre-service training system for secondary teachers. Drawing on recent proposals regarding teacher education, put forth by the EU, and on Romanian legal and curricular provisions in force, a small scale questionnaire-survey was conducted in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the framework in use, in prospective secondary-school teachers’ view. The subjects’ answers highlight the good and bad points of the Romanian teacher education system, leading us to the conclusion that the prospective secondary-school teachers’ view is realistic and giving us the opportunity to make some recommendations.

Keywords: pre-service teacher education; secondary-school teachers; Romanian pre-service training system

1. Introduction

The main goal of the Strategic Framework for Education and Training (ET 2020) is to ensure high-quality teaching, and the European Council’s conclusions of March 2013 pinpointed to the possible means of accomplishing this goal. Thus, ‘by ensuring effective initial teacher education, by providing coherent and adequately resourced systems for recruitment selection, initial teacher education, early career support and competence-based continuing professional development of teaching staff’ (EC, 2013:3), one can make sure that this EU priority will eventually take shape. Nevertheless, the issue is complex and, more often than not, country-sensitive. Taking this into

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consideration, this paper aims at giving a short account of the current situation regarding the initial education for secondary school teachers in Romania, mainly from the point of view of the Bachelor’s Degree students wishing to become teachers. In part one, we briefly outline the recent proposals regarding teacher education in Europe, and, using it as a reference point, in part two, we review the Romanian legislative and curricular provisions in force. Thus, we provide the theoretical basis necessary for our empirical research, described in part three in point of methodology, data analysis and interpretation. The final part deals with the conclusions of our investigation and introduces possible solutions for the problems that have been identified.

2. EU Perspectives on Teacher Education

The activity of the European institutions in the field of teacher education has had a long history. Starting with the Treaty of Rome (1957), which tackled the issue of professional training, continuing with the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), which dedicated an entire article to education, several other official documents have constantly outlined that a highly educated population is the key to economic success and sustainability. The initiatives included in the Memorandum for Lifelong Learning adopted by the Lisbon Council in 2000 prepared the launch and the implementation of the work programme ET 2010 and its continuation, ET 2020. The result is a common European strategic framework for education and training that should be followed by policymakers, education and training providers, employers and learners.

Therefore, teacher education has gradually become one of the EU watchwords. The development of Common European Principles on Teacher Competences and Qualifications (2005) (‘a well qualified profession; a profession within the context of lifelong learning; a mobile profession; a profession based on partnership’) helped the European Commission suggest further policy steps in its Communication on Improving the Quality of Teacher Education (2007). Focusing on lifelong learning, the 2007 Commission proposals would serve: to ensure that provision for teachers’ education and professional development is coordinated, coherent, and adequately resourced; to ensure that all teachers possess the knowledge, attitudes and pedagogic skills that they require to be effective; to support the professionalisation of teaching; promote a culture of reflective practice and research within the teaching profession; and to promote the status and recognition of the profession (EC, 2007). It had become obvious that by providing high-quality initial teacher training, one comes closer to achieving the main EU goals.

3. Pre-Service Teacher Education for Secondary-School Teachers in Romania

In Romania, education reform started after the events in 1989 and has been sped up since 1998. Ever since the beginning, one of its priorities has been the reformation of the pre-service and in-service teacher education system. Initial teacher education has been regulated by several Acts of Parliament, and, as our research focuses on future secondary-school teachers, we limit our short description to this well-confined category.

Pre-service teacher education for secondary-school teachers has been progressively reformed, in three main stages. Firstly, Education Act of 1995 (modified and supplemented by Act 268/2003 and by Act 354/2004) and Act 128/1997 on the status of teachers (modified and supplemented by Act 349/2004) regulated the teaching positions and the selection and occupation procedures. Accordingly, higher education graduates who wished to become teachers could join the profession only if they had attended the psychopedagogical training and methodology courses organized by the Teacher Education Departments (TED) within the universities (Education Act of 1995, 68, (1), (2)). For example, a Math university graduate could become a Math teacher, only if he had attended and graduated from, during or within 3 years since his university graduation, the compulsory and elective courses provided by the TED (Pedagogy, Curriculum Theory and Methods, Teaching Theory and Methods, Educational Psychology, Computer-Assisted Instruction etc); thus, the initial training curriculum for secondary-school teachers meant coping with an extraload of lecture, seminar and practice hours (the equivalent of one semester). Moreover, only after being employed as a secondary-school teacher for two years and passing the permanent certification exam, did the period of initial teacher training finally end.

