

NAVIGATING THE FIRST YEARS: ADAPTATION NEEDS OF BEGINNING TEACHERS IN PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION¹

Andreea DUCA²

Abstract: *This theoretical study explores the integration of novice teachers in pre-university education, highlighting the main adaptation challenges and the critical role of mentoring. Key factors include professional guidance, emotional support, and a collaborative school culture. The study emphasizes the need for coherent policies and continuous training to enhance teacher retention and performance.*

Key words: *novice teachers, mentoring, professional adaptation, teacher integration, educational policies*

1. Introduction

At the outset of their careers, novice teachers encounter a range of material, socio-emotional, and professional challenges, largely stemming from limited experience and inadequate institutional support (Edu.ro, 2023). In the absence of well-structured programs, they are often required to develop professionally through individual effort, potentially affecting the quality of the educational process. Consequently, guidance from experienced educators, particularly through structured mentoring programs, is vital for ensuring a smooth and effective integration into the teaching profession (Edu-Mentoring, 2020).

Integration into the education system is a critical stage in a teacher's career, where early support—especially through mentoring—is vital for developing skills and adapting to the profession (Garbatovschi, 2022). Given the link between teacher professionalism and educational quality (Edu.ro, 2023), schools must prioritize the integration and continuous development of novice teachers. Leadership support and a collaborative environment that fosters mentoring are essential for preparing educators who can contribute to both student success and societal progress.

This article represents a theoretical study based on the analysis of both national and international literature, considering the relatively small number of studies published in

¹ This paper was first presented at The International Conference on Education and Psychology “Innovative Perspectives in Digitalized Society”, Braşov, Romania, 27-28 November 2024.

² *Transilvania University of Braşov*, andreaduca010101@gmail.com, corresponding author

Romania on this topic. The selected literature was analyzed according to conceptual relevance, subject timeliness, and applicability in the context of pre-university education. The study aims to identify the main adaptation needs of novice teachers, to classify the factors that may influence this process, and to highlight how these factors affect the professional integration of early-career educators.

2. The General Context

2.1. The National legislative framework for novice teachers in Romania

The integration of novice teachers into the pre-university education system is often viewed as a rigid process driven by structured plans and routines. In reality, it is a non-linear journey marked by trial and error, ongoing challenges from societal and technological shifts, continuous learning, and the need for adaptability. Research underscores this complexity and dynamism, emphasizing that successful integration requires more than formal procedures—it demands flexibility and resilience (Garbatovschi, 2022).

A novice teacher is generally someone with limited experience, often gained through pedagogical practice during high school or university, leading to a degree that allows entry into the profession. Initial training offers foundational teaching qualifications, but ongoing professional development is needed to build subject and pedagogical skills. Beyond knowledge, novice teachers require guidance, motivation, and consistent support to adapt successfully (Teach for Romania, 2020).

Legally, a teacher is considered a novice until they pass the National Tenure Exam, as defined by Law no. 1/2011 (art. 241). Entry into the profession requires initial training that builds both theoretical and practical foundations. This stage helps future teachers develop key skills for lesson planning, age-appropriate strategies, and competency-based instruction (Eurydice, 2023; Iucu, 2005).

According to Law no. 198/2023 (Articles 170–174), initial teacher training is essential for entering the profession and includes theoretical instruction, practical training in application schools, and mentorship coordinated by both a tutor and an experienced teacher. The process ends with a national exam—portfolio evaluation and written test—required for full certification. Those who do not pass may only work temporarily as substitute teachers. After one year of classroom experience, candidates may take the National Tenure Exam to obtain certified teacher status.

To take the National Tenure Exam, teachers must complete at least one year of classroom practice under a mentor's guidance. The exam includes two parts: an eliminatory test with two classroom inspections and a portfolio evaluation, followed by a four-hour written test on instructional planning, teaching strategies, assessment, and subject knowledge. After passing the exam, teachers become tenured and must pursue continuous training to develop professionally.

Even experienced teachers may struggle during school changes or temporary contracts, though less so than novices (Vasilache, 2018). For beginners, adapting to curricula and institutional demands is a major challenge, often requiring peer support—

though this is not always accessible. Research emphasizes the role of mentoring and feedback in promoting integration, reflection, and growth (Dumitru, 2020; Anton, 2017). Emotional support is also crucial, as novice teachers are prone to stress and impostor syndrome, which can affect confidence and performance (Bălan & Iacob, 2021). Successful integration relies on both professional guidance and a collaborative school culture (Stanciu, 2018).

These needs are interdependent and crucial for a balanced transition into the teaching profession. To ensure effective integration, educational institutions must implement structured support systems that address both professional development and emotional well-being (Popa, 2019).

