Present and Perspectives in the Teachers' Continuous Professional Training in Romania

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Abstract: Complementing the initial training that provides the foundation for the professionalization of the teaching career, the teachers' continuous professional development represents an area of analysis that has always been in the attention of the educational policy makers, at the level of all national education systems.

In a study conducted at the European level (2007), concerning the concrete ways to achieve the continuous training of the teaching staff, it is noted that, although there are 28 different training systems as organizational manner, there are no major differences in functional terms. Also, in this context, a number of fundamental characteristics of the profession were identified; it represents a qualified profession, through university studies (in most cases), which involves the graduation of different programs of continuous professional development, a certain degree of mobility of teachers in the national and European space, as well as partnership relations between different institutions involved in initial and continuous training.

The paper tries to illustrate several results gathered from the opinions of a Romanian group of teachers, about the effectiveness of the on-going training programs in Romania. At the same time, the purpose of the paper is to identify new ways of organizing and conducting those on-going training programs, in line with the views of direct beneficiaries and educational practices confirmed at the European level.

Keywords: *Continuous professional development; initial training; training programs; efficacy; relevance; PROFILES project.*

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1. Introduction

Discussions concerning the importance of teaching, in all the aspects circumscribed by it, are priorities at the level of EU. In this respect, the EU Council stipulated that “*education and training have a crucial role to play in meeting many socio-economic, demographic, environmental and technological challenges facing Europe and its citizens today and, in the years, ahead*” (Jurnalul Oficial al Uniunii Europene, 2009). In 2015, the EU Council and Commission refer to “*the strong support for teachers, trainers, school leaders and other educational staff who play an essential role on ensuring the students’ success, together with the implementation of the EU education policies*” (Jurnalul Oficial al Uniunii Europene, 2015). EU member states are preoccupied to optimize the initial and lifelong learning programmes as they are aware that high-quality education provided to beneficiaries depends on how well trained the teachers are and, by extrapolation, this training representing a key factor on ensuring personal, social and professional achievement, and also durable economic prosperity in social terms.

2. Problem Statement

2.1 Distinctive Notes of Lifelong Professional Development for Teaching as a Profession, at European Level

The actions for improving the teachers training process have to be substantiated on concrete data, based on an analysis of the educational system specific to each country and further subjected to a comparative analysis. The goal of such analysis is to highlight good educational practices, added-value elements identified in relation to existed teachers’ professional development programmes implemented in some member states, which may be transferred or extended later, after appropriately adaptations, to other states, in the spirit of the European cooperation which is vital in education and training.

In strict reference to lifelong learning, there can be noticed several characteristic aspects of various education systems in Europe:

(a) In most European education systems, it is mandatory for schools to have a *PGP (Plan for Professional Growth)* of which elaboration is the responsibility of the school leader, management team or other teacher, especially appointed to coordinate continuous learning/professional development activities.

(b) In Bulgaria, Spain, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia, *PGP* is an obligation and a requirement to advance in career and to

benefit of an increase income - when applying for a superior position, it is required to provide evidences for participation.

(c) In Luxemburg, Hungary, Malta, Portugal, Romania and Finland, there are precise specifications on the minimum number of hours/transferable credits that each teacher has to spend on training courses. In some countries, participation to a minimum lifelong learning period is required to continue to practice (Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Turkey and others), whereas in others (The Netherlands, Slovenia and Great Britain - Scotland), a minimum number of *PGP* hours is considered to be the right of teachers.

(d) In many countries, the authorities set priority themes or areas for lifelong learning/professional growth.

(e) Some educational systems offer financial incentives for teachers who attend certain *PGP* activities (Greece, Malta, The Netherlands). In other countries, teachers are granted time off school or paid holiday for participating to *PGP* (Ireland, Greece, Spain, Italy and others).

(f) Educational systems offer teaching staff support for *PGP* mainly by: covering costs charged by *PGP* providers, earmarking funds for schools and directly reimbursing teachers. In almost half of the European educational systems, the quality of *PGP* programmes is provided/assessed by high education authorities (Ministry of Education). Most countries have enforced educational policy measures for implementing the EU Lifelong Learning Programme. However, the national mobility schemes for encouraging teachers to participate in training/learning activities abroad (transnational learning) do not exist in all European countries (Eurydice, 2013; Hosseini-Shokouh, Dabaghi, & Rahimi, 2018).

