

Europe's Twists and Turns in Teacher Education

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Abstract—Teaching profession is experiencing a regression in places and it certainly suits the current economically oriented neoliberal education policies. Teacher training is accepted by academic model of teacher education, however this model shows that the notion of university teacher education is still a fragile one. The question is whether the former will prove feasible.

Keywords—Europe's twists and turns; teacher education

I. INTRODUCTION

I come from a country in which public schooling was first supported back in the eighteenth century. Schooling became compulsory in 1777, and was free for poor children and admitted girls. I come from a country which not only introduced compulsory schooling but also provided special training for those wishing to pursue careers as teachers. Teacher training schools began to appear towards the end of the eighteenth century. On completing their training, graduates spent a year working as a teaching assistant before taking the teaching exams qualifying them as teachers. This was the beginning of the history of teacher professionalization and the end of unqualified teachers being accepted into the teaching profession. Since then the history of teacher education has been one of twists and turns and abrupt reversals; nonetheless, strong foundations had been laid for a robust conception of teaching. Here I will add that in Europe one cannot help but mention the name of John Amos Comenius (1592–1670) in this connection, a Czech theologian and philosopher whose extensive works helped build the civilized foundations of the European tradition of education and the modern conception of teaching and the school[1].

I come from a country where almost all teachers are fully qualified from nursery school up to the highest education levels. Teachers from the elementary level onwards hold master's degrees. This is increasingly reflected in preschool education, where teachers are generally not qualified to master's level, but the vast majority of them right across the country – almost 100% – have been fully qualified for decades. I come from a country that experienced an era in which the entire education sector was public and free, when teaching was generally perceived to be an attractive occupation, when all schools were state regulated and supported, and a dense network of education institutions was created. At that time it was a country in which human freedom was restricted and teachers operated under strict ideological controls. Despite this, for those who believe education is a public concern and largely a state responsibility, the education

system that existed then is entirely imaginable today, albeit with certain adjustments.

The country I come from also has a dense network of teaching faculties: there are seven faculties for a population of five million. In addition teachers also undertake training at many other humanities and natural science faculties at traditional universities and at technological and other higher education establishments. Like the teaching faculties, the humanities and natural science faculties prepare teachers for general teaching, while the technological, agricultural and economics universities train teachers in the specialist subjects taught at vocational secondary schools. This extensive network contains a large number of students preparing to become teachers, sometimes to the extent that not all of those graduating and wishing to find work as a teacher can.

The faculties and universities involved in training teachers have multiplied in the last three decades despite the higher education tradition having been founded and developed during the middle of the last century. One may gain the impression that we should be satisfied with the prospects for teacher education and training and the fact that it is built on strong foundations and good experiences and a secure infrastructure. Many academics, not just from my country but from other central and eastern European countries as well, would describe the situation much as I have, as indeed would colleagues from other European countries, insofar as we are talking about the present day.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

A. Other side of the coin

However, this feeling of certainty and satisfaction is by no means warranted. Let me go back to my home country. Although I have described both the past and present positively, that is just one side of the coin. The other side reveals a country in which the teachers are ready to strike at any moment and where two strikes have occurred in the last two years. We may have lots of universities, teacher education programmers and student teachers, but fewer and fewer students want to become teachers and many will not enter the teaching profession. The number of secondary school pupils wishing to become teachers and for whom the faculty of education is their first choice is shrinking. At the education faculties we find that year after year we are admitting weaker students, many of whom do not have the motivation to undertake difficult studies. The dense network of universities training teachers is suddenly finding it has fewer students.

