

# The Relevance of Continuous Training Programmes Dedicated for Teachers from Pre- University Education

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**Abstract:** The didactic profession has a major social importance. However, its attractiveness decreases drastically, both among potential aspirants to the status of teacher – the students, and among those who practice this profession, whether they are at their debut, whether they have already accumulated enough experience at the chair.

In this context, investing in the initial and continuous teachers' training is essential, if we really want to improve the efficiency and quality of the educational process, to have a high/advanced education system, in which to practice the teachers with vocation, dedicated both to children and school.

Regarding to the continuous training of teachers, it is necessary that all those responsible for the process - from the Ministry of the resort to the programme providers - to provide opportunities for the training and development of professional competences in agreement with their own training needs.

Our study has the assumption that teachers from pre-university education sometimes demonstrate a low motivation for participation in continuous training programmes, because in many situations there is a hiatus between the curriculum offer of the providers of such programs and their real needs for processing and development of professional competences.

For this purpose, we have organized two focus-groups, having as participants teachers for pre-school education and teachers for primary education, in order to identify their opinions on the relevance and effectiveness of continuous training programmes at which they have been participated in recent years.

**Keywords:** *didactic profession; continuous professional development; training needs; professional competences; continuous training programmes.*

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## 1. Introduction

Initial and continuous teachers training represent a significant component for many EU strategies and initiatives in the area of education, having also a major impact in the educational process and facilitating a qualitative education and placement of students in successful situations, in relation to school, converted later into a successful outcome in relation to both society and individual profession.

The access to a qualitative education ensures to people the necessary knowledge, skills and competencies which enable them to benefit from an optimal socio-professional insertion, to become active citizens of the world defined by democratic values, in which the main point is to laid on promoting insertion, equity and equality.

## 2. Problem Statement

### ***2.1. Continuous Professional Development - A Conditional Factor of a Qualitative Education***

The concern of the Romanian decision-making factors and the developers of education policies outlines clear guidelines for all entities responsible for teachers' training, beyond the alignment to common European norms related to training and professional development of teachers, awareness of how important this professional segment is related to a developed society.

In Romania, the process of teacher training is met in the art. 242, section 1 of the *National Education Law of National Education* (Romanian Parliament, 2011) - "*Continuous training of teachers comprising professional development and career evolution*". More, art. 244, section 5 of the above-mentioned document provides that: "*Professional development of teachers, school leaders, counselling and auditing staff are substantiated on professional standards for the teaching profession, quality standards and professional competencies (...)*".

The professional competencies specific to the teaching profession as a whole, structured in knowledge and skills, are presented in the "*Methodology regarding the Continuous Training of Pre-University Teachers*", approved by the *Order of the Minister of Education, Research, Youth and Sport* no. 5561/2011, amended and supplemented, as follows:

- Art. 92 (2) - The system of competencies comprises five fundamental categories:

- a) professional competencies: cognitive competencies, functional and action-related competencies;
- b) complementary competencies: digital competencies, linguistic competencies, counselling competencies;
- c) transversal competencies: role-related competencies, personal and professional development competencies;
- d) management, counselling and auditing competencies;
- e) competencies acquired by (re)training programmes.”

All providers of training programmes for teachers should comply with the quality standards stated in official documents. In the *Methodology for periodical accreditation and assessment of continuous learning*, approved by the Order of the Minister of Education, Research, Youth and Sport no. 5564/2011, in art. 2, section 2, the continuous training programme is defined as *an educational offer made by a provider which aims to form and develop professional competencies of teachers, auxiliary teaching staff, school leaders, counselling and auditing staff within pre-university establishments, in accordance with professional standards specific to the teaching profession*. The article 16, section 3 of the same document states that *a continuous training programme will be internally coherent insofar as the contents proposed and the time budget earmarked will be in line with the training needs of the potential participants*.

The presentation of some aspects related to continuous training of teachers in Romania have to be made by highlighting the common European perception on this issue.

In this respect, it is necessary to state that European Commission identified the following *priorities* for future actions in relation to training and professional development of teaching staff:

- consolidation of recruitment, selection and training of the best candidates for the teaching profession;
- enhanced attractiveness and reputation of the teaching profession, including comprehensive strategies and approach of the gender imbalance in relation to this profession;
- support of the initial education and continuous professional development of educators, especially to cope with students' diversity, experience-based learning, digital competences and innovative pedagogies;
- promoting excellence in teaching at all levels, by projecting programmes, organising learning and motivation structures and exploring new ways to measure the quality of teachers' education (European Commission, 2015).

In 2015, the *Joint Report of the Council and Commission on the implementation of the Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training* (ET, 2020), it is underlined the necessary support of teachers, school leaders and other members of the teaching staff, with a fundamental role on ensuring the success of trainable persons and on implementing education policies, which represents a priority.

To ensure a qualitative education, it is necessary that relevant staff working at all levels and in all the sectors of education and training should acquire durable teaching skills and competencies, based on research and sound practice. In addition, education and continuous professional development (CPD) of teachers have to be achieved enabling them to approach the individual needs of trainable people and the more and more diverse social, cultural, economic and geographic media from where they come, to prevent early dropout and to optimally use innovative teaching methods and ICT instruments, benefiting at the same time from a *real integration support* in their career.

