

TRAINING OF THE DIDACTIC COMPETENCIES. AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT. The paradigmatic changes that have taken place in nowadays Romania both at the educational and social level determine the reorientation in teachers' initial and continuing education and a redefinition of the competencies required by the teaching profession, which generates a repositioning of the teacher as an agent of change. Moreover, the current educational requirements impose the setting of a role-model for the didactic profession, a unitary, standardised one that may be nationally acknowledged and in accordance to the European space. Hence, ensuring an educational process at quality standards is dependent on the acquisition and practice of competencies specific to the teaching job, competencies that correspond to the current psycho-pedagogical requirements and existing social needs. The extent to which the current continuing training programs contribute to the development of these competencies as well as the secondary education teachers' perception regarding the building of professional competencies within the initial training are the variables explored in the current study.

Keywords: *continuing education, initial training, competences, training programs.*

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG. Die paradigmatische Veränderungen, die heutzutage in Rumänien sowohl im Bildungs- und Sozialniveau geschehen, bestimmen eine Wiederorientierung in der Lehrer Aus- und Weiterbildung und die Neudefinition von den Kompetenzen, die nötig für den Lehrberuf sind. Das generiert eine Neupositionierung des Lehrers als Agent des Wandels. Zudem, die aktuellen bildungspolitischen Anforderungen stellen eine Einstellung eines Rollenmodell für die didaktische Beruf auf, die auf nationaler Ebene anerkannt werden kann und einheitlich, standardisiert und in Übereinstimmung mit dem europäischen Raum ist. Folglich ist die Gewährleistung des Bildungsprozess

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bei Qualitätsstandards von der Übernahme und die Praxis der Kompetenzen spezifisch für die Lehrtätigkeit abhängig, Kompetenzen, die auf die aktuellen psycho-pädagogischen Anforderungen und bestehenden sozialen Bedürfnissen entsprechen. Das Ausmaß, in dem die aktuellen Weiterbildungsprogramme zur Entwicklung dieser Kompetenzen beitragen als auch die Sekundarstufe II Lehrerwahrnehmung in Bezug auf den Bau von beruflichen Kompetenzen, innerhalb der Grundausbildung, sind die Koordinaten der aktuellen Studie.

Schlüsselwörter: *Weiterbildung, Grundausbildung, Kompetenzen, Ausbildungsprogramme.*

1. Introduction

Considering the globalization phenomenon and the dynamics of the information society it is mandatory to reevaluate a series of terms in the educational field, such as: education, educated person, learning, school, teacher/educator, initial training, and continuing education. At the same time, the need for the development of the training level and requalification, self-learning, self-development and maximal valorisation of the abilities and intellectual potential becomes a preferred dimension of the educators and the educational decision-makers. It is expected that teachers manifest interests such as the focalization on an active and proactive continuing education, based analytical thinking, synthetizing, problem solving. (Melek, 2009).

The methodological guidelines of the current Romanian legislation state both the general coordinates which ensure the teacher training as well as the stages of evolution in a didactic career, the examinations taken in order to be granted the permanent teacher certification and 1st and 2nd teaching expertise degrees. Therefore, continuing education and initial training are conceived as interdependent processes, bearing interactions and self-regulation means that allow for a permanent adaptation of the teacher's training to the dynamics of the processes and educational systems. Both initial and continuing education are stipulated to ensure the building and development of professional competencies that correspond to the teaching profession standards.

Teaching skills are essential parts of teachers' professional development and play important roles in teachers' daily practice in classroom. Teachers use teaching skills to design, teach and organize learning activities inside and outside classrooms. The development of teaching skills requires the application of general skills to the classroom setting in a variety ways (Zhao & Jiao, 2012). Research in the field confirms the fact that professional development is accomplished by means of active participation of the teachers to the continuing education activities organised within school institutions. The literature highlights the important factors that support teachers' professional development: learning from colleagues and from everyday working practices, promoting of an emotionally safe atmosphere, the leader's personal support, the flexibility in work planning, shared lessons with colleagues, training events in an authentic work environment and colleagues' professionalism (Ryymin & Lallimo, 2010).