In respect to the abovementioned considerations, the efficiency of teachers' initial and lifelong learning programmes do not meet - in all the cases - the expected outcomes. Consequently, the quality of education is affected, the interest and the attractiveness for teaching is dropped, being necessary to adopt some measures to generate durable effects in relation to *PGP* in general, and the educational systems in particular, restoring the status deserved by this profession.

2.2. Characteristics of Lifelong Professional Development for Teaching Career in Romania

The acquisition of professional skills and competences required on conducting a high-quality teaching activity, as well as the improvement of initial and lifelong learning, represent priorities for the Romanian educational system.

Lifelong learning represents a complex development activity in relation to one's career, carried out to adapt educational practices to evolutions within the society, at scientific, technological, economic and social level. Lifelong learning is a response to those evolutions and their related issues, integrable in the larger context of permanent education.

The objectives of the lifelong learning of teaching staff, auxiliary teaching staff, management, guiding and control staff from pre-university establishments and their related units, in universities and other education establishments and organizations under the Romanian educational system, aim to:

- development of basic competencies (psycho-pedagogical, particular specialization, scientific research, managerial, administrative etc.);
- acquisition of new professional and transversal competencies, specific to different categories of beneficiaries.

The teaching staff and the management, guiding and control staff from pre-university establishments have to periodically attend lifelong training programmes, in order to get a minimum number of 90 transferable credits (CPT) every-five-consecutive-years from the date of obtaining their qualified teacher status.

The provider of lifelong learning programmes is an institution/education establishment, a non-governmental organization, even a public or a private company, that, according to the own statute, provides lifelong learning and professional development of teaching staff, auxiliary teaching staff, or management, guiding and control staff from pre-university education institutions. All accredited providers of lifelong learning programmes, activating both in the public and private education sector, are organized in the National Register of Accredited Lifelong Training Providers (Ministerul educației naționale, 2017).

The lifelong training programmes offered by such providers have to be projected/elaborated in relation to the learning needs of the teachers, in order to ensure their "endowment" with solid skills and competencies, susceptible to enable rapid management of all variables, specific to the educational space and evolution in the teaching career.

The national report on analysis of the educational environment in Romania - *TALIS 2013* - underpins a series of data, relevant for the endeavor of improving teachers' lifelong learning process. The basic premise of this endeavor is that *"in schools, the most important factors influencing the learning process are teachers and teachers-related factors"* (National Centre for assessment and evaluation, TALIS national centre, 2014).

Being questioned related to the type of improvement activities to which they have participated, ranging from organized and structured learning activities to informal and autonomous learning activities in Romania, 52% of teachers stated they have attended activities such as courses or workshops. In addition, higher percentages of respondents mention that attended continuous professional development programmes were focused on didactical competencies of teaching their own discipline (78%) and knowing and understanding specialized disciplines (75%). On the other hand, a low number of teachers stated they have participated to lifelong learning activities which were relevant for training/developing intercultural competencies and competencies enabling appropriate management of diversity in the classroom (on the average, 18%) or school management (managing education establishments - nearly 20%).

According to the data included in the TALIS 2013 report, 27% of the Romanian teachers specified that an area where the teaching needs are not sufficiently covered in classes is represented by the students with special needs. In addition, on the average, the second and third most important needs relating to professional development mentioned by teachers, are related to teaching in a multicultural or multilingual environment (one of five teachers) and the extensive use of ICT as a modern teaching and learning support (19% of teachers).

In fact, in the thematic areas dedicated to lifelong learning programmes, the providers are recommended to introduce topics / themes in line with the training needs expressed above (table 1). It is important for the providers of professional development programmes to include such topics in their curricular offers, and to be aware of the fact that the relevance of a lifelong learning programme for teachers is rendered by the correspondence between the programmes and the learning needs expressed by potential members of the target group (Ministerul educației naționale, 2017).

