

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTION OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Katalin Zoller

**Abstract:** This paper is linked to a doctoral study focusing on teachers' professional development practice in Romania. The purpose of the study is to collect and report teachers' perception of continuous professional programs, to determine whether or not those programs are perceived to provide valuable knowledge and insight into the different development of teachers that promotes student achievement. The paper involves analysis of data drawn from 12 interviews from teachers and 2 interviews from in-service teacher education providers and trainers. The research participants were drawn from a narrow area in Romania with characteristics such as: the territory is mostly populated by Hungarians, therefore the interviews are conducted with teachers whose mother tongue is Hungarian and the teaching language is Hungarian too. They are not selected to provide a representative sample of teachers in the area, our focus was to identify local patterns of learning in the larger context of possibilities given. Combined with a larger comparative dataset analysis, the results of this study could support a discussion about different possible interventions to evaluate the national system in the larger context of international frameworks.

**Keywords:** teacher professional development, perception of professional development, models of professional development, Romania.

### 1. Introduction

The features of continuous professional development (CPD) are extensively described and analyzed in OECD's TALIS surveys (2008, 2013), which are based on the perceptions and self-reports of lower secondary education teachers about their entire school activities, including professional development. Government Decision no. 906/07.09.2011 (Published in the Official Monitor no. 688/20.09.2011) approved the Romanian participation first time at The Educational International Program developed by OECD, Teaching and Learning International Survey – TALIS 2013, regarding teachers' international assessment. Taken into consideration the findings of the international research, our main goal in this study was to provide deeper insights regarding effective CPD and teacher learning. Our main research question was to identify how teachers perceive their possibilities to learn in the given Romanian CPD system. We argue that the level of intention to learn determines the forms, the duration and the content of the chosen CPD programs, altogether the way teachers perceive their learning possibilities. For the interpretation of data drawn from the interviews we adopted the framework of Kennedy (2005) who identified nine models of CPD. The data are analyzed with reference to the models (Kennedy 2007) which offers a composite framework for understanding teacher learning. Using our data underpinned with the knowledge about the educational policy aspects of teacher professional development in Romania, we outlined the dominant models best fit to describe the circumstances.

### 2. The system of CPD in Romania – Policy context<sup>1</sup>

The Romanian Law on National Education and the explanatory methodologies (Law nr. 1/2011; Regulation no. 5561/2011) regulates the types of programs which are intended to provide further training for teachers being in in-service period of their teaching career. One component of teachers' continuous professional development is related to the career path of teachers and consists of classroom inspections,

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<sup>1</sup>Based on previous research by Stark, G. and Zoller, K.

compulsory written and oral exams and research based dissertations (for didactic degree I and the title of *profesor emerit* in secondary education). The second component of CPD is based on professional transferable credits and requires teachers to participate in professional development programs and achieve 90 credits in each five year period.

The career path of teachers is a progression process where the professional degrees are the main stimulants for evolution in the teaching profession. Although the professional degrees aren't compulsory, the majority of teachers take this path because the higher the professional degree, the higher the appreciation and formal recognition within the education system. In any case where job cuts are justified, the professional degree held by the teacher is determinant, even decisive in keeping the employment status. Besides specific salary-incentives are established according to the professional degree held by the teacher and are added to the salary according to the level of initial training, the professional degree and the number of years spent in education system. The advancement in teaching career is composed of two professional levels, named *didactic degree I and II*. Didactic degrees can be obtained after achieving the *definitive status* as a teacher. This represents the right to practice teaching, actually certificates every graduate coming from initial teacher education systems as a teacher after at least one year of teaching practice under the supervision of a mentor. The definitive status is compulsory for any graduate student who wants to become a teacher. This year represents the final stage of teacher's initial education. Within a period of five years graduates may try to pass the exam three times to obtain the definitive status; otherwise they can no longer be employed as a qualified teacher.

Being a qualified teacher, the career path is available only after four years of teaching practice. Teachers at the first stage of the path meet the same requirements as the requirements of the definitive degree, those exams having the same structure. Before the application of the latest National Education Law (Law 1/2011), the definitive degree it was part of the teachers' career path, was and remained compulsory for every graduate student who wants to become a teacher. The career path model presented as part of the continuous professional development of teachers emphasizes the training of teachers mostly detached from the school and teachers needs. Training is determined mostly by external evaluation standards and is finalized with rigorous exams.

