How Did I Become a Good Teacher?  
Implications for Teacher Education

Ioana Gabriela MARCUT  
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania  
ioana.marcut@ulbsibiu.ro

Stefania KIFOR  
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania  
stefania.kifor@ulbsibiu.ro

ABSTRACT

The professional standards for teachers provide the competences needed for this occupation, in function of the level of education and of the career stages. This study aims to discover the most important training factors which contribute to the acquisition of teacher competences and to establish the implications for teacher education. We have used a mixed-method design as the procedure for collecting, analyzing, and combining both quantitative and qualitative data. To detect the main agents in the teacher competences’ achievement, we applied a questionnaire and we asked the personal opinion of the teachers regarding their evolution in the career. The findings indicated that the principal factor was the individual study, followed by the continuing professional development, through training courses, the collaborative learning, and, almost on the last place, the initial teacher education. Implications for teacher education: the changes in the future are incalculable, so we have to rethink the teacher education to ensure future teachers able to learn and adapt themselves to different conditions. We appreciate the recommendations to reform teacher education in the context of lifelong learning very useful (Dolan, 2012) and we will study the applicability of them in our university.

Keywords: teacher competences, lifelong learning, professional standards.

CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

During the last two decades, the education in Romania was reformed several times, with the purpose to adapt its outcomes to the new educational policy requirements, to the digital era’s new generations of children, to the European recommendations. The main agents of these changes are the teachers, who had to adapt their work, to modify the teaching-learning methodology, to acquire new skills, to alter the previous beliefs in education. In this fast-changing world, it is vital that the teachers have the essential competences in order to be effective in the classroom, ensuring to raising levels of pupil’s attainment. But teachers need to help students acquire not only “the skills that are easiest to teach and easiest to test, but more importantly, ways of thinking (creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making and learning); ways of working (communication and collaboration); tools for working (including information and communications technologies); and skills around citizenship, life and career and personal and social responsibility for success in modern democracies” (OECD 2011).
The material “Supporting teacher competence development for better learning outcomes” of the European Commission (2013) is a guide which offers practical and reasonable advice in this domain for policymakers of education. It explains the importance of defining teacher competences, the connections between competences and standards, how to develop and implement teacher competences frameworks with policies examples from European countries. In Romania, the order 4476/2016 of the Education Ministry establishes the professional standards for teachers, with the derived competences, according to the advices of the European Commission.

Our study aims to establish the contribution of different agents in the teachers’ competences development. The factors involved in teacher training are: the initial teacher education, continuing professional development, school inspectorate and headmasters, collaborative professional development, and the individual learning. We are interested to find ways to improve the initial teacher education, to be appropriate to the new requirements.

Research questions

The basic questions of this study are:
“To what extent they have contributed various training factors to develop teacher competences?”
and
“What are the tasks of teacher education so as to produce well prepared teachers for the future?”

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Teacher competences

A competence is “a complex combination of knowledge, skills, understanding, values, attitudes and desire which lead to effective, embodied human action in the world, in a particular domain” (Deakin Crick, 2008).

The concept of competence, in teaching, thus encompasses the following features:

- it involves tacit and explicit knowledge, cognitive and practical skills, as well as dispositions (motivation, beliefs, value orientations and emotions) (Rychen & Salganik, 2003);
- it enables teachers to meet complex demands, by mobilizing psycho-social resources in context, deploying them in a coherent way;
- it empowers the teacher to act professionally and appropriately in a situation (Koster & Dengerink, 2008);
- it helps ensure teachers' undertaking of tasks effectively (achieving the desired outcome) and efficiently (optimizing resources and efforts);
- it can be demonstrated to a certain level of achievement along a continuum (González & Wagenaar, 2005).

