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Developing learning abilities through flexible teaching strategies

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Abstract

The national Romanian curriculum challenges practitioners to apply it through educational and structured activities so as not to delineate the structure indicated by the national curriculum. Due to a common dialogue with other educational systems, the current Romanian educational system addresses at the micro-pedagogical level educational practices specific to other educational systems. The Finnish educational system manages to effectively combine current curriculum structures, the social vision based on trust and the implementation of educational software. This triad of components provides Finnish practitioners and foreign practitioners with the Finnish educational system, a design of educational activities validated by the educational outcomes. We wanted to discover the Romanian teachers' vision of the opportunities of the Finnish education system, as well as finding out about the continuous training of teachers in the national educational system.

Keywords: Romanian curriculum, Finnish educational system, cooperation, curriculum implementation.

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1. Introduction

At European Union level, a European education is being addressed, focusing on guaranteeing the quality of education for a good functioning of European directives at the European level. At the national level, each country has its own curriculum development and implementation system in line with the history of the country and in close connection with the policies developed and adopted over the time. Educational policies are often consistent with national goals and largely support the economic market and the principle of competition in any society (Pietrandrea, Lacaïta & Latempa, 2018). The authors support the creation of policies that not only support the integration of the individual at the end of a study cycle in a national or international labour market but the formation of education as a 'common European good: a 'collective enterprise'; a form of 'citizenship', a space of action and the definition of political objectives that do not give up the cultural, social and civic dimensions of education. This can be done by' citizens who are culturally capable of 'influencing, acting and imagine the alternatives' (ibid). In the context of Romanian national education, we can see a certain discrepancy between the school ideal and the social ideal. Thus, there is an imbalance between the application of educational policies and their highlighting in concrete final results. The Romanian educational ideal fails to include some values with a real benefit in the development of an adult who is prepared for the labour market as well as for the social life (Chis, Chis & Bocos, 2015). The authors of the paper mention the importance of focusing on the values related to the development of self and respect for others, as well as the interpersonal relationships in the society in which the adult functions. Socio-cultural development is another important point in the curriculum that teachers should be able to implement at the class level. By means of group and individual projects this is possible and one can also see the interdisciplinary approach through project-based approach (Simion, 2018).

Professor Gologan (2015) notes a lack of overall vision of childhood education in the formal school: *'the school must build the child's mind, form syllogistic figures, make it practice judgments with logical development, mental structures abstract approach with the rapid possibility of moving to concrete, simplified structural analysis possibilities, all accompanied by a minimal luggage of knowledge to efficiently use modern technologies'*. The social and emotional development of students is a key point in the work of a teacher. Having a teacher preoccupied with their academic and emotional training give room for the students to be more confident in themselves and also in the teacher (Stan & Simion, 2018). According to this study, pupils see school as a second family where everyone has their role, and the importance of the relationship between teacher and pupils is a predictor for the pupils' social and emotional development.

The focus on competences is the trend of the last two decades since the European Parliament and Council Directive in 2006. The eight key competences concerned (Figure 1) tend to refer to complex notions beyond cognitive aspects and include additional attitudes and capacities. Key competences are not focused on a specific subject in school and can be developed with a cross-curricular and integrated curriculum. Centring on competences is highlighted in the Romanian curriculum in the light of the curriculum developed with the centre developing these competences.

