

The professional development of teachers in Europe - aspirations and reality

HRK 'Project Nexus' conference on 'Education and Training for European Teachers: Competence Models, Curricular Objectives and Harmonizing Theory and Practice], Essen, Germany: 20-21 January 2014

Speech

(+/- 2100 words)

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Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to be amongst such distinguished experts from the field of Teacher Education.

I would like to thank the Rectors for organising this important conference, and for inviting the European Commission to participate. I would like to take this opportunity to address from an EU perspective the central role teacher education plays in quality education and training. I will also briefly outline the ways in which the EU works with Member States to support and improve teacher education, with the ultimate aim of providing a better educational experience for all young people.

[The global context]

It is a crucial task; and one that the economic crisis has made all the more urgent. Education and training systems need to change to become more relevant; to this end the EU wants to help Member States to improve the working environment of

teachers, and to improve the quality of teaching, so that we can improve the life chances of all learners.

In the past few years, the landscape of education has been shaken by the world economic problems. And education is certainly not immune to the pressures on public budgets.

But this has at least had the positive consequence that there is now a widespread understanding - at national level, at European level, and amongst our competitors too - that investing in education must be a priority, because competences and skills are central to growth.

At the same time, we are witnessing profound changes in the field of education itself, including:

- a global recognition that education which is relevant to the rapidly changing needs of the economy and of society will increasingly determine whether societies succeed or not; and
- a massive impact of technology on society, offering a huge potential to change educational provision and methods.

But against this background, there is also the growing realisation that Europe's education and training systems are still, in 2014, failing to provide some of the most basic requirements of modern societies – like making sure that

everyone can read, write and calculate at the basic level required by daily life.

This is borne out by the results of the recent PIAAC and PISA surveys. They show that:

- 20% of the EU population of working age has low literacy and low numeracy skills; (the figure rises to 25% for unemployed people);
- 25% of adults lack the skills they need to make effective use of the ICTs that are nowadays all around us;
- The EU is seriously lagging behind its target in mathematics, with persistently low levels of attainment.
- There is a striking gender gap in reading: boys have a serious disadvantage.

And there are serious challenges when it comes to both quality and equity, too:

- as regards quality, university graduates in some Member States have lower levels of attainment than upper secondary graduates in other countries, and
- as regards equity, socio economic background still plays a big part in determining educational success.

[European cooperation in education]

These shared challenges help to explain why, although responsibility for education and training systems rests entirely with Member States, the idea of European cooperation on Education and Training policy is now widely accepted.

From the start, teacher policy has been at the heart of this joint work. Because there is a recognition in Education Ministries around the EU that - despite their very different education systems - they face similar challenges when it comes to the teaching profession. I would summarise these challenges as follows:

- the difficulty of attracting the best candidates,
- the lack of support for beginning teachers, leading many of them to 'drop-out',
- the disconnect between in-service training and teachers' real learning needs, and
- the demographic 'time-bomb' of 'baby boom' teachers retiring.

[Teaching professions - EC proposals]

Ultimately though, whatever the challenges may be, the simple fact is that in order to raise standards of literacy and numeracy, reduce early school leaving, and achieve the levels of competences that the economy needs, we must improve the

quality and professionalism of teachers, and of those who educate them.

With this in mind, in 2012 the Commission outlined its ideas for reforming Education and Training systems to meet economic and social challenges, called 'Rethinking Education'. Improving policy support for teachers, school leaders and teacher educators is a key part of these proposals.

[Teachers specifically]

It is the Commission's view that 'Improving teacher quality' means introducing significant, systematic and sustained reforms of the support given to teaching professionals throughout their careers.

To start with, we need to be very precise about the competences that teachers are expected to deploy, and to make sure that on completing Initial Teacher Education every new teacher has mastered the basic competences to be effective in the classroom.

That means basing ITE around substantial periods of properly supervised practical training in real live classrooms. It also means - where necessary - re-designing initial teacher education, focussing it on those competences that teachers should be able to deploy, so as to make sure that they actually acquire them.

It includes giving teachers the competences they need to take full advantage of digital media and equipment wherever it can improve learning, as the Commission outlined in its recent communication on ‘Opening up Education’.

There is also a need to invest in systematic personal and professional support (or ‘Induction’) for every beginning teacher, in their first few years in the profession, to reduce abandonment rates, while serving teachers – no matter how experienced – should get regular formative feedback about how to improve the quality of their teaching.

And finally, every teacher should have an individually tailored support and training to make sure that they really can continue to improve their competences.

In parallel to this, action is needed on the recruitment side, too. Recruitment systems should be designed to attract and select the best candidates.

Some may object that this is easier said than done, especially when public finances are tight. To them I would say that while salary is of course an important element, it is by no means the only one: by offering clear paths for promotion, a high degree of professional autonomy and better working conditions, teaching can be made into a truly attractive alternative.

