

## **PERFORMER - A PATH TO NEW PERFORMANCES AND PROFESSIONS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

Rodica-Mariana NICULESCU<sup>1</sup>, Aida FRANGULEA-PASTOR<sup>2</sup>  
<sup>1,2</sup> Transilvania University of Braşov, Romania

### **ABSTRACT**

*The master programme – EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY OF PRESCHOOL AND PRIMARY SCHOOL offered and still offers a valuable and almost unique niche in the training and educational market provided by higher education institutions beside other public or private providers. In the context of European and national policy implementation regarding early childhood education field, the master enables graduates to be much more competitive in labor market. Alongside the skills developed by completing the training program, the master gives the possibility of establishing a group of experts in early childhood education and eligible to work in the public and private contexts. This qualitative research included the analysis of graduates' reflections on the journey of learning alongside the two-year master program and self-management in terms of quality of learning.*

**KEYWORDS:** early childhood care and education, teacher training,

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The master study programme titled *EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY OF PRESCHOOL AND PRIMARY SCHOOL* is provided in the framework of the Sectorial Operational Programme for the Development of Human Resources through the "*Perspective of master training of early education and young age schooling specialists - PERFORMER*" project. The afore mentioned project contributes, through its proposed results, in achieving one of the most important objectives of the programme, thus contributing to the sustainable increase of productivity for highly trained specialists. Given the role of the master study programme to provide early education professionals, there are created the prerequisites for a highly trained workforce, able to adapt to new technologies and the ever-changing labor market requirements which is essential for a competitive and dynamic economy. In particular, the PERFORMER project master's study programme is oriented towards training early education professionals.

Based on the diagnosis that fundamentals the Sectorial Operational Programme for the Development of Human Resources (POS DRU) and the projects ran under its coordination, the National Reform Programme 2007 - 2010 underlines the fact that *investments are needed in modernizing education and professional training, especially in the field of early / preschool education.*

This is done in the context of the need for the education and training system to respond to the labor market changes and an increased demand for high quality education. All of this is directly linked to *the level of qualification of the human resources involved in education* and the lifelong learning programmes.

Romania achieved a real progress in the latest years relative to early education through implementing various national programmes and projects and by enforcing an adequate legal framework.

The programmes / projects that achieved the most positive impact have been the Early Education Programme for Areas of Stimulation (1991 - 1998) - national programme implemented at national level with the aid of UNICEF Romania aimed at developing highly trained teachers, interdisciplinary teams, new areas of stimulation applicable in the classroom with small groups, a new curricular approach - , the Early Education Reform Project - financed by EBRD and the European Commission and the Inclusive Early Education Project - supported by the World Bank.

The legislative framework that supported early education included the establishment of the "preparation" grade (2002 - 2005) through the Ministry Order (M.O.) no. 3799/22.05.2002, the Early Education Curriculum (for the preschool level 3-6/7 years old) through the M.O. no. 5233/01.09.2008 and providing on the Education ministry official website support materials for those who interact with the child between 0 and 3 years old (as part of the 0 - 3 years old curriculum), adoption of the Fundamental Highlights in Learning and Early Development of the child, from birth to the age of 7 (M.O. no 3851/17.05.2010) as well as the approval, through the M.O. no 3850/17.05.2010 of the *Standards for the teaching - learning documentation in early education* and the *Minimal endowment for early education services targeted at 3 - 6/7 years old children*.

Currently, an important pillar in early education in Romania is the National Education Act (no 1/2011). As a result of this law, professionals in education base their activity on a new early education curriculum, (for the infant level and the preschool level), standard finalities for early education, clear relations between the infant - preschool - preparatory class levels as well as training for the teaching staff.

These nationally implemented measures contribute to the European early education objectives set by the Communication from the European Commission - *Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow*, Brussels, 17.2.2011 - COM (2011) 66 - which states that " Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is the essential foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability" and the *Council conclusions on early childhood education and care: providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow* (2011/C 175/03) - Official Journal of the European Union 15.6.2011 which says that "high quality early childhood education and

care provides a wide range of short- and long-term benefits for both individuals and society at large".

