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Neli Koleva & Maya Stoyanova-Warner

'A New Way for New Talents in Teaching' or the Impact of Targeted Recruitment, Rigorous Selection, Innovative Training, and Ongoing Professional Support on Beginner Teachers' Performance

Abstract

'A New Way for New Talents in Teaching' (NEWTT), an Erasmus+, Key Action 3: Policy Experimentation project, explores alternative pathways into the teaching profession for highly motivated graduates and professionals. The project is inspired by prior research that compares traditional teacher education programs to alternative pathways to the profession based on teacher and student performance and on key competencies and mindsets demonstrated by the teachers in both tracks. The key hypothesis tested is that rigorously selected career-changers or top-performing graduates with a strong commitment to teaching could combine their first two years at school with practical, on-the-job training and a university teacher certification program and perform at least on par with traditionally trained beginner teachers. If this proves to be true, NEWTT could potentially address a few major EU-wide education challenges. An impact assessment team have been tracking the competence, motivation, and mindsets of the alternative training group and have been comparing them to the competence, motivation, and mindsets of control groups – traditionally trained beginner teachers also working in underperforming schools. The impact evaluation interim report for Bulgaria outlines a few key trends: NEWTT trainees and beginner teachers enter the profession with different job motivators – the main one being social responsibility for NEWTT trainees and job security for the control group, teaching competences increase for both groups over time, and traditionally trained teachers feel a higher need for support in the three main teacher tasks of tracking student progress, giving students feedback, and establishing classroom routines.

Keywords: alternative pathway, teacher training, career changers, rigorous selection, policy experimentation, multi-national collaboration

Introduction: Prerequisites for 'A New Way for New Talents in Teaching'

The results of student assessments such as PISA, TIMSS, and PIRLS have led to close examination of the quality of teaching as well as to the implementation of measures to increase school effectiveness. In search of different levers to improve education, teacher training and development and specifically teacher induction (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011), prove to be promising starting points. In the last decade, there have been numerous studies examining the effectiveness of existing teacher education programs.

Hutchings et al. (2006) conducted a broad evaluation of the Teach First programme in England during its first two years of existence. The main objective of the study was to identify innovative aspects of the programme which could be beneficial to initial teacher training as a whole. Data were gathered through

interviews of different stakeholders, focus groups, questionnaires and observations. The authors identified a number of innovative aspects, such as the selection criteria for individuals to participate in the programme, the recruitment of high-achieving graduates who otherwise may not have considered teaching, the development of a strong community among trainees, continuity from initial training to induction year, and strong ongoing support structures. Schools also reported back various ways in which trainees had a positive impact: imaginative teaching, initiation of extra-curricular activities, and stimulation of professional dialogue among teachers. Additionally, trainees evaluated the programme positively, with 40% of those completing it staying at their placement schools for a third year (Hutchings et al., 2006).

In 2015, Abs, Eckert, and Anderson-Park evaluated the training program of a similar alternative pathway program, Teach First Germany. They followed one cohort of Teach First Germany trainees over a period of eight months. In addition to collecting data on the quality of the different training modules, the researchers examined different outcome variables: teacher self-efficacy, teaching competence, and teacher performance on a pedagogical knowledge test. The results showed that Teach First Germany trainees assessed their teaching competence and their teacher efficacy highly. However, though they felt increasingly competent over time, their teacher self-efficacy slightly decreased over this same period. The test results also indicated a significant knowledge gain for the program content specific questions, as well as for The Teacher Education Development Study in Mathematics (TEDS-M) questions. A descriptive comparison of the average proficiency between alternative pathway trainees and traditional pathway teachers in the TEDS-M study revealed that alternative pathway trainees possessed higher proficiency at the beginning of their program than traditional pathway teachers at the beginning of their studies in teacher education. At the end of the program, alternative pathway trainees possessed a similarly high or higher proficiency than beginning teachers within the regular pathway.

The findings of the different studies underline the potential for innovative approaches to teacher recruitment, training, and professional development. In particular, research suggests that alternative pathway programs that employ practices such as rigorous selection criteria and practical on-the-job training can be effective in bringing into the profession new entrants without prior teaching experience and training them to achieve positive outcomes. Still, the research in the field has been limited, including to only select (mostly English-speaking) countries in the European Union.