In a teacher training program that took place in the USA, the didactic competence is referred to as split in five specific competencies, respectively: the cognitive competence, the affective competence, the exploratory competence, performance-based competence, in which teachers prove not only that they know, but also that they can make use of what they know, and the competence to produce noticeable changes of the students as a result of the pedagogic relation. (Gliga, 2002). Philippe Perrenoud, sociologist and pedagogue, revealed within a study the existence of ten domains of priority professional competence in the continuing education of teachers and educators, with the elaboration of specific competencies for each reference competence: organisation and vitalisation of learning situations, management of school evolution, design and improvement of differentiation instruments, involvement of students in learning and practice, team work, school management participation, informing and involvement of parents, use of new technologies, involvement in the tasks and ethical dilemmas of the job, personal management of continuing education. (Perrenoud, 2004).

The need to access continuing education programs by teachers is indicated by the results of studies such as *Effective Use of Instructional Materials and Technologies in Teacher Training: Expectations and Opinions of Teacher Candidates*, which shows that: "The majority of teachers cannot combine their own teaching methodologies with information and communication technologies. It can be

said that the most important reasons for not using education technologies/materials in lectures effectively are respectively lack of knowledge about adapting technology to the course, lack of equipment and lack of time” (Cengizan, 2011).

2. Major research coordinates

Our research was based on the following questions:

1. What is the perception of teachers in the Romanian school education over the professional competencies necessary to teachers?
2. What is the extent to which the system of professional competencies for the teaching career is developed at the level of the Romanian initial teacher training programmes?
3. To what extent do continuing teacher training programs contribute to the development of professional competencies needed by a teacher?

We mention that a professional competence for teaching represents the sum of cognitive, affective, motivational capacities, which together with personality traits provide the teacher with the qualities necessary to carry out the didactic activity that satisfies the aimed objectives and bears very good results (Gliga, 2002). The investigation method we used was the questionnaire-based survey. Therefore, the intention was to use an opinion survey in order to investigate the teachers’ perception in school education regarding the professional competencies that are necessary to an effective teacher, the level at which this can be accomplished throughout initial training as well as the extent to which continuing education programs contribute to the development of these competencies. The questionnaire consisted of eight items with multiple choice questions, items regarding the types of competencies necessary to a teacher, professional competencies that characterise an effective teacher, professional development levels that are based on the content and curriculum of continuing education programs. The sample consisted in 96 teachers in the rural and urban area. The obtained results were statistically processed, and they presented in a table format below.

3. Presentation and interpretation of the results

The first item of the survey referred to the type of competence that a teacher must possess.

Table 1. The prevalence of the main competencies a teacher must possess

Response types	Number of responses	%
Psychopedagogical competence	42	43,75%
Cross-sectional competence	11	11,46%
Competence in the field of practice	18	18,75%
Psychosocial and managerial competence	25	26,05%

An analysis of the data presented in Table 1 shows that the psychopedagogical competence is indicated by 43,75% of the respondents, as the competence necessary to be held by a teacher. This option can be explained as illustrative for the awareness of practising the competence of knowing the students and considering their age and individual particularities in the design and completion of instructive-educative activities, the capacity to prepare students for self-learning and self-education. The psychosocial and managerial competence is considered by nearly one quarter of respondents, 26,05%, as a second most important competence that a teacher requires. We appreciate this option as a thoroughly justified one due to the need of taking responsibility of the organising, orientation, coordination and guiding of the group of students, self-motivation in decision-making situations for teachers. Though considered as the most relevant competence by a significant number of respondents (a proportion of 18,75%), the competence in the field of practice occupies the third place within our list of competencies. Stemming from the premise that a teacher must know and make excellent use of the information in the field he/she teaches, we gather why this competence reached such a positioning. The final ranking the transversal competencies have got, according to the opinions of 11,46% of the respondents, can be traced in the fact that we still lack the human resource in the teaching staff

that can firmly hold the practice of animating a group, of effectively carrying out team-work, of adapting promptly to new situations, capable of innovating, creating and taking decision in various cases.

