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Cristina BUTNARU

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The Determinism of Professional Development Needs in Continuous Teacher Training

Cristina BUTNARU[1]

Abstract

The need for professional development is a gap that could be bridged by a proper training that is meant to foster both demonstrated and expected competences of an individual or a group. Nowadays it is necessary to distinguish between the socially generated needs for professional development and the individually generated ones. Some of them include certain needs which are seemingly unrelated to professional competences, but which can influence the individual learning process: the need for self-training, the need to interact with other teachers, the need for leisure time, the need to study at a personal pace. It is obvious that a more thorough analysis is definitely required prior to courses in order to tailor them to each individual's professional development set of needs. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to provide a deeper and more realistic analysis of professional development needs, which can lead to a better insight into a more effective benchmarking of continuing professional training. The taxonomy featured in this paper is a tool that can be used by providers of continuing professional training to such an extent that they are enabled to optimise their course content and approach. Furthermore, this framework which relies on genuine professional needs empowers teachers to reflect on their own development priorities when they are supposed to select a suitable training programme provided by different educational suppliers.

Keywords: *Need for professional development; individual need; social need; continuous teacher training.*

[1] "Dunărea de Jos" University, Galati, Romania, cris_butnaru@yahoo.com

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Corresponding Author:Gabriel BULANCEA
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1. Introduction

Professionalization of teaching career is one of the objectives of a qualitative education and the policies framed by the European Union converge towards a common vision for fulfilling this purpose. The dynamics and complexity of the current socio-economic context require continuous adaptability from teachers. They are expected to regularly develop their professional competencies in order to meet both their students' educational needs and the scientific innovations arising from research done in various fields. Continuing teacher education is a necessary ongoing process generated by uninterrupted social evolution. Therefore, this process calls for optimizations and innovations that must be related to social, scientific and technological evolution. One of the directions meant to make teacher education more effective emphasises the need for a judicious correlation between the professional development needs, training curriculum and course delivery system. It is practically important to update the strategies and techniques of continuous training by taking into account both the scientific and methodological requirements as well as the rhythm of teachers' social life. That is the reason why the boundaries between the emerging professional and personal development needs may sometimes seem blurred.

2. From individual learning needs to professional results

In order to optimise the teaching staff professional development needs, a continuous training program should be developed relying on the following coordinates: adult learning specificity, orientation towards self-education / adulthood self-education and learners' individual characteristics. One of the theoretical paradigms [2] that synthesise specific aspects of a learning process in adulthood is the Andragogic Model [2], still relevant due to the connection between its basic principles and the social effects of individual development. The learner's needs in terms of learning style, self-image, problem- solving, and past career experience are prerequisites for both personal and professional outcomes. The multidimensional approach and successful application of the andragogical model highlight the necessity to capitalize on it in any field of adult education, implicitly in the continuing teacher education as well.

Owing to the fact that the learner's needs in relation to learning have an essential role in the efficiency of the process, it is necessary to analyse the dynamics of the relationship between the socially determined training needs (mainly stemming from the educational policy line) and the concrete training

needs, reflecting each teacher's individual and institutional professional path. Voiculescu [4], attempts to categorise the educational needs and distinguishes several levels of possible investigations: social versus individual needs, common versus special needs, manifest versus latent needs as well as current versus potential needs [4]. Even though the nuances of these dichotomies are more difficult to grasp - hence the versatility of the approach - the usefulness of analysing adult training needs is obvious at least from a social and individual perspective. For a deeper analysis of these needs, we added another dichotomy to the paradigm under scrutiny that is explicit professional development versus implicit ones.

Bradshaw identifies four types of needs, referring to the diversity of needs underpinning the development of training programs by taking into account all analysis levels: normative, comparative, internalised and verbalised [4]. The regulatory needs reflect the differences between the established standards and the assessed level of knowledge, skills or abilities to succeed. The comparative needs arise from the comparison between levels of knowledge, skills and achievements of certain individuals or groups, a term of comparison being used as a reporting standard. The personal developmental needs are the ones that an individual is aware of but which they do not always verbalise.

Due to the fact that the didactic profession generates personal needs which are seemingly unrelated to the didactic competences but are of paramount importance for the teacher's professional development (the need to interact with colleagues, the need for free time, the need for self-training, the need to study at their own pace, the need to prioritize family and social concerns, etc.), the theoretical milestones regarding the peculiarities of learning in adulthood are useful for highlighting issues that have not been thoroughly researched but are equally relevant for teaching career development.

