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**FORMING PROFESSIONAL SKILLS OF THE SPECIALIST FOR
PRIMARY AND PRESCHOOL EDUCATION**

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Abstract

Aims for initial teacher training for preschool and primary education are the professionalization for teaching career. Developing the competency profile of this specialist is done through the following components - didactic skills, classroom management skills, pupils' knowledge skills, pupils /group counseling competences, ICT skills, communication skills, career management skills. The purpose of this paper is to present a comparative analysis of the training curriculum of specialists for primary and preschool education offered by training institutions during this period. In Romania, the initial training of these specialists is done through two routes - pedagogical high schools (secondary education) and specialized faculties (university studies). In earlier times, there was even a third training route – colleges (short-term studies). The goals pursued are the same, but the training curriculum is different. The largest differences we identify in terms of the following aspects – teaching practice, methodical disciplines, the number of educational activities allocated to each specialized discipline. The conclusions of the study demonstrate that a restructuring of the whole initial formation domain proves to be necessary, based on a coherent strategy. The objectives of initial formation for the didactic profession must correlate with the new curriculum for early education for the preschool and primary level but also with the graduates' demands of professional insertion, proved by the professional certificate exam and by the tenure examination.

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1. Introduction

The implementation of the educational reform as regards the professionalization of the didactic career is supported by the mission of education, which is to generate and to transfer knowledge towards society through teachers' initial and continuing formation, towards personal development, professional insertion of the graduate and the satisfaction of the need for competences in the socio-economic environment.

Presently, the preschool and primary educational cycles include teachers who got through the following initial formation routes: pedagogical high school (with a duration of 4-5 years), post secondary school (with a duration of 2 years), pedagogical institute (with a duration of 3 years), pedagogical university college (with a duration of 3 years), the Faculty of Education Sciences – bachelor program Pedagogy of Preschool and Primary Education (with a duration of 3 years), Faculty of Education Sciences – professional conversion program Pedagogy of Preschool and Primary Education (with a duration of 2 years).

There are several aspects which make the difference between the initial training system of teachers in Romanian and the same system at the European level. The professionalization of the didactic career is regulated by law in Romania and a particularity of the Romanian system is that, initial training for early education (preschool and primary level) can be achieved through alternative routes: initial training achieved through universities, within bachelor and Pedagogy of Preschool and Primary Education - conversion programs, and through pedagogical high schools.

2. Problem Statement

The initial training of the teachers from the preschool and primary education cycle has a specific character determined by social, psychological and pedagogical foundations built on a modern, efficient perspective, adapted to the contemporary requirements and tendencies of European educational systems. These imply the observance of terms and conditions imposed by international standards; compatibilization of the initial training system of the teachers from the preschool and primary education system with the institutional structures at the university level (Iucu, 2004).

In defining the specific competence of the didactic profession we can identify different conceptual approaches: "professional competence", "pedagogical competence", "didactic competence", the conceptual differences being given by way in which the term competence is defined structurally and functionally. The integrated model of the competence elaborated by the pedagogy specialists Dan Potolea and Steliana Toma define the didactic competence through the following elements: the learning task, performance standards, knowledge, skills, the educator's personality traits. From this perspective, didactic competence represents the person's capacity to use his /her knowledge and skills adequately with a view to obtain success (Potolea & Toma, 2010).

In the international models the definition of the education specialist competence profile has as a premise the development of partnerships with specialists with a view to cumulate experience and expertise from them in order to meet the children's various learning needs (Bruder, 2010).

Pedagogical competence represents "the educator's capacity to take a decision upon a pedagogical problem, on the grounds of a deep knowledge of laws and determinations of educational phenomena" (Gliga, 2002, p. 27); the set of organizational competences of the class, of structuring contents, of

distribution, communication, resolute and evaluation competences, manifestation of formative potential competences, competences referring to the socio-emotional climate, competences of stimulating creativity (Neacșu, 1990, p. 243-244); "a set of cognitive, affective, motivational and managerial capacities which interact with the educator's personality traits" (Jinga, 1998, p. 78).

A considerable part of research had been focused on the identification of the lists of competences which are essential in teachers' training. The list of the qualities the specialist in the didactic career must possess include didactic optimism, love of children, patience (Zulfija, Indira, & Elmira, 2013). Philippe Perrenoud emphasized 10 primary domains in the teachers' continuous training: organization of the learning situation, management of pupils' progress, the use of differentiated education instruments; involving pupils in learning activities; teamwork; participation in school leadership; collaboration with the family; the use of new technologies; securing professional ethics; management of one's own continuous training (Perrenoud, 1997).

Studies show that teachers' initial training should ensure not only the acquisition of a set of knowledge and psycho-pedagogical skills but also the conditions for subsequent development of these competences (Salyakhova & Valeeva, 2015). Presently, through the professionalization of the didactic career, teachers' status is recognised; they gained their autonomy, becoming directly responsible for their actions (Zgaga, Neacsu, & Velea, 2007).