Table 1. Thematic Areas for Lifelong Learning Programmes

Curricular projection	Equal opportunities and gender equity
Teaching-learning-assessing strategies	Non-formal, extracurricular and informal education
Curricular habilitation	New educations
Class management	Management and counselling toward teaching as a profession
School counselling and vocational orientation	Management and leadership in education
ICT/digital competencies	Educational marketing

Educating children with special educational needs	Quality management in education
Educating especially gifted children and youngsters	Education policies

In the Eurydice report entitled “The Teaching Profession in Europe: Practices, Perceptions and Policies” (2015), in the section referring to the types of the activities specific to professional development programmes, it is indicated that the traditional training methods - courses, workshops and conferences / seminars - have to be harmonized with activities which focus more on collaborative learning, computer supported learning, networking, mentoring and mutual learning (Eurydice, 2015). If we relate to the *classical* training systems, *e-learning* or *blended-learning*, we can distinguish, based on the description presented in table 2, the advantages and the limits of their introduction. The tendency of the providers of lifelong learning programmes is to integrate, within the same programme, various types of activities, both traditional and modern, based on ICT, optimizing in this way the training endeavor, meeting also the needs of different categories of beneficiaries.

Table 2. Methods to organize lifelong learning courses for teachers

(adapted from Butnaru, 2016, p.100)

Method for organizing lifelong learning courses	Basic characteristics
Direct (face-to-face) learning	All activities are performed directly, in specific training spaces (classroom, laboratory etc.); The group of trainees is formed beforehand; Schedule/calendar of learning activities is usually imposed by trainers; Communication trainer-trainee is direct; Assessment is conducted on a specific date, in the same manner for all trainees.
E-learning	All activities are conducted on-line (using an educational platform); Trainer-trainee (trainee-trainee) interaction is indirect, computer-mediated; Learning programme involves certain deadlines, however each trainee may manage his/her own learning programme/time; Assessment is conducted individually, in relation to certain requirements set, usually agreed by both trainer and trainee.

Blended-learning (mixed)	<p>Some activities are carried out directly, in specific training spaces, others on-line; The group of trainees is formed beforehand; Schedule/calendar of learning activities is usually imposed by trainers, only for direct activities; Trainer-trainee communication is both direct and indirect, mediated; Assessment is conducted directly, on-line or in a mixed manner.</p>
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3. Research Questions/Aims of the research

The main research objective was oriented on capturing the teachers' opinions concerning the efficiency of lifelong learning programmes existed in the Romanian educational market. More, the research tried to identify new methods to organize and conduct lifelong learning programmes, in line with the beneficiaries' needs and adapted to the actual European educational practices.

4. Research Methods

In order to achieve the abovementioned objectives, a sample of 100 voluntary teachers from the educational system (primary and secondary education), coming from Dâmbovița, Argeș, Prahova and Constanța Counties, and enrolled in continuous professional development programmes, answered to questionnaire comprised of 10 items, with 9 close-ended predetermined questions and one open-ended question. The questionnaire was applied in 2017, exploiting the moments occasioned by several lifelong learning activities, workshops and round-table discussions.

The data obtained from those questionnaires were processed using quantitative, statistical and mathematical analyses. The data was processed and interpreted, being correlated with qualitative appreciations following the discussions held with some respondents.

5. Findings

Being questioned concerning the extent to which the teachers consider lifelong learning activity, as projected and conducted today, qualified teacher status, teacher certifications and accumulation of 90 transferable credits (CPT) every five years, meeting so their real needs for professional training etc., the respondents appreciate that this is achieved to

a very great extent - 31%, a great extent - 48%, a moderate extent - 16%, a small extent - 2% and a very small extent - 3% (figure 1).

Figure 1. The extent to which respondents consider that lifelong learning activities meet their real needs for professional development

Regarding the thematic areas which represent priorities in selecting a lifelong learning programme, the respondents' opinions are various compared to their individual needs. However, on top of their preference is positioned the education of children with special educational needs, improvement of ICT/digital competencies and management and leadership in education, which demonstrates the necessity of generating an offer for lifelong learning programmes meant to support teachers and to provide them with the competencies relating to the complex problems facing them in the actual educational environment (figure 2).

Figure 2. Thematic areas which represent priorities in selecting a lifelong learning programme

Concerning the institutions which should manage the organization of lifelong learning programmes for teachers, the respondents first refer to *Teaching-Staff Resource Centres (CCDs)*, followed by *Teacher Training Departments* which act in universities.

Aiming to collect the opinions of the questioned teachers regarding how important and useful the lifelong learning activities are, most of them seem to be aware of the formative value of those activities and consider them important with the view to have a chance when advancing in the career (figure 3).

