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BEYOND THE LIMITS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS: THE ROMANIAN CASE

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Abstract

The teacher, one of the essential resources in the teaching-learning process, is expected to permanently attune to latest professional developments, and in-service training is supposed to serve this purpose. Moreover, teacher education, as a whole, directly influences the results that students might achieve. Starting from these assumptions, as well as from the international reports focusing on these variables, we noticed that the Romanian educational system is characterized by an obvious discrepancy: (very) well trained teachers, according to their own perceptions, and (very) low prepared students, according to the results they obtained in international assessments. Thus, our paper aims at analyzing the causes lying beneath this gap, in order to get some further insight into the current situation. Our conclusions point to the weaknesses, the shortcomings and the deformations of the Romanian professional development system for teachers (part of the Romanian in-service training system). We suggest that both legislative and methodological changes are badly required so that all Romanian stakeholders (training providers, teacher educators, teachers etc.) could fully benefit from qualitative and effective professional development, which could indeed ensure long life learning.

Keywords: Teacher education; in-service training; professional development for teachers; teacher educators.

1. Introduction

No matter the trends characterizing education, the teaching-learning equation has always included two main elements: the learner and the teacher. Diachronically, their weight has varied according to the ideas underlying educational theories and, gradually, the learner has started to play the main role. Nevertheless, the teacher's importance should not be overlooked, as student's achievements depend on the teacher's ability to teach.

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Both pre- and in-service training help teachers gain teaching abilities. Metaphorically, one could say that pre-service training lays the foundation of this profession and in-service training puts the finishing touches on it. The latter 'is at the heart of the European strategy for improving the quality of education' (European Commission, 2015, p. 55) and our paper deals with professional development (PD), which is part of in-service training according to Romanian educational standards.

The starting point of our research stems from the obvious discrepancy between the Romanian teachers' opinion on themselves (2013 TALIS National Report) and Romanian students' 2012 PISA scores: Romanian teachers considered themselves (very) well trained professionally; Romanian students' scores were below the average obtained by OECD countries. Although factors such as school conditions, school attendance, out-of-school learning experiences and family resources could account for Romanian students' poor performance, the teacher variable also carries some weight. Consequently, our paper aims to investigate the causes leading to the mismatch between teachers' perceptions and their students' results. In part one, this paper points to relevant literature and research/reports covering the issue of teacher PD in Europe, with a special focus on the Romanian case. Then, the second part deals with methodology, research findings and discussions, and the final part presents the conclusions of our investigation, introducing possible solutions for the problems that have been identified.

2. Teacher Professional Development: A Brief Outline

Teacher education is and should be viewed 'as a life-long experience for teachers, a continuum that goes from their initial education to their retirement' (Musset, 2010, p. 45). Thus, no matter how relevant and effective pre-service training might be, in-service training acquires paramount importance to maintain and improve the quality of education.

European countries have scrutinized the needs, participation, enablers, and barriers to PD in order to identify the best, the most flexible and the most appropriate ways to equip teachers with the necessary skills, so that they could be efficient in the classroom and could smoothly attune to the growing demands of the teaching profession. In-service training systems in Europe are, more often than not, country specific as far as the following aspects are concerned: training means; course topics; course length; potential rewards for teachers attending the courses; status (in-service training is either a right or an obligation, or both) (EC, 2015; European Union, 2014; Mâță & Boghian, 2012; Musset, 2010; Valencic Zuljan & Vogrinc, 2011; Şerbănescu, 2011; Iucu, 2007). Nevertheless, at European level, in-service training of teachers represents a major priority, as it directly influences the overall quality of the national education systems.

