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The (2020) reform of initial teacher training in France: between requirements and realities

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Abstract

Teacher training in France has undergone three reforms in less than twenty years. Each new government that comes to power sets out, in line with its own party manifesto, to renew teacher training which is deemed partly responsible for the failures of the French education system. These reforms are met with a mixed response from teacher trainers. This article provides a case study of how the latest reform launched in 2019 is playing out at the INSPE (Institut national supérieur du professorat et de l'éducation / National Higher Institute for Teaching and Education) of University X. It will attempt to shed light on the way in which local actors, the INSPE management team, and master's pedagogical teams are implementing this reform by putting together the MEEF (Métiers de l'enseignement, de l'éducation et de la formation / Teaching, Education, and Training Professions) master's programme proposal. In particular, it will focus on the way in which different categories of trainers, both vocational and academic, adhere to top-down recommendations.

Keywords

Teacher training; France; reforms; trainers.

Introduction

In France, a teacher-training reform was launched in 2019 which has brought changes to a previous reform introduced in 2013. Its main ambition is to set up a training programme that will attempt to join up academic and vocational types of training even better (MEN, MESR, 2019a), for the benefit of all teachers. This reform concerns first-level teachers who teach pupils aged 3 to 11 (nursery-school pupils aged 3 to 6, and primary-school pupils aged 6 to 11); second-level teachers who teach collège pupils aged 11 to 15; and general, technical, and vocational secondary-school teachers who

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teach pupils aged 15 to 18. First-level teachers receive multidisciplinary training in the subjects they will be teaching, while second-level teachers specialise in one teaching subject (maths, life and earth sciences, foreign languages, etc.). All these teachers also undergo placements in educational establishments.

Since 2010, teachers have had to hold a master's degree. However, the current reform has been accompanied by a new framework for the MEEF (Métiers de l'enseignement, de l'éducation et de la formation / Teaching, Education, and Training Professions) master's programmes for training students who choose a teaching profession. This reform has also introduced changes to the tests required for recruiting teachers since in France teachers are recruited as civil servants and have to pass written and oral tests. The weight of professional tests in these exams is particularly valued.

So-called INSPEs (Institut national supérieur du professorat et de l'éducation / National Higher Institute for Teaching and Education) have been created to replace the former ESPEs (Ecole supérieur du professorat et de l'éducation / Higher School of Teaching and Education) which had been in place since 2013. Like the ESPEs, the INSPEs are schools attached to universities, but they are required to work more closely with the employing state, the Ministry of Education which employs the teachers. New measures are supposed to make more room for professional actors in the management of the INSPEs.

We therefore wish to present a case study which looks at how the new master's programmes are being set up at the INSPE of University X. We will show how, on the basis of certain reflections and scientific knowledge, the INSPE management team and the various academic and vocational trainers work together to change the master's curricula for the purpose of greater professionalisation, more closely and better linked to the realities of the job. In this respect, it is worth noting that in the political programmes of the French centre and right, pragmatism and experience drawn from the realities in the field are always valued, to the detriment of academic knowledge which is deemed too theoretical to be immediately useful (Lapostolle, Solaux, 2022).

Our study will focus on the year when the master's programme was redesigned (2020-2021), which required many stages of work. It will show what the ministry's recommendations are but also, and above all, how the actors involved in the context of the respective INSPE, have taken these recommendations on board and translated them into the programme proposal (maquette) that is sent to the ministry for approval. This programme proposal is a document of around thirty pages which sets out the skills

targeted, the teaching content, the systems set up, and the staff involved in the master's course. We will try to show how requirements that come from above are put into practice by local training actors, how the latter accept them, sometimes by deviating from their initial intention, and at other times by seeking to comply with them strictly.

First we will present the research protocol used in our case study. Then we will explain how the MEEF master's courses had been working since 2013 and what guidelines were introduced by the MEN (Ministère de l'éducation nationale / Ministry of National Education) and MESR (Ministère de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche / Ministry of Higher Education and Research) to change these courses. Finally, we will show how these requirements were put into practice at the INSPE of University X by highlighting the arguments and positions held by the various local actors as they sought to shape the new programme proposal.