Teachers need a deep knowledge of how to teach their specific subject (Krauss et al., 2008). Teaching has to be both effective (successful in producing learning) and good (morally and rationally sound) (Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2005). Teachers require the ability to adapt their plans and practices to meet students' learning needs (Vogt & Rogalla, 2009). Teachers' actions and effectiveness are bounded by the social, cultural, institutional opportunities and constraints of their professional settings (Putnam & Borko, 2000). The act of teaching implies mediation with stakeholders about contents and methods, practices and choices in the classroom – negotiating skills are therefore crucial. There is an increasing recognition of the benefits of teachers themselves generating new knowledge about teaching, in schools seen as communities of practice and inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Reflective, interpersonal skills for learning in professional
communities are important, together with research skills. Teachers need to have critical, evidence-based attitudes to their own practices, grounded in input from different sources—students’ outcomes, theory and professional dialogue—in order to engage in innovation (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

Teachers’ competences can be outlined in six broad paradigms, which should be seen as integrated, complementary aspects of the profession (Paquay & Wagner, 2001): the teacher as a reflective agent, knowledgeable expert, skilful expert, classroom actor, social agent, lifelong learner.

Two basic requirements are fundamental in the preparation of quality teachers:
- the capacity to systematically assess one’s own knowledge base and professional practices, on the basis of a wide range of criteria coming from practice, theory and research; and
- critical and responsive attitudes to innovation (Dinicu, 2017; Virca, 2017) and professional improvement (Hagger & McIntyre, 2006).

Professional standards

A professional standard endeavors to describe what teachers believe, know, understand and are able to do as specialist practitioners in their fields (Ingvarson, 1998). In particular, professional standards for teachers focus on what teachers are expected to know and be able to do. They are usually concerned with accountability and quality mechanisms, and are closely linked with the action of institutional and professional bodies. They can be defined as:
- shared representations of visions of practice, i.e. means for describing a consensus model of what is most valued in teaching knowledge and practice;
- measuring tools for professional judgment, i.e. tools for making judgments and decisions in the context of shared meanings and values, and/or instruments for providing specifications of levels of achievement (Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2007).

The purposes of professional standards can vary, according to the prevailing focus on one or more of the following aspects (European Commission, 2013):
- information: they can be used as signals conveying information on teacher action and behavior to diverse social groups;
- guidance: as principles directing the action of institutional and professional stakeholders;
- modeling: as model examples representing ideals of professional quality and practice for teachers, along different career stages;
- management: as uniform measures for relationships/transactions in teaching, teacher education and professional development;
- monitoring: as rules to be checked for compliance, by institutional and professional bodies.

The degrees of precision and prescriptiveness of standards can vary according to their subjects and uses. Since standards usually refer to systems of meanings and values as authority sources, standard setting entails creating political and technical consensus.

In educational policies, two contrasting approaches about standards can be found (European Commission, 2013):
- a bureaucratic, ‘technical’ approach for accountability purposes, focused on measuring, monitoring, comparing and regulating individual behavior; or
- a ‘developmental’ approach, with loose definitions of competences indicative of performance, stressing principles and codes of practice.

The ‘technical’ approach focuses on observation, measuring and control; it is associated with a skills-based view of teaching and teacher quality, whose focus is on individual teachers’ performance, rather than on overall professional development.
By contrast, the ‘developmental’ approach to standards highlights values, purpose and agency in teaching - the ability to balance priorities about what is educationally desirable and make situated judgments, informed by theory and research (Biesta, 2011). It sees standards as descriptive tools for reflection, sense making and guiding professional action, helping to identify development opportunities and needs at individual, school level, and beyond (Conway et al., 2009).

Some view standards as useful means for the legitimating of the knowledge base and profession of teachers, and thus for quality control and effective professional learning (Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2007).

**Professional standards for teachers in Romania**

The Education Ministry order 4476/2016 and its annexes established the professional standards for pre-university teachers in Romania.

The professional standards for didactic career are statements regarding the expected qualitative level of the professional performance of teachers. There are different in function of the level of education (pre-primary, primary, lower secondary, upper secondary) and of the career stages.

