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**DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS ' TEACHING SKILLS**  
**PERCEPTIONS ON THE CONTEXTS OF ACHIEVEMENT**

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*Abstract*

The quality of teaching is a decisive factor in facilitating successful learning and academic outcomes in students. Teaching is also a complex task implying a wide range of comprehensive knowledge and skills teachers must ideally master to manage successfully the specific requirements of teaching in class. The professional development of teachers can be achieved by enrolling them in activities that are regularly and systematically organized by competent bodies in the field of education, such as those included in the continuous vocational training programmes. Teachers' professional development can also be enhanced through constant self-study efforts, according to the needs of everyone, or by practising daily teaching activities. Many teaching skills seem to develop much better once teachers start conducting classes, rather than during the initial training or by participating in activities that are designed specifically for this purpose, such as training courses or tutoring. This article aims at presenting the perception of teachers who conduct primary school classes, on the context in which they developed the specific skills and expertise required for the successful unfolding of their teaching activities in the classroom, and optimal interaction with students.

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## **1. Introduction**

Today's teachers face a horizon of constantly changing expectations in their professional activity. To maintain a high standard of didactic act they need to demonstrate a complex set of competences, as well as the ability to adapt to different learning environments. Teachers are supposed to organize their classroom logistics and educational resources, to plan, prepare and conduct classes that meet the needs of all students, to assess their achievements at school, and record the gradual progress made by students. Teachers are able to meet such challenges successfully if they have what specialized literature calls teaching competences.

The competences needed to pursue teaching as a profession are developed during higher education studies and are further upskilled and improved by continuous training. In order to be successful in their profession, teachers who are properly trained to meet the main challenges of the current and future society should prove good competences both in the scientific subject(s) they primarily teach and in the field of education sciences. To this end, teachers should ideally take advantage of every opportunity to improve their professional competences and expertise, to provide a high-quality education to all students. The efforts to enhance teachers' competences and efficiency are essential in ensuring the quality of any modern education system. In addition, the continuous training and professional development of teachers has become an especially important topic not only in scientific research papers, but also as a major concern for different decision-making bodies.

In this regard, the European Commission's Europe 2020 Strategy outlines the need to enforce the professional profile of teachers, both by ensuring the efficiency of their initial training within coherent education systems having sufficient and suitable resources for their recruitment, selection and training, and through the strong support given at the beginning of their career and professional development. The Education and Training Strategic Framework (ET 2020) also emphasizes, "the need to provide teachers with adequate initial and ongoing training schemes and long-term professional development programmes, in order to make teaching an attractive career choice" (Eurydice, 2013, p. 11). The education and professional training policies developed at the level of the European Union are defined as landmarks for each Member State to set up its own regulations, policies, and lines of action.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The literature on the education and training of high quality teachers indicates that there is a common foundation of basic knowledge and skills a teacher should master for the efficient provision of high quality education and teaching (Fajet, Bello, Leftwich, Mesler, & Shaver, 2005; Murphy, Delli, & Edwards, 2004). A generic teaching competence is based both on the ground theoretical knowledge of the specialized subjects that are to be taught, on thorough knowledge of education sciences, as well as on the knowledge of procedural and methodology areas which include information on the management of teaching and learning activities in the classroom. All these elements, together with specific personal features that are not the result of formal or institutionalized education, but are the result of life experience accumulations, contribute to the development of a teacher's professional competences (Păun, 2017). The meta-analysis of factors influencing students' learning methods and preferences invariably show that

teachers have the greatest influence on students' academic performance and educational outcome (Muijs & Reynolds, 2001; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Timperley, 2011).

While it is generally acknowledged that parents and the educational community do play an important role in providing high quality education to children, much emphasis is placed on the fact that teachers are, in fact, the main driver of change within the education system.

The corpus of research analysed by Villegas-Reimers (2003) has shown a strong correlation between an improved teachers' training and professional development, better teaching practices and increased academic performances in students. A responsible teacher is aware of the level of their skills and competences, but also of the importance of personal development. A clear-cut perception of one's own skills will help every professional in the field of education to properly fulfil their duties and responsibilities, as well as to plan their future professional development accordingly.