Didactic degree I exam has a different structure, the content can represent in an emphasized way the local socio-cultural, school- and individual teacher needs. The degree can only be achieved if degree II has been already achieved and also only after four years of teaching after getting the degree II certificate. The candidate must have the school collectives' recommendation; his/her work must meet very high standards in term of quality, pedagogical competences, research, innovation in the process of education, school and class management, ethical and deontological issues. The enrollment process ends with a colloquium, based on a content and literature previously approved by the Ministry of Education. After passing the colloquium, candidates enter a process of research based work; they must elaborate a dissertation proving their ability to research empirical questions as well. Each candidate works with a mentor, who is a university teacher. The roles of universities are determinant in teachers' in-service education. The examinations for degrees I and II are centered on universities; they deliver the examination element of those compulsory assessments as the passing grades.

The highest formal professional degree in the system is represented by the *profesor emerit title*, which can be awarded after 15 continuous active teaching years following the didactic degree I certificate. It represents the highest level of professionalism in teaching career. It is also based on competitive examinations, classroom inspections, colloquium for enrolment and the defense of a research based dissertation.

Besides the professional development itinerary of teachers' career, the second type of in-service teacher training programs refers to the periodical in-service duties. According to the Order No. 4796/2001 teachers must participate in a professional development program once every five years (Law 158/1997) which is awarded with professional transferable credits. Teachers are required to undertake the compulsory training. These are delivered either by the Teachers' Resource Centers throughout Romania, which are administrated by the regional inspectorates or by other providers from the "private sector" who must be accredited by the Ministry of Education to offer training. Those providers include universities, colleges and non/governmental agencies (NGOs).

The career path of teachers seen as a part of in-service teacher education has long traditions and deep roots in the Romanian educational system. The legislative framework of continuing teacher professional development in actual structure was developed in the past two decades and expanded the conception of in-service training interpreted only as a teaching career path. Although achieving these didactic degrees is equivalent to an in-service education program and the condition of *once every five years compulsory in-service education* is considered fulfilled for those teachers who have obtained the definitive degree or any other didactic degree in the considered period.

### 3. Key characteristics of the Romanian CPD system

Taken into consideration the system of the Romanian CPD, in this part of the paper we will outline a conceptual framework in terms of how the key elements are structured determining the context where questions about professional knowledge are asked.

The *career path* of teachers is a self-directed process, and it is very individual. Although isn't compulsory, the majority of teachers take this formal and linear path. Why we called formal and linear? This subcomponent of the CPD system is more like a formal training of teachers in order to obtain a professional degree. There is a very little feasibility for them to enforce their learning needs. By analyzing the content of the exams leading to the degree, internal and external evaluation procedures are identified. Internal evaluation procedures are compulsory and consist in an annual individual evolution of professional performances. To go further in the process, the candidate must get at least a "sufficient" mark. Also the candidates' professional portfolio has to be evaluated. External evaluation is also compulsory and contains the following steps: two special inspections where the minimum passing mark is determined and a written examination. Each special examination consists in four didactic activities and it is valid only for the current school year and the current exam session. The content of the written examination depends upon the teachers' education level, but in all cases is comprised of subject-specialty, subject-specific didactics, pedagogy and element of psychology. The linearity has to do with the progression of standards from basic knowledge, skills and attitudes to a more complex understanding.

Identifying and analyzing needs in this stage of professional learning can be very hard given the top-down system where the teachers has to go through and be able to meet the objectives set by centralized standards. The in-service learning possibility described above is largely delivered through the award-bearing and training models described by Kennedy (2005). The career path of teachers emphasizes the completion of award-bearing programs of study and is validated by universities. However, in current discourse about the content of the exams leading to the degree, there is an emphasis on practical, classroom-centered activities too. Although the linear step-by-step process is a very simplistic approach to teacher learning, rarely could be an alternative (Hoban 2002) in introducing new knowledge, which supports the notion of learning through the career path. Learning content is usually decontextualized and is delivered to the teachers by an expert in order to prepare them to meet the nationally agreed standards. Although "professional" and "academic" routes (Kennedy, 2005) are designed for teachers to meet the standards set, the career path takes away the opportunity from them to be in position to express and meet their own developmental needs.