Figure 3. The importance of lifelong learning activities, expressed by questioned teachers

The next item, structured as control key for validation of the responses to the first item, is focused on the extent to which respondents understand the need of change/reform of the current teachers' lifelong learning system in Romania. Therefore, we see that, even though initially most respondents stated that they were satisfied with how the lifelong learning system is working, there is actually a strong need for reforming it, as shown in figure 4.

Figure 4. The extent to which the respondents consider a need of change/reform of the current teachers' lifelong learning system in Romania.

Referring to the manner in which lifelong learning activities are organized, the respondents ranged as first in the list the mixed learning/blended learning format, followed by the exchange of good practices with teachers in the country and abroad, and participation to workshops. It should be noted that only a small percentage (approximate 12%) of the questioned teachers chose traditional, face-to-face training, which confirms the necessity for changing the current lifelong learning system for Romanian teachers (figure 5).

Figure 5. The teachers' feedback related to the methods used for organizing lifelong learning activities

Among the most important reasons concerning the reasons for attending a lifelong learning programme, there were highlighted, in descending order: professional development, accumulation of transferable credits, personal development, getting marks, maintaining / changing the teaching position and accessing to a leadership position.

6. Discussions

Among the solutions identified by the respondents with regards to the optimization of the current educational policies and practices in Romania, concerning the training of teachers, there can be mentioned the following:

- Ensuring gratuity/granting subsidies for lifelong learning programmes;
- Total or at least partial reimbursement by school for lifelong learning costs;
- Organizing training courses within each educational level;

- Existence of some on-line or blended-learning courses;
- Creation of a national information platform including all the training offers;
- Correlation between offers and real learning needs expressed by teachers;
- Using of modern training strategies;
- Monitoring the intervention in classrooms, after the raduation of the training programmes;
- Focusing on applicative, practical and less on theoretical aspects.

It is also worth mentioning that the questioned teachers consider the costs for being trained as the most important problem they have to cope with, when choosing and attending lifelong learning programmes. There are many situations where the costs are covered from the teachers' own income. Additionally, the respondents reported that learning offers are often insufficiently popularized and they do not reach all the potential beneficiaries. This must lead to the creation of a national network for providing information on lifelong learning programmes in progress, at least at national level.

6. Conclusions

The illustrated research highlights the characteristics of the continuous professional training of the Romanian teachers involved in pre-university education. In addition, the research tried to emphasizes several aspects of the Romanian teachers' professional development, analyzed in comparison with what is happening in other European countries.

It is obvious that a series of good practices noticed in the Romanian training system can be transferred at European level, as the structure of various thematic areas, but also the scientific and methodological monitoring process of the training itself. Although at first sight there are aspects that can be linked as a centralized system, to the same extent, there are many characteristics that denote structuring and systematization which require the elaboration of criteria that make easier to track progress and evaluation. However, there are also aspects that can be improved, taking into account the European trends, like: elaboration of a teachers' continuous professional development plan, participation in continuous training sessions just after a clear analysis related to the actual teachers' needs, financial support or other rewarding methods for teachers interested in continuing training, supporting and recognizing the training by various providers, in strong accordance to

the teachers' requests (taking into consideration the categories of existed competences) etc.

All the findings demonstrate that teachers realize the necessity of a reform in relation to teachers' lifelong learning system. It is obvious that teachers feel the real necessity to be involved in continuous professional development programmes structured in two main sections: one which embraces the scientific preparation, in relation to the curricular area taught by each participant, and the other which targets to pedagogical and methodical training (Stăncescu, Gorghiu, & Petrescu, 2017).

In the actual system dedicated to teachers' continuous training, there are also highlighted a series of aspects which are considered as weaknesses: the process of monitoring of the allocated credits and providers, ambiguous legislation regarding the continuous training and its recognition. In this respect, for the teachers' training programmes providers, it is required to design and implement new training strategies meant to provide teachers with the theoretical - and more importantly - methodological support, necessary for a high-quality education, in every sense of this term, which we have often heard over the past years, yet which does not fully correspond to the actual educational trends.

On the other hand, important perspectives can be drawn both for the policies and practices of continuous training in the Romanian education system, as well as for the European ones, in the respect for the principle of subsidiarity and European tendencies.

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