

DIVERSITY, RELEVANCE AND ACTUALITY CONCERNING THE TEACHERS' TRAINING NEEDS

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ABSTRACT

In the context of our contemporary society and postmodern education, the teachers from the pre-primary, primary and secondary education are invited to assume new tasks and professional roles. The current socio-educational environment compels the teachers to make their students achieving high-level school results and trying to be socio-professional integrated in the labor market. On the other hand, the teachers must develop professional skills: methodological, conception and content planning, communication, relationship, motivation etc. More, in the last decades, it appeared a new profile of competence - the educator seen more as learning facilitator, mentor, motivational agent and less as information provider and evaluator. Nowadays the teacher has to be concerned about understanding the student's potential value, creating the proper educational climate for developing communication, relational and socio-affective skills among students, identifying effective ways for students' motivation, continuous self-development at personal and professional levels. The paper aims to identify the opinions of a sample of Romanian teachers concerning their professional development, recorded in several teachers' training programs. In this respect, a set of questions - focusing on the issues related to the continuous training needs experienced by the participant teachers - was designed, taking into account the perspective of diversity, relevance and actuality, having in view the specificities of the contemporary education.

Keywords: continuous training; postmodern education; professional skills; training needs;

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary world is constantly changing and rapidly transforming. We live in an era of competition, where the school system faces challenges and responsibilities generated by meeting ever-increasing performance and efficiency needs. It is increasingly obvious that the needs of the actual society make a growing pressure and call for accountability in order to improve the results of national and performance evaluations in the education sector, similar to the management of results in the private sector.

In this context, the teachers who are enrolled in pre-primary, primary and secondary education are forced to take into account new tasks and roles as postmodern approaches to pedagogy and pedagogical relations. The current educational environment implies the achievement of the best possible results in the preparation of the students in their classroom and their successful socio-professional integration, the development of conceptual, methodological, strategic competences, relationship connected to the contents, motivation and teaching strategies, class of students. Here, there can be mentioned: methodological

skills, content designing and planning, communication, relationship with students in the context of constructivist, postmodern approaches, competences that support efficiency and performance in professional work based on trust, motivation, determination, involvement and responsibility, both from teachers as well as from students parts, but also from other actors involved in the educational process.

More specifically, in the last decades, a *new language of education* is required, based on the teacher's fundamental role - facilitator of learning and teaching, of a process for creating learning opportunities, of schools as learning environments, of student as a learner, of adult as a lifelong learner. Those ones can become reality, especially through the most valuable resources in any type of organization, and especially in the school organization - the *human resource* (Enache, Brezoi, & Crişan, 2013). Systems of any kind, including education, are getting older. Teaching materials and tools wear out physically and morally. Only people, through the involvement of a sustained effort of transformation of attitude and mentality, have the chance to develop permanently, to grow and become more efficient and performant, under the motivation and desire to approach education in a modern pedagogical manner, so that they are preoccupied to understand the potential value of students, creating the climate of a productive team spirit, motivating the development of each student, and thereby contributing to the personal success, as well as to the productivity of the entire class of students (Tudorică, 2004).

1. THE ROMANIAN SCHOOL CONTEXT

The Romanian school needs transformations to imprint its route, in line with the new facets of the contemporary education. The transformation of the Romanian school as a system, the most important public project of Romania for the decade 2014-2024, strategically defines the closing of the chapter of modern history of our country started after 1945, and the authentic engagement to the way opened on the 1st of January 2007. This public project implies the process of adaptive change or the profound transformation of what education means today. In order to initiate it, the first necessary actions are related to the development of the *continuous training* processes. The duration of a process of adaptive change of education has a transformational impact of 4-8 years, and the time horizon in which this transformation process will make its effects felt in the different layers of the Romanian society covers 10-20 years, from the time of its initiation (Chivu, 2008). Therefore, time will prove that the adaptive change of education represents a profound exercise of community-based collective learning, based on involvement, trust, authenticity, integrity, competence and performance designed to generate irreversible gains - short, medium and long term, for all individual and institutional actors involved on making them happening. The condition for the education to be able to assume and fulfill its strategic role is to design its functional mechanisms to integrate internal processes with a high learning and transformation capacity that ensure the continuous and dynamic positioning of education as a key factor for the sustainable development of the society. The strategic role of education as a public system - the only sustainable generator of a highly competitive human resource of any society - is the fundamental premise on which the process of transformation of the educational system is being projected (Enache, 2015).