The second item of the survey completes the previous one by elaborating on the specific competencies of an effective teacher. The results are shown in Table 2:

Table 2. Necessary competencies of an effective teacher

Response types	Number of responses	%
Clearly sets the objectives that students must accomplish	15	15,63%
Identifies and designs learning opportunities that are relevant for the students' daily life contexts	20	20,83%
Shows intent to adapt to students' diversity	18	18,75%
Creates and keeps the class in an environment that supports learning and learning motivation	11	11,46%
Encourages social interaction of students	12	12,5%
Gives students challenging work tasks meant to stimulate their intellectual development	10	10,42%
Permanently monitors the students' progress	10	10,42%

The interpretation of the registered scores at the level of each of the six competencies that build the pattern of an effective educator allows us to appreciate that the differences among them are small, which indicates a polarisation of the respondents' opinions. The fact that the identification and design of learning opportunities that are relevant for students' daily life is voted by an important part of respondents, 20,83%, as the most relevant competence defining an effective teacher enables us to estimate the positive effects of the reform in education, respectively to emphasise the paradigmatic feature of learning, by means of connecting theory to the practical aspects. Only two percentage points below, at a slight difference, is positioned the competence that marks an educator's concern in adapting to students' diversity. The

option chosen by 18,75% of the respondents can be explained in the same context of contemporary pedagogy, where the student-centred approach of the didactic process is a priority. The third positioning of the competence “clearly sets the objectives that students must accomplish” is nominated by 15,63% of the interviewed subjects. We appreciate this option as an objective one, in the context in which the success of any didactic endeavour is highly dependent on its projection, a process that starts with the clear and correct setting of the aimed objectives. The fact that the last four positions are occupied by competencies that register very close scores with differences of only two, one or no perceptual points allows us to estimate that an effective teacher is defined through a wide spectrum of competencies, their importance and positioning being nearly equal.

Table 3 renders the scores obtained in item number three, which was designed so as to indicate the extent in which initial training programs are appreciated by our respondents as beneficial to the acquisition of professional abilities.

Table 3. The extent in which initial training programs contribute to the building of professional competencies

Item/Answer	Very much	A lot	Little	Very little	Not at all	Total
To what extent has the continuing teacher training programs contributed to the development of your professional competencies?	22 22,92%	43 44,8%	16 16,67%	14 14,58%	1 1,04%	96 100%

The analysis of results indicates that initial training programs are appreciated by 44,8% of respondents as highly responsible for the building of professional didactic competencies. Their formative effect is confirmed by the fact that 22,92% of the respondents answered that such programs greatly contributes to the total of their professional abilities. In comparison to the

number of those who claim that initial training contributed little (16,67%) and very little (14,58%) to the development of professional skills, the number of those who stated that such training was irrelevant was very little (1,04%). Nonetheless, it can be read as an alarming signal that nearly 30% of respondents mention that initial training is insufficient in the construction of professional competencies. Hence, we consider the higher attention must be paid to curriculum and the means of implementing it at the level of initial training, in such a way that the majority of necessary qualifications for a teacher may be covered at a higher level.

Item 4 completes the third item in the sense of identifying the extent in which current training programs fulfil the needs of the teachers to improve and develop.

Table 4. Extent to which continuing education programs have satisfied the trainees' needs of development

Item/Answer	Greatly	A lot	Little	Very little	Not at all	Total
To what extent have continuing education programs satisfied your needs of development?	21 21,88%	33 34,38%	14 14,58%	16 16,67%	12 12,5%	96 100%

As indicated in Table 4 the prevalence of those who declare themselves satisfied (34,38%) and highly satisfied (21,88%) by the manner in which continuing education programs met their needs for development is equal to those on the opposite side, namely: 14,58% are little satisfied, 16,67% very little satisfied, while 12,5% considered initial training useless in the development of their competencies. Based on the results we obtained, we may indicate an increase in the interest of ensuring the correspondence between the needs for training and the programs accessed by trainees, as well as in view of correlating training programs' contents to those elements that are mandatory in the design of didactic and field-related professional competencies.

