

CURRICULAR INNOVATIONS IN THE ROMANIAN TRAINING PROGRAMMES FOR IN-SERVICE PRE-PRIMARY AND PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to highlight the curricular innovations from the continuous training programmes for preschool and primary school teachers from Romania. The first section of the chapter will present the context of the educational reform generating transformations at the level of teachers' continuous training programmes. The second section presents and describes the main programmes implemented in Romania, aimed at the continuous training of teachers in applying curricular innovations. Continuous training programmes have significant implications in terms of the quality of teachers' training through the curricular resources created and, especially, in terms of educational policy, through the elaboration of professional standards for teachers from preschool and primary education.

Key words: continuous training, curricular innovations, pre-primary teachers, primary teachers

1. The context of the educational reform regarding the continuous training of pre-primary and primary school teachers

In a world where changes occur rapidly, the demand for active, well-informed and responsible teachers is stronger than ever. In the present context, the teaching career traverses a period of transformations, most of them generated by the need to harmonize the educational system with the European job market, as well as by the changes in the educational, political, social and economic paradigms. All these imply a constant improvement of the quality of the educational system. Teacher training is a key element of every educational system, which is regarded as a priority, anticipating the development of education. Along with the educational reform started

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after 1989, reorganizations at the level of the national law of education occurred, as well as of curricular documents for primary and pre-primary teaching, which triggered the need to continuously train pre-primary and primary school teachers, so that they may be able to adjust themselves to the new changes.

Introducing curricular innovations in the pre-primary and primary school teachers' continuous training has been slowly applied after 1990 and, on a general level, until 2005, when the first programmes designed particularly for pre-primary teachers occurred. In the first stage, the teacher training programme, from the eight elements of the educational reform, addressed all teachers (*The Reform Project in the Pre-university System, 3724-RO, 2002*), with no adjustment to the pre-primary and primary education particularities. The New National Law of Education from Romania, which entered into force at the beginning of 2011, also envisages a new wave of changes in the area of teachers' initial and continuous training. Starting in 2012, a relevant modification in the Romanian law of education consisted in moving the preparatory group from pre-primary education to primary education, under its new name of "preparatory grade". The focus on building skills, attitudes related to socio-emotional development, physical development or learning attitudes and abilities, together with the traditionally pursued academic competences, demands that teachers reconsider the educational process, the specific organization of teaching, learning and evaluation for this level of education. In this context, both initial and continuous training should adapt to the new requirements and special attention should be given to: designing continuous training modules for teachers working with preparatory grades, which should focus especially on curricular integration and evaluation in the context established by the new Law of national education; reviewing the training programmes for primary school teachers; exploiting the mentors already trained through the external funding programmes of the Ministry of National Education, which focused on early education within a new mentoring programme conceived for this segment of the primary level.

Structuring contents according to competences influences the curriculum, discipline didactics and the teaching-learning-evaluation process, as well as school inspection and teacher training. Teacher training should be oriented towards: understanding and using the term competence correctly; studying the need for change in teaching, in order to achieve the elements of competences; reviewing the evaluation system in order to meet the new demands; understanding correctly the terms intra-, multi-, inter- and transdisciplinarity, and applying them in the teaching-learning process. The changes imposed by the pedagogy of competences demand, in their turn, changes at the level of teachers' training strategies.

2. Innovative continuous training programmes for pre-primary and primary school teachers in Romania

The first comprehensive teacher training project for applying the new reorganizations in the Romanian pre-primary education was the *Project for the Reform of Early Education (P.R.E.T.)*. The project was conducted on a national level, in all the 42 counties of Romania (including Bucharest) as part of the larger programme for the reform of early education in Romania and the complex strategy of early education reform (2005-2011), developed by the Ministry of Education. The second component of the project aimed at training and perfecting the kindergarten staff (managers, teachers, nurses, administrators and other categories), specific modules for perfecting pre-primary teachers (approximately 35000 persons), the staff from care centres, childcare staff / nurses / medical staff (approximately 13000), managers (about 2500) and parents. Upon completing these courses, the teachers were given a certificate to attest to the number of credits accumulated. A crucial role in training pre-primary teachers was played by the Educational Programme *Step by Step* from the project “Education for All – Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI)”, which contributed to conducting the training activities of 105 regional trainers and monitoring “in tandem” the activities for 1200 teachers (2007), the training and direct monitorization of 1350 teachers, the training of 104 local mentors and 80 specialists from the institutions of teacher initial training (2009).

