

What do trade unions think about continuing education for teachers in Galicia?

Baena Ampudia, Departamento de Didactica e Organizacion Escolar, Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 15782 Santiago de Compostela, Spain.

Ana M^a; Fernandez Tilve*, Departamento de Didactica e Organizacion Escolar, Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 15782 Santiago de Compostela, Spain.

M^a Dolores, Departamento de Didactica e Organizacion Escolar, Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 15782 Santiago de Compostela, Spain.

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Abstract

The common ups and downs of school agendas coupled with the existence of new educational challenges have created a complicated scenario that places the issue of continuing education for teaching staff directly under the spotlight. As a consequence, the role of teachers' trade unions as with other requirements of continuing education is now put centre stage. Within these considerations, we have carried out an unprecedented and ongoing survey in Galicia with the intention of taking a closer look at continuing education for non-university teachers promoted by trade union organisations. For this purpose we put forth a qualitative and quantitative methodological approach while using documentary analysis as a tool for gathering data as well as discussion groups and Likert type assessment scale questionnaires. In this essay we provide the data obtained during the intensive-qualitative stage of the investigation. The resulting findings although provisional and partial reveal that an improvement in students' education should go hand in hand with the continuing education of teaching staff. It also becomes apparent that training activities are being substantially conditioned by the legislative jungle that is shrouding continuing education, by the lack of resources and by the pragmatic lines followed by the Education Administration. Furthermore, certain pending issues are cropping up such as the need to channel learned contents into our classrooms, to satisfy the emerging concerns of training recipients regarding their training, to perform follow-up and evaluation tasks regarding the training actions that are being undertaken and to strive for an improved coordination between management staff, users and knowledge workers.

Keywords: Non-university personnel, continuing education, professional development, union organisations, education needs or requirements

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Ana M., Fernandez Tilve**, Departamento de Didactica e Organizacion Escolar, Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 15782 Santiago de Compostela, Spain. *E-mail address:* mdolores.fernandez.tilve@usc.es

1. Introduction

Teaching was and still is a hard task, and more so in this dawning 21st century. This century is burdened by a wide array of unresolved issues concerning the numerous educational reforms. Also, the ups and downs typical of school agendas and the presence of new educational challenges due to changes in our society, culture, technology, economy, etc. have created an even more complicated scenario. Specifically, in the last decades we have witnessed multiple educational changes which have had a decisive impact on teachers' training, thus justifying the need for innovation and suggesting new methods of teaching and learning (Gonzalez Arrabal, 2007; Imbernon, 2012).

This has consequently placed continuing education of teachers under the spotlight, especially regarding education aimed at non-university domains. Furthermore, it has currently developed into a key pillar for facing the challenges of teaching as well as a tool for facilitating a constant adaptation to these changes and for the improvement of quality (OCDE, 2009).

In this context of ever increasing demands, the role of trade unions has varied noticeably during the years and is nowadays a primary focus of attention. And to quote Montero (1996, page 149), this is an *"especialmente conveniente momento para detenerse y pensar, para mirar hacia el pasado y para mirar hacia el futuro, y examinar lo que sucedió"*. In line with these thoughts, we have decided to begin a more wide-ranging study to give a more in-depth view of the possible contributions made to the professional development of our teachers by the major union organisations in the Autonomous Community of Galicia (CIG, CCOO, CSIF, UGT and ANPE), thus offering a likely picture of the training that has been promoted during recent years. Specifically, we would like to give voice to these education managers in order to discover the characteristics of the training being offered as well as their response to the perceived educational needs. We also wish to provide guidance regarding any new tendencies and obstacles that in their view have been playing out in the domain of continuing education in recent years.

We are therefore dealing with an unprecedented research aiming at analysing the present while still keeping the future in view. We have the humble intention of revealing all the existing hopes and needs despite legal hindrances and contradictions and despite the overbearing presences that leave no one untouched. In this essay we provide the first findings obtained during the intensive-qualitative stage of the investigation.

