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New Approaches, Challenges and Future Development of the Teaching Profession

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Abstract

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Education systems worldwide are under constant pressure to adapt to changes generated by the new needs of society and the economy. The national context is imposed in correlation to global orientation and European policies to which Romania has subscribed, as well as to the overall specificity of the knowledge society that brings a grid of values dominated by education, research, development and innovation. The impact of the European agreements and regulations is felt throughout society and at all levels of the education system, but this paper aims to achieve a concise analysis of the most significant challenges and changes that have occurred in recent years in the teaching profession felt at global and national level, as well as policymaking structures reactions in the field of training human resources in education. This study aims to explore the possibility of making the difference between the direct characterization of the teaching profession, where the competences and the character's features are explicitly presented, and the indirect characterization, where the features must be analysed against the social perception an expectations, with opportunities and limits, all these having a meaning only if it emphasizes the typology of didactic style created at the mental level. Combining both perspectives, we propose to explore the different perspectives about the representative teaching profession profile for a society at institutional and personal level.

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Keywords: Teaching profession challenges; social perception and expectations; politics of development human resources in education.



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1. Introduction. Problematic and hypotheses

Education systems worldwide are under constant pressure to adapt to changes generated by the new needs of society and the economy. Decentralization of education systems - assumed as a priority and strategic direction of the EU member states - has proved to be a complex process involving cooperation with a number and variety of social partners, with new roles and responsibilities. Employers and local communities, as final beneficiaries, are now more attentive and informed about education and how future graduates are trained; this is why schools are pressed to provide the best educational services to meet the learning needs of children and young people. This context perceived on social level has generated a global consensus on accepting the complexity of education and, with this, recognizing the role of human resources and expectations towards teachers. Thus, the quality of teacher training and how they are prepared for such a fundamental role in contemporary society has become a priority in the new policies and has entered the European agenda.

Initial Teacher Education (Initial Teacher Education - ITE) is the first and most important step for a future profession in education. Developing a system of knowledge, teaching skills and an intellectual style for the future teacher, this first step actually wants to ensure a basic level of preparedness for the ability to successfully lead and facilitate the learning of children and youth. Consolidation, further development of teaching skills and sharing of best practices circumscribe the area of specific activities for the second stage in the preparation of a teacher, known as continuing education and lifelong learning (Continuous Professional Development for Teacher Education - CPDTE), which includes various stages of training, from beginner to successful careers and status of professor emeritus.

Design and implementation of this continuum in training for the teaching career requires coherent policies and new approaches to support the current challenges and combine guidance emerging in the field of governance ITE – CPDTE with the need to create collaborative learning environments for teachers to foster cooperation and partnerships between employers, official beneficiaries, ITE providers and CPDTE, teachers, parents, experts, associations and professional communities.

The national context is imposed in correlation to global orientation and European policies to which Romania has subscribed, as well as to the overall specificity of the knowledge society that brings a grid of values dominated by education, research, development and innovation. The impact of the European agreements and regulations is felt throughout society and at all levels of the education system, but this paper aims to achieve a concise analysis of the most significant challenges and changes that have occurred in recent years in the teaching profession felt at global and national level, as well as policymaking structures reactions in the field of training human resources in education.

The complexity of issues addressed in the study on new approaches, challenges and changes in the teaching career, implied delimitation of the investigation area and setting up the research directions with hypotheses questions status:

- What is the European context in the field of initial and continuous training policies for human resources in education?
- What are the new challenges and changes faced by teachers in schools in contemporary society?

- What is the answer of the official structures and what are the options of the national system of Romania in the field of human resources in education to these global challenges?

The answers to these questions are not easy and the research work required an integrated and complementary approach between the study of specialty literature and legislative documents, the official reports of the Council of Europe, and a qualitative investigation carried out through focus groups and discussions with representative participants to the selected theme. This approach has enabled the capture of official guidelines and actual effects reflected in the perception of the specialists from Romania, actions that have favoured the collection of sufficient data to formulate some conclusions and new discussion threads in the field.