I-A case study

Our research is a case study of how the reform of master's programmes was implemented at an INSPE belonging to the University of X. Whilst this case study cannot, without caution, allow for a generalisation of its results since it concerns only one of the thirty-two INSPEs that exist in France, in certain respects the INSPE studied here has undergone these changes in a manner that is relatively identical to the other French INSPEs. This is particularly because the INSPEs, but also the master's courses they have to design, are governed by recommendations from the MEN (Ministère de l'éducation nationale / Ministry of National Education) and MESR (Ministère de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche / Ministry of Higher Education and Research), which are relatively strict and the same for all. This leads us to believe that the problems we note and the results we produce could be found to a greater or lesser degree in many INSPEs.

The way in which the INSPEs work is prescribed by legal standards that apply uniformly to all INSPEs. Each of their directors is chosen by the president of the corresponding university and the official representing of the Minister of National Education at the Region level. This is a change from the ESPEs where the representative of the Ministry of Education (MEN) was not involved in this decision. In this respect, the place and role of the MEN, which employs teachers, have been increased with the INSPEs. Academics, however, are traditionally not in favour of their

activity being monitored by anyone other than their peers (academics). Whilst symbolic, their position is also based on the French law and constitution – they want their freedom and independence to be guaranteed as enshrined in both. University research and teaching, provided they show tolerance, should not be placed under any kind of supervision, nor subjected to any pressure, including political. (MESR, 1984)

The composition of the INSPE board is the same for all: elected representatives of the teaching staff and other staff involved in the training activities of the institute, representatives of the University, and outside figures designated for their personal expertise in the fields of teaching, education or training

The structure of the master's programmes is also the same for all INSPEs: they are all bound by a reference framework that sets out the goals and main training areas of the master's courses for primary- and secondary-school teachers (MEN, MESR, 2019b). Moreover, a vade mecum (MEN, MESR, 2021) for rectors and INSPE directors seeks to facilitate the concrete implementation of the reform. Thus, these national guidelines show that our case is likely to have similarities with the other French cases in which the reform is taking place. It should be noted that the guidelines are based on “skills” that need to be developed by the trainee teachers. However, some academics sometimes struggle to get their teaching content to fit into these “skills”, which are defined ever more strictly by the employing state, the Ministry of Education. They find it difficult to develop the critical dimensions that their research would help produce. (Woollven, 2019).

In France, it is generally accepted that teacher training needs to be regulated and monitored throughout the country, since relatively strict guidelines make it possible to observe the fundamental French principle of equal education for all, everywhere. Teachers trained to the same standards across the country are one of the conditions for this equality. This is one of the reasons why we can generalise our study. However, these guidelines are not always well perceived by academics who are very attached to the defence of their academic freedom.

The empirical data on which we will base our study consist of the ministry's guidelines: legal provisions such as laws and decrees; and a vade mecum. They also include local actors' working documents: notes from the INSPE management team, a framework conference (*conférence de cadrage*) (Roegiers, 2020), summaries of meetings, and master's programme proposals. We also conducted ten interviews: two with the INSPE Deputy Director in charge of monitoring the design of the master's

courses during the year 2020-2021; three with the master's course co-ordinators; and five with trainers and members of the master's teaching teams. These interviews have provided valuable information on how each of these actors views the reform, what they like about it, and what they don't. They also show how each of them influenced the design of the programme proposal so it could conform to their conception of training teachers, but also to their own interests and skills.

We have thus pulled together the information provided by all these empirical data in order to conduct our analysis. In doing this, we have tried to reveal what lies behind the design of a master's programme proposal for training teachers. Our analysis of the process will cast light on the way in which a reform that seeks to transform teacher training in France is being implemented. Ours is a political analysis in the sense that it highlights the major objectives pursued by political actors, but also how these objectives are adapted to local realities and, above all, the way in which local actors put into practice, depending on their constraints, major policies set by political-administrative authorities.