The process of training trainers and teachers for the preparatory grade was achieved within the project implemented by the Ministry of National Education, entitled “Interdisciplinary organization of the learning offers for building key competences at students from grades 1-8” – a continuous training programme of the type “blended learning” for primary school teachers, which involved 8194 teachers. The main objectives of the project are: improving the quality of continuous training offers, so that these may become flexible and more adapted to the needs of primary school teachers; increasing the level of continuous training regarding the professional competences of teachers by introducing topical training areas, such as: supporting the building of key competences in primary school students, the interdisciplinary organization of the learning situations, integrated learning techniques; education in the spirit of sustainable development, promoting equality of chances to education. The participation of primary school teachers to the training courses contributes to sharing an innovative-creative vision for improving existing educational practices. The first stage, training national trainers, was conducted during 20 – 24 August 2012, and covered 40 hours. The next stage, training teachers for the preparatory grade, was conducted in each county, including in Bucharest, and consisted of 40 hours of face-to-face

interaction, followed by 94 hours of online interaction. The programme platform contained interactive lessons based on the course material, trainer – trainee discussions, elaboration of projects and teaching materials, evaluation tests. Upon completing this course, the teachers obtained a number of 40 credits. The continuous training of the course was added to the initial training of all teachers who teach preparatory grades. The purpose of this training is to make sure the teachers will adjust to the novelty of the particularities of preparatory grades. The variety of the types of activities included in this training programme focused on clarifying the elements of novelty related to the preparatory grade and providing adequate teaching materials.

The main programmes conducted in Romania for training pre-primary and primary school teachers in applying curricular innovations are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Analysis of the continuous training programmes for pre-primary and primary school teachers in Romania*

Title of programme	Objectives of continuous training	Curricular innovations
<i>Project for the Reform of Early Education (P.R.E.T.)</i> – programme addressed to pre-primary teachers (2005-2011)	Improving the level of pre-primary education quality by perfecting teachers and providing appropriate teaching materials	- Curriculum for early education; - innovative training materials for pre-primary teachers
Educational Programme <i>Step by Step</i> from the project “Education for All – Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI)” – programme for training pre-primary teachers (2007-2009)	Elaborating new educational policies documents and teaching materials	- Professional standards for teachers from early education institutions; - Standards for learning and development from birth until the age of 7; - Teachers’ guide for early and pre-primary education; - Curricular guides for the initial and continuous training of teachers from early education
<i>“Interdisciplinary organization of the learning offers for building key competences in students from grades 1-8”</i> – continuous training programme for primary school teachers (2012-2013)	Improving access and participation of primary school teachers to opportunities of continuous training based on digital resources and blended learning courses, with a view to supporting the building of key competences in lower-elementary students, through the interdisciplinary organization of the learning offers.	- The competence profile of the primary school teacher (preparatory grade – 4 th grade); - Course material for primary school teachers; - Educational reform with material resources in the field; - New school curricula for the preparatory, first and second grades

Identifying the main features of a training programme is important for designing the structure of the scientific process and harmonizing the educational content with the beneficiaries’ individual and group needs. D. Csorba (2013) has recently conducted a study based on a mixed research

methodology, including qualitative and quantitative methods, to identify the continuous training needs of primary school teachers in Romania in the areas of integrated learning and the interdisciplinary approach to the curriculum. Within the same study, a questionnaire was issued to 526 primary school teachers in order to identify their continuous training needs. The information obtained after the data analysis highlighted several alternatives to the possible priority themes which teachers would like to deepen during continuous training/perfecting courses: modern methods and procedures for class management, interactive and interdisciplinary teaching, discipline didactics, models of psychological analysis of the primary school student, using the computer in class, integrated teaching, transcurricular activities, the inter/transdisciplinary approach, innovative class management, educational soft – a tool for streamlining teaching, developing creativity in the lower-elementary student, designing the curriculum and adapting it to students with special educational needs.

