

DOES THE TEACHERS' CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT REPRESENT A PRIORITY FOR THE ROMANIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM?

Roxana Constanța ENACHE¹, Gabriel GORGHIU², Ana Maria Aurelia PETRESCU³,
Laura Monica GORGHIU⁴

¹Technical University of Civil Engineering of Bucharest,

^{2,3}Valahia University of Targoviste, Teacher Training Department,

⁴Valahia University of Targoviste, Faculty of Sciences and Arts, Advanced Sciences and
Technologies Department

ROMANIA

¹rocatare@yahoo.com, ²ggorghiu@gmail.com, ³anapetrescu2007@yahoo.com,

⁴lgorghiu@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

At present, being involved in a permanent professional development process represents a compulsory issue for teachers. In fact, the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) of the actual teachers has recorded considerable importance during the past two decades. As example, whether in 2002/2003, the teachers' involvement in CPD activities was considered as optional in approximately half of European countries (Eurydice, 2005), in 2018, a massive percentage of teachers (92.5 % of lower secondary teachers) participated in CPD activities (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. Teachers in Europe: Careers, Development and Well-being, 2021). Several European countries (Bulgaria, Spain, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia) considered the participation of teachers in CPD activities as a crucial step for their career development. However, in most European countries, the schools have to design a continuous professional development plan for their own staff. In such conditions, less than 1/3 of schools asks teachers to be involved in a particular CPD plan. In the case of Romanian teachers, their involvement in CPD process is regulated by the National Education Law (1/ 2011), with several amendments and completions. But in order to make it efficient, the whole process must be in accordance to the actual challenges related to teaching practices. In this respect, the paper tries to answer to an issue that envisages the teachers' CPD as a real priority for the actual educational system.

Keywords: Teacher's Continuing Professional Development (CPD); teaching career; educational policies; educational system;

INTRODUCTION

It is generally assumed that teachers' CPD, although a priority at the level of the European educational policies, is still an unresolved issue for the majority of the member states. Also, it is internationally noted that teachers have an important job, with responsibilities and tasks that increase in difficulties and diversity. As such, many member states of European Union pay more attention to study the ways in which teachers could be trained for such important tasks, in the context of the contemporary European society, directing by postmodernist trends.

Changes in education impose new demands from teachers, but the reality shows that in many cases, the professional development systems are not always adequately equipped to meet the actual demands. Thus, according to the Eurydice Report - *Key data on teachers and school leaders in Europe: 2013 edition* -, the lack of teachers' pedagogical training remains as a problem for several European countries. By the lack of pedagogical training, it is understood that "teachers are unprepared to respond to the challenges they face, such as managing increasingly heterogeneous groups and student behavior, as well as effectively using information and communication technology." According to the same report, not all European countries have transnational typologies for teachers' educational mobility, through transnational learning, involving also the exchange of good practices between teachers from different states, which hinders the CPD. (*Teachers in Europe: Careers, Development and Well-being*, Report, 2021)

1. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Considering the core of the addressed problem, several reference documents should be highlighted, summarizing a series of historical recommendations related to policies in the field of teachers' Continuous Professional Development and professional insertion, valid for EU Member States (*Developing Coherent and System-wide Induction Programmes for Beginning Teachers - a handbook for policymakers*, Report, 2010; *Supporting the Teaching Professions for Better Learning Outcomes*, Report, 2012; *Study on policy measures to improve the attractiveness of the teaching profession in Europe*, Final Report, 2014; *Order no. 5561 for approving the methodology related to the continuous professional development of teaching staff from pre-university education - valid for Romania*, 2011):

- in the field of professional insertion, the objectives may vary from country to country, but they must be clear, feasible and must have measurable effects;
- the main objectives should include: reducing the situations when new teachers leave the profession at early stage; improving the teaching quality; providing support for professionalization in the teaching career; providing feedback on initial teacher education; ensuring vertical continuity between different stages of professional development;
- designing comprehensive programs for professional insertion - compulsory for all teachers -, across all levels of education, with a duration of one year, at least;
- structuring a system of rapid detection of the difficulties faced by beginner teachers and identifying appropriate solutions;
- reducing the number of actual teaching hours for beginner teachers;
- providing specific training for all educational actors, allowing them to provide effective collegial support and develop cooperative practices (involving the entire teaching staff);
- cooperation between the actors who provide initial education for the teaching profession and mentors, school heads, school inspectors, in order to establish and develop a common professional language.