We thus need to explain how master's programmes worked before the 2019 reform and highlight the latter's goals to change them.

II-Previous master's programmes and new requirements

Teacher-training programmes have three aims: provide students with research training, provide them with vocational training, and prepare them for the national education recruitment exam.

Since 2013 this exam had been held at the end of the first year of the master's course. Students admitted into the second year would be on placement in educational establishments for just under a third of the week, and at the same time work on their master's degree. If they got their master's degree and their placement had gone well, they became full teachers.

However, it was difficult to simultaneously pursue these three aims attached to a master's programme. Exam preparation during the first year of the master's course was aimed at passing tests with a mainly academic content and led students into a form of cramming that was incompatible with the aims of professionalisation. Whilst an exam requires candidates to show that they are able to answer the questions set without making any mistakes, the process of professionalisation requires them instead to

recognise their mistakes and analyse them in order to suggest improvements. A different logic, a different intellectual approach applies. As for research training, most of it took place in the second year of the master's course and involved writing and defending a thesis. Research training requires a long period of reflection, however, its importance was diminished by the fact that during this same year students had to also successfully complete their placement which was essential to their becoming full teachers. These placements would lead students to deal with emergency situations as they had to prepare lessons for their class from one day to the next. And these emergencies left them very little time to prepare their thesis. As a result, academics would lower their standards in terms of the quality of the thesis which also ended up being written in a hurry.

The 2019 reform seeks to address these problems. It places vocational training at the heart of the master's programme, with exam preparation and research training organised around it. Practically, this translates into the exam being held at the end of the second year of the master's course, so the time spent preparing for it has been extended to two years. Thus, by the time they take the exam, students will have more experience and be more in touch with the realities of their future profession since they will have spent more time on placement in the first and second years. Vocational training, which was less important in the first year due to exam preparation, could be given a more prominent place. The tests making up the exam have also become more vocational in nature, as indicated in the vade mecum issued by the ministries (MEN, MESR, 2021) – although it is only once the first exams have taken place that we will be able to assess whether this goal has been achieved.

The exam still includes academic written tests, however, oral tests, which are supposed to assess candidates' ability to express themselves and face an audience, have been given more weight than the written tests.

These few changes are the most noticeable aspect of the reform but its spirit encourages, above all, a profound transformation of master's curricula. These curricula are expected to lead to more effective teachers in the classroom. This is what is proposed in the training reference framework entitled *Former l'enseignant du XXIème siècle* ("Training the teacher of the 21st century") which sets out goals, main training areas, skills to be worked on, and the level of proficiency expected by the end of the MEEF master's programme (MEN, 2019). In its preamble the document states: "Whilst future teachers or educational staff need to be aware of the high level of responsibility they will have to assume on a daily basis, they must first be trained to exercise it fully."

It goes on to point out that “schools and educational establishments are the best places to work on this learning in close contact with the pupils and in interaction with the other actors of the educational community: they should therefore be fully integrated into the training systems set up and be regarded as learning organisations.” It further adds that “at least one third of training time needs to be provided by practitioners, teachers working in parallel with classes at the trainee’s level.” These few recommendations clearly reflect the spirit of the reform. Teacher training needs to focus on the demands of practising the actual profession. This is evidenced by the reminder of the importance of educational establishments as “learning organisations” and the obligation to assign practitioners that are still working with pupils a significant role in this training.

These recommendations will necessarily have to be followed by all INSPEs, including the one in our study. The programme proposal put together for this purpose will be checked by the university to which the INSPE belongs, and then sent on to the Ministry of Higher Education and Research which will either validate it or ask for changes to be made if it does not meet ministerial requirements. At the INSPE of University X we have studied, special measures have been taken to respond diligently to the recommendations coming from the ministry, particularly in order to train students who by the end of their master’s course will be ready to practise their profession “fully”.

