

EXPLORING THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ONLINE CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

In Romania, the pandemic compelled a significant rethinking of the activities dedicated to teachers' continuous professional development, considering the use of the online format that became a prevalent one. This way of training offers certain benefits and drawbacks, particularly concerning psychological well-being, but also influences the school performance and teachers' professional development trajectory. On the other hand, teachers are reluctant to participate in professional development programs that demand several weekly hours in synchronous online sessions (across various platforms) or webinars, requiring active involvement and continuous oversight, in addition to time spent on assignments. In addition, enough tasks are requested to be solved asynchronously, waiting for the trainers' feedback. This study tries to identify the advantages and disadvantages of the online format of continuing professional training for teachers. Moreover, it seeks to understand teachers' perspectives on their engagement within those online programs. Ultimately, the research findings illustrate a series of proposed recommendations designed to improve the efficiency and ensure the long-term viability of in-service teacher training initiatives.

Keywords: teachers' continuous professional development; psycho-pedagogical skills; teachers' perceptions, solutions for online CPD

INTRODUCTION

During the pandemic, most educational activities embraced the online format. At the same time, the programs dedicated to teachers' professional development have started to be organized online, continuing to be held in this format, in many cases, at present.

The continuous training represents how each teacher ensures his/her career progress and performance. Moreover, the educational practice shows that teachers attending

continuous training programs have developed knowledge, skills, autonomous use of knowledge, and professional skills, according to the requirements of the educational market.

After completing continuing education programs, teachers are expected to possess a range of skills, such as active and proactive lifelong learning, based on knowledge, analytical thinking, synthesis, problem solving, and involvement in effective communication. In the Romanian educational system, the continuous training of the teaching staff is based on the model of approach through competencies, and the concept of cumulative development through competencies (Manea, 2014).

In Romania, the in-service teacher training has to ensure the training and development of teaching staff, including the acquisition of new skills, in line with the actual developments in education and curriculum needs; it must be conducted following the requirements regarding the adaptation of teaching staff competencies to the changes in the educational structure and process. In this respect, beyond being a professional requirement (OM 5564/2011; OM 5387/2016), the teachers' engagement in continuous training is crucial for their professional growth, fostering the development, broadening, or completion of the competencies essential for their role. Thus, it is expected to have open-minded teachers in schools, endowed with advanced skills, capable of projecting high-quality didactic approaches for students.

However, the pandemic forced a major reconsideration of teacher professional development activities, making the online format a prevalent and necessary solution. Even after that period, the online format is still viable, having advantages and disadvantages. The effects are generated mainly at the psychological level, as well as related to the students' school performance. In this context, we can also extrapolate several issues to the level of teachers' continuous training / professional development programs.

Unfortunately, there are major differences between expectations and reality. Not so many teachers are enthusiastic to follow a professional development program in the online format, and to spend some hours online daily in synchronous meetings (on various platforms) or webinars, with direct participation and involvement, under permanent monitoring.

1. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The new Education Law (The School Education Law 198/2023) establishes, among others, the working conditions, the compulsory professional training for securing teaching positions, but also the types of teacher training programs.

The support measures for teachers can be classified into the following categories (Eurydice, 2023a):

- Job security measures for tenured teachers;
- Measures to facilitate and encourage participation in continuing education programs;
- Support measures for teachers working in rural areas;
- Social support measures;
- Measures to ensure the transparency and fairness of all types of decisions regarding professional status, career progress, evaluation etc., as well as specific conditions for conflict resolution.

Although measures to facilitate and encourage participation in continuous training programs are mentioned, when teachers were asked what those measures are, their feedback was unclear, without identifying anything concrete. Even from the analysis of the documents

referring to the methodology of continuous professional development, those measures were rarely found to be present in the actual Romanian training system.

