

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND PRIMARY EDUCATION IN ROMANIA: NEW DIRECTIONS IN TEACHER TRAINING AND CURRENT CHALLENGES

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**Abstract:** *Recent reforms in Romanian higher education, particularly the separation of the traditional Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education program into two distinct specializations—Early Childhood Education and Primary Education Pedagogy—have generated extensive debate within the academic and professional community. This literature review synthesizes national and international perspectives on the implications of this reform for teacher education, curriculum design, and quality assurance. Drawing on policy documents, ARACIS evaluation standards (2024–2025), European frameworks such as the Eurydice and OECD Starting Strong reports, and scholarly analyses, the article examines the theoretical, pedagogical, and economic arguments for and against specialization. Findings from the reviewed literature highlight both alignment with European trends in differentiated teacher training and concerns about fragmentation, duplication of resources, and loss of integrative pedagogical vision. The review also explores how institutional capacity, educational effectiveness, and quality management—core components of the ARACIS framework—are addressed in current debates. By mapping these perspectives, the article aims to provide an evidence-based, balanced understanding of the reform and to identify areas requiring further research and policy clarification.*

**Keywords:** *early childhood education; primary education pedagogy; teacher training reform; quality assurance; ARACIS standards; educational policy.*

## Introduction

Recent years have brought significant reforms to Romanian higher education, particularly in the domain of teacher training for early childhood and primary education. Among the most debated changes is the restructuring of the long-established *Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education* (PIPP) program into two distinct specializations: *Early Childhood Education* and *Primary Education Pedagogy*. This reform, formalized through the provisions of the Education Laws of 2023 and further operationalized by the ARACIS Methodology for External Quality Evaluation approved by Government Decision no. 962/2024, aims to align Romanian teacher education with European quality assurance frameworks and international trends emphasizing differentiated competences across educational levels (ARACIS, 2025; Eurydice, 2025; OECD, 2021).

The separation is grounded in the premise that children aged 0–6 have developmental needs substantially different from those of pupils in primary school, thus requiring distinct pedagogical approaches, competences, and learning environments. This perspective is supported by international frameworks such as the *OECD Starting Strong* reports (OECD, 2021) and *Eurydice* analyses (2023, 2025), which stress the importance of specialized training for educators working in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Furthermore, the new ARACIS standards reinforce the need for clarity in program outcomes, curriculum alignment, and institutional capacity tailored to each specialization.

However, the reform has also generated strong controversy among academics, practitioners, and policymakers. Critics argue that Romania had already developed an effective and well-regarded model through the integrated PIPP program, which allowed graduates to work flexibly across preschool and primary levels. From this perspective, the new separation is viewed as pedagogically questionable, economically inefficient, and institutionally burdensome, as it duplicates resources and reduces graduates' career mobility. Some commentators have expressed concern that the provision was introduced without sufficient consultation or evidence, raising questions about its pedagogical and economic justification.

In this context, understanding the reform requires an equidistant and evidence-based analysis. Beyond political or emotional reactions, it is essential to examine how this separation aligns with international research, European policy trends, and Romanian quality assurance mechanisms, as well as how it responds to the realities of teacher education institutions. The literature offers diverse perspectives—from theoretical and normative arguments in favor of specialization to

empirical and critical analyses warning against fragmentation and loss of coherence.

### *1. Policy and Legislative Context in Romanian Teacher Education*

Romania's recent educational reforms are shaped by the Education Laws of 2023, which redefined teacher training pathways across the entire preuniversity system. A particularly significant modification was the abolition of the double specialization program Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education (PIPP), replaced by two separate degree tracks: Early Childhood Education and Primary Education Pedagogy. This restructuring is connected to broader efforts to align national standards with European frameworks for quality assurance. The ARACIS External Evaluation Methodology (Government Decision no. 962/2024) emphasizes three main pillars:

- Institutional capacity,
- Educational effectiveness, and
- Quality management (ARACIS, 2025).