Every standard has a set of competences attached, but there are two different positions to interpret the relation between them:

- the standard is defined as a set of circumscribed competences;
- the competences are set in terms of a standard or criterion; the standards define the stages of evolution of one and the same competence.

The approach to competence is progressive and cumulative. On different career stages, in addition to the progressive increase of competence, specific competences may also arise, with a higher degree of representativeness.

The competences are of three categories: **competences of subject knowledge**, **professional competences** and **transversal competences**.

The competences of subject knowledge are usually ensured by the initial education, bachelor programme, before or simultaneously with teacher education.

The professional competences are divided in six units:

1. Designing educational activity
2. Management and monitoring of the educational process
3. Evaluation of educational activities
4. Integration and use of ICT in education
5. Knowing, counseling and differential treatment of students
6. Management of the class / group of pupils / children

The transversal competences include three units:

1. Institutional development of school and school-community partnership
2. Career management and personal development
3. Applied educational research

Every unit includes competence’s elements, with components for:

Knowledge:
- Knowledge, understanding and use of specific language / Explanation and interpretation

Skills:
- Application, transfer and problem solving
• Critical and constructive reflection
• Creativity and innovation

Attitudes:
• Autonomy and responsibility.

At the end of every competence’s unit, there are performance criteria, for different career stages, to facilitate the evaluation of the competence’s acquirement.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study has used a mixed-method design as the procedure for collecting, analyzing, and combining both quantitative and qualitative data. We applied a questionnaire with multiple-choice responses and an open item, where the teachers were invited to express the personal opinion concerning their teacher competences’ evolution.

The target population of the study consists of 34 teachers from diverse schools, various levels of education and different career stages. All pre-university levels are represented: 23.5% of teachers are from pre-school education, 8.9% are working in primary schools, 38.2% in lower secondary schools and 29.4% in upper secondary schools. The teachers from the sample cover all the career stages: 32.4% are in the first three years of working, 11.8% have between 3 and 10 years of experience, 35.2% between 10 and 20 years, 14.7% between 20 and 30 years and 5.9% have over 30 years of experience in education.

The teachers were invited to reflect on their professional career, to detect the main factor which helped them to acquire the teacher competence’s elements, for every unit of competence. The questionnaire contained the 47 elements of competence included in the teacher professional standards established by the Education Ministry. The proposed training factors were: the initial teacher education, the continuing professional development, school inspectorate and headmasters, collaborative professional development, and the individual learning.

**FINDINGS**

**Quantitative results**

An overview of the results indicates that 37.95% of teacher competences were acquired by individual learning. The continuing professional development, by training courses, is on the second place in the teachers’ opinion about their competences development, with 24.55%. The collaborative professional development contributes with 18.25%. Almost at the end of the ranking, with 10.38%, is the initial teacher education, and the headmasters and school inspectorate helped the teachers to develop theirs competences in proportion of 8.88%.

Analyzing the results on categories of competences, the aggregated data indicate the following:

The *competences of subject knowledge*, as the teachers stressed, were principally developed by training courses, 52.4%, only 23.8% by the initial teacher education, followed by the individual learning, 14.3% and the collaborative professional development, 9.5%.

The *professional competences* were acquired in proportion of 39.2% through individual learning. At almost the same level, with 21.11% and 20.28% are the continuing professional development and the collaborative learning. The initial teacher education contribution was only of 10.84% and the school leadership’s implication of 8.57%. There are differences from one competence unit to another. In *designing educational activity*, the crucial factor was the individual learning (38.1%),
followed by the collaborative professional development (27.37%). The management and monitoring of the educational process was acquired especially through courses of professional development (32.53%) and individual study (29.92%). The competences in evaluation of educational activities were gained by individual learning (47.62%) and, at the same level, training courses (21.43%) and collaborative professional development (20.24%). Integration and use of ICT in education was achieved through individual learning and continuing professional development, both with 33.33%. Knowing, counseling and differential treatment of students was acquired especially by individual study (40.82%), followed by collaborative professional development (23.13%). Individual learning (46.43%) and collaborative learning (22.62%) conducted to the acquisition of the management of the class / group of pupils / children.