On one hand, it is therefore necessary to analyse the needs for professional development so that both types of needs and their interdependence are taken into consideration. On the other hand, it is also essential to identify to what extent individual needs, irrespective of their relatively diffuse character, may affect the effectiveness of the continuous training process.

3. Why a Determinism of the Professional Development Needs?

Since the analysis of professional development needs prior to the design and delivery of training programs is often limited to identifying

discrepancies concerning didactic skills, it seems that the factors that can trigger individual, special, latent, potential or other needs can be ignored. Thus, a series of questions arise: to what extent continuing training programs meet the real needs of professional development? What are the arguments that convince a teacher that a particular program is valuable? Could a teacher be more attracted by the course topics, or by how the course will be delivered (face-to-face, blended-learning, e-learning), preferring either more interaction with colleagues or more free time?

4. Research Methods

In this context, the design of a taxonomy reflecting the determinism of the professional development needs on the social-individual axis has been a useful approach meant to clarify the aspects that can lay the basis of optimising and even re-conceptualizing the teachers' continuing training. In order to design the theoretical paradigm that highlights the determinism of the professional development needs, a quantitative research, using a non-standardized instrument - the questionnaire survey - was carried out at the Teaching Staff House in Galati. The study involved 181 teachers who were randomly selected from Galati County - Romania. The questionnaire was applied at the beginning of the school year, before the development of the continuing training offer and was incorporated in the need analysis as an intrinsic step in the continuing training cycle of teachers. The research tool included both items related to competencies requiring further development and areas teachers considered to be relevant as well as items regarding individual needs that could be integrated into the training process. In order to quantify certain aspects that could be unclear to prospective course attendants, respondents had not only the opportunity to choose the variants that best suited them, but also the freedom to add their own variants.
It is worth mentioning that the study on determinism was part of a broader research which aimed to make the process of continuing teacher training more efficient.

5. The Statistical and Theoretical Results of the Research

5.1. Questionnaire and result processing

The following items were included in the questionnaire in order to investigate the determinism of professional development needs:

- When you want to choose a training program from a job offer, first of all, you take into account: the individual needs for professional

development; the certification procedure; well-known and consecrated trainers; the possibility of going through individual sequences of the program; the amount of the course fee; supplier type (CCD – Teacher Training House, NGO etc);

• Apart from the fields in which your professional development is required, what other need of yours should be addressed when you want to participate in a training program?: the need for constant interaction with your course mates; the need to study at your own pace; the need for free time; the need for guidance during the implementation of the topics and practical applications; the need for support to identify sources of information.

The quantitative processing of the responses led to the following results:

Table 1. Criteria for choosing training programs

The Criteria	Frequency	Percent
Individual needs for professional development	87	48.1
Type of certificate	21	11.6
The trainers	28	15.46
Individual sequences	24	13.25
The tax amount	13	7.18
Supplier type	8	4.41
Total	181	100

There is a frequent focus on the individual professional development needs even if this item does not define them or suggest them. However, the prevalence of this response is to be compared with the certification method, the tax amount and even the type of supplier. The learning needs in adulthood are related to the possibility of going through individual sequences for some respondents, which can be statistically significant in a more complex study.

Table 2. Implicit needs for professional development (including continuous training)

The need	Frequency	Percent
The need for constant interaction with classmates	39	21.55
The need to study at your own pace	62	34.25
The need for free time	60	33.15
The need for guidance during the implementation of the themes and applications	12	6.63

Need for support for identifying sources of information	8	4.42
Total	181	100

This item suggested more implicit needs in terms of professional development and the responses given to this item require a more nuanced approach towards these needs. Responses contributed to the differentiation of professional development needs into a taxonomy that reflects their determinism.

5.2. Theoretical Results – The Determinism of Professional Development Needs

The interdependence between social needs and individual needs of continuous training is reflected in the determinism illustrated in Fig. 1.