About 'A New Way for New Talents in Teaching'

'A New Way for New Talents in Teaching' (NEWTT), an Erasmus+, Key Action 3: Policy Experimentation project is inspired by this research and by the remaining need for greater investigation of alternative pathways into teaching to comprehensively study the effects of implementing and scaling such approaches across the EU and in different cultural settings. The project consortium is comprised of fifteen organizations from seven EU member countries, namely Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, Spain, Austria, the UK, and Germany. It is important to note that besides the multinational level of cooperation, the consortium brings together non-

governmental organizations, national ministries of education, universities, and stakeholders from the industry sector. It includes five non-governmental organizations which are part of the global network Teach for All, Teach For Bulgaria, Teach for Romania, Teach for Austria, Empieza por Educar (the Basque country, Spain), and Mission Possible (Latvia). The ministries of education in these five countries are also part of the consortium and the resulting collaboration between the government and the NGO sector is groundbreaking and quite promising for scaling the results during the exploitation phase of NEWTT. Plovdiv University (Bulgaria) and University of Bucharest (Romania) are also partners in the consortium and their role is crucial as they provide NEWTT trainees with teaching certification. The Federation of Austrian Industries provides the much needed perspective of the business sector, and an impact assessment team from the University of Duisburg-Essen is responsible for the external evaluation of the project. The global network for expanding educational opportunities, Teach for All, also supports the consortium in their effort to prove the effectiveness of alternative pathways to teaching in order for national educational institutions to have a solid ground for policy reform. It is important to note that whereas the consortium is comprised of partners from seven EU member states, the policy experimentation pilots are tested in only five of these seven countries: Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, Austria, and the Basque region in Spain.

Main hypotheses tested

The policy experimentation project sets out to test four main hypotheses as outlined in this paragraph. The recruitment, selection and initial training methodologies of the NEWTT alternative pathway pilots will generate trainees who are suitable for teaching (with regard to teacher competence, e.g., pedagogical knowledge, teacher attitudes, and self-efficacy). The trainees starting teaching in each national pilot will overall perform at least as well on initial measures of teacher competence as beginning teachers in traditional programs. Trainees who enter through the NEWTT alternative pathway pilots will improve their competence as teachers over the course of the NEWTT pilots. The overall competence of trainees within the NEWTT alternative pathway pilots will compare positively with those of beginning teachers in traditional programs. At the end of the program, at least a proportional share of trainees from the NEWTT national pilots will finish their second year at school and will be willing to continue teaching or contributing to the impact of schools for the students they have taught, as compared to beginning teachers from traditional programs.

If these hypotheses are proven, NEWTT has the potential to address a few major EU-wide challenges outlined by the Council of the European Union in 2013. One major challenge is related to teacher shortages, as the teaching profession does not attract top talent and is not viewed as an attractive career. This shortage is especially acute in schools working with vulnerable communities, which need motivated teachers who are prepared to adequately address the additional challenges that impede students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in their pursuit of quality education. The aging teacher population (in Austria and Bulgaria in particular) and low interest in the teaching profession among young people raises concerns of impending teacher shortages.

The partner universities in the consortium and the tailored certification programs they provide for the NEWTT trainees tackle the necessity for an updated teacher certification curriculum to address the needs of 21st century students. Teacher certification curricula across Europe do not evolve as quickly as the needs of today's learners. As numerous studies have demonstrated, 21st century students need to develop literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, and other skills that boost employability and enable them to stay competitive in an ever-evolving economy. NEWTT pilot certification programs are shorter than the traditional four-year tracks because a basic requirement for applying to participate in any of the five pilot programs is to hold a bachelor's degree. This made it possible for the partner university in Bulgaria, for example, to develop an innovative teacher certification master's program for the NEWTT trainees.

The training program of the NEWTT trainees addresses yet another challenge, namely the insufficient practical training for teachers prior to entering the classroom. Research demonstrates that teachers-in-training in some countries, spend very little time in the classroom and, as a result, often begin their careers without the preparation necessary to meet the needs and challenges of their students.

The final challenge that NEWTT sets out to address is retaining teachers past their first two years in the classroom. Beginner teachers tend to leave the profession because they feel that they lack the preparation and support to deal with the challenges with which they are confronted. NEWTT aims to address that by providing trainees with ongoing professional support, mentorship and coaching.

Key shared elements of the pilots

Alternative pathways to teaching tested in this policy experiment comprise of several key shared elements which are different from the traditional pathways for entering the profession. These elements include the proactive recruitment of promising university students and professionals from various fields into a teacher training program; the rigorous selection of candidates (trainees) to enter into the training program based on a predefined set of competencies associated with high-quality teaching; the placement of trainees in a preselected school, with a focus on placement in schools that serve disadvantaged students; a comprehensive training and professional development curriculum, typically for a period of two school years and characterized by school-based on-the-job training, mentorship and coaching for trainees, and a set of theoretical and practical courses provided in person and online; a learning community created amongst the trainees. As these elements unfold, there is continuous monitoring and evaluation of trainees' performance and competence levels and their impact on student outcomes (academic and non-academic).