2. The European context of policies in the field of teacher trainer

The study of European programmatic documents and specialized literature allows us to say that the generally valid orientation assumed as a target for Europe 2020 is to ensure the quality and attractiveness of the teaching profession, initial teacher education (ITE) and Continuous Professional Development for Teacher Education (CPDTE) being recognized as priority objectives in the Strategic Framework ET2020 (European Council, 2009), fundamental document of EU official policy in the field of *Cooperation in education and training* and the *Joint Report on its implementation* the from 2015 STI (European Commission, 2015). The new policies and positions of the European Commission are illustrated in the document entitled *Rethinking Education* (European Commission, 2012a), in which the official support for teachers, managers and schools leaders, as well as teachers trainers is clearly expressed through key policies to increase efficiency, consistency and coordination within the educational system (European Commission, 2012b). The prominent role of the teacher seen as the main factor in the effectiveness of acquisition for young people was highlighted in multiple surveys and reports resulting from international assessments - Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) – interpreted in benchmarking of OECD. The reports show the direct correlation between the quality of the didactic work seen as a key factor and the way in which schools manage to successfully improve the outcomes for young people. The best practices of teacher training are associated with a positive attitude of young people towards learning and problem solving and the assertive behaviour of the teacher and teacher-student relationship generate good academic performance (OECD, 2009). PISA results show that countries that have improved their performance and equity in education have introduced clear requirements and standards for didactic qualification, have increased the attractiveness of the teaching profession and have created benefits to attract quality people in education, teachers motivated for career and professional development. The school systems that have achieved a high level of educational equity indicator also improved the employer involvement in internal assessments in schools regarding teaching related activities, the quality of teachers and resources. At the same time, feedback on leadership, confidence and commitment to the school community is provided.

In 2014 the education ministers of member states agreed in consensus with the conclusions on the initial teacher training that should be optimized and aligned with developments in the area by adding key competences required in order to provide a high quality in the training process of teachers and, at the same time, to stimulate their motivation to permanently optimize and update the teaching career

specific competences. At this official level, it was concluded that considering the entire national context of different education systems, it is necessary for the optimization to be done not only through the inclusion of new areas of knowledge and rethinking pedagogical skills by integrating teaching practice strategies, and by supporting and encouraging the professional development directions: reflection and self-professional development along with cooperation work, adaptation to a multicultural learning environment present in the group of students/youth and complementary accountability of specific leadership roles (OECD, 2013).

There is another perspective on the issues, challenges and new demands of the teaching profession. The voice of the teachers and school leaders is taken into account and scientifically reflected in the *Teaching and Learning International Surveys (TALIS)* reports, which offer a different kind of feedback necessary for optimizing and changing educational practices. It highlights the leadership in making decisions, which is very different in the European countries and it depends on the degree of autonomy, being considered a premise with great potential to increase learning outcomes. It is also considered that the initial teaching education (ITE) must integrate at least three components: knowledge of academic themes, theory and practice of training, counselling and motivational support for young people and for the learning activity. 80% of EU teachers who completed the initial teaching education say that in the 2015 assessment the programme included three components. In TALIS 2013 the proportion was even higher for three-quarters of the European education systems. It appears that a large proportion of teachers in the EU feel very well prepared for their work in all three components covered in the initial training program. However, the same report also highlights a number of urgent needs for professional development, identified and ranked in a rating by teachers themselves, as well as a relatively low level of collaboration between teachers.

3. Challenges and changes in the didactic career

From the analysis of official documents on educational policies adopted at European level and in our country, it follows that the whole society assigns the teacher a fundamental role, being generally considered one of the major agents of success in education, and specifically, the key factor in learning and training of children and youth. Moreover, specialty studies show that the supportive relationship between the role of the teacher and the learner is the most powerful generator of the school optimization and development process (Eurydice, 2015). In this regard, in the face of the nowadays challenges in education, it becomes essential that teachers understand that they are resource people for learning and that the social duties and expectations towards them are in the process of expansion and increasing the demands. With the recognition of the importance of the teaching profession, it is necessary to integrate in the initial and continuous training process new content and activities that develop skills related to new social and educational conditions. We will mention a summary of the most important challenges and also the necessary adaptations in ITE and CPDTE:

