

Marta Kowalczyk-Walędziak, Rita Tavares de Sousa, Amélia Lopes and Erika Kopp

Teacher educators navigating barriers and facilitators in teaching research-informed practice in Poland, Portugal and Hungary: Insights from focus group discussions

Abstract: Drawing upon a larger study, this paper explores how teacher educators in Poland, Portugal and Hungary navigate the barriers and facilitators involved in teaching research-informed practice (RIP) within master's-level initial teacher education (ITE), as well as what recommendations they would propose for strengthening this process. Thematic analysis of focus group data revealed a range of barriers: institutional fragmentation and 'policy silence', curricular and organisational constraints, limited student research literacy and underused opportunities within existing ITE curricula. Conversely, facilitators were found to stem largely from individual commitment and collaboration – teacher educators' identities as researchers and motivation for teaching RIP, collaborative microcultures and students' emerging curiosity towards research – as well as institutional openness and opportunities. Despite their contextual differences, the participants across all three countries emphasised the need for coherent support systems, professional learning opportunities for teacher educators and school–university partnerships. The study concludes that sustaining the teaching of RIP in ITE necessitates systemic support that aligns policy, institutional frameworks and professional cultures, moving beyond a reliance on isolated individual efforts.

Keywords: initial teacher education; master's studies; research-informed practice; preservice teachers; Poland; Portugal; Hungary

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Marta Kowalczyk-Walędziak, PhD, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Białystok, Świerkowa 20, 15328 Białystok, Poland, mkowalczyk@poczta.fm ©

Rita Tavares de Sousa, PhD, Researcher, Centre for Research and Intervention in Education (CIIE), Catholic University of Portugal, Rua de Diogo Botelho 1327, 4169005 Porto, Portugal, rrsousa@ucp.pt ©

Amélia Lopes, PhD, Full Professor, Centre for Research and Intervention in Education (CIIE), Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Porto, Rua Alfredo Allen, 4200135 Porto, Portugal, amelia@fpce.up.pt ©

Erika Kopp, PhD, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Eötvös Loránd University, Kazinczy u. 23-27, 1075 Budapest, Hungary, kopp.erika@ppk.elte.hu ©

Introduction

Initial teacher education (ITE) has increasingly been recognised as vitally formative in cultivating research-informed practice (RIP) among preservice teachers (e.g. Peiser et al. 2022; Wang et al. 2023). In this paper, RIP refers to teachers' use of academic research to improve their teaching, decision-making and/or ongoing professional learning (Brown et al. 2022). Recent studies have suggested it is during ITE that teachers develop or fail to develop the dispositions and competencies necessary for using research in their professional practice (e.g. Van Katwijk et al. 2023). Teacher educators thus have a profound impact here, namely in terms of their pedagogical choices, the opportunities they facilitate for preservice teachers to engage in and with research and the extent to which they themselves value research as a tool for improving teachers' professional practice (e.g. Kowalczyk-Walędziak et al. 2025). Therefore, understanding how teacher educators navigate this complex work is fundamental to any serious effort towards strengthening preservice teachers' use of research in their future careers.

Nonetheless, surprisingly little scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding what barriers and facilitators teacher educators find impact their efforts to teach RIP, and what recommendations they believe could help. Existing research has instead prioritised the research–teaching nexus within ITE (e.g. Wang et al. 2023), research integration into teacher education curricula (e.g. Arnau-Sabatés et al. 2025) and teacher educators' conceptualisations of RIP and its value for future teachers' practice (e.g. Sousa et al. 2019). Bridging this gap in the literature is crucial, as preparing preservice teachers to use research effectively in their professional practice involves far more than simply teaching them academic research skills or requiring them to participate in inquiry projects (Evans et al. 2017). Rather, it requires fostering their understanding of how research can inform and transform their professional practice and their capacity to interpret and apply research evidence within authentic classroom contexts (Brew and Saunders 2020).

Furthermore, most existing studies remain confined to single national contexts, overlooking the variations between teacher educators' experiences across different teacher education systems (Menter and Flores 2021). Indeed,

teacher education systems differ considerably in terms of, for example, their structures, epistemological traditions and the extent to which preservice teachers are expected to be involved in research (Caena 2014). The set of countries involved in this study illustrates such variations clearly. In Poland, ITE is now provided exclusively by higher education institutions awarded category B or above in national research evaluations, and since 2023, all teachers have been required to have a master's degree (Korzeniecka-Bondar et al. 2023). Hungary's system has been reformed in recent years, relocating ITE to research universities and simultaneously placing emphasis on practical training (Chrappán et al. 2020). Although teachers in Portugal are also required to have a master's degree, there are more diverse routes into teaching, with the delivery of ITE distributed across universities and polytechnics (i.e. institutions with diverse research profiles) (Flores 2024). Despite these variations across the three countries, in recent decades, all have pursued policies elevating ITE to a master's-level qualification, positioning research as a central element (Chrappán et al. 2020; Kowalczyk-Wałędziak et al. 2019). This convergence on research-oriented ITE – achieved through three distinct national trajectories – thus creates a productive space for comparing how teacher educators perceive the barriers and facilitators involved in teaching RIP under different structural conditions.