2. Trade unions as agents of continuing education for teachers

As we have previously pointed out, the ongoing social changes demand for a shift in our teaching function. However, if we take a look at recent teacher training plans, there is an apparent lack of any strong commitment on behalf of the Education Administration in our autonomous community that might encourage a real and substantial change in continuing education programmes. According to Alvarez Rojo (2007), the reason behind the problem is that, barring specific exceptions, the education provided to teachers lacks a sufficiently close relationship to the performance of their work or to the scenarios in which it is to be implemented. Furthermore, the contents that are dealt with and the tempos provided for such education to be materialised may also be subject to criticism.

The main Galician union organisations are seeking to close the gap in continuing education although it remains true that each trade union is geared towards its own ideological principles; "The concept of school and the role of its teachers is not unanimous" (Perrenoud, 2001). And this leads to divergences and peculiarities within the education currently being offered. However, there is a common goal regarding education: "professional improvement and the collaboration of public authorities with specialised bodies and associations" (Fernandez Guisado, 2012). We are also aware that research on the continuing education of teachers is currently insufficient, especially on a trade union level. In this sense, it must be pointed out that, despite the wide range of training options oozing out from the

variety of trade unions, we still lack reliable and verified information that might provide a global picture of their possible impact as a driving force towards change and improvement in teaching.

What does become clear however is the European commitment with these training options; as early as 1992, a work document issued by staff at the European Commission indicated that the trade union training systems should be made more consistent in order to face the challenges set forth by the European construction. Therefore in a general way, national and regional trade union confederations play an essential role in providing trade union education and shaping the model of the education being offered on a national level. On this point we must highlight certain peculiarities in the different trade union confederations and in the training on offer because the contents being dealt with are a response to two different pressures that are in constant interaction with each other; firstly, there is a commitment with a training program shaped by centralised policies and, secondly, we can observe a decentralised training design shaped by the demands arising from every autonomous community, province and even from every different location [which itself is confirmed by the fact that each organisation takes on the name of its own particular region in our case "Galicia" or a patronymic term thereof] (Brigdford & Stirling, 2002). Practically speaking however, we find a major coincidence among all organisations in the issues that are approached within the different modalities and training actions as well as in the way the education on offer is being organised (Fierro Botas, 1998). During recent years, there has been a truly important increase in distance training courses aimed at adapting to challenges in teaching and therefore satisfying specific educational needs.

Specifically in Galicia, we have five major confederations catering to the education sector: Sindicato Independiente, also known as ANPE, the most significant trade union in public education; Confederacion Intersindical Galega (CIG), a regional organisation considered to be the most representative trade union in Galicia in legal effects; Central Sindical Independiente y de Funcionarios (CSIF), the most representative trade union in public administrations; Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) and Union General de Trabajadores (UGT), who have a greater relevance on a national level due to their presence in all the Spanish sectoral boards and to their projects carried out both state-wise and on an international level. Trade union education is more specifically concentrated in an "internal" way and in separation from other trade union services as it is offered through sectoral education delegations, foundations and other bodies created for such purpose and set apart from the grass-roots organisation itself which turns out to be a critical point for enabling to clarify specific objectives and methodologies within the educational framework (Fierro Botas, in Brigdford & Stirling, 2002). In our case in particular, we have established open contact with the following trade unions: ANPE Galicia, CIG Ensino, CSIF Galicia-Ensenanza, CCOO Ensino Galicia (Federacion de Ensino de CCOO de Galicia) and FETE-UGT Galicia (Federacion de Traballadores do Ensino de UGT de Galicia). In each case, common priorities and agreements have been established, albeit with certain specifications.

With regard to funding educational actions, it must be pointed out that they are mostly supported by the State and, in our case, also by the Autonomous Community of Galicia, as indicated above. Other major sources include municipal authorities, cultural foundations, international trade union confederations and agreements made with cultural or academic institutions such as the European Social Fund.

Besides these subsidised actions, the different organisations provide education that entails a cost of varying amount for participants or users depending on whether they are affiliates or members and even depending on their seniority as such members due to the contributions of affiliates not being enough to cover all the expenses underlying the educational actions they intend to implement.