- *New teaching skills and continuous professional training* involve the creation and functioning of the local support structures to facilitate a long-term development of the teaching career in the spirit of active, participatory and differentiated learning, of communication and cooperation with parents and other educational factors, of the classroom management, conflict resolution and application of

prevention techniques. Leadership in the teaching career becomes the essential in the effort to collaborate with others in any developing teaching experience and to promote expertise with the ultimate goal of improving educational practice. The teachers who take on the leader role in front of or behind the classroom are a contributing factor in school effectiveness, quality of teaching and increase of student achievement.

- *Learning and peer review practiced in ITE and CPDTE* develop a peer-to-peer culture and learning and observation among teachers and between children. Mutual supervision is also effective in school and in collaboration with other schools of different types in a school networks type of relationship, collaborative platforms and other IT tools that have proven their efficiency in the area of interpersonal and inter-institutional cooperation.

- *Understanding the phenomenon of early school leaving* involves centring in the curriculum for teacher training, on knowing the school dropout prevention mechanisms and educational disadvantages, of possible risk and prevention factors. Young people who choose an academic career must understand their key role in supporting and ensuring continuity in learning and development of children, as they are best in identifying school disengagement and the emergence of learning difficulties at an early stage, when it can immediately act and remedy the situation in time, preventing school dropout. In such a situation, the teacher's expectations, attitudes and language have a significant impact and influence on children and family. Schools can create support programs with interventions targeted on cases of problematic children or children who exhibit inappropriate behaviour and require an individualized plan with achievable goals. The effectiveness of these programs is increased if it involves family members, it constitutes multidisciplinary teams in schools and if it calls upon the expertise of external specialists. In communities and schools where the drop-out rate is high or in those socio-economically disadvantaged communities, it is necessary to recognize and support more the work of the teachers, in the form of incentives for continuous training, sabbatical year for professional development, additional teaching resources, so that the positive emotional state and wellbeing are supported.

- *Accepting diversity* is a challenge that requires teamwork and coexistence with people and different approaches. Teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudes should reflect their understanding of diversity in all its forms, an intercultural education, multilingualism and learning another language, all of which are integrated with priority in the initial and continuous training of teachers. From this perspective, it would be appropriate to attract a large numbers of candidates, representatives of the whole society in the initial teacher education (ITE), from which to recruit the best, while maintaining cohesion around fundamental values and objectives of school, shared by society and education beneficiaries.

4 The reaction and options of the Romanian education system in the field of teacher training

All these optimizations that didactic training needs in different career stages involve adjustments and changes to both its official vision, but also to educational policies and an institutional and personal acceptance. In the transformation process of the education reform in Romania into a reality, little attention was given to teacher training process. As such, in training human resources in education field

the need to shift from specific actions to a strategic thinking is felt, as evidenced in multiple reports and analyses made in recent years, which include among their priorities the development of professional teacher training (Marin, 2013). The educational community has acknowledged the need to establish standards specific to the teaching career and rethinking of the education staff training process, in accordance with these standards. The existence of several models of initial didactic training resulted in a long period of debate in our country, in order to arrive at an efficient and appropriate way for the context of our country.

The model presented below is the result of several focus and debate groups at national level attended by education specialists, representative of the official structures of decision, beneficiaries of the teacher training and for providers of initial and continuous training in the Romanian education system. The discussion sessions have revealed a clear feedback about the different ways of perceiving challenges and changes at strategic level or at implementation level. The consensus has convened on the recognition of the need to optimize the training system for the teaching career and to adapt to new requirements. The successive changes occurring over time in initial training programs for the teaching career, as well as the malfunctions in the system were highlighted. The highest frequency of responses and testimonies of participants have highlighted the weaknesses of the system, of which we nominate those with the highest frequency:

- underfunding from the state budget of training programs for the teaching career;
- lack of legislation in the field of teaching practice at university level and the arbitrary decision at local level in this regard;
- difficulties in collaboration with school units regarding pedagogical practice in the context of a lack of regulations and methodological rules agreed at national level;
- low attractiveness of the teaching profession and attracting candidates with average potential;
- relative selection on admission and completion of the training programmes for a teaching career;
- reduced number of hours for pedagogical issues related to the new teaching skills and challenges;
- specialized training that is dominantly theoretic, without didactic approaches to scientific content in different areas of specialization.

