EXPLORATION OF THE GAPS IN POLICIES AND PRACTICES OF REFORMING INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION FOR THE CURRICULAR AREA OF LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Mihaela Mitescu Lupu
Lecturer, Department of Teacher Education
University of Arts "George Enescu" Iassy Romania
office_lupumihaela@yahoo.com

Andreia Irina Suciu
Assistant Lecturer, Faculty of Letters,
"Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău
andreiairinasuciu@yahoo.com

Abstract:
The paper introduces a brief analysis of current trends in the field of initial teacher education whilst focusing on the relationship between policies and practices as depicted in the recent flow of research literature focusing on the issue. An overview of recent literature is presented with the purpose of situating possible perspectives on new research addressing the subject of initial teacher education. This work has been supported by CNCSIS-UEFISCSU, project number 282, PN II –RU - 58 /2010.

Keywords: initial teacher education, policy, practice, research

1. Introduction – the need for competitive education in a competitive society

Defining, in current times, the fast development of communication technologies and its emergent phenomenon – globalization – generated a worldwide competition Tatto and Plank (2007) in search of the most successful economic system, a competition in which governments engaged in a race against the clock for identifying and efficiently making use of all available resources. At the European level this goal is embedded in the effort to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion Lisbon Convention (2000). When looking at such an ambitious goal, the human resources are the focus point in all development policies (economic, social, cultural, educational ones). The political discourses are abundant in imperatives concerning the human resource development as an essential element of any attempt to increase the

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economic success at any level. Investments in education – proclaimed to be absolute necessities – envision the increase in the quality of teacher training and education initiatives through improved pedagogical tools, better access to communication technologies and access to education for all as the epicentre of any reform in education and in developing the human resources. A similar idea is argued for the case of the United States of America (Caroll et al. 2007).

Despite its complexity and the immense situational diversity of the educational contexts, the curricula for initial teacher education have at the European level a centralized form of organization, mostly of national degree. Governments propose *objectivist* responses (Edwards et al. 2002) to a field of professional action by nature exposed to localism, flexible (re)actions and diverse responses in all its components and for all sequences of systemic functioning. Action plans are drawn with the hope of re-establishing control and order in a world where everything – work, family, education, technology, society – is changing. However education as a system of social activity has not been granted control of these changes and easily becomes, along with its most representative agents promoting actions within this system – the teachers, targets for the blames pinning down educational systems for their apparent incapacity to produce graduates capable of flexible, creative and efficient actions in a world of change. Even more perplexing in this problem space, almost without exception, the reformist proposals formulated by governments tend to promote singular solution-plans for the training of teachers, in the shape of national curricula for teacher education heavily relying on the principle of best-practice transmission and locating most financial resources (approx. 95%) in the initial stages of teacher education programmes (Buchberger et al. 2000).

It is thus of crucial importance to form a deep understanding of the level at which investments in initial teacher education programmes generate the desired outcomes – beginning teachers capable of flexible pedagogical actions, responsive to the specific developmental needs of their students, as well as of fast and efficient adjustment to the contexts of professional practice and school ethos – and the ways in which the investments past the initial stages of teacher education could be made more efficient.

2. Strategies used in building/ improving curricula in teaching languages

When attempting to find responses to the first part of the problem formulated here, European comparative studies concerning curricular initiatives for initial teacher education and traditions of pedagogical knowledge reflected in them show that developing problem-solving abilities of beginning teachers is debatable in the teacher education models promoting contents-delivery conceptions of learning (Buchberger et al., 2000, Edwards, 2005). Studies

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conducted at the end of the last decade in the context of the English system of initial teacher education (Edwards and Ogden 1999) show that when in schools, student-teachers are often isolated in the space of one classroom, and learning is mostly centred on planning teaching and reaching behavioural targets promoted in current governmental view of school success – aspects of training which depict an image of the new teacher far from the desiderate of a professional capable of expert, reflective, responsible and creative action. The potential located in the presence of student-teachers in the space of the schools of application is sadly restricted to a presumable access to a community of learning and professional practice where by *peripheral participation* (Lave and Wenger 1991,1999), student-teachers experience and internalize authentic teaching tools (language, instruments, practices, principles, etc) – localized in the institutional culture where access is allowed during their pre-service teacher education programme.

Most programmes addressing teachers' introduction to the classroom and school practices promote conceptions of learning heavily relying on imitation of best-practice models under the supervision of a more experienced practitioner (Edwards 2005) whose knowledge-in-action can be observed and implicitly, imitated by novices, and less on scientific pedagogical and psychological knowledge (Burn, 2006, Jones and Straker, 2006). Approaches located in practical learning in the space of the classroom seem to lead to training teachers to perform on measurable, standardized inventory of behaviours and hardly ever to act on their theoretically informed decision making about the educational context and students' learning needs, competences and perspectives for professional development (Edwards 2001).