The study presented in this paper draws from our larger cross-national research project conducted in Poland, Portugal and Hungary, which examined how RIP is embedded into master's-level ITE programmes (Kowalczyk-Wałędziak et al. 2025). The decision to focus on master's-level programmes was taken in light of their unique potential to shape preservice teachers' dispositions towards RIP (e.g. Woore et al. 2020) – that is, their capacity and inclination to use research in their professional practice. Indeed, recent studies have suggested that preservice teachers' engagement with thesis work, research seminars and academic literature supports both their research competence and their willingness to use research in their professional decision-making (e.g. Antonsen et al. 2024). These features render master's-level ITE an ideal context for examining how teacher educators perceive the barriers and facilitators that influence their efforts to teach RIP.

Our larger project had three aims: (1) to explore the extent to which RIP is integrated into national ITE curricula, (2) to examine teacher educators' confidence and preparedness in supporting preservice teachers to develop their own RIP and (3) to investigate how RIP is taught and modelled within ITE. It employed a mixed-methods design that combined document analysis, a survey and focus group discussions. In this paper, we specifically report on findings derived from focus group discussions with 21 university-based teacher educators working in Poland, Portugal and Hungary. The present study's research questions are as follows:

1. What barriers and facilitators do teacher educators report as shaping their efforts to teach RIP within ITE?
2. What recommendations do teacher educators propose to improve the teaching of RIP via ITE?

By foregrounding teacher educators' experiences, the study provides insight into the complex realities of cultivating RIP during its earliest formation.

Literature review

Due to the lack of studies specifically on teaching RIP in ITE, understanding the barriers and facilitators that shape how teacher educators teach RIP requires situating this inquiry within the broader scholarship on integrating research into ITE. Two strands of existing research help frame the present study. The first concerns the research–teaching nexus and the distinctive ways it operates within the field of teacher education, while the second focuses on the barriers and facilitators impacting the integration of research into ITE curricula.

The research–teaching nexus within ITE

The research–teaching nexus refers to the relationships between the generation of knowledge through research and its dissemination or application through teaching. Healey and Jenkins' (2009) seminal model proposes four forms of this nexus: *research-led* (teaching content based on research findings), *research-oriented* (teaching focused on the processes of inquiry), *research-based* (students engage directly in research activities) and *research-informed* (curriculum and pedagogy¹ shaped by research on teaching and learning).

However, while the concept of a research–teaching nexus is well established and continually evolving in higher education, its enactment in the specific context of teacher education remains elusive (Idris et al. 2024). Teacher education involves both academic study and professional practice; therefore, integrating research requires bridging the two epistemic worlds of academic knowledge and practical knowledge (Bergmark and Erixon 2019). In ITE, the nexus thus spans not only research and teaching but also theory and practice, the university and the school, and teacher educators and preservice teachers. Recent systematic reviews (e.g. Wang et al. 2023) suggest that the nexus manifests across three levels in ITE: the *intended level* (how curricula formally embed research objectives), the *implemented level* (how teacher educators integrate research into their pedagogies), and the *experienced level* (how preservice teachers perceive, internalise and apply research in their professional practice). The present study focuses on the implemented level, examining the barriers and facilitators that university-based teacher educators report as impacting their teaching of RIP and their recommendations for strengthening this process.

¹ The term 'pedagogy' is used here in its Anglo-American sense, referring to teaching practices and methods. We recognise that in Central and Eastern European scholarly traditions, including Slovenian, *pedagogika* (pedagogy) denotes the broader science of education. This article employs the narrower meaning, focusing specifically on instructional approaches.

Facilitators and barriers to integrating research in ITE

The extent to which teacher educators successfully integrate research into their delivery of ITE depends on a complex interplay of several individual and institutional factors.

Studies have found that, on an individual level, teacher educators' integration practices are influenced by the dual nature of their professional role, which definitively entails both teaching and researching (e.g. Kaasila et al. 2023). Teacher educators who have strong research abilities and a positive inclination towards research are also sensitive to occasions in the teaching and learning process where a particular situation could be improved by systematically and intentionally studying it (Tack and Vanderlinde 2014). However, even those teacher educators who perceive themselves more as teachers than as researchers report integrating research into their teaching (Cao et al. 2019).

Additionally, teacher educators' own beliefs about the value of research for preservice teachers' future professional practice significantly shape their integration efforts. Indeed, those who perceive research as essential for developing reflective, adaptive practitioners are more likely to prioritise research integration in their courses (Sousa et al. 2019). Active researchers possess advanced research competencies useful for teaching and supervising students (Flores 2018), as well as boosting their students' own research abilities (Kowalczyk-Wałędziak et al. 2025). Moreover, teacher educators' approaches to teaching also influence their integration of research: for instance, the more they view their teaching through a student-focused lens, the more they value the role of research in that teaching (Cao et al. 2021).