Considering the status of education as a strategic resource, as well as the necessity to transform the Romanian school, it is necessary to consolidate the dominant nature of the action in education - in first instance -, based on methodological, didactic and specialized components, and subsequently, doubled by actions centered on classroom management. It is necessary to seek and find solutions for the continuous improvement of students' adaptation

to social requirements, for schools to have good trainers able to guide efforts to improve the quality of education from the macro level to each teacher, who as educational manager, can make a significant contribution to transform the school into a place where authentic education for the profession and life is accomplished successfully (Enache, & Crişan, 2015). This answer to the requests mentioned in the Eurydice Report - *Key Data on Teachers and School Leaders in Europe* (2013, p. 60) -, stipulating that “most European education systems consider participation in Continuous Professional Development as a teacher’s professional duty or obligation”, and also, in some cases, “particular incentives are offered to encourage teachers to improve their skills and knowledge”.

In theory, the Romanian education reform is focused on the following dimensions: curriculum, school textbooks, teacher training, school management and leadership, occupational standards. Until now, even if sometimes inconsistent, the most visible changes generated by the Romanian education reform have occurred at the level of curriculum, evaluation and school textbooks. However, the current curriculum model is still anachronistic and inefficient. In addition, at a whole, there is a poor performance of the teaching staff, which can be seen in the results of the students’ national assessments, as well as in international test results. The current set of values promoted in the Romanian school is practically non-existent. Therefore, the priorities of the educational reform need to be further oriented towards real curricular decentralization, improving the school management and teaching staff, developing leadership and communication skills for the entire population of teaching staff (Enache, 2008).

2. ADAPTATION OF THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS TO POSTMODERN SOCIETY

In the abovementioned context, it is necessary *to adapt the educational process to the postmodern society*, in which students are learnt about (Enache, & Crişan, 2015): encouraging educational pluralism, respect for diversity and family-school educational coherence; valorizing different point of views and diversifying learning paths and school paths - here, it is important to flexibilize the programs and educational offers; using active-participatory and group interactive methods to develop active learning in diverse social contexts; holistically treating and stimulating the personal development in accordance with his/her own individuality; respecting the individual peculiarities, interests, needs, individual working rhythm; tolerance towards cultural, religious, ethnic, social, gender etc. differences of all members of the educational community; valorizing as an agent of one’s own learning and human development, favoring the increase of autonomy, its repatriation for learning and development (learning through research, discovery, social learning, collaborative learning, experimental learning, natural learning, authentic living situations) and overcoming the strict boundaries between formal, non-formal and informal learning; stimulating learning pleasure and increasing intrinsic motivation for learning; adapting teaching and assessment methods to student-centered educational process (negotiation of rules, participation and joint decision, valorisation of these processes as general formative processes); activating the creativity, spontaneity and ability to find varied solutions, referring to authentic living situations (opening the school to real life and searching for learning situations in everyday life); innovation and diversification of evaluation strategies, greater use of alternative, unconventional modalities, with impact on the own development (portfolio, project, report, exhibition, etc.); emphasizing individual progress by analyzing the learning process (not necessarily the results); valuing self-control and self-evaluation as factors which can determine the interest for improvement and continuous learning.

Pedagogical and relational aspects are fundamental components of any field of activity, including education. Those areas focus on elements that should underpin an effective educational process: a judicious allocation of material and human resources, reasonable and efficient use of energies, transformation of the targeted student into a partner etc. From a psychosocial perspective, the school institution is an organization, which like any type of organization, requires management and leadership specialized at all levels - from the classroom to the institution as a whole. It is therefore necessary to develop the psycho-pedagogical and management skills of the teacher, as well as the assumption of the role of organizer and mediator of the learning experiences. School reality has shown that any teacher has faced problematic situations due to deficiencies in motivation, relationship, communication with students, parents, colleagues, school leadership. This fact calls for the optimization of the planning and organization of the instructive-educational process: school/teacher-student-family. Focusing on teacher training, precisely on psycho-pedagogical and didactic competencies, indirectly aims at developing functional competences essential for social motivation and success: communication, critical thinking, decision-making, development of capacity for active integration into different socio-cultural groups (Enache, & Crişan, 2013).

