

THE ROLE OF THE CONTINUING EDUCATION FACILITATOR IN THE CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

Customizing the specific areas of expertise related to the specific skills of the facilitator can lead to identifying, descriptively, the particularities of specific behaviours they show during their daily school activity: they develop cooperative relationships with the school team, with local institutions, so that school and extracurricular activities are performed successfully; they know the community where the school is located; they are specialists in planning of teaching activity; they offer support for teachers to choose the most effective methods of teaching, learning and assessment; have knowledge of the age related particularities of students they work with; they are open minded, creative; they provide alternatives in education, which help school staff reinvent themselves; they organize extracurricular and school activities, identify learning needs, interests, skills and prepares motivational activities, together with the school teachers, students and their parents.

Keywords: *facilitation, collaborative work, creative problem solving, motivational activities*

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, facilitation is an action used in many activity areas. The essence of facilitation process consists of planning and management of contexts, certain approaches, activities, actions, so that they can be developed easily, by impartial and neutral involvement of certain individuals.

Because collaborative work is a basic feature of human activity in modern society, finding ways for people to work together more effectively becomes an imperious necessity within organizations, for teams that are in the process of training. This category includes creative problem solving and techniques for making groups more dynamic. Equally important is creating an environment where people participate actively at specific activities precisely because their strengths, needs, values, beliefs, specific goals and uncertainties they may develop had been previously identified. The approach to identify specific elements of each organization member's personality is likely to be conducted by a facilitator who uses a set of specific tools. The same person facilitates the full participation of people who are part of a group on the basis of a philosophy that organizes and encourages full participation.

Consequently, facilitation is a key competence of any contemporary organization that is learning, and for whom ability, flexibility and creativity are core values, and the facilitator is the person within the organization who chiefly promotes confidence and performance.

On the basis of directions for action presented, the facilitator is the person who, within and in favour of the organization they belong to, plans and organizes work, helps to clarify the vision and actions to implement, monitors processes, provides advisory service for process and diagnostic, develops teams, encourages personal and professional development and uses different methods to achieve objectives.

By customizing the situation to the particularities of school education environment, there are several areas where facilitator's involvement is required. It is appropriate that the person who performs the role of facilitator in the school participates in the design of the institutional development plan, in the educational marketing, in counselling, mediation, and coaching activities. The school itself, as an institution, needs the involvement of the facilitator in skills upgrading and training of teachers and school staff, in activities with parents, in the specific action to sustain formal learning in order to support students' success, in algorithmic approach to plan the school- based curriculum and extracurricular activities. Involvement may also occur within large-scale activities, beyond the school, such as fundraising or partnerships with the community.

Synthesis of the specific areas of contemporary facilitator's involvement allows delimitation of their specific competencies. The facilitator is recognized, also within the school, as a negotiator and mediator, a sociologist of education, specialist in curriculum planning and development, psychologist and school counsellor, resource person, as well as manager who has expertise in organizational development. Customizing the specific areas of expertise related to the specific skills of the facilitator can lead to identifying, descriptively, the particularities of specific behaviours they show during their daily school activity: they develop cooperative relationships with the school team, with local institutions, so that school and extracurricular activities are performed successfully; they know the community where the school is located; they are specialists in planning of teaching activity; they offer support for teachers to choose the most effective methods of teaching, learning and assessment; have knowledge of the age related particularities of students they work with; they are open minded, creative; they provide alternatives in education, which help school staff reinvent themselves; they organize extracurricular and school activities, identify learning needs, interests, skills and prepares motivational activities, together with the school teachers, students and their parents.

Methodological aspects of the evaluative research

Evaluative research of the perception regarding the role and impact of the facilitator on continuing education in the Romanian society aimed at identifying

potential beneficiaries' opinions on the pertinence, functionality and value added through the specific action of this social actor.

Objectives of the research

The research aimed at:

- Determining the extent to which the specific activities of the continuing education facilitator can help achieving the objectives of the school development project;
- Identifying elements of beneficiaries' satisfaction / dissatisfaction concerning specific activities performed by the continuing education facilitator;
- Identify potential barriers to accessing the activities, especially for disadvantaged social categories.

Data collection method

The data collection questionnaire involved the following categories of continuing education facilitator beneficiaries:

- Students from 5th to 12th grade from schools in urban and rural areas (75 respondents)
- Teachers from schools in urban and rural areas (59 respondents)
- Parents of primary and pre-school students (28 respondents)

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with:

- Headmasters and school counsellors
- Representatives of public institutions and NGOs that have conducted activities in partnership with schools.