Numerous barriers hinder these integration efforts. Teacher educators cite structural constraints at the institutional level – including insufficient time due to heavy teaching loads, inflexible curricula and large class sizes – that make research-based pedagogies difficult to implement (e.g. Cao et al. 2019; Yuan and Lee 2014). Conversely, Cao et al. (2021) found that teachers who allocate a greater proportion of their working time to research tend to hold more positive attitudes towards integrating research into their teaching. Yet institutional pressures to 'publish or perish' risk demotivating teacher educators from integrating research into their teaching by aggravating any conflict between the dual responsibilities within their workloads (Geschwind and Broström 2015).

Student-related factors also pose challenges. Teacher educators report that students often lack the motivation to engage with research activities, particularly when they value practical skills or exam performance over research competencies (Van Katwijk et al. 2019). Furthermore, student teachers' limited academic preparation can create additional barriers to teacher educators' potential to include research as part of the courses they deliver (Baan et al. 2020).

Finally, teacher educators' own preparedness matters: those with limited research training or experience report finding it difficult to incorporate research into their teaching, and a lack of professional development opportunities compounds these challenges (Kowalczyk-Wałędziak et al. 2025). Researchers urge institutions to provide teacher educators with the resources, time and

support required to fulfil both the teaching and research aspects of their roles in mutually enriching ways (e.g. Cao et al. 2021).

Methodology

Participants

As mentioned in the introduction section, this study draws on data from our larger cross-national project examining the teaching of RIP in ITE. Convenience sampling was used to recruit 105 teacher educators involved in master's-level ITE programmes at four universities: one in Poland (n = 46), two in Portugal (n = 28) and one in Hungary (n = 31). These participants completed a survey asking about their approaches to teaching RIP. Survey respondents who expressed a willingness to participate in follow-up focus group discussions and provided contact details were subsequently invited to join the qualitative strand of the study. All those who volunteered were included, resulting in 21 participants across six focus groups: three in Poland (n = 11), two in Hungary (n = 6) and one in Portugal (n = 4). The data reported in this article are drawn exclusively from these focus group discussions.

The participants came from diverse institutional and curricular contexts. In Poland, the participants (n = 11) taught on long-cycle five-year master's programmes preparing future kindergarten and primary school teachers. In Portugal, the participants (n = 4) taught on two-year master's programmes that build on a prior undergraduate degree and qualify teachers in a range of specialisations, such as early childhood education, primary education or subject-specific teaching at lower-secondary level. The participants from Hungary (n = 6) taught on two-year master's programmes qualifying teachers to work at lower- and upper-secondary schools.

Country	Number of participants	Number of focus group discussions	Gender (F/M)	Highest level of qualification	Academic positions	Years of teaching experience	Years of research experience
Poland	11	3	8/3	PhD (9) Master's (2)	Assistant professor (7) Associate professor (4)	3–32 years	3–29 years
Portugal	4	1	4/0	PhD (4)	Assistant professor (1) Associate professor (3)	17–34 years	17–32 years
Hungary	6	2	5/1	PhD (5) Master's (1)	Assistant professor (3) Associate professor (3)	8–30 years	5–30 years

Table 1. Overview of focus group discussion participants by country

In line with ethical procedures, the participants' socio-demographic data are summarised for each country to ensure anonymity (see Table 1). Most participants were women ($n = 17$). All were experienced teacher educators and generally well established in their careers, with 18 holding doctoral degrees and three holding master's degrees.

Data collection and analysis

Facilitated by the authors, focus group discussions lasted between 35 and 75 minutes. A semi-structured protocol was used to guide the discussions to cover five broad topics: (1) the impact of RIP on preservice teachers' professional practice, (2) the presence of RIP concepts and principles in teacher educators' taught modules, (3) teaching strategies used to encourage preservice teachers to develop their own RIP, (4) barriers to and facilitators in teaching RIP, and (5) possible improvements in how RIP is taught. For the purposes of the present study, the analysis focused on data pertaining to the fourth and fifth topics.

Six focus group discussions were conducted in the participants' respective native languages. Three took place online (via Zoom or Microsoft Teams) and three took place in person. The facilitators maintained a neutral, non-judgmental and reflexive stance throughout, using open-ended questions and active listening to elicit authentic accounts of participants' experiences, practices and beliefs. All discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using an inductive/deductive hybrid thematic analysis (Proudfoot 2023; see also Braun and Clarke 2006). The analysis was first conducted separately within each country's dataset by the respective national research teams, who applied both inductive and deductive coding strategies. Deductive codes were derived from the study's guiding research questions, while inductive codes emerged directly from the participants' accounts. The lists of codes and categories identified in each country's dataset were subsequently reviewed and cross-checked within and across the teams. For the Poland and Portugal data, this was done collaboratively within the national research teams, and for the Hungary data by an external researcher familiar with the study's aims but not directly involved in data collection. These lists, together with illustrative excerpts, were then translated into English by the researchers themselves and sent to the Polish team, who then prepared an integrated coding framework by identifying convergent codes across the three national datasets, resolving terminological differences and grouping related codes into broader thematic categories. To ensure analytic consistency across languages, the lead researcher (the first author) created the English translations while consulting with national team members whenever conceptual ambiguities or translation uncertainties arose. This iterative process of clarification ensured that the meaning and nuances of the codes and themes were accurately preserved across the three linguistic contexts. Where national datasets revealed distinct context-specific patterns, these were retained as sub-themes within the broader framework. This framework was further discussed online via Teams until full agreement was reached between all project members by reviewing coded excerpts and refining theme definitions.