3. Research objectives and methodological procedure

Our research work aims at getting a closer look at continuing education for teachers in Galicia, which in this case is given by the main trade union bodies (CIG, CCOO, FETE-UGT, CSI-F and ANPE). Specifically, our intention is the following:

- Describing and analysing the characteristics of continuing education of non-university teachers in the Autonomous Community of Galicia, which has been organised and promoted by trade unions in recent years.
- Determining the extent to which the actions taken by the most representative Galician trade unions regarding continuing education are meeting the real needs of teachers in the schools of the 21st century.
- Examining the possible modern-day difficulties and challenges that are present among non-university teachers in Galicia.

In order to provide an answer to the goals set forth in this research, we have followed a qualitative and quantitative methodology. In this part, we will focus on the qualitative stage of the study and introduce the data obtained through the discussion group until now. We will therefore offer a summarised qualitative perspective of our informers or research subjects. It must be pointed out that in order to activate the process for collecting and analysing information, several dimensions have been set out to establish analysis categories, regardless of other new categories arising during the process itself (see figure 1):

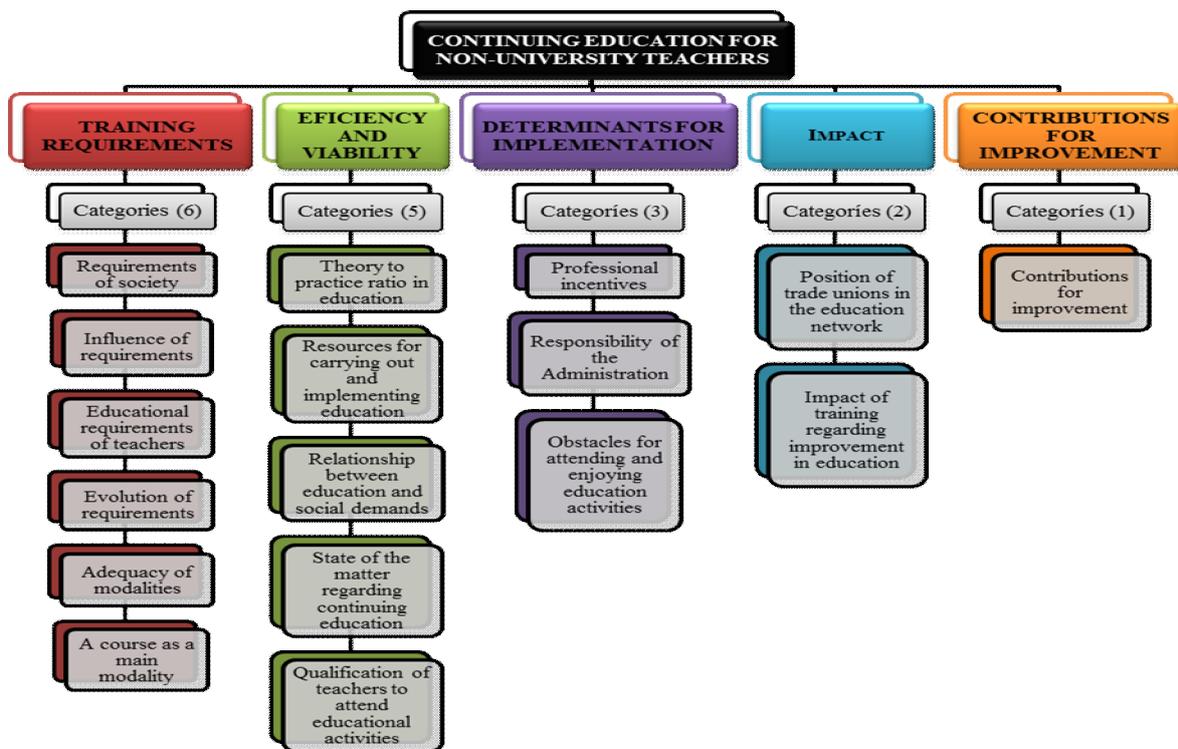


Figure 1. Analysis, dimensions and categories of the discussion group. Prepared by the author.