Suitability of facilitator's intervention and activity for continuing education in contemporary Romanian school

Among the teachers participating in the research, 82.6% consider that presence and specific manifestation of the facilitator is a good initiative for continuing education in the school. Similarly, the opportunity for such a change in contemporary Romanian school life is appreciated by 88.5% of parents. Conversely, 14.7% of teachers and 2.4% of parents consider that the program is unsuitable, 9% of parents and 2.7% of teachers are neutral. On a scale of 1 to 5 where 5 represent "initiative is very good", the average of parents' responses is 4.291, which places them among those who highly appreciate the facilitator's intervention for continuing education in Romanian school.

The number of teachers who appreciate the program decreases with children's educational stage (86.3% in primary school, 77.9% in high school). Depending on the residence, more teachers who work in rural schools appreciate the potential activity of a continuing education facilitator (87.6% versus 77.4% in urban areas).

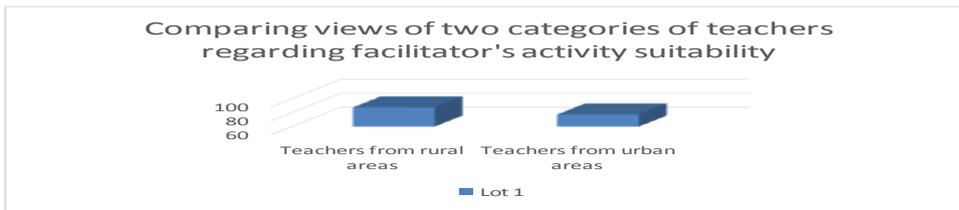


Figure 1. Appreciation of facilitator’s activity suitability, as seen by teachers working in urban areas and those working in rural areas

Data collected by questionnaire indicates that most teachers, pupils and parents consider that the specific activities that can be undertaken by the continuing education facilitator at school are able to bring more innovations, making learning - the main action performed by student in the school educational space - attractive. Group discussions with students also revealed interest in the activities from facilitator’s portfolio. 61.8% of students and 54% of teachers questioned believe that facilitator for continuing education can contribute further to student’s training. The percentage of those who believe that specific interventions of the continuing education facilitator have little or no contribution is about 9% for both categories of respondents.

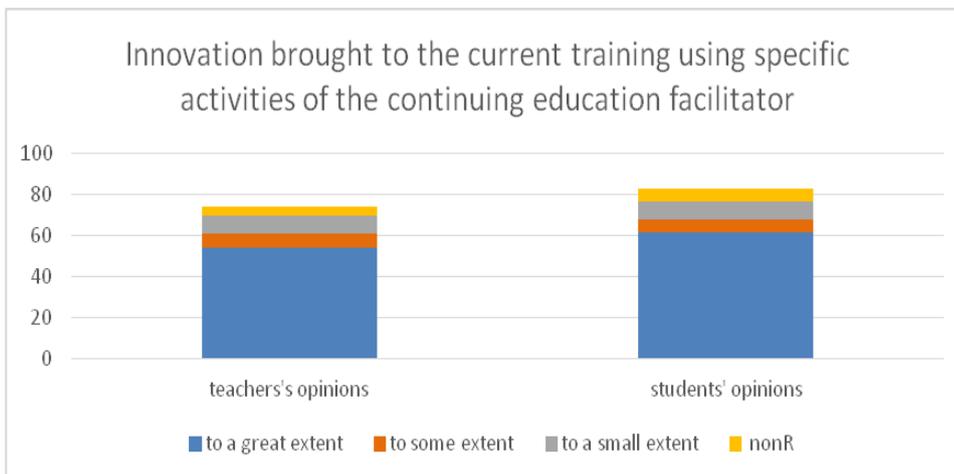


Figure 2. Overall estimation of the value added. Opinions of students and teachers

With reference to the seniority in education system criterion, it has been found that the strongest criticism of the impact of specific activities performed by the continuing education facilitator is formulated by teachers who are either at the beginning or at the end of their careers. The environment criterion revealed that the respondents who are less confident in the value of formative intervention of the continuing education are those who live in urban areas.

Students surveyed considered that teacher-student relationship would become much closer if it involved a certain influence of the specific activity of the continuing education facilitator (65.8%), compared to usual teaching activity. Members of the same category of respondents anticipate that a school activity marked by the presence and specific intervention of the continuing education facilitator will certainly lead to a much greater involvement in the activities performed. (56.2%).