The second reform stage is marked by the Bologna Process. Romania, having signed the Declaration in 1999, regulated the new higher education structure by means of Act 288/2004, which came into force starting with the 2005-2006 academic year. As a result, initial teacher education was seriously amended from both a quantitative and
qualitative point of view: the number of hours necessary for teacher training was doubled and new disciplines (e.g. Developing and Managing Educational Programmes, the Sociology of Education etc.) were introduced. More exactly, the TED has remained the body responsible with initial teacher education, and the two possible cycles, the Bachelor and Master’s degrees, entitle the prospective graduates to different qualifications, the former allowing its owner to get a teaching position in the compulsory education system, and the latter offering the possibility to teach in upper-secondary schools (the regulations are provided in a document annually issued by the Romanian Ministry of Education, comprising the disciplines, the domains and the specialisations, as well as the competition methodology for getting a teaching position in secondary education). Thus, in line with the example given before, a graduate with a Bachelor’s Degree in Math may obtain a teaching position in lower-secondary education if he has attended the first level of psychopedagogical training, and if he continues his education by completing a Master’s Degree, together with the second level of psychopedagogical training, he can become an upper-secondary teacher.

The third stage, initiated by Education Act of 2011, has further reformed pre-service teacher education, and its provisions should come into force for the 2014 Bachelor graduates. According to the new regulations, initial teacher education is divided into: (I) theoretical training acquired alongside the specialization programme for the Bachelor’s Degree; (II) didactic knowledge and skills acquired through the 2-year Master’s Degree; (III) one-year teaching practice under the supervision of a mentor-teacher. Recent research (see Serbanescu, 2013; Staiculescu and Paduraru, 2013) critically analyses the good and bad points of the forthcoming system. Thus, as compared to the previous two stages, these new regulations seem superior, not only from a quantitative point of view (three full years of exposure to theoretical and practical aspects of teaching), but also from a qualitative point of view, if we consider the fact that a Bachelor’s Degree graduate consciously applies for a Master’s Degree to become a teacher. Moreover, these provisions definitely follow the policy steps suggested by the European Commission, and, even there is hope that the current situation – people choosing to become teachers mainly because they do not have any viable alternative – might change, and students might become motivated to choose a teaching career, provided the pay system improves. Nevertheless, at present there are no clear indications as to how this Master’s Degree will unfold, what the curricula should comprise or who will finance the programmes. In addition to these, current 1st and 2nd year students, who wish to become teachers, have attended the courses provided by the TED, although, at least in theory, their training should have been ensured by the Master’s Degree. As a result, our investigation is aimed at the students that will get their Bachelor’s Degrees this academic year (2012-2013) and who, having attended the psychopedagogical programme offered by the TED, may apply for a teaching position in the secondary education system, if they choose so, beginning with the 2013-2014 school year.

4. Research

4.1. Methodology

The survey was conducted at University of Ploiesti (UPG), in April 2013 and included a sample of 100 3rd year students, from different specialisations: Philology (47), Economics (28), Computer Science (11), Math (9) and Administrative Sciences (5). The number of Philology students who choose the TED programme is bigger as they can usually teach basic disciplines (e.g. Romanian, foreign languages). The sample is 84% made up of females and 16% males, the proportion being similar with the situation at national and even European level, according to data provided by Eurydice and OECD. 62% are from the urban area and 38% from the rural area. Except for two subjects, the sample gained their teaching experience as a result of their teaching practice during their 3rd academic year. A high degree of homogeneity is also reflected in the students’ age, 97% being between 21 and 24 years old, which is typical for the Bachelor’s Degree students. The questionnaire included 12 specific items, structured according to the objectives of our research: (1) the students’ quantitatively and qualitatively evaluating the initial teacher education programme provided by the TED in order to help us determine their degree of satisfaction with the programme they have attended; (2) the extent to which the students are informed about the legal provisions in force, regulating the teaching profession; (3) students’ opinion on the present form of initial teacher training as compared to the new form envisaged by Romanian Education Act of 2011; (4) self-evaluating students’ competences necessary for their prospective activity as secondary-school teachers.
4.2. Research Findings