Continuing training is both a right and an obligation, according to the present legislation. The main ways to achieve continuous training are (Conceptual Framework, 2024):

- programs and activities to improve scientific and didactic training;
- training programs in the area of education management, guidance, and evaluation;
- training courses in preparation for exams which secure the 2nd and 1st degree of teaching qualification;
- professional re-training programs;
- studies corresponding to a specialization in the field.

In Romania, the continuous training of teaching staff is a right that is achieved mainly through professional development and professional re-training. In correlation with the specific regulations of adult education and lifelong learning, teacher training is achieved through compulsory training. The continuous training courses ensure the professional development of teaching staff, being part of the evaluation/equivalence system through transferable professional credits; any teacher must accumulate 90 credits over 5 years (Conceptual Framework, 2024). Continuous training programs are organized modularly across the following main fields: specialty, pedagogy, educational psychology, specialty didactics, ICT, and educational management.

The continuing professional development process ensures that teachers with up-to-date and developed skills, including the acquisition of new competencies, depending on the evolution in terms of education needs and educational curriculum, as well as according to the requirements regarding the adaptation of teachers' competencies to the changes recorded in education structures and processes.

Related to its main objectives, the continuing professional development process aims at:

- updating and developing the competencies in the field(s) of specialization, corresponding to the didactic functions gathered via the initial training, through periodic training/development programs;
- developing the competencies to progress in one's didactic career, through the system of preparing and achieving the didactic degrees;
- acquiring or developing leadership, guidance, control, and evaluation skills within the structures and organizations of the education system;
- acquiring new skills, via programs of professional retraining, for new specializations and/or new didactic functions, other than those achieved via the initial training;
- acquiring complementary skills that broaden the range of activities and functions that can be performed by teaching staff (teaching in the e-learning system, teaching in foreign languages, educational counseling and career guidance, adult education etc.);
- developing and extending transversal skills regarding social roles and personal and professional development, interaction and communication within the social and pedagogical environment, assuming responsibilities regarding the organization, management, and improvement of the strategic performance of

professional groups, self-control, and reflective analysis of each teacher's activity etc.

The continuous training of the teaching staff is based on the paradigm of the competency approach and the concept of cumulative development of the teachers' competence level. The level of competence targeted by continuous training/development programs and activities is evaluated according to (Eurydice, 2023b):

- teachers' ability to mobilize, combine, and autonomously use their general and professional knowledge, skills, and competences, following various requirements of a certain context, situation or problem;
- teachers' ability to cope with change, complex, and unforeseen situations.

Thus, we can conclude that continuous training represents a complex development activity in teaching, designed to adapt educational practices to scientific, technological, economic, and social developments. The continuing training process responds to those developments and their issues, which can be integrated into the wider context of lifelong learning.

The objectives of the continuous training of teachers, auxiliary teaching staff, management, guidance, and control staff in pre-university education units and institutions, and from their related units, from universities, as well as from other educational institutions or organizations, in the Romanian education system, are to:

- developing basic (psycho-pedagogical, specialty, scientific research, managerial, administrative, etc.) skills;
- training new professional and transversal skills, specific to different categories of beneficiaries.

Compared to other continuing training systems in Europe, the Romanian one does not offer incentives or compensatory elements.

The main ways of organizing continuing education courses for teachers are presented in Table 1.

Table no. 1. Ways of organizing continuing education courses for teachers (Butnaru, 2016)

Format of training	Characteristics
Traditional (face-to-face)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - all activities take place in the classroom; - the group of students has been created beforehand; - there is a rather inflexible calendar/ schedule; - communication between students and trainer is made directly; - the final evaluation is held at the same time for all participants.
Online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - modern variant of distance learning; - all activities take place on an online platform; - students are registered with the training provider, but there is no direct contact between the trainer and the students; - the program schedule includes deadlines, but students can access the course at any time (asynchronous lessons); - final evaluation is held individually, at a time chosen by the student within the timeframe specified by the trainer.