Ethics

The study was approved by the ethics committee of the first author's institution. All participants gave their written, informed consent after receiving detailed information about the study's aims, procedures and scope. Participation was entirely voluntary, and the participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without providing a reason. In reporting data, quotations are presented in a manner that prevents the identification of individual participants.

Findings

Teacher educators' perceptions of barriers and facilitators for teaching RIP in ITE

Analysis of focus group data revealed, on the one hand, a range of institutional and curricular barriers that hinder teacher educators' efforts to teach RIP and, on the other hand, both individual and collective strategies that sustain these efforts despite such constraints. The following sections explore these dynamics, outlining the main categories of barriers and facilitators identified by the participants.

Barriers

Four main categories of barriers were identified across the three national contexts: (a) institutional fragmentation and »policy silence«, (b) curricular and organisational constraints, (c) preservice teachers' limited research literacy, and (d) the underutilisation of existing ITE curricula for developing preservice teachers' RIP.

(a) Institutional fragmentation and 'policy silence'

Across all three contexts, participants explicitly or implicitly referred to the notion of 'policy silence' to describe the dichotomy between national policy documents calling for RIP to be taught within master's-level ITE yet offering little guidance on how to actually do so. The participants in Poland noted that, while teacher education standards reference teacher research engagement, the accompanying policy documents fail to detail how it should be enacted: »Of course, in ministerial standards, all of that is there, undoubtedly ... But I have never attended any meeting or seen any document that actually explains how to do it. Silence, silence, silence.« (Poland)

The participants in Portugal also referred to this failure to match policy rhetoric with implementation guidance: »It is an inconsistency that we speak within the academic context about training teachers who are aware, knowledgeable and 'informed by research' when they have no – or very little – research training.« (Portugal)

They further noted that the two-cycle structure introduced by the Bologna Process reinforced epistemic divisions between academic and professional knowledge: *»This division between the first and second cycles has brought many constraints to teacher education ... We fragmented it again, didn't we? More scientific training and more pedagogical training [... but] it didn't bring any benefits ...«* (Portugal)

Similarly, the participants in Hungary highlighted the fundamental disconnects across national policy contexts, teacher education contexts and actual practice contexts: *»Because research-based decision-making is not a priority in education [in our country] and teaching is not seen as a prestigious profession by education policy, we often feel that we are training them with a thoroughness that is not really needed in most schools. It creates a kind of systemic futility.«* (Hungary)

This notion of systemic futility captures how research-informed ideals are upheld within ITE in spite, rather than because, of educational policy.

(b) Curricular and organisational constraints

Across the board, the participants highlighted how curricular structures hinder the development of preservice teachers' research skills. The Portugal participants flagged a failure to integrate theory and practice consistently within ITE: *»... wrongly, [...] there is no early and continued work on this theory–practice relationship, where the processes of practice informed by research are present«* (Portugal).

The participants in Hungary emphasised the lack of coherence between research courses offered during ITE, for example: *»The development of research skills ... needs to be carried out over several semesters, building on each other. Inadequately sequenced courses make this difficult.«* (Hungary)

They also stressed that large class sizes inhibited the formation of collaborative inquiry cultures since: *»[...] there is no possibility of forming small groups of students who trust each other and can work together on research projects [...]«* (Hungary).

Similarly, the participants in Poland reported facing resource-related constraints, including large class sizes, limited teaching hours and rigid programme frameworks. Furthermore, the participants reported that systemic barriers, such as bureaucratic overload, performance pressures and limited pedagogical preparation to teach RIP, are also major barriers: *»When we are overworked and buried under paperwork, it's very hard to sustain the energy needed to inspire others towards RIP.«* (Poland)

(c) Preservice teachers' limited research literacy

Participants in all three countries identified preservice teachers' limited research literacy as a significant barrier to teaching RIP, reporting that they are typically taught to view research as a highly academic pursuit. The participants in Hungary noted that this externally imposed framing often led preservice

teachers to perceive research as an abstract exercise detached from classroom realities: *»Preservice teachers are often constrained to a narrow understanding of research that follows only a rigid scientific methodology. They feel that such depth and thoroughness is too time-consuming – that as teachers they will have neither the time nor the inclination [to pursue it].«* (Hungary)