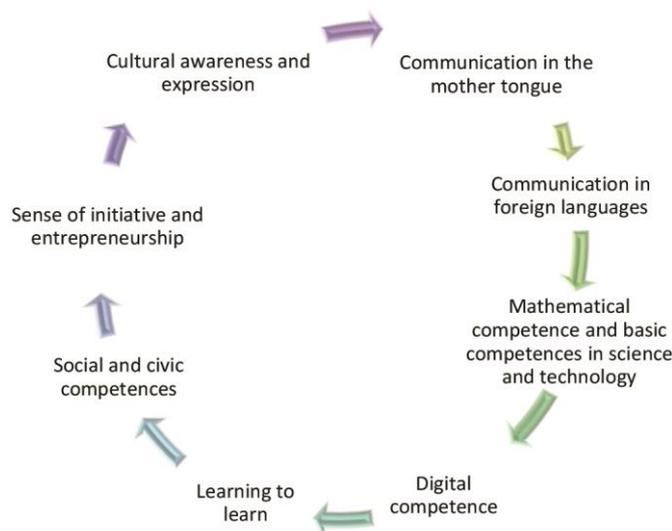


Figure 1. Key competences of the European lifelong learning framework

For a variety of positive experiences, it is necessary to apply essential elements previously acquired in the professional training of teachers and how this perpetual learning cycle becomes an indispensable skill for any adult and, in particular, a teacher. A teacher with a positive attitude, motivation and confidence in his/her success can solve any problem in the learning process and these features guarantee lifelong learning. Obstacles and changes occurring at the level of professional and personal training are met by a teacher with previous experience and the desire to use previously acquired knowledge.

The Eurydice report (Apud Fredriksson & Hoskins, 2008) identifies a defining quality of key competence, namely, 'enabling a person to successfully integrate into a range of social networks, while remaining independent and effective from the point of view staff in familiar settings, as well as new and unpredictable'. Thus, a key competence is to give people an opportunity to constantly update their knowledge and skills in the context of contemporary society, most importantly in the work place. A flexible approach is a key in the developing policies that encompass the visions of the current trends.

On the recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council (2006): 'Learning to learn is the ability to pursue and persist in learning, to organise their own learning, including through efficient management of time and information, both individually and in groups. The 'learning to learn' competency encompasses the learning process and the needs and also teaches how to use the experience gained previously. The different contexts in which this competence can be used provide adults with a wide variety of applicability and variety in their choices. At the same time, this competence is found in various fields of learning: information technology, literature or mathematics.

According to the latest report by the London University College Education Institute, an important component of the curriculum reform is to improve the capacity of teachers. This improvement can be achieved in two ways: recruitment of teachers who already have the necessary knowledge, skills and provision and/or the development of continuing vocational training programs to compensate for the lack of knowledge, skills and provision needed to teach the new vision of education (Gray, Scott & Mehisto, 2018). Kari Kivinen (Secretary General of the European Schools) notices an opportunity to rethink the way the learning space is built. The school should be a better learning environment and at the same time, the collaboration between the community and the school should be encouraged. To be a teacher means to be sensitive to everything that is happening around you and involves a moral compass because working with people, and especially with children involves responsibility and conscientiousness (Rasanen, 2000). The author believes that this profession involves several criteria

for which it is a profession with moral responsibilities: the fact that the teacher is with or without their intention a model for the child and for society, the influence they have on the world and the future and the fact that the interconnectivity of values, education and school is permanent. At the University of Oulo, Finland, the implementation of an ethical and moral training course for the future teacher has been an important step since the 1980s and then more active since the early 1990s. The course was a real success that managed to answer many but also to highlight the importance of such courses in the life of the future teacher in the classroom. Rasanen acknowledges the importance of internationalised cooperation at the level of education systems and believes that an open dialogue between different cultures can benefit all stakeholders: teachers, pupils and the community.

The educational framework in which a teacher starts to work fails to provide, in most cases, the teacher with all the training support required for his or her teaching activity. For starting school teachers, their entry into the educational system is a challenge for which they need to be trained, yet most of the time they need mentors or other teachers for guidance. According to a national report (Talis, 2013), less than half of the teachers entering the educational system participate in an integration program for teachers who are just starting to teach. This number is not at all satisfactory given that the European average is 66%. A worrying situation is also found with integration programs for new teachers in a school where only 19% of schools have implemented such a program. Changing the teaching environment is another reason for the need of an integration program that could have the role to encourage teacher-level cooperation and even across the school.