School - as the main agent of educational influence - needs, through the action of the teaching staff, to translate into reality any educational intentions, with great responsibility, in order to produce the desired effects: the formation of easily adaptable personalities in a world that is in constantly changing...

3. RESEARCH METHOD

In order to identify several opinions of the Romanian teachers related to the professional development in which they have to be involved, but mainly to identify their educational and training demands, a *needs analysis* research was developed, based on *quantitative and qualitative methods*. In this respect, 250 teachers from various schools, coming from 5 Romanian administrative units (Prahova, Dâmboviţa, Constanţa, Argeş and Bucharest - the capital of Romania) answered to a specific questionnaire, and expressed their point of views in dedicated focus groups having as topics the diversity, relevance and actual specificities of contemporary education. It was filled out by teachers from different levels of education: pre-primary (13%), primary (22%), lower secondary (45%), upper secondary (15%) and post-upper-secondary (5%). 53% from teachers coming from urban education units and 47% from rural ones (47%). The questionnaire was administered in a training program that has as aim to train and develop skills and necessary competencies for the teaching staff from pre-university education, in order to efficiently deploy the actions and activities for the achievement of the postmodern educational objectives, and improve the quality of the educational process and students' results.

In this respect, a "*questionnaire for the identification of the actual needs for teachers' continuous training and knowledge improvement of the educational staff*" was designed, and addressed to teachers from the nominated administrative units, during the last two school years. The questionnaire was used also for collecting the information provided by the professional development managers in schools, being complemented by those responsible for training, either by organizing focus groups with school teachers, or by individual discussions with teachers and those responsible with methodological issues. It was applied to 250 teachers from schools in rural and urban areas, having in general all specialties met in pre-university education.

Also, in the process of diagnosing the teachers’ professional development needs, data provided from several sources of documentation was processed. Thus, there were taken into account the training needs identified in the “school internal environment”, by the managers responsible for training, together with the heads of the educational institutions, as well as the needs identified by persons from the “school external environment”, by specialized inspectors, especially noticed during school inspections, and more, by trainers (as they are members of teaching committees), who undertake psycho-pedagogical training courses, but also continuous training courses dedicated for teachers - collaborating in this respect with Counties Scholar Inspectorates and Counties Teacher Training Centers.

The results concluded from the questionnaires are summarized below, and led to the identification of the main educational and training needs at the pre-university education levels, mostly in the abovementioned counties, on the basis of which the purpose, specific objectives and contents of the several proposed training programs have to be formulated.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main target of the research was to analyze the teachers’ motivation for participating in training programs, with the view to improve the quality of the educational act and students’ school results. The teachers were asked to offer clear point of views and sincere answers. Referring to the extent to which the teachers consider that the continuous training contributes to the maintaining of the educational relations specific to the principles of postmodern education, 65% of the respondents consider that this is done to a large extent, 20% to an medium level, 13% to a small extent, and 2% are undecided (figure 1).

We find out that, at the perceptions level, the respondents are aware that the role of continuous professional training is a very important one (65%) in order to achieve a postmodern, constructivist education. However, the percentage of 13% of respondents - whose lifelong learning activities contribute to maintaining the educational relations specific to the postmodern paradigm - is important, and cannot be ignored. In our opinion, those respondents either do not give too much importance to the effective relationship with the students and do not promote a student-centered education, or they did not attend continuing education courses on such topic.

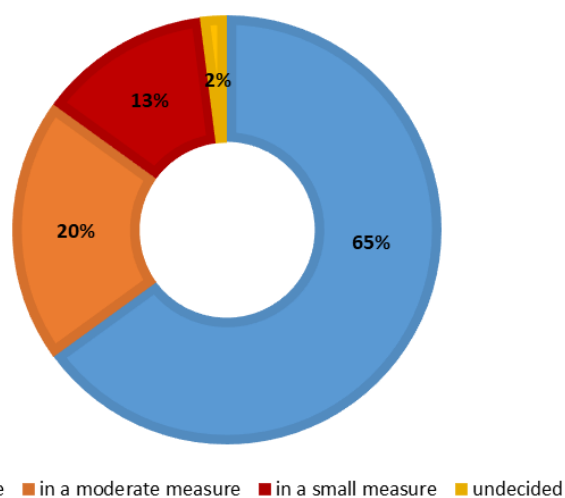


Figure no. 1. The extent to which the continuous professional training contributes to the maintaining of educational relations specific to the principles of postmodern education

The distribution of the topics/subjects that the respondents would like to retrieve in specific training programs is illustrated in figure 2.