These standards require universities to demonstrate clarity of program objectives, appropriate infrastructure, and effective stakeholder feedback mechanisms. However, while the legal framework promotes differentiation, commentators in Romanian academic journals (e.g. *Revista de Pedagogie, Educatia* 21) warn that implementation challenges—such as limited practicum sites and a shortage of qualified mentors—may hinder compliance with ARACIS standards (Roman & Bulat, 2025; Scorțescu et al., 2024). Furthermore, policy analysts like Marin (2025) and Langa et al. (2025) highlight the inconsistency between the goal of specialization and the economic and institutional realities faced by universities, especially outside major urban centers.

### *2. European and International Trends: Specialization versus Integration*

Internationally, educational systems vary in their approach to teacher preparation. The OECD Starting Strong VI report (2021) and Eurydice (2023; 2025) documents show a trend toward specialized training for early childhood educators, grounded in child-centered pedagogy and socio-emotional learning.

Countries such as Finland, Norway, and Germany differentiate early childhood from primary education training, reflecting research showing distinct developmental stages and learning frameworks (Melhuish et al., 2015). Nonetheless, integrative models persist in some contexts, particularly where continuity between early and primary education is prioritized (Eurydice 2025). In these systems, teachers with cross-level training support smoother transitions and coherent pedagogical progression. Romania's former PIPP program aligned with this integrative philosophy, preparing teachers capable of understanding

and addressing children's development from ages 3 to 10. Thus, while the new separation follows international specialization trends, critics argue that Romania's tradition and context favored integration, and that reformers overlooked the program's proven effectiveness.

### *3. Theoretical and Pedagogical Arguments*

The academic literature reflects divergent theoretical perspectives regarding the separation of teacher education programs. On one side, advocates of specialization argue that each educational stage—early childhood and primary—requires distinct pedagogical frameworks and specific professional competences. According to OECD (2021), the developmental and learning characteristics of children aged 0–6 differ substantially from those of pupils in primary school, thus necessitating differentiated preparation. In the same vein, Eurydice (2023) emphasizes that specialization contributes to a clearer professional identity and enables greater curricular depth, allowing teacher education programs to focus more precisely on the competences relevant to each educational level. Conversely, proponents of integrated training underline the benefits of maintaining a unified formation pathway. Research by Melhuish et al. (2015) suggests that integrated programs ensure continuity in early learning, supporting smoother transitions between preschool and primary education. From this perspective, a dual qualification is seen as advantageous because it offers greater career flexibility and promotes economic efficiency, allowing graduates to adapt to various teaching contexts (Catalano et al., 2025). Historically, Romania's PIPP program embodied this integrative philosophy, cultivating teachers with broad competences who were particularly valued in rural schools where staffing flexibility is essential. Romanian scholars such as Tănase et al. (2025) further stress that reforms in teacher education should be anchored in the national educational culture rather than merely replicating international trends. They warn that an abrupt shift toward full specialization, without sufficient adaptation to local contexts, risks generating fragmented curricula and incoherent career trajectories. The literature thus presents a complex picture in which both specialization and integration hold theoretical merit, but their effectiveness depends largely on contextual factors, institutional capacity, and the coherence of implementation. (Stan et al, 2018)

### *4. Quality Assurance and ARACIS Standards*

The ARACIS methodology (2024) establishes rigorous evaluation standards that all new teacher education programs must satisfy. According to the literature examining these reforms (ARACIS, 2025; Roman & Bulat, 2025), compliance requires institutions to articulate clearly defined graduate profiles, ensure adequate infrastructure and

qualified human resources, and implement transparent mechanisms for feedback and continuous improvement. These standards aim to align Romanian higher education with European quality assurance principles, fostering accountability, clarity, and stakeholder involvement. Despite this structured framework, recent analyses reveal persistent challenges in practice. Scorțescu et al. (2024) note that many Romanian universities continue to face difficulties in fully integrating stakeholder feedback—particularly from students, mentors, and partner institutions—into their internal quality management systems. As a result, institutional responsiveness often remains limited, and quality loops intended to drive improvement are not consistently effective. The introduction of separate study programs for *Early Childhood Education* and *Primary Education Pedagogy* further amplifies these challenges. Each specialization must now independently demonstrate compliance with capacity and effectiveness indicators, as mandated by ARACIS. Langa et al. (2025) observe that this requirement raises legitimate concerns about duplication of resources and financial strain, especially for universities operating with constrained budgets. Without coordinated planning and additional investment, the risk of uneven implementation and compromised quality remains significant.