Blended-learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - some activities take place in a classroom, others on an online platform; - the group of students has been created beforehand; - the activity schedule is fixed only for classroom activities; - communication is both direct and virtual (via asynchronous lessons); - final evaluation is held either in the classroom, online, or both.
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In this respect, in many cases, the question that each teacher tries to answer sounds like: “Does online training represent a solution for teachers’ training?” A fast answer is: “Yes, online training can represent a modern and flexible offer that supports and develops the authentic professionalism of teachers”. It tries to achieve the following issues (eLearning Romania, 2010):

- making available to students the immediate and specific applicability of the training content;
- guiding teachers towards reflective practice and using multiple perspectives;
- approaching learning as a collaboration effort between trainer and student;
- providing the basis for self-direction and lifelong learning;
- capitalizing on professional experience.

RESEARCH AIM AND METHODOLOGY

The proposed research aimed to target:

- reviewing the perceptions of the teachers concerning their involvement in online training programs;
- identifying the advantages and disadvantages of teacher training activities, carried out in an online format;
- identifying possible solutions needed to increase efficiency and achieve a sustainable implementation of teacher training programs.

In order to achieve those objectives, a questionnaire was designed and applied to a sample of 84 teachers from pre-university education, from Dâmbovița, Argeș and Constanța counties. The questionnaire contains 10 items, 9 being closed, with pre-determined answers, and one item being introduced with an open answer. The resulting data obtained through the questionnaire-based survey were processed by quantitative, statistical-mathematical analysis, and subsequently correlated with qualitative assessments that resulted from the discussions with some respondents.

2. RESEARCH RESULTS

The answers to the question: “To what extent do you consider that continuous training is carried out effectively in an online environment?” are illustrated in Figure 1.

The perception of safety, efficient time management, and easy management of the disturbing factors for effective, continuous training in the online environment determines that the respondents have a favourable opinion. Each respondent takes efficiency into account the

time saved for traveling, as well as his/her comfort and safety. All teachers emphasized a reinterpretation of the values, priorities, and specific aspects of the online training.

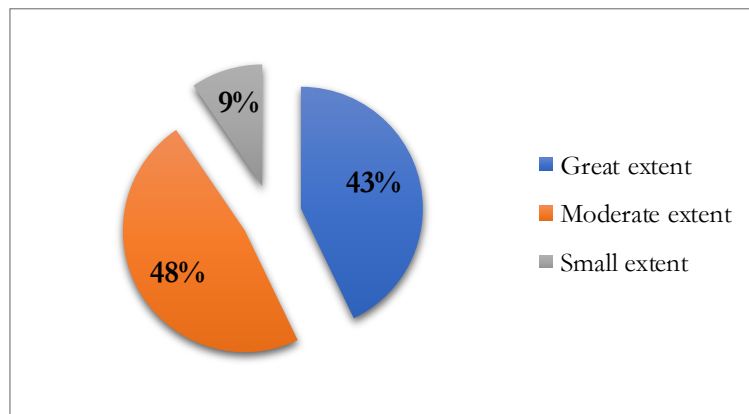


Figure no. 1. Teachers' feedback considering the efficiency of continuous training in an online environment
Source: Personal authors' conception

The next item (“*For you, continuous training in online format meant ...*”) highlights once again, by listing desirable and undesirable aspects, a change in perceiving and relating to continuous training in the online environment (in fact, as many aspects of daily life had shifted towards the Internet, we can say that those issues were count as pandemic-related effects). The teachers’ answers have been materialized in various terms such as: tiredness, competencies, best practices, pressure, exhaustion, training, knowledge, interesting ideas etc.

To the next item: “*What are the most important benefits of online continuous training for you?*”, there were recorded different answers (illustrated in Figure 2): saving time that would have been otherwise spent for traveling, interactive, eloquent, attractive audio-video strategies that can be interpreted personally, as well as specific applications rooted in personal experiences, recordings etc. Those answers are considered the most common advantages mentioned by associating lifelong learning with the online environment.