The *2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) - New priorities for European cooperation in education and training* mentions the teachers, trainers, directors of educational establishments, and other members of the educational staff, playing an essential role on ensuring the student's success in the implementation of educational policies. The EU Member States expressed their concerns for optimizing the initial training programs and those aimed at teachers' continuing training, being aware that the quality of the teaching staff depends not only on the quality of the education delivered to the beneficiaries, but much more being the first factor for ensuring the personal, social and professional fulfilment of all citizens, as well as for achieving sustainable economic prosperity, at social and global levels.

In 2017, in the *Communication from The Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the School development and excellent teaching for a great start in life*, it is reiterated the idea that supporting teachers and school heads can achieve an excellent quality of teaching and learning as main condition to ensure a high quality education for all, which implicitly helps the EU states to reach their economic and social goals.

In Romania, in particular, the *2018 OCDE International Study regarding teaching and learning - the main identified aspects (TALIS)*, expresses that "during the initial education and training, 91% of the Romanian teachers were trained mainly in strong conjunction to the content of particular disciplines, pedagogy and classroom practice - a higher percentage than recorded in the average of the OECD countries participating in TALIS (79%)." In Romania, 37% of teachers declared that they participated in a formal or informal training preparation program when they joined the school, compared to 42% of the teachers from OECD countries. On the other hand, in the *Methodology related to the continuous professional development of teaching staff from pre-university education - valid for Romania, 2011*, it is mentioned (related to teachers CPD), that such programs for the preparation of beginner teachers are fulfilled rather in informal contexts, determined by a number of factors linked to culture, climate and management or leadership of the educational organization in which they are integrated.

2. METHODOLOGY

Taking into account the abovementioned issues, it was interesting to investigate the opinions of a sample of teachers (and aspirants to the teaching career) related to the importance of the CPD process in their actual and future career. Thus, the respondents - young teachers and prospective teachers - were invited to provide answers to several questions like: (a) *To what extent do you consider that teacher's CPD represents a priority?* (b) *How do you define CPD?* (c) *What are the main issues that teachers must face in their career?* (d) *What are the main aspects needed to be addressed rapidly concerning the teachers' CPD?* (e) *What kind of solutions are needed to be adopted in order to make the teachers' CPD a high-priority process?*

The main research method used for this study was oriented on *questionnaire-based survey*. In this respect, a 10-items questionnaire was designed - three items with open answers, six items being closed ones with predetermined answers, and one item being of a mixed-type.

The questionnaire was administered during the 2019/2020 academic year, to a number of 100 respondents: teachers having different specializations and experience between 1-44 years in education, but also students enrolled in Master programs (in the didactic field), and/or in the level II of the psycho-pedagogical training program for the didactic career.

In a second phase, the answers were subjected to quantitative and qualitative processing, in order to configure a more realistic image concerning the way in which the CPD process is seen/ perceived by the respondents. Also, the provided answers may lead to the crystallization of viable, sustainable and efficient ideas and solutions regarding the optimization of CPD activities.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first item of the questionnaire surveyed the respondents' opinion regarding the extent to which they consider that CPD represents a priority for teachers in pre-university education. As can be seen in figure 1, 48% of the respondents consider that CPD is a priority for teachers *to a great extent*, 33% *to a large extent* and 15% *to a moderate extent*. Only 4% of respondents claim that CPD represents a priority *to a small extent*.