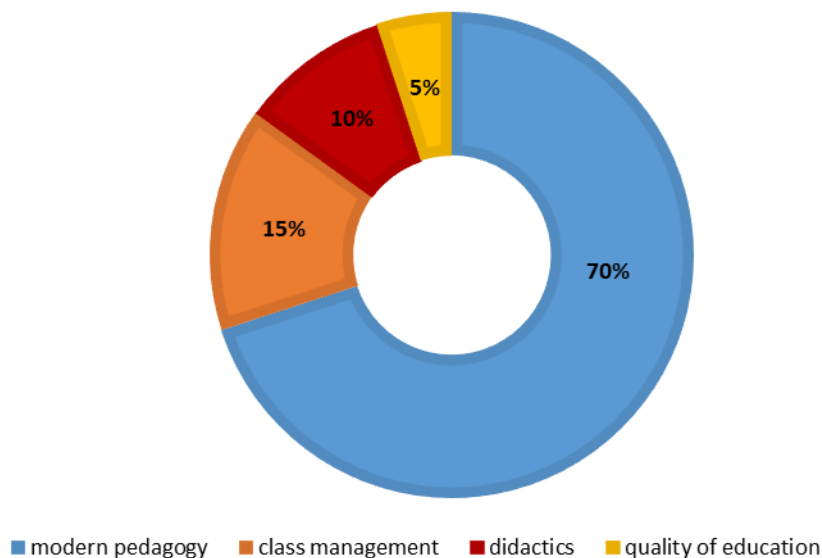


Figure no. 2. Distribution of topics that respondents would like to find in specific training programs

The postmodern pedagogy, with constructivist elements in teaching, learning and evaluation, as well as the aspects of the post-modern lesson, are perceived as a priority by 70% of the questioned teachers (as this result from the applied questionnaire, but also from the focus groups organized with teachers of different specialties). In the options offered by the respondents, this is followed by class management (15%), didactics (10%) and quality of education (5%). We appreciate that those answers represent a fairly image of the Romanian educational reality, regarding the needs of continuous training expressed by questioned teachers.

Another item invited the respondents to offer a hierarchy, on a 1 to 5 scale (1 - totally unimportant, 5 - very important) related to the level of importance for their professional activity, acquirements and skills/abilities. In this respect, the respondents place on the first place as important for their own professional activity the development of related knowledge concerning the pro-active teaching methods (40%), followed by the knowledge related to: innovation and change (30%), skills and motivation (10%), communication (10%), specialty methodological issues (8%) and didactic principles (2%).

At the same time, referring to skills/abilities, the respondents consider that the most important one for their professional activities, are the teaching skills (35%), followed naturally by the skills required by their specialization (18%), to which are added a number of necessary competences specific to a postmodern teacher: ability to work in a team (15%), responsibility (12%), initiative spirit (10%) and creativity (10%).

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the feedback offered for the items mentioned above, considered as very important.

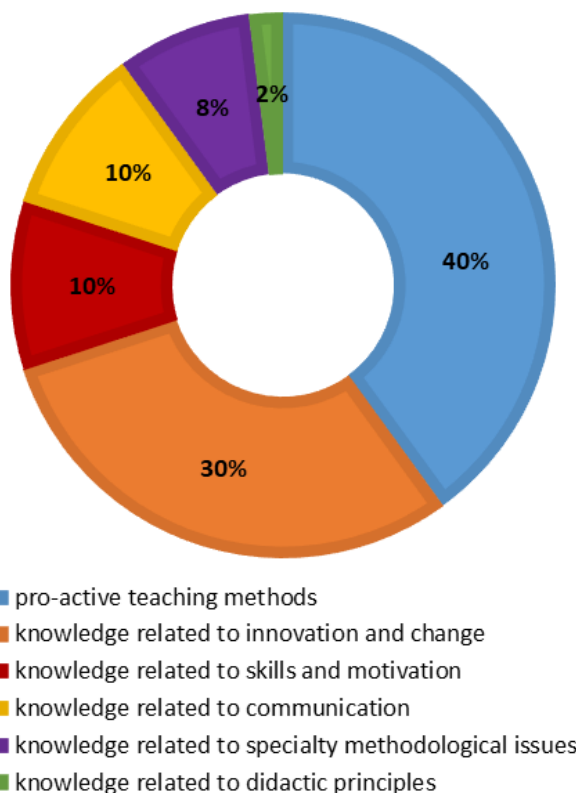


Figure no. 3. The importance offered by respondents to several thematic areas, taking into account the need for acquainting the knowledge in those areas