The professional and personal development and development of a teacher should be in a continuous balance in which the determinants of the teacher's emotional development are not viewed with scepticism (Chis, Chis & Catalano, 2016). By knowing the possibilities of educational alternatives and the ways in which they can be implemented in the classroom in order to benefit both the pupil and the teacher, a collaboration between the different successful systems in Europe and beyond can be achieved. 'Europe 2020' education goals are at the heart of a 'smart, sustainable and insoluble' approach. According to the agenda published by the European Commission (2017), it implies certain goals for higher education: developing skills with labour market needs, accessing the higher education environment, enhancing innovation in the higher system and expanding efficiency and effectiveness (Franke & Heriard, 2018). The Finnish model can be approached and implemented successfully in other education systems, because it addresses key elements in the training of both teachers and pupils. A particular importance are the different approaches to classroom learning environment design and employment but not limited to this only—textbooks available online and in print, learning games exercised in different learning environments, interdisciplinary approach at all the levels. An important role is played by learning in unconventional environments that are more common to other world educational systems. One of these successful approaches is learning in the natural outdoor environment—excursions and museum visits. Finnish teachers are independent in choosing materials to practice in the classroom and the methods they will apply in fulfilling their desired goals for teaching. The way teachers work to address the learning environment reduces the stress on students and all activity is a combination of breaks and learning but also short breaks of sports or refreshment. Teacher collaboration is very common in the Finnish system, where the 'surplus-centred' approach—we all can move forward—is a well-used mentality.

2. Method

2.1. Problem statement and purpose of the study

Along with the reform at the level of the Romanian curriculum, we consider the importance of implementing the cooperation between the teacher, pupil and parent in the educational process. The development of these approaches requires a cumulating of specific forces from the teacher's preparation both at the beginning of the road and during his/her activity at the classroom. The success of other educational systems in other countries provides an example to follow in order to achieve

fruitful cooperation among educational actors in our own country. This study aims to find out more about the perceptions of Romanian teachers regarding the implementation of other elements or structures from other educational systems more or less familiar to them. The study focused on the approach of teachers in the primary school in Romania—the teachers from the preparatory classes all through the fourth grade.

2.2. Participants

We contacted the teachers from the pre-school and primary education level in Romania and a number of 48 respondents followed the invitation to answer the questionnaire developed for this study. All respondents to the current questionnaire were females. In the preschool and primary school in Romania, most of those who teach are females and as a result the answers to the questionnaire showed this in the statistics. Regarding the number of years of activity as a teacher, the participants in the study had between one year and 42 years of activity. Below, we present a summary of the participants' characteristics (Figures 2 and 3). From the total number of participants, four of them are active in the pre-school system, eight are primary school professors and the remaining 36 are primary and pre-primary teachers.