Those results let us appreciate that for the most part of the respondents, there is an appropriate, conscious and responsible attitude towards CPD, but also on their future evolution in the teaching career. Also, we consider that the percentage of 4% can be correlated with the age of the respondents, whether we speak of beginner teachers or prospective ones - who did not have anything yet to do with CPD supporting activities -, or whether we speak of teachers very near to the retirement moment, who are no longer interested in CPD activities.

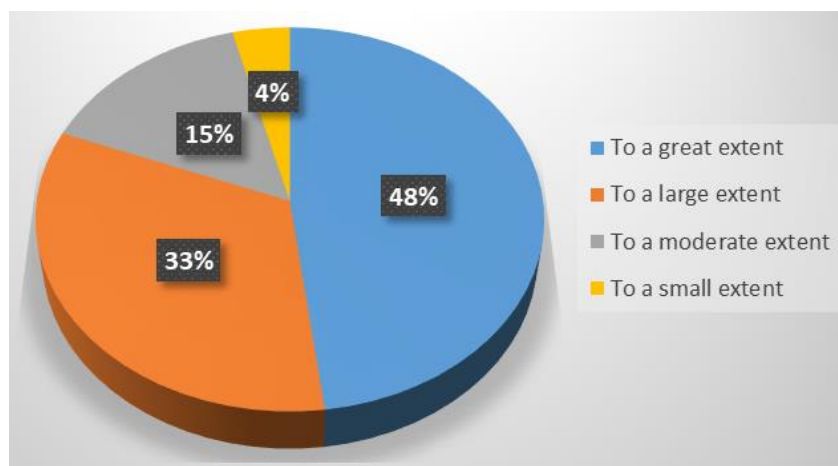


Figure no. 1. The extent to which respondents believe that CPD represents a priority for teachers in pre-university education

The second item was one that required an open answer, asking the respondents for their opinion on what CPD activities represents for them.

From the respondents' opinions, we hold as representative the following ideas that define CPD (and capture its complexity): improvement, exchange of good practices/ experience, new ideas, development of professional and personal skills, adaptation to new situations and changes, evolution, professional success, reinvention, accumulation of

transferable professional credits, ways of satisfying the need for professional development, necessity in order to carry out quality educational activities etc.

When they had to identify the most important problem faced by teachers in pre-university education (figure 2), most of the respondents mentioned: elaboration of documents, portfolios (40), followed by integration of students with special educational needs (34) and management of educational conflicts (25). Only one respondent appreciated that CPD is a real problem for teachers in pre-university education. The arguments/justifications of the respondents in relation to the problem related to the elaboration of documents/ portfolios were directed towards the fact that such documents/ portfolios are often very dense, require a lot of time and effort, and are often practically useless.

Regarding the integration of students with special educational needs, the respondents argued that they often face situations they cannot effectively deal with (children with autism, behavioral disorders, ADHD etc.) because they do not have the necessary skills for solving such situations, and they are not supported by the family and/ or specialists. Related to the conflict management, the main argument relates to the parents' lack of involvement and collaboration with the school, in order to achieve coherent and systematic steps. The respondent who mentioned CPD as being a real faced by teachers, justified the choice by the fact that, in general, the courses are financed from the personal budget and not from the budget of the educational institution.