III-Implementation

The INSPE management team decided on a framework for developing the programme proposals which draws on the work of Roegiers (2020). The academic in charge suggested a conference for devising “integrative situations” in order to give coherence to the input of academic and vocational trainers, and for this input to lead to greater professionalisation in the training provided within the master’s courses. The INSPE’s website, which all of the institute’s trainers can access, defines “integrative situations” as follows:

“An integrative situation is a challenge presented to students based on a complex situation which can last from a few weeks to a semester or a year. An integrative situation has the following characteristics: It is a challenging activity, neither too complex nor too simple, which allows students to learn to deal with a situation by taking a holistic approach. It is realistic and authentic in relation to, for example, a

professional activity. It is based on a simulated or real-life situation: a simulated situation is an authentic activity that has been simplified to eliminate certain constraints (budgetary or legal considerations, data collection in the field, etc.), in order to focus the activity on the tasks related to the skills you would like your students to develop. A real-life situation usually takes place at the end of the course when students have acquired sufficient skills to carry out an activity that is subject to all the constraints of professional life. This requires autonomy and initiative on the part of the students in dealing with that situation. It leads to an elaborate piece of work produced by students. When this piece involves teamwork it also helps students learn how to work as part of a group. It joins up the benefits of different types of teaching (knowledge, know-how, interpersonal skills) with the aim of fostering the integration of student learning. Using a skills-based approach, it makes it possible to ascertain whether a certain level in the development of their skills has been reached. It will be assessed based on a final written report and a presentation, sometimes in conjunction with other pieces of work (intervention plan proposal, developing a prototype, etc.). Generally speaking, this helps to reduce the number of independent and juxtaposed pieces of work that are required of students. By combining several assessments into one it is possible to extend and consolidate the learning achieved in several complementary classes, and to check that the learning goals related to the curriculum have been attained. Finally, this can also foster an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approach and encourage reflexivity.” Using this framework, each master’s course co-ordinator, together with the INSPE management team and the master’s training team, have worked to put together the new programme proposal.

However, the design of these integrative situations has given rise to several types of criticism on the part of trainers, which shows that in practice their support for this reform is very moderate. Drawing on working documents (programme proposals, minutes of meetings) and interviews with the various actors involved in the training provided, we can show that these various actors are more or less moderately involved in the process of implementing the reform.

Whilst the management team is implementing the reform without expressing an opinion on its adequacy, master’s course co-ordinators and vocational and academic trainers often merely give lip service to it, or at times are more or less clearly opposed to it. One of the trainers’ first arguments is that there have been too many reforms and they have followed each other in too quick a succession.

They went through a reform in 2007, then in 2013, and again in 2020. One of these trainers stated: “The previous reforms were not always easy to apply, we had to find arrangements, make adjustments such as shifting courses from one semester to another, clarify expectations with the students... You must remember! In 2007 the exam was held in M2, in 2013 in M1... Each time we had to put together a new programme proposal that we then improved based on the experience gained over the next few years... And when those adjustments began to bear fruit, a new reform would come along and take everything back to square one. We had to come up with yet another programme proposal.”

Trainers’ first complaint is that, like previous reforms, the current reform does not take into account their assessments of their own work. “Improvement councils”, in which exchanges between students and trainers take place twice a year in order to assess where the training actually needs to be improved, were made compulsory by the previous reform. These councils are genuinely useful in concretely improving the training. The reports produced by the councils need to be included in an assessment file (of around thirty pages) which has to be submitted to the ministry every five years. However, the latest reform took place before the file could be sent to the ministry. As a result, trainers question the arguments behind the need for a new reform. It should be noted that, as far as France’s education policy is concerned, it is not uncommon for an assessment report to be requested by a minister and for that report to arrive after the departure of that minister. His or her successor will then not take the report into account. Many observers of political education policies (Lapostolle, 2004; Legrand, 1994) have been making this observation for over thirty years. Their conclusion is that the education system is primarily governed by an ideological interpretation of its functioning, more so than by one based on scientifically constructed assessments, and that ministers seek above all to be “new brooms”, disregarding the operational actors.

