

Trends in teacher education across Europe: an initial analysis

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Introduction

This paper identifies three of the broad trends in teacher education across Europe, with some inevitably limited attempts to consider the resulting issues. This work is at an early stage of development so the reader may find some of the ideas presented here to be broad and general; it is a deliberate decision to present the work at this stage, even though I am aware of the considerable complexities underlying broad trends in policy and practice, particularly when these are transnational. I briefly outline these complexities at the beginning of this paper and intend to return to explore them further in later work. Other decisions made are around the focus and structure of the paper with the overall focus being on pre-service or Initial Teacher Education (ITE) rather than Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for serving teachers. This decision does not imply, of course, that pre-service is always more important than CPD; while pre-service programmes act as the foundation stones for teacher development, good CPD opportunities provide the continuity and progression of learning across the career-course, which are essential for career satisfaction and development. The chosen focus here then rather reflects pragmatic choices around what is possible in a presentation of this length. The paper, like the presentation on which it is based, first considers the background factors in policy analysis before moving to identify and discuss the trends in European teacher education. This choice of just three trends amongst the many patterns found in policy documents on teacher education across Europe is, of course, in the end, a personal one.

First, some words about the inevitable limitations of this kind of analysis which focuses on policy trends and public discourses at the macro levels of teacher education. As Stephen Ball (1994:16) points out, policies are only ever

‘representations which are encoded in complex ways (via ... interpretations and re-interpretations) and decoded in complex ways (via actors, interpretation and meanings in relation to their history, experiences, skills, resources and context).’

Furthermore, as Thomas Popkewitz (1987:ix), identifies these policies and the ‘public discourses’ they may represent often serve to ‘dull sensitivity to the complexities that underlie the practices of teacher education....(by) a filtering out of historical, social and political assumptions’. What these two quotations – and many similar ideas - serve to indicate then is that under the broad patterns of convergence and divergence at the levels of transnational

policies are the realities of teacher education as it is interpreted by national, regional and institutional policy makers and then 'lived' by student teachers, serving teachers and mentors in the schools, teacher education institutes and universities in which they work.

Considering teacher education policies means also taking into account the broad social, cultural, political and economic changes currently taking place across Europe. It is clear that the economic crisis of 2008 onwards had profound political and social effects. As the European Commission report in 2015 stated,

'Public budgets in all Member States are under great pressure. The global economic downturn and declining revenue in many Member States in recent years have aggravated this problem and put greater pressure on education and training budgets, as countries try to balance their public finances. Fiscal constraints have led to cut-backs in public funding for some phases of education.' (European Commission, 2015:2)

But here I am thinking not only of economics but also of the increasing social, cultural and linguistic diversity across Europe, the increasing levels of social inequality in some member states and the ways in which EU countries are dealing with the fall-out from conflict and social unrest, particularly the current refugee crisis fuelled by the Syrian civil war. The fast pace of technological changes is now clearly leading to changes in our social behaviour and the ways in which we understand the world, view knowledge production and participate in knowledge dissemination. Intensifying globalisation and international competitiveness have had profound consequences for the European Union and all its transnational structures, as well as for each of its member states. All of these changes impact on national and transnational government policies including health, social welfare and employment as well as education.

Thinking specifically in terms of education, globalisation pressures have contributed to the growth of neo-liberal regimes of performativity and audit in our universities and teacher education institutes and the growing 'marketisation' of Higher Education. Many of our institutions are now graded in national or international hierarchies and league tables in which research is prioritised over teaching. In schools results from PISA and other international attainment indicators drive high senses of government anxieties about educational – and hence economic – competitiveness and sometimes result in attempts to reform schooling, change teaching methods and introduce austere testing regimes. As part of the agenda for reforming schools, many governments across the world see teacher education as a lever for achieving change in schooling and in teacher professionalism.

Trend 1: Improving Teaching through Reforming Pre-Service

The convergence of these factors means that many European countries are taking actions to improve the quality and status of teaching, by this positioning of ITE as a policy lever for changing the schooling system and for raising the quality of teaching but there are definite divergences in how this is being achieved. For example, there is a known trend across most of Europe towards requiring higher levels of qualifications for Initial Teacher Education (European Commission, 2015). Introducing higher levels of qualifications has included moves to requiring Masters level for the majority of teachers in countries such as Hungary, Portugal, Norway and Ireland. These changes take place in Higher Education contexts still experiencing the long term impact of the Bologna Process which initiated structural, conceptual and institutional changes for teacher education, including the re-modelling of existing degree and

post-graduate programmes, institutional mergers or collaborations and institutional 'upgrading' often to university status.