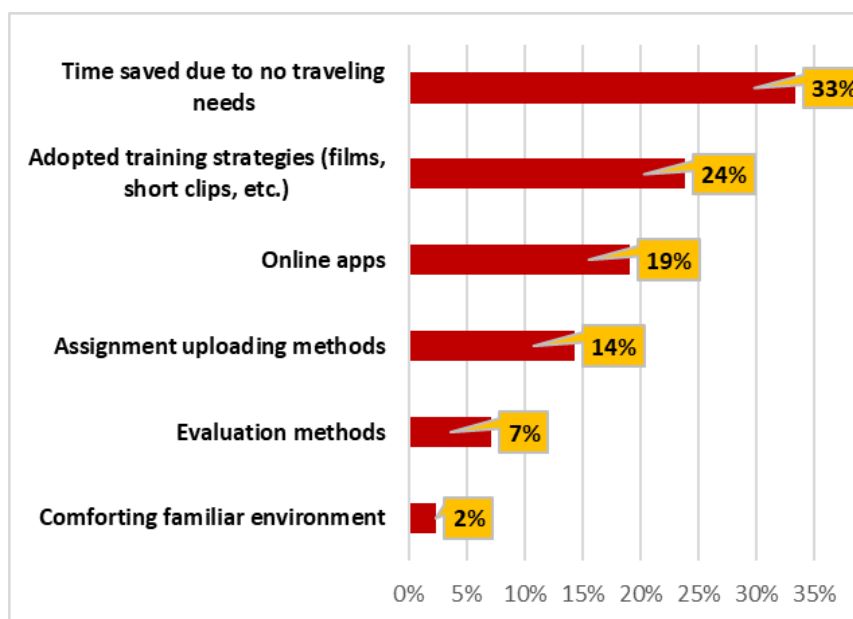


Figure no. 2. Teachers' feedback related to the most important benefits of online continuous training
Source: Personal authors' conception

Communication and debates in the online environment also represent a challenge for trainers who deliver vocational training courses. From the teachers' point of view, the advantages relate to the teaching strategies that maximize their educational potential. Used as examples, explanations, and recordings of personal experiences, the approach of teaching-learning-evaluation didactic strategies has been changed by intensifying the interactive, participatory aspects, emphasizing practice-linked theory, turning examples and explanations into debates, problematization, personal interpretations, and an exchange of good practices through audio-video recordings.

At the same time, the most common disadvantages from the perspective of online continuous training have been marked as (Figure 3): duration (the ability to be focused is decreasing in a familiar environment, with frequent temptations), difficulties in familiarizing with multiple platforms (teachers used different work platforms for teaching and continuous training - each training provider had the freedom to choose the most competitive platform in terms of training opportunities, costs etc.). Moreover, for trainers, the diversification of the platforms functions and structure have been perceived as a disadvantage, because the online environment was not used in the Romanian system of continuous training before pandemic (at most, very few providers resorted to the accreditation of continuous training programs as blended-learning - face-to-face theoretical activities combined with online applications).