The result of the debate it generated an *dominant option of the pedagogic communities* in the Romanian system is to integrate the two models and to stimulate the formation for the academic career by achieving Level I during undergraduate studies, followed by didactic master for 2 years, and these programs are coordinated by the psycho-pedagogic department. The arguments can be summarized in two principles:

- Initial psycho-pedagogical preparation achieved by following a program developed during undergraduate studies, offers the chance of labour market insertion for these graduates with bachelor's degree.
- Didactic Master is a level of expertise meant to contribute to the deepening of university training for the teaching career, with distinct and different types of finality, skills, curriculum and certification than the initial training.

The new requirements and guidelines require that the level of educational policies and official bodies to articulate *a strategic vision about the teaching career approach in terms of its professionalization through theoretical and practical foundation*. The issue is vast and complex, but we mention a few topics for discussion and resolution:

- Stimulating the modular programmes offer and the differentiated routes for training in the teaching career;
- Extending the applicability of transferable professional credits system and establishing a minimum standard to certify the level of specific competences;
- Capitalization of legal regulations in the field of quality in education that created the favourable framework for optimizing the activity of the teacher training departments and their recognition as institutional structures specialized in psycho-pedagogic training, through the process of evaluation and accreditation according to criteria and specific standards;
- Ensuring the necessary financing for the teaching career training programmes (bachelor and masters);
- Equal opportunities for all universities in developing teacher training programmes;
- Correlation of qualification levels with the early labour market insertion of graduates;
- Correlation of Master types (professional and didactic), of certification and of employment legislation in the education system;
- Systemic approach and correlation of legislation regarding initial and continuous teacher training.

5 Conclusions and discussions

The requirement to optimize initial and continuous training of teachers and to make teaching career more attractive is very clear and the specialists are in agreement. The methods of achieving are, however, discussed and disputed. Different views on the teaching profession and school, in general, are rooted in local and national culture and bear the imprint of time and past experiences. As such, these new approaches and changes in the teaching career and employment status of the teacher are dependent on social, economic and contextual factors, generating a wide variety of situations in the education systems. Despite these differences, normal in a very extensive geographical and temporal area, however, specialists and authorities can focus on adjusting a few minuses that international assessments have highlighted, by focusing on:

- The best didactic practices are achieved through team work with others and not through solitude and isolation;
- Being reflexive in the didactic work and involved together with other colleagues in the school activity;
- Creating a collaborative learning environment, sharing ideas and supporting the learning communities;
- Promoting effective partnerships and clarifying employers' roles and responsibilities;

- Coherence, communication and coordination are becoming significant indicators in the balance between regulation, responsibility, trust and autonomy.

Through thematic and manner of approach, the teacher training process is an educational component with strategic and innovative character that allows development and optimization. Based on these priorities, we believe that any action initiated by official or advisory bodies can help create a favourable framework for the scientific approach of professionalization of the teaching career, especially if it is based on exploitation and development of knowledge/experience in the field.

In the actual social context it comes, therefore, as a necessity to elaborate a modern and coherent conception regarding teaching profession, a conception inspired from recent assets in pedagogical theory and practice, and, mostly, from the scale of values in school, from the philosophy, culture and socio-economic fundamental at the basis of the educational system. Teaching profession, in turn, brings forth strategies, actions, as logistics, which is the reason why they have to be carefully planned according to the context specific to the given school; but strategies only do not ensure improvement, at the same time pre-university schools must bear in mind the internal circumstances which maintain and support improvement, even if they are expected to appear the opportunities or limits.

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