

WAYS TO IMPROVE THE TRAINING OF TEACHERS FOR EARLY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT:

The aim of this study is show that didactic competences required by teaching profession can be acquired through the Master`s programme Psychopedagogy of Early Education and Young Schooling. The Motto of each educational system should be “no child without education and care”. Therefore, educational systems should be improved on all levels, starting with preschool and primary school education. In our study, we have tried to identify ways to increase quality in education by a thorough initial training of teachers for preschool and primary education. As mentioned by EURYDICE Report [1], the priorities of the European Commission are centred on education and professional training for early education and care, school graduation, prevention of early school leaving (ESL), development of higher education, graduates` insertion on the labour market, early professional formation (EPF) and lifelong learning. According to these strategies, early education and teacher training sets its main objectives for the years to come. Education and professional formation have been considered the most important objectives for a future development of the society. Teachers attend initial training to acquire and develop competences in early education and school. Future teachers enrol Bachelor and Master Studies in educational sciences, special education, social policies, psychology, adult education and history of universal culture.

KEYWORDS: competences, education, instruction, training, performance, strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is the main objective of a society aiming at progress in all fields of activity. A nation that focuses on education stimulates the educational field and develops a strategic thinking. The improvement of education depends on the extent to which educational policies try to improve the selection of future teaching staff and the degree of their preparation for the didactic profession. The importance of education across European countries has increased in the past few years. Along with adhesion to the European Union, Romania took important measures to adjust the national educational system to European requirements on initial and continuous teacher training. Delors (2000) stated that: „*Modern societies show an increasing urge to change the teaching-learning process into a process that would support individual judgement and the feeling of responsibility in each individual, so as to allow pupils/students to*

develop their anticipatory abilities and to adapt to all changes around them. Educational process should develop the conditions in favour of the individual's lifelong education". It is considered that education starts at conception and continues throughout its entire life. Apart from genetic and environmental factors, we consider education as one important factor in shaping a future personality capable of taking part in social activities, consuming and most importantly producing material and cultural goods.

Psychology studies emphasize the importance of creating an environment that would support the development of human personality, a warm, affectionate environment where instructive-educational influences make a contribution to shaping the human personality according to its inborn potential.

Children are the most valuable treasure of a nation, they are the future generation, and therefore investments in education and childcare are absolutely necessary. Teachers have the noble and responsible task of forming a generation capable of facing a society with many unknown elements.

Dan Potolea (2001) mentions some roles and competences that teachers have to assume:

- The role of expert;
- Didactic roles;
- Educational roles;
- Roles of researcher;
- Institutional and community roles;
- Roles regarding personal and professional development.

According to the National Education Law of 2011, teachers' initial training consists of:

- a) Theoretical initial training in their field carried out in universities in accredited study programmes;
- b) didactic or scientific master programme of 2 years;
- c) teaching practice of one school year carried out in an educational unit under a mentor's coordination.

The interest for professionalization of teaching career has increased lately, throughout Europe and especially in our country. Practitioners try to acquire professional competences in accordance with specific training standards for didactic profession.

2. Early education across Europe

A study conducted by the European Commission in 2012 shows an increased interest among Community countries to reform education. It is

believed that education should start at early ages through educational programme for children of 0 to 6-7 years of age and.

The law on improving the quality of education in all Member States was adopted in 2007. It stipulates that: “*teaching provides a service of considerable social relevance: teachers play a vital role in enabling people to identify and develop their talents and to fulfil their potential for personal growth and well-being, as well as helping them to acquire the complex range of knowledge, skills and key competences that they will need as citizens throughout their personal, social and professional lives*” (Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on improving the quality of teacher education (Official Journal C 300, 12.12.2007).

According to the European Commission Report from October 2012, currently children from most European countries, except Denmark, Finland, Norway, Slovenia and Sweden are placed at risk due to economic recession. [2]. The socio-economic environment influences the possibility to attend school and organized learning in these areas. [3]. Still, compared to other parts of the world, in Europe, the percentage of children with access to education in pre-school years has increased from 85.2% in 2000 to 92.4% in 2010[3]. The European Commission took some measures related to early education which aim to increase the access to education of all children, including those at risk such as disadvantaged areas or Roma children. [4]