However, this is not unique to Slovakia. It is a reflection of a general trend that is not restricted just to European countries, and that is sometimes referred to as the teaching profession crisis[2]. The teaching profession has generally become less and less attractive. There are also notable problems such as the aging of teaching staff (the average age of a teacher is rising), teacher education graduates not wishing to enter the profession and recently trained teachers leaving the profession. In particular the teaching profession has ceased to appeal to men, further increasing the gender imbalance of the profession [3]. Many teachers are starting to feel their career and financial prospects are limited. The profession does not appeal financially and salaries do not reflect teachers' education levels when compared with other professions requiring a similar level of education. Teachers complain that their social status is declining and that it does not correspond to the difficulty nor the social mission of their work[4].

Education and schooling is in constant flux and appears to be a highly dynamic sector. However, this dynamism does not attract teachers, but repels them. This is a result of the turbulence and endless education reforms. International education comparators, economic competitiveness, technological innovation and globalization all put pressure on education to change. International organizations and national governments are pushing for educational change. This is felt by all teachers today. There is now talk of permanent reform and a tangible pressure for continual and enduring change[5].

Understandably these changes have a negative effect on satisfaction in the teaching profession. They upset and destabilize teachers' professional identity. One of the associated features and general outcome of these changes in education is the somewhat paradoxical growth in bureaucracy accompanying the reforms, which does not find favor among teachers. It is a burden that threatens their identity and is felt to be a departure from their original role, which they see as participation in children's learning. (It is not necessarily like this, though, as some of our research has shown that teachers incorporate bureaucratic tasks into their professional identity and consider the successful handling of bureaucracy to be a mark of their identity)[6].

Teacher identity is also negatively impacted by difficulties coping with the growing new demands placed on their work and this can lead to resistance. This does not just concern technological change, as one might initially assume. The centuries-old role of the teacher is also being challenged by the new demand, in keeping with ideological preferences and current discourse that the teachers of today should not actually teach but simply mediate, facilitate and mentor. Not to mention the frustration that can arise out of the general questioning of the previous stability of school institutions and increasing talk of how schools are losing their monopoly on education and that the education environment is now a diffuse one.

Teachers are losing their security and finding it hard to adopt new forms. Insecurity is not entirely compensated for by the benefits the teaching profession can offer. A generation of teachers is changing, as are the characteristics of those

entering the teaching profession. Given the permanent reform processes this raises questions as to whether and how the nature of teacher education and its current and future institutional basis should change. Many of these questions are old and still valid, and many emerge over time[7].

B. A closed or open profession

Defining the teaching and the skills that comprise this profession is not easy. There are many hidden factors underpinning the expertise teachers require to succeed in their profession that we are unable to identify satisfactorily. We attempt to classify them but cannot be sure of doing so correctly and comprehensively. We are not even entirely sure whether people can be effectively prepared for teaching or whether we should assume there are elements we cannot completely capture. It is not unusual to hear that one has to be born to teach or have an aptitude or certain innate dispositions.

Not all teachers who have the appropriate education, a master's degree say, are guaranteed to succeed in the profession as teachers. We can imagine a successful teacher without the required formal training. One would be hard put to say whether a teacher was qualified or not simply based on a classroom observation. We might note differences in experience or ease of routine, but these are not necessarily connected to formal education.

Of course we should not doubt that teacher education is important and can provide basic insights into the profession. It is certainly a benefit initially, laying the groundwork for a good beginning, providing direction and certainty for those teaching specific subjects. These things are not a given where unqualified teachers are concerned, although the word 'unqualified' can mean different things. At its worst it may mean teachers having a lower level of formal education than is required, and at best, as is the case in Slovakia, it may mean having that level of education (a master's) but not specifically related to teaching. The first is an example of an education deficit, while the second is a professional deficit.

However, the problem is now starting to emerge elsewhere. Professional training and teacher 'expertise' are being sidelined in the education policies being formed internationally. On the one hand there is a constant emphasis on professionalism and the lifelong professionalization of the teacher, while on the other the focus is on the pluralization of the school environment with schools no longer being seen as the only education setting. Teachers are also no longer perceived as the basic source of education. If we look just at European education policy, we see that lifelong education policies are promoted in official documents, with three sources of learning being legitimized: formal, informal and non-formal [8]. Legitimacy is being accorded to the equivalence of the processes and outcomes of these three learning sources. If we take account of sources outside formal learning, in the settings within which it occurs, then we see that there is no longer any real reliance on the teacher. Stimulation is important, but not the professionals responsible for it. If the school does not monopolize education, then professional teachers will also cease to be monopolies.

