

ERD 2017
Education, Reflection, Development, Fifth Edition

AN INQUIRY IN TEACHERS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Teachers' training is mostly imposed by the the need to accumulate a number of credits, the reforms in education or some dysfunctions in teaching activity. Continuing training, as its name suggests, should be seen as a long-term process and not as a set of disjointed events (courses and workshops). This change of paradigm implies the need for teachers to have at their disposal complex and up-to-date instruments necessary to training needs analysis and to monitoring their professional development. Based on these instruments they could be able: to assess their teaching skills and practices, to decide the most effective way to optimize their teaching (support from school, learning from practice and/or attending training course), to regulate and proof their professional development.

The present study analyzed the views of 316 teachers from the northern region of Romania, referring to their specialized knowledge, their ability to plan, put into practice and evaluate their teaching and the support received from school for their professional development.

The survey was conducted online between January and May 2017. The results reveal gaps in teachers' competences and knowledge, difficult to cover by simply attending training courses because it involves not only theoretical knowledge but also a lot of practice.

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Keywords: Professional development, training, inquiry, teaching.



1. Introduction

The educational system is constantly a subject of revisions and innovations, driven by social evolution, pupils' needs, and the context of learning. These revisions should be related to the professional development of teachers, the latter being an important factor in the effective implementation of reforms at any level (Bell & Gilbert, 2015; Yigit & Bagececi, 2017: 243). Teachers's professional development is a concern for the students, parents, school institutions and governors (ibidem) because they can meet their needs and interests (James, Ashcroft, & Orr-Ewing, 2002: 128).

Numerous studies are devoted to professional training and development, and this is seen from the perspective of the teacher's effort to expand his professional skills and competences (Desimone, 2009: 182) and the efforts of institutions to provide the necessary training framework (Broad & Evans, 2006: 7). Professional development is sometimes assimilated with teachers learning and transfer of knowledge into practice (Avalos, 2011); with learning by action (Devetek & Vogrinc, 2014: 183); with its effects such as the creation of professional thinking and the development of learning to learn skills, critical reflection, development of emotional intelligence, etc. (Day, 1999 quoted by Rose & Reynolds, 2011).

In the literature field, professional development of teachers is defined as a three-dimensional (professional, individual and social) learning process that takes place throughout the professional life and aims at enriching knowledge and developing the skills and competencies needed to successfully fulfill professional roles. It is "the result of gaining increased experience and examining its systematic teaching" (Glatthorn, 1995 cited by Villegas-Reimers, 2003) and its goal is to increase the efficiency of learning activity and, implicitly, student performance.

In this long-term process, teachers integrate and transfer to the classroom the knowledge gained in the university, the experiential knowledge, the knowledge acquired in formal contexts (training, mentoring, workshop, demonstrative lessons offered by experienced colleges) and informal discussions with colleagues and school leadership, study of literature, documentary films, etc.) They develop different learning patterns (Vermont, 2014: 85) and, over time, make the transition from 'professional learners' to 'learning professionals' (Eraut, 2003: 14).

Grundy & Robison (2004: 154) emphasizes the importance of learning at work by showing that in classroom activity the teacher faces different situations and interactions that lead to the development of their professional knowledge and skills and their personal, social and emotional development. Therefore, the experience gained in teaching is the necessary filter for the selection of effective knowledge and practices and a tool for regulating vocational learning.

Díaz-Maggioli (2004: 13) prefigures some characteristics of successful professional development in response to the finding that often professional development has little positive effect on student learning. Thus, in order to be effective, professional development must involve collaborative decision-making, a growth-driven approach, tailor-made techniques, varied and timely delivery methods, adequate support systems, context-specific programs, proactive assessment, andragogic (adult-centered) instruction.

Grundy & Robison (2004: 153) points out that professional development cannot be determined by coercive measures but involves voluntary involvement.

2. Problem Statement

Frequently, teacher training institutions offer training / professional development programs elaborated on subjective considerations, without prior consultation of the trainees. In Romania this practice is all the more damaging as a number of teachers are involved in training activities. Most of them attend training programs because the current legislation obliges them to have 90 transferable credits for each five-years of teaching career, while the rest attend training programs for subjective reasons (to promote in a career, to run for a job etc.) At the same time, the teachers willing to self-assess their teaching activity and to identify their training needs do not have the necessary instruments. It is therefore necessary to provide instruments and information for the real needs of teacher training and development.