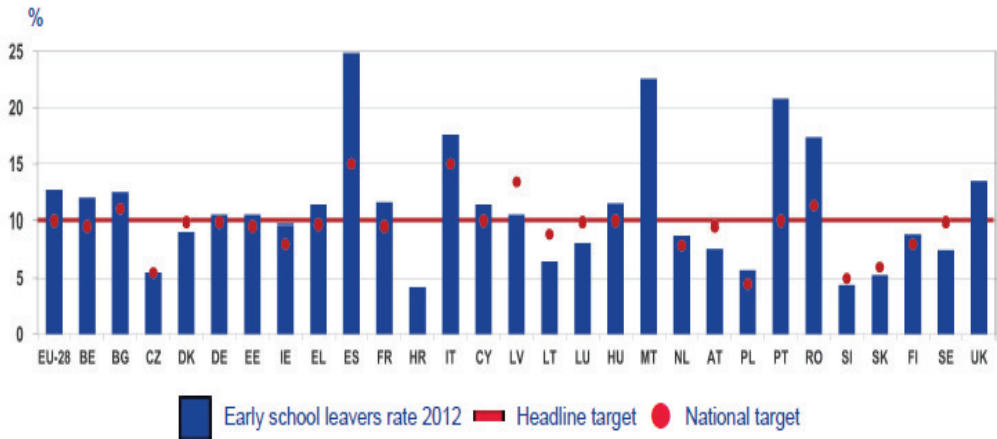


Fig.1.Level and minimum length of initial teacher education on pre-primary teachers

The studies on this topic reveal certain guidelines for the improvement of policies on early education. Emphasis is laid on priority direction which we present in the table below. [5]

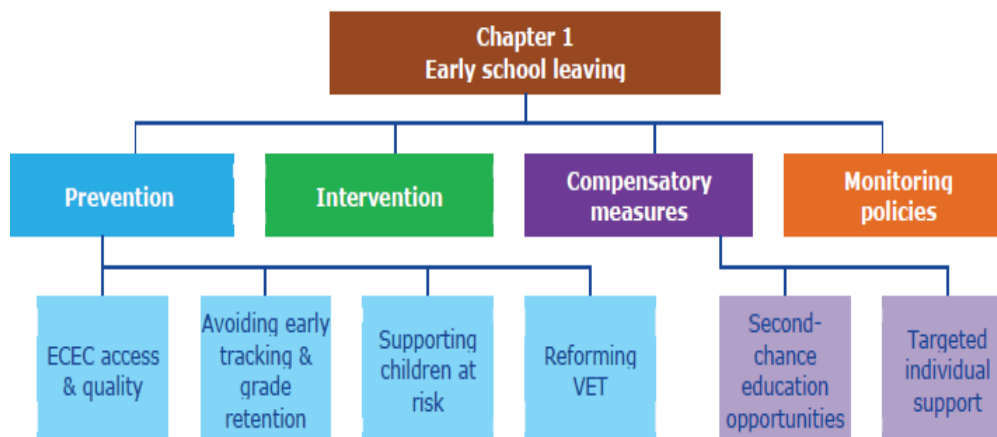


Fig.2. Source: Eurostat (data extracted 25 April 2014).

In most countries, educational reforms focused on the implementation of a curriculum starting with the age of 0. This curriculum was adopted based on certain principles developed for the benefit of children. It would implement educational support so that the child develops his/her personality in own pace, and would ensure emotional and material support for an optimal development. The curriculum tries to change mentalities and seeks orientation towards policies which support age- appropriate programmes, designed for the child's level of understanding.

The Curriculum for Early Education was implemented in Romania according to the requirements of the Commission for Education and it follows the Union's strategies and directives. The entire educational process is based on the *Curriculum for Early Education* developed on two age levels: 0-3 years and 3-6 years. Preschool education starts at the age of 2-3; kindergartens are organized in groups according to the age of children: low group, middle group and preparatory group. Preschool education in Romania is not compulsory but most children 3 to 6 years of age attend one type of kindergarten: with normal programme between 8 and 12, prolonged programme between 6 and 16 and weekly programme from Monday to Friday.

Values promoted by the curriculum for early education:

- the child's fundamental rights (the right to life and health, to family, to education, to be listened to and the freedom of speech);
- the child's global development;
- inclusion, as process of promoting diversity and tolerance;
- non-discrimination and the exclusion of social, cultural, economic and gender inequity (equal chances for all children, irrespective of their gender, ethnic belonging, religion through a balanced educational approach).

3. Pre-primary and primary school teacher training

The directions for competence development required for teacher training have been set (Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualification, European Commission, DG EAC, 2005) [5].