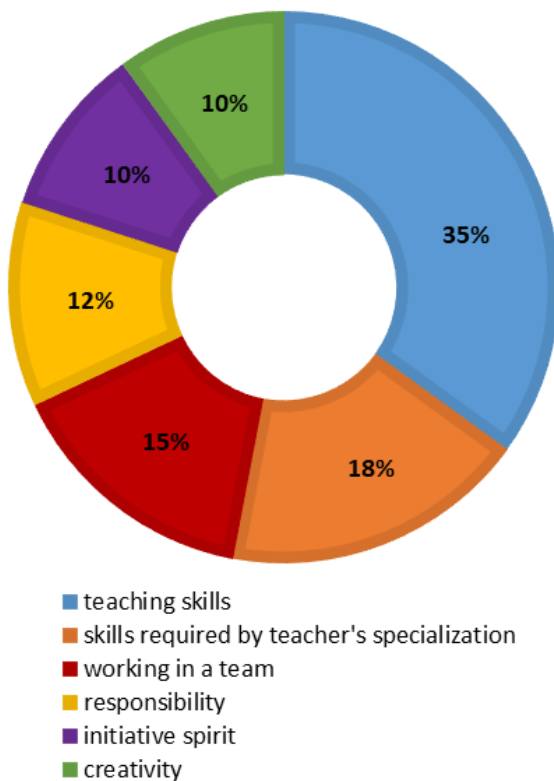


Figure no. 4. The importance offered by respondents to several thematic areas, taking into account the necessary skills/abilities/competences

Asking the respondents to choose that part of a training program they consider to be most interesting (figure 5), 60% opted for didactic skills, which denotes the concern of the teachers to be updated with those new pedagogical / didactic ideas and practices designed to meet the needs of students and the demands of the contemporary society.

The fact that the choices regarding the curriculum, educational management or evaluation register much lower percentages did not mean that those ones represent the effect of minimizing their importance, according to the respondents. Those responses could be interpreted as the effect of a holistic educational approach in which topics such curriculum, management or assessment must be pragmatically addressed, starting from the actual requested didactic skills.

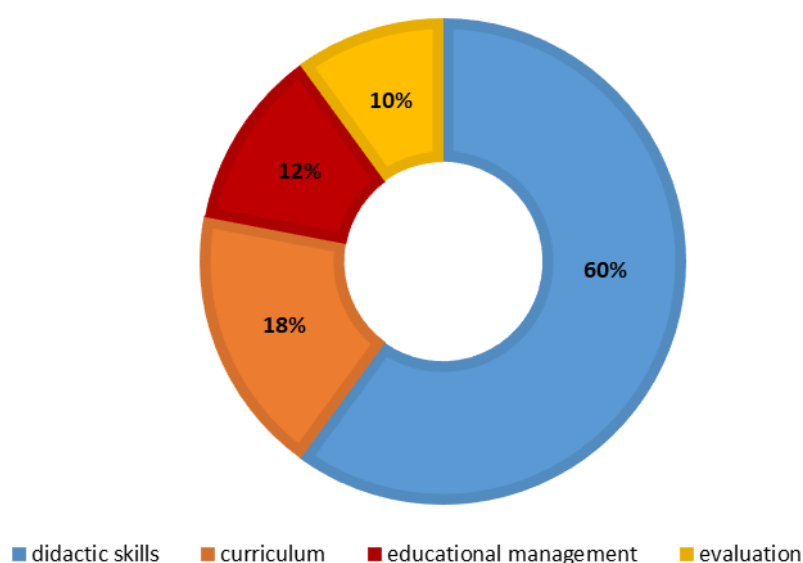
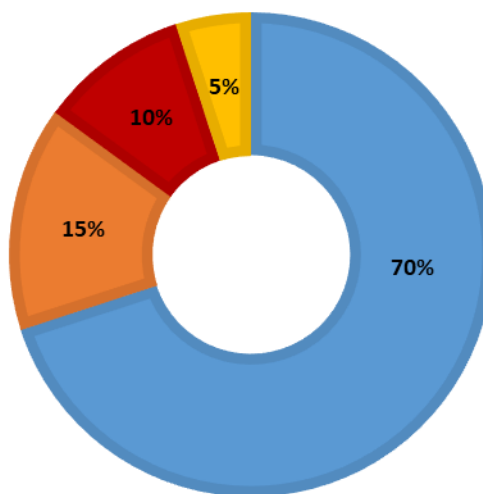


