

## **Beginner teachers and the challenges of the tenure exams: A longitudinal zonal analysis of official data from pre-secondary education**

**Ramona Kiru**  
**Adventus University from Cernica**

### **Abstract**

The Tenure Exam is an important challenge for all beginner teachers in Romanian education. The resumption of this exam has become a habit of the first years of teaching, clearly influencing the evolution of the regional results. The 147 subjects of the research represent the entire population that took this exam only once during the years 2015-2019, in Ilfov county, to occupy a teacher position in the preschool or primary education.

The evolution of the results during the period examined is positive, the differences between the obtained averages being statistically significant. There are no significant differences between teachers depending on the level of education, the area of residence, the level of education, the type or form of education completed. Both the increase in the number of graduates who want to work in education, as well as the increasing marks registered to the Tenure Exam indicate that the teacher positions are beginning to be attractive to the labor market.

Further research should probe the relationship between the grade obtained to the Tenure Exam and the ability of beginner teachers to cope well with the first years of teaching. Also, the subsequent research should focus on identifying the special needs of the pre-secondary education in this area and on offering specific educational programs for the initial training of the teachers who will teach in this area.

**Keywords:** beginning teacher, longitudinal analysis, pre-secondary education, tenure exam

### **Introduction**

The initial and continuous training of teachers is a complex action with profound implications on social and individual development (Nicu, 2012). All teachers start as beginners, anxious about different issues related to teaching: the curriculum, the students, the teaching of documents within the deadline, the building of authority and so on. The faculty is one of the few professions where newcomers are expected to perform the same tasks as veterans in the field. However, due to lack of experience and support, new teachers may face the most stressful conditions in school. Research in the field suggests that, regardless of the type or quality of the teacher training program, beginners will likely enter the most vulnerable stage of their teaching career (Moir, Barlin, Gless & Miles, 2009; Podolsky, Kini, Bishop, Darling-Hammond, 2016).

A constant of the teachers' concerns and challenges is represented by the Degree Examination. Most of them repeat it at least once in the first years of teaching, either to obtain the right to remain in education or to change the teaching environment. More than half of the beginners (Spătăreanu, 2015) are in the first situation. They need to repeat the exam in order to obtain a stable job in education. In the second case, although the result may be satisfactory, the teacher is oriented towards more attractive teaching environments, the organizational climate being very important for further professional development (Niculiță, 2015).

Krasnoff (2014) suggests that the first three years of teaching are essential to the development of what may become the next 30 years of teaching practice in the teacher's career. Special attention to how schools provides support to new teachers is not only essential for the success of these new teachers, but more importantly for the success of their students.

Recent research suggests that 14% of new teachers leave education in the first year of teaching, 33% leave in the first three years, and 44% leave in the first five years after they start teaching. Usually teachers change and every year there are others in schools where there is high poverty and low achievement. Students in these schools deal with inexperienced teachers each year which could adversely affect their ability to learn (Ingersoll et al., 2018).

Without adequate support, beginners who are left to struggle on their own, work in unstable learning environments, and have an impact on both student and teacher success. If nothing is done to prevent this constant transformation of new teachers leaving the profession, we will continue to exacerbate the inequities that exist in schools and inevitably extend to a larger scale (Ingersoll, 2012; Krasnoff 2014).

Experienced teachers know that learning to teach is a process that requires patience and time. School principals should be wise and not overlook the fact that the early years in a teacher's career are very stressful and anxious. In this crucial period of development, beginning teachers learn to apply theory and knowledge gained during college and need the continued support and guidance of an experienced and trusted teacher (Bartell, 2004).

## Literature review

### *Tenure examination*

Regardless of the route you have chosen to specialize in, enrolling in a specialized high school or enrolling in a profile faculty (Nicu, 2016), the most important exam in the life of the beginner teacher is the tenure in education. It tests the quality as a fresh graduate (Dragomirescu, 2007) and involves both a special effort (Sas, 2010) made by the participants competing for a teaching position, as well as a massive mobilization of human and financial resources from the organizing institutions (Brătianu & Popescu, 2009; Andone, 2014).

As in other countries of the European Union (Petrovici, 2004), in Romania the simultaneous model is applied: the training program integrates simultaneously the academic, professional training and the pedagogical practice. In France, for example, there is a national competition, similar to the one in Romania, which offers professional certification for educators and teachers.