As in other EU countries, in Romania the decrease recorded in the quality of education as well as in the interest for the teaching career is obvious. Therefore, it is required to urgently take some actions in order to increase attractiveness of this profession and to enhance its statute. In this context, it is necessary to project continuous training programmes which are relevant for teachers and susceptible to provide them with opportunities for career development and for enhancing specific competencies.

## ***2.2. Continuous Training Programmes for Teachers - Relevance Indicators***

A valuable continuous development of teachers represents a priority in Europe. Good teachers are the ones “producing” graduates who possess durable life competencies and skills, being prepared to be actively integrated in society. The graduates must be capable and motivated to learn throughout their life; able to practice their profession in a responsible manner and to constantly invest in their professional and personal development, who understand that this is the only way towards fulfilment, towards personal wellbeing and evidently, social wellbeing.

Nevertheless, to have good teachers whose professional competencies are in line with desirable quality standards, it is necessary to implement relevant continuous training programmes. The main indicators to which beneficiaries of such programmes relate when analysing them in terms of relevance, are: the extent to which they meet the training needs, explicitly

expressed, curricular/training resources capitalised/provided to trainable persons, and the embraced training strategies.

Analysing the data resulted from the researches conducted over the past few years, both at international and national levels, we can see the following aspects:

a) *training needs*

- most teachers, irrespective of age and professional experience, state that their fundamental training needs focus chiefly on the domains which may have an impact on the optimisation of the teaching practices. Among them “teaching students with special needs”, “ICT skills for teaching”, “new technologies at workplace”, “approaches in individual learning” and “teaching cross-curricular skills” are frequently mentioned (Eurydice, 2015: 12). A low percentage of teachers consider the training courses focused on “knowing and understanding my domain/my teaching domains” and “curricular knowledge” to be useful to a moderate or high extent (some of them) (Eurydice, 2015: 12);
- In the *TALIS 2013 Report*, it is highlighted on five domains corresponding to the main training needs expressed by a higher number of teachers: 1) teaching students with special needs; 2) ICT skills for teaching; 3) new technologies at workplace; 4) students’ behaviour and class management and 5) teaching in a multicultural or multilingual environment (CNEE, 2014: 47). The mentioned data are similar for most countries in Europe, including Romania.

b) *curricular/training resources*

- teachers consider that they need resources which should allow them to move the focus from the theoretical aspects to the class itself and to concentrate more on supporting their students towards developing their metacognitive skills, which are essential in controlling one’s own learning (Eurydice, 2015: 62). In this respect, ICT resources may be capitalised as they play an important role in turning the education process as individual and flexible in general, and the learning process in particular. Furthermore, permanently accessible and free education resources (*Open Educational Resources - OER*) enable in a dramatic way the transformations in the educational practice, facilitating new ways of learning, characterized by “*customisation, involvement, use of digital communication means, collaboration (...)*” (European Commission, 2012: 10).

c) *training strategies*

- teachers involved in CPD programmes consider that strategies based on collaborative learning, experiential learning, ICT instruments and capitalisation of professional networks specially developed for continuous training activity, represent one of the important vectors of change and improvement of the teaching practices. They value especially the strategies which promote training methods and techniques which they can multiply and apply in their class activities, contributing therefore to the revival of their students and their involvement in the teaching-learning-assessing process.

### **3. Research Questions/Aims of the research**

Our investigative demarche starts from the hypothesis according to which teachers in pre-university education - pre-school and primary school - sometime show a low motivation to participate in continuous training programmes, as in many situations there is a hiatus between the curricular offer of the providers of such programmes and the teachers' real needs to grow, train and develop professional skills.

The main objectives of this micro-research aimed to accurately delineate the indicators, according to which teachers in pre-university education, rate the relevance and the efficiency of a training programme and also identify some real training needs.

The data collected may be used in projecting and implementing of continuous training programmes compatible with the potential beneficiaries' fundamental needs.

### **4. Research Methods**

For fulfilling the research, a qualitative group method (the *focus-group*) was used.

In this regard, two focus-groups were organised with 15 teachers from pre-school and 15 teachers from primary education as subjects, with a view to identifying their opinions on the relevance and the efficiency of the continuous training programmes to which they have participated over the past few years and implicitly their specific training needs.

We mention that the focus-groups were formed in the early academic year 2017-2018, in October, when all teachers involved in this demarche were registered in their first year of study for bachelor or master degrees in Educational Sciences, at Valahia University Targoviste.

The focus-groups were carried out in line with a semi-structured interview guide.

## 5. Findings

Processing the results required a qualitative analysis based on information received from the teachers involved in the research. We mention that the continuous training programmes to which the focus-group subjects referred are not specified, as our investigative demarche does not propose to establish a hierarchy of providers according to the beneficiaries' opinions. Our goal is to identify their opinions and perceptions in order to use them on designing some curricular offers which should effectively meet the teachers' real training needs.

