

DIGITAL SKILLS OF TEACHERS FOR LIFELONG LEARNING - ROMANIAN REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

The need for teacher's Lifelong learning is a permanent and paramount goal of any 21st-century education system and the best investment that any state can make to ensure the social, economic and cultural future.

The European Union has shown an increased interest in training and developing the digital skills of teachers in the European area in recent years. In this regard, EU has developed a series of measures and recommendations for Member States. Nevertheless, in Romania we are experiencing a crisis caused by the shift of teaching activities to the online environment, the lack of digital skills of teachers in pre-university education and, last but not least, the lack of digital media (free internet access, computers, tablets) for a large part of the students.

The current paper aims to identify the Romanian context shaping the development of the teachers' digital skills for Lifelong Learning up to the onset of lockdown, which led to the relocation of teaching activities online (on 16 March 2020), also focusing on the measures taken during lockdown (16 March 16 - 15 May 2020). The question we are trying to answer is how prepared were the teachers to cope with the online teaching activities, how much had the schools advanced in the integration of digital resources to face-to-face teaching.

Key words: *Lifelong learning; Digital skills; E-learning; Education crisis.*

1. The Romanian context of the development of the teachers' digital skills for Lifelong Learning

To meet the challenges of the dynamic knowledge-based society in the digital age, teachers must possess digital skills, both as a component, an integral part of their professional skills and as an incentive for the development of students' digital skills.

In a closely connected world, digital skills are gaining in importance and the school is becoming one of the poles - perhaps even the most important of them - that contributes to the development of these digital skills. In such a world, the school itself must transform in order to meet the new challenges and adapt its pedagogical practices to the technologies that can make it more effective (EduTech report, 2018, p. XI).

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Research estimates that there is a need to develop digital skills and use new technologies among teachers, in particular to adapt the teaching content and activities to the requirements of digital tools.

The European Commission has conducted a series of research on national teaching career policies in Europe in recent years. The analysis of the characteristics of the teaching profession focused on aspects such as: continuing education of teachers and types of professional support provided for them (2018, Teaching Careers in Europe: Access, Progression and Support. Eurydice Report); teachers' less developed competences, which require systematic interventions with relevance for the field of curriculum development: teaching methodologies adapted to the specificities of different groups; alternative methods of student evaluation; promoting interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches; promoting digital skills and using open educational resources; personalised approaches to learning, development of students' socio-emotional skills and self-regulation of learning (2015, 2013).

Currently, there is no national strategy explicitly aiming at teacher training, but the sectoral strategies of the Romanian education system implemented between 2015-2020 - *Strategy to reduce early school leaving in Romania; National Lifelong Learning Strategy*; The national strategy for tertiary education - underpinning multisided approaches to the training of teachers, with emphasis on their preparation to assume various roles in education.

2. Development of the teachers' digital skills for Lifelong Learning

The main providers of continuing professional development for teachers in Romania are the Centres for Teacher Professional Development (Romanian name: Casa Corpului Didactic, acronym - CCD). These are defined, in accordance with the National Education Law no. 1/2011, as centres for resource and educational and managerial assistance for the teaching and non-teaching staff and as accredited providers of continuing education.

In the *Raport privind nevoile de formare ale cadrelor didactice din învățământul primar și gimnazial în domeniul abilitării curriculare (Report on the training needs of teachers in primary and secondary education in the field of curriculum development)* (2020, coord. Irina Horga), we find that out of the 168 training courses conducted by the Centres for Teacher Professional Development, 74% took place in the face-to-face mode, 20% in the blended learning format and 0.6% online. It should be noted that 21 of the CCDs stated that they had not organized any training programme in the blended learning format; 9 had only one blended learning course; 7 CCDs organized between 2-5 such courses. Previous data highlight the limited experiences of CCDs in conducting and logistically supporting courses in the blended learning format.

The number of dedicated training courses in pre-university education cannot be accurately computed, given the fact that only 4% of the total training courses organised by the Centres for Teacher Professional Development between 2013-2018 aimed at developing digital skills/use of ICT in the teaching-learning-evaluation

process. The report aiming at identifying the training needs of teachers indicated that only 10% of them stated that the last course they participated in comprised ICT/digital skills in the teaching-learning-evaluation process, and the purposes for which teachers previously used online learning platforms highlight only a partial and "static" use of the facilities and opportunities that such platforms can provide for users, to the detriment of flexibility, the ability to tailor training to personalised needs and their use for the development of genuine online learning communities.

The analysis of the National Registry of Accredited Continuing Education Programmes, updated in March 2020, published on the website of the Ministry of Education and Research, points out once again to the low interest of continuing education providers for ICT/digital skills, only 8% of the accredited programmes addressing the development of the teachers' digital skills for Lifelong Learning.

The Centres for Teacher Professional Development, according to the Law of Education, is the main provider in the field of continuing professional development of teachers in Romania, but the National Registry of Accredited Continuing Education Programmes dismisses this, at least in the field of ICT/digital skills: 55% of these programmes are provided by non-governmental organisations (associations, foundations), 36% by Centres for Teacher Professional Development and 9% by Universities.

