

ERD 2021**9th International Conference Education, Reflection, Development****THE BEGINNING TEACHER IN ROMANIA - BETWEEN
PROFESSIONALIZATION AND DIGITIZATION**

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Abstract

The debut period in the teaching career is defining for the subsequent professional path. The beginning teacher in Romania must prove a level, at least satisfactory, of development of the competences specific to the didactic profession, especially psycho-pedagogical competences and skills corresponding to the field of specialization. In the current situation of the COVID 19 pandemic, the beginning teachers must prove their level of professional skills by using digital technologies. This paper describes the challenges and difficulties faced by beginning teachers in the process of digitized professionalization of skills specific to the teaching profession. The research begins with an analysis of professional skills, valorised by areas of competence and levels of cumulative skill development. The high percentage found in the level of skills development in the field of Information and Communication Techniques required an analysis of the context in which digital skills were developed. Are beginning teachers native digitals or digitally trained? Low percentages expressed in levels of skills development in areas directly related to effective teaching experience - Didactics of specialization, Educational Psychology and Pedagogy, lack of effective teaching experience, inability to develop intrinsic motivations, lack of professional support during the internship, all these aspects indicate in fact the question we answer at the end of the research: Did the Covid 19 pandemic influence beginning teachers' decision to continue their teaching career?

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1. Introduction

Graduation from specialized studies in the qualification of teacher for primary and preschool education is the first stage of initial vocational training. The second stage involves a practical internship, which aims to complete the initial training. The Romanian National Education Law stipulates that the persons who have passed the national competitive examination for filling vacant teaching positions (in the common language - tenure exam) can be employed in the national pre-university education system for a determined period of practical internship, with the status of beginning teachers.

The practical internship lasts one school year and is carried out in an educational unit, usually under the coordination of a mentor teacher. After completing the practical internship, the beginning teachers can take the final exam. Passing this examination confers them the status of teachers with the right to practice, i.e. tenured teachers in pre-university education.

The debut period in the teaching career is defining for the subsequent professional path. The beginning teacher in Romania must prove a level, at least satisfactory, of development of the competences specific to the didactic profession, especially psycho-pedagogical competences and skills corresponding to the field of specialization. In the current situation of the COVID 19 pandemic, the beginning teachers must prove their level of professional skills by using digital technologies.

1.1. The current legislative framework of initial training for teaching positions in primary education in Romania

The National Education Law no. 1/2011 in Romania (art. 247), regulates the initial training for the didactic positions in primary education: teacher for primary education, with its different names for specific levels of training in Romania (*profesor pentru învățământ primar, institutor / institutoare and învățător / învățătoare*). Initial training for the position of teacher in primary education includes:

- initial, theoretical training, in the respective specialty, offered in universities within programs accredited according to the law;
- practical internship lasting one school year, carried out in an educational unit, usually under the coordination of a mentor teacher (idem, art. 236, para. 1, letter a, c.).

The initial training of teachers for primary education is carried out within the Bachelor's Degree Program *Pedagogy of primary and preschool education*, with a duration of 3 years. The study program is intended both for high school graduates with a baccalaureate degree and for teachers in primary and preschool education without higher education (graduates of pedagogical high schools / short-term educational institutions).

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By exception from the provisions of para. (1), the training of the primary education staff for the positions of *învățător/învățătoare* is carried out through the pedagogical high schools (idem, Art. 236,

para. 2). The framework regulation for the organization and functioning of pedagogical education in the pre-university education system provides: Art. 2. (1) The educational units in which pre-university pedagogical education is organized are high school education units, which have the capacity to organize the teaching-learning - evaluation process and pedagogical practice, for the specializations within the vocational chain: teacher for the primary and preschool education (*învățători-educatoare*), educator-puericultor, extracurricular education instructor, school mediator.

The initial training of teachers for primary education comprises two stages:

- completion of specialized studies in the qualification of teacher for primary education / *învățător-învățătoare*;
- performing a practical internship. People in the internship period have the status of beginning teachers.

Occupying a teaching position during the practical internship *lasting one school year* is achieved through a national competition for vacant positions / chairs (LEN no. 1/2011, art. 240). In common parlance this contest is called *tenure exam*.