Overall, the literature suggests that while the ARACIS framework provides a solid foundation for quality assurance, its successful application depends on institutions' capacity to translate formal standards into meaningful, context-sensitive practices that genuinely enhance program effectiveness.

##### *5. Curriculum Design and Professional Development*

Scholarly literature consistently emphasizes that distinct teacher education specializations must be supported by tailored curricula that reflect the specific pedagogical demands of each educational level. In the case of *Early Childhood Education*, programs are expected to prioritize play-based learning, socio-emotional development, and collaboration with families, elements considered essential for fostering holistic development during the formative years. In contrast, *Primary Education Pedagogy* is designed to concentrate on literacy and numeracy foundations, disciplinary didactics, and the cultivation of instructional strategies that respond to diverse classroom contexts (OECD, 2021; Eurydice, 2023). Despite this clear theoretical distinction, comparative analyses reveal that Romanian curricula remain only partially differentiated. Studies by Catalano et al. (2025) and Marin (2025) suggest that many teacher education institutions continue to rely on shared curricular components derived from the former integrated PIPP program. This continuity, while offering certain efficiencies, may hinder the full realization of specialized competences

envisioned by the reform and limit alignment with international standards.

In parallel, the literature on professional development underscores the importance of continuous training, reflective practice, and mentoring as critical elements for sustaining teacher quality throughout the career. Scortescu et al. (2024) highlight that effective mentoring and university–school partnerships play a pivotal role in ensuring that theoretical preparation is reinforced through coherent practicum experiences and competence-based assessment. Strengthening these partnerships is therefore viewed as essential not only for improving initial teacher education but also for fostering a culture of lifelong professional growth.

Taken together, the evidence indicates that curriculum differentiation and structured professional development are interdependent processes. Without well-defined curricula and robust practical training frameworks, the intended benefits of specialization risk being diluted, underscoring the need for systematic coordination between universities, schools, and quality assurance agencies.

#### *6. Synthesis and Gaps*

The body of literature reviewed portrays the current reform as both complex and contested, reflecting a dynamic interplay between policy intentions and practical realities. On the one hand, the separation of teacher education programs into distinct specializations appears to formally align with European policy trends and with the quality assurance standards established by ARACIS. It embodies the aspiration to modernize teacher preparation and to enhance professional clarity by distinguishing the competences required for early childhood and primary education.

On the other hand, scholars highlight a range of practical, economic, and pedagogical challenges that complicate implementation. Institutions face difficulties in ensuring adequate resources, faculty expertise, and practicum opportunities for two separate programs, while questions remain about the coherence of the new curricula and their capacity to respond effectively to educational needs across different contexts.

Across the literature, several notable gaps emerge. First, there is limited empirical evidence assessing the actual outcomes of the reform, particularly regarding its impact on teaching quality, graduate competences, and employment trajectories. Second, many analyses point to insufficient consultation with stakeholders—including university educators, school mentors, and professional associations—during the design and rollout phases, which may have weakened both legitimacy and contextual fit. Third, the need for comprehensive policy

evaluation is consistently underscored, particularly evaluations that connect quality assurance frameworks with the development of teacher competences and the evolving demands of the labor market.

Together, these observations suggest that while the reform's conceptual foundations are sound, its long-term success depends on a stronger empirical base, participatory policy processes, and systematic mechanisms for monitoring and adjustment.

### **Critical Synthesis**

The separation of teacher education programs into *Early Childhood Education* and *Primary Education Pedagogy* marks a turning point in Romanian educational policy, reflecting both aspirations for modernization and unresolved systemic tensions. The literature reviewed reveals a dual narrative: one emphasizing alignment with European quality standards and specialization, and another warning against fragmentation and inefficiency.