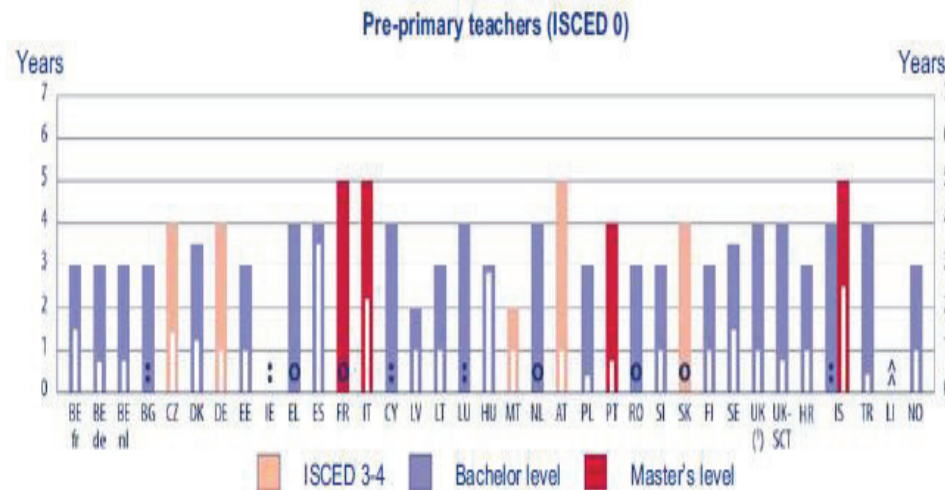


Fig.3. Source: Eurostat (data extracted 25 April 2014).

The training of specialists for early education is organized in most European countries by universities through three-four yearlong studies. Teenagers are more and more reluctant when it comes to working in education system due to the didactic profession's lack of attractiveness. Therefore, state policies try to improve national education policies and make the didactic profession attractive for the best high school students, who would want to choose teaching out of passion and vocation: *“in their policies and programmers, countries widely recognize the changing role of teachers towards becoming collaborators, facilitators of learning, and lifelong learners, but there is still too little debate involving teachers themselves.”* [6]

Most countries try to apply different strategies of making the didactic profession more attractive:

- Improving the recruitment of candidates for the teaching career;
- Improving the admission system to Bachelor and Master studies for teaching career;
- Thorough initial training;
- Support programmes for young teachers;
- Improving continuous learning programmes;
- Improving teachers' mobility programmes;

- Programmes of professional retraining;
- Improving promotion conditions;
- More attractive salaries;
- Changing mentalities towards teaching career;
- Improving work conditions. [7]

More economically developed countries have a better recruitment and retention system in teaching profession.

Table 1.1: Mapping of countries and education systems according to policy measures aiming at enhancing the attractiveness of the teaching profession

| | Global and systemic strategy | Significant piecemeal policy measures | No significant targeted policy measures |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| Global shortage of qualified teachers | Norway | Austria, Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg | Belgium (fr), Italy, The Netherlands, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Sweden, Turkey |
| No global shortage of qualified teachers | Estonia, Ireland, Lithuania, Scotland | Belgium(nl), Czech Republic, England, France, Hungary, Poland, Portugal | Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Iceland, Latvia, Malta, Spain |

Fig.4. Source: Eurostat (data extracted 25 April 2014)

The quality of educational services offered by universities is mostly conditioned by the quality of human resources, namely the professional quality of teaching staff, the relevance of the curriculum but also by the manner of its practical implementation. The higher education system has to impose high quality human resources, high professional standards of teachers' promotion.