## **2. CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR EARLY EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS**

Continuing education represents the totality of the education endeavors of a person during the course of his / hers existence, including initial training, lifelong learning, ulterior training programmes aimed at forming and developing intellectual / moral / physical feats. From a social perspective, lifelong learning / continuing education are terms that are replacing gradually words such as "learning" or "education" in the daily vocabulary. Their often use illustrates an evolution in the policies and practices of professional insertion (prolonging the learning period after the teen years). The notion of "training", poli-semantically, refers the ensemble of general knowledge, both technical and practical, that are involved in practicing a trade as well as behaviors, attitudes and dispositions that allow job integration as well as social integration. The objectives of initial education and continuing training for the teaching professionals involved in early education must take into account the need for a successful implementation of the early education policies as well as the multiplication of the roles of the teacher - manager, councilor, resource, mediator, etc.).

Mr. Romita Iucu (2007, p.27) observes this dynamic regarding the expansion of the social and relational framework of the teacher - "the modern paradigms which regard the teacher as a member of a well defined organizational structure (the school), of a community (either local of professional) require a different level of acceptance of the roles and professional identities, underlining the pragmatically, reflexive and creative side of the training process".

By arguing the expansion of the roles assumed by the teaching professionals in infant, preschool and primary education, the *EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY OF PRESCHOOL AND PRIMARY SCHOOL* master study programme answer to these particular needs for the training services sector.

### **2.1. The impact of the masters study programme in training early education professionals.**

The masters study programme, through its planned activities, has been addressed to a wide spectrum of occupations in the educational fields (including some professional niches) such as mentor, school inspector, school principal, instructional designer, pedagogical research assistant, etc. 75 students from 3 universities have attended the masters programme. The research that assessed the relevance of the study programme involved 25 students from the *Transilvania* University of Braşov, Faculty of Psychology and Education

Sciences. The objective of the analysis is to identify teaching routes over the course of the 2 years from the perspective of the self management of teaching quality.

The subjects / students have been invited to write an essay regarding the self management of teaching quality from the perspective of the relationship between the teaching process and the following elements: classes/seminaries, documents provided by the professors, documents identified by the student, practical activities and feedback from the professors. Out of the 25 students, 18 actually submitted the essays that had an average length of 1,5 pages. The following categories have been defined after the analysis of the submitted essays:

- The motivation behind choosing this master study programme
- Strengths of the master study programme
- Opportunities provided as a result in participating in the masters study programme
- The study programme as an investment in continuous training
- The professor's role in the teaching process
- Threats / obstacles in the teaching process
- Weaknesses of the programme

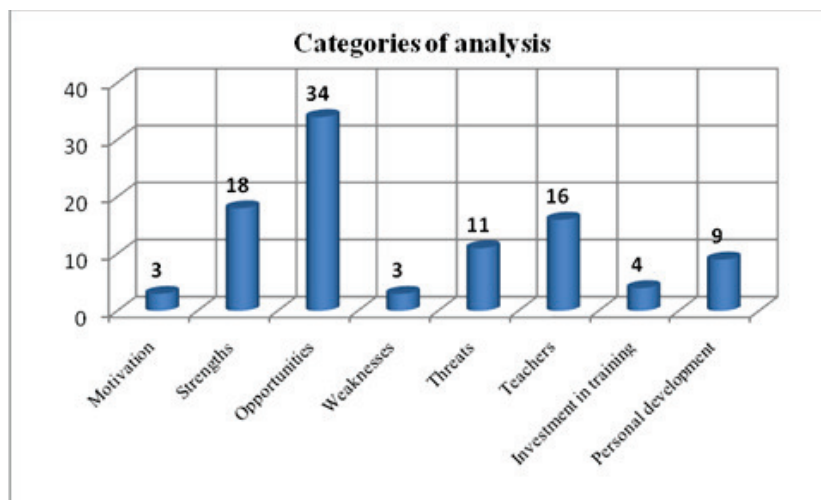


Fig. 1. Analysis categories for the submitted essays

As the graphic above is showing, the masters study programme has been evaluated, by most students, as a opportunity in the learning process. The lowest values were recorded in perceiving the programme as a weakness or as an investment in continuous training.

In relation with the theme of the essay, *the motivation* of attending the masters study programme has been identified, in all instances, with the

necessity to adapt the professional activity to the direct beneficiaries of early education - the children.

During the analysis of the *strengths and opportunities*, the definitive conclusion has been that the most mentioned elements have been the specific elements of the programme translated into knowledge, abilities and attitudes.

General competences regarding analysis, reflection, arguing and interpreting as well as general personality traits included in the study programme have been identified through mentions of the conceptual clarifications in the field of education and early development, the ability to expose reasoning, analysis, reflection, interpretation, the ability to create and work in a team, active involvement.