Regarding the transversal competences, the teachers pointed out as the principal factor the individual learning (43.31%), on the second level the training courses (22.15%), followed by the collaborative learning (17.13%), headmasters and school inspectorate (12.45%) and, at the end, the initial teacher education (4.97%). The competence unit institutional development of school and school-community partnership was acquired firstly by collaboration with colleagues (34.7%) and, in equal measure, through the intervention of headmasters and school inspectorate (25.85%) and individual study (25.17%). Career management and personal development was crucial determined by the self study (52.38%) and the continuing professional development (26.98%). Competences in applied educational research were acquired especially through individual learning (52.38%), and the continuing professional development (26.98%).

Qualitative data

The personal opinions of the teachers on professional competences and their acquisition have gravitated around some ideas, accepted by the majority. First of all, the teachers stressed the fact that the initial teacher education does not provide all the needed competences, so that a beginner teacher has to prepare alone, by individual learning, or to collaborate with colleagues to face teaching obligations. Another idea was about the practical training, they consider that are required more activities in the classroom during the initial teacher education. The teachers are prepared for the ideal school; they should be familiarized with the reality of the Romanian schools, with concrete examples. The teachers pointed that they were not well prepared to relate with the pupils’ parents, with the school managers, colleagues, society in general, another weak point in teacher training. All of them emphasized the value of the training courses, for continuing professional development.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

As the study proved, the initial teacher education is insufficient for the lifelong professional needs of teachers and for the acquisition of all the provided competences.

Ministers of Education have recognized that: No course of initial teacher education, however excellent, can equip teachers with all the competences they will require during their careers. Demands on the teaching profession are evolving rapidly, imposing the need for new approaches (European Union, 2016).

As the data analysis showed, the principal factors in the teacher competences’ acquisition are the individual study, the collaborative learning and the continuing professional development. The initial teacher education should focus on prepare its students for the lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning is a concept which appears very frequently in educational policy in the last years. It has not a definition because it “is such a broad concept that is difficult to reach a clear, uncontested definition (Chapman and Aspin, 1997). It is based on three principles: “lifelong
learning is life-long, life-wide and centered on learning, rather than on education and on educational institutions” (Schuetze and Casey, 2006); “lifelong learning embraces all learning, including that which takes place both formally and informally within organizations, universities and colleges of education” (Chapman and Aspin, 1997); “it has implications not only for adult education, but also for all those involved in primary education, for colleges of education, for universities, for all students, for teachers and, indeed for school children” (Dolan, 2012).

Lifelong learning for teachers is considered to be vital, involving quality programmes of initial teacher education, appropriate early-career support and relevant continuing professional development opportunities for teachers and school leaders – all of these programs should be informed by systematic academic research and extensive practical experience (European Commission, 2007).

In “Reforming teacher education in the context of lifelong learning: the case of the BEd degree programme in Ireland”, Anne Dolan (2012) suggests seven recommendations for all agencies involved in teacher education. We analyze the applicability of these principles to our teacher education programme.

Introduce lifelong learning as a compulsory component of the teacher education curriculum “Learning how to learn and learning across the lifespan must be more than mere slogans, they should be written into all teacher education programmes and their principles should inform curricula, content, context and pedagogical approaches of all teaching and learning opportunities” (Dolan, 2012). For the student teachers it is important to recognize that teacher education is only the first step on the continuum of teacher education. We have not a course dedicated to lifelong learning in this moment. The idea is very good, but it is not so easy to find specialists in this domain and it implies to change the curriculum. We consider it important and in the future we expect that the managers will be convinced by the reality.