Looking at the second type of in-service learning, a lot more possibilities are emerging for teachers to express their professional development needs. Theoretically the elements of CPD system identified are representing a wide scale of opportunities for teachers from individual, accountability based models to collaborative intensions that support transformative practice. The question is, to what extend teachers are knowledgeable of the system, aware of their learning needs and offered potential activities? What kind of factors determine their choices? The interpretation of the interviews conducted will offer some answers to the questions posed. Nevertheless we will try to determine the dominant issues in relation to the characteristics of the system. The training model of CPD is a dominant form of CPD for teachers.

#### 4. The interpretation of interviews

In this section of the paper below we discuss the data of the interviews conducted and will explore in the light of the themes identified above. The findings of this research provide a much more complex picture about teachers and their CPD programs.

One of the issues to consider is the degree to which CPD can effectively meet individual professional development needs. The role of individuals in the identification of their needs based on the interviews has been very different. The structure of the biphasic system has different effects on teachers. Since there is a big pressure to complete the professional degrees, teachers focus mostly on their duties to fulfill those expectations. The system supports this attitude, according to regulations, achieving the didactic degree (one of them in a five year period) or formal teacher education training (for example master degree) is equivalent to 90 credits, furthermore the teacher doesn't have to fulfill other obligations in the considered period. However, whilst accepting the importance of further formal training of teachers (definitive degree – induction period, didactic degree II, didactic degree I or any other teacher education training), we wanted to explore in this research how teachers act in this regard.

Having a very controversial context, we tried to outline some learning patterns of teachers based on their perception of CPD. Through the interviews two main paradigms emerged as teachers think about their CPD activity.

##### **The perception of CPD as formal learning**

In accordance with the results of the TALIS 2013 data set, formal learning is very popular among teachers and often they not even know/mention other possibilities beside those courses, conferences, all day trainings, known in the literature as INSET days. The popularity and the accentual presence of transmission methods (Table 1.) in our view come with the structure of the biphasic system, which has different effects on the teachers. The structure and the course of the career path has all the features which are associated with the traditional perception of CPD: direct teaching, training, top-down delivery, lecture style teaching, etc.

Since there is a big pressure to complete the professional degrees, teachers focus mostly on their duties to fulfill those expectations and pass the exams associated with the certificates. The perception of CPD as a formal learning determines the learning patterns. Teachers are mostly in a passive role as recipients of specific knowledge, this way they can meet the nationally agreed standards.

Even for some teachers who already completed the highest degree CPD remains an obligation with a high commitment to obtain the credits associated with courses. These way teachers fill the obligation to obtain the credits, and at this point no matter what kind of content the CPD has. After collecting the certificates, no learning needs emerge, and they tend not to participate in any CPD-s until the next phase. Teachers perceiving CPD as a formal training rarely express individual professional development needs.

##### **The perception of CPD as a non-prescriptive learning path, an expression of individual (learning) needs**

Although we talked about the career path as very formal, prescriptive way of learning, there are elements which can be exploiting by teachers who are committed to develop their skills and knowledge. They can enforce their learning needs also by choosing CPD programs related to their interest.

In some cases individual learning needs are associated with a competitive nature of CPD. In those cases they look at CPD events as a possibility which takes them one step ahead of their colleagues. The competitive situation is created by the constantly voiced job cuts. In those situations teachers with more certificates are in better positions. Our question is to what extent a competitive environment can support communities of teachers within schools, what kind of effect does such an atmosphere have on them?

Analyzing the interviews we identified another kind of individual attitude of teachers, who participate in CPD-s. Some teachers attend different training events, and then disseminate the information to colleagues. At one institution more than half of teachers are involved in a CPD as a result of the

involvement of one of their colleagues. Although we can identify features of the cascade model (Kennedy, 2005), we need to mention, that our experience is that not the knowledge or skills are shared, rather they advertise the CPD, so other teachers already can make a reference about the CPD they will participate to. The attitude expressed is a small step toward the transitional, transformative model of CPD (Table 1.).

Another scenario identified based on interviews, teachers are eager to progress in accumulating the credits and after the tasks are fulfilled they are free to choose what best fits for them, they are in position to express and meet their own developmental needs. Teachers who I talked to, mentioned that most of the time the CPD they choose does not even have credit points, but they participate because it is very effective in the everyday teaching practice.