Managerial competences have been included by the students in their essays by mentioning elements related to the management of groups and relationships, adapting of the learning activities to the available timeframe (both in terms of finalizing an activity as well as time as a resource), identifying new professional areas, fine tuning the pedagogical endeavors, personal development, etc.

Communication competences have been identified in the essays through mentions of the ability to expose / present reasoning, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialists in early education and outside professionals. Such competences have been practiced by the students through oral evaluations of projects as well as oral exams.

Design competences have been used during professional activities (at infant, preschool and primary school level) as well as during teaching scenarios where elements from the personal professional experience have been included.

Methodological competences have been developed by managing the own teaching process as well as that of the direct beneficiaries of early education (through self management, feedback and constant evaluation), stress management (as a motivational factor as well as a disturbance). During team activities, the professional experiences shared and analyzed have been integrated in the learning process as best practices.

Social competences: the ability to animate groups of children / adults.

Research competences have been implicitly indicated by the students through experiments achieved in a professional capacity as well as those observed in practice locations.

Evaluation competences have been indirectly developed through feedback and evaluation by the professors.

Within the submitted essays, the teaching process from the masters study programme has been perceived in direct relation to the *professional training and development* as a component of lifelong learning, personal development, evolving from teacher to education provider, identifying professional niches, belonging to a professional group of experts, changes in the

education system (integration of early education principles, decentralization, organizational changes and evolutions). Also, this study programme has been identified as a way to adapt to a certain social dynamic with direct impact on education in relation to the *investment in training and developing the human resource* in the context of globalization, national and international competitiveness, work productivity early education policy implementation at European and national level.

*The weaknesses* associated with the masters study programme has been the poor time management which did not allow for an extensive documentation, a deep analysis of the discussed themes, and has been an obstacle in participating in all proposed activities.

One of the most important factors in the teaching process has been identified by the student as being the *professor* (generically) and its role as a feedback provider. Also, the roles of the professor as perceived by the students included documentation provider, task designer, professional role model, facilitator, expert, etc.

The main *threats / obstacles* in the teaching process associated with the masters study programme that have been identified by the students regarded the novelty of the activities in relation to the previous teaching (initial and continuous) experiences. Thus, a new activity classification has been used, with categories such as A for academic activities, B for eLearning activities, C for group activities, D for supplementary documentations. The students acknowledged the fact that C type activities have been an impediment due both to the divergent objectives of the group members, inconsistent levels of involvement from the group members, different learning styles and exchanging the structure of the group. The students have mentioned as threats / obstacles in the learning process the schedule of the activities and the number of tasks assigned.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Teaching early education professionals is one of the most important steps toward a coherent and consistent implementation of the specific policies of the field and the EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY OF PRESCHOOL AND PRIMARY SCHOOL masters study programme represents an unique opportunity for the continuous training.

The first need that derive from updating the relevant legislative framework is the elaboration / reforming of the early education curriculum (consistent with the obligatory education curriculum) and informing / training and counseling the teaching staff that will conduct educational activities in the infant, preschool and preparatory grade classrooms.

Such measures determine the expansion of professional and social roles assigned to a preschool teacher. Besides his / hers teaching activity, at the preschool education level there is a need to involve and work alongside professional nongovernmental associations, civil society bodies, public authorities with competences in the educational field. Also, special attention needs to be assigned to the reality that the market for educational services is a educational habitus that has the potential both for covering training needs for the teaching staff as well as for disseminating early education best practices.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- [1] Government of Romania (2007). *National Reformed Programme*. Bucharest.
- [2] Communication from the European Commission - *Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow*, Brussels, 17.2.2011 - COM (2011) 66 final
- [3] *Council conclusions on early childhood education and care: providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow* (2011/C 175/03) - Official Journal of the European Union 15.6.2011
- [4] Iucu, R., Păcurari, O. (2001). *Initial and continuous training of teaching staff. Introduction of the transferable credits system: evolution and perspectives*. Bucharest: Humanitas Educational.
- [5] Iucu, R. (2005). *Project: Four educational policy exercise in Romania. IInd Theme. Training the teaching staff-working version*. Bucharest: Centru Educația 2000+.
- [6] Iucu, R. (2007). *Training the teaching staff. Systems, policies, strategies*. Bucharest: Humanitas.
- [7] Zamfir, C., Vlăsceanu, L., (1993). *Dictionary of Sociology*. Bucharest: Babel