The selection introduced by this national examination brings results that indicate major differences between regions. A study conducted in 2015 shows that the results obtained in the southern part of the country, respectively Bucharest and Ilfov, are much lower than in the rest of the country (Spătăreanu, 2015). In the other university centers the competition for a teaching position is very high. In the rest of the country, in the economically developed areas the demand for educators and teachers is higher (Brătianu & Popescu, 2009). The focus of general attention on lifelong learning and on promoting the continuous development of teachers did not solve the low marks obtained in the degree exams (Szekely, 2018). In many respects the legislation is outdated and does not respond to the specific needs in accordance with the principles of decentralization and local and regional autonomy (Brătianu & Popescu, 2009).

In a study conducted on graduates from the years 2016-2017, statistically significant differences were highlighted, regarding the results obtained in the degree exams, depending on the year of graduation and the manner of conducting the pedagogical practice. Moreover, the average of graduating from the initial education studies was very strongly correlated with the mark obtained in the degree exam (Spătăreanu, 2019a).

### *The challenges of the first years of teaching*

The first year of teaching is a period with many beginning moments. Beginner teachers need to learn how to solve problems, establish professional routines, and deepen emerging skills to become effective teachers in the classroom (Moir, et al., 2009). Among the many things learned in the first years of teaching, beginning teachers need to acquire knowledge about the specificity of the reality in which their students live, to understand how to design a curriculum that responds to the needs of all students, and to understand the political and cultural landscape of the school.

In the first year of teaching there is a process of change and reorganization of the knowledge, values, attitudes and concepts that the teacher developed during the initial training, until the teacher begins to develop his own teaching style (Bozu, 2010: 57). The biggest problems identified for beginners in Romania are: the lack of quality mentors, the large volume of school documents to be completed, the inconsistency between theory and practice, the increased requirement of parents in contrast to the continuous degradation of children's behaviors (Spătărelu, 2019a).

The beginner teacher arrives in a little-known social and cultural context and has to adapt to the institutional culture, typical of the school where he was appointed and which will mark him for the rest of the professional life. It is the place where, according to Ávalos (2016), he finds students with different characteristics: particular abilities and school environments. His work determines him to relate to the content of the curriculum, as well as to participate in the activities of the school communities and to interact with colleagues, parents and authorities. In addition, new teachers need to have a complete understanding of how they will be evaluated. They need to understand how they will be evaluated and what standards they should reach. It is expected that both beginner and experienced teachers will create and implement a curriculum that meets the needs of all students.

Assessment can be a stressful time for new teachers, but with appropriate support and guidance, it can also be a time when they can learn how to improve their skills to enhance student performance. "It would be good if the teacher training programs were more focused on how beginner teachers could know their effects and less on self-knowledge and teaching - so we could get better results. The crucial requirement is for teachers to develop their competence in assessing the effect they have on students. It is not so important that, for example, beginners know or do not know what diversity means, but it is more urgent for them to know what effects they have on the various students they teach" (Hattie, 2014: 72-73).

In the early years, the beginner teacher has the same tasks to perform as an experienced teacher and, at the same time, must learn how to perform these tasks (Boerr, 2014). Like his colleagues, he must manage his personal environment, which largely includes the personal, family, economic, political, religious and professional side. Class planning, evaluating the skills developed by the students, preparing and using the appropriate teaching resources, maintaining motivation and a certain control of their students' discipline are some of the new tasks faced by the beginning teacher. To these are added the interpersonal relationships that must be built simultaneously with school staff, students and parents (Spătărelu, 2019a).

### *The gap between theory and practice*

Another important aspect is that the beginning teacher realizes that there is a significant gap between what he learned in college and school practice. During the first year in class, the beginning teacher observes how the best practices of his / her initial training program are suppressed by the relentless pace of his / her daily life and the situation on the ground (Windschitl, Thompson, & Braaten, 2011; Spătărelu, 2019a; Spătărelu, 2019c).

Given this situation, the beginner teacher is discouraged and may be disappointed and thus comes to believe that the effort made during the initial training does not correspond to what he has to do in school (Ibarrola-García, 2014).

However, as Dicke, Elling, Schmeck and Leutner (2015) stated in the results of a study with 97 German teachers, as a result of lowering expectations, beginning teachers were able to adapt to their new environment and to build and develop learning situations and skills to successfully perform in the professional career. In this framework, knowing and doing reflective practice generates a practical, new and useful knowledge in favor of its students. The beginner starts his profession full of optimism (Spătărelu, 2019b), and this attitude can help him to overcome many discouraging situations.

