Teachers for the Knowledge Society

The teachers and their need for further education in didactics - An example from the Technology curricular area

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Abstract

The research in education shows a contradictory situation: although the Romanian teachers participate in many training courses, when students get to the end of compulsory education their results are disappointing, in both national and international recent evaluations. Out of the need to sort out this contradiction, we developed a Master program that should make available the latest teaching-learning strategies and methods to the teachers who are interested in the matter. The purpose of this study is to highlight the reasons why teachers prefer short and ineffective training courses, instead of attending a Master program.

Keywords: Master in didactics; educational reform; teaching career; Technology curricular area; teachers

1. Some preliminary ideas

This study was developed as a consequence of the conclusions of the \textit{Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study 2007} (TIMSS 2007), which assessed the students’ performances in mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology and geography at an international level. „In Romania, a percentage of the students, almost the double as compared to the international average, attend schools that report continuous training activities in all the five subjects, at least three times a year or even more often. The highest level of attention is paid to the development of didactic abilities and domain-specific training; the schools report that more than 80% of the students in the 8th grade are trained by teachers who attended training courses in their specific field.” (Noveanu, 2009, p. 123).

When we analyse the research data, an apparently paradoxical situation occurs: the results which are obtained by the students place Romania at the lower end of the classification on nations, while, according to the number of the teachers’ participations in training courses, it is placed on one of the top positions of the list.

Under these circumstances, we can certainly draw a conclusion: the competences that the teachers acquire during the various training courses are not materialized in the students’ results, a conclusion that brings out to light one of
the following hypotheses: either these training courses were inappropriate, being initiated without a needs analysis beforehand, or they took place formally, simply to allow the participant teachers to obtain a number of credits or a supplementary diploma (we should not overlook the hypothesis that this discrepancy between the frequency of the training courses the teachers take part in and the results obtained by the students is due to the combination between the two above-mentioned aspects). We should mention that the high number of participations in training courses for teachers in Romania is also due to a legal regulation that imposes obtaining 90 credit points over five years from participating to training courses, even if the law does not state any sanction to be applied on those who do not accumulate these credit points. However, some financial bonuses (yearly merit bonuses, three-year merit pay etc.) – an absolute must if we consider the low levels of salaries – or some honorific awards (medals, diplomas etc.) are also conditioned by the 90 credit points. Also, we should mention that obtaining better positions (in towns as compared to villages, at a higher ranked school etc.) can be achieved without a contest if certain criteria have been met, among which the number of participations in training courses, respectively obtaining the respective number of (let’s say) didactic credits.

2. The teachers’ condition during the communist regime

In this context, we should draw on several general considerations as regards the status and the role of teachers in schools in particular, in the Romanian society in general, before and after December 1989.

Before the fall of communism, at least apparently, teachers used to play a central role in the educational field, even if this role was not confirmed, within the community, by a high income or social prestige. On the other hand, the lack of some alternative sources of knowledge (internet, publications, specialized books etc.) offered teachers the authority and the prestige granted by what Bochenski called epistemic authority: „The epistemic authority is that of the man who knows better, who knows more than the individual. Thus, the teacher’s authority is, in comparison with the students’ one, an epistemic-like authority. It is the authority of the specialist.” (Bochenski, 1991, p. 53).

The following is to be observed in the same context: „Within the educational field the teacher was the only authority (often power) figure, therefore the possibility that his position be put under question seemed rather a mere speculation; as was the possibility that the force lines of school reality be defined by several poles of authority (activating students and transferring decisional competences towards them)” (Stan, 2009, p. 14).

We should highlight the fact that this type of authority, based on the students’ trust in the teacher’s competences, was not spread at social level, where the status was legitimated and consolidated according to criteria specific to the deontic authority: „The deontic authority, however, is not that of the man who knows better, but it belongs to the chief, to the boss, to the commander, to the leader etc.” (Bochenski, 1991)

As a matter of fact, the deontic authority is the one that allowed the access to the resources, even if its carriers found themselves, most frequently, in flagrant contradiction with the epistemic authority.

3. The teachers’ condition after the fall of the communist regime

After the fall of communism, as a result of the „opening” at the informational level, teachers lost their status of sole depositary of knowledge, even if information and knowledge overlap only partially; however, in a society overwhelmed by information, very few people took into consideration the issue of the selection criteria, of the validity of the available knowledge, which is why the mass-media imposed itself as a validation criterion and standard: in other words, a piece of information is relevant at cognitive level because it appeared in the newspaper (initially) or on TV (today).