Moreover, *apprenticeship* models of mentoring (Edwards and Ogden 1999) create learning environments drawing on the isolation of learners in the space of localized patterns of action and thinking about the profession, descending from the imitable models of actions, monitoring and regulatory feedback provided by more experienced professionals holding the position of a teacher-mentor. Such patterns are hardly representative for the entire span of educational actions and tools that are necessary for initiating formative actions responsive to the educational needs of various groups of students the beginning teacher will have to work with. Altogether with the increased risk of debuting in teaching without a hold on the necessary pedagogical tools for flexible, collaborative, creative pedagogical action adjusted to the students' learning needs and to the employing school's ethos, beginning teachers have to face, in many cases, simultaneously the lack of a school support system facilitating their induction in the context of practice.

Warnings related to the association of the two categories of risks are serious: as many researchers observed, even the most talented and prepared of the beginning teachers enter the classrooms still on a learning mode; when

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not supported to develop as masters of their teaching act, most of them will either leave the profession or fail to adequately respond to the learning needs and expectations of their students (Cochran-Smith et al., 2008, Grossman and Thompson, 2004). Where such systems are available, they take the shape of an induction programme (Bartell, 2005, Yusko and Feiman-Nemser, 2008) or an internship such as the case is for the Romanian programme for initial teacher education, prolonged until the awarding of the definitive teacher status (Iucu 2004).

When looking at the second part of the problem – the ways in which the investments in teacher education could be made more efficient, past its initial stages – studies show an increased interest in understanding *what* could be done for the improvement of the induction and retaining rates of beginning professionals in the teaching career. A relevant example for this way of conceptualizing the interest in understanding the induction process seems to be encapsulated in the research question set by Cornbleth (2008) in her research about beginning teachers' responsiveness to diversity: What might teacher educators and prospective teachers learn from the interaction of individual and institution in school settings during pre-student-teaching field experiences and student teaching itself that could better prepare new teachers for constructively engaging student difference and diversity?

Similarly, Yusko and Feiman-Nemser (2008) analyse in their study the relationship between assessment and concealing actions in the roles of mentor-teachers during induction programs, by comparing two case studies of induction programmes in US. The two researchers observed that the two dimensions are not only possible to meet in the same role, but is desirable to do so as well. In novice – mentor meetings set up on the principles of a) focusing on learning; b) focusing on formative goals guided by professional standards; c) respect as by-product of relationships based on trust; d) constructing knowledge about teaching based on examples of practice from the novice's experience, emerge opportunities to cross over the boundary of personal opinion and personal experience (Yusko and Feiman-Nemser 2008). Valuable for the attention it pays to what are otherwise traditionally regarded (Breux, Wong 2003) as separated roles in the process of training novices during induction programmes for teachers, the study proposed by Yusko and Feiman-Nemser (2008) focuses on the manner in which certain dimensions in the mentor's role influence the learning processes of beginning teachers, without paying too much attention to *how* learning actually takes place. In their final statements, the two researchers conclude that each of the compared institutional cases facilitate learning to the same extent – either by the authority exerted by counselling teachers taking on the roles of formal assessors of learning progress during induction (finalized in written recommendation), or in formative environments where both

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assessment and counselling dimensions are taken on by mentors in their encounters with the beginning teachers. The space of *how beginning teachers* engage with the learning activity during initial practical stages and of the links between the learning and the professional culture embedded in the tools, relationships, division of labour and rules of the school context where the initial teacher education programme is situated remains open for exploration.

Yusko and Feiman-Nemser' study (2008) promotes a qualitative approach to the research issue, proposing a comparative analysis of two case studies – programmes of initial training for beginning teachers – and engages with primary and secondary data generated in field observations, interviews and documents analysis. The results generated confirm the interest in covering a question space where quantitative approaches, with large scale populations have little to say – whilst the argument of various features (complex mentorship schemes) of induction programmes positively correlating with the retention of beginning teachers in the work field is frequently relying on quantitative data and approaches (Fletcher et al., 2008, Ingersoll and Smith, 2004, Stanulis and Floden, 2009), not much could be thus said about the type, contents and quality of these mentorship and induction programmes.