On the basis of the statements made by Del Rincon, Arnal, Latorre and Sans (1995), we have selected the type of persons considered ideal for our research subject by following specific criteria:

interest and availability to participate in the research; a capacity for critical thinking; related and consecutive education activities; trade union experience and seniority; experience in the field of planning, development and evaluation of the continuous education of non-university personnel. A deliberate and intentional sample is therefore available, which is comprised of individuals selected for their significance regarding the goals of the research.

As to the answers obtained in the discussion group, they have been subjected to a transcription process in which each one has been converted into a discourse to be subjected to analysis by means of a rigorous and exhaustive procedure aimed at preserving as much information as possible, both linguistic, paralinguistic and analogue (pauses, hesitation, onomatopoeias, emotional aspects such as laughter, ironic tones, etc.). Following the transcription, the next step was to analyse the content, which in this case was carried out using the ATLAS/ti computer tool and a CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software) with the aim of facilitating work and speeding up the selection and data interpretation process in a systematic and exhaustive way.

4. First qualitative results to be obtained

Below we will present the initial results obtained during the qualitative stage of the study by following the different analysis dimensions and categories (see figure 1):

4.1. Dimension 1: Training requirements

The most noticeable references are those referring to the "educational needs of teachers", which are similar in this case to those expressed regarding the very "impact of the created needs". Special mention is made of training courses due to the shortcomings in the initial education of secondary school teachers for which special training activities become necessary in secondary level education as well as skills in new technologies as teaching tools.

Of course. They use paper format there. I don't use digital whiteboards and I'd need training to be able to do it. And who's supposed to... to set the standards in the classroom? It's me, isn't it? And... What I need is training so I can make the most of my teaching (P1, 1:84, 354:354).

Other educational needs that were detected were those regarding emotional management and management of problems arising from occupational hazards (bullying, stress, voice problems, etc.).

Regarding the "adequacy of training modalities", a preference is observed for on-line education compared to classroom courses as the former allows participants to adjust their own schedule without having to actually travel to a physical location, thus leading to a greater demand compared to face-to-face education. In addition to this, it may be observed that despite the superiority of course modalities, training in educational centres is valued highly, despite being the most complicated one regarding its implementation. As to the reasons for placing "courses as the main modality", it is understood that this is mainly because they are given during weekdays, compared to other training options which are provided on weekends, normally reserved for free time.

When it comes to analysing the "needs of society", it can be observed that transversal issues and the need for specific educational support are seen as elements to be targeted due to a lack of work being dedicated to them and due to their greater training requirements. This also includes new technologies due "firstly to the existence of a teaching staff that uses certain tools at the request of institutional programmes in which they have not been socialised, and secondly due to the existence of students belonging to the Net generation (Segovia, Mérida, Gonzalez & Olivares, 2013).

Finally regarding the "evolution of needs", they feel that "We have been doing the same thing for years and years" (P1, 1:64, 225:226) due to the unchanging education promoted by the Education Administration.

4.2. Dimension 2: Effectiveness and viability of education

The category with the largest number of references is the "qualification of teachers for attending educational activities"; they point out that most teaching staff work many more hours than those that are demanded by the Administration, therefore resulting in a highly prepared and qualified staff. However, it is also stressed that there are people with no commitment towards educational upgrading who are simply motivated by economic interests.

Sometimes it's like running an education corner shop. So along comes a teacher, he walks in through the door and I ask him "Can I help you, sir?" Oh, I'd like ,well, a twenty-hour course, please. Anything really. I don't mind if it's A or B as long as I can get the job done and complete the schedule. So that's the pure frustration that hits everyone, including the educators of teachers themselves. It's very frustrating (P1, 1:56, 201:201).

In relation to this, it is made apparent that the impossibility to link professional development to promotion in their teaching careers becomes a factor in their lack of teaching motivation. To this it may be added that as teachers, they find themselves at a crossroads full of demands without any help to cope with them. Regarding the course modality, it is pointed out that the courses themselves are able to have an impact on or create intrinsic motivation, depending on whether the courses pique their interest or on the methods that are followed in each case.

