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**LIFELONG LEARNING OF TEACHERS FROM VOCATIONAL
EDUCATION: REALITIES AND TRENDS**

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Abstract

Continuous training of teachers became one of the important aspects of the evolution of the educational system. Given the continuous reform, initial professional training cannot meet the real needs of education. A special situation is in vocational education. The diversity of initial training, the different levels of qualifications of professors and supervisors, the rapid development of technology in the field of work, are just some of the many causes that continuous training requires. A study carried out on a representative sample highlighted the specific aspects of the process of continuous training of those involved in the achievement of vocational education. There is a different motivation and attitude towards continuous training in general and contents. A major influence of the directive management and a decrease of the level of teachers' own initiative can be noticed: those who activate in institutions that are run by dynamic directors who are aware of the importance of continuous training of the teaching staff, are more involved in the process. We find a tendency of the employer's involvement in the continuous training of teachers in vocational education, who is interested in the quality of professional training of future employees and invest in the quality of education.

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Keywords: Lifelong learning, continuous training, motivation, educational content, didactic strategies.



1. Introduction

The lifelong learning of teachers from the vocational education is one of the priorities of the education system in the Republic of Moldova. This is due to the evolution of technologies in various fields and to the need of the future skilled workers to acquire new competencies. Also, there is a diversity of vocational education and training of teachers, as they prove different levels of teaching skills, education and professional qualification: from vocational education qualifications, to bachelor, master and even doctorate degrees. The role of human resources in a socio-economic system is indisputable and its quality for the educational system is of much value. The quality of education mostly depends on the teacher. Under these circumstances, the need for continuous teacher training should be emphasized and must be regarded as an investment at the moment. The world experience confirms the economic effects of investment in education, which proves to be the most cost-effective both for teachers and society. The modern world has created ideal conditions that theoretically allow each person to orient his / her skills to the type and totality / volume of desired education (Husén, 1979).]

2. Problem Statement

Having analyzed vocational education policies, we can identify certain trends. In the Reference Framework of the National Curriculum for Technical Vocational Education in the Republic of Moldova (2015) is stipulated that, under the conditions of the nowadays society, the role of education, which is consciously perceived as a priority, is increasing. The Education Code of the Republic of Moldova (2014, art. 72) emphasizes the teacher training in vocational education. Also, there have been created conditions for the formation and development of professional competencies through continuous training. At the same time, there is the reality in which the vocational education system operates. The human resource is one of the basic conditions that ensure the functionality and quality of this system. There is the need to identify and analyze the real situation of the continuous teacher training in vocational education and the involvement of teachers in lifelong learning.

3. Research Questions

This study will therefore address the following research questions:

1. What are the reasons for VET teachers' involvement in lifelong learning? Does the level of initial training or gender have an influence on the reasons?
2. What are the factors that influence the involvement of VET teachers in continuous training? Does the organizational culture of the school influence the involvement of teachers in continuous training?
3. Are there any trainings or contents that teachers consider important or less important?

4. Purpose of the Study

Based on the identified problem and the research questions, we have formulated the purpose of the research: to determine the reality and trends of the continuous teacher training in vocational education: the attitude towards the lifelong learning; reasons for involvement and the awareness of the importance of continuous training for the professional activity.

5. Research Methods

The study of lifelong learning and the teachers from the vocational education in the Republic of Moldova has been carried out on the basis of a research conducted in the vocational education system. The sample has been created on the basis of the principle of the representativeness, and namely:

- a) representativeness in relation to the geographical location of the teachers;
- b) representativeness in relation to the location of the professional activity (municipality, town/city, district, rural areas);
- c) representativeness in relation to the percentage of teachers in various fields of vocational training.

As a result, 191 people have been included in the sample. This number of people enhanced the objectivity of the findings, since it is considered representative when about 10% of the total number of working persons are required for a research. The participants are employed people from thirteen vocational schools, 870 specialized teachers (teachers and foremen, about 22%). The 164 people involved in the study participated in continuous trainings, and the collected data and findings were based on the answers of this number of teachers.