In Romania, in-service training is both a right and an obligation (2011 National Education Act, Art. 245 (1)) and the necessary complementarity between the pre- and in-service training is laid down in Romanian legislation: 'In-service training and pre-service training are conceived as interdependent processes, which should be characterized by a high degree of interaction and self-adjustment, meant to attune teacher training to system dynamics in education' (Ministerial Decree No. 5561/2011, Art. 4 (2)). Similarly, as in other European countries, Romanian in-service training 'continues, refines and attunes

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pre-service teacher education, offering added value as circumstances keep changing and new demands emerge, different from the ones characterizing pre-service teacher education' (Iucu, 2007, p. 28).

Romanian in-service training is divided into career development (to reach the maximum status of their career development, novice teachers are required to complete three stages: qualified teacher, teacher certification level 2 and teacher certification level 1) and PD (teachers are bound to attend in-service training courses in order to gain 90 professional transferable credits within 5 years). Whereas teacher career development focuses on teacher's reaching specific degrees of scientific and methodological competence, PD aims at systematically equipping teachers with those skills that could help them attune to the latest trends in their field (both scientifically and methodologically).

Most Romanian teachers enroll in career development as permanent teacher certification not only provides professional stability, but also raises their salaries, very much like teacher certifications (levels 1 and 2), whereas PD is rather optional (although Romanian legislation specifies that 90 professional transferable credits shall be acquired by teachers after they have become certified teachers level 1, there is no reference to the penalties that they might get if they choose not to enroll in any PD course at all). Thus, it is up to each individual teacher whether he/she chooses to attend PD courses in order to get the 90 professional credits, as there is no immediate reward (only indirect and unguaranteed rewards, e.g. accumulating scores required when applying for: teaching staff transfer; becoming a member of the national body for professionals in educational management) and no financial compensation, as, in most cases, teachers themselves pay for the courses they attend (OECD, 2014a, p. 98).

In contrast with this situation, most Romanian teachers consider PD to be an obligation, a duty, and, very rarely, acknowledge it to be their right (Iucu, 2007, p. 108), and this makes PD become highly formal and even perfunctory (Jigău, 2008; Velea & Istrate, 2011; Stan, Suditu & Safta, 2011; Masari, 2013; Popa & Bucur, 2015; Zoller, 2015). And yet, many Romanian teachers are eager to comply with this obligation: 83% of lower secondary teachers report having undertaken a PD course in the 12 months prior to the survey (OECD, 2014b), percentage which is, nevertheless, below the 88% OECD average (OECD, 2014a).

Although, apparently, it is still difficult to account for the relevance of PD for the individual teacher or for his/her school (Șerbănescu, 2011, p. 88), 'empirical evidence increasingly shows the positive impact of teachers' PD on students' scores' (OEDC, 2014a, p. 97). Even if Romanian students failed to rank among the best in international assessments (OECD, 2013), considering the content of the discipline they teach, as well their methodological skills, Romanian teachers have a very high opinion of themselves as compared to the international average (National Assessment and Examination Center, 2014). The aspects listed above make up a contradictory picture, which has prompted us to ask ourselves: *Is there anything wrong with teacher PD in Romania?*

3. Methodology

Our questionnaire-based survey was conducted in 2015-2016 school year: 200 subjects, primary and secondary school teachers participated in the survey (Prahova county – 176, Dâmbovița county – 15, Giurgiu county – 4, Ilfov+Bucharest – 7). One of the items provided the following identification data for the survey participants (gender was excluded, as only 6 male subjects, all from Prahova county, took part

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in the survey): (A) **school location**: rural – 112 (56.0%), urban – 88 (44.0%); (B) **status**: tenured teacher – 188 (94.0%), substitute teacher – 12 (6.0%); (C) **qualification**: novice teacher – 13 (6.5%), qualified teacher – 30 (15.0%), certified teacher level 2 – 27 (13.5%), certified teacher level 1 – 130 (65.0%); (D) **age**: under 25 – 32 (16.0%), 26-35 – 16 (8.0%), 36-45 – 78 (39.0%), 46-55 – 59 (29.5%), over 55 – 15 (7.5%).