Primary school teachers who participated in the study believe that the most efficient *training activities* consist in using e-learning virtual platforms (154), individual study (105) and exchanging experience with specialists from other EU countries (85). The least efficient are considered to be the training courses (154 teachers believe these are on level 1 out of 7 levels of efficiency) and exchanges of experiences / good practices / methodical activities (124 teachers believe these are on level 1 out of 7 levels of efficiency and 148 teachers believe these are on level 2 out of 7 levels of efficiency).

Regarding the *main characteristics of a training programme*, the information analysis has revealed the following aspects: the educational content, the organization of the training programme, the relevance of the professional training of the trainer. Teachers want training programmes in which the quality of information should be based on well-structured scientific contents, on elements of novelty which may raise interest in, and motivation for the course and attendants' active participation in the act of learning. Also, the knowledge transmitted should be relevant, in agreement with the school curriculum and with a predominantly practical / applicative nature. In this respect, there occurred the need for clear, accurate objectives and interactive learning-evaluation strategies, which may stimulate the dynamic character of the training programme. That is why an essential role in the activities of professional development belongs to the trainer, who should own thorough theoretical and practical training. The aspects regarding the organization of the training programme were related to the time and space of the training programme, as well as the dynamic, attractive nature of courses. The course coordinator should have good theoretical training, the ability to send information, create courses with a concrete,

applicative character, and motivate the course attendants to participate actively in the courses by using updated teaching-learning-evaluation techniques.

Regarding the *competences of primary school teachers* in relation to continuous training courses, the teachers' answers point to the following categories of competences: competences in using modern teaching-learning-evaluation techniques; complementary/extension competences in educational alternatives (the e-learning system); linguistic competences; competences in using informational technologies; communication competences; competences needed to manage the class of students efficiently. The ability to motivate and actively engage students in the learning process relies on efficient management of the teacher-student relationship. Perfecting the teaching methods and strategies, adopting new styles of planning lessons, and building linguistic and technical competences facilitate the process of accessing and designing relevant educational projects, contribute to teachers' personal development and enhance self-confidence. Following the study, the SWOT analysis was elaborated (Table 2.).

Table 2. *The SWOT analysis of the continuous training needs of primary school teachers*

<p>STRONG POINTS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Raising awareness of the importance of perfecting professional competences; - Openness towards exchanging pedagogical experiences/ good practices; - Accurate identification of the most important areas of interest; - Motivation for continuous development and professional improvement. 	<p>WEAK POINTS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Insufficiently crystallized competences / issue appreciated as relatively new; - Routine educational practices, scientifically unsubstantiated; - Preservation of certain traditional types of practices as a benchmark for professional identity faced with the avalanche of some innovating proposals appreciated as “passing trends” in pedagogy; - Insufficiently crystallized digital competences.
<p>OPPORTUNITIES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Trainers skilled in the area of the theory and practice of integrated teaching/learning; - Adequate personal development strategies, based on real training needs; - Adult education methods; - The existence of Romanian studies and analyses in the field of building key competences by means of an integrated type of curriculum; - The existence of a platform and a set of blended learning practices. 	<p>CONSTRAINTS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited offer of training programmes in the area of the interdisciplinary organization of the learning offers for building key competences from the preparatory to the fourth grade; - The long distance to the training provider; - Insufficient resources for implementation / under elaboration / insufficient time until the beginning of the school year.