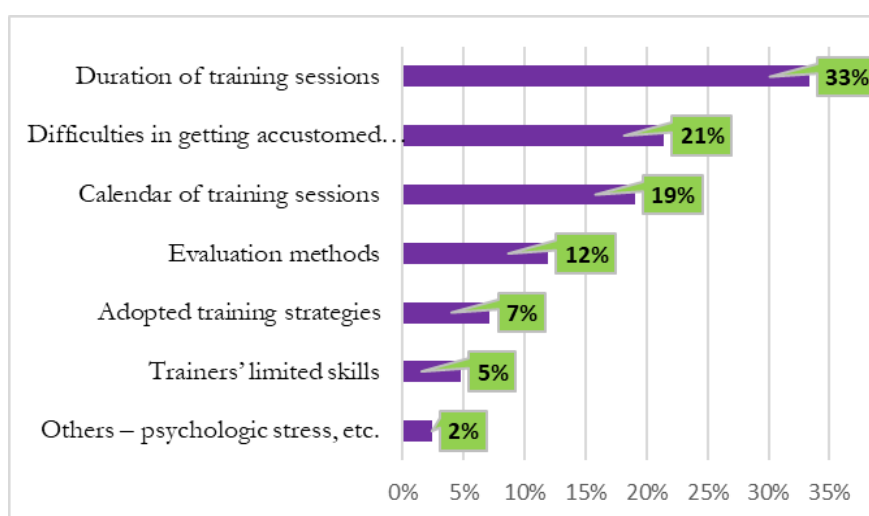


Figure no. 3. Teachers' feedback related to the most common disadvantages of online continuous training
Source: Personal authors' conception

To the following question: "What do you think related to the main aspects that would make online training attractive?", the provided answers were different, as shown in Figure 4. The respondents' perception strengthens the previous conclusions regarding the potential of the strategies and didactic resources in the online environment. Their valences are unfortunately very little explored in the teachers' continuous training, the lack of trainers' expertise being one of the causes, but also one of the expectations for improving online training by working on its development. Another expectation frequently formulated by the respondents regards readdressing the evaluation paradigm, or at least anchoring the evaluation methods deeper in educational practice.

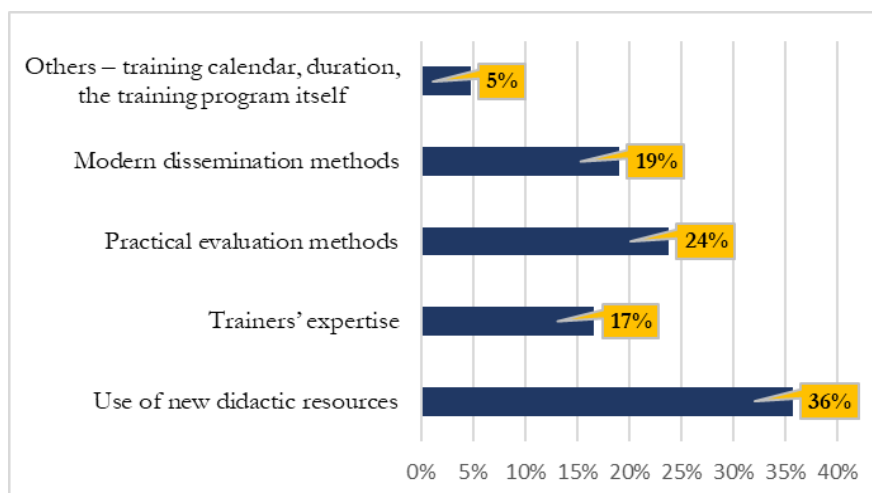


Figure no. 4. Teachers' feedback related to the main aspects that would make online training attractive
Source: Personal authors' conception

One criterion for the evaluation of a training program, according to respondents, is the trainer's skills (as the previous item revealed, one way to improve online training is to improve the trainers' competencies). On the other hand, the less pleasant aspect is not the monitoring of the training process, but the way it was done, being considered unprofessional, without neither the monitoring criteria being made known, not the purpose, tools, duration etc., which was rather being perceived as a source of frustration, pressure, and audio-video discomfort (Figure 5).