Similarly, a participant in Poland stated that preservice teachers equate research with formal academic writing, rather than consider it a tool for professional practice: *»To them, research is something you cite in a thesis, not something you actually use in your future work.«* (Poland)

Furthermore, several participants in Poland noted that students often lacked confidence in connecting theory and research with their developing professional practice. For example, one participant stated: *»When I asked them to choose a theory to illuminate a practical issue, they did it – but very intuitively. They can't always name it or specify how it relates to practice.«* (Poland)

d) Underutilisation of existing ITE curricula for developing preservice teachers' RIP

Participants in all three contexts identified a barrier in missed opportunities within existing curricula to connect research to classroom practice. In particular, student theses were flagged as potentially powerful yet underused tools for linking the two: *»Students produce master's theses, often with very good results, yet nothing happens with these works afterwards. ... Students rarely propose how these results could lead to ... improvement of their professional practice. There's no follow-up, no translation of research into practice.«* (Poland)

Facilitators

The participants also spoke about facilitators of their teaching of RIP, which operated primarily at the micro level and is rooted in individual teacher educators' commitment rather than in institutional structures. Four key categories emerged: (a) teacher educators' intrinsic motivation and research identity, (b) collaborative microcultures and peer learning, (c) preservice teachers' evolving curiosity about research and (d) institutional openness and emerging opportunities.

(a) Teacher educators' intrinsic motivation and research identity

The teacher educators reported that their own intrinsic motivation and research identities were crucial facilitators. Many participants cited their commitment to research and belief in its transformative potential as well as their personal enthusiasm for teaching RIP.

The participants in Poland in particular, spoke about their personal drive to integrate research into their teaching, reflecting a research identity grounded in being both a researcher and a teacher educator. One participant explained: *»I don't need any external encouragement because I'm passionate about research*

and RIP approaches myself. I really do it ... I use my own research and also share relevant reports to keep our discussions up to date.« (Poland)

The participants in Portugal highlighted how engaging in research was integral to their own professional identities, claiming *'being teacher educators means constantly questioning our own practice – we do research not only about teaching but through teaching.'* Similarly, the participants in Hungary described a resilience that sustained their commitment to RIP despite policy silence: *»A research-based approach is key to strengthening the professionalism of teacher education ... [since in] the absence of research competencies, preservice teachers will not be able to carry out their own research-led developments.*« (Hungary)

Across all three contexts, the participants' intrinsic motivation and strong research identities functioned as moral and intellectual anchors as well as sources of credibility and resilience that counterbalanced systemic fragmentation, both shaping how they taught and casting them as agents of change within teacher education.

(b) Collaborative microcultures and peer learning

Although institutional strategies for supporting the teaching of RIP were generally reported as absent, the participants spoke about localised cultures of collaboration: groups of colleagues, university-school projects and inter-departmental cooperation that acted as *'isolated islands of support'* (Poland). These collaborative spaces allowed them to share good practices and sustain research-informed approaches through collective commitment.

The Poland participants described projects that modelled genuine dialogue between research and practice. For example: *»I was part of a team [...] working on the standardisation of a diagnostic tool ... The project involved everyone, from nursery caregivers and preschool teachers to school pedagogues and university researchers. We all worked together on the same process [...] We were truly equal partners in that project.*« (Poland)

Across all three contexts, the participants were enthusiastic about such integration between the two aspects of ITE. One participant explained: *»These projects fill the gap between the world of academia and everyday educational practice. They act as a kind of brokerage, engaging both sides as equal partners.*« (Poland)

The participants in Hungary and Portugal referred to departmental 'internal networks' that fostered informal, enduring communities of inquiry, which they viewed as vital counterweights to systemic fragmentation. The participants explained that these microcultures of collaboration reinforced their professional agency and sense of belonging within RIP.

(c) Preservice teachers' evolving curiosity about research

While preservice teachers' attitudes towards research were seen as a barrier, as reported above, many participants also noted that through inquiry, students' curiosity and self-discovery through inquiry could become powerful facilitators once they have experienced the practical relevance of research firsthand.

The participants in Poland observed that preservice teachers' interest in RIP deepened once they conducted their own fieldwork: *»It was challenging for them when we simulated RIP during theoretical classes. But ... their internship in a preschool was their first real opportunity to approach practical issues through a research lens. They found it to be a truly rewarding experience.«* (Poland)

Similarly, the participants in Portugal noted that when students realised that research could illuminate practice, their motivation to engage in RIP grew: *»When we involve future teachers in researching their own practice, they are more willing to apply research-informed approaches in their everyday work.«* (Portugal)

(d) Institutional openness and emerging opportunities

The participants identified contextual facilitators that created space for teaching and promoting RIP within otherwise constrained systems, including supportive colleagues, departmental autonomy and project-based funding that enabled experimentation with research in practice. The participants in Hungary described leveraging local projects to build small examples that work despite limited national guidance. The participants in Poland similarly used individual autonomy over course design to embed research experiences, demonstrating that flexibility enabled innovation even within tight frameworks, while those in Portugal observed that although the Bologna Process brought fragmentation, it also introduced opportunities to integrate elective research components, allowing inquiry to continue *»both as an academic element and as part of students' own developing practices«*.