At the time of our investigation, all the subjects were enrolled in a PD programme. Moreover, to get some further insight, we organized 6 focus groups (36 respondents, each group comprising at least one representative from the 6 counties mentioned above).

Besides the identification item, our questionnaire comprised 6 more items (3 closed, 3 open), correlated with the main objective of our research: identifying Romanian teachers' opinion on the current PD system (*1. How did you find out about this PD course?; 2. Why did you enroll in this PD course?; 3. Who pays for this PD course?; 4. Have you attended any PD course in the last 5 years?; 5. How useful did you find PD courses in your classroom activity?; 6. Explain your reasons for the answer given in question 5).* Thus, the items were designed so as to allow us to investigate: the general features of PD in Romania; the weaknesses of the PD system in Romania; how the knowledge and the skills acquired by teachers during the PD courses could be implemented; the kinds of competences that teacher educators may require.

4. Findings and Discussions

Analyzing the structure of our group of respondents, and correlating it with the survey data and group interviews, we consider that the following aspects are worth being given some explanations:

- there are more survey participants that come from rural areas because (1) they are motivated to attend PD courses as their chances of occupying a better position (closer to home or in an urban area) increase and (2) public administration institutions in rural areas are more likely to pay the course fees for the teachers in their schools (41 teachers out of the 53 teachers, who received sponsorship to attend the PD course, come from rural areas);
- many of the survey participants come from Prahova County because the course they attended took place in the county capital, Ploiești. The course attendants belonging to the other counties chose to enroll because (1) they could get easier to Ploiești than in their own county capital (the reason given by respondents from Dâmbovița); (2) the moment they enrolled there was no course / no appealing course was organized in their county of residence;
- the majority of the survey participants are older than 36 because (1) younger teachers are usually in the process of gaining their qualification/ certification (exams which belong to the career development stage, thus younger teachers might have already obtained or be about to obtain the required number of transferable professional credits) and (2) senior teachers are more likely to enjoy the benefits granted by PD (e.g. the possibility to occupy a management position, to become a teacher methodologist in the school inspectorate or an expert in educational management or to get a financial reward based on his/her professional merits) as compared to their younger counterparts;

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- the big number of tenured teachers suggest (1) tenured teachers' high interest in PD and, obviously, (2) the low interest exhibited by substitute teachers, either because their status is temporary (they will leave the educational system as soon as a better opportunity occurs) or because they want to become certified teachers in the near future (PD does not really help them achieve this objective, as it involves passing a national exam).

The answers given by our respondents on how they got informed about the PD course they chose to attend (by e-mail sent by teacher educators/ training providers to prospective trainees or to school offices; from colleagues or acquaintances in informal discussions; from colleagues in formal contexts – e.g. subject-oriented methodological workshops) suggest that promoting and disseminating PD courses is not a very well organized activity. Nevertheless, 164 of our survey participants (82%) took part in such a program in the last five years, percentage very close to the one included in the OECD report on Romania (2014b), indicating the high level of interest that Romanian teachers seem to have in PD.

Being asked about their reasons for enrolling in the PD course and being given the possibility to enumerate one or more answers, the survey participants pointed to: the possibility to develop professionally (66 responses); the wish to accumulate 90 professional transferable credits (64 responses); the convenient schedule of the program – organized at the weekend as compared with other programs available only during the week (51 responses); the convenient price of the PD course (36 responses); the difficulty of enrolling in fully-sponsored PD courses, which are in very high demand (29 responses); the possibility of applying for a better teacher position during the transfer period (17 responses); the possibility of joining the national body of experts in educational management – getting 60 credits in educational management is a prerequisite to becoming a member of this group of experts (16 responses); the location of the PD course (13 responses); the possibility of complying with the criteria for obtaining a financial reward for their professional merits (12 responses); the possibility of getting the position of teacher methodologist in the school inspectorate (1 response). To sum up, we noticed that, out of the 305 responses, the ones referring to intrinsic reasons (individual PD needs) are in obvious minority, as most responses are in close connection with the already listed characteristics of PD in Romania: on the one side, it is mandatory (more like a constraint), independent of personal needs, formal and, on the other side, it represents a prerequisite for reaching personal objectives.