There is increasing talk of the school as an open environment. There are direct demands that children should have plural sources of knowledge and that schools should also be open to non-teachers as well. In Slovakia it is not unusual for some schools and politicians to push for the legal stipulations on who can teach in a school to be watered down. This would enable those who are not formally educated teachers, but who wish to or who have something new to say, to facilitate, demonstrate or impart knowledge.

Teacher identity will therefore no longer be able to insist on a formal professionalized basis. Especially since, along with the pluralism of education settings, teachers are being called on from all sides to exchange their traditional teacher identity of a cultural authority and guarantor of norms for one in which they will guide pupils to various knowledge sources and in which they will no longer teach but accompany and stimulate them instead.

This causes difficulties for the concept of professional teacher identity, distancing it from other professional identities (for instance those of lawyers, medical practitioners or engineers). It also raises the usual questions about, and complicates, conceptions of teacher education and pathways to becoming a teacher.

On the one hand there is an increasingly strong current emphasizing teacher professionalism. It is associated with a focus on stand-alone teacher education programmers and continues to defend teaching degrees and the pressure on teachers to achieve the highest level of university teacher education. It is also holds that specialist initial training should be linked to subsequent continual teacher education and that this should not be a replacement for initial training but a means of professional growth. In a way it is a conservative view of the teaching profession and is a kind of defense of its special status. Naturally it emanates more from the academic sphere than from professional teacher groups since it is an expression of self-defense and self-affirmation. One should also note that this approach is conservative in that it automatically suggests that teaching is some kind of 'calling' and a life-long profession.

On the other hand space is opening up for a more flexible approach. Here teaching could equally be a life-long profession associated with continual professional growth and self-perfection. But it is more of an ideal scenario rather than the only successful teaching trajectory. This position accepts flexible entry paths into the profession, the current motivations for teaching and education diversity as well. But not at the level of the education required, but at the level on which there is movement between the professions and similar education levels. The idea of formal and non-formal learning (and training for a profession) is also being legitimized in the pathways to becoming a teacher.

The icy conservative waters are therefore thawing and opportunities are being created such that the decision to become a teacher will not be a once-only decision taken before embarking on study. It is envisaged that prospective teachers will be able to make that decision at any stage of their life and career path and that they should be helped in this. Not by making them attend a lengthy teacher education

programmer from the outset, but by enabling them to accumulate any lacking knowledge and experience and by taking account of any previous relevant experience and motivation and, let's say, demonstrable talent.

This pathway has always existed in some way and can take the form of additional formal teacher education; however, thus far it has not proved very flexible nor has it reflected the more liberal view of the teaching profession. These approaches have led to expectations that more motivated teachers will be attracted into schools, that they will bring a dynamism into the teaching body and enrich the education options on offer and link the school classroom environment with external stimuli.

These ideas are increasingly being promoted and feature as part of the reform processes. They have been met with fierce opposition in conservative circles, and welcomed by supporters of innovation. At the very least, though, the premise that pathways into teaching could be varied and opened up is being considered in new ways. One should note, though, that the conservatives are correct to warn that this pathway could be abused by politicians seeking to eradicate the problem of insufficiently qualified teachers or to continue underfunding teaching.

C. Limits of academic training

Ensuring that teachers are highly qualified is an education policy goal in all countries and achieving it on the formal level at least is a sign of well-functioning system. When associated with a master's degree as an education requirement, it is a mark of the successful efforts made to ensure teachers are highly professionalised and that the profession has a high status. It is a mark of the political, professional and academic struggle to improve not only the quality of teachers, but of education generally.