Figure no. 5. The components of a training program that have the highest degree of interest for the respondents

Regarding the optimal time for organizing continuous training courses dedicated to teachers (figure 6), most of the respondents want them to be carried out in week-ends (70%), because this is an interval that can be easily managed by the teachers.

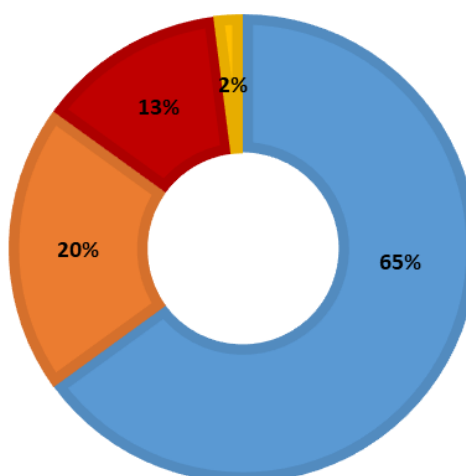
The alternative of organizing in the methodical days registered the lowest percentage, because in many school units, the methodical day is not respected and for different specializations it does not coincide. The holiday period was chosen by only 15% of the respondents, because it often overlaps with what the holidays are about. The alternative of organizing the continuous training activities during the school year gathered only 10% of the respondents' answers, taking into account the variable schedule of teachers / school units and the effect of the generated overload of teachers.



■ in week-ends ■ in holidays ■ during the school year ■ in the methodical days

Figure no. 6. The optimal time for organizing continuous professional training courses

The last item envisages the extent to which a continuous training program focused on the topic of *postmodern pedagogy* would respond to their professional training interests (figure 7). 65% of the respondents consider that a training program dedicated to *postmodern pedagogy* responds to their own professional training interests to a large extent, 20% to a medium level, 13% to a small extent and 2% are undecided. However, an important percentage - 13% -, consider that a training program on such topic respond to their professional training interests only to a small extent. This percentage can be situated, in our opinion, on the one hand, on the account of a conservative attitude of some teachers, but also on their overloading (in general), in their effort to be adapted to the multiple changes / reforms registered in the last decades, at the level of the Romanian school.



■ in a great measure ■ in a moderate measure ■ in a small measure ■ undecided

Figure no. 7. The extent to which a continuous training program focused on the topic of postmodern pedagogy would respond to the interests of the teachers' professional training interest

CONCLUSION

It is important to notice that most of the questioned teachers considered that they have training needs correlated to an emergent area - *new educational approaches from a postmodern perspective*. This fact demonstrates their conscious and responsible attitude regarding the current trends and the perspectives that mark the educational field. In this respect, taking also into account the focus-group discussions, several priority themes were identified related to teacher training: elements of postmodern pedagogy, constructivist didactics, teacher-student relationship building.

Noteworthy is the desire of teachers to create a set of materials with relevant curricular aspects, with postmodern emphasis and examples of good practice, taken from the context of Romanian pre-university education, that can be made available to all teachers, leaders of educational institutions, welcoming to support the educational practice. The whole analysis leads to the conclusion that such a continuous training program will have a significant impact on teachers, and by sure, this is possible to be implemented in all the Romanian counties. More, even such attempts are in an incipient phase, the dissemination of the knowledge is feasible, mostly using the networking features, the technology playing an important role in many cases. In fact, as demonstrated in several recent projects, teacher networks represent one of the best solutions for exchanging ideas and good practices. Knowledge can be promoted in certain conditions and circumstances, and it can be easily spread not just at national level, but also international, by extending dedicate teachers' networks (Gorghiu, & Gorghiu, 2016).

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