Research studies in this domain have shown that to have an accurate idea of the level of competence one has achieved, a consistent reflective approach is required. In this context, researchers encourage teachers to become introspective and thorough investigators of their own practices, given the fact that the ability of teachers to reflect on their own teaching practices is very important (Normand & Derouet, 2011). In brief, the self-reflective practitioner model is quite widespread (Paquay, Altet, Charlier, & Perrenoud, 2001), and the enforcement and promotion of this model seems to be very important in the further professional development of teachers (Altet, Desjardins, Étienne, Paquay, & Perrenoud, 2013). According to Perrenoud (2001),

*the autonomy and responsibility of a professional have no positive outcome without a strong ability to reflect on their own actions. This ability to self-reflect and self-correct over time, according to a specific set of values and goals, is at the heart of continuous training and development; it is based on the individual's previous life experiences, skills and professional knowledge. (p. 14)*

This is a key-dialogue with oneself and with others in the process of professional evolution and its purpose is to question one's own work, values and practices, in an attempt to constantly self-improve and grow, in order to achieve excellence as a person and as a professional, over time. In all modern education system, teachers face problems for which they have not always been initially trained (Brodeur, Deaudelin, & Bru, 2005); learning must consequently extend from the beginning of the initial training to the end of one's career, thus contributing to the development of teachers' professional identity and profiling. In fact, this lifelong learning approach overlaps with the professional development process.

In our opinion, professional development is essential in an effort to establish and strengthen the range of skills and competences needed in the field of teaching and learning. On the one hand, it contributes to the education and training of an efficient teacher who is capable of developing, modifying and adapting, if need may be, their professional knowledge and skills, according to the context and evolution of society, its values, regulations and challenges. On the other hand, teachers' professional development contributes to a sustained continuous training throughout one's career, and to the shaping of refined, cultivated educators whose curiosity and openness to the world in general, and to culture in

particular, should never fade. Teachers' professional development is viewed as an extension of their initial training, incorporating experiences that are in line with their needs and objectives, which in turn align with the standards, assessments, practical initiatives and the latest results of scientific research (Kedzior & Fifield, 2004). Over the years, teachers have faced many challenges and changes brought about by the need for new educational programs, new assessment methods and innovative technologies.

Consequently, we think substantial investment should be made in teachers' continuous training and professional development, with the aim of helping them cope with the constantly changing aspects relating to their domain of activity. There are many factors involved in facilitating sustainable professional development opportunities for teachers, and among these, we mention providing an adequate social and economic environment, the current and prospective range of relevant programmes on continuous professional training, the content of the training itself, the activities implemented to promote the training, the intrinsic learning process particular to each teacher taken individually, their reactions to continuous learning and training experiences and last but not least, the impact of teachers' interest and striving for permanent professional development and growth on students' learning experiences, and hence, on the level of their academic performances (Timperley, 2011; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007).

Professional development is a constant process of change and transformation that enables teachers to gradually manage and improve their performance and feel comfortable in practicing their profession (Uwamariya & Mukamurera, 2005). In this respect, we believe it is necessary for teachers to engage constantly in the process of continuous learning, and focus on being able to self-reflect with regard to their professional performance and practices, in order to maximize their potential, as well as the positive impact they may have on the academic outcomes of their students.

All these aspects are part of a broader perspective on building a high-quality professional profile in teachers as a community, based on their permanent efforts of acquiring and constructing of a corpus of relevant knowledge that would benefit all educators and the beneficiaries of their teaching services. The knowledge, innovative methods, the expertise, skills, competences and advancements acquired in years of practice, reflection, exchanges and collaborations, training, etc., would therefore form the best premises of positive changes teachers can make throughout their careers. The basic teaching skills and competences develop during the initial training years, through higher education. Nonetheless, the initial training stages cannot fully comprise and teach potential educators all the abilities and expertise necessary for practicing the profession. In addition, the very nature of the teaching profession generates a permanent variation in the conditions one must abide by in order to practice it, which certainly requires focusing on continuous learning, professional training and development throughout any teacher's car.