2.2. International legislative models supporting teacher induction

The integration of novice teachers is a global concern, with many countries using legal and institutional measures to support them. While early career teachers everywhere face challenges like uncertainty and pressure, some systems ensure structured support through national policies and legal frameworks (OECD, 2019).

In the United Kingdom, the Early Career Framework (ECF), introduced in 2021, provides a legally mandated two-year induction program that includes reduced teaching hours, formal mentoring, and structured training sessions. These are supported by public funding and overseen by the Department for Education, ensuring that novice teachers benefit from consistent and coherent support from the beginning of their careers (Department for Education, 2021). In the United States, similar induction programs are governed at the state level. For instance, California's Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) program links credential advancement to the completion of mentoring, performance evaluations, and formative feedback, reflecting a legal and financial commitment to teacher retention and quality (Feiman-Nemser, 2012). In Finland, although the system is less centralized, mentoring is sustained through strong partnerships between universities and schools. While not legally required, mentoring is deeply embedded in the national education culture, with experienced, well-trained teachers offering structured support, reflecting a system built on professional autonomy, trust, and collaboration (OECD, 2019).

In contrast to these countries, **Romania's system**, while evolving, still struggles to ensure consistent implementation of mentoring across schools, despite legal provisions such as *Law no. 198/2023*. In many cases, the mentoring relationship lacks structure, resources, or institutional monitoring (Popa, 2023). The disparity between legal intent and practical enforcement highlights a key difference between Romania and countries where mentoring is both a legal requirement and a strategic priority.

Overall, international legal approaches show that effective teacher induction needs more than policy—it also requires investment in mentor training, strong institutional collaboration, and clear role definitions. Together, these elements help build supportive environments that enhance teacher retention, identity, and teaching quality.

3. The Adaptation Needs of the Novice Teacher

3.1. Mentoring

The stage of active classroom practice represents the most important phase in the process of insertion and adaptation for the novice teacher. Upon arrival at the educational institution, the teacher is assigned a group, class, or multiple classes depending on the teaching level (early childhood, preschool, primary, lower secondary, or upper secondary). They are also introduced to the institution's rules and regulations and subsequently meet their mentor, who will guide and support them throughout their training.

The mentor is an experienced teacher who has reached the highest professional level (*Grade I*) and is recognized for their exemplary teaching practice. Their role is to support novice teachers by sharing educational expertise, creating learning opportunities, and guiding them through the adaptation process (Goraş, 2023). More than just a source of pedagogical knowledge, the mentor plays a key role in the professional and social integration of beginning teachers. Within the mentoring program, the mentor offers support tailored to the novice's specific needs and challenges (Branişte, 2016), helping them build confidence and integrate into the school community (Iordan, 2017).

The mentoring plan is a structured approach that addresses novice teachers' needs while aligning with educational standards. It includes scheduled mentor-mentee meetings, classroom support, and co-observation sessions with feedback on teaching and classroom management (Iuroaia, 2011; Tărnă & Goraş, 2017; Goraş, 2019).

Mentoring is essential for the integration and professional growth of novice teachers. It involves lesson observations with feedback, training in methodological skills such as lesson planning and digital tools, and personalized guidance (Popa, 2023; Georgescu, 2023). Mentors also clarify program goals, support exam preparation, and foster growth through constructive feedback and goal-setting (Goraş, 2024). Through modeling, they help novices develop communication and classroom management skills (Georgescu, 2023; Iordan, 2017). By sharing teaching experiences, strategies, and resources, mentors connect theory to practice and strengthen instructional identity (Goraş, 2023). Regular, non-punitive evaluations guide reflection and ongoing learning (Goraş, 2024). Beyond pedagogy, mentors support relationship-building, behavior management, and inclusive teaching—helping novices handle diverse classroom realities (Iordan, 2017).

As education evolves, so does mentoring. The integration of digital tools has become a key component of support, with mentors guiding novice teachers in using technology to create interactive resources and facilitate collaborative learning—preparing them for the demands of a digitally enhanced classroom (Popa, 2023).

However, the effectiveness of mentoring is closely tied to the institutional culture in which it takes place. A school environment that promotes trust, open communication, and shared learning strengthens the mentor–mentee relationship and reduces the risk of professional isolation and stress (Tărnă & Goraş, 2017; Branişte, 2016).