In the current legislative context, obtaining tenure in pre-university education in Romania involves, in fact, two stages:

- promotion of the national competition for filling the vacant teaching positions (in the common language - tenure exam), following which they may fill a teaching position for the determined period of the practical internship;
- passing the final exam, after which the candidates acquire the right to teach, that is the capacity of tenured teacher or teacher in full in the pre-university education system, and may fill a teaching position for an indefinite period.

Tenured teachers in the pre-university education system are teachers who have signed an individual employment contract for an indefinite period. The Romanian National Education Law provides the following: Art. 241 (2) Teachers who pass the final exam acquire the title of teacher with the right to teach in pre-university education (teachers in full, tenured teachers). (6) The persons who do not pass the final exam in education, under the conditions of the present article, may be employed in the national system of pre-university education only for a determined period, with the status of beginner teacher. Art. 254 (13) The candidates who have obtained the tenure in education, teachers with the right to practice, and have filled a vacant teaching position, through a national competition, are tenured teachers in pre-university education (*idem*).

In Romania, in these past ten years, a series of legislative changes have been made in order to ensure a high quality teaching, which have led to the differentiation of teachers through national exams:

- a) Starting with 2012, the tenure in education is obtained by sitting a national exam (OMECTS no. 5560/2011). Since the 2013 school year, the novelty has been the increase of the average grade to at least eight for passing this exam (OMECTS 6193 / 13.11.2012). The decrease by more than ten percentage points of the number of teachers who passed the final exam in 2013 (51.26%) compared to (62.23%) in 2012 is justified by this change. From one year to the next, the results of the national tenure examinations decreased in percentage, the promotion rate being slightly below 50%.

- b) In with the school year 2016-2017, the structure of the examination for tenure in education was modified, which includes: practical internship with the support of two specialized inspections, evaluation of a personal portfolio and a written test (OMENCS 5087 / 31.08.2016).
- c) In the school year 2020-2021, the training programs related to the tenure and tenure exams in primary and preschool education were modified again (OMEN 5.975 / 9.11.2020)

1.2. Professionalization of the teaching career in primary education

Explanatory dictionaries in Romania define *the primary school teacher* as being a *qualified person*, with special training, *who teaches* a series of subjects on the level of primary education. The teaching profession in primary education represents:

- a set of specific skills. Candidates who opt for the specialization *Pedagogy of primary and preschool education* take, upon admission, a series of eliminatory tests - music, drawing, diction and communication.
- a qualification - a professional occupation. *The right to teach - qualification* is acquired by graduating with a bachelor's degree in the specialization *Pedagogy of primary and preschool education*. Effective teaching - the professional occupation is legislated by the occupational standard no. 234101 - primary school teacher.
- a set of specific professional skills. Professionalization of teaching - professionalization for the teaching career - is based on the model of approach through competencies and on the concept of cumulative development of the competence level of the teaching staff (LEN no.1/2011, Art. 90).

The main areas in which the competences corresponding to the teaching profession are defined are:

- a) the domain of specialization and didactics of specialization corresponding to the curriculum subjects and the position held by the teacher;
- b) the field of pedagogy and educational psychology;
- c) the domain of educational management and school legislation;
- d) the field of information and communication techniques applied in teaching and learning processes, in institutional management and data management.

The competence system aims to achieve a set of quality standards. The assessment of teachers' professional competencies thus relates to the elements described by professional standards.

1.3. The role of digital skills in the professionalization process for the teaching career

The competencies specific to the teaching profession are the subject of a development / change at a rate never seen before. In these past 10 years, the international strategies regarding the professionalization of teachers are focused with priority on the use of new technologies in pedagogical contexts. For example, in Canada, specific skills in this regard involves “integrating information and communication technologies into the preparation and management of teaching-learning activities, in the management of education and professional development” (Villeneuve et al., 2013, p. 24).

1.4. Support and assistance for beginning teachers

In the initial training, not everything necessary for the exercise of the profession can be learned. The context of practicing the profession can be characterized by “complexity and mobility, and sometimes by ambiguity, uncertainty, indeterminacy. The growing set of expectations to which teachers are subjected made us meditate upon the support they need” (Albulescu, 2019 p. 77).