In this context, the teacher’s epistemic authority has been massively eroded, its consequence being the loss of the central position he used to have within the education field; it is worth mentioning the fact that the erosion was also favoured by the reserve with which most teachers faced the Internet and the possibilities it offers at cognitive level.

The erosion of the teachers’ epistemic authority also questioned their deontic authority. For this reason, their interventions in settling some conflict situations that took place in the classroom have proved more and more ineffective and inappropriate: „In fact, the teacher’s authority, identified with the adult’s authority, appeared as
given whereas any attempt at contesting it, at questioning it on behalf of the students becoming useless and illegitimate; hence the impossibility of a prompt and adequate reaction from the teachers in the years following December 1989, as they were too taken by surprise by the iconoclastic behaviour of their students” (Stan, 2009, p. 14).

On the other hand, the public area took over the same confirmation criteria of the social prestige from the communist period (the position held in the hierarchy of power, namely the access to the resources etc.), for which reason teachers have once again been neglected. At the same time, the political sector sent deprecatory media messages referring to the quality of the teaching staff, either to give an excuse for the fact that education is given a totally insufficient share of the GDP, or to reject salary increase requirements.

4. Reforms without teachers

Out of these reasons, and also of other reasons that are not the object of the hereby study, we can speak about “the low interest so far for the condition of teachers (for the didactic career and the training of teachers)”, which “resulted in slowing down the development of reforming activities at the concrete level of the classroom practice.” (Iucu and Păcurari, 2001, p. 9-10).

In reality, we can assert the fact that teachers have never undertaken any of the reformation attempts of the Romanian education system, therefore in the absence of a minimum undertaking of responsibility by the teachers, the decision-makers can develop reform projects which are more or less realistic but they can never put them into practice: “A reform cannot be made only at the level of the central and local bodies, ministry, inspectorate, but it should take place in the classroom... Most blockages are recorded here, at the very level of the education practice, beyond what we consider to be the potential breaking factors, at a simple level of awareness, the lack of material, financial resources.” (Iucu and Păcurari, 2001, p. 22)

The main consequence of not understanding the role of teachers in the reform of the education system and of the disinterest for its adequate financing was represented by the disinterest of the young graduates for a teaching career; consequently, the well-trained graduates prefer to look for much better paid jobs in other fields of activity, which should guarantee them a certain level of financial comfort and social prestige, namely the elements to support and strengthen their self-respect.

5. A didactic career is equivalent with failure

In this context, we may speak about the development of a wide-spread feeling, although nobody speaks it out publicly as such, according to which only the very ordinary graduates choose a teaching career: “Several signals of alarm have already been drawn, according to which some schools will not be able to function due to the lack of teachers. The numeric decline of educators also came with a decline in the quality of the didactic personnel. The attractiveness of other fields of activity increased disproportionate as compared to the activity in the educational sector, so as the best-trained young people decide to start other careers than that of educators. The selection for the didactic professions has begun to be made in a residual modality: the ones who want to work as educators are those that remain after the other fields of activity have selected the best-trained graduates.” (Iucu, 2004, p. 8)

The report of the Presidential Commission for the analysis and policy making in the education and research field in Romania (2007) came with a similar result: „The analysis of the human resources involved in the educational system reveals a sombre picture. The poor financial retribution system (in 2005 a teacher newly acceding to the system had 58.2% of the medium gross pay which s/he only exceeded after obtaining the second didactic degree and 40 years of employment) and the decrease in social status of the teaching staff have dramatically reduced the interest in the didactic career (...) Universities offer a very weak initial training for the teaching career, and in-service training is superficial. The teaching staff has expressed itself in public exclusively by unionist claims and not by didactical innovations or professional initiatives”.

In this context, we may speak about a relative loss of quality at the level of the Romanian educational system, which has (and will have as well) serious consequences on medium and long term, at the economic-social level: let
us not forget, the decline of the quality of the educational activity will result in mediocre graduates in other words mediocre labour force, mediocre citizens, therefore a decline in the quality of life, which is a matter of concern for everybody.