In training the specialist for the didactic profession there are competences which become more and more relevant: entrepreneurship competences; competences of pluridisciplinary teamwork; of communication (with the family, representatives of the educational community, the child); support competences for the development of the child on the social and pedagogical level; of collaboration with the community space; of facilitating the integration and care for the children with SEN; of efficient management of educational situations; digital competences and competences of innovative use in the research methods and professional development.

A fundamental element in the competence structure of the specialist in the preschool and primary educational cycle is represented by the professional and the personal component. Professional component is defined through skills (defined as capacities of intelligent use of theoretical knowledge – professional and scientific) and practical competences (active professional component). The personal component is defined by motivation, assuming aspirations in professional growth and development (Zakirova, 2016). It is also important for students to acquire transversal competences in order for them to become good specialists in the field of educational sciences (Langa, 2015).

3. Research Questions

The study starts from the following research questions:

- Are there any significant differences in the initial training for the preschool and primary teachers between the curriculum offered by pedagogical high schools and the curriculum offered by the university studies programs (bachelor /conversion studies)?
- Which aspects emphasize these differences taking into account that the graduates' insertion from the two schooling types happen under identical conditions?
- Is it necessary to improve initial training at both levels and which sides of it?

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study is to underline the essential dimensions of improving the initial training of teachers for the preschool and primary education cycles, under the current legal context of initial training for the didactic function. To this end, the study presents a comparative analysis of the curricula offered by the pedagogical high schools and by the specialized faculties for the initial training of the specialists in the preschool and primary education.

This analysis starts from the assumption that regardless the schooling type form, graduates insert professionally under identical conditions – national tenure examination, with an unique syllabus. Equally, the same competence profile is certified for all graduates, irrespective of the type of certificate – high school diploma and bachelor's degree.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Study design

In order to answer the research questions, the study analyzed the school documents specific for the two schooling levels: the competence profile of the graduate, the specific curriculum in terms of the disciplines, number of hours allotted /discipline, the modality of organizing the activities of the practical activities.

5.2. Sample

The analysis had been achieved within a focus group meeting with 6 specialists in education sciences (3 trainers in pedagogical high schools, 3 trainers at the university level), all of them having a didactic experience of over 20 years, experience as trainers in teachers' continuous training programs, as specialists in national activities for the professionalization of the didactic career.

Also, 40 tutors for the preschool and primary educational cycle (8 males and 32 females having a didactic experience over 20 years, national trainers, persons involved in practical activities for tenure examination, professional certificate exam, didactic exams) have been requested to answer a questionnaire to identify the main aspects related to the improvement of the teachers' initial training in order to ensure a good professional insertion.

6. Findings

The two types of teachers' initial training follow the application of the concurrent model (the interlacing between theoretical and practical training).

The syllabus and programs for the differentiated curriculum (those elaborated to date) from the specialization preschool teacher /primary teacher, in the pedagogical high school, include psychology and pedagogy disciplines selected appropriately which can be found in the initial training curriculum in the European system. However, the allocation of the pedagogical and methodological disciplines on years of study an number of hours /week is not satisfactory for the formation of the competences specific to the didactic profession.

If we analyze the syllabus for the specialization preschool teacher /primary teacher within pedagogical high schools, we observe a reduced number of fundamental and specialty disciplines

(Fundamentals of Pedagogy, Theory and Methodology of Curriculum, Theory and Practice of Instruction and Evaluation, Special Psychopedagogy, Developmental Psychology, Psychology of Education), didactics of specialty (Methodology of Teaching Romanian /Mathematics /History /Geography /Music, Drawing /Practical Abilities /Physical Education), and a considerable number of optional disciplines (Class Management, Communication Techniques, innovative didactics in transdisciplinary approach etc.).

The curriculum and the syllabuses /programs at the university level are better centered on the competence profile of the teacher, being revised yearly according to the teaching criteria and standards for the didactic profession. This flexibility in curricular organization determined by higher education autonomy offers a propitious background for a permanent reconfiguration of school curriculum according to initial training needs, correlated with the demands of the professional market.

In the curriculum of the bachelor /conversion level from the specialized faculties we identify a solid body of fundamental and specialty disciplines and only few disciplines centered on the teacher's didactic competences. Among these, we can mention: Theory and Methodology of Curriculum, Theory and Methodology of Instruction, Theory and Methodology of Evaluation, School Management, Early Education, Psychology of Play, Integrated Education, Developmental Psychology, History of Pedagogy, Compared Pedagogy. There also transversal disciplines: ICT; Methodology of Educational Research, Ethics and Deontology. The electives include among others: Puericulture and Hygiene for Children, Alternative Pedagogies, Logopedy, Family Psychology, Educational and Institutional Standards, Assistance and Protection of Children's Rights; Self-Awareness and Personal Development. The category of didactics include: Methodology of Teaching Romanian /Mathematics /History /Geography /Music /Drawing /Practical Abilities /Physical Education.