These are some of the major reasons that drive teachers to constantly develop their professional skills. In addition to the formal and traditional training activities, such as, for instance, courses and programmes provided within official continuous education frameworks, conferences, methodological committees and teacher training workshops, there are also less formal lifelong educational activities, based on self-study, direct teaching experience and interaction with students in or outside the classroom, collaborations with colleagues and involvement in the community.

### 3. Research Questions

The sampling questions to which we refer in this section were to what extent do teachers consider having a set of proper teaching skills? and What formative contexts do primary school teachers consider having contributed the most to shaping their relevant teaching skills?

### 4. Purpose of the Study

As a practical purpose of this research, we aimed at investigating three types of perceptions teachers have: the perception on their own teaching competences, on the order of importance of different types of competences they acquired and use during teaching activities, as well as the perception on the context in which they acquired the previously mentioned skills and competences. The data we refer to have been collected from 296 teachers from the north-west region of Romania (Cluj, Bistrița-Năsăud, Maramureș counties), who teach in primary education (preparatory class, 1st to fourth classes), with a proven teaching practice of at least 10 years.

### 5. Research Methods

Throughout our investigative procedure, we used the questionnaire-based survey method.

### 6. Findings

The resulting statistical data are reflected in the tables bellow.

**Table 01.** Teachers' perception of the extent to which they have the necessary teaching skills and abilities

To what extent teachers have the required skill	To a lesser extent	To a large extent	To a very large extent	I do not know/ do not answer
1. The ability to convey concepts, theories and problems specific to the disciplines taught, in a clear and systematic manner	1.01%	25%	72.64%	1.35%
2. The ability to acknowledge diversity in students and take it into account in teaching activities	1.69%	31.76%	64.86%	1.69%
3. The ability to create different contexts for the learning process	2.03%	39.53%	57.09%	1.35%
4. The ability to design and implement the most appropriate teaching, learning and assessment strategies	2.36%	43.92%	52.36%	1.35%
5. The ability to perform class management effectively	2.03%	28.04%	67.57%	2.36%
6. The ability to use ICT media in educational activities	7.09%	45.61%	45.61%	1.69%
7. The ability to anticipate new demands and educational needs	6.75%	56.08%	35.81%	1.35%
8. The ability to self-assess	2.03%	29.39%	66.55%	2.03%

(critically reflecting on one's own teaching performance)				
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As shown in table 01, primary school teachers consider that they do have the skills needed in teaching, to a large or significant extent. However, we think it is substantial that quite a considerable number of respondents (7.09%) seem to demonstrate a low ability to use information and communication technology (ICT) in their teaching activities. Along the same line, a surprising number of respondents (6.75%) reveal that they have a reduced ability to foresee new demands and educational needs of students.

**Table 02.** Teachers' perception of the context in which they have acquired the necessary teaching skills and abilities

Context of acquiring their teaching skills and competences	Initial training	Continuous training programmes	Self-study and teaching experience
1. The ability to convey concepts, theories and problems specific to the disciplines taught, in a clear and systematic manner	26.01%	28.72%	45.27%
2. The ability to acknowledge diversity in students and take it into account in teaching activities	5.41%	19.93%	74.66%
3. The ability to create different contexts for the learning process	5.07%	41.55%	53.38%
4. The ability to design and implement the most appropriate teaching, learning and assessment strategies	6.42%	48.31%	45.27
5. The ability to perform class management effectively	6.42%	29.39%	64.19%
6. The ability to use ICT media in educational activities	4.73%	61.15%	34.12%
7. The ability to anticipate new demands and educational needs	2.70%	52%	45.27%
8. The ability to self-assess (critically reflecting on one's own teaching performance)	8.45%	18.92%	72.64%

According to the data we have gathered (table 02), a larger number of respondents (26.01%) consider that it was during the initial training, through university studies, that they have acquired the ability to communicate concepts, theories and problems specific to the disciplines they teach, in a clear and systematic manner, while for the other skills we have inquired about, very few respondents considered they have gained these competences in such a context. We must also point out that the foundations for such skills and competences are being laid during the initial training teachers receive during university years, but their further development is a complex and lasting process, carried out throughout their career, as what we call continuous training.