In this respect, the literature provides extensive information regarding teachers’ training models, specific standards and competencies, the creation of integrated programs based on practical skills, abilities to learn teaching practices, identification of unitary teaching practices, development of mentoring programs (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Souto-Manning, 2019).

High quality teaching is directly influenced by what teachers know and can achieve. The knowledge and skills acquired in the early years of the teaching career represent a starting point that can be strengthened through training programs, mentoring or induction in the profession (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2018). Mentoring and opportunities to learn from and with other teachers, in one's own school or in other schools, bring a major contribution to the professional development of beginning teachers.

2. Problem Statement

- The beginning teachers in Romania are subjected, at the beginning of their teaching career, to rigorous professional exams: the national tenure competition and the final exam - in a constantly changing legislative context.
- In Romania, all teachers, regardless of the teaching experience gained, are evaluated against unique performance criteria. The results of the competency assessment are the basis of the school's decision to award the annual grade, which allows the teacher to continue teaching. In the absence of differentiated assessment standards, beginning teachers must demonstrate good levels of competence in all areas specific to the teaching profession. The annual grades obtained allow them access to take the national exams.
- In the training of teaching staff in Romania, the field of information and communication techniques applied in teaching and learning processes, in institutional management and data management represents one of the four main areas in which competences corresponding to the teaching profession are defined. Although there has been a legislative regulation in this respect since 2011, the importance given to digital competences in proved their true value in the times of the Covid 19 pandemic.
- In Romania, starting with 2012, the body of mentors was established on the national level. This legislative measure, meant to provide support to beginning teachers during their internship, has not become operational. The body of mentors is not yet functional.

3. Research Questions

- According to the Romanian legislation, the beginning teachers in Romania are subjected, at the beginning of their teaching career, to rigorous professional exams: the national tenure competition and the final exam. Has the pandemic situation affected the motivation and / or the capacity of beginning teachers to continue their teaching career by taking and passing the tenure and definitive teacher exams in education?
- The fields in which the competences corresponding to the teaching profession are defined are complex. The levels of competence development are expressed in annual grades, which, for beginning teachers, allow not only the continuation of the professional activity, but, especially, the access to take the national exams. In the current situation of the Covid 19 pandemic, to what extent could beginning teachers manage to develop their competencies in each of the fields corresponding to the teaching profession?
- Training institutions for teachers in Romania do not have a digital skills training policy in place.
- In the current situation of the COVID 19 pandemic, to what extent could the beginning teachers succeed in using the new technologies in teaching?
- Although it has been legislated since 2012, as a measure to support beginning teachers during the internship, in Romania the body of mentors is not functional, not even today. In the most common situations, the support provided to beginning teachers consists in the collegial support of teachers with expertise. In the current situation of the Covid 19 pandemic, has the lack of professional support that could have been offered by the school and by the colleagues affected the integration of the beginning teachers into the chair and implicitly their decision for a teaching career?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research is to present the challenges and difficulties encountered by beginning teachers in primary education in the process of digitized professionalization of skills specific to the teaching profession in the context of the Covid 19 pandemic.

The objectives of the research are the following:

Objective 1: Identifying the level of development of skills corresponding to the teaching profession by beginning teachers in primary education

Objective 2: Identifying the curriculum subjects related to initial training for primary education, which directly contribute to the formation of digitalisation skills for teaching and their placement in the framework training plan.

Objective 3: Identifying the effects of Covid 19 pandemic on the motivation of beginning primary school teachers to continue teaching

5. Research Methods

The research approach is applicative-ascertaining, and uses:

- methods of data collection: study of documents, questionnaire-based survey, interview-based inquiry;

- methods of presentation and statistical data processing: SPSS statistical program, digital tools;

- methods for interpreting research results: SPSS statistical program; content analysis.

The research design integrates three stages:

a. The research begins with an analysis of the levels of development of the competences corresponding to the teaching profession by the beginning teachers in primary education.