Teacher educators' recommendations for strengthening the teaching of RIP

Across all three contexts, the participants articulated a shared conviction that strengthening the teaching of RIP in ITE requires both structural and cultural renewal. Their recommendations converged around three interrelated priorities: (a) developing research capacity and dispositions among teacher educators, (b) building institutional and cross-sector collaboration and (c) redesigning curricula to embed authentic research experiences for preservice teachers.

(a) Enhancing teacher educators' research capacity and dispositions

Across the board, participants emphasised that sustainable change must begin with teacher educators themselves. In particular, the participants in Poland underscored the importance of teacher educators having a love of research themselves: *»University teachers should have a passion for doing research and teach courses genuinely informed by that research. This authenticity can inspire students to undertake their own inquiries.«* (Poland)

The participants also called for more structured professional learning, mentorship and dialogue about teaching RIP, such as dedicated workshops for early-career academics. Other participants urged universities to recognise and

reward research-informed teaching, since evaluation systems *»too often privilege research output over pedagogical innovation«* (Hungary).

(b) Building institutional and cross-sector collaboration

Participants across all three contexts viewed stronger, more reciprocal university–school partnerships as essential, with the Portugal participants stressing the importance of bidirectional learning between academic and professional communities: *»School teachers should have the opportunity to teach alongside university teachers ... to bring professional knowledge into the university and not just have the university entering the school.«* (Portugal)

Such partnerships were viewed as catalysts for transforming both teacher education and school practice. Regarding format, the Poland participants proposed collaborative research projects, the joint supervision of school placements and shared learning communities as mechanisms for sustaining dialogue between ITE and school settings.

Furthermore, the participants in Hungary recommended institutionalising collaborative research across departments and schools to address the current lack of synergy that isolates innovative initiatives.

(c) Redesigning curricula for authentic research engagement

The participants across all three countries highlighted the need to move beyond a narrow, thesis-centred understanding of research, and towards experiential, practice-based inquiry embedded throughout the course of ITE. The participants in Hungary advocated for the introduction of research methodology early on in ITE and for the integration of inquiry into school placements: *»The systematic teaching of research methodology is important ... many students are expected to write a thesis based on their own research without any prior methods training.«* (Hungary)

The participants in Poland recommended the implementation of dedicated modules on action research and research use in practice, similar to Finnish models, to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The participants in Portugal envisioned cooperative supervision and communities of practice that enable preservice teachers to use research to improve their practices.

Discussion

This study examined teacher educators' perspectives on barriers, facilitators and recommendations regarding the teaching of RIP within master's-level ITE in Poland, Portugal and Hungary. The findings reveal a striking asymmetry: while barriers are primarily structural and embedded in policy frameworks, institutional arrangements and curricula design, facilitators arise from individual agency, collegial collaboration and moral commitment to RIP. The discussion section situates these findings within debates about the role of

research in teacher education, highlighting both cross-national convergences and distinctive contextual trajectories.

Barriers to teaching RIP

Our study identified four interrelated categories of barriers to teaching RIP: institutional fragmentation and policy silence, curricular and organisational constraints, students' limited research literacy, and the underutilisation of existing ITE curricula for developing RIP. The participants most frequently emphasised the gap between policy promises of research engagement and the absence of concrete guidance on *how* it should be taught, modelled or assessed. This mismatch between aspiration, articulated in teacher education standards and accreditation frameworks and implementation foists the responsibility for developing RIP onto individual educators, reinforcing what Goodwin (2020) terms 'tick-box professionalism' (i.e. compliance without capacity building).

Several organisational and curricular arrangements exacerbate these challenges. The participants described fragmented programmes, poorly sequenced research components, limited supervision and chronic shortages in time and resources. These findings align with critiques of divisions between theory and practice in the structuring of teacher education (e.g. Menter and Flores 2021; Resch et al. 2022). Bologna Process reforms, which are intended to harmonise European education systems, have paradoxically deepened this divide by separating scientific cycles from and pedagogical ones, thereby further entrenching distinctions between academic and professional knowledge (e.g. Sousa et al. 2021).

The epistemic positioning of research within ITE is another barrier to teaching RIP, with the participants reporting that research was typically presented to students as a rigorous academic exercise culminating in a thesis hand-in, rather than as an inquiry tool for problem-solving in professional settings. Consequently, everyday forms of inquiry – reflection, observation and action research – remain undervalued in professional knowledge creation, thus corroborating prior findings that effective preparation for RIP requires inquiry-based, collaborative and practice-connected learning (e.g. Allas et al. 2020; Pike et al. 2023). Ultimately, the limited epistemic framing identified in this work reflects the treatment of research as a product, rather than an ongoing process of professional growth (Guilfoyle et al. 2024).