The analysis of the data shows a high degree of homogeneity in subjects’ answers, not linked to the given variables (study programme, sex or residence). As far as the teacher education programme provided by the TED is concerned, 54% of the subjects consider it adequate, but insufficient, whereas 46% of the subjects deem it adequate and sufficient. In 50 subjects’ view, the weaknesses of the programme relate to the reduced length and inconsistency of the teaching practice period, and also to the limited time allotted to the disciplines in the curriculum or to the rapid pace imposed by the curriculum. According to 21 subjects, the strengths of the programme derive from aspects not related to the issue under discussion, appreciating the programme as it offers them a secondary option for a job, apart from the specialization provided by the Bachelor’s Degree, a kind of plan B, which always comes in handy, while the rest emphasize the topicality of the programme and the pleasant manner in which the courses are delivered.

Being required to state the reasons for their choosing the programme, to a great extent, the subjects’ answers reveal the same external motivation, evidenced earlier: 42 subjects declare that ‘the programme is compulsory for the prospective teachers’; 23 subjects consider it ‘an alternative, a different option’, and 11 subjects mention the fact that the programme is free. There are other reasons as well, less frequently brought up, but very much along the same line of thought: ‘simple curiosity’, ‘the opportunity to find a job quickly’, ‘it’s nice to have it under qualifications in one’s CV’ or ‘acting on family advice’. Moreover, we have also identified another type of reasons: ‘improving knowledge’ – 20 subjects; ‘novelty’, ‘challenge’, ‘being able to teach other people’ or even the simple answer ‘I like it’ – 18 subjects. It is important to mention at this point that the reasons enumerated by our subjects do not always clearly fall under the two given categories, and that there are some cases when the reasons are combined – for example ‘I like it and it’s free’.

Regardless of the reasons, if they had to choose again, 95% of the sample would attend the programme once more, 19% of the subjects rating the results of their training as excellent and 73% as good. Only 8% did not express a firm opinion, viewing the training provided by TED as neither good nor bad (we would like to point out that no subject went for the bad or very bad opinion). As for the subjects’ level of satisfaction with certain aspects of the teacher education programme (very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied, very dissatisfied), our analysis starts with the high end of the hierarchy. Therefore, subjects were very satisfied with the debates/discussions during activities, and then the order is the following: exchanges with peers, assigned readings, course assignments and projects. They were satisfied or dissatisfied with the balance between theory and practice, an aspect which was already pinpointed as one of the weaknesses of the programme by a previous item of the questionnaire. As for total dissatisfaction, the aspects graded so involve: coverage of current issues, professors’ methods of evaluating students and the academic advising they received. Even if the overall rating of the teacher education programme is positive, many of the subjects do not really know basic information about their prospective profession, as they are not able to indicate the disciplines they will be allowed to teach or the exact secondary level curricula (lower or upper) to which these disciplines belong. Although 74% of the subjects state that they know this information, when asked to enumerate the disciplines they could teach and the corresponding teaching level, the percent drops, as one subject cannot give any details and 8 of them give the wrong information. Thus, the percent of the subjects who are insufficiently informed about their teaching opportunities as Bachelor graduates, increases to 35%.

When asked whether they are familiar with the new provisions for initial teacher education put forth by Education Act of 2011, which will come into force starting with the 2014-2015 academic year, 63% of the subjects are unable to provide a positive answer. But, after including the missing information in the next item of the questionnaire (‘According to Education Act of 2011, Bachelor graduates who want to become teachers have to apply for a Master’s Degree in teaching. Is this form of initial teacher education superior to the present one?’), 76% of the subjects rate the new form of initial teacher education as superior, emphasizing: ‘the length and focus of the programme’; ‘the opportunity to deepen one’s understanding and increase one’s knowledge’; ‘the possibility to make a balance between theory and practice’; ‘the need for highly qualified teachers’. As for the opinion of the subjects who do not consider the new type of initial teacher education to be superior to the present one, there are arguments worth mentioning here: a longer training period (6 years, if the induction period is included vs. 3 years)
means delaying the moment when teachers come into contact with school reality, preventing prospective teachers from accumulating practical experience; inborn qualities - a personal call for the teaching profession - are more important than the time spent on getting a Master’s degree. Moreover, for the pessimistic, the lengthening of the training period would widen the gap between theory and practice, an issue which has already been mentioned with other items of the questionnaire and which definitely seems to be one of the major weaknesses of the Romanian initial teacher education.