Based on the analysis, principles and recommendations are formulated to substantiate and implement the continuous training programme for primary school teachers:

- designing training courses which may function according to the principles of “learning by doing”, the transferability of methodology, proactive communication, interrelating, creativity and flexibility, in order to contribute to a high level of training of professionals from the pre-academic educational system;
- the differentiated structuring of continuous training programmes in the field of integrated teaching/learning, to build key competences in lower-elementary students, in order to reflect the different training needs at the various stages of the career;
- the need to elaborate documentation materials for selection and study;
- building a learning community, adjusted to real training needs, open for reflection and excellence practices in the domain of promoting an authentic culture of integrated learning;
- identifying and promoting the mechanisms which encourage teachers to take advantage of the continuous training opportunities and inviting schools to reflect more upon the training needs of their teaching staff.

An innovative result of continuous training programmes for pre-primary and primary school teachers is represented by the elaboration of the professional standards for each educational level. Knowledge of these standards enables each educator to reflect upon his/her own psycho-pedagogical training and practices, identify the strong points of his/her competences, as well as areas of his/her professional training which demand improvement. Thus, on the basis of self-evaluation, teachers may identify the areas of professional competences upon which they should focus in their career, design a personal development plan according to which they may opt for various forms of self-improvement: consulting specialized materials, continuous training and perfecting courses, exchanging experience, participating in thematic conferences etc. The concern for improving practices and psycho-pedagogical training represents a constant priority of the teaching profession, and professional standards constitute a support tool in enhancing the quality of the educational service.

The professional standards of teachers from the area of early education (Annex 1) had as its main benchmark the standards for learning and development for the child between 5 and 7 years of age. To meet the demands needed to ensure all the conditions for the child’s full learning and development, stipulated through the learning and developing standards, the teacher should have a wide set of competences related to how a child thinks, the childhood and education of the young child, acting and interacting with the child as well as the child’s family, and teaching

competences related to the organization of the educational environment, as well as the learning and evaluation strategies used. To cover the entire range of competences, several domains have been delimited, and standards and indicators for each of these domains formulated.

The profile of the professional competences needed by primary school teachers (Annex 2) has been built based on what we want the teacher to know and be able to do in order to meet the expectations concerning the child's development and learning (*The interdisciplinary organization of the learning offers for building key competences at lower pre-primary students. "Blended learning" Continuous Training Programme for Primary Education Teachers. Lecture notes*, 2013). The professional competences of primary school teachers reflect the perspective of the education centred on the student.

The continuous training programmes of pre-primary and primary school teachers represent an important step in implementing the educational reform and perfecting teachers in agreement with the present reorganizations and demands of professionalizing for the teaching career.

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Annex 1. Professional standards for early education teachers (*Learning and Development Standards for Children from Ages 5-7: National Professional Standards for Teachers, 2008*)