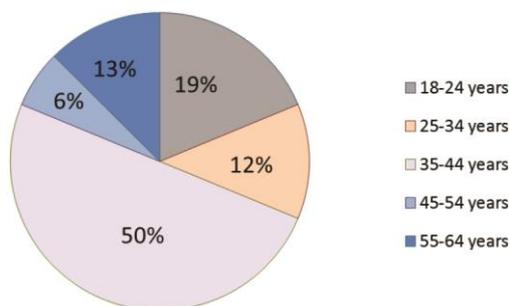


Figure 2. Age of the participants

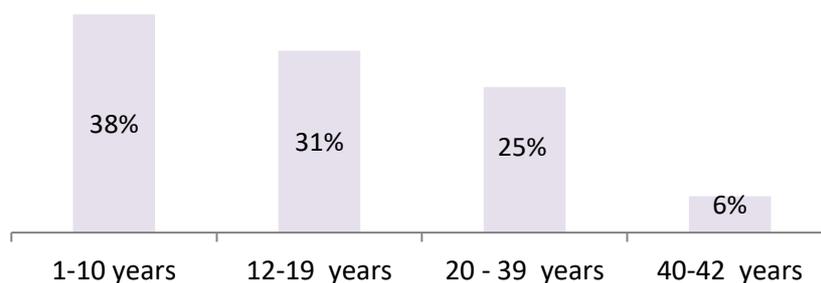


Figure 3. Experience in education of the participants

2.3. Procedure and design

The current study used a semi-structured questionnaire conducted by the authors for this study. It comprises a total of nine questions, and three of them provide the collection of demographic information. The questionnaire was distributed both through the online medium (Google Forms) and print media to reach as many teachers as possible. The open questions in the questionnaire required the details for: the information that the teacher has on the Finnish education system, the evaluation process within the system, the opportunity to implement such a system in our national system and also information about their continuous training in the classroom activities.

2.4. Results

The data were collected and processed qualitatively in view of the nature of the open and descriptive answers given in the questionnaire. Here is an overview of the results.

The answers to the questionnaire question: 'What do you know about the Finnish education system?' gave a picture of the premises from which we can start in this approach to a new education system. It can be seen what 25% of the participants do not know much about this education system or do not know about this system at all. Even if 6% of respondents argue that the Finnish system is competence-based, 42% of them claim that this system is the best or the best performing system they know (Figure 4).

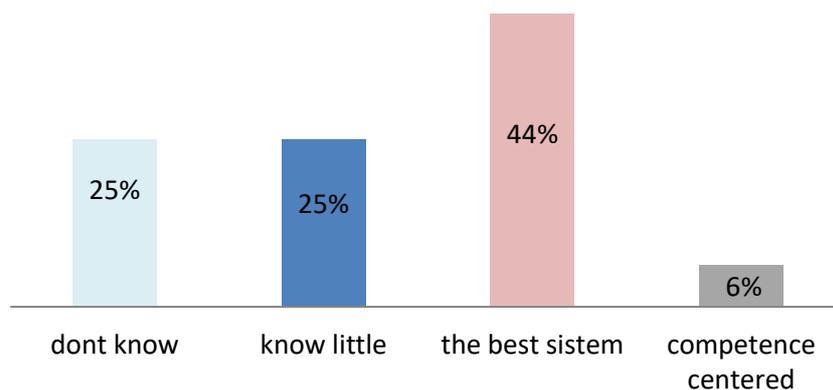


Figure 4. The amount of information about the characteristics of the Finnish system

To find out more about what teachers know, we analysed the answers to the question: 'What are the information you know about the evaluation process in Finnish schools?' (Figure 5). Thus, 13% of the respondents know very little about the evaluation system, 63% know nothing about the evaluation in this system and 19% know that it is a continuous assessment system, in which the notes are made known periodically to the parents and the reports on the situation of each student are known by the parent.

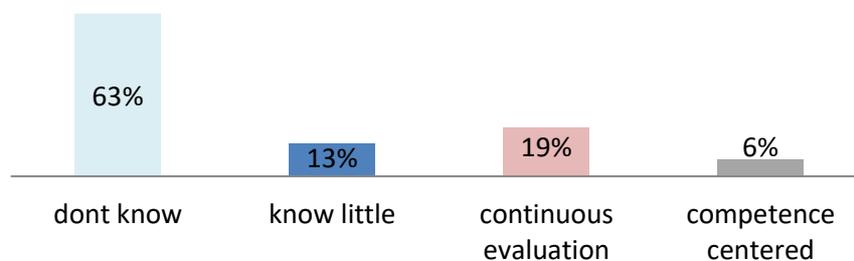


Figure 5. The amount of knowledge of the evaluation process in the Finnish system

For the next question, we wanted to find out if: 'Do you think it is appropriate to apply the teaching rules used in Finland under the current education system? Please give an argument to your answer.' The results show that 38% of the teachers consider it appropriate to approach this education system in the Romanian teaching system, while 50% of the respondents are not determined in such innovative implementation.