5.1. The methods used

The study was mainly based on the methods of focus groups and questionnaires. Despite the advantages and disadvantages of the mentioned methods, we considered that they would complement each other and the level of subjectivity would be diminished.

5.2. Instruments

The Focus- group method has been carried out on the basis of questioning (adjustable to the activity), and allowed us to conduct the research on the following variables: the attitude towards training, motivation, frequency of lifelong learning, the training fees and the ways preferred by the teachers. The questionnaire was structured on the basis of multiple choice questions and assessment scales. At the end of the questionnaire the respondents were asked to come with suggestions and opinions related to the continuous training of teachers from the vocational education.

6. Findings

6.1. Theoretical background

Agnes van Zenten offers in the work *Dictionaire de l education* an explicit presentation of the evolution of the concept and the phenomenon of lifelong learning (Van Zenten, 2008). This social phenomenon is based on the context of the socioeconomic impact and theoretical marks developed by researchers in various fields (Aghion & Cohen, 2004). Quite vivid are the economic theories on the return of investments, which emphasize the importance of lifelong learning for both the individual and the society. Another theoretical approach to outline the influence of labor market is transition, which requires continuing training that provides professional safety (Gazier, 2003).

Colin and Le Grand (2008) define the concept as “the learning activities undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving the knowledge, skills and competences within a personal perspective: civic, social or employment-related. The authors emphasize the importance of the process in maintaining

employee's workplace. "Developments in technology and the needs of the economic fluctuations, involves the concern for the continuing training throughout their lives to provide up-to-date professional skills, which guarantee the adjustment to the world of work and evolving environment" (p. 1.).

The phenomenon of lifelong learning approaches have been highlighted in the continuing training of teachers, since the trainer is the one we are referring to. Regarding the training of teachers, Cucuș (2017) note: "We support this renewal whereas the issue of teachers' training is one of the most important for the education reform. The quality of education depends considerably on the quality of the training of teachers. The investment in human resource constitutes a strategic factor of progress in the medium and long term, even if the profit is not immediate" (p. 143).

6.2. The Descriptive Analytical research

Our study was attended by 191 teachers from vocational education, which represents 100%, and the number of teachers that did not have training in the past five years is 27, or (13,62%). The majority of them are young employees (about 90%). We have also identified people who have an experience of more than five years as a teacher or foreman in vocational education, who have never participated in continuous training (or have not participated in continuous training in the past five years). Reasons of non-involvement are the frequent job changes and continuous education disregard.

The issue of gender was also analysed in our research. Out of the 191 respondents, 97 (50.8%) were women and 94 (49, 2 %) were men. Traditionally, some occupations were considered for men and others for women. Thus, we can notice the prevalence of male teachers and female teachers in relation to the specifics of the profession (e.g. welders, locksmiths - male teachers; dressmakers, cooks - female teachers). Despite the changes in trends, teachers still express social perceptions of the past.

Vocational qualification is an important aspect of the professional activity. The level of training determines the perception of certain aspects of the professional activity, particularly those of the methodological conceptual type. Usually, people with a higher qualification level, have a higher level of knowledge and understanding of the conceptual aspects of their professional activity. Also, in our research, we have encountered some difficulties of foremen involvement, which have a low level of competency: difficulties in filling in the questionnaire, difficulties in formulating ideas/reasoning while conducting the focus groups, difficulties in understanding terms specific to the educational process. We think that this fact is due to the peculiarities of the professional activity. After graduating from the vocational school, they took over the model of teaching from their foremen and focused on apprenticeship activity.

Analysing the competencies that a teacher from vocational education should possess, we have studied the involvement of the participants of the sample in trainings for developing the professional and pedagogical skills. Since the issue of professional skills has always concerned the teachers from the vocational education and training, the pedagogical skills are outlined in the legal provisions, which stipulate the requirement of this type of skills in institutionalized training. Until the entry into force of the provisions concerned, a part of the teaching staff of the vocational education, particularly specialized teachers and foremen, were developing skills of teaching and the organization of teaching, on the basis of the model of their own teacher.