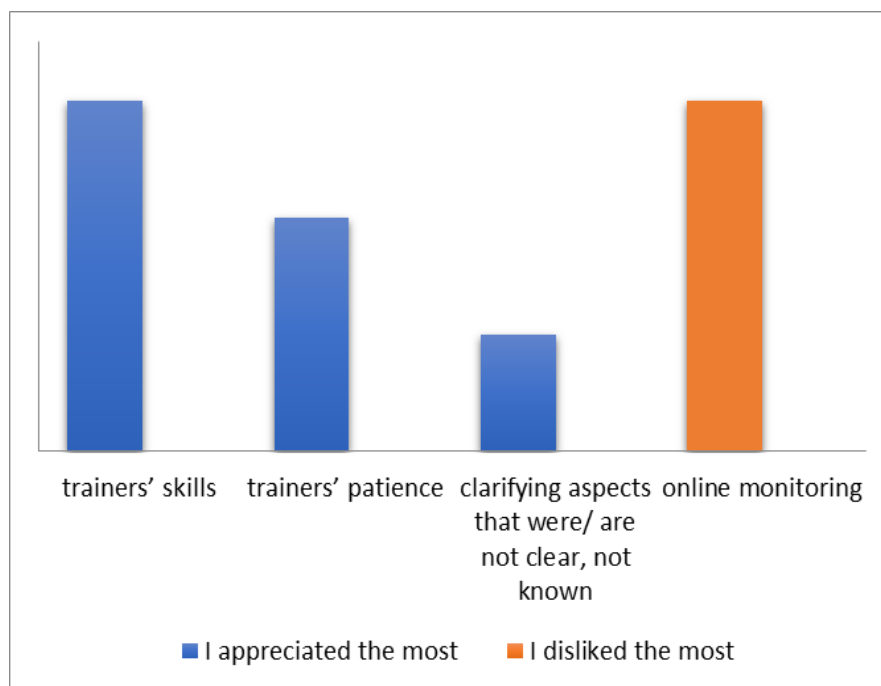


Figure no. 5. Teachers' perception concerning what was appreciated and what was disliked in the online training process
Source: Personal authors' conception

3. DISCUSSION

Considering the abovementioned issues, some possible solutions for optimizing continuous training activities in an online format have been proposed:

- developing trainers' competencies in conjunction with using and capitalizing educational platforms, as well as their expertise in their specialty fields, in order to be able to select and exploit the potential of the online environment;
- rethinking the curriculum for the training courses that are going to be implemented in the online format;
- identifying and capitalizing open educational resources (OER) accessible to all students;
- designing training materials on digital support, including interactive applications;
- restructuring evaluation methods and tools, following the online training post-pandemic context and educational reality;
- a better dimensioning of the time allocated to training and evaluation, reported to a series of psycho-pedagogical principles related to: the strain of psychic processes and functions, the observance of the effort curve, as well as the time-balance between work and rest;
- transparency and professionalism in monitoring the continuous training process;
- establishing flexible training programs adapted to the beneficiaries' needs.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Following this research, based on the feedback of the teachers involved in continuous development programs, organized in an online format, there can be noted the following conclusions and - at the same time - recommendations:

- diversification and flexibility of training offers (flexibility concerning the priorities of training at the national level, balancing the training offer considering specialized fields, rethinking the relationship between theory and practice in the design of the curriculum for continuing training programs);
- development of training providers' institutional capacity concerning the methodologies aligned to the training needs at the local and regional levels, but also to the strategies on the training offer among some categories of teachers, whose access is usually impeded. In this regard, training providers should pay more attention to the issues related to the professional and personal relevance of the trained content;
- recognition of other forms of professional development - learning in non-formal contexts is currently little encouraged/recognized. A significant number of questioned teachers claimed that both the Methodical Commissions and the Pedagogical Circles remain important sources of training, even though they are not considered part of the credit system;
- systematically monitor the training courses' results and impact, and provide feedback to training providers and organizers;
- information on the specific regulations of vocational training - clear explanations are required on the incentives and ways to ensure the correlation of structures

and moments in the teaching career with educational standards, and how the transferable vocational credit system contributes to ensuring professional dynamics;

- increase the quality of the continuous training offer - diversifying the categories of learning materials, from the point of view of the forms and degree of adaptation to the didactic activities' concrete needs;
- diversify the training and evaluation strategies - to overcome formalism, it is desirable to diversify training and evaluation strategies by increasing the emphasis on applying theoretical knowledge in practical contexts and on evaluation that values ongoing progress. This also involves more accurately linking evaluation to students' actual performance during training and favouring assessment methods used within concrete classroom settings.

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