Regarding the question related to self-evaluation (‘What kind of teacher do you think you will be?’), 18% of the subjects rate themselves as excellent teachers, whereas more than three quarters (83% - the same percentage obtained for another question, ‘Do you intend to teach in the near future?’) consider themselves good teachers, 17% of the subjects go for the neither good nor bad answer and no subject chooses the ‘poor’ option. This quite optimistic view on themselves as teachers diminishes, subjects taking a more prudent stand when invited to self-evaluate concrete aspects of the actual teaching-learning-assessment activity, most of them estimating their teaching knowledge and skills as ‘fair’. Thus, based on subjects’ answers, the aspects taken into consideration can be ordered as follows (on the excellent - poor continuum): using educational technology as a learning tool; planning stimulating lessons; motivating students to participate in academic tasks; teaching knowledge and developing competences described in the curricula; seeking and using feedback to improve instruction; using classroom research and inquiry strategies; teaching problem solving, conceptual understanding, and other aspects of higher-order thinking; using inquiry methods to create an effective learning environment; using classroom management techniques/procedures; using formative assessment; interpreting and using standardized test results; using knowledge and skills accumulated during Bachelor’s Degree for effective instruction; handling uncertainty by posing questions and seeking the best solution to problems based on evidence; making decisions about teaching based on classroom evidence; creating learning experiences that make the central concepts of the subject matter meaningful for students; reflecting on and improving their teaching performance; reflecting on and evaluating their theories of teaching; knowing ways to diversify lessons to meet the students’ individual needs; applying recent research in education; accommodating individual differences by adapting curriculum and instruction; making teaching decisions based on the results of pupil assessments; using the national curriculum frameworks and performance standards to plan instruction. As for the interpretation of this order, it is easy to explain why ‘using educational technology as a learning tool’ was ranked first, if we take into account the fact that most subjects are digital natives, ‘native speakers of the digital language’ (Prensky, 2001), whereas, for the issues that came last – ‘using the national curriculum frameworks and performance standards to plan instruction’, assessment related problems – it is more difficult to find an explanation. Nevertheless, if we reflect on the fact that even Romanian experienced teachers generally feel less secure about issues related to ‘Assessment Theory and Methods’ and ‘Curriculum Theory and Methods’ (Iucu, 2007), it means that initial teacher education programme needs to give these disciplines more attention.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

With no intention of being an exhaustive characterization of the initial teacher education for secondary-school teachers in Romania, this research paper concisely describes the current situation from the prospective secondary-teachers’ view: the programme they attended is adequate, but there is definitely room for improvement. Nevertheless, due to the small number of subjects (100) and the fact that our study is limited to one Romanian university, this is rather preliminary research which needs further, deeper and wider investigation. However, taking into account our teaching experience, we cannot but moderately optimistic about the extent to which the current generation of Bachelor’s Degree graduates is prepared for their prospective teaching career. Therefore, very much like those reserved subjects of our inquiry (17%), who made it clear that they do not want to teach in the near future, we are aware of the problems characterising the Romanian education system - low salaries, exaggerated bureaucracy, work-related stress - problems that generally demotivate teachers to a great extent. Moreover, there are other important aspects worth considering, which our subjects pinpointed in their answers, such as the huge responsibility the teaching profession involves and teachers’ versatility, given the multiple roles they are supposed to play under current social circumstances. Thus, even if, at the beginning, prospective teachers are enthusiastic about teaching, reality can make them back off and reconsider their position.
Apart from these social and financial issues that need to be at least partially solved, initial teacher education has to be reconsidered, in close relationship with the other priorities of the Romanian educational reform. The weaknesses of the current system, revealed by our subjects and highlighted by recent research (Serbanescu, 2013), could be diminished once the provisions of the new Romanian Education Act of 2011 come into force and provided EU recommendations are followed: by devoting two full academic years to initial teacher education (Master’s Degree), the gap between the knowledge and skills acquired during the Bachelor’s Degree period and the psychopedagogical training can be narrowed; by introducing the one-year induction period, spent under the supervision of a teacher-mentor, one can bridge the gap between teaching theory and practice; by including new disciplines in the teacher training curriculum (for example School Legislation, which might provide the teachers with the necessary information about their legal status and responsibilities) or by allotting more time in the curriculum to those disciplines indicated by experienced teachers and pointed out earlier in this paper, the system can produce better newly-qualified teachers. On condition that all these measures came into force according to schedule, the Romanian initial teacher education system could become competitive.

References