The results of the two components of the training are different from the point of view of the request, the appreciation of the importance and the reasons for the involvement, which is proved by the obtained data, represented graphically in Figures 1 and 2.

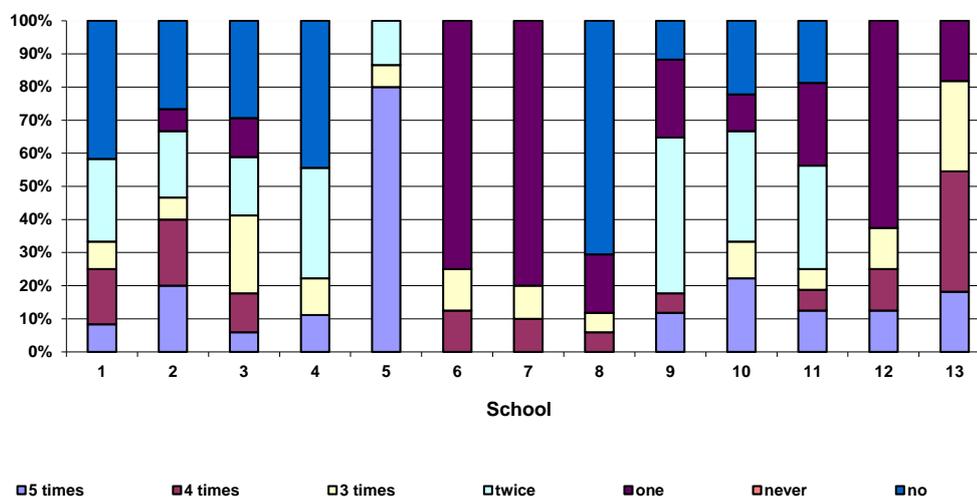


Figure 01. The number of specialization stages in the last 5 years

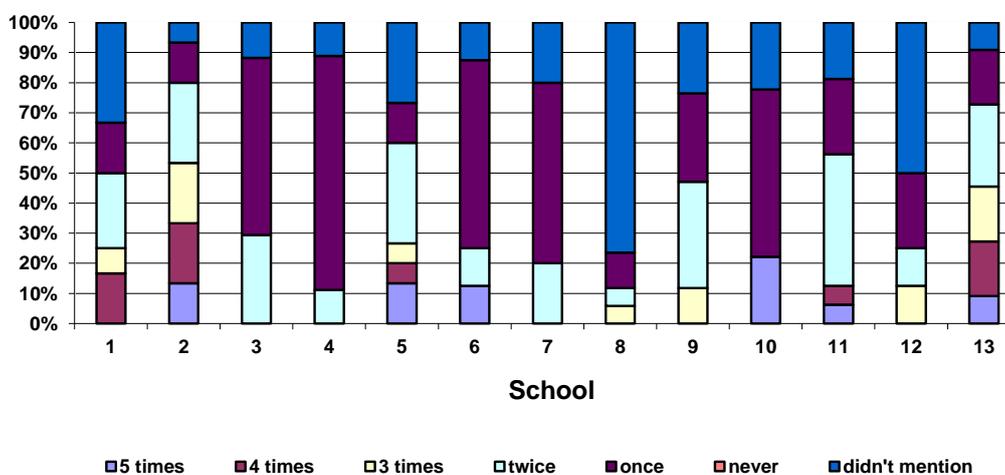


Figure 02. The number of pedagogical training stages in the last 5 years

The situation is obvious in different schools, which confirms the theories on the role of the organizational culture on professional behaviour of the employees, including the attitude towards continuing training (Zlate, 2007; Panisoara, 2006). At the same time, we noticed that parts of the respondents do not know the number of training stages they were involved into. The situation shows us that the teachers from the vocational training do not have a plan for professional development. This problem is not sufficiently coordinated in the institutions, and no document is provided to monitor the continuous training of employees. The careless attitude of some teachers shows the degree of awareness of the need for training, the involvement and the efficiency in the learning process. This situation, indicates the fact