After having experienced the phenomenon, we identified one CPD, which is clearly very popular among teachers in the region but it is not accredited. In the brochure where all the CPD activities are listed, it is under CPD-s offered by local partners. Having talked to the provider and trainer, she listed serious bureaucratic barriers in the process of accreditation. Despite the barriers (no credit points, teachers pay for the CPD) head teachers acknowledged the effectiveness and promoted and implemented the CPD at the level of community. During our interviews this was a very encouraging step toward a collaborative perception of CPD.

## 5. Concluding comments

The training model of CPD is a dominant form of CPD for teachers. Asked about their preferences regarding the types of CPD activities they had undertaken, at first they gave details of their training possibilities listed in previously prepared programs<sup>2</sup>. The main organizers of these courses were the House of Teaching Staff for the training of teachers. By analyzing the program guide, we concluded that most courses were provided by higher education institutions with significant financial cost and credits offered. Other training possibilities are listed also, including institutional structures which are implementing international projects (e.g. Socrates, Leonardo) or projects whose beneficiary is the Ministry of Education and are financed by international organizations (World Bank, Phare programs); foundations, professional associations and NGOs whose object of their activity is the training of teaching-staff; county school inspectorates. Regarding the programs, teachers were concerned with credit points offered for the CPD. Some teachers were more likely to emphasize the reward for the participation against the gain in knowledge. At this point the content or the form of the CPD has no importance. Asking the motives behind, teachers listed issues like job security, keeping the employment status, formal recognition in the system. Kennedy (2005) describes the training model as a way to place teachers in a passive role as recipients of specific knowledge. The teachers we interviewed tended to confirm this feature of the model placing most importance upon their benefits regarding fulfilling the expectations. Teachers frequently described feelings of guilt and professional negligence in expressing such behaviors. This indicates that the formal expectations and personal developmental needs mostly does not coincide, also indicates that teachers are aware of their individual needs and areas where more consultation is needed. Whilst there is a separation between external expectations/external validation and internal developmental needs, we found that teachers desire to learn is very high and they often felt motivated by CPD with content tailored to their needs. Also we could state that based on the interviews such content is mostly offered by local partners, often without accreditation and with significant cost. Despite those individual commitments, many teachers talked about those CPD-s, which have a real impact on their practice, an opportunity to focus on their own developmental areas.

## 6. Framework confirmed

Based on the interviews, and looking at the spectrum of CPD models (Kennedy, 2005) only in a very few remarks we can identify some displacement from the transmission models to models where the capacity for professional autonomy is increasing (Table 1.). The system as a framework for the CPD

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<sup>2</sup>Brochure for school year 2014-2015 offered by the Ministry of Education, Covasna County School Inspectorate and the House of Teaching Staff "Csutak Vilmos" Covasna County.

does not supports the enforcement of professional autonomy. However positive initiatives are emerging from the bottom-up.

Table 1. The summary of the framework adopted by Kennedy (2005)

Framework	Terms of categorization	What is being categorized?
Kennedy's framework for analyzing CPD (2005)	Transmission=>transitional => transformation	Capacity for professional autonomy and transformative practice supported by the professional learning

## 7. We need to consider

The evidence from key informants and teachers discussed above suggests a wide variation in understandings how teachers perceive their possibilities to learn. Without drawing any final conclusion from our discussion, we can state that there are different learning patterns based on the perception of CPD. Our experience is that whether teachers perceive CPD as a formal training path or as a possibility to express their learning needs, either way they perceive CPD as an individual process. Very little steps were made to expand internationally recognized effective teacher training activities to the whole school community. In the absence of collaboration there is no real strategy behind why the choices are made. There is no coherence and sustained, long term plans, no strategic focus and collaborative environment.

There is no real follow up as to what extend teachers actually used it. Mostly individual needs are the principle drivers for participation. The role of school leadership is in a follow-up position. After performing some kind of CPD, the coordinator in each school introduces in a centralized database and the database does not exceeds the radius of the school.

Is the biphasic system of the CPD effective? Analyzing the system and research data our conclusion is that resources are very often wasted on poor or indifferent provision. Also the standards of the stages duplicate teachers' initial training.

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### Author

**Katalin Zoller**, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj Napoca (Romania), University of Debrecen (Hungary)  
E-mail: katazoller@gmail.com.

Katalin Zoller is a teacher assistant at the Department of Pedagogy and Applied Didactics, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, and a PhD candidate at the University of Debrecen, Educational Sciences. Her research interests centre on teacher professional learning and education policy analysis.