3. Research Questions

The question is: What are the training / professional development needs of the teachers involved in the survey? Needs analysis focused on: a) the knowledge and skills of designing, implementing and evaluating an effective teaching-learning process; b) the relationships with colleagues, parents and local community, and c) the professional development management.

4. Purpose of the Study

The present study was designed to identify the views of a sample of teachers from the northern region of Romania on their training / professional development needs. The results obtained through the survey can be used by trainers, teachers, school institutions, etc. and can contribute to improving the offer and quality of training programs dedicated to the development of teaching competences.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Data collecting and processing

The research presented in this study was conducted online, between January and May 2017. The instrument used included demographic data and 67 items structured in 10 areas: Job description, Relationship with students, Teaching - learning activity, Designing - Planning, Specialty knowledge, Evaluation and monitoring, communicating with colleagues, Communication with parents, Maintaining communication with the local community, Professional development management. The applied questionnaire was adapted and developed according to the instrument developed by Farla, Ciolan & Iucu (2007). Completion of the questionnaire was done on a 5-step Likert scale (total disagreement - total agreement). In addition, there were three debates with 23 teachers and school directors attending a master degree program.

5.2. Participants

The subjects involved in the research are 316 teachers from the North of Romania. Participation in the investigation was voluntary. Respondents are mostly women (80.01%) and come from rural (33.86%) and urban (66.14%) areas. 38.29% of respondents teach in high schools, 27.85% teach in secondary schools, 23.42% in primary school and only 10.44% in pre-primary. 61.71% of the respondents have all teaching degrees and 7.91% are executives/ school directors.

Table 01. Demographic data

A. Level of education where the respondent is teaching	(%)	B. Teaching position of the respondents	(%)	C. Teaching degree of the respondents	(%)
pre-school	10.44%	directors	7.91%	full-time professional degree	14.87%
Primary	23.42%	kindergarten & primary school teachers	9.49%	doctorate	4.75%
secondary school	27.85%	elementary school teachers	21.52%	Teaching degree I	61.71%
high-school	38.29%	teachers	61.08%	Teaching degree II	18.67%

The analysis of the data in the table shows that the majority of the respondents are teachers who teach in secondary schools and high schools (66.14%) and have II or I teaching degree and doctorate (85.13%).

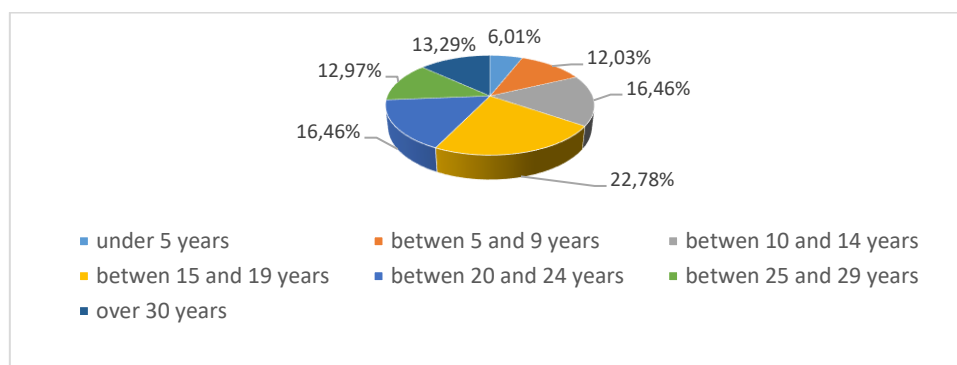


Figure 01. Distribution of respondents by teaching experience

As shown in Figure 1, 82% of respondents have more than 10 years of teaching experience.

5.3. Research method

The research method is a type of opinion based research method.

6. Findings

6.1. Analysis of synthesis data

The results on item domains are presented in Table 1. As can be seen from the data analysis, the average percentages of respondents who have expressed their agreement with the items of the questionnaire are over 90% in most of the fields, except for the domains: Job description, Communication with parents, Maintaining communication with the local community and Professional development Management. This situation is explained, according to the interviewed teachers, by the fact that these fields are often neglected both in the activity carried out in the school and in the training activities.