Domains	Competences
A. View upon the child and early education	A.1. The teacher meets the unique learning and development needs of the students and provides the necessary support for all students to achieve their full potential.
	A.2. The teacher approaches the student's development in an integrated way, equally ensuring his cognitive, socio-emotional and physical development.
	A.3. The teacher knows the particularities of the learning process for the child between birth and 7 years of age.
	A.4. The teacher promotes social inclusion giving all the children equal chances to develop and learn, respecting the values based on human rights, the principles of an open, democratic society, promotes tolerance for what is different by respecting diversity.
B. Planning learning	B.1. The teacher designs well-structured daily and weekly plans, based on knowledge of the child's development, good knowledge of the children in the group and the objectives of curricular areas.
	B.2. The teacher designs daily and weekly plans which reflect the integrated approach of the curriculum.
	B.3. Planning activities is a participatory process, which involves children and their families, in order to provide children with the best opportunities for learning and development.
C. Organizing learning	<i>C.1. Sub-domain: Teaching strategies</i>
	C.1.1. The teacher knows and uses various strategies which contribute to active learning, to the child building his/her own knowledge, developing skills and abilities.
	C.1.2. The teacher displays competence in using games as an integrating form to stimulate learning and development.
	C.1.3. The teacher uses mainly interactive strategies.
	C.1.4. The teacher correlates the reference objectives of the curricular areas with the contents of learning, the learning tasks, the forms of organizing work with children, also taking into consideration the age particularities of children and their previous learning experiences.
	C.1.5. The teacher creates many opportunities for choice and decision making for children.
	C.1.6. The teacher exploits to the maximum the learning opportunities of routine time spans and adopts flexible and creative attitudes when faced with unplanned situations.
	<i>C.2. Sub-domain: The learning environment</i>
	C.2.1. The teacher understands the strong impact of the environment upon the children's learning and development and ensures an environment in which each child may develop and learn according to his needs, interests and skills.
	C.2.2. The teacher creates a customized and friendly physical environment which gives identity to the group of children.
C.2.3. The teacher creates a social climate which promotes learning.	
D. Evaluating learning	D.1. The teacher constantly uses observation to record data concerning the child's development in all the areas of development.
	D.2. The teacher uses evaluation to support the child's development and learning.
	D.3. The teacher uses evaluation methods and tools which are relevant for the learning activities conducted by the children and adjusted to their age.
	D.4. The teacher uses evaluation to plan more rigorously the activities and to organize the learning environment in a way that is more appropriate to the children's needs and interests.

	D.5. The teacher requires and uses data about the children's previous experiences, their health, nutrition, hygiene, needs, learning behaviours and progress from discussions with the family, the child him/herself, in order to evaluate the child's progress.
E. Professional development	E.1. The teacher consults regularly specialized materials in order to improve his/her professional competences.
	E.2. The teacher participates regularly in continuous training courses.
	E.3. The teacher reflects constantly upon his/her professional activity, demonstrating the ability to motivate his/her professional decisions and improve his/her daily practice following the analysis of the professional results obtained.
	E.4. The teacher uses team work with other colleagues and specialists in order to improve his/her educational practices and the practices of families in educating and developing small children.
F. Partnership with the family	F.1. The teacher admits the importance of knowing the family background the child comes from and inside which he/she grows.
	F.2. The teacher respects the quality of parents as the child's first educators, regarding as relevant the family's aspirations, interests and wishes concerning their child.
	F.3. The teacher regards as fundamental the constant communication with the parents for the healthy development and well-being of the child.
	F.4. The teacher constantly involves the family in making decisions concerning the education and development of their own child.
	F.5. The teacher encourages, through various means, the parents' participation in the educational programme of the nursery / kindergarten.

Annex 2. The profile of professional competences needed by primary school teachers (*The interdisciplinary organization of the learning offers for building key competences in lower pre-primary students. “Blended learning” Continuous Training Programme for Primary Education Teachers. Lecture notes, 2013, pp. 47-54*)