[Teacher Educators]

Our recent work with Member States has highlighted the need to pay much more attention to another teaching profession: the teacher educators. By this we mean all those who play a part in the career-long education of teachers, whether they are university lecturers or school-based mentors.

Their role is crucial for a number of reasons:

- Teacher Educators are present at every stage of the teacher's life-cycle: guiding student teachers, supporting beginning teachers, and encouraging experienced teachers to extend and develop their competences;
- Teacher Educators must exemplify in their daily teaching what it means to be a professional teacher and a lifelong learner. They must embody what is called "reflexive professionalism": constantly thinking about how to work better, constantly learning from experience.
- And, finally , it's Teacher Educators who undertake the key research that develops our understanding of learning and teaching themselves.

This is a profession to whom six million teachers in Europe turn for instruction, for guidance, and for professional support, and which plays a key multiplier role for the future of our education systems.

[Teaching in Higher Education]

Before I turn to the Commission's proposals for improving teacher education, please allow me a small digression into the world of higher education. The subject of this conference is Education and Training for European Teachers. I wonder how many of us here think of higher education teachers when we read this title?

But the issue of how best to promote quality in teaching and learning within European higher education institutions is highly relevant to today's and tomorrow's discussions.

In September 2012 the European Commission established a High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education chaired by the former Irish President, Mary McAleese. The report of the group was presented last June to the public. It is available online, for those of you who are interested to have a look.

One of the report's key messages is that teaching skills are indispensable to higher education systems faced with ever more students while trying to raise the quality of education. Yet few countries have any structured initial or continuous didactical and pedagogical preparation of college and university teachers. Teaching in higher education also needs to be given the profile it deserves, and to be placed on an equal footing with research, not only in career terms, but to ensure that both missions

combine in a way whereby good teaching is always informed by the latest research results in any discipline.

There are some exceptions in countries and institutions, though. The High Level Group heard from the advanced experiences in promoting quality teaching and learning several countries and from numerous higher education institutions and their initiatives to promote high level teaching skills as core to academic standing. Being here in Germany, I probably do not have to mention the Qualitätspakt Lehre, which is an impressive programme.

The report of the high level group develops realistic and transferable recommendations to HEIs, to Member States and to the EU on how best to improve the quality of teaching and learning. To give you an idea, the recommendations:

- ask for institutional strategies to support and improve the quality of teaching and learning,
- ask for certified pedagogical training for all teaching staff – sounds unrealistic though the Dutch government introduced just that last summer –
- ask institutions to take teaching performance into account for entrance, progression and promotion of academic staff.

There are 13 more recommendations in the report, which took into account the different starting points of countries and

institutions and offers a tool box of easy to apply – yet sometimes hard to implement – instruments to pave the way to high quality teaching and learning, to a high quality higher education.

We tried to make sure that this report and its recommendations found its way to every higher education institution in Europe. The feed-back we had from the world of higher education was more than positive.

The European Commission will, of course, support initiatives to put the recommendations of the report into practice via Erasmus+, our new programme for education, training, youth and sport.

[Themes]

But coming now back to Teacher Education, underlying our proposals for the teaching profession are some common ideas.

The first is the **value of research**; hard evidence from serious research must underpin every aspect of Teacher Education:

- research about the pedagogical and didactic approaches that are most effective in specific situations and with specific kinds of learner;
- research about the specific competences required by teacher educators, mentors and School Leaders; and

- research that links school teachers with university colleagues and brings academic inquiry right into the classroom.

The second idea concerns **professionalism**. There is a need to stimulate a new sense of ownership and agency in the teaching professions. Already in a couple of countries it is the profession itself that sets its quality standards, and that is promoting innovation and undertaking research. This kind of approach must be fostered so that the future development of the EU education systems builds upon the experience and expertise of teachers themselves.

The third idea is that of **coherence and continuity**.

In almost all Member States, teachers' initial education is totally separate from the training they undertake once they have started work. And yet, there is an urgent need to make sure that teachers' in-service learning helps them build upon the competences they acquired at university, that it can really take them to the next level.

EU Ministers agreed, way back in 2007, that Initial Teacher Education, Induction and continuing professional development should be organised as one single continuum: coordinated and coherent.

We are still waiting for most Member States to put this into practice, but Ireland has shown the way by adopting a national policy on the continuum of Teacher Education.

[Next steps]

Ladies and gentlemen,

Teacher education has been moving slowly but surely up the political agenda.

I'm pleased to be able to tell you that the Greek Government, which as you know has just taken over the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, will invite Education Ministers in May to adopt Council Conclusions on Teacher Education.

The European Commission for its part will continue to help Member States to implement the reforms necessary to raise the levels of attainment of all our pupils and students. This includes making sure that they have teachers of the highest quality.

I can see that this conference has already provided some very useful ideas about how we can help the teaching professions to play a full part in that endeavour.

Thank you for your attention.