Table 5. The levels at which continuing education programs produced positive effects

Response types	Number of responses	%
Gaining new knowledge, specialty-related information	22	22,92%
Practising the exploratory competence –by creating opportunities that requires the practice of didactic abilities	11	11,46%
Acquiring inter-relational competencies regarding the teacher-student relation	25	26,05%
Development of assertive communicative competencies	14	14,58%
Development of intellectual abilities that are focused on identifying/ indicating stringent educational issues	16	16,67%
Development of reflexive and pragmatic attitudes	8	8,34%

We can infer from the analysis of the data presented in Table 5 that “the acquisition of inter-relational competencies regarding the teacher-student relation” is considered by 26,05% of the participants to be the dimension that registered positive changes as a result of completing continuing education modules, which is rejoicing. The response option “Development of assertive communicative competencies” was selected by 14,58% of the teachers who answered. They considered it to be the direct benefit of the completed training program. The combined data of these two items enable us to allege that the programs were highly relevant from the perspective on intercommunicative effectiveness. Another aspect that was considered to be well shaped as a result of completing the continuing education modules was represented by the „gaining of new knowledge, specialty-related information”, answer option selected by 22,92% of respondents. This allows us to mention that the continuing education programs within the curriculum contain new elements, up-to-the-minute information with focus on the trainees’ specialty. The component „development of intellectual abilities that are focused on identifying/ indicating stringent educational issues” is believed to be reached by 16,67% of respondents, which indicates the concern of both trainers and trainees to develop research competencies applicable in the identification of problems and solutions in the field of the education. Less rejoicing, however, is the fact

that the „development of reflexive and pragmatic attitudes” is chosen by only 8,34% of respondent claiming that the continuing education modules they completed had the above-mentioned direct benefit. We reckon that this component deserves to be approached with more attention within the content and the curriculum of training modules, as we are in need of pragmatic teachers, who are involved in the issues of socio-education and determined to identify valid solutions for any problem.

Item 6 could provide relevant information about the extent to which some means of organising continuing education were represented according to their degree of effectiveness. The results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. The extent to which the means of organising continuing education are considered to be effective

Response types	Number of responses	%
Methodical commissions, teacher circles at the level of the school unit	25	26,05%
Training modules ensured by CCD	19	19,8 %
Training modules organised by higher education	21	21,88%
Training programs accessed through POSDRU	27	28,13%
Training programs completed through international organisations	4	4,17%

According to the data in the table above, the preferred option referred to is „training programs accessed through POSDRU” (28,13% of respondents). This can be explained based on the advantages, including the material ones that participation in such programs brings. A close score, 26,05%, is given to training and development activities conducted within the school unit (applied didactics commissions, teacher circles at the level of the school unit). Our opinion, with respect to these results, is that learning is produced with even greater ease by sharing personal experience as a result of sharing the same socio-educational environment. Both the programs offered by higher education, 21,88%, and those ensured by The Teacher Training House, 19,8%, register close scores from the point of view of effectiveness, which can be explained

regarding the similar offer of the two suppliers of continuing education. A small score of 4,17% was assigned to „Training programs completed through international organisations”, which accounts for the scarce participation of teachers to such a type of continuing education, mainly due to insufficient promotion or difficult access to these programs.

4. Conclusions

As a result of our investigation we believe that new directive actions should be taken in the field of teacher training, that are meant to lead to the development of professional competencies in accordance to the model of didactic competencies desired didactic model in nowadays society. We refer to:

- Orientation of initial and continuing education programs towards the development of transversal competencies that may be organized in: group animation competencies, effective team-work, flexibility and quick adaptation to novelty, capacity to innovate, create and decide in various situations;
- Strengthening of the pragmatic feature of learning and focusing on specific services that can be applied to each individual (personal and professional development);
- Growing interest in ensuring a link between the needs for training and the programs that trainees access, with an emphasis on curriculum flexibility in view of matching the content of training programs to those elements that are necessary in the building of competencies according to the didactic profession (e.g. development of reflexive and pragmatic attitudes, the competence of inducing visible changes at the students' level as a result of the pedagogic relation).

Considering that “didactic competencies represent essential landmarks in developing initial and continuing training programs” (Glava, C., 2009, p.73) we estimate that the concern of providers of study and training programs for teachers in primary and pre-school education will be anchored in the identification of the training needs and ensuring the development of professional competencies at high quality standards. Given that there is interrelation between the quality of education and the quality of the teaching staff, it is mandatory to provide continuing education on the basis of standards that are strict, unique commonly adopted and correlated to the standards available in other countries.

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