Objectives

In short, the objectives of NEWTT are to define innovative, value-added ways to bring new talent into teaching, to prove their effectiveness and viability, and to identify the necessary conditions for such pathways to be integrated into formal policy and to be scaled up within the consortium countries and across the EU.

The policy experimentation in conjunction with the evaluation design allows for three different types of comparisons. First, preconditions of the participants as they

start teaching in the respective intervention and control groups such as initial competence, prior pedagogical work experience, etc. are compared and analysed. Second, it is possible to follow the development of the participants within the experimental groups and monitor their change in teaching competence, including their knowledge and attitudes as well as their enthusiasm and self-efficacy (output variables). Third, the achievements of the experimental groups can be compared to those of the control groups. Finally, it is be possible to measure the retention during the first two years of teaching and the intention to stay in the education sector. The sample for the study consists of all trainees in the alternative teacher preparation programs provided by the non-government partner organisations in the five NEWTT consortium countries. The ideal control group consists of beginning teachers in schools with similar school characteristics as the placement schools of the intervention group trainees, who teach in the same International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) level, the same grade level, and the same subjects. Where it is not possible to find beginning teachers at the placement schools in sufficient numbers, beginning teacher from the same subject at other schools of the same ISCED-level and a similar socio-economic background can be chosen for the control group.

Preliminary results

Since the beginning of the project, over 225 trainees have been placed in 123 underperforming high-need schools in Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, the Basque Country in Spain, and Austria. These 225 trainees have been actively recruited and rigorously selected out of over 4000 applications. More specifically, the numbers per country are the following: Austria – 41 trainees in 27 schools; Bulgaria – 117 participants in 41 schools; Latvia – 20 participants in 15 schools; Romania – 31 participants in 30 schools; the Basque Country – 20 participants in 10 schools.

We have yet to see the complete results of the external evaluation carried out by the impact assessment team from the University of Duisburg-Essen. However, the interim report has been shared with the consortium partners and it outlines a few key trends for all five partner countries with pilot programs. The numbers below are specific for Bulgaria.

NEWTT trainees and beginner teachers enter the profession with different job motivators, the main one being social responsibility for NEWTT trainees and job security for the control group. When asked what motivated them to become teachers, NEWTT trainees rated working with children and having social responsibility as very important. Of all the motivations listed, job security, which includes salary, was the least important for them in contrast to the participants in the control group for whom job security was the leading motivator to enter the teaching profession.

NEWTT trainees and the teachers in the control group did a self-assessment of their teaching competences before the beginning of their first year at school and at the end. The results show that despite the fact that the control group had undergone an intense four-year pedagogical university program prior to entering the classroom, there are no significant deviations in the self-assessment of both groups. On the contrary, teaching competences increase in both groups over time. With regard to teacher self-efficacy, NEWTT trainees rated their instructional skills as being very good (3.59 out of 5). Even though they rated their self-efficacy concerning

classroom management lower, it is still rather high (3.16). These results are quite remarkable considering that the trainees are beginning teachers with very little or no teaching experience.

Last but not least, the results of the self-assessment also show that traditionally trained teachers feel a higher need for support in the three main teacher tasks of tracking student progress (2.63 out of 5 for NEWTT trainees vs. 3.00 for the control group), giving students feedback (2.52 vs. 3.07), and establishing classroom routines (2.89 vs. 2.98). Based on these results, for example, a policy that could be introduced after the project is completed would be to provide professional support to all beginner teachers during their first two years at school. This support could be in the form of coaching and mentorship by the more experienced teachers at school which is one of the elements of NEWTT. Such collaboration is a win-win situation for both parties, because on the one hand beginner teachers would receive the support necessary for any employee entering a new profession, and on the other hand their experienced counterparts would be able to see themselves as mentors and perhaps even be reinvigorated in their teaching.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to point out that the policy experimentation project NEWTT does not aim to replace traditional pathways into teaching with alternative ones but rather to explore practices that would prove beneficial when tackling EU-wide education challenges. NEWTT also demonstrates how non-governmental organizations, national governments, universities, and school leaders can collaborate in the name of a worthy cause – giving access to quality education to all children, especially students from vulnerable communities.

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Dr. Neli Koleva, Teach For Bulgaria, Bulgaria, n.koleva@zaednovchas.bg

Maya Stoyanova-Warner, Teach For Bulgaria, Bulgaria, m.stoyanova@zaednovchas.bg