As for the usefulness of the various PD courses they have attended, for their present activity in the classroom, our subjects' answers indicate their moderate satisfaction: *very useful* – 19%; *pretty useful* – 54.5%; *neither useful nor useless* – 7%; *useless* – 4.5%; *no response* – 15% (see Fig. 1). Thus, most responses pick up the middle option, which, in our opinion, indicate our subjects' high degree of conformity (exhibiting their preference for prudent and conventional behaviour).

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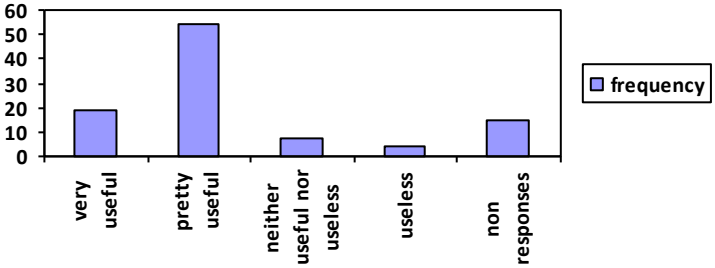

Fig. 1. Subjects' opinion about the usefulness of PD courses in classroom activity

The fact that they are not fully convinced that taking part in the PD program will positively influence their didactic activity resurfaces with the next question (*item 6*) and with the group interviews. Our respondents' views are relevant and we divided them into four groups, closely related to the aims of our investigation:

(1) the general features of PD in Romania – its high degree of formality ('*most teachers attend PD courses because it is a must and, at the end, they get a diploma indicating a number of credits'* – certified teacher level 1, rural area, Giurgiu; '*in our school, participating in PD courses is highly appreciated when annual assessments are drawn up, but nobody is interested whether they positively influence our didactic activity'* – certified teacher level 1, urban area, Prahova; *'many teachers don't care which PD course they attend, they are more interested in the number of credits they might get and, if they're able to attend the course, they'll do it'* – certified teacher level 1, rural area, Prahova); the vagueness of the provisions regulating the teachers' attendance (*'Legally, we're bound to attend PD courses, to accumulate 90 credits within 5 years. But what if we choose not to? There are colleagues who have never taken part in any PD course. When we are told to enroll, only those who have done it before will do it again!* – certified teacher level 1, urban area, Ilfov); mismatch between the teachers' training needs and the courses on offer (*'PD courses are always the same. If somebody wants something new, there is no available option after a while.'* - certified teacher level 1, urban area, Prahova; *'I want to attend PD courses, but I either have to pay for them or I am not interested in their topic, as it doesn't meet my needs.'* – certified teacher level 2, rural area, Giurgiu); PD is viewed by teachers more like an obligation and a prerequisite for career advancement (*'We're forced to attend PD courses, as any assessment includes reference to participation in PD – how many courses attended, how many credits obtained.'* – certified teacher level 2, rural area, Prahova; *'I have to attend PD courses in order to be better ranked if I want a teacher position closer to home'* – certified teacher level 2, rural area, Prahova).

(2) PD weaknesses in Romania – the content is too general, theoretical, obsolete, instead of being customized in order to be compatible with the participants' curricular area(s) or the age characteristics of their students (*'even if the topic of the course might be good for any teacher, generally, no examples or particularizations are provided and that's what we badly need'* – certified teacher level 1, urban area, Prahova; *'the courses are made up only of theoretical stuff, we don't know what we could apply or how'* – certified teacher level 1, rural area, Dâmbovița; *'some PD courses covered the same topics I studied when I was a university student; it was OK, but I had different expectations before the courses begin'* – qualified teacher, rural area, Prahova); more flexibility is needed as far as time and place of the training

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courses are concerned (*'a different way of organizing the PD courses is needed, neither during the school year, nor at the weekend'* – certified teacher level 2, rural area, Prahova; *'even if we would very much like to attend a PD course, sometimes it's too far from home and we don't have the time or the money to commute'*– certified teacher level 2, rural area, Dâmbovița).