Yet against this focus on higher levels of qualification in many countries, we are also seeing a worrying growth of alternative routes into teaching. Ireland has seen the growth of on-line courses provided by an organisation called Hibernia. Many countries have experienced the rapid spread of programmes - based originally on the Teach for America scheme - which recruit only those with 'good' under-graduate degrees onto fast track schemes for teaching and educational leadership. European countries as diverse as Estonia, Norway, Bulgaria and Austria now have such 'Teach for.....' schemes. In England, which has a history of these alternative routes dating back to the late 1980s, there is now a wide variety of Employment Based Initial Teacher Training (EBITT) schemes; for example Teach First (again, like Teach for America) and Troops into Teaching (for ex- members of the armed forces). Many of these alternative routes - across Europe - certainly provide high quality learning for student teachers, but some other routes are untested and the quality of learning is not always guaranteed, particularly when essentially experimental routes are expanded at scale.

In England there is also an 'assessment only' route by which intending teachers can apply for qualification through assessment against the eight current teacher Standards (Beauchamp et al., 2013) without completing an academic educational programme of any sort as part of their training. More worrying still, some types of schools are now permitted to recruit and employ untrained teachers, if they wish, although the majority of state-funded schools still have to employ trained teachers. In this context, alternative providers of pre-service work have proliferated.

The absence of any kind of pre-service programmes in some parts of England and some other European countries is particularly lamentable and divergent from pan-European norms. Analysis of TALIS data in the European Commission report of 2015 shows that more than nine out of ten teachers in Europe have completed Initial Teacher Education (91.2 %). The same analysis shows that at EU level, teachers feel better prepared for the different aspects of their job if they have completed a pre-service programme. A large majority of these teachers (80%) say that their studies included what many experts - including the Commission itself (European Commission, 2015) - would consider to be the three essential elements of research-informed content, pedagogy and practice. These components of pre-service can also be variously summarised as the 'content' of teaching (subject knowledge), its 'pedagogy' (understanding of teaching and learning) and 'practice' (classroom-based training) or, alternatively, as pedagogical competences, subject-matter knowledge and subject didactics, practice and the development of students' capacities for reflective practice and on-the-job research.

Trend 2: The Practical Turn

Analysing the structures and components of pre-service programmes brings me to the second major trend in teacher education across Europe which I wish to identify. This is a 'turn to the practical' (Hoyle, quoted in Furlong & Lawn, 2011) and a (re-) emphasising of the importance of learning in schools. The European Commission report of 2015, for example, identifies

'a trend towards remodelling Initial Teacher Education for student teachers to learn in school settings so that they can get into real classrooms early in the programme, spend

more time there and receive stronger support in the process.’ (European Commission 2015:4)

This statement mirrors international trends to increase the amount of practical training and learning in schools, including - but not limited to - traditional school-based practice or the practicum, within programmes, but across Europe there are inevitable divergences in what this trend means and how it is being achieved. In England, for example, the ‘turn to the practical’ has, over the last thirty years, brought about a distinct change in the epistemologies of pre-service programmes. Here recent governments - of all political persuasions - have worked to change the control and locus of teacher education from higher education to schools, around a predominantly practical, relevant and school-led curriculum framework. There is often an accompanying, unquestioning belief that gaining more experience in schools by extending the practicum will automatically lead to better quality learning for pre-service teachers.

But just across the border in Scotland, a more measured approach in turning to the practical can be found. The highly influential Donaldson Report in 2011 stated, for example, that,

Simply advocating more time in the classroom as a means of preparing teachers for their role is..... not the answer to creating better teachers.... The nature and quality of that practical experience must be carefully planned and evaluated and used to develop understanding of how learning can best be promoted in sometimes very complex and challenging circumstances. (Donaldson, 2011: 4-5)

In other parts of the report, the practicum was also clearly linked to research as a ‘site for experimentation in ‘well researched innovation’ by ‘research aware teachers’ (p.102) and providing ‘the opportunity to use practice to explore theory and examine relevant research evidence’ (p.90). This emphasis on the practicum as a site for *research-informed* practice mirrors the teaching methods used in the Finnish system (Sahlberg, 2011). In other systems too, the ‘turn to the practical’ has meant a growing emphasis on *practice-relevant research* or the implementation of models of *clinical practice* (Burn and Mutton, 2013). In these and similar models, the challenges of teacher practice are analysed using the lenses provided by both communal reflection-on-practice and relevant research findings, with these integrated processes guided by teacher educators, based either in schools or universities and teacher education institutes.