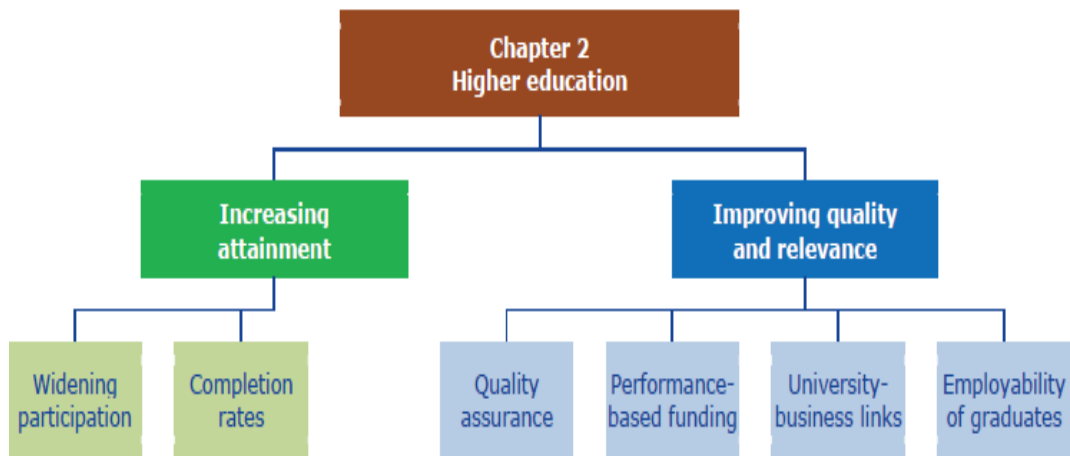


Fig.5. Source: Eurostat (data extracted 25 April 2014).

The teaching profession can be achieved by the controlling the involved factors:

- Identifying the training needs of future academic teaching staff;
- Investigating the motivational factors involved in choosing teaching career;
- Polling the students' attitude towards teaching career at the beginning, during and at the end of the psychopedagogic study programme;
- Students' awareness of their own abilities compared to the professional competences required by the standards for academic teaching career;
- The trainers' awareness of students' abilities and the stimulation of active involvement in their own training;

Since 2011, our country promotes *coherent and comprehensible educational policies* in initial training of academic teaching staff:

- Bachelor studies accompanied by psycho-pedagogic programmes of training for teaching career;
- Scientific or didactic Master programme;
- Doctoral studies.

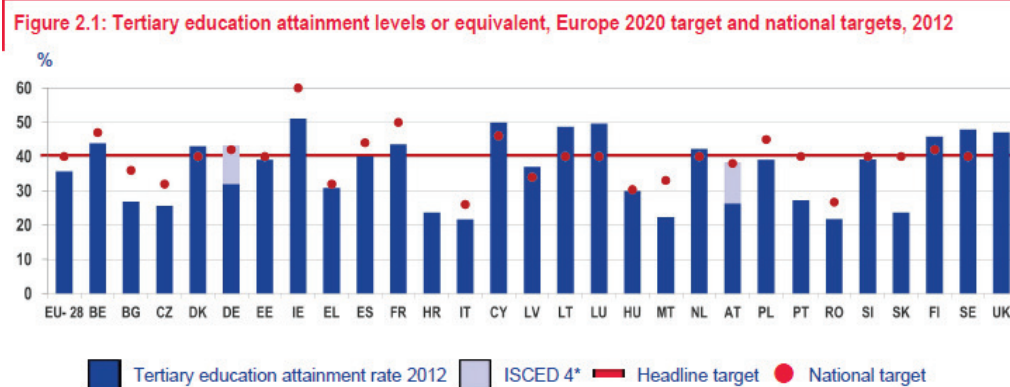


Fig.6. Source: Eurostat (data extracted 25 April 2014).

The Master certificate is an important premise for the beginning of teaching career; it basically makes a contribution to the training of undergraduate teaching staff.

By acquiring didactic competences, the teacher will be better prepared to face the challenges of a continuously changing society. Generally speaking, competence means:

- Set of potential behaviours (cognitive, affective, psycho-motor), which allow an individual to practice efficiently a complex activity;
- Set of a person`s abilities to fulfil all work-specific tasks (related to teaching profession) at a high level of;
- Minimal professional standard sometimes regulated by law, that a person has to reach in fulfilling certain tasks related to teaching profession.
- Competence is connected to a job, to a profession, a status, a professional or social referential situation; in this situation we are talking about the teaching profession. [8]

Professional training activity in terms of modern and postmodern psychology seeks certain principles embedded in specific strategic models:

- The incentive-personal model (based on stimulating the trainees motivation and on the development of their individual potential);
- The model of acquisition by social insertion (based on learning in real professional context);
- Humanistic model (which aims at acquiring general knowledge, intellectuals` training);

- Technical model (centred on acquiring professional knowledge in order to train specialists, and professionals)

Professional training is experiencing an unprecedented interest. Remarkable personalities have dealt with the issue of achieving teaching competence. Among them we would like to mention F.M. Gerard, X. Roegiers, J. Cardinet, J. E. Ormrod, R.W. Houston, F. Raynal, Dall’Alba G., Sandberg J., A. Reunier, P. Perrenoud, S. Marcus, N. Mitrofan, I. Jinga, C. Cuceş, M. Diaconu, R.M. Niculescu, R. Iucu, L. Antonesei, L. Gliga, I. Jinga, E. Istrate, S. Cristea, I. Neacşu.