## 7. Conclusion

A significant finding based on the statistical results of our survey is that most respondents seem to consider that they have developed the professional skills and competences they need through self-study and actual teaching experience, rather than by involving themselves in continuous education and training programmes. This discovery seems to suggest that continuous training programmes might not meet the real needs of teachers optimally, being rather focused on contents provided and fitted more for those who propose them (educational institutions and organisations), given the fact that they may be offering generically designed professional paradigms, instead of analysing, testing and adapting them in advance to fit teachers' actual needs. Another explanation might be that such programmes are insufficient, so that only a reduced percentage of teachers can access them.

In some of its dimensions, professional development can occur only in contact with real-life situations, given the fact that simply practicing the teaching profession contributes to the further development and enhancement of professional skills and competences. For teacher to achieve some of them, real-life teaching practice is indispensable. Some skills develop much better once teachers are in the workplace, rather than during their initial training. Teaching as a profession can provide a large range of situations, which, more frequently than not, illustrate that the initial teachers' training has its limits, like in so many other areas. It Teaching takes place in a large variety of contexts which requires teachers to have specific self-learning and personal abilities, such as, for example, learning and adapting to the specific of the organisational culture of their school, specific interpersonal skills in relation with fellow colleagues, a natural capacity to analyse and adjust to the particular needs of students, at any given moment, as well as openness and authenticity in relation with the community, etc. Most of these skills and competences cannot be assimilated outside the actual context of practicing teaching as a profession.

In this context, we would like to point out that indeed, many professional skills and abilities seem to improve once teachers are in the workplace, rather than during their initial training. In addition, "the peculiarity of teaching resides in the fact that professional development, life-long training, expanding available knowledge, diversifying experiences and improving self-confidence [...] are goals that can only be achieved by practicing the profession" (OECD, 2005, p. 106).

Although it is true that experience matters a lot, it does not equal excellence in the profession. The knowledge and skills required to become a successful professional do not automatically or necessarily derive from practice. The statistical data resulted from our survey can also suggest that during the initial training throughout the university years, greater emphasis is placed on the assimilation of various contents and on the ability to passing on knowledge.

Our take on this survey is that for most teachers, professional development is based on individual efforts, self-study, as well as on permanent interactions with students or on facing and responding to various real-life concrete situations. Experience has shown that the most effective training for teachers is brought about by their personal efforts and self-regulation practices in learning, through a steady process of research and inquiring within their immediate educational environment and beyond. A case in point might be when teachers need to identify and diagnose students' learning problems and difficulties and being able to use a broader range of theoretical and practical knowledge they have already acquired to address and solve these problems.

Teaching as a profession can be characterized by complexity and mobility, and sometimes by ambiguity, uncertainty, and indecision. As in most modern education systems, teachers nowadays face a multitude of variables most often unpredictable, which they can control. These are the reasons that cause them to constantly strive and develop their teaching skills and competences. Teaching is subject to various forces generating change: societal hierarchy of values change, the relationships between adults and children have gradually become less stable and more vertical than before, the communication and information technologies at our fingertip have a strong impact on our daily lives, the volume of knowledge increases exponentially and is readily accessible through multiple channels that effectively compete with the means and principles school uses to pass on knowledge to future generations, etc.

In short, the world in which schools and teachers operate today will always require permanent adaptations. The initial training provides teachers with the basic skills needed to practice the profession, but it does not have the means to prepare them for all the situations they face throughout their professional life, hence the need to engage in a professional development process through continuous training, throughout their career.

While many teachers consider participation in continuous training courses and programmes as an opportunity to develop the teaching skills they need throughout their profession, a significant percentage of the respondents believe that their professional development depends mostly on individual study, exhaustive teaching practice and permanent interactions with students, in real-life situations. The challenge for leaders in the field of education and training, as well as for education policy experts is to find the best ways to provide high quality professional development opportunities for teachers.

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