In the case of teacher training, the relationship between theory and practice, which is constantly questioned by the ministry, has been taken into account by the improvement councils. Theory courses are placed before and after placements so as to prepare these placements and then analyse them. It is not enough to require one third of trainers to be professionals active in the field for the training to be meaningful for students. Most ESPEs already had a third of trainers active in the field. It is by gradually and concretely adjusting students’ needs and the way in which courses are run that this relationship is regulated.

Furthermore, trainers almost unanimously stated that they no longer wished to change the content of their courses. And, in fact, a comparison between the 2013 and the 2020 programme proposals shows that the classes included in the new proposal have remained the same. They have simply changed categories. The CEs (constituent elements (éléments constitutifs)) of the former TUs (teaching units (unités d'enseignement)) that made up the 2013 master's programme are now, in the 2020 master's programme, grouped into "modules" that are linked to actions. There used to be 5 TUs per semester, consisting of 3 or 4 CEs of around 12 hours. These TUs bore names such as "sociology and public policy" or "educational values". These have disappeared and the corresponding CEs can now be found in modules whose names start with action verbs: "Acting based on institutional, regulatory, and ethical foundations; communicating and co-operating within the educational community"; "Managing a class in context, taking a reflexive approach". But the descriptions of the CEs which include goals, bibliographical references, and summaries of the teaching content have remained the same in these modules as in the 2013 programme proposal.

What has changed is the way in which assessment is carried out. Given the requirement to assess "integrative situations", teachers will no longer be able to assess strictly their own CE. They will have to meet more frequently to decide, within each module, on new ways to assess students which integrate their CEs. What matters to the management team is that classes are no longer juxtaposed and are organised to address situations that are close to the reality of the profession. For their part, trainers deplore the number of meetings that will be needed to agree on assessment, considering that they are giving the same courses. One trainer made the following observation: "We have spent more than 20 hours in meetings to put together this new programme proposal, and it will take us the same amount of time to come up with new assessment methods... And during all this time spent on meetings we are not really working on the content of our courses."

Another major type of criticism comes from academic trainers, particularly educational researchers, philosophers, and sociologists. They explain that the injunction to reinforce the professionalising dimension of master's courses leads them to draw a veil over the emancipatory or critical dimension of the disciplines they teach. They thus echo Woollven's (2019) analysis of how sociology is taught as part of the MEEF EE master's programme (Métiers de l'enseignement, de l'éducation et de la formation, Encadrement éducatif / Teaching, Education, and Training Professions, Educational

Supervision). Whilst the pedagogical intention of teacher researchers in this field is to break with a certain number of “prenotions”, that is, spontaneous, general knowledge drawn from experience and conceived prior to any scientific study of the facts, breaking with these prenotions proves to be tricky in the case of MEEF master’s students. Durkheim (2019), one of the founding fathers of French sociology, says that these prenotions are necessary for living in society but “dangerous” for science: “The sociologist must therefore, either at the moment of establishing the object of his research, or in the course of his demonstrations, resolutely refrain from using these concepts which were formed outside of science and for purposes that have nothing to do with science. He must free himself from these false facts which dominate the vulgar mind, shake off, once and for all, the yoke of these empirical categories which long habituation often ends up making them tyrannical. At the very least, should necessity at times compel him to have recourse to them, let him do so in the knowledge that they are of little value, so as not to require them to play a role in doctrine of which they are not worthy” (Durkheim, 2019, p.51).

However, as far as academic trainers are concerned, a number of concepts are institutionally driven, such as “self-esteem” or “benevolence”, and are developed outside of science. They are found in official guidelines or exam boards’ reports. They have been accepted by students and become self-evident. It is therefore difficult to question these concepts, as they should be in science. Other trainers, those in charge of the professional dimension of training, because they have not been trained in research, are less committed to this critical function of research.