The last two questions of the questionnaire focused on the source of teacher training and the involvement of parents in pupils' schooling. We considered the question to be appropriate because teachers need preparation at all the levels, and the way parents involve themselves in pupils' lives must be known by teachers so they can address and solve the various problems that may arise during cooperation with parents.

Teachers have indicated that the continuous training is done through specialised courses offered by the Teaching Staff House (locally)—it offers periodically formation and training services for teachers. Teachers also use the individual study to prepare for their teaching career. Three of the participants in the study recalled that they are enrolled in doctoral courses and that they are also a form of preparation for them. As far as their opinion on parental involvement is concerned, the teachers have shared diverse opinions (Figure 6).

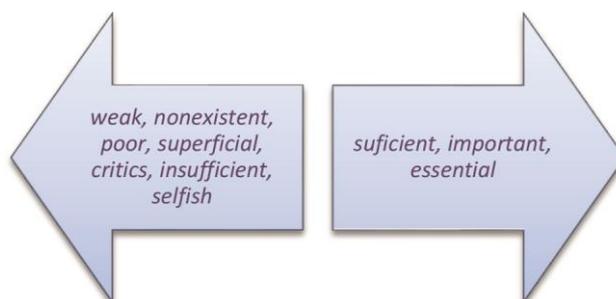


Figure 6. Teachers words to describe the relationship of parents with school

3. Discussion and conclusion

Teachers who participated in this study were available to give us as many details as possible about the information that they have on the Finnish education system and details of their professional training. Statistically speaking, all the participants were female and this was not a problem given that the majority of teachers in the primary levels are female. Most respondents were nearing the age of 50-year old and half of them have a significant number of years of experience in teaching. At the same time, one quarter of the participating teachers have over 20 years of seniority in the Romanian educational system. We have found that less than half of the teachers know about the Finnish education system, while a quarter of them know very little or nothing about this education system. As far as the evaluation in this system is concerned, it could be seen that more than half of the teachers do not know the evaluation system used in the Finnish education system. Some of them mentioned that it is a continuous and competence-based assessment. The most common form of continuous professional training is the courses provided by the Local Teaching Staff House. Methodological activities, specialised seminars and examples of good practice are a form of training and inspiration for the teachers. The views were shared in terms of parents' cooperation with teachers. Most parents treat their involvement in school life superficially or are individualistic and non-cooperative. An important role in this cooperation is the way in which the didactic framework manages to motivate the parent to be a significant active part in the pupil's life. Most of the time parental support can be superficial for reasons of ignorance because the teacher believes that everything is under control, and thus creates a false image about the real needs of children or even teachers.

There is a need to diversify the professional training of teachers who fail to be aware of the themes of the current educational interest. One reason would be the lack of providers of training programs, seminars and conferences that are not accessible to teachers at this level of teaching. Training programs are an important point in familiarising teaching staff with innovative and effective teaching practices from other successful educational systems.

The opportunities that international cooperation can offer can be a starting point for implementing other approaches in a native system. Even if some teachers succeed in implementing some really

successful elements both at their classroom and even through private schools, the effect needs to be amplified. In order to be able to adopt elements in the classroom, reports already drawn from the countries already implementing these systems and approaches can be used. Teacher training programs should include familiarity with both new models and implementation tools due to new elements that can create difficulties for beginners in particular or for traditionalists. It is important to understand the importance of developing a curriculum that combines both authentic and innovative elements in order to be able to have the expected results both at national and international level.

A holistic approach to teacher training should be considered at the beginning of the career when the student to be a teacher succeeds in acquiring both basic information and developing real skills for teacher life. With the insertion into the system, the novice teacher needs real support and guidance for his/her own integration. Teacher cooperation is the fundamental to both professional and personal success. Education is an instrument to overcome social inequality, as it has been since the 1980s that Finland manages to put education as a basic priority as access to free school food and personalised counselling.

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