In this respect, a grid of analysis of the competences specific to the teaching profession has been elaborated, which refers to:

- the competencies development level of beginning teachers in each of the 6 fields where the competences corresponding to the teaching profession are defined: the field of specialization and didactics of specialization corresponding to the curriculum subjects and the position held by the teacher, the sphere of pedagogy and educational psychology, the domain of management education and school legislation, the field of information and communication techniques applied in teaching and learning processes, in institutional management and data management (see the Table 1)

- level of cumulative development of skills corresponding to the teaching profession by beginning teachers - 10 levels of cumulative development of professional skills: Knowledge, Understanding, Use of specific language, Explanation, Interpretation, Application, Transfer, Problem solving, Reflection, Creativity (see the Table 2)

The research method used is the questionnaire-based survey. The sample to be researched consists of 31 school inspectors.

b. The high percentage expressed in the level of skills development in the field Information and communication techniques required an analysis of the formal context in which digital skills were developed. Are beginning teachers native digitals or digitally trained?

In this sense, an analysis of the curriculum carried out by 11 universities was performed, in order to identify the curriculum subjects that directly contribute to the building of teaching digitization skills. The method of data collection is the study of official documents (curricula, syllabi). Thus, the study plans in force were analysed, found on the websites of the following universities: 1. West University of Timișoara; 2. Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca; 3. University of Bucharest; 4. Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași; 5. University of Pitești; 6. University of Oradea; 7. University of Craiova; 8. Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava; 8. Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad; 9. Vasile Alexandri University of Bacău; 10. 1 Decembrie 1918 University of Alba Iulia; 11. Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu (see the Table 3 and 4).

c. Low percentages expressed in levels of skills development in areas directly related to actual teaching experience - Didactics of specialization, Psychology of education and Pedagogy – determined an analysis of the motivations of beginning teachers to continue their teaching career.

With the help of digital tools, we interviewed a number of 75 beginning teachers in primary education about the effects of the Covid pandemic on their motivation to continue their teaching career were interviewed.

6. Findings

6.1. Areas of competence corresponding to the teaching profession and level of competence

Objective: To identify the level of development of competencies corresponding to the teaching profession by beginning primary school teachers

Drawing on professional experience, school inspectors assessed, using a scale:

- the level of competence development by novice teachers in primary education - in the main areas corresponding to the teaching profession (as shown in Table 1);
- the level of cumulative development of professional skills by beginning teachers in primary education (as shown in Table 2).

Table 1. The level of development of the competences specific to the teaching profession by the beginning teachers in the primary education in Romania

| The main fields corresponding to the teaching profession | Most of the time (90-70%) | Somewhat (40-60%) | Few times (10-30%) |
|--|---------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Field of specialization | 80.66 % | 16.13 % | 3.23 % |
| Field of specialization | 9.68 % | 87.10 % | 3.23 % |
| Psychology of education | 3.23 % | 83.87 % | 12.9 % |
| Pedagogy | 12.90% | 74.19 % | 12.90 % |
| Educational management | 64.52% | 29.03 % | 6.45 % |
| Information and communication techniques | 64.52 % | 29.03 % | 6.45 % |

- The highest level of development of the competences of the teaching profession by the beginning teachers is registered in the field *Specialization*, result that confirms a thorough theoretical training during the initial training carried out in the university.
- Good levels of development of competencies specific to the teaching profession by beginning teachers are registered in the fields *Educational management and Information and communication techniques*.
- The lowest levels of skills development are registered in the fields: *Specialization didactics, Educational Psychology and Pedagogy*, areas directly related to the actual teaching experience.

Table 2. The level of cumulative development of professional skills by beginning teachers in primary education in Romania

| The beginning teacher in primary education has skills | Most of the time (90-70%) | Somewhat (40-60%) | Few times (10-30%) |
|---|---------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Knowledge | 22.58 % | 74.19 % | 3.23 % |
| Understanding | 12.90 % | 83.87 % | 3.23 % |
| Use of specific language | 12.90 % | 83.87 % | 3.23 % |
| Explanation | 19.35 % | 64.52 % | 16.13 % |
| Interpretation | 22.58 % | 64.52 % | 12.90 % |

| | | | |
|-----------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Application | 16.13 % | 74.19 % | 9.68 % |
| Transfer | 3.23 % | 87.10 % | 9.68 % |
| Problem solving | 22.58 % | 45.16 % | 32.26 % |
| Reflection | 3.23 % | 61.29 % | 35.48% |
| Creativity | 32.26 % | 61.29 % | 6.45 % |