As for the "resources used to carry out or to apply training", they claim that there is currently a lack of both economic and human resources for the performance of activities. They feel that they are in a precarious situation, which leads them to make the most of their resources at the expense of being able to generate new educational activities. Regarding the implementation of acquired knowledge, they feel that although a major financial investment has been made in teaching centres, it still fails to translate into a real improvement.

A lot of money was put in. And so you've got all those well-equipped centres but now we realise that it doesn't work because when they're in the classroom and they have to go to the Abalar website they just won't. So what might be the problem, then? The problem is that teaching staff aren't properly trained and it's all a vicious circle in the end (P1, 1:21, 79:79).

Regarding the "relationship between education and social demands", they feel that the needs are present in day-to-day work and must be approached within the subject matters pointed out in the previous area. They also understand that improving their relationship strategies is fundamental as well as coming closer to their pupils and their families in order to adapt to the circumstances that arise on a daily basis.

When assessing the "state of the matter regarding continuing education", they mention six-year payments as the major limitation, which obliges them to certify their courses to ensure their validity, meaning that it is necessary to have a set minimum number of participants. They stress the extrinsic and financial motivation for attending education courses. As to their capacity for facing challenges, they feel that it is necessary to attend education with a view on change and innovation.

From the viewpoint of the "theory to practice ratio in education", the practical area of training is rather scarce despite the fact that many courses do include workshops in their final stages. Lastly, it must be said that there are no relationships of note between the analysed areas.

4.3. Dimension 3: Determinants in continuing education

A number of references crop up regarding the "responsibility of the Administration", in which they explain the reduction in funding and support regarding education. Furthermore, they state that the Education Administration focuses and directs education contents in two different ways, this being

English language and new technologies, in which the latter is not meeting real expectations. They claim that teachers do not find the subjects relevant for themselves or for any improvement in education.

-[They sell it to us], just like with ICTs in education but education has to come hand in hand with other things as well.

-[yes, that's the word] they're selling it to us"

-Exactly

-[And also], there's just a whole load of political interests behind it, not because they have this goal in mind, this vision of improving public education (P1, 1:33, 133:136).

In matters regarding "professional incentives", they insist on their rejection of six-year periods. They perceive that teachers feel obliged to work those hours and obtain the necessary certification as a mere administrative procedure to obtain their additional payment, therefore making it pointless in that sense to work extra hours. They also add that the previous professional incentive known as the "transitional access system" had the same perverse effect on education.

Regarding the "obstacles for performing and enjoying education activities" participants in the discussion group claim that they feel suppressed and subjugated to the education regulations, which they consider to be a greatly bureaucratized area whose ideological interests become reflected in the granting of subsidies. As to the performance of educational activities, they insist that the fact that they are provided after school hours inhibits motivation and interest among teachers.

4.4. Dimension 4: Impact of continuing education

When asking them about the "standpoint of trade unions on the education network", the subjects under research claimed that they consider themselves to have a limited weight due to the existence of other institutions and bodies offering continuing education and also because the field of education is only a small part of the work done by trade unions; to this issue we must also add their loss of prominence during recent years due to a reduction in budget allocations. In this situation, they are realistic when considering their options and try to compensate the educational void existing in the Administration's education scheme while sorting out the needs that arise during their teaching activity.

A project this size needs teacher training and at the end of the day the Administration won't provide that training for teachers because it costs money. So that's why we trade unions have to keep on working, to fill those voids (P1, 1:30, 100:100).

Also, they feel that the effort involved in planning, designing and developing continuing education is not duly appreciated. Lastly, they point out that their commitment to their affiliates is of vital importance for their trade unions.

When discussing the "impact of training regarding educational improvement", they feel that teachers are not sufficiently trained to pedagogically apply and adapt the resources that are made available to them. However, despite lacking a true impact assessment, they do perceive an improvement regarding the use of new technologies on behalf of teachers during recent years. No correlations are established between the two analysed categories.

4.5. Dimension 5: Contributions for improvement

In terms of "improvement contributions", they suggest that the Administration should prepare new professional incentives and, especially, promote a real improvement through teacher training.