### *Abandonment in the first year of education*

Many educators acknowledge that they were tempted to change their jobs in their first year of work (Spătărelu, 2019c). Ingersoll (2018) suggests that almost 44% of new teachers leave because of the high workload, the conditions in which they carry out their school activities, the degree of autonomy and the discretion allowed on the problems that arise in the classroom. Another reason they leave includes the high level of expectations. This is compounded by the feelings of isolation they feel because of the lack of support. Thus, a gap appears between the beginners' expectation of what education should be like and the reality on the ground. Surprisingly, the reasons for dropping out of education are not normally related to salary, but are attributed to excessive testing of stakes, disruptive behavior of students, precarious leadership, and the idea that teaching is only a temporary profession until something better comes up (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Krasnoff, 2014; Podolsky et al., 2016; Ingersoll, 2018).

In order to remain in education, the beginner teachers must feel competent and have the satisfaction of the work well done. They are more likely to stay when their efforts are recognized and supported. This leads to a sense of autonomy and greater satisfaction in the workplace. Both beginner and experienced teachers are attracted by educational directors who are good training leaders and who support them to become effective educators (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Teachers who are given time to interact and collaborate with supportive colleagues and receive significant professional development, which has been achieved according to their individual needs, feel supported by the management of their school. However, working conditions, status and job satisfaction are essential for their retention. Allowing the teacher to engage in important decisions that affect his daily work with students is also an important factor in keeping him (Podolsky et al., 2016).

The success of the schools is ultimately determined by the improvement of the practice of the teachers that leads to optimal achievements for each student. "The new teachers hired today are the teachers of the next generation. Their success will determine the success of a whole generation of students. Their success can be assured by providing them with a comprehensive and coherent plan for professional development" (Wong, 2004: 41). Improving student performance is ultimately based on the effectiveness of teacher practice, which, in turn, determines the quality of instruction received by students.

### *Mentor and beginner teacher*

Mentoring as a way of guidance and support for personal and professional development is important for the success of beginner teachers. Currently, mentoring is carried out in different countries and over the years it has become the subject of research and analysis (Roehrig, Bohn, Turner & Pressley, 2008; Löfström & Eisenschmidt, 2009; Inostrosis by

Celis, Jara & Tagle, 2010; Wood & Stanulis, 2011; Richter, Kunter, Lüdtke, Klusmann, Anders & Baumert, 2013; Spătărelu, 2019a). The mentoring brings a significant contribution both to the teacher who starts his professional practice in the classroom, as well as to the school and the education system in general. Mentoring means the personal and professional relationship between a more experienced teacher and a less experienced teacher or group of teachers. The mission is to help beginners to develop in a certain time.

The mentor is a role model among his colleagues. He is a teacher with experience in the classroom, pedagogical and disciplinary knowledge and with a personal disposition to support the beginner teacher. His professional capacity for teacher training makes him an excellent companion (Richter et al., 2013). The mentor must be able to build knowledge, develop skills and attitudes above those required by his profession (Inostrosis by Celis, Jara & Tagle, 2010). A combination of experience-training will allow the mentor to achieve greater efficiency in the performance of the novice teacher (Roehrig, Bohn, Turner & Pressley, 2008), as he is co-participant and co-responsible for the permanent improvement of the novice teacher.

Löfström and Eisenschmidt (2009) argue that the mentor needs to understand and respond to the needs of the beginner teacher. The permanent connection between the two will cause a permanent flow of two-way communication. The more the mentor knows the reality of the beginner teacher's life, the more he will have the opportunity to know what to do to support the professional development of the beginner teacher in the beginning period.

In this regard, a quality mentoring program should include time available for mentors to get to know and work directly with beginning teachers, which means that the mentor must have a part-time teaching task (Wood & Stanulis, 2011). An overload of the mentor with tasks limits his involvement in the relationship with the beginner teacher.

## Methods

The objectives of this study were elaborated on the basis of the information summarized in the previous section. His first concern was the analysis of the graduates' performance with higher education and with a secondary education in the Degree Examination, an examination that allows access to the labor market in the educational field. The second concern was to identify the evolution of the results obtained in Ilfov county during the last five years, a county which at the beginning of this period was ranked at the end of the ranking (Spătărelu, 2015). The third concern was the analysis of the interdependencies and influences exerted by the socio-educational variables on the graduates' performance in this national exam.