Table 02. Synthesis results for item domains

No.	Domain	No. of items	Percentage of respondents who expressed their agreement	Percentage of respondents who expressed their disagreement	Percentage of respondents who opted Indifferent
1.	Job description	4	77,97%	12%	11%
2.	Relationship with students	6	93.60%	2.01%	4.39%
3.	Teaching - Learning Activity	14	93.01%	1.79%	5.20%
4.	Designing - Planning	9	90.68%	2.00%	7.31%
5.	Specialty knowledge	4	90.98%	3.16%	5.86%
6.	Evaluation and Monitoring	7	94.80%	1.45%	3.75%
7.	Communicating with colleagues	8	92.64	2.22%	5.14%
8.	Communication with parents	4	61.79	31.25%	6.96%
9.	Maintaining communication with the local community	5	54.81%	25.25%	19.94%
10	Professional development Management	6	87.92%	87.92%	7.17%

6.2. Results by domain

The *Job description* domain. The responses collected show that the respondents have the job description sheet (93,03%), that the tasks stipulated therein are clearly specified (70,57%) and can be done during working hours (70,57%), which also allows the deployment and of other activities in school (56.33%).

The *Relationship with students'* domain. Respondents agree that they promote positive values, attitudes and behaviors towards students (97.78%), develop correct and constructive relationships with students, based on respect, trust and support (90.41%), they are tolerant towards the social, religious, ethnic and linguistic diversity of the students (96.52%) and thus create a favorable learning environment (96.52%). Respondents also say they offer practical advice to colleagues in any situation, including cases of equality, inclusion and diversity (88.92%).

The *Teaching - learning activity* domain. 92.40% of respondents agree that they effectively communicate the objectives of the lesson to their students, 92.73% that they attractively present the content of the lessons and 94.30% give pupils positive and constructive feedback to improve their learning experience. In terms of teaching-learning strategies, respondents agree that they know, understand and can use and evaluate a wide range of teaching/learning strategies (89.87%), use creatively and constructively teaching strategies (90.50%) and adapt strategies to the specifics of the pupil group, class profile, and year of study (96.20%). Respondents affirm (agree) that during their didactic activity they identify and exploit the extracurricular learning opportunities (90.82%), that they are concerned about the school progress of their students (95.57%) and periodically improve, when necessary, the approaches used in their didactic activity (96.52%). Respondents also show (agreement) that they practice critical reflection on the effectiveness of their own didactic activity (95.57%), on the impact of feedback provided to students (95.25%) and on the impact of their own teaching activity on student progress and outcomes (94.30%).

The *Designing-Planning* domain. 93.99% of respondents agree that they have a good knowledge of school curricula and learning objectives, including school curriculum changes (87.03%), and that they are able to attend school curricula (89.24%). Regarding the design of learning, 83.86% of the respondents consider that they are able to set priorities and plan lessons for the taught subject, and 94% can balance the situations of teaching and assessment. 89.87% of respondents say they are satisfied with the way they organize their students' gradual, written or oral evaluation. 92.72% of respondents agree that they plan and support engaging lessons that take into account the students' level of knowledge and skills, 93.67% of respondents consider that they offer opportunities for students to develop their thinking and learning skills and 91.77% say that they are developing didactic materials for the subject taught, as needed.

The domain of *Specialized Knowledge* concerns both the possession by the respondents of the knowledge about the taught subject (95.89% agreement) and the psycho-pedagogical knowledge (93.35%). Approximately equal percentages of respondents (86%) are recorded in the items that they make an effort to be aware of the latest developments in the field of the subject they are teaching (consult specialized materials, collaborate and work in professional organizations) and present the latest developments in their taught subject in a clear and appropriate form.

The domain of *Evaluation and monitoring*. Respondents agree that they know the evaluation criteria applicable to the taught subject (97.15%), provide a rhythmic scoring for the students (94.62%), perform the evaluation activity and interpret the results (94.62%) giving students constructive and positive feedback (93.67%), receive and accept feedback on their own teaching (94.31%) and are able to improve classroom efficiency (95.57%). Also, 92.73% respondents periodically assess whether they have achieved their goals.

The domain of *Communication with colleagues*. Respondents affirm that they collaborate effectively with colleagues and appreciate teamwork (93.35%), that they offer support to colleagues to improve their teaching (92.08%) and share younger colleagues their professional experiences (92.09%). They also show a willingness to consider the advice and feedback received (92.72%), maintain professional contacts with colleagues teaching the same discipline (93.67%), and ask for help from colleagues when they have difficulties (88.92%). At the same time, respondents respect and appreciate the work of the school leadership team (93.35%) contributing directly to providing a school working environment open to dialogue and based on mutual respect (94.93%).

