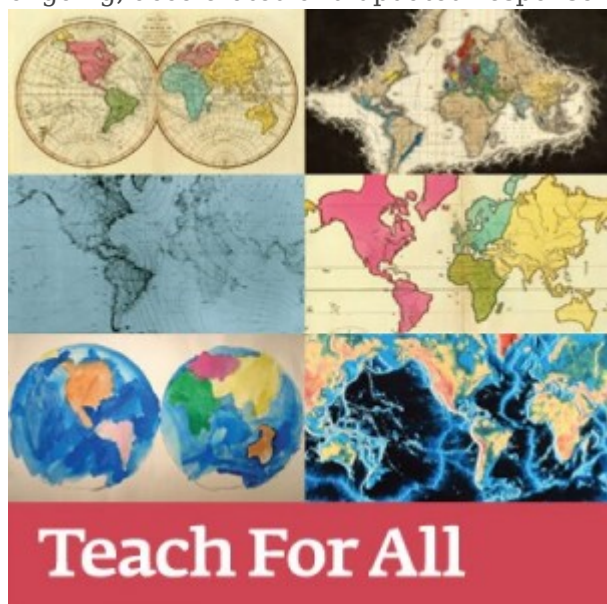


Teach for all, Teach for Romania

Primary education for all children is crucially important in order to help them get off to the right start. A basic need and right for all children around a world enshrined as **Millennium Development Goal no. 2**, education is a multi-faceted issue that speaks about numerous challenges, problems and opportunities, different needs, different approaches and asks for an ongoing, accelerated and updated response both globally and locally.



It is already well-known that the country where a child is born determines the kind of education he or she will receive and, moreover, it influences their future professional endeavors and options in life. On average across countries, a child coming from Sub-Saharan African countries is less likely to complete primary school than a child from Western Europe. However, in many countries with high primary completion rates, large numbers of school dropouts or out-of-school youth need our attention too.

Teach for all is an international movement that already exists in 36 countries and should be implemented in numerous other rich and poor countries that face both different and similar education-related problems. Quality education is needed everywhere, from New-York to Mumbai and Săcele, and other small cities and villages in Romania where educators from **Teach for Romania** (the Romanian branch of *Teach for all*) teach their pupils English, Arts and other subjects, and above everything, motivate them into finding out what future they want and why school is important in their endeavours.

According to the World Development Indicators, **the Gross Enrollment Rate (GER)** at the primary level in **Romania** reached 94.2 percent in 2012 (GER measures the total enrollment in primary education divided by the population size of primary-school-aged children, including here older persons attending primary school). However, despite the fact that these numbers should make us optimistic about the situation of primary education in Romania, the 17.5 percent rate of school dropouts in Romania in 2013 also deserves warrant attention. In addition to this, it is worth mentioning that the first cause of school dropouts in Romania remains poverty.

While almost every school teacher in Romania dreams at working in comfortable and modern environments, teachers from **Teach for Romania** have committed themselves to the most troubled and less appreciated schools. The first generation of teachers (*teachies*) have been selected for a 2 years mandate to literally serve the nation. They left behind their fast-paced lives in corporations, offices and universities to go to small villages, impoverished cities and neighborhoods to teach, motivate, break stereotypes and perform a gradual change in the minds of pupils living on the edge of poverty. To be a teacher in Romania is neither very popular, nor financially attractive; therefore, being part of this program asks for motivation, strong leadership skills and enthusiasm. Moreover, teachers involved in the program should believe in the power of education and make a goal out of reducing education inequity in Romania.

Teach for Romania educators have been recruited based on a highly selective procedure and afterwards, they have been part of very demanding training sessions which prepared them for the school work in impoverished environments.

Fully integrated into the school team of their institutions, the 18 *teachies* just started their work in many schools all over Romania.

Interviewing **Ms Corina Puiu, co-founder and Head of Training and Support at Teach for Romania**, we found out that she gave up an important position within Vodafone Romania (as the one leading the project 'Vodafone Mobile Payments') and put all her professional experience and personal motivation into the idea of bringing **Teach for All** in Romania.

Alexandra: Corina, how did Teach for Romania started in Romania?



Corina: "Teach for all" is a global, but country-specific program that exists in 36 countries around the world, from the United States of America to India and Bulgaria.

In 2012, John (Ionut) Soleanico was back in Romania after graduating from Harvard Business School and Harvard Kennedy School of Government and living for many years abroad.

In Bulgaria, he met by chance Ms Evgenia Peeva, the founder of **Teach for Bulgaria** and realized that such an initiative should exist in Romania as well. At that time, I was in charge of Vodafone Mobile Payments within Vodafone Romania. When Ionut told me about the idea of Teach for Romania, this related a lot to my childhood back in Vaslui (where I was born) and Constanța (where I spent my childhood and my school years until university) and I committed myself to a project that, at that moment, was not sure to be approved by the Romanian Ministry of Education. Since then, we have been the co-founders of Teach for Romania. A couple of years ago, Bogdan Georgescu tried to implement it, but it was refused by the Romanian authorities at that time. However, in 2013, our plan was approved by the Ministry of Education and since then, we have concentrated all our efforts in having the first generation of teachers start their activity by September 2014. I believed in this idea from the beginning and now I am very excited about the way it grows and brings its first results.



Alexandra: Can you offer us a general profile picture of the ones involved in Teach for Romania in terms of academic and professional experiences and personal motivation?