#### *Alignment with European Trends and ARACIS Standards*

Proponents of the reform argue that specialization is consistent with international frameworks such as *OECD Starting Strong* (2021) and *Eurydice* reports (2023, 2025), which underline that the developmental needs of children aged 0–6 differ fundamentally from those of primary-school pupils. Accordingly, teacher preparation should focus on distinct competence frameworks, curricular models, and pedagogical methods tailored to each stage. In Romania, the ARACIS 2024 methodology explicitly supports this direction by requiring clarity in graduate profiles and distinct learning outcomes. Universities are now expected to demonstrate, for each specialization, adequate institutional capacity (infrastructure, faculty, practicum partnerships), educational effectiveness (curricular coherence, outcomes), and quality management (feedback and continuous improvement). From this perspective, the reform appears as a necessary adaptation to European expectations — aiming to raise quality standards, enhance transparency, and improve the professional identity of future educators.

#### *Challenges and Critical Perspectives*

However, numerous Romanian scholars and practitioners question whether this reform truly responds to the national context and institutional readiness. Analyses (Roman & Bulat, 2025; Scorțescu et al., 2024) emphasize resource disparities, particularly in rural regions, where universities and partner institutions struggle to provide sufficient practicum placements and qualified mentors for two separate programs. Critics argue that educational reforms often stem from fiscal or political rationales rather than pedagogical evidence. From a pedagogical standpoint, integrated training (as in the former PIPP

program) offered teachers a holistic understanding of child development from ages 3 to 10 — supporting smoother transitions and more coherent practices. Its abolition, critics claim, reduces flexibility and duplicates costs, potentially producing narrower professional identities and limiting mobility in the labor market.

#### *Economic and Institutional Considerations*

The literature highlights significant economic implications. Maintaining two separate programs demands parallel curricula, faculty specialization, and practicum partnerships — stretching already limited budgets. As Catalano et al. (2025) point out, reforms that increase specialization without proportional investment risk diluting quality rather than enhancing it. Moreover, ARACIS standards, though rigorous, do not automatically guarantee successful implementation if institutional capacity is weak. Langa et al. (2025) underline that effective quality assurance requires not only formal compliance but also genuine culture of evaluation and feedback — something still developing in Romanian higher education.

#### *Tensions between Policy Intentions and Implementation*

The reform reflects a policy paradox: it aims to modernize teacher education by introducing specialization and quality assurance, yet may weaken system coherence and increase inequities. The literature documents a gap between policy and practice, where universities report tight timelines for program adaptation, which may limit opportunities for consultation and empirical assessment, often without sufficient consultation or empirical assessment. This resonates with international studies (OECD, 2021; Melhuish et al., 2015) showing that successful ECEC reforms depend less on formal differentiation and more on investment in professionalization, mentoring, and continuous development.

#### *Emerging Consensus and Unresolved Questions*

Across the reviewed literature, a nuanced consensus begins to take shape regarding the recent reform of teacher education programs. Scholars generally acknowledge that the theoretical rationale for specialization is well-founded and broadly consistent with international trends emphasizing differentiated pedagogical competences for early childhood and primary education. Nonetheless, authors also caution that the capacity for effective implementation varies considerably across institutions. Disparities in infrastructure, faculty expertise, and practicum opportunities risk undermining the intended improvements in quality and coherence. In addition, the literature repeatedly emphasizes the limited involvement of key stakeholders—particularly university faculty, practicing educators, and professional associations—in the design and rollout of the reform. This insufficient



consultation has contributed to skepticism and resistance among practitioners, who often perceive the changes as externally imposed rather than collaboratively developed. Consequently, the reform's legitimacy and acceptance within the educational community remain fragile. Researchers further note that the reform's long-term impact has yet to be systematically assessed. While initial analyses suggest both potential benefits and unintended consequences, the absence of longitudinal studies means that claims about its effectiveness remain largely speculative. The literature thus calls for sustained evaluation efforts capable of capturing both quantitative outcomes—such as student performance and teacher placement—and qualitative dimensions, including professional identity and satisfaction.