The paradigms of professional training based on certain models are a useful guideline for professional training programmes of future teachers. Trainers’ training is a strong point in modernizing education; it is the most important way of renewing quality *authentic* education according to *the demands of postmodern society*. [9]

4. Priorities

Our faculty, the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Psychology and Social Work tries to implement *coherent programmes of initial training for undergraduate teaching staff* (for example, didactic Master studies, scientific Master studies, post-graduate studies of training for teaching career). We are focused on developing study programmes according to *European requirements and the professional standards for undergraduate teaching staff*, on designing and developing *intensive programmes*, and an intensive psycho-pedagogic training programme for undergraduate teaching staff that would promote:

- *A flexible training offer*, adapted to specific learning needs, which facilitates the access to the development of undergraduate teaching career;
- *Increase the quality of academic teaching staff training* by integrating training strategies and techniques which are specific for undergraduate education;
- *The development of teaching staff competences* according to fields of interest, with positive impact upon the quality of undergraduate education;
- Support for the *beginning* as well as *the development of teaching career* by encouraging attendance at training courses;
- Ensuring a *effective functioning* of training programmes for future academic teaching staff by focusing the whole instructional process on the development/improvement of teaching and learning competences;
- The undergraduate’s teaching staff’s *contribution to research* that would make a contribution to their professional training. [10]

In our study programme, we have asked our Master students from two study programmes (*Psychopedagogy of Early Education and Young Schooling and Interactive Pedagogy*) to rank the aspects that they find attractive in the teaching career according to a given list. The master students placed on top positions: the need for esteem, willingness to develop and improve, the chance for vocational fulfillment and the need to practice well the chosen profession (first place), on second place they mentioned: the need for esteem, the nature of profession itself, the possibility to obtain double certification, on the third place they have identified: increased chances for getting a more attractive work place, the possibility to train future generations, on the fourth place they ticked job safety and on the fifth place, they mentioned autonomy. We consider that all these indicators are a mark of the need for self-fulfilment and professional training and are also intrinsic motivational factors in choosing teaching career.

| The significance of teaching profession | PETSM | | PI | | Total group | |
|--|-------|------|------|------|-------------|------|
| | % | Rank | % | Rank | % | Rank |
| Willingness to develop and improve | 87,3 | I | 88,9 | I | 88,1 | I |
| Need for esteem | 58,7 | II | 59,3 | II | 59 | II |
| Increased chances for getting a more attractive work place | 37,5 | III | 32,7 | III | 35,1 | III |
| The chance for vocational fulfilment | 73,6 | I | 68,9 | I | 71,25 | I |
| The possibility to train future generations | 48,5 | III | 39,5 | III | 44 | III |
| The need to practice well the chosen profession | 79,5 | I | 76,4 | I | 77,95 | I |
| The nature of profession itself | 65,4 | II | 69,3 | II | 67,35 | II |
| Autonomy | 19,5 | V | 16,9 | V | 18,2 | V |
| Job safety | 28,6 | IV | 25,9 | IV | 27,25 | IV |
| The possibility to obtain double certification | 49,7 | II | 55,6 | II | 52,65 | II |

Table no1. Hierarchy of motivational elements for the teaching career

After graduating the Master programme *Psychopedagogy of Early Education and Young Schooling*, students have mentioned a few aspects related to the quality of their training achieved through this programme. Below, we list some of its features:

- An extremely well-structured syllabus, adapted to the needs of modern education;

- Modules well-structured on units, which try to involve the student actively in learning activities;
- Connection between theoretical knowledge and their applicability;
- Availability for professional development of future teaching staff.

The goal of any university is the modernizing and improvement of educational act so that it would comply with the demands of knowledge based society, in times of competitive economic market and of a society based on European democratic values. [13]

Conclusions

The contemporary world is evolving so rapidly that all professional categories, especially trainers of trainers and teachers have to admit the fact that their initial training is not sufficient. Initial training should change into lifelong learning. Teaching activity demands constant training and improvement of the teacher's` competences and teaching techniques. Teacher training is facing times of permanent changes and reorientations, so that teachers would possess exactly those intellectual and human qualities that innovate their teaching activity. Quality education involves continuous improvement of professional performance as dictated by social changes. Education institutions try to reach the priority objective – continuous development of human resources so that competitiveness and excellence would be balanced with social cohesion and access freedom. Thus, they would lead to the improvement of the entire society.

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