Participants also highlighted the underuse of opportunities already available within ITE. Students' theses and school-based projects can yield valuable insights that remain unshared – as one participant observed, 'end[ing] up on a shelf'. This failure to fully activate existing mechanisms aligns with what Menter and Flores (2021) describe as a lack of coherence between research, practicum and coursework – these components are not treated as parts of a continuous developmental pathway. Our findings extend their analysis by showing how institutional cultures and assessment practices inhibit student research from contributing to collective professional learning. Realising this potential requires reimagining ITE as a research-rich environment, where inquiry is deliberately

woven through coursework, practicum and thesis activities as a sustained professional pathway rather than a one-off requirement (Wang et al. 2023).

Facilitators for teaching RIP

While the barriers identified in this study are largely structural and policy-driven, the facilitators emerge from teacher educators' professional commitment, moral agency and collaboration. Participants' accounts highlight the importance of teacher educators modelling a research-oriented stance, rather than treating research solely as course content (Janssen et al. 2023). Their own engagement with research provided intellectual stimulation and moral purpose, sustaining their efforts to teach RIP despite limited institutional recognition. Consistent with prior studies, our findings suggest that teacher educators who are research-active themselves are well positioned to integrate research into their teaching and, in turn, spark students' own RIP (e.g. Cao et al. 2021).

However, the participants frequently described themselves as 'islands', since they were forced to rely on personal initiative and informal peer networks to teach RIP in the absence of systemic support. This pattern, noted in previous works (e.g. Boyd and Szplit 2017), underscores the fragility of inquiry cultures reliant on individual agency rather than structural support. Thus, the challenge is to move towards professional cultures that normalise inquiry as a collective practice. Participants highlighted how collaborative microcultures (i.e. small departmental teams and partnerships) acted as 'living laboratories' for the teaching of RIP at the meso level, reflecting OECD (2025) findings that peer communities and cross-sector collaborations foster sustained reflective dialogue and capacity building for RIP. Nonetheless, the participants also cautioned against over-formalisation, as this may erode the trust, autonomy and authentic collaboration essential to teaching RIP.

Finally, the participants observed that preservice teachers themselves can become facilitators of RIP when inquiry is meaningful and grounded in ITE curricula. Field projects and action research were found to often transform initial scepticism into curiosity and ownership, thereby supporting existing evidence that experiential, practice-based inquiry fosters preservice teachers' capacities for RIP (Guilbert et al. 2016). These findings reaffirm the need for pedagogical design that converts uncertainty into motivation for inquiry, positioning preservice teachers as co-constructors – not passive recipients – of professional knowledge.

Recommendations for strengthening the teaching of RIP

The participants' recommendations for strengthening the teaching of RIP converged around three interrelated priorities: expanding research capacity, building sustainable partnerships and embedding inquiry throughout ITE curricula. These priorities echo longstanding calls for systemic alignment within ITE between policy, institutional structures and professional learning (e.g. Menter and Flore 2021). The present study extends this argument by

demonstrating that such coherence must be both organisational and epistemic, necessitating alignment between institutional frameworks and the ways in which research is conceptualised, taught and enacted as a form of professional knowledge.

Partnership reform featured prominently in the participants' visions for strengthening the teaching of RIP within ITE. They recommended collaboration between universities and schools, as well as between teacher educators and school-based mentors, in the form of shared supervision, protected time for joint inquiry and recognition of practitioner expertise. These more equitable research–practice partnerships would emphasise the reciprocity and knowledge co-construction spanning institutional boundaries already recommended in existing research (e.g. Hermansen and Mausethagen 2023). The participants also called for curricular redesign via the integration of research methodology and inquiry components across the course of ITE, echoing earlier calls for inquiry-oriented ITE curricula that bridge theory and practice (e.g. Darwin and Barahon 2021).

Finally, the participants emphasised the need to reform evaluation and quality assurance systems so that inquiry-based pedagogy is recognised as legitimate scholarly work, reiterating critiques of performative accountability in teacher education and amplifying calls to rebalance reward structures (e.g. Mockler 2020).

Convergences and divergences across national contexts

The participants in Poland, Portugal and Hungary reported remarkably similar barriers and facilitators to RIP. Policy silence, curricular fragmentation, limited institutional recognition and reliance on individual initiative emerged as definitive features of ITE across all three countries, speaking to the persistent imbalance between policy ambition and institutional capacity (e.g. Menter and Flores 2021). These findings reinforce how structural conditions – not professional resistance – currently constitute the main barrier to embedding RIP into ITE in Europe (ibid.).

However, national contexts did shape how these tensions were experienced and negotiated. The participants in Hungary described policy misalignment and the marginalisation of evidence-informed approaches, reflecting post-USSR concerns about weak policy support for teacher professionalism (Chrappán et al. 2020). The participants in Portugal described Bologna-driven reforms as entrenching the theory–practice divide, positioning partnership reform as essential for future progress and challenging Europe-wide policies that prioritise structural coherence over bidirectional knowledge-building (Lopes et al. 2023). The participants in Poland spotlighted how individual innovation was hampered by inadequate support systems (Korzeniecka-Bondar et al. 2023), exemplifying teacher educators' micro-level agency enacted under macro-level constraints.