(3) the difficulties related to the implementation of the knowledge and the skills acquired by teachers during the PD courses – the poor conditions in Romanian schools (lacking technical equipment, space, etc) as well as the traditional mentality deeply rooted in some teaching staff (*'Sometimes we discover a new teaching method or approach, but, at school, we don't have what we need. Sometimes we provide for it, sometimes we give up. Usually…'* – certified teacher level 1, urban area, Prahova; *'Even if, at PD courses, we were taught how to work with the [preparatory grade] pupils, we have to do what we are told. Otherwise they say we don't do anything. We are compared with older colleagues, and parents or school principals suggest us to use obsolete methods.'* – qualified teacher, urban area, Prahova; *'even if we would like to apply what we are taught, we either lack the means or the place to do it'* – certified teacher level 2, rural area, Dâmbovița profesor).

(4) the profile of the teacher educator (*'Some teacher educators are committed. If you are lucky to have a good teacher educator, then you are able to learn something useful, but very rarely this is the case.'* – certified teacher level 2, rural area, Prahova; *'PD courses should be well anchored into present trends, but, as a matter of fact, it is the teacher educator who gives the weight it deserves. The teacher educator is the one who should look for, identify and include appealing, convincing and recent approaches into the course.'* – certified teacher level 1, urban area, Giurgiu; *'The latest PD course I attended was very instructive and effective. The teacher educator was extremely well qualified, she knew how to conduct the training sessions and the trainees were content with the PD course even if it was very difficult.'* – certified teacher level 1, urban area, Prahova).

5. Conclusions and recommendations

As our findings show, PD problems have evinced the weaknesses related to legislation, curriculum, methodology, thus creating the proper circumstances to make the teachers participating in PD courses pretend that they are motivated and willing to attend the training sessions. Even if, more than a decade ago, Romanian education specialists tried to sound the alarm so that appropriate measures would be taken (Potolea, & Ciolan, 2003; Bârzea, et al., 2006), so far, no important steps have been taken to improve the PD system.

In our opinion, the most serious problem is related to the quality of teacher educators. In education, at any level, the most important resource is the individual: *education* trains people, and only people can train people; so, without investing in people, no beneficial changes could occur in education or for education. In order to achieve better learning outcomes, students have to rely on their teacher (=their most important learning resource), and, similarly, teachers should be able to get the most from their teacher educators, as teachers' teachers are supposed to represent valuable learning resources. That is why we consider that, in Romania, efforts should be channeled towards supporting teacher educators, going along the lines laid down at EU level (EC, 2013). We suggest that PD research in Romania should focus on identifying the most suitable ways of training and selecting teacher educators, on defining the profile

of the teacher educator, in order to deliver teacher educator PD programs in accordance with our national context, given the Romanian conditions. In our opinion, specific, national-oriented approaches are needed, so that Romanian frameworks and policies regulating PD could be devised.

Although the group of subjects we investigated was small, it covered a wide range of situations, which gives a certain weight to our conclusions. Our findings reemphasized the problems already identified by Romanian researchers focusing on PD, pointing to the importance of reconsidering the teacher element in the education equation. PD, as integer part of in-service training, represents one of the most direct ways of improving teacher quality and, unfortunately, in Romania, this profession is currently in freefall. We consider that by solving teacher-related problems, the rest of the education-related problems could be alleviated. Thus, Romanian education could hope for better teacher educators and better teachers, who could produce better students, who, eventually, will possess the skills and competences to build up a brighter future for us all.

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