Quantitative approaches to the issues related to teacher initial training stages such as that proposed by Fletcher et al. (2008) attempt syllogisms on the relationship between initial teacher training and its effects on the school performances of the students beginning teachers work with. In the above mentioned study employing data generated on a population of participant extended to 51 beginning teachers and 1288 students, authors draw conclusions on the fact that programmes conveying initial teacher education may positively influence students' school performances if during initiation of beginning teachers weekly mentor–novice meetings are allowed and confirmation of status for mentor teachers is highly selective. The implications of such approaches emphasise the importance of the existence of support systems for beginning teachers – in the form of induction programmes – but leave unanswered questions relating to the qualities of these programmes: What exactly makes mentors' actions so valuable to the quality of teaching in novice practitioners? How does learning take place in this space of professional practice? What is the dynamic of the interactions between learners and educators and to what extent is the institutional climate visible in the formative encounters? These are all research questions that are still waiting for their explorers.

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3. Key points for future efficient curricula

One essential component in the problem space of organizing educational programmes for beginning teachers in relation to which the literature objectified in the main flow of publications proves special interest in is that of the role played by conceptions of learning as collaboration and active participation to a community of practice in the success of induction programmes for beginning teachers. Rogers and Babinski (2002) observed that beginning teachers lack on opportunities to reflect on their work by engaging in conversations with their peers. Similarly, Edwards (2005) raises awareness on the importance that enhancing and exerting student - teachers' *relational agency* – understood as the capacity to align one's thoughts and actions to the ones of the others in order to interpret the problems of practice and to generate responses to the problems based on common interpretations of it, as well as the capacity to work with others and to make use of the resources distributed in the activity systems in order to promote one's own initiatives – hold for the formation/affirmation/expansion of their professional identities and implicitly, for the learning activity. Developing the relational agency is closely related to the contexts in which collaboration with one or more partners in activity and crosses the boundaries of mere introduction to existent forms of practice; it implies a fluidity with the object of activity in expansion, and thus, a capacity for working with others in partnerships understood as continuously transforming entities requiring an active engagement with problems, current meanings and resourceful contexts for new solutions to those problems, partnerships in everyone is a resource for the learning of others (Edwards 2005).

In a quasi similar vision of learning, Birkeland and Feiman-Nemser (2009) propose replacing the image of the teacher initial education programmes as sums of actions that can be planned, funded and managed in a variety of institutional contexts, to the image of a process of introducing novices to the culture of the school, with its values and practices. Conceptualizing the beginning stages of teacher education programmes as part of the activity of a learning community becomes possible in the former vision, attention focusing on the school as a site of continuous professional learning and opportunity for professional development (both for the teacher and for the student as future employee), where the rules and principles of teaching as well as conceptions of learning and teaching are in the making. The two approaches to learning in initial teacher education programmes proposed by Edwards (2005) and Feiman-Nemser (2009) are not identical in that they focus on different dimensions of learning: whilst Feinman-Nemser focuses her research in the space of identifying *what* is being learned, Edwards proposes an approach sensitive to both *what* and *how* learning takes place in teacher education programmes.

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4. Conclusions

In short, in the light of these arguments what could be observed is that in current reformist views in education, a change in the conception and approaches to the teaching activity is proclaimed almost ubiquitously in the political discourses. The change required focuses on promoting learning and student-centred activities in the classroom, whereas responsiveness, collaboration and flexibility become the main features required in the *new* teaching approaches. Teachers are expected to move away from curriculum-delivery approaches to classroom actions and closer to pro-active, reflective initiatives gathering in *forums* of activity the teachers, students and other members of the community of learning that school is. Collaboration is celebrated for its resourcefulness in relation to teachers' professional development. Collaboration and community of learning are pedagogical concepts considered to be intimately correlated.

A genuine improvement of strategies applied in programmes of initial training for teachers of language and not only should take into consideration a development of a three-fold analysis of the potential, needs, expectation, motivation and competences belonging to the individuals involved in this process, but also to the group and the organization. An initial analysis of the necessity for implementation of innovative programmes (strategies, techniques, methods) should be performed so as to ensure positive results not only of the educational undertaking but also ensuring the successful implementation on the labour market of students as future employees. Programmes strongly focused on developing competences (ranging from the cognitive to the affective ones), but also cultural awareness (responsiveness to different environments and different work partners in terms of ethnicity, gender, religion, types of intelligence) and the awareness of the importance of aspects of interpersonal (with collaboration especially between teachers and students but also teachers and teachers, student and student and teachers/ students and community) might ensure the success and validity of programmes of initial teacher education to a greater extent than insular behaviouristic approaches focusing on either one direction.

However, despite all its resources for the formative contexts, few studies focus on *how* learning is structured in collaborative contexts of action. The stress falls instead on *what* teachers learn and on features and characteristics of the efficient collaborative contexts facilitating opportunities for the professional development of teachers. Research is thus still much needed on what and how allows or constrains learning in the space of initial teacher education, focusing on understanding how individuals act on and shape their worlds as well as being shaped by it.

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