- On a scale of cumulative development of the level of competence in 10 steps, in general the beginning teachers have a level of development of professional competences of 40-60%.
- At the first three levels of competence - Knowledge, Understanding, Use of specific language - beginning teachers have the highest level of competence development, a result that confirms a thorough theoretical training during the initial training carried out in the university.
- A high level of competence is registered on the Creativity level.
- The lowest levels are recorded on the Reflection and Problem Solving, levels related to the actual teaching experience.

6.2. Domain Information and communication techniques - use of new technologies in teaching

The high percentage expressed in the level of skills development in the Information and communication techniques field – 64.52 % of the teachers have digital skills most of the time; 29.03% somewhat and 6.45% few times - required an analysis of the context in which these competencies were formed.

Objective: To identify the curriculum subjects related to the initial training for primary education, which directly contribute to the formation of the digitalisation skills of teaching and their positioning in the framework training plan.

Following the comparative analysis of the curriculum proposed by 11 universities, in terms of the name of curriculum subjects that directly contribute to the building of digital skills, 4 study subjects resulted (see the table below).

Table 3. Curriculum subjects that directly contribute to the training of digital skills of beginning teachers in primary education

| Nr.crt. | Curriculum subjects |
|---------|--|
| | Technologies of information and communication (ICT) / Information and communication technology / Informational and communicational technologies / Technologies of information and communication (applied in specific fields) |
| | Computer Aided Training (IAC) / Computer Aided Training and Online Educational Platforms |
| | Documentation and use of databases |
| | Use of computers in kindergarten and primary school / ICT for children |

The comparative analysis of these study programs, however, reveals a worrying reality. Practically only one study discipline is taught in a unitary manner on the level of all study programs, which represents a share of less than 2% of the total curriculum. At best we identify a maximum of three digitization subjects taught during a bachelor's degree program (see the table below).

Table 4. Comparative analysis of study programs by curriculum subjects that directly contribute to the training of digital skills of beginning teachers in primary education

| Subject weight | Curriculum subjects that directly contribute to the formation of digital skills |
|---|--|
| In 100% of the programs, the following subjects are taught: | Technologies of information and communication (ICT) / Information and communication technology / Informational and communicational technologies / Technologies of information and communication (applied in specific fields) |
| In 36% of the programs, the following subjects are taught: | Computer Aided Training (IAC) / Computer Aided Training and Online Educational Platforms |
| In 9% of the programs the following subjects are taught: | Documentation and use of databases |
| In 18% of the programs the following subjects are taught: | Use of computers in kindergarten and primary school / ICT for children |

6.3. Motivation for professionalization in the context of the Covid 19 pandemic

Objective: Identifying the effects of Covid 19 pandemic on the motivation of beginning primary school teachers to continue their teaching career

Did the Covid 19 pandemic influence beginning teachers' decision to continue teaching? Two important aspects can be considered:

- Beginning teachers did not have the opportunity to experience teaching in the traditional way. This is proved by the low percentages expressed in levels of competence development in the fields directly related to the actual teaching experience - Didactics of specialization, Psychology of education and Pedagogy..
- Beginning teachers did not have the opportunity to develop intrinsic motivations. Studies on motivation in choosing and continuing the teaching profession highlight the preponderance of intrinsic factors, such as contact with children, passion for the field they teach, the help they can provide in the development of students. etc.

We may add other aspects to the above:

- At the beginning of their career, beginning teachers in Romania are subjected to rigorous professional examinations, such as: the national tenure competition, after which candidates can hold a teaching position for a determined period, and the exam for becoming definitive teachers, after which candidates acquire the tenure in pre-university education system and may have a teaching position for an indefinite period. These pressures are felt more acutely in the context of the pandemic:
 - 64.3% of beginning teachers intend to take the tenure exam / the exam for the definitive grade this school year;
 - 35.7% of them do not intend to take these exams this school year. Of these: 50% may postpone it for the next school year, justifying insufficient training and 50% no longer want to work in education.
- Beginning teachers in Romania do not benefit from concrete professional support, in order to get integrated in the profession and in the school institution. In the most common situations, the

support consists in the collegial support from the part of experienced teachers. In the pandemic situation:

- 57.1% of beginning teachers declared to have benefitted from assistance - professional support for integration in the chair and in the school
- 42.9% of them did not benefit from any support. Of these, 21.4% consider that the lack of professional support affected them to a high extent, 28.6% to a low extent and 50% not at all.