Devise a curriculum for teacher educators. Teacher educators should be well versed with the theory and philosophy of lifelong learning (Dolan, 2012). It is true that especially the teacher educators who’s specialty is the didactics of different subjects are primary self-educated; they were trained through some courses. Cochran-Smith (2003) argues for the need for a curriculum for educating teacher educators and for a discussion about what teacher educators need to know in order to prepare teachers for the twenty-first century. They need to be positive models in lifelong learning for the teacher students and they have to use modern methods, and, in this area, our university organized courses with internal and external trainers.

Incorporate teachers as active partners. We have a strong relation with the schools where our students are involved in practice. The primary and secondary school teachers are our partners in training student teachers to gain the teaching skills. The teachers share their expertise and experience systematically, by the practice programme. Of course, they have the experience of lifelong learning because they have to adapt the activity to all reforms which were implemented in the last 27 years.

Promote the co-construction of knowledge. The students entering initial teacher education are from different high schools with different profiles. The co-construction of knowledge can be achieved, in our opinion, in heterogeneous groups which work together, to help each-other, to complete the lack of knowledge useful for the future teachers.

Reflective practice. Reflective practice is an important aspect of teacher education in both theoretical and practical respects (Pollard et al., 2008). The insufficient practice was a critical point reported by the teachers involved in the study. Usually, in our university, the teacher students have to reflect about their lessons, to speak about and to stress the good parts and the parts where they
could change something. If the teachers are accustomed to reflect on their work, they will do it in the future too, so it is a condition for the lifelong learning. But reflexivity takes place in a deeper level and incorporates reflections about the self, the event and the wider social context in which the event took place. To be reflexive can actually nourish reflections as introspection leads to heightened awareness, personal development and improvement of self and of the practice of teacher education (Dolan, 2012). We suppose that our psychologists can help in this domain and incorporate the opportunities for reflexivity for students and teacher educators.

Establish a broader role of the teacher education. The teacher role in society has to be reconsidered and appreciate according to its importance for the future. Only when this profession will be valued, the role of the teacher education will increase. In the material A new skills agenda for Europe, the European Commission (2016) stipulates: “increasing the attractiveness of the teaching profession would stimulate talented young people to pursue this career”.

Foster collaboration between partners. The teacher education institutions have to work with students in creating new lifelong learning models of teacher education. There is necessary more cross-collaboration between universities and schools, between teacher educators and teachers. We should educate our students to be able to relate with the pupils’ parents, with the school managers, colleagues, society in general. These are neglected aspects in teacher training, as the teachers from the sample stressed. Our department organizes activities with participation of primary or secondary school teachers, pupils, student teachers, teacher educators, and School Inspectorate’s representatives together. This collaboration is very important and it is imperative to be augmented in the future.

In order to prepare teachers for the challenges posed by global and societal changes, initial teacher education programmes need to draw upon the theories and practices of lifelong learning in a fully informed manner.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study responded to the first research question: “To what extent they have contributed various training factors to develop teacher competences?” analyzing the results of the questionnaires. The teachers from the sample had to reflect on their professional career and indicate only the decisive training factor for each competence. This is a weak point of the study, because a competence is acquired in time and more agents contribute to form it. We are convinced that the results are reliable; they reflect the reality of our educational system. The individual learning, the collaboration with the colleagues and the courses for continuing professional development are the principal factors in the acquisition of teacher competences.

To respond to the second research question: “What are the tasks of teacher education so as to produce well prepared teachers for the future?”, we analyzed the questionnaires results and the teachers opinions about the acquirement of professional competences. Two conclusions are drawn: the initial teacher education ensures a little part of the needed competences and the teachers must be prepared as lifelong learners to be able to deal with all the challenges and professional requirements in their career.

The solution to have well prepared teachers for the future is to apply the lifelong learning principles in the teacher education. Some of these principles are available and handy to implement, but, to introduce a lifelong learning compulsory course seams difficult, but not impossible.
We have to guide our activity according to the provisions of the professional standards for teachers, to introduce more practical activities, to adapt our work to the reality of the contemporary school and of the new generations of pupils.

We think that now is the moment to take the important decisions to improve the teacher education in our university.

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