Thus, the challenge for these teacher researchers is to continue to develop teaching content that is in line with this professionalisation dynamic, while preserving what constitutes the very identity of social sciences: breaking with opinion, opposing common sense or thoughts and words that derive their authority from powers that be. What is expected in professional training is not always compatible with the mission of science, which is also to develop critical thinking. The knowledge produced by science should be the result of a long process of objectification. This is a recommendation by Bachelard (1938) which is taken literally. For the philosopher, “initial knowledge is an obstacle to knowledge”. This means that scientific knowledge can only emerge after a long process of overcoming this “initial knowledge” based on beliefs and emotions, which must first be “destroyed”. The construction of scientific knowledge is based on what is called an “epistemological rupture”. In other words, this knowledge is

constructed in opposition to “common sense” which expresses a “practical consciousness”. Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron (1968) remind us of it in these terms: “Social facts are won against the illusion of immediate knowledge[,] familiarity is the primary epistemological obstacle[, and] social sciences must make the epistemological break capable of separating scientific interpretation from all artificialist and anthropomorphic interpretations of how society works” (Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron, 1968: 24).

Thus, the INSPE actors’ implementation of the reform at this stage shows that the latter has not been very well received and that the intended changes have been met with some reservations. Sometimes changes made are merely superficial, like the CEs that stay the same from one reform to the next. The challenge taken up by the management team to improve the courses or, more precisely, the ways in which these are transmitted, by imposing new assessment methods using “integrative situations” could perhaps lead to CEs being better joined up. Trainers’ ability to work as a team will be crucial in this respect.

More generally, what is being questioned in this implementation is the way in which education or training policies are set up in any country. There is indeed a degree of uniformity among national policies. This uniformity is largely influenced by supranational standards, such as training teachers at master’s level, as recommended by the Bologna Process, which is a process of approximation of European higher education systems initiated in 1998. It is also influenced by performance indicators used in education systems (PISA, PIRLS).

Moreover, the reforms implemented under these policies are shaped by the ministers’ own ideologies. However, a reform can only be effective when it is shared by those who implement it (Lascoumes, Le Galès, 2012). But, first and foremost, what is basically needed is to point out any problems in teacher training prior to a reform, rather than ask why the actors active in the field are resisting the implementation of that reform. No single actor has the legitimacy to decide what the problem is. A problem is a construction, it cannot be determined a priori, neither by scientists, nor by experts, nor by political actors. It needs to be constructed together with all the actors concerned by the planned changes. However, the operational actors – in this case, teacher trainers – did not help construct the problems raised. The problems lying at the root of the reform are simply not theirs nor their priorities. In this case, their resistance or hostility to the

reform is due to the fact that they are having to deal with reforms which address problems that are relatively alien to them.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, since the 1990s teacher training in France has constantly been reformed. Each political handover in the wake of presidential and parliamentary elections sees the appointment of a new Minister of Education and Higher Education. The latter tries to put in place an education policy, in this case in the field of teacher training, which is in line with their party's manifesto. Reforms are thus initiated. The management teams of the teacher-training institutes, whether they change or remain the same from one reform to the next, have no choice but to implement them. They use many strategies to get trainers, who often remain the same, to change.

The latter are reluctant to accept the changes imposed on them. Most of them deplore the fact that the reforms follow one another too quickly, while the effects of the previous reform are not really felt by the time a new one is introduced. Their commitment to the reform is therefore minimal as though they were anticipating the fact that, when the next reform happens, what they have agreed to reflect on and change in their practice will in any case scarcely be taken into account.

Academics seem to be the most reluctant about any reform that attempts to further professionalise teacher training. Their regret is that they are losing something of the critical dimension that their discipline can bring, particularly as they have to teach prenotions. What motivates their stance is probably related to their professional identity, to the identity and critical social function they attribute to their discipline.

In short, while teacher training undoubtedly needs to change in order to adapt to social developments and in particular to the characteristics of new school populations, which have themselves changed with the democratisation of school, the reforms that implement these changes would be more effective and gain greater support from the actors concerned if they were based on broader consultations with teacher trainers, teachers themselves, and users. These consultations would be all the more effective if they were introduced at the stage where problems are being constructed, which is before the reform itself.

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