Despite these emerging points of convergence, several critical questions remain unresolved. One central issue concerns the reform's influence on teacher identity and career trajectories: it is unclear whether specialization will strengthen professional recognition or, conversely, restrict mobility across educational levels. Another challenge relates to institutional sustainability—whether universities, particularly those in less resourced regions, can maintain two distinct, high-quality programs under existing financial and human resource constraints. Finally, scholars question whether ARACIS evaluation frameworks are sufficiently flexible to accommodate continuous feedback and adaptive quality management, or whether they risk becoming overly prescriptive, focusing on compliance rather than genuine improvement. Taken together, these considerations underscore the complexity of the reform and the need for ongoing, evidence-based dialogue among policymakers, academics, and practitioners.

#### *Towards a Balanced Perspective*

The evidence suggests that neither full integration nor rigid separation is inherently superior. Instead, what matters is coherence, adequate resources, and alignment with educational goals. Romanian policymakers and universities might consider hybrid solutions, such as shared foundational modules with later specialization, or joint practicum frameworks ensuring continuity between preschool and primary education.

#### **Conclusion and recommendations**

The analysis of existing literature reveals that the separation of teacher education programs into *Early Childhood Education* and *Primary Education Pedagogy* represents both an opportunity and a challenge for the Romanian educational system. On one hand, the reform demonstrates a clear intention to align national teacher training with European standards of quality assurance and to reflect the

developmental distinctiveness of children in early and primary stages. This direction is theoretically supported by numerous international frameworks and resonates with the broader goal of enhancing the professionalization and specialization of the teaching workforce.

On the other hand, the Romanian academic and professional discourse points to persistent difficulties that may hinder the reform's success. These include uneven institutional capacity, insufficient stakeholder participation, and the duplication of resources required to maintain two fully functional programs. Moreover, the absence of comprehensive longitudinal research means that the real impact of the reform—on teaching quality, professional identity, and educational outcomes—remains largely unverified. Given these findings, the literature suggests several recommendations for policymakers, universities, and quality assurance agencies:

First, reform implementation should be accompanied by systematic monitoring and evaluation, using both quantitative and qualitative indicators. This would allow decision-makers to assess not only institutional compliance with ARACIS standards but also the effectiveness of the programs in preparing competent, reflective, and adaptable educators.

Second, there is a clear need to strengthen stakeholder engagement. Collaborative platforms involving university faculty, practicing teachers, school leaders, and professional associations could foster shared ownership of reform initiatives, reduce resistance, and generate more context-sensitive solutions.

Third, universities must receive adequate financial and human resources to support the development of differentiated curricula, specialized practicum networks, and targeted professional development for teacher educators. Without such investment, specialization risks remaining a formal distinction rather than a substantive improvement.

Fourth, ARACIS and related bodies are encouraged to further refine their evaluation frameworks to promote adaptive quality management, emphasizing continuous improvement and responsiveness to feedback rather than mere compliance with standards. Integrating stakeholder perspectives into external evaluation processes could enhance both transparency and relevance. (Catalano & Albulescu, 2022)

Finally, future research should explore comparative outcomes between graduates of the former integrated PIPP program and those trained under the new specialized tracks, as well as longitudinal studies on career trajectories, professional identity formation, and classroom practices. Such evidence is essential for determining whether specialization genuinely leads to higher educational quality or whether

a hybrid model—combining foundational integration with later specialization—might offer a more balanced approach.

In conclusion, the reviewed literature converges on the idea that successful reform requires more than structural change. It demands a coherent strategy that combines theoretical justification, institutional readiness, stakeholder collaboration, and continuous evaluation. Only through such an integrative, evidence-informed approach can Romania ensure that its teacher education system meets both national needs and European quality benchmarks, while preserving the pedagogical coherence and professional dignity of its educators. (Albulescu & catalano, 2019)

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