that some of the teachers of vocational education participate in continuous trainings, organized by the administration of the institutions, simply by being imposed by the provisions of the laws, and not by their own choice that would guarantee a conscious involvement in the process of improving professional skills. An important role for the involvement in trainings is motivation. In order to increase the objectivity of the evaluation, we insisted on the identification of reasons, which contributed to the involvement of teachers in trainings. The motivation is in direct connection with the need for lifelong learning. It determines the degree of involvement in the activities of learning and the effects of the training. Zlate (2007) stipulates that the reasons are characterized by the degree of awareness, intensity, duration, and correlation. The statistical data indicates clearly motivational tendencies of the teachers from vocational education. A good part of them (59,15%) is concerned with getting teaching degrees, which ensure the safety of the workplace and extra salary payment. The workplace itself is a priority indicated by about 15% of the respondents. By means of extrapolation, we can assume that for about ¾ of the employees a priority is the salary and the workplace. We have identified a different situation concerning the involvement in trainings with the purpose of the acquisition of specific and psycho-pedagogical competencies. We have identified that 37% of the respondents have shown an intrinsic motivation for the specialized training. They were interested in the training objectives, content and efficient communication with the trainer. The others have shown an extrinsic motivation, being influenced by the fear of punishment by the school administration, or by the pay raise (which is provided for didactic degrees). About 50% of the respondents have not shown any reason they would carry out the pedagogical training. The lack of reason is an indicator of the lack of attitude, which in turn will indicate on their own lack of wish for such trainings. Obviously, there are teachers who have a conscious attitude (less than 30% of them mentioned the need for training as a reason for the involvement), this is due to the level of the organizational culture, the atmosphere in the institution and culture level of the specialization.