In Romania, although mentoring is legally regulated, its practical implementation often varies depending on school leadership and available resources. By contrast, Norway

adopts a shared responsibility model, in which school leaders are directly involved in supporting and coordinating the mentoring process. According to national policy documents, principals are expected to allocate dedicated time, provide structured collaboration spaces, and ensure both pedagogical and emotional support for novice teachers (Caspersen et al., 2022). This distributed leadership approach reduces the pressure on individual mentors and fosters a collaborative school culture. Compared to the inconsistencies often found in Romanian practice, the Norwegian framework formalizes leadership involvement and frames mentoring as a collective institutional commitment—an essential condition for the sustainable integration and development of novice teachers.

In conclusion, mentoring is essential to the integration and professional development of novice teachers, significantly influencing their success. Beyond pedagogical and psychological support, mentors help develop communication skills and guide new teachers in managing classroom diversity. Through observations, feedback, and tailored plans, mentors facilitate the novice's entry into the educational community, enhancing both performance and emotional well-being. Mentoring must also be part of a collaborative culture, where shared experiences, educational networks, and ongoing training strengthen professional growth and foster a sense of belonging. This collective approach supports the integration of novice teachers and contributes to a high-quality, modern educational environment.

3.2. Specific challenges encountered

The types of adaptation needs experienced by novice teachers can be divided into three essential categories: professional, psychological, and social/organizational. These needs are interdependent and reflect the complexity of the integration process of a new teacher into an already established educational system.

3.2.1. Professional needs of novice teachers

One of the main challenges faced by beginning teachers is adapting to the professional demands of the educational system. These include both curriculum integration and the application of effective teaching methods that meet students' needs. Novice teachers must acquire lesson planning skills, learn classroom management, and implement innovative educational activities—all essential for career success (Goraş, 2023). In this regard, continuous training and mentor support play a crucial role in the development of these skills, being fundamental elements in the professional adaptation process. A study conducted by Branişte (2016) emphasizes the importance of a well-structured mentoring plan that supports beginners during their early career stages, providing them with resources and practical examples to facilitate their integration into the educational framework.

Psychological and Emotional Needs of Novice Teachers

Alongside professional demands, novice teachers face numerous psychological and emotional difficulties. They often experience stress caused by new responsibilities,

constant evaluations, and the pressure to meet the expectations of students and parents. Furthermore, a frequently encountered phenomenon among beginners is the "impostor syndrome," where they feel they are not competent enough to fulfill the teaching role, which can undermine their confidence in their own abilities (Iordan, 2017). These challenges are often overcome through support from colleagues and mentors, who help build confidence and reduce the anxiety associated with starting a teaching career. In this context, constructive feedback and reflective sessions on teaching practices are essential for building a successful career.

3.2.2. Social and organizational needs of novice teachers

Social and organizational adaptation is a crucial aspect of novice teacher integration. Positive relationships with students, colleagues, and school leadership greatly shape their early experiences. Successful integration into a cohesive, supportive team is key to their development (Goraş, 2023). Collaboration with experienced peers and participation in shared activities like lesson planning and training foster a growth-oriented environment. Institutional support, through clear policies and a culture of collaboration and continuous learning, is equally essential (Țărnă & Goraş, 2017).

In addition to individual and relational factors, the organizational culture within the school significantly influences the emotional and professional adaptation of novice teachers. When schools foster open communication, collegiality, and shared responsibility, beginning teachers are more likely to feel included, supported, and confident in their professional growth. For instance, schools that encourage regular peer collaboration, joint lesson planning, and informal mentoring create a psychologically safe environment that buffers against stress and professional burnout (Țărnă & Goraş, 2017). In contrast, rigid or hierarchical institutions with little emphasis on feedback or inclusion can lead to professional isolation, reduced motivation, and stagnation in teaching development (Stanciu, 2018). Thus, without an organizational culture based on trust and collaboration, even the best-designed mentoring programs risk becoming formalistic and ineffective.

Moreover, school leadership plays a vital role in shaping this context. Effective principals who prioritize teacher well-being, facilitate team-based professional learning, and support innovation contribute to higher levels of adaptation among new teachers. A school leader who actively supports mentorship initiatives, provides access to resources, and models collaborative behavior can create the necessary conditions for sustainable professional integration (Goraş, 2024). Ultimately, while mentoring remains a central mechanism in supporting novice teachers, its success is strongly mediated by the broader institutional environment in which it operates.

In conclusion, the professional adaptation process of novice teachers is complex and multidimensional. It involves not only acquiring professional skills but also managing psychological, emotional, and social challenges. Support from colleagues, mentors, and school leadership is essential for the rapid and effective integration of novice teachers into the educational community, thereby contributing to the development of a successful teaching career.