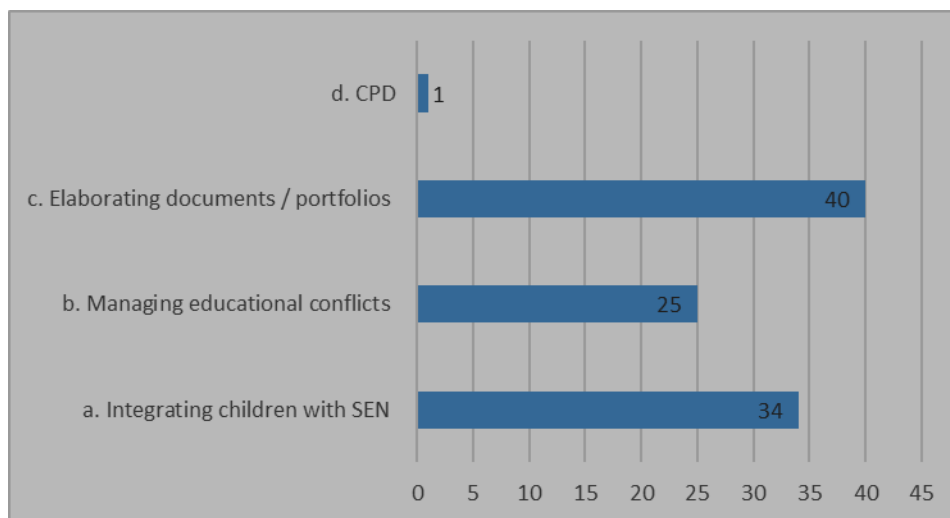


Figure no. 2. The most important problems faced by the teachers involved in pre-university education

For answering to the following question, the respondents had to choose from five options: *How important is your CPD for:* (a) tracking the students' progress; (b) going through the syllabus; (c) motivating students to participate in school activities; (d) their own professional development; (e) communication inside the school organization. The respondents were asked to rank the mentioned issues (in the order of considered importance), from 1 (*the most important*) to 5 (*the less important*). The answers are diverse and can be consulted in table 1.

Table no. 1. The importance given by the respondents to the CPD activities in relation to various indicators (figures in percentages)

Indicators/ rank	1	2	3	4	5
a. tracking students' progress	21	16	33	32	10
b. going through the syllabus	28	20	21	9	25
c. motivating students to participate in school activities	19	8	25	20	16
d. own professional development	9	31	8	15	31
e. communication inside the school organization	23	25	13	24	18

Analyzing the indicator related to the importance of CPD for their own professional development in particular, we find that only 9% of the respondents ranked it in the first place, 31% ranked it as second, 8% in the third position, 15% in the fourth one, and respectively 31% ranked it in the last place. Although, at first glance, we could say that most of the respondents (60%) do not express the appropriate importance for their own professional development, and at a closer analysis, we observe that, basically, by giving a higher weight to other indicators, the respondents aim indirectly, through various educational activities, towards their own evolution and career development.

A significant percentage (42%) of those surveyed, considered the practical relevance/ results that can be implemented in the classroom, as defining for the CPD process. Another 20% pay special attention to the topics covered, and 16% to the professional skills (trained or developed). Smaller proportions include indicators like: training strategies (methods, teaching methods, means of organization - 8%), trainer's skills (6%), training program duration (5%) and location (3%) - figure 3.