Under these circumstances, the following conclusion must be drawn: “Unless the teachers’ salaries increase and their social image is improved, the battle for quality in our system of education might be lost. The card of quality in education is mainly played on the field of motivating the involved personnel more than on the structural alterations or the abundance of material means.” (Pătrăuţă, 2008, p. 16) In support of this conclusion are also the data of the report elaborated by the Presidential Commission (which we mentioned above) even if, due to reasons that pertain more to ignoring educational realities, the report does not refer to the need of an adequate funding for the teachers’ work: „The human resource is worryingly aging (the average age of the teaching staff is 40 in women and 44 in men) and the quality of service is generally poor. Only 18% of the teaching staff have attended a training course in the use of ICT in education, and in a recent poll, 74.3% of the eighth grade students said teachers ask them to write after dictation at most subjects.” (Romania – country of education and research: the Report of Presidential Commission, 2007).

6. Technologies curricular area – specific problems

An analysis, be it brief, of structuring the domains that show a deficit brings out to light an even more disturbing fact: the curricular areas for which fewer and less trained graduates come are technology, mathematics and science, that is the domains of study that the European Union considers vital in the competition for supremacy in the field of knowledge and technology (obviously, Romania shows the same shortage of teachers as the European Union as a whole, even if, according to the reactions of the political decision-makers, it is not sure whether it has the same targets and preoccupations); out of these reasons, the European documents that refer to education lay the accent on the access of as great a number of students in information and communication technology (ICT) courses as possible, as well as on the increase in the number of students oriented towards the field of engineering.

At the same time, on the labour market (at European or national level), the most wanted graduates are those who graduated information technology and engineering studies, and the salaries in these fields are, as Mihailescu said, much more attractive (see Iucu, R, 2004). Taking into consideration the fact that more and more graduates who reached this option “in a residual manner” enter the Romanian system of education, the quality of their specialisation training (especially the psycho-pedagogical one) is lower and lower: “It is not exaggerated to assert that, even today, most teachers learn their profession by trial and error, under the impression of the general belief that the only thing somebody needs to teach is to master his/her own subject well.” (Pătrăuţă, 2008, p. 15).

The assertion is also sustained by the data offered by TIMSS 2007, according to which: “The average length of service in the education system of the Romanian teachers is 19 years, 4 years longer than the international average. 38% of the Romanian students have science teachers aged 50 or older, which is 16% more than the international average. In Romania, there is a significant percentage of students (11%) who are taught science by teachers who are not adequately qualified. In 2007, the average length of service in the education system of science teachers increased to 21 years, which is statistically significant.” (Noveanu, 2009, p. 121).

The data obtained by questioning 100 teachers in the county of Prahova who teach within the technology curricular area do nothing but confirm this state of facts: 52 teachers have the 1st rank as teaching qualification, 15% have the second rank, 15% have the basic teacher’s certification and 18% are substitute teachers; these figures highlight a significant ageing of the teachers in this field, as well as an unacceptable level of instability at the beginning of the teaching career.

The instability is due to the fact that substitute teachers are divided into two categories: middle-aged persons who were dismissed from the economy and who found in teaching a refuge until the retirement age and young graduates who are looking for and hope to find a job in a field with better payment and who, until that moment comes, "earn a penny" in the education system; both situations bring out to light the lack of interest in the field of carrying on the specialty training, especially related to the prejudices connected to the uselessness of the psycho-pedagogical and didactic training; the data obtained as a result of our research are relevant in this respect: 79% of the teachers who
were questioned did not graduate a Master program in their domain of study and only 30% took part in continuous training courses, even if the ratio of those who consider they need in-depth psycho-pedagogical and didactic training is 87%.

Apart from the resignation of those who “are waiting for” their pension teaching, as well as from the lack of interest of the young people who hope to leave the educational system at any minute, the high percentage of the teachers who fail to enrol in continuous training programs is also due to the lack of financial resources: 99% of the teachers consider that the Ministry of Education should finance these programs, while 91% would attend a Master in didactics and specific didactics provided they were free of charge.

Our conclusion is also supported by the relatively high number of teachers who know that, within the Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti, there is a Master program dedicated to the field of specific didactics (65%), but also by the much higher percentage of the teachers who are aware of the necessity of attending some continuous training programmes along their entire teaching career – 80%. From this point of view, apart from the optimization of the marketing strategies, the solution of the development of some continuous training programs is mandatory, by obtaining European funds which should allow the free access of teachers but which should also allow a very rigorous control of the quality parameters of the respective programs, in order to eliminate their changing into opportunities to accumulate credits and training diplomas. Apart from the punctual solution which could solve a punctual problem (that of the persons who want to attend the courses of this Master in didactics), there remains the substance issue, that of increasing attractiveness in a didactic career for young graduates; this is the only way to eliminate the “residual” option for a didactic career, and the form that has been considered educational reform so far will be granted the appropriate substance.

References