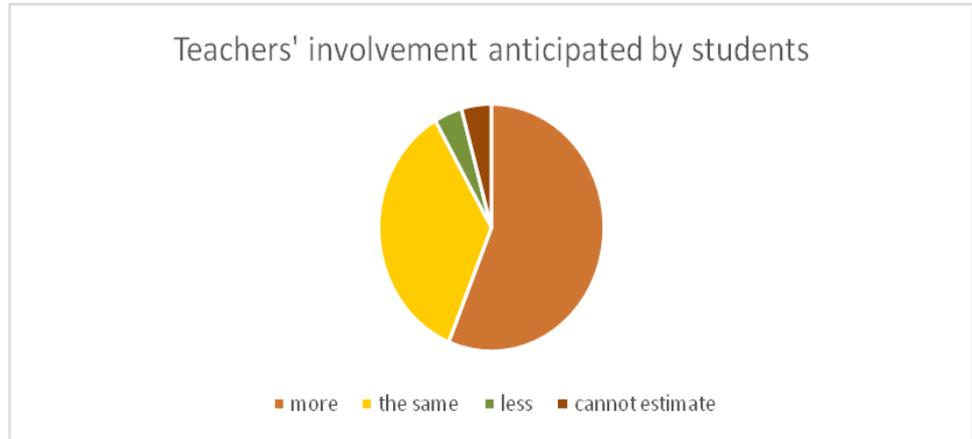


Figure 3. Students' opinion on the involvement of teachers in specific activities if they collaborate with the continuing education facilitator

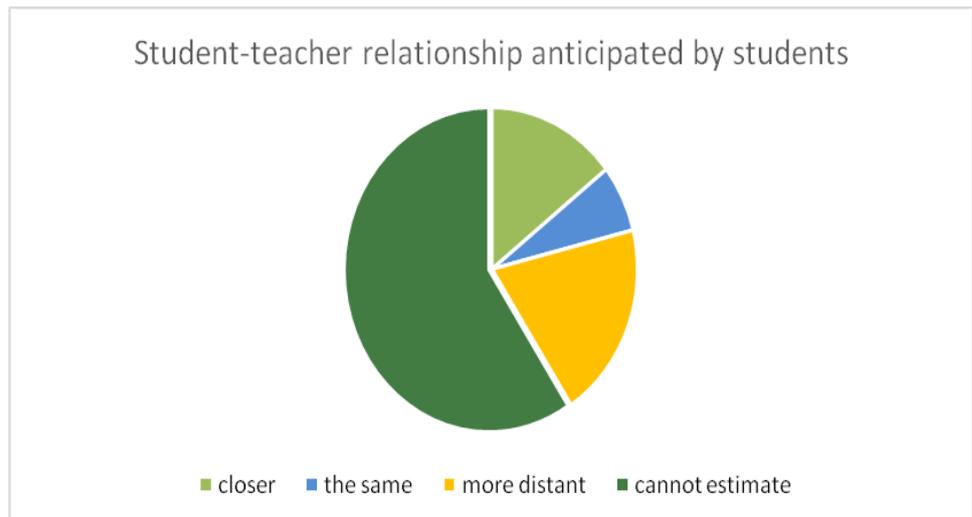


Figure 4. Students' opinion on student-teacher relationship in case of collaboration with the continuing education facilitator

The main effect anticipated by respondents is better collaboration between students, reflected in improving relations and communication between students and teachers, as well as between students.