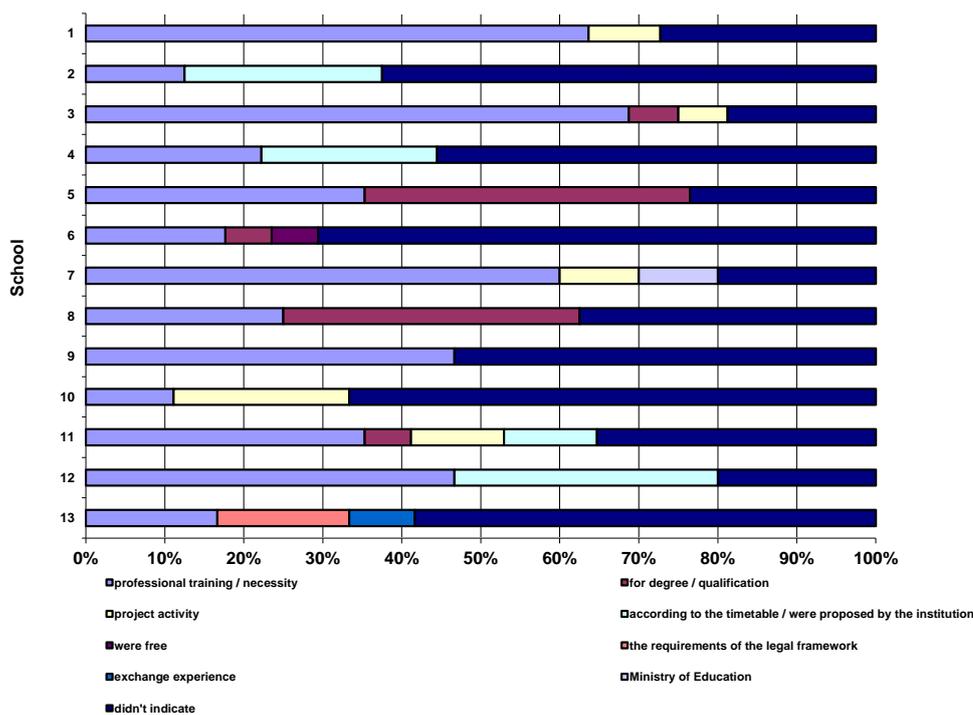


Figure 03. The reasons of professional continuous training involvement

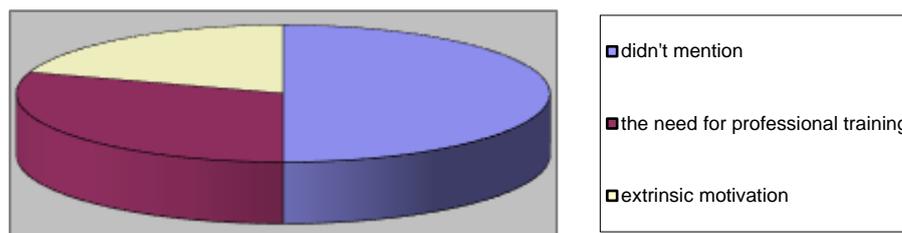


Figure 04. Motivation for pedagogical training

If we compare the results of the motivation for the psycho-pedagogical training and the motivation for professional training, we notice a higher motivation for professional training. Fewer teachers and foremen in professional schools are concerned about the need for psycho-pedagogical training. The reason lies in the traditions of the vocational training education. This issue has not been debated at the level of educational policies. At the moment, all the existing documents place psycho-pedagogical training in a legal framework, thus continuing training is one of the means of training and improving the skills of organizing the educational process. As Cucuș (2017) mentioned: “A Quality education is not only by grace and disinterested devotion (necessary but not sufficient), but also by some strings that results in the production of certain aspects of the high level of teaching, educational relationships of a particular type” (p. 156).

Panisoara (2009) reflects on the psycho-pedagogical training by mentioning that the success of the pedagogical activity brings out the principle of teaching competence which is focused on psycho-pedagogical knowledge that must be developed. The author finds that “Unfortunately, in current practice there is the prejudice, according to which the professional knowledge is sufficient for becoming a good teacher” (p. 25).

The motivation directly influences the intention and the degree of involvement in the activities of lifelong learning. Graphic data show that about 50% (48,8), have indicated that they had participated in trainings on their own initiative, and about half of the respondents have indicated other circumstances which led to the involvement in trainings. In the informal discussions and focus - groups, we identified that the involvement of teachers in trainings, projects and their interest to increase professional competences is mainly influenced by the atmosphere of the institution, especially the quality of the institutional management, the personality of the principal and the managerial team.

These findings go in line with the theoretical provisions. “Manager's conduct and relationships with others is a factor of motivation. When the manager of an institution shows a motivational behaviour, this can become a model of conduct for others” (Cojocaru, 2013, p. 42).

7. Conclusion

The analysis of the results obtained from the questionnaires and their qualitative interpretation, the conclusions derived from the interference of various variables of research, concerning the lifelong learning of teachers from vocational education lead us to the following generalizations and suggestions:

- a) The culture of lifelong learning of teachers from vocational education is in process.

Teachers do not have a plan for professional development, in which to identify the needs of continuous training.

b) Teachers have different attitudes towards various components of training. The specialization component is mostly appreciated by the teachers. The pedagogical component was imposed in recent years because of legal provisions.

c) Participation in lifelong learning programmes has a largely directive character, which is imposed by the administration of the institution. The institutions, whose administration is actively involved in projects and obtains relevant training, financed from certain funds, has changed the attitude of the employees towards the lifelong learning. This activity is becoming necessary for the development of vocational training.

d) The involvement of teachers in training courses and the evaluation of their quality is influenced by the immediate needs: there is no content and methodical support, lack of knowledge about how to implement the new educational policy provisions (changes in the plan of studies, the curricular approach). The appreciated trainings are the trainings which offer teaching support materials, because in the absence of new manuals and guides, teachers from the vocational education cannot cope with the requirements.

e) In the process of continuous training, it is necessary to focus not only on the acquisition of knowledge and skills, but on the formation of a positive and responsible attitude towards the lifelong learning process. It would be beneficial to address the problem of professional branding, of strengthening the self-image and of the belief that lifelong learning is the main source of professional development and the condition of a successful career.

Teachers from vocational education face various challenges. One of the most difficult is their own training: the identification of motivational issues, the determination of the priorities in relation to the beneficiary requests are the basic conditions of professional self-achievement by means of ensuring the quality of education.

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