Taken together, our findings suggest that while the core tensions impacting RIP in ITE are transnational – rooted in Europe-wide patterns of policy ambiguity and structural fragmentation – their expression and resolution are

mediated via distinct national histories, institutional traditions and professional cultures. This study therefore contributes to comparative scholarship on teacher education by illuminating how teacher educators across three diverse contexts navigate, resist and reimagine teaching RIP within ITE.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. Its data draw exclusively on the perspectives of teacher educators, thus overlooking how the teaching of RIP is perceived by policy-makers, university leaders and preservice teachers. The number of focus groups varied across the three contexts, and the overall sample was relatively small, constraining the scope and transferability of the findings. As an interpretive, cross-national inquiry, this study seeks to illuminate underlying patterns and mechanisms rather than provide generalisable or statistically representative results. Future research could include a broader range of stakeholders and adopt longitudinal designs to examine how evolving policy and institutional conditions impact the teaching of RIP within ITE.

Conclusion

The study's findings indicate that while individual teacher educators demonstrate a strong commitment to prioritising RIP within ITE, their efforts are frequently constrained by structural and institutional factors. As a result, RIP-related initiatives tend to remain fragmented and dependent on individual engagement rather than being systematically embedded within programmes or institutions. Advancing RIP in ITE therefore requires greater institutional coherence, sustained collaboration, supportive policy frameworks and the development of shared professional understandings of what constitutes RIP and how it should be taught. The reconceptualisation of teacher educators' professionalism in recognition of their role as active contributors to knowledge production and as mediators between research and practice, rather than merely as implementers of externally defined requirements, is equally important.

Statement on access to research data

Data are accessible with restrictions (legal/ethical restrictions)

The research data used in this article are not publicly available due to restrictions related to personal data protection and/or copyright (in accordance with ZVOP-2 and/or ZASP). Access to anonymised or restricted versions of the data is possible upon reasonable request to the authors of the article.

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Marta KOWALCZUK-WALĘDZIAK (Pedagoška fakulteta, Univerza v Białystoku, Poljska)
Rita TAVARES DE SOUSA (Center za raziskave in intervencije v izobraževanju, Katoliška
univerza na Portugalskem, Portugalska)
Amélia LOPES (Center za raziskave in intervencije v izobraževanju, Univerza v Portu,
Portugalska)
Erika KOPP (Fakulteta za pedagogiko in psihologijo, Univerza v Budimpešti, Madžarska)

VISOKOŠOLSKI UČITELJI MED OVIRAMI IN SPODBUDAMI PRI POUČEVANJU RAZISKOVALNO PODPRTE PRAKSE NA POLJSKEM, PORTUGALSKEM IN MADŽARSKEM: UGOTOVITVE IZ FOKUSNIH SKUPIN

Povzetek: Članek izhaja iz obsežnejše študije, ki raziskuje, kako visokošolski učitelji na Poljskem, Portugalskem in Madžarskem premagujejo ovire in izkoriščajo možnosti, povezane s poučevanjem raziskovalno podprte prakse v okviru začetnega izobraževanja učiteljev na magistrski ravni. Študija prinaša tudi priporočila za okrepitev tega procesa. Tematska analiza podatkov iz fokusnih skupin je razkrila vrsto ovir: institucionalno razdrobljenost in »molk politik«, omejitve v kurikulumu in organizaciji, omejeno raziskovalno pismenost študentov in premalo izkoriščene priložnosti v obstoječih kurikulumih začetnega izobraževanja učiteljev. Nasprotno pa ugotavljamo, da raziskovalno podprto prakso spodbujata predvsem individualna zavezanost in sodelovanje – identificiranje visokošolskih učiteljev kot raziskovalcev in motivacija za poučevanje raziskovalno podprte prakse, sodelovalne mikrokulture in porajajoča se radovednost študentov do raziskovanja – ter institucionalna odprtost in priložnosti. Kljub razlikam v kontekstih so udeleženci iz vseh treh držav poudarili potrebo po doslednih sistemih podpore, možnostih strokovnega izobraževanja za visokošolske učitelje in partnerstvih med šolami in univerzami. Študija ugotavlja, da je za ohranitev poučevanja raziskovalno podprte prakse v začetnem izobraževanju učiteljev potrebna sistematična podpora, ki usklajuje politiko, institucionalne okvire in poklicno kulturo, s čimer presega izolirana prizadevanja posameznikov.

Ključne besede: začetno izobraževanje učiteljev, magistrski študij, raziskovalno podprta praksa, bodoči učitelji, Poljska, Portugalska, Madžarska

Elektronski naslov: mkowalczuk@poczta.fm