3.3. Factors influencing the adaptation of novice teachers

The adaptation of novice teachers within the educational system is a complex process that depends on several key factors essential for their effective integration and the development of a successful teaching career. These factors can be grouped into three main categories: mentor support, school policies and continuous training, and teacher self-regulation and resilience.

a. Mentor Support

Mentor support is crucial in the adaptation of novice teachers. Experienced mentors guide new teachers, helping them navigate challenges in their teaching practice. Goraş (2023) highlights that mentors contribute to developing professional skills through feedback, lesson observations, and discussions of pedagogical strategies.

Beyond pedagogical support, mentoring also addresses emotional and psychological needs, reducing anxiety and stress at the start of a career. According to Iordan (2017), an effective mentor is essential for building confidence and learning from real-life experiences.

b. School policies and continuous training

School-level educational policies are essential for the successful integration of novice teachers. Organized environments with clear norms and strategies for professional growth—such as training sessions and collaborative learning—support their development and adaptation.

According to Parfentiev and Ciobanu (2014), institutions that promote continuous training and collaboration help enhance teaching skills and ease integration. Ongoing development also fosters an updated educational vision, including adapting to new technologies (Popa, 2023).

c. Teacher self-regulation and resilience

Individual self-regulation and resilience are essential in the adaptation process of novice teachers, as the ability to manage emotions, cope with stress, and remain flexible greatly influences successful integration into the school environment (Țărnă & Goraş, 2017). Teachers who reflect on their practice and adapt to the needs of students and institutions are better prepared to face challenges. As Georgescu (2023) notes, resilience helps them learn from setbacks and stay motivated, supporting more effective professional integration.

The adaptation process of novice teachers depends significantly on the support provided by mentors, school policies, and continuous training, as well as the development of self-regulation and resilience. These dimensions are interconnected and contribute to the creation of a learning-friendly and professionally rewarding environment, ensuring the long-term success of novice teachers in their educational careers.

4. Conclusion

This theoretical study contributes to the understanding of novice teacher integration by systematizing the main professional, emotional, and organizational factors involved. Through a comparative analysis of national and international mentoring models, the article highlights how structured support and school leadership influence teacher adaptation, retention, and performance. Being based exclusively on existing literature, the study's limitations lie in the absence of empirical validation. Future research should explore the actual impact of mentoring programs in Romanian schools, with attention to institutional differences and long-term professional outcomes.

The integration of novice teachers into the pre-university education system is a complex and multidimensional process that requires more than initial training or individual effort. It demands a coherent support system combining mentorship, institutional leadership, and policy-level commitment. As shown both in the Romanian context and through comparative international examples, mentoring is most effective when embedded in a collaborative school culture, clearly defined by legislation, and supported through consistent implementation and leadership involvement.

While Romania has made important legal steps toward regulating teacher induction, challenges persist in translating these provisions into practice. In contrast, systems such as those in the UK, the US, Finland, or Norway demonstrate that well-structured mentoring programs, backed by legal clarity and shared institutional responsibility, can significantly improve teacher retention, emotional well-being, and instructional quality. The mentoring models analyzed reflect a tension between formal regulation and professional autonomy, with comparable outcomes when institutional support is consistent and collaborative, regardless of the legal structure.

Therefore, effective integration must be viewed as a strategic investment in the future of education—one that prioritizes not only professional development but also the emotional and organizational inclusion of novice teachers. Sustainable progress will require continuous reflection on mentoring practices, increased collaboration between policy and practice, and an active role from school leaders in fostering an environment of trust, feedback, and innovation.

References

- Anton, A. (2017). Mentoratul în educație: O abordare de sprijin pentru debutanți [Mentoring in education: A support approach for beginners]. *Bulletin of Transilvania University of Braşov. Series VII: Social Sciences and Law*, 10(2), 45–59.
- Bălan, M., & Iacob, R. (2021). Impactul stresului profesional asupra cadrelor didactice debutante: Factori de risc şi intervenţii posibile [The impact of professional stress on beginner teachers: Risk factors and possible interventions]. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 35(3), 102–115.
- Branişte, S. (2016). Dimensiuni manageriale ale inserţiei profesionale a cadrelor didactice debutante [Managerial dimensions of beginner teachers' professional insertion]. *Univers Pedagocic*, 52(4), 16–22.