Domains	Competences
A. The specifics of primary education	<i>Competence A.1.:</i> the primary school teacher meets the unique learning and development needs of the students and provides the necessary support for all students to achieve their full potential.
	<i>Competence A.2.:</i> the primary school teacher approaches the student’s development in an integrated way, equally ensuring his cognitive, socio-emotional and physical development.
	<i>Competence A.3.:</i> the teacher knows the particularities of the learning process for the lower-elementary student.
	<i>Competence A.4.:</i> the primary school teacher promotes social inclusion giving all the children equal chances of development and learning, respecting the values based on human rights, the principles of an open, democratic society.
B. Planning learning	<i>Competence B.1.:</i> the primary school teacher designs well-structured, balanced yearly and semester plans, learning units/lesson plans based on knowledge of the child’s development, good knowledge of the children in the group and the key competences corresponding to the disciplines of study from primary education.
	<i>Competence B.2.:</i> the primary school teacher designs learning units/lesson plans which reflect the integrated approach of the curriculum.
	<i>Competence B.3.:</i> the primary school teacher regards the design of activities like a participatory process, which involves children and their families, in order to provide students with the best development and learning opportunities.
C. Organizing teaching-learning	<p>C.1. Sub-domain: Teaching strategies</p> <p><i>Competence C.1.1.:</i> the primary school teacher knows and uses various strategies which contribute to active learning, to the child building his/her own knowledge, developing skills and abilities.</p> <p><i>Competence C.1.2.:</i> the primary school teacher displays competence in using games as an integrating form to stimulate learning and development.</p> <p><i>Competence C.1.3.:</i> the primary school teacher uses mainly interactive strategies.</p> <p><i>Competence C.1.4.:</i> the primary school teacher correlates the competences specific to the disciplines of study with the contents of learning, the learning tasks, the forms of organizing work with children, also taking into consideration the age particularities of children and their previous learning experiences.</p> <p><i>Competence C.1.5.:</i> the primary school teacher offers many opportunities for choice and decision making for children.</p> <p><i>Competence C.1.6.:</i> the primary school teacher exploits to the maximum the learning opportunities of routine time spans and adopts flexible and creative attitudes when faced with unplanned situations.</p>
	<p>C.2. Sub domain: The learning environment</p> <p><i>Competence C.2.1.:</i> the primary school teacher understands the strong impact of the environment upon the children’s learning and development and ensures an environment in which each child may develop and learn according to his needs, interests and skills.</p> <p><i>Competence C.2.2.</i> The teacher creates a customized and friendly physical environment which gives identity to the group of children.</p> <p><i>Competence C.2.3.</i> The teacher creates a social climate which promotes learning.</p>

D. Organizing the process of evaluating learning-the teacher's evaluation competences	<i>Competence D.1.:</i> the primary school teacher uses observation constantly to record data concerning the child's development in all the areas of development: cognitive, socio-emotional, physical, attitude towards learning (according to the <i>Child Educational and Development Standards</i>).
	<i>Competence D.2.:</i> the primary school teacher uses evaluation methods and tools which are relevant for the learning activities conducted by the children and adjusted to their age.
	<i>Competence D.3</i> the primary school teacher uses evaluation to plan more rigorously the activities and to organize the learning environment in a way that is more appropriate to the children's needs and interests.
	<i>Competence D.4.:</i> the primary school teacher requires and uses data about the children's previous experiences, their health, nutrition, hygiene, needs, learning behaviours and progress from discussions with the family, the child him/herself, in order to evaluate the child's progress.
E. Professional development-self-reflection, self-evaluation competences, professional career management competences	<i>Competence E.1.:</i> the primary school teacher consults specialized materials regularly in order to improve his/her professional competences.
	<i>Competence E.2.:</i> the primary school teacher participates regularly in continuous training courses.
	<i>Competence E.3.:</i> the primary school teacher reflects constantly upon his/her professional activity, demonstrating the ability to motivate his/her professional decisions and improve his/her daily practice following the analysis of the professional results obtained.
	<i>Competence E.4.:</i> the primary school teacher uses team work with other colleagues and specialists in order to improve his/her educational practices and the practices of families in educating and developing small children.
F. Partnership with the family- the teacher's competences of communication and cooperation with the student's family	<i>Competence F.1.:</i> the primary school teacher admits the importance of knowing the family background the child comes from and inside which he/she grows.
	<i>Competence F.2.:</i> the primary school teacher respects the quality of parents as the child's first educators, regarding as relevant the family's aspirations, interests and wishes concerning their child.
	<i>Competence F.3.:</i> the primary school teacher regards as fundamental the constant communication with the parents for the healthy development and well-being of the child.
	<i>Competence F.4.:</i> the primary school teacher constantly involves the family in making decisions concerning the education and development of their own child.
	<i>Competence F.5.:</i> the primary school teacher encourages, through various means, the parents' participation in the educational programme of the nursery / kindergarten.