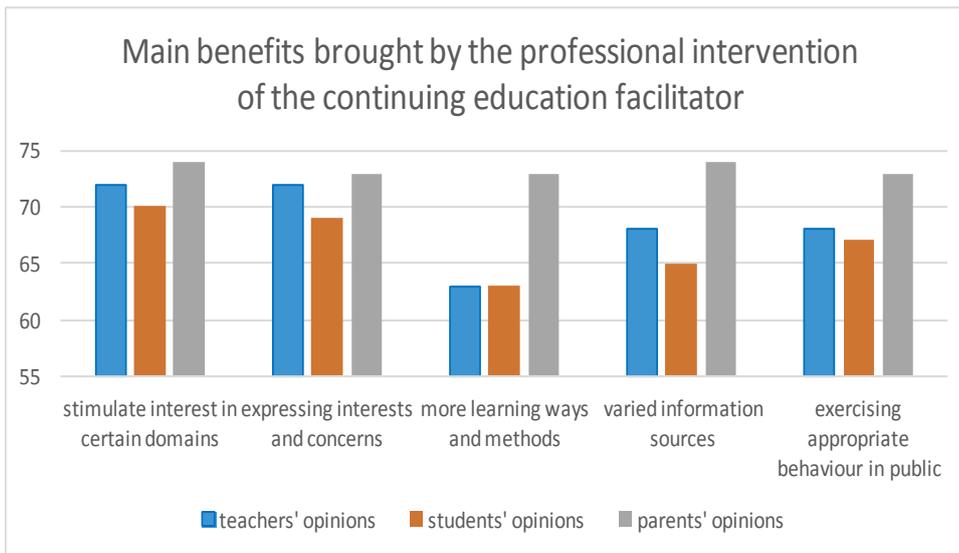


Figure 5. Opinions of teachers, students and parents on the benefits of continuing education facilitator's specific activity and intervention

Critical analysis of the potential progress in education by hiring a professional continuing education facilitator in contemporary Romanian school

The issue of continuing education facilitator's activity is tackled in the context of the availability of a training programme for this qualification within the continuing professional development offer for teachers in the Romanian education system. Even if the practical, concrete purpose of this approach, developed by means of the projects carried out in several areas of the country, remains uncertain, it contributes to the alignment of Romanian education development directions with European education standards. Initiating public debate on this new profession determines a set of reflections on the possible impact it may have on the instructive-educational activity taking place in schools within the Romanian education system. Comparing these to the results of a research study we conducted is the action after which we believe that it is possible to formulate conclusions about the eligibility of the approach and its effect, resulting in the effective functioning of the continuing education facilitator.

The emergence of the continuing education facilitator in Romanian social space is an initiative that is part of the already classic direction of Romanian education reform. Certainly, teachers are no strangers to the issue of change, "change is their lives, up to the point that many are no longer bothered by it, [...] but the requirements to introduce new syllabi [...] succeed very fast" (Hattie, 2014)

Given the lack of continuity or purpose of most initiatives launched in the education system over the last twenty-five years, we expect that this initiative, which is essentially desirable, to be included in the category of structural changes placing the Romanian education system within the parameters of a perpetual transition. In such a context, facilitator's formulation of high expectations for all students they are with, constantly, becomes a goal quite difficult to achieve, even though the relevance of such a goal is, according to specialized literature, recognised and valued: "Teachers must develop high expectations for all students in a class and behave consistently in classroom" (Marzano, 2015).

The role of facilitator described above may be assumed, professionally, by people who are currently not part of the education system or by teachers who are now active in the Romanian school educational environment. In case one might consider that the ability for the role of continuing education facilitator should be built on the basis of a specialized pedagogical initial training, we consider that the issue of lack of enthusiasm many teachers in the Romanian education system "are suffering" from, will occur. Lack of interest in understanding new things, wonder in many teachers' repertoire is, in our view, the reason why the specific action of continuing education facilitator, activated and supported by teachers, is doomed to failure, even from its planning stage. In spite of the above, there is still an important category of innovative teachers in the Romanian education system, who are able "to give up some of their authority and control to attain the transition from «the wise man at the desk» to the « low-profile mentor »... authority resulting from the expertise, from the ability to listen carefully and empathetically, to ask the right questions, and to shape good values" (Wagner, 2014) is the one that actually matters.

The lack of stability and predictability characteristic to Romanian education system are also important obstacles to starting and developing the implementation process of the project which targets the continuing education facilitator. Because of the issue stated, professional involvement of the continuing education facilitator may be perceived as disrupting for the system

CONCLUSION

The quality of perception regarding the role and impact of continuing education facilitator's activity in the Romanian society is much higher compared to our theoretical estimation we initially set on the basis of valorising the theoretical research analysed. It is possible that an optimistic approach to a reality that was not perceived directly, but only through a mediator who has provided relevant information about the project for training the continuing education facilitator, underlain the value judgements of participants involved in the research (students, teachers, parents).

The opportunity of vocational training for the social position analysed in this paper is emphasized both theoretically and practically. The necessity of the continuing education facilitator in the Romanian school is supported by arguments related to the functionality of this role analysed through the results expected to be

integrated into specific behaviours of the direct beneficiaries of their activity - students.

Summarising the ideas expressed above, we consider that the transfer from the time of the continuing education facilitator's initial training to the moment when the facilitator's specific actions and activities are implemented in the school system, activities that are connected in a coherent system, harmonized with other development directions of the school institution, should be carried out fast, as a result of responsible engagement of all actors involved.

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