We have exemplified by selecting 6 relevant items from the proposed guide, as follows:

### 1. *Teachers' perception on the efficiency of a continuous training programme*

Analysing the results related to the opening question - *What word/phrase would you use to describe an efficient continuous training programme?* -, we see that the most frequent phrases/words used were: *innovation, relating to training needs, focusing on training/development of skills, interesting, application-based, challenging, focusing on experiential learning, useful, opened to current themes from Educational Sciences, motivating, based on sharing experiences* etc.

### 2. *Teachers' perception on the impact of the continuous training programmes on professional development*

In terms of professional development, the impact of the continuous training programmes is synthesized by most participants as decisive insofar, as such programmes propose new themes in harmony with their training needs, and new working methods to facilitate training/practising/developing of some specific professional competencies.

All participants mentioned that the continuous training programmes in relation to which the strategies used by trainers in direct activities focused on learning by cooperation, experiential learning, use of ICT instruments, have a major role in their professional development, as they allow them to develop their personal experience, ensure exchange of good educational practices and they may therefore improve their own strategies in approaching the teaching act.

The responses provided by the participants to the focus-group indicate that they consider to be more efficient and with a greater impact on professional development, a training programme which mainly involves direct face-to-face activities, combined with on-line activities (however in a

lower percentage), which may generate functional networks specially established to promote collaborative learning.

3. *Teachers' perception with regards to the main indicators according to which they determine the relevance of a continuous training programme*

Among the indicators found to be important in judging the relevance of a continuous training programme we notice very strong three ones: 1) beneficiaries' training needs; 2) used training strategies; 3) learning resources provided to beneficiaries.

4. *Teachers' perceptions with regards to the value-added elements of the continuous training programmes*

As seen by the teachers who participated to continuous training programmes, the main elements which differentiate those programmes from other similar ones, were: type of proposed activities (blended-learning programmes are deemed to be more useful), e-learning platform, modern training practices, curricular resources which support learning, innovative practical applications.

5. *Teachers' perception with regards to the relation between their own training needs and the curricular offer of the continuous training programmes*

The participants to those two focus-groups pointed out the fact that many continuous training programmes which they attended or refused to attend, approached already redundant themes/contents or themes with no correlation to their training needs among which we can cite: modern training methods specific to the pre-school/primary education, interactive teaching strategies, pedagogical projection, curriculum management, ethics and professional conduct etc.

6. *Teachers' perception on their own training needs*

The discussion on the most important training needs of the pre-school and primary education teachers has enabled identification of the following thematic components of some curricular offers, identification which may prove to be motivating: educating children with special educational needs, inclusive school, intercultural education, parental education, conflict management, managing interpersonal relationships, strategies to improve socio-emotional intelligence, ICT, family/child counselling, managing a class of students or a group of pre-schoolers etc.

## 6. Discussions

Analysing the opinions and perceptions of the interviewed subjects, with regards to the efficiency and relevance of the continuous training programmes, we see that they operate with pertinent assessment criteria.



They state their reasons by saying that such programmes aim at an efficient learning only when they approach themes which help them to improve their teaching techniques and also to optimise the interactions with the trainable persons, the communicational process, the educational relations - all those finding their “*echo*” in the performances at school.

Moreover, teachers stated that they are animated by an enhanced motivation when they participate to continuous training programmes of which curricular offers are compatible with their training needs and that they refuse to formally attend courses which are redundant in terms of themes approached as such participation only results in a number of credits granted with no other factual impact on their professional competencies.

The discrepancy between the training needs of teaching staff in pre-schools and primary schools and the providers’ training offer may be removed. Thorough analysis of the problems faced by the education system, identification of both strengths and weaknesses of the initial training programmes designed for the teaching profession, monitoring the continuous training programmes implemented, especially over the past few years, and obviously accurate finding of the real training needs as expressed by teachers, are all solutions for projecting and undertaking some relevant endeavours in relation to continuous professional development of teaching staff.

Predominant use of modern training strategies, based on interactive methods and techniques, on ICT instruments and innovative teaching materials, represent to the teachers - who have participated to the focus-group - another indicator measuring the relevance of the continuous training programmes. They actually consider that such a programme should represent a model of good educational practice, a “loudspeaker” of informational, procedural resources which may be multiplied and enforced in their own educational activities.

To summarise, the success of the continuous professional development programmes consists in their authentic focus on the teachers and their training needs. Only if teachers are confident that participation to such training programmes may help them to place the student in the centre of the teaching process, to customise/differentiate training, to turn this training into a modern, efficient process which is encouraging for the trainable persons, will determine the teacher to invest, both efficiently and affectively, in such an endeavour.

## 7. Conclusions

The hypothesis set as starting point in our investigative demarche is therefore confirmed and strengthens our belief that, in order to secure teachers' loyalty and motivate them for continuous professional development, to consolidate their statute and professional profile, it is required to have a coherent and flexible approach of the training system for the teaching profession, and particularly to define some continuous training routes centred on the teachers' needs and their specific professional competencies, consistent with the features declared at each school level and also with each evolution stage in the teaching profession.

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