### *Participants and procedures*

For this research, the entire population of middle and higher education graduates from 2015-2019 was taken into account. Regarding the secondary education, in Romania, the graduates of the Pedagogical High Schools have the right to integrate as teachers directly in the primary or preschool education, without completing the specialized higher education courses for this area. Graduates of higher education have completed their studies in private or state education, specializing in the Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education (PIPP). A significant part of them (approx. 30%) also hold other diplomas, in similar or completely different fields. The 147 subjects of the research represent the entire population of graduates who registered during the period mentioned in the Degree Examination in Ilfov County. Over 95% of the subjects are women, a normal percentage for these levels of education.

*Variables, measures and data analysis*

The mark obtained in the Securitization Exam is the dependent variable of this research. Possible values of this variable are between 1 and 10. The independent variables are represented by the year of the examination (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019), the level of education completed (secondary studies, higher studies), the type of education (state, particular ), the form of education (with frequency, without frequency), the environment of residence (urban, rural) and the level of education (preschool, primary).

All information has been retrieved from the official database at the web address <http://titularizare.edu.ro/2019/>. All data were centralized and analyzed with the help of the PSPP program, an open license program. In the process of processing the official data, the laws in force regarding the protection of personal data were respected.

**Results**

*The influence of the examination year*

The descriptive analysis of the batch of subjects shows the increase of the number of graduates registered during the period 2015-2019, with a maximum of registered in 2017. In 2016 there is an increase of over 100% of the number of registered graduates, compared to the year previous, a trend that is also maintained for the year 2017. The year 2018 brings about a decrease of approximately 33%, of the registered graduates, while the difference recovers in the year 2019 (Table 1).

Regarding the averages of the marks obtained in the Securitization Exams (Table 1), we can observe notable differences according to the years. When applying the Student t test for independent samples, statistically significant differences were highlighted ( $t_{53}=-2.19$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), between the averages obtained in 2015 ( $M_1=5.98$ ,  $SD=1.39$ ) and the averages obtained in 2017 ( $M_2=7.27$ ,  $SD=1.83$ ). The same difference was observed when comparing 2015 with 2018. The statistically significant differences are maintained ( $t_{39}=-2.26$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). The 2015 averages ( $M_1=5.98$ ,  $SD=1.39$ ) were significantly higher than the 2018 averages ( $M_2=7.21$ ,  $SD=1.60$ ). However, when applying the One-Way ANOVA test on the total results, no statistically significant differences are reported, thus obtaining  $F(4,142)=1,470$ , with  $p>0.05$ .

Table 1. The averages obtained by the graduates in the Degree Examination between the years 2015-2019, primary and pre-school education, Ilfov county

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
N	11	21	44	30	41	147
Average note	5,98	6,91	7,27	7,21	6,96	7,02
Std. Deviation	1,39	1,82	1,83	1,60	1,49	1,69

Regarding the composition of the groups analyzed according to years (Table 2), it is observed that the graduates with average studies who have registered for this national examination represent less than 10% of the total number and the percentage remains relatively constant during the analyzed period. The graduates from the state education, frequently, predominate, and those from the rural area are increasing until 2017, then keep their proportions relatively constant. Although initially the beginners tend to prefer pre-

school education for entering the labor market from education, towards the end of the period studied the preferences for the two levels are balanced.

Table 2. Frequency analysis by years and compared groups

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Education						
Secondary	1	0	0	1	4	147
Higher	10	21	44	29	37	
Type:						
State school	10	19	38	26	40	147
Private	1	2	6	4	1	
Form:						
Full time	4	20	39	22	31	147
No freqv	7	1	5	8	10	
Environment:						
Urban	7	9	25	19	27	147
Country side	4	12	19	11	14	
Level:						
Preschool	4	12	25	18	20	147
Primary	7	9	19	12	21	
Total	11	21	44	30	41	147

*The influence of the level of education graduated*

Regarding the influence of the level of education graduated on the general results in the degree exam for 2015-2019, no statistically significant differences were identified ( $t_{109}=-0.12$ ,  $p=0.904$ ) between the average obtained by the graduates with high school studies ( $M_1=6.82$ ,  $SD=1.32$ ) and the average obtained by graduates with higher studies ( $M_2=6.92$ ,  $SD=1.77$ ). The results obtained are not in line with those obtained in a similar study from 2014, where the averages obtained by the two groups were statistically significantly different (Spătărelu, 2015).