- Caspersen, J., Raaen, F. D., & Helleve, I. (2022). Tracing ideas about mentoring newly qualified teachers and the expectations of school leadership in policy documents. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 66(3), 415–428. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2020.1869073>
- Department for Education. (2021). *Early Career Framework*. UK Government. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-early-career-teachers>
- Dumitru, L. (2020). Sprijinul profesional al cadrelor didactice debutante în învățământul preuniversitar: Necesități și provocări [Professional support for beginner teachers in pre-university education: Needs and challenges]. *Revista de Științe Educaționale*, 14(4), 78–91.
- Edu.ro. (2023). *Conferința Națională NEST – Mentorat adaptiv în educație [NEST National Conference – Adaptive Mentoring in Education]*. Ministerul Educației. https://www.edu.ro/conferinta_NEST_mentorat_adaptiv
- Edu-Mentoring. (2020). *Ghid pentru mentorat educațional [Handbook for educational mentoring]*. Edu-Mentoring Project. https://edu-mentoring.eu/handbook/handbook_ro.pdf
- Eurydice. (2023). *Formarea inițială a cadrelor didactice și a formatorilor care sunt implicați în formarea profesională [Initial training of teachers and trainers involved in professional training]*. Retrieved from <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/ro/national-education-systems/romania/formarea-initiala-cadrelor-didactice-si-formatorilor-care-sunt>
- Garbatovschi, V. (2022). *Integrarea profesorului debutant în colectivul pedagogic [Integration of the beginner teacher into the teaching staff]*. Institutul de Științe ale Educației.
- Georgescu, N. M. (2023). *Repere teoretice ale dezvoltării competenței de comunicare contextualizată la cadrele didactice [Theoretical milestones in developing contextualized communication competence in teachers]*. Retrieved from https://ibn.idsi.md/sites/default/files/imag_file/294-309_0.pdf
- Goraș, M. (2017). Formarea continuă – o perspectivă în optimizarea procesului de adaptare a cadrelor didactice debutante [Continuous training – a perspective in optimizing the adaptation process of beginner teachers]. *Probleme actuale ale științelor umanistice*, 16(1), 127–137.
- Goraș, M. (2021). Parteneriat educațional – componentă evolutivă pentru adaptarea profesională a cadrelor didactice debutante [Educational partnership – an evolutionary component for professional adaptation of beginner teachers]. *Comunicarea Interpersonală*, 2, 131–138.
- Goraș, M. (2023). Adaptarea profesională – o precondiție de succes pentru cadrele didactice debutante [Professional adaptation – a prerequisite for success for beginner teachers]. *Univers Pedagogic*, 80(4), 70–78.
- Goraș, M. (2024). Rolul managerilor școlari în adaptarea cadrelor didactice debutante [The role of school managers in adapting beginner teachers]. *Vector European*, 1, 192–202.

- Iordan, I. (2017). Integrarea profesorului debutant. O cercetare în şcoala românească [Integration of the beginner teacher. A study in the Romanian school]. *Revista de Pedagogie*, 65(1), 83–96.
- Iucu, R. B. (2005). *Formarea cadrelor didactice Patru exerciţii de politică educaţională în România* [Teacher training. Four educational policy exercises in Romania]. Educaţia 2000+ Centre & UNICEF Romania.
- Iuroaia, F. (2011). Analiză curriculară a programelor de instruire a cadrelor didactice [Curricular analysis of teacher training programs]. *Studia Universitatis Moldaviae (Seriă Ştiinţe ale Educaţiei)*, 49(9), 11–20.
- Law nr. 198/2023 regarding initial training of teachers. (2023). *Monitorul Oficial al României*.
- National Education Law nr. 1/2011. (2011). *Monitorul Oficial al României*, Partea I, nr. 18 from 10 January 2011.
- OECD. (2019). *A flying start: Improving initial teacher preparation systems*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/cf74e549-en>
- Popa, D. (2023). Mentoratul pentru cariera didactică între oportunitate şi necesitate [Mentoring for the teaching career between opportunity and necessity]. *Cercetarea pedagogică*, 328–332.
- Stanciu, P. (2018). Cultura organizaţională şi sprijinul colegial pentru profesorii debutanţi [Organizational culture and collegial support for beginner teachers]. *Revista de Psihopedagogie Aplicată*, 23(2), 56–70.
- Țărnă, E., & Goraş, M. (2017). Importanţa culturii organizaţionale în procesul de adaptare profesională a cadrelor didactice debutante [The importance of organizational culture in the professional adaptation of beginner teachers]. In *Educaţia din perspectiva valorilor* (pp. 114–120). Eikon.
- Teach for Romania. (2020). *Ghid pentru sprijinirea integrării în şcoală a profesorilor debutanţi* [Guide for supporting the integration of beginner teachers in schools]. Teach for Romania.
- Vasilache, M. (2018). Adaptarea cadrelor didactice debutante la şcolile din Republica Moldova: Studiu comparativ [Adaptation of beginner teachers to schools in the Republic of Moldova: Comparative study]. *Revista Educatorului*, i(4), 112–125.