This is the context regarding the development of the digital skills of teachers in Romania with the onset of lockdown, which led to the suspension of teaching activities in classrooms and the transition to online teaching activities.

3. Measures proposed by the Ministry of Education and Research during the online activities

More than a month after the the onset of lockdown, during which the teachers tried to keep in touch with the students, with no legal provisions in this regard, the Ministry of Education and Research issued on the Order no. 4135 on 21 April 2020, laying down the legal provisions for the development of the online instructional-educational process. The Order stipulates that the Ministry of Education is to draft and subsequently adopt the National Plan for Educational Intervention during the Suspension of Pre-university Courses. An Instruction for creating and/or strengthening the capacity of the pre-university education system through online learning was issued as Annex to the order, which provides the legal framework for the measures at the level of the Ministry of Education and Research, school inspectorates and pre-university education units in order to continue the learning process at the level of the pre-university education system. The measures provided are intended to ensure that the online learning process takes place.

It is planned to operationalise an online portal (<https://digital.educd.ro>) as a unique resource for online learning.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Education and Research will take the necessary steps to support the training of pre-service and in-service teachers in order to integrate teaching technologies to the teaching-learning-evaluation process through:

- the introduction of the specialised teaching methodologies and practical training subjects (compulsory) in the curriculum of the pre-service teacher training programmes with a view to the development of the competences of technology integration to the teaching-learning-evaluation process.
- supporting the Centres for Teacher Professional Development that will provide continuing training programmes for teachers aimed at the development of skills for integrating technology to the teaching-learning-evaluation process, by, first and foremost, accrediting them by the CSA.

This document drafted by The Ministry of Education and Research (Romanian acronym: MEC) specifies a series of duties and obligations that teachers must fulfill in the context of digital education; hence, the teachers shall: collect information necessary for students' access and participation in the online teaching-learning-evaluation process; design the support activity for online learning based on the online teaching and learning principles; carry out the teaching activity in the online system and to undertake responsibility for ensuring the quality of the educational act; develop, adapt and select open educational resources, learning sessions on education platforms, applications, as well as other categories of resources and means that can be used in the online learning process; develop assessment tools applicable online to record students' progress; provide permanent constructive feedback to each student, following the participation in the activities carried out and the completion of tasks; report the activity carried out to the management of the education unit, in compliance with the established conditions and terms of reporting; participate in the training activities and webinars recommended by the Ministry of Education and Research, The County School Inspectorate (Romanian acronym: ISJ)/ The School Inspectorate of Bucharest (Romanian acronym: ISMB) and the management of the education unit.

In order to be able to fulfill all these responsibilities, all teachers should already have developed digital skills, which is very unlikely, given the data in which this paper is grounded.

Article 11 of the Order establishes that parents/legal guardians have the obligation to ensure the access and participation of students in the online learning activities provided by the school. In other words, the parents are obliged to provide the student with the necessary equipment and to ensure the internet connection.

The Ministry of Education does not assume responsibility for ensuring free access to education for all students in the context in which 38% of children and young people under 16 are in a precarious financial situation that has been aggravated by the limitation of economic activities. The Ministry of Education has not conducted any study on the need for IT resources for schools and teachers in Romania (although it possesses statistical data that we have used in this paper, and reports at the national level) (2, p. 14).

This is the only normative act drafted by the competent ministry for this period, which unfortunately, does not offer solutions for any of the actors and stakeholders of the educational process: students, teachers, parents. All other ways of communicating and regulating the current situation belong to informal registers and settings: letters to teachers, press releases, etc.

4. Conclusions

The Romanian school has faced serious difficulties in conducting online educational activities, because there has been no interest in developing the digital skills of teachers and no coherent strategy to prepare schools to use digital tools in the education process.

What can Romania do on short and medium term to facilitate the efficient development of education processes in the online environment?

More and more frequently the speeches delivered by the officials of the competent ministry highlight the idea of continuing the teaching and learning process in the online environment from the beginning of the new school year. In this context, it is necessary to regulate the obligation to use an online tool in parallel with the educational activities carried out in the traditional classroom.

Currently, digital textbooks are available on manuale.edu.ro textbooks, and the Ministry also owns the educared.ro platform, which has begun to be widely used in pre-university education. We consider it necessary to continue the development of this platform, which can be an important resource in the training of teachers' digital skills and a resource for carrying out online teaching activities. The moment of the Coronavirus crisis must be capitalised constructively in the sense of reforming education - on the one hand, the government must provide the necessary infrastructure to schools (equipment, internet access), train teachers and school managers to develop digital skills, support those measures ensuring that each student has access to online training (equipment, internet access).

The current context of the Coronavirus situation forces us to reshape existing educational practices, both in terms of teaching, which we must adapt to student learning, in interdependence with new evaluation methods and techniques, in compliance with online teaching-learning.

For education to continue in sustainable ways, it is absolutely necessary to take all measures so that technology will reach all teachers and students, so that teachers and students will stay connected.

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