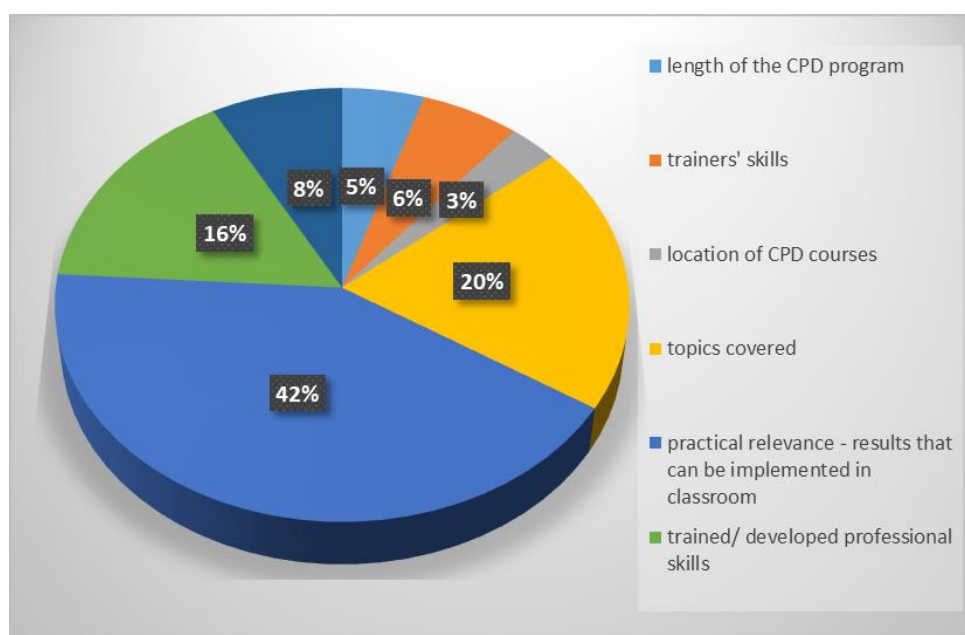


Figure no. 3. Defining aspects of CPD in the view of questioned teachers

Analyzing the main aspects which need to be addressed quickly in relation to the CPD process (figure 4), the respondents included the funding sources in the first position (45%), followed by the training strategies (27%), the means of disseminating the information in the planned events and organization of CPD activities (20%), and the training of trainers - those who are capable of designing and carrying out training activities - (8%), in the last place.

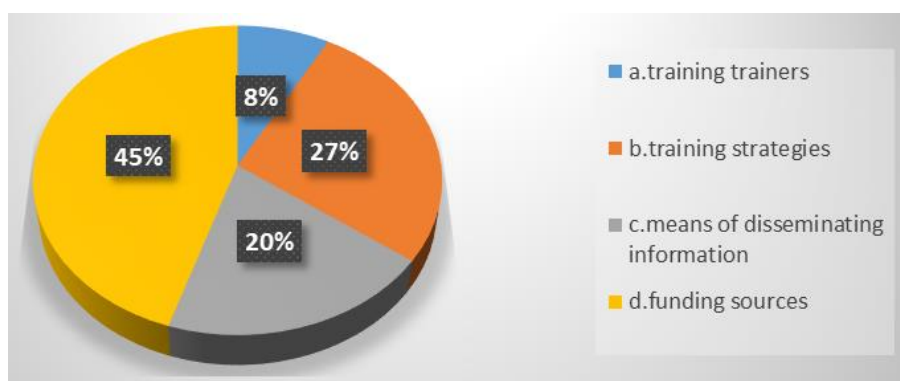


Figure no. 4. Aspects that have to be addressed in relation to CPD process

Correspondingly with the answers to the previous item, and according to the respondents, the main aspects for which the CPD activities must be considered as topical (figure 5), are represented by the following ones - ranked according to importance -: the use of new technologies in training (41%), modern and diverse ways for dissemination (31%), modern teaching methods (18%), and the trainers' level of training (10%).

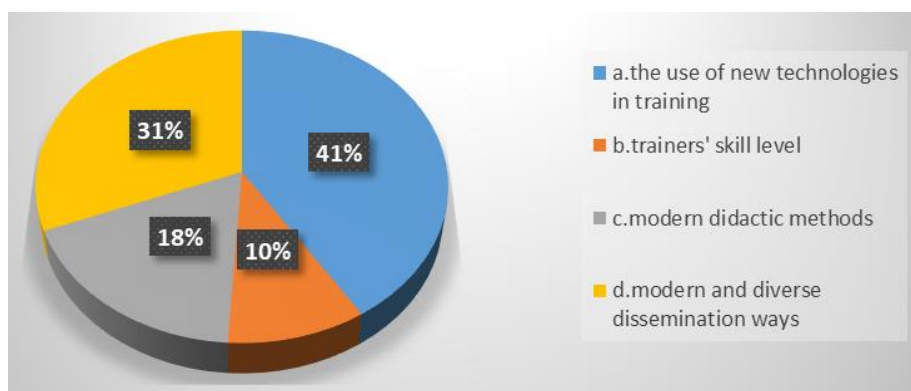


Figure no. 5. Main aspects for which the CPD activities must be considered as topical

Also, according to the respondents, the main aspects for which the CPD activities should be considered a priority (figure 6), are related to: the covered topics (43%), the trainers and their skills (8%), the monitoring process and the ways of evaluation in class/ in school (19%), and the financial support received from the educational institution (30%).