Choosing the career of teacher in primary and preschool education is a firm one - over 85% of students who complete this specialization intend to practice in this field (Prodan, 2015, p. 80-84). This percentage analysed in the light of the above results shows that the Covid 19 pandemic has negative effects on the motivation of beginning teachers to continue their teaching career.

7. Conclusion

The period of debut in the teaching career is defining for the subsequent professional path. The pandemic situation has left its mark on the motivation of beginning teachers in Romania to continue their teaching career.

7.1. Motivation for professionalization in the context of the Covid 19 pandemic

At the beginning of their career, beginning teachers in Romania are subjected to rigorous professional exams, such as: the national tenure competition and the definitive teacher exam. These pressures were felt more poignantly in the context of the pandemic situation: 35.7% of respondents do not want to take these exams this school year. Of these: 50% may postpone it for the next school year, justifying insufficient training and 50% no longer want to work in education. Given the results of studies prior to the pandemic which showed that over 73% of students in this specialization intend to practice in the field, we can say that the Covid 19 pandemic had negative effects on the motivation of beginning teachers to continue teaching.

This decrease in the motivation of beginning teachers for their teaching career is correlated with other aspects influenced by the pandemic context.:

- During the pandemic, 42.9% of beginning teachers did not receive professional support for integration into the profession, and 21.4% believe that this aspect greatly affected them,
- During the pandemic, beginning teachers did not have the opportunity to experience teaching in the traditional way. The proof is constituted by the low percentages expressed in levels of competence development in areas directly related to the actual experience of teaching - Didactics of specialization, Psychology of education and Pedagogy. On a 10-step scale of cumulative development of the level of competence, in general the beginner teachers have a level of development of professional competences of 40-60%.

Experiencing traditional teaching would have facilitated the development of intrinsic motivations, such as contact with children, passion for the subjects they teach, help they can provide in the development of school pupils, defining factors in continuing their teaching career. In the pandemic

situation, beginning teachers must demonstrate their level of professional competence through the use of digital technologies. The high percentage expressed in the level of skills development in the field of Information and Communication Techniques (64.52% of teachers have skills most of the time, 29.03% have some skills in this field) required an analysis of the formal context in which digital skills have been developed. The results of the comparative analysis of the curricula proposed by 11 universities, in terms of the name and share of study disciplines that directly contribute to the formation of digital skills are worrying. Practically only one subject is taught in a unitary manner in all study programs, which represents a share of less than 2% of the total curriculum. The answer to the question - Are beginning teachers native digitals or digitally trained? excludes thus the formative component from undergraduate study programs. The development of digital skills can be explained by the access of beginning teachers to informal and non-formal contexts, and, why not by a series of characteristics specific to generation Z: openness, creativity, adaptability.

In the long run, each society defines its fundamental orientations, the standard and the major directions of development of the education and training system. We anticipate for the next 20 years that the autonomous personality will become the human personality standard. Consequently, a redefinition of lifelong learning as more than adults' education is needed; it is a way of thinking and an ability of people to act in the sense of adapting to the requirements brought about by the society of the future. The only permanent thing is change, said Heraclitus in the sixth century BC. In the 21st century, learning brings change.

In relation to the general tendencies and directions of evolution of society, we expect a digitalization of the education system. An essential component is the training of digital skills used in the educational process.

In the medium and short run, the major directions foreseen are necessary to produce changes in the structure of the education system and the content of the education process, such as the introduction of study disciplines for the formation of digital competences, starting with primary education.

As for teaching, the lack of human interactions that make the difference between pedagogy and technology. In situations that do not allow face-to-face teaching, research is needed on students' learning and performance behaviours, which will be used for elaborating combined training models.

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