Specialists in education sciences and tutors recommend the following reorientations of the administrative, curricular and training management state in the initial training process through the pedagogical high school:

- the modification of the syllabus for the IX-th and X-th grade for the fundamental disciplines Introduction in Pedagogy and Theory and Methodology of Curriculum, Theory and Practice of Instruction and Evaluation in accordance with the curriculum for the preschool and primary educational cycle and the rethink of the number of hours /week (presently, there are 2 hours /week respectively 1 hour /week for these disciplines and summative evaluation is achieved through midterm paper;
- the completion of support materials for the specialty fundamental disciplines (manuals, methodological guides) adapted to current syllabus;
- redesign of curriculum for the practical activities through: extended time range; enabling a deep knowledge of the institutional dynamics; a rise in the pupil's autonomy and engagement in the pedagogical practice activities (as regards the analysis of model activities, self-analysis of own activities, elaboration of didactic strategies, elaboration of the evaluation instruments, the design of instruments for the acquaintanceship of the pupil /class).

In the initial training at the higher education level, we can mention the following recommendations:

- a better coordination of pedagogical practice activities and the determination of the mentors' status as mentors are involved in the practical training of students;

- to propose viable evaluation standards for the activities developed during the practical stages;
- the design of practical activities content for each year of study with a concrete training and clear evaluation criteria;
- to secure the continuity between theoretical, methodological and practical training.

For each of the two forms of schooling, the specialists in education sciences and tutors emphasize the necessity of developing an unitary framework of initial training in relation to the professional integration demands, expressed through the requirements of the tenure examination and of the professional certificate exam.

Practical stages considered to be the main training "laboratory" of didactic competences, include thoroughly described and regulated requirements. The emphasis is laid upon participative observation and the project method. The evaluation of pedagogical practice activities is very important. Participative observation activities unfold during 2 academic years (pedagogical high school) and 1 year (higher education); didactic activities proper are carried out during 2 academic years (pedagogical high school), respectively 2 academic years (higher education). Observation instruments as well as the content elements of the didactic project and their elaboration requirements are designed by the team of tutors for the specialty practice and the quality depend on their professional competences, as there are no standardized instruments at the national level.

However, there are distinct differences between the modalities of organizing practical activities at the high school level as compared to the same activity developed at the university level. Although syllabuses include the same number of hours - 4 hours /week for the specialty practice, there are differences in the organization and management of this activity. At high school level, the specialty practice is managed through the implication of three categories of specialists (coordinator of the pedagogical practice as a specialist in education sciences, tutor as a specialist in the academic disciplines specific for the curriculum preschool /primary cycle, preschool /primary teacher as a specialist for the preschool /primary education cycle). At the level of university studies, pedagogical practice is coordinated by the practical activity coordinator who can be any teacher in the faculty, regardless of the specialty, who has training activities included in the syllabus for the bachelor studies together with the preschool /primary teacher.

The evaluation of the theoretical training stage is done at the end of the high school studies (4 years) respectively of the bachelor studies (3 years). The training activities can be seen in the competence portfolio acquired by the graduate of the high school, elaborated after accomplishing two practical activities (one at preschool level the other at primary level) evaluated by the interdisciplinary team of coordinating the specialty practice, preceding the baccalaureate, which has oral and written exams at the disciplines from the initial core curriculum (Romanian language, Mathematics, optional discipline). In case of the university studies, the graduates have to defend a bachelor thesis and /or will sit a written exam based on specialty bibliography (Romanian language and literature, Didactics of specialty).

7. Conclusion

Actually, there is a call for a restructuring of the whole initial training domain, based on purposeful strategy. The objectives of initial training have to correlate to the new curriculum for early education, which has underwent substantial modifications during the last 10 years (in 2008 and 2018, by reorganizing the

educational activities in the preschool cycle from the perspective of specific approaches for education at early ages – holistic education, competence-centered training, education which respects the domain of human development, experiential education etc.; in 2013 and 2014 through the structuring of preuniversity education from the perspective of the 8 key competences).

To that effect, teachers' initial training has to target fundamental domains of the preschooler's and primary school pupil's development: different stimulation of the preschooler /primary school pupil and personalization of the didactic approaches; achievement of an educational approach based on the interaction with the adult /children, on an interactive organization of the learning environment and learning activities; promotion of play as an educational form at early ages; parents' counselling and their active implication and the development of formal and informal partnerships in order to support the child in his training process; integrated design of educational activities to facilitate the basic acquisitions (literacy, numeracy); child support in acquiring and developing transversal competences (communication in foreign languages, digital, entrepreneurship, socio-emotional, intercultural, cultural expression, learning autonomy, etc.).

An unitary framework, better centered upon competences with real professional relevance has to be developed for teachers' initial training. To become a specialist in early education (preschool and primary education cycle), the graduates of the pedagogical high school should attend bachelor studies in faculties of education sciences; this situation is found in a small percentage, as most graduates of the pedagogical high school reorient towards other professional domains after graduation.

The analysis carried out through this study emphasizes that the training of specialists for preschool and primary education needs certain optimization modalities: more specialization means and professional diversification, coexistence of integrated models of training (theoretical training updated according to the new curricular approaches for early education; interdisciplinary practical activities); the training process should be centered upon skills and competences adequate to the professional profile of the teacher, upon transversal competences which would allow reflection mobility, increased adaptability and an articulate character to professional approach.

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