Due to the fact that the questionnaire was applied under conditions of absolute confidentiality, the data provided by the respondents are considered as valid and credible. Also, comparing the obtained data with similar ones, gathered in previous researches in the field of CPD (Enache, & Crişan, 2014; Enache, & Crişan, 2015; Enache, Petrescu, Gorghiu,

& Drăghicescu, 2019), and correlating with the information gathered by us in the role of trainers involved in various CPD programs, it can be expressed that such results capture the reality in a fairly faithful way. On the other hand, we consider that the relatively small size of the sample (100 respondents) represents a limitation of the study, which does not allow a generalization of the obtained data, but draw attention to some key-issues that teachers' CPD process and activities is facing, and it even offers some possible solutions for improvement.

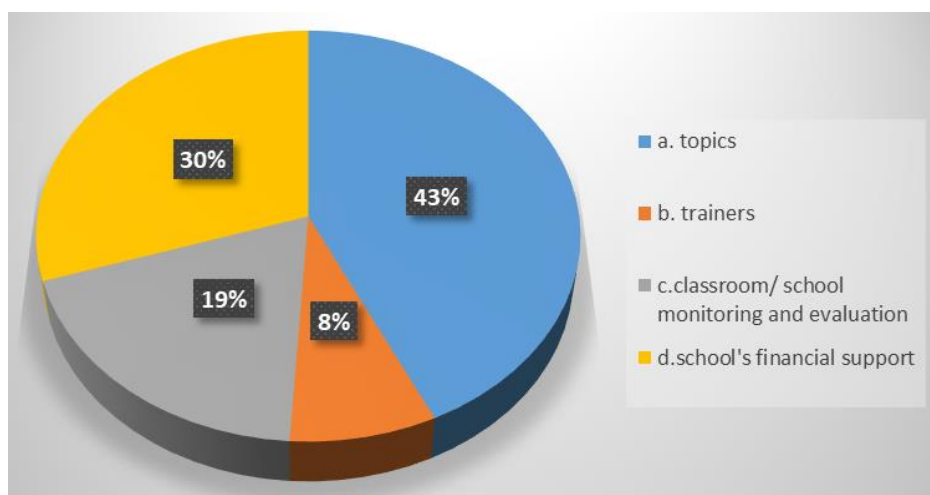


Figure no. 6. Main aspects for which the CPD activities should be considered a priority

Thus, according to the respondents' feedback, in order for the CPD process to be topical and high-priority for teachers, a series of actions are required, such as:

- organizing free CPD courses, financed through (inter)national programs/ projects or from the funds available to each educational institution (extra-budgetary resources);
- the training courses should be based on the real training needs of the teachers, and those needs have to be accounted annually, at the level of the educational institution;
- the CPD program should cover a topical issue, with practical relevance and direct applicability to the classroom;
- the organization of CPD courses must be carried out, as far as possible, in the teachers' workplace, using the available logistical resources and facilities;
- the setting up of a database, which must be operational at national level (if not even at European level), where the offers of different training providers must be listed.

CONCLUSION

Considering all the results mentioned above, it can be appreciated that most of the respondents have a realistic perception about the teachers' CPD process, targeting on positive aspects, but also on its limitations. As has been known from various documents and studies, in the last decade, important steps have been taken, at national and European level, in the direction of optimizing the training and continuous professional development process.

However, the reality shows that there are some gaps between the “beautiful theories” about education and professional development, and the current practices, when talking about the teacher training and professional development.

In this sense, it must be said that there is a strong need for an in-depth reform of the teacher training system that involves (among others): a rigorous selection - based on real quality criteria of the trainers and training providers -, a systematic monitoring process of the teachers’ training needs, as perceived by teachers, as well as a serious analysis of the added-value elements that CPD activities bring to teachers, students, school and community, to the quality of education, and to the diminishing, as much as possible, of the formalism related to the simple accumulation of transferable professional credits (TPC).

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