The domain of *Communication with parents*. Respondents agree that pupils' parents must be aware of and directly involved in the school (95.89%). It also communicates to parents in a timely manner all issues related to the pupil's school or disciplinary situation (92.72%) and negative behaviors (50.00%). Respondents disagree with the claim that they are asking for personal favors to parents (8.54% agreement).

The domain of *Maintaining communication with the local community*. For items in this area, the percentage of respondents opting for the agreement is in the range 43% -80%. The highest percentage of respondents is registered for the item "I encourage students to keep in touch with the school and after they have completed the courses" (79.75%). The lowest percentages of respondents are registered for items that refer to establish regular contacts with members of the local community and informing them of the taught subjects (44.94%) and to inform the local community about the changes made in the school organization (43.67%). About 53% of respondents agree that they involve the local community in the life of the school

and invite local community stakeholders to visit the school and to take part in curriculum / discipline activities.

The domain of *Management of professional development*. Respondents agree that they successfully fulfill their tasks and responsibilities at present (93.67%), but to fulfill other responsibilities in school they consider that they would need more training in the field they are interested in (71.52 %). Stressing that they are interested and involved in their own professional development (94.62%), respondents show that they set specific, measurable, realistic and achievable personal goals (94.31%). Respondents also agree that the school management effectively transmits the necessary information to carry out high quality work (88.29%) and is concerned with the professional development of each employee (85,12%).

6.3. Discussion

Respondents agree in a very large percentage of the claims that are made in the analysis of training needs, in particular with regard to items related to teaching-learning activity. We deduce that for the most part these competences do not represent training needs / professional development needs. This can be explained by the fact that 76.58% of respondents have high-level didactic degrees (first degree and doctoral studies), and great experience as teachers. Therefore, having such an educational background, they were also beneficiaries of numerous training programs.

Regarding the job sheet, the discussions with teachers and directors show that this is considered a mere formality, as the tasks mentioned in the document are often overcome numerically by the tasks that really belong to the teacher.

Communication with parents is deficient due to lack of time or lack of parental interest. For example, parents of pupils in rural areas work in agriculture or maintain a household alongside the job they have. As a result, they give little time to their relationship with school. Concerning the lack of parental interest, teachers show that it is necessary to educate parents in this regard.

Communication with the local community is often reduced to inviting community representatives to festivities (Day of Open Doors, end of school year, National Holidays, etc.) and to school visits to local institutions (police, town hall, church, etc.) In the opinion of the discussions group we cannot talk about systematic relations with the local community, about the real involvement of the community in school life and it is necessary to educate the school and the community in this respect.

The item with the lowest percentage of agreement in the field of Professional Development Management is "To fulfill other responsibilities in school, I would need more training in the field of my interest" (total disagreement: 4,43%; partial disagreement: 7.91%, indifferent: 16.14%, partial agreement: 24.68%, total agreement: 46.84%). The participants in the discussions group concluded that teachers are less interested in responsibilities other than those concerned with teaching, are not at all interested in unpaid responsibilities (e.g. in charge of vocational training) being more interested to get a managerial job.

The agreement-disagreement ratio has the highest values for the items "I set specific, measurable, realistic and achievable personal goals" (74.26) and "I am interested and involved in my own professional development" (59.89). In relation, these values refer to a constant and systematic concern for professional development. Referring to these results the participants in the discussion group stressed that teachers,

particularly young teachers, are becoming aware of the competition in their profession and of the need to improve their knowledge and teaching skills. However, they mention "the hunting of diplomas and credits" showing that this extrinsic motivation replaces for some teachers the interest to develop their knowledge and skills.

7. Conclusion

The training programs offered by the various institutions (universities, teachers' houses, school inspectorates or ONGs) must be built on the real needs of teacher's training, needs to be identified through in-depth training needs analysis.

Teachers interested in their professional development should be trained to use specific tools to assess their professional skills and identify their training needs. School directors and teachers must be educated to identify quality training programs that best meet professional needs and not encourage/prefer participation in training programs in order to obtain credits or diplomas.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the participants involved in this survey.

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