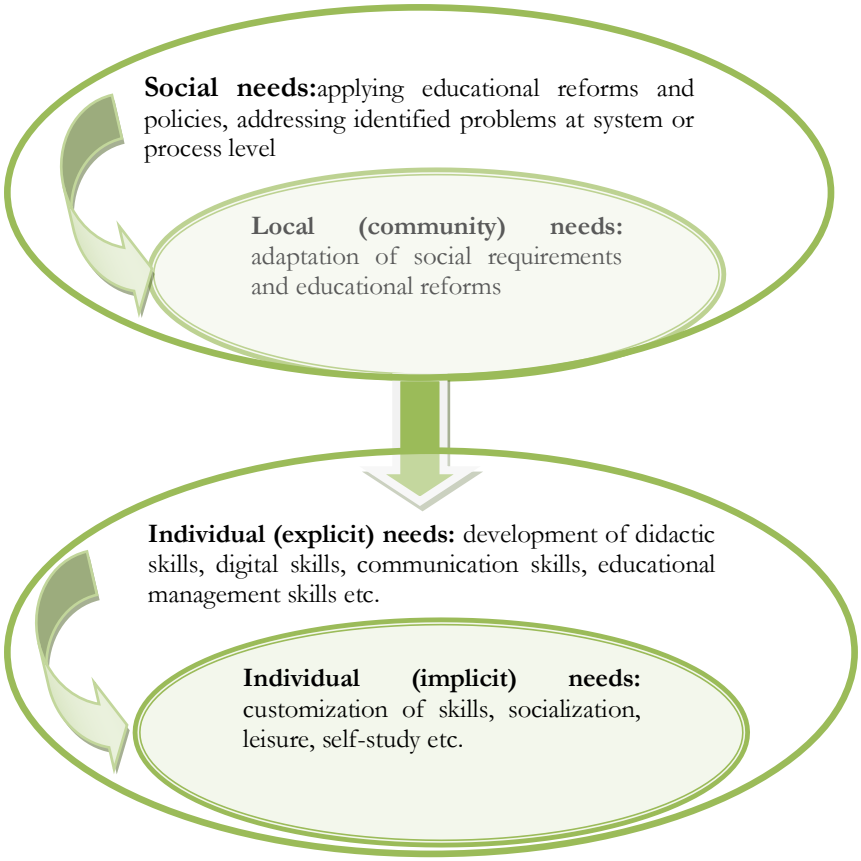


Fig. 1. The Determinism of Professional Development Needs

Socio-professional development needs include a sub-category that can be considered as an intermediate area. This particular area can ensure a desirable continuity and coherence in determining needs: community /local needs, which may overlap with institutional ones. R. Paloş delineates "the main objectives of the need assessment which are expected to identify the existing problems at the community level, the possible alternatives to address the problems encountered and the evaluation of these options, followed by the design of the action plans" [3].

Some discrepancies between teacher competences are due to global restructuring (eg. curriculum reform) or are identified in the didactic activity and centralized at national level (for example, counseling and guidance lessons), but continuing ought to focus on issues that are relevant to the community or school involved. Therefore, a progressive approach to analyse training needs starting from the general social framework and reaching the course attendant's personal perspective, is more conclusive than the syncopated evaluation of the professional development needs.

The experience gained recently has shown that among the needs expressed by the teachers, there are not only the explicit ones which address the professional competences and require amplification, but also the implicit ones which continue the determinism in its sequence from general to particular. Sometimes implied training needs have a stronger propulsive power for teachers to attend courses than the need to develop formal, strictly professional competencies. Even if the training needs analysis is carried out on a more complex dimension (community or educational institution), we are of the opinion that individual needs have a high degree of relevance to the creation or adaptation of continuing training programs and that "schools will be able identify continuing education programs that meet the needs of teachers to develop their general and specific skills according to their individual training needs. These individual needs are the basis for designing and delivering continuing training programs by suppliers"[1].

6. Applicability and limits of research

By identifying multi-level professional development needs, the institutions offering training programs have the opportunity to streamline their delivery procedures and training methods without artificially undermining the aims or the curriculum quality. Depending on the identified individual needs and the structure of the course attendant group, these procedures can be easily adapted if the necessary resources are available (e.g.,

distance learning platforms, video conferencing systems, m-learning applications, competent trainers for this process). From the perspective of teachers wishing to choose a continuing training program, the utility of determinism is reflected in a greater degree of awareness of their individual needs owing to the fact that not all learners in a group have the same level of competence development or the same gap between acquired and required skills.

The study limitations stem from the following: the use of a non-standardised tool, pre-formulated responses chosen by respondents, and one-choice only for each item. However, as far as teachers are concerned, this research had a reflexive role, fostering self-analysis and a more appropriate choice of continuing training programs. As for course providers, it has led to the diversification of need analysis areas so that teachers can increase their motivation for career progression.

7. Conclusions

The process of continuing teacher education may sometimes be influenced by artificiality stemming from partial or incomplete awareness of the professional development needs. It is not always the teachers who choose course subjects based on some real needs, but rather on the basis of certain subjective criteria such as the length of the program, the trainers or the way of certification. Due to the fact that during adulthood, learning is oriented towards individualisation, self-education and certain personal priorities, the way the courses are delivered is also important. Determining the needs of professional development can optimise the results of continuing training by creating tools and analysis methods that will deepen this important process and provide each teacher with personalised opportunities for progress in teaching.

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