In this respect Europe appears to be a successful and exemplary continent, notwithstanding the differences between countries concerning the required level of higher education for teacher status, especially regarding the various teaching sub-professions. There are still large differences in teacher training for the lower levels (nursery schools, elementary schools), with secondary schooling being the requirement in some places and a master's degree in others [9].

The truth is, especially in relation to the professions where it is still possible to gain a teaching qualification at various education levels, certain teacher characteristics benefit those with a higher level of education. Our research for instance has shown that preschool teachers with higher levels of education (minimally a bachelor degree) are more autonomous, open to change and have greater faith in their professional skills than those who have secondary school training. Nonetheless we should not infer from this that more educated teachers make better teachers nor that higher education, particularly university education, leads to better quality.

All those of us who are university teachers and work in teacher education have encountered anomalies, constraints, paradoxes and conceptual ambiguities. We have also experienced the expectations placed on us university teachers

by the external evaluation process and the schools we prepare teachers for or the students that come to study under us.

We can state right away that teaching is not a traditional nor a standard university discipline. Education programmes hover somewhere among the classic disciplines – they are a disciplinary mosaic that never plums the depths of anything – and somewhere between academic life and teaching or classroom practice. The demand that teacher training become an academic concern is both logical and legitimate. It is right to expect teachers to be people with perhaps the highest level of intellectual knowledge, for teaching, even practical subjects, is an intellectual activity. In this sense it differs from tutoring or training. It is perhaps for this reason that the phrase ‘teacher training’ is being replaced by ‘teacher education’. However, the way in which intellectual knowledge is acquired through a university education (learning through research) clearly involves a different intellectual mode from the one teachers use in their work.

A university education simply directs students to the methods and tools academics employ in their intellectual work. And on this basis, but also through the selection criteria they use, they are guided through the somewhat lengthy processes of analytical thinking, performing sophisticated research and then writing and publishing. This is not the same skillset as that of a teacher. Anyone who has worked in teacher education will have felt this tension. The skillset of university academics is not entirely aligned since they are distanced from the daily work of the teacher and neither is that of student teachers since they are drawn into certain kinds of professional activities (science and research), a trajectory they did not set out to pursue.

Western universities therefore came up with an alternative concept, reflective practice, which is supposed to reconcile academic contemplation with everyday practical experience to justify the university modus operandi and reconcile it with the active practice of a teacher’s daily work [10]. However, a thorough analysis of this concept shows that it is more a rhetorical feature of academic departments responsible for teacher education than a tool that would truly resolve the problems of training teachers within a university setting [11]. This paradox remains unsolved. Indeed it is being reinforced by the fact that teacher education programmes are admitting students who are less well-equipped for demanding intellectual work

D. New turn to practice

Western teacher education policies may formally be aimed at promoting highly qualified teachers, but they are also moving away from the existing conservative model of university teacher education. The political priority is for teacher education to be oriented towards practice, towards methods that ensure it is associated with practice and towards the relationships that form an alliance between the academic

world and the practical world of the school or working environment and the labour market generally.

The current tensions in teacher education are dealt with best by those who openly recognise that teacher education is not a traditional university degree, but a professional one; that it is training for a specific vocation. The purest form of this model is not the one operated in universities but the one found at specialist higher education colleges. This kind of teacher education is more forgiving of the less academic and more practice oriented interests and activities of higher education lecturers teaching at these colleges and satisfies students who are more attracted to practical curiosity than to theorising.

III. CONCLUSION

Perhaps this is a more appropriate solution for today, since the teaching profession is experiencing a regression in places and it certainly suits the current economically oriented neoliberal education policies. The idea of a form of teacher training that engages more with practice is also accepted by supporters of the academic model of teacher education; however, it is a model that shows that the notion of university teacher education is still a fragile one. The question is whether the former will prove feasible.

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