I think... if you want to improve continuing education, you have to set aside all the traps, which you can find if you really look at it. And like we were saying before, we always had available time for education and that's something they should extend, but not cut down. Meaning that they should help us continue our education instead of throwing obstacles in the way (P1, 1:85, 356:356).

In general terms, most references are closely related to each other, whilst those that only fit into a single category are practically non-existent. This occurs in single dimensions as much as among several of them, which constitutes a clear indication of the link between the different aspects to be analysed.

4.6. Other reflected aspects

It must be pointed out that certain interesting revelations have been made during the analysis which do not match any of the defined categories. Firstly, and on the basis of the remaining notes, the Education Administration and specifically the current legislation constitute a burden of requirements; due to their role as training providers, they also keep a strict control over the aspects of teachers' education, which entails that the trade unions and teaching institutions as well as the teachers themselves must adhere to such requirements.

[Sorry but], the trouble I see with education, with the contents provided by the Administration is that it's... hmm, it's comprised of just two things.. meaning new technologies that are completely outdated so they aren't new anymore, and foreign languages... I'm talking about English (P1, 1:71, 257:258).

Following this line of thought, we find constant complaints about the initial education provided to secondary school teachers in pedagogical subjects, both in the former CAP (Certificate of Pedagogical Qualification) and in the current Master's Degree, a matter which we consider worth mentioning. This results in secondary school teachers being under-trained and not being able to appreciate or take interest in this type of education.

- The problem is that the Administration used to say you have to get the CAP, and now they'll tell you to get the Master's Degree which is supposed to be better but I'm not too sure about that either.

- [It's all just theory], because the shortcomings are still there (P1, 1:88, 368:371).

In consequence, it becomes necessary to provide pedagogical education through formative plans aimed specifically at secondary school teachers right from their initial education. In the area of new technologies, it must be said that we have spotted a contradiction regarding the "Abalar Project" when referring to the plans designed by the Education Administration. In this particular case, they insist on the need for innovation and for the use of ICTs. However, they simultaneously focus their efforts on this resource which, in the opinion of our key informers, is obsolete.

And the Abalar issue was the first obstacle but the project is about having a digital classroom. That's the final goal. That means the students leaving their books at home and using their computers. It's more stable. And positive (P1, 1:29, 98:98).

Another very striking contradiction has to do with the teacher's IT qualifications. On the one hand, they claim that teachers are very well qualified but however they seem to feel unable to adapt and implement their resources in an educational way inside the classroom.

And so you've got all those well-equipped centres but now we realise that it doesn't work because when they're in the classroom and they have to go to the Abalar website they just won't. So what

might be the problem, then? The problem is that teaching staff aren't properly trained and it's all like a vicious circle in the end (P1, 1:21, 79:79).

It must also be noted that trade unions, as institutions providing continuing education, feel obliged to bear the brunt of the requirements left unsatisfied by the Education Administration. And consequently such requirements are inevitably pushed back to the domains of trade unions:

When we plan education, we try to keep transversal contents in mind. I mean, the contents approved by the government department aren't exactly rocket science, are they? So we assume it has to address our relationship with society, doesn't it? So these aspects have to be worked on because they're unfinished. Or perhaps they need a bit of going over (P1, 1:1, 25:25).

In general, it must be said that there is a clear need to become educated mainly in new technologies and teaching. The on-line and course modality are mentioned predominantly, mainly because of their convenience. In addition to the latter, the scarcity of practical exercises in education activities makes it even more difficult to subsequently implement the acquired knowledge. Furthermore, the existence of dead-end careers in education has a strong impact on teaching motivation, despite not being the only key factor.

Regarding the Education Administration, it is apparent that it has reduced its budget on continuing education considerably. This coupled with six-year payment periods as a professional incentive is degrading and vilifying the entire process. Trade unions perceive that they have limited weight after losing their power. Regarding educational requirements, they do perceive an improvement in digital competency among teachers. Lastly, they openly state that achieving a real improvement will require a strong impulse that will bring about major changes on behalf of the Education Administration.

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