*The influence of the type of education graduated*

No statistically significant differences were identified ( $t_{142}=0.38$ ,  $p=0.707$ ) between the graduates who studied in public institutions ( $M_1=7.04$ ;  $SD=1.64$ ) and the graduates who studied in the institutions private ( $M_2=6.88$ ;  $SD=1.93$ ), regarding the average obtained in the Degree Examination in the period 2015-2019. These results are similar to the results obtained in the 2014 sample (Spătărelu, 2015).

*The influence of the graduated form of education*

When applying the Student's t test for independent samples on the whole population, it was observed that neither the form of the graduated education had an influence on the obtained environments. Thus, graduates with frequency studies did not have statistically significantly different ( $M_1=6.97$ ,  $SD=1.62$ ) statistically ( $t_{145}=-0.81$ ,  $p=0.421$ ) graduates with non-frequency studies ( $M_2=7.25$ ,  $SD=1.88$ ).

Regarding the differences according to the years, statistically significant differences were identified ( $t_{39}=-2.05$ ,  $p=0.047$ ) between the averages obtained by the graduates of fulltime studies ( $M_1=6.66$ ,  $SD=1.50$ ) and the graduates of studies without frequency

( $M_2=7.67$ ,  $SD=1.25$ ), in the year 2019. The graduates of studies without frequency have obtained superior results.

#### *The influence of the environment of residence*

The average urban graduates ( $M_1=7.14$ ,  $SD=1.66$ ) were slightly higher than those of rural graduates ( $M_2=6.91$ ,  $SD=1.70$ ). However, the differences were not large enough to be statistically significant ( $t_{145}=0.85$ ,  $p>0.05$ ).

#### *The influence of the level of education*

Graduates who opted for a job in pre-primary education had similar backgrounds as graduates who opted for a job in primary education. Thus, from a statistical point of view, no significant differences were recorded ( $t_{145}=0.53$ ,  $p>0.05$ ) between the average obtained by the future educators ( $M_1=8.09$ ,  $MD=1.76$ ) and the future teachers ( $M_2=6.94$ ,  $MD=1.58$ ).

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The candidates for the Tenure Competition in Ilfov County for the last five years have several basic characteristics: they present an accentuated tendency of numerical growth, of improvement of the averages over the years, most of them come from the state education, they have attended full time courses, have an university degree, they come from both rural and urban areas and prefer both pre-school and primary education.

A small percentage of the candidates is represented by the graduates of secondary studies, generally the Pedagogical High School, the results indicate that they have the same level of preparation as the candidates who have completed university-level courses. Regarding the type of education graduated, it is observed that both the graduates from the state education and those from the private education obtain approximately similar means. This fact shows that their level of preparation is approximately identical. Given that the only profile unit in the county is private, this information provides a positive perspective on future developments in this area.

Approximately one fifth of the beginners have attended vocational training courses without frequency. The fact that their results were at the same level as those of their colleagues who took day courses is a welcome fact. It is likely that students of this type are highly motivated or have completed other higher studies, which helps them, because they already have skills for the labor market. Some graduates were already working in education as non-qualified substitutes during the training, and combining theoretical information with work experience was very effective.

One good thing is that the level of candidates from the rural area was not lower than the level of training of the candidates from the urban area, as is the case in pre-university education. Probably the access to the same type of educational services was sufficient to equalize the results from this point of view. This situation offers a new ground for rethinking the policies for improving the quality of rural and pre-university education.

Although initially, at the beginning of the analyzed period, the candidates mainly focused on the preschool level, in 2019 the candidates for primary education numerically equalized the candidates from the preschool education. This tendency can be associated with several possible causes: differences in the number of posts in primary and pre-school, differences in difficulty from exams at both levels, expectations of beginners regarding the degree of difficulty.



The evolution trend of the academic training of the teachers in the preschool and primary education in Ilfov county is in a positive trend, the subsequent research should focus on identifying the special needs of the pre-secondary education in this area and on offering specific educational programs for the initial training of the teachers who will teach in this area. Also, further research should probe the relationship between the grade obtained to the Tenure Exam and the ability of beginner teachers to cope well with the first years of teaching.

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