Corina: Surprisingly enough, we received 362 applications from individuals with different profiles willing to get involved in the 2-years mandate of teaching in troubled schools and environments in Romania. After interviews and group exercises, we selected 23 teachers and 18 of them already started their activity in several schools in Romania. We were looking for highly motivated professionals, with a passion for education and willingness to challenge themselves working in primary schools in areas where teaching positions were not at all desired by other also very highly qualified teachers. The preparation sessions that took place during the **Leadership Summer Academy (LSA)**, a couple of weeks before the start of the academic year, have been a test of

endurance, patience and ability to face unusual school-related situations. LSA was conceived as the largest hub for leadership and pedagogy in Romania with 300 participants, including 200 children and around 100 trainers, facilitators and teachers. It was a first important step towards preparing our selected Teachers for Romania for their 2 years activity in schools.

The program started in September 2014 when 18 of our recruits were assigned in schools. They teach English, Romanian, Latin, Drawing and Arts, Mathematics and other subjects and try their best to meet the needs of their pupils. Therefore, they have the huge potential to bring tremendous influence on the lives of the children they work with every day for two years in a row. And at the same time, this experience is completely transformational for them as well. They are not volunteers in the program and we support them financially through our scholarship program. Moreover, after the 2 years mandate, they become part of an alumni systemic-change network that looks quite promising already.

Alexandra: Can the idea of Teach for Romania bring innovation and change in the education system in Romania and open up new opportunities for the children involved in this project?

Corina: I would like to see the next generation of leaders of Romania coming from these children we have met while implementing Teach for Romania in rural and urban Romania.

Teach for Romania is part of the formal education system and we are committed to change and innovation. However, reality proves us that while students may be entering primary school, they are not always completing the cycle. And one of the first reasons why they abandon their studies is poverty. Thus, for the moment our hopes go to these children who are on the verge of leaving school with low credentials and qualifications and thus, with no future prospects. While we believe that a good start in life is highly dependent on education, they should also give credit to school and education in general. In low-income urban and rural areas, teachers' efforts are going in this direction as well. According to 2012 PISA assessment, Romanian students are the less motivated ones from 65 countries involved in the research.

In these environments, motivation and willingness to fulfil studies and look for a better future are tremendously needed. Our aims for social justice and social efficiency go together with education quality. On the long term, we look forward to reducing education inequities that separate low-income students from their more privileged peers; moreover, we try to motivate teachers to bring not only knowledge, but also motivation and role-models in their classrooms. Moreover, while being a teacher in Romania is not a dream job, I hope that teaching for Romania is more than that.

In the US and other countries with a longer tradition in this program, it already exists a Teach for Alumni network that works very well there. Many of these Alumni decide to continue their teaching activities in low-income communities or go for other education-related positions. Step by step, they do not only understand the needs and problems of the system that have to be tackled at the moment, but they also look forward to bring change and innovation from their new positions. I hope that our generations of **Teach for Romania** professionals will form the network of leadership and advocacy that is very much needed in the education system.

Sabina Pop, 3rd grade teacher in Gârcini, gave us her opinion regarding her experience as a **Teacher for Romania.**

The reason why I joined Teach for Romania is that one of my values includes having an impact in the world I live in. In time, I realized that the only way to do so is by starting teaching and educating young people. I believe that education is the foundation of society and if we want to change generations, we have to help youngsters build inner confidence and facilitate learning experiences where they can realize how many life options they can have if they are motivated enough.

When I found out about Teach for Romania I knew, just by "scanning" the website, that I found the people who share the same vision I have for this beautiful country we live in and for our fellow citizens. I applied for the open position and, as they saw my motivation and determination, became a Teach for Romania teacher.

It is not easy at all. Teaching in Gârcini is the toughest experience I've ever been through. The

reality struck me, even though we were prepared for it in the Leadership Summer Academy that took place just kilometers away, in Tarlungeni. The pupils I'm teaching are in the 3rd grade and 90% of them still have to learn the letters. Half of them are too old to be in the 3rd grade. They cannot do basic math problems, nor read or write. Their families are not supportive at all and they are all dependent on social supplements and monthly allowances.

Nevertheless, I am here (in Gârcini) because I do believe in them. I believe in the power of example and, most of all, in the power of a 'healthy' education - one in which the student is always encouraged to trust himself or herself, develop critical thinking skills, be curious about the world and motivated to learn more. I don't have a lot of teaching experience myself, but I am learning a lot every day. I am trying to educate them, so they become motivated to be someone when they grow up - a person who has a well-paid job, who is satisfied with his/her family life and who is always willing to give support to the people in the community where he or she lives in. This is my vision for my pupils and I put all the efforts to help them achieve their best.

My greatest achievement so far is the one related to the management of violence in my classroom. Children who exhibit violent or aggressive behavior at school are a great challenge for the school personnel. I used to have at least five or six very violent students in my class who would always hit and spit each other. Since I never hit them, always encouraged them to reflect on their behavior and used the power of example, after only two months, I don't have this problem anymore. I have to be honest and say that I am still surprised, but very happy we have come so far in such a short period of time. The same situation has occurred during the Leadership Summer Academy; at that time, we had to deal with some noncompliant and violent behaviors exhibited by some pupils we worked with in Tarlungeni. We are still in touch with these kids and it is wonderful to see that they improved their behavior after we left their school.

In a nutshell, my greatest objectives for this school year (2014/2015) concern improving my pupils' reading and writing abilities. These are ambitious goals since we have to learn in one year what other students used to achieve in three years; however, I am confident that all the teaching methods and strategies I have learned during the Leadership Summer Academy together with my strong motivation to succeed in our project, will help us check out our accomplishments quite soon.