These differences in the implementation of the ‘turn to the practical’ may be seen as inevitable given the variety in the architectures of teacher education across Europe and the deep cultural and educational values which underpin them. Just in considering the practicum the starting points for implementing this trend show that the amount of time currently devoted to practical training (the practicum) in schools varies widely between European countries. For example, for student teachers on under-graduate degree ITE courses for primary (elementary) schooling ranges from 40 hours in Latvia to 630 hours in Italy and 900 hours in Austria (European Commission 2012). Student teachers on a post-graduate course of 36 weeks in England spend two thirds of their time (840 hours or 24 weeks) in schools. And turning to the practical often involves elements beyond the practicum where practical preparation for teaching and important learning may take place in either schools or teacher education institutes. In the appendix to this paper, I include some research focuses which I think will be important for tracking how turning to the practical is implemented across EU Member States; also in that appendix are some questions and points about the implementation of the

practicum, based on personal experience and research and my recent book with Olwen McNamara and Marion Jones, *Workplace Learning in Teacher Education*.

Trend 3: Focusing on Teacher Educators and Mentors

One of the most important elements for consideration, especially if student teachers are to spend more time in schools and to experience better quality learning in those locations, is that they should receive stronger support in the process. The European Commission report *Supporting Teacher Educators for Better Learning* (2013), for the first time in the pan-European policy agenda positioned teacher educators themselves as a major factor in achieving improvements in teacher education and consequently, schooling. The definition of the occupational group given in the report is inclusive, seeing teacher educators as all those who 'guide teaching staff at all stages in their careers, model good practice, and undertake the key research that develops our understanding of teaching and learning' (p.2). The report therefore extends the traditional occupational group of teacher educators based in teacher education institutes to include mentors in schools. The report asks for national definitions of the competences needed by all these educators.

'Countries which have not already done so need to define explicitly what competences are required by any professional involved in the initial or continuous education of teachers, in whichever institutional setting they may work.' (European Commission 2013: 7)

In the report such definitions of 'competence-based criteria' are seen as providing the basis for selection and recruitment procedures and the subsequent crafting of 'specific professional development opportunities' (p.6). The competences which teacher educators are said to need reflect their multi-faceted and complex roles (Davey 2013:79). They include those related to knowledge of: the first order field of schooling; the second order field of teacher education (Murray, 2002); research (or 'knowledge development' as it is termed in the report); the educational systems in which they work; leadership skills; and more general abilities to integrate knowledge. A further area is the need for 'transversal competences' which enable teacher educators to work across and between schools and teacher education institutes. This competence is seen as central as it supports the required 'active collaboration' (European Commission, 2013:2) between all those educating teachers, in whichever setting they work - a collaboration which is acknowledged as essential for high quality teacher education.

Member states have, of course, responded to this trend in differing ways: in Norway, for example, a national programme for providing mentor learning programmes at Masters levels and then for awarding professional recognition has been established (Smith and Ulvik, 2015). In Hungary, local programmes to strengthen mentoring provision are well underway including work at Eszterházy Károly University College of Applied Sciences in Eger (Falus et al., 2015). In the Netherlands, Belgium (Flanders) and Austria, professional initiatives designed to enhance and recognise the work and competences of teacher educators in teacher education institutes and universities are well underway. These initiatives often include emphases on enhancing the 'transversal competences' of these educators in working across Higher Education and schools. In the Netherlands and England there is clear recognition of the important of school-based teacher educators' work in new roles which extend well beyond conventional models of mentoring.

Across all these national initiatives emerging, there is a consensus that all teacher educators are important but that mentors in schools, in particular, need to be more carefully selected, educated, supported and, finally, professionally recognised. The 2015 European Commission report also suggests that additional remuneration is needed for mentoring work. That the support offered by all teacher educators should match the individual learning needs of student teachers, with skills in formative and summative assessment, observation and feedback well developed, is undisputed. And it is now clear that there are new learning, roles and forms of professional learning and recognition emerging in the teaching teachers, with the potential to develop to improve both pre-service and CPD provision.

Conclusions

This paper has identified and focused on three main trends in pre-service teacher education across Europe: the actions which many member states are taking to improve the quality and status of teaching by using pre-service as a policy lever for change and quality enhancement in schools; the 'turn to the practical' with provision being 'remodelled' to enable student teachers to learn more in school settings; and the enhanced attention paid to those who teach teachers, both the traditional occupational group of teacher educators based in teacher education institutes or universities and the mentors based in schools.

For each of these broad trends, the paper has identified some convergences and some distinct divergence in implementation. So, for example, the analysis shows convergence in reforming teacher education but distinct divergences in how this is being achieved with many European countries moving to higher levels of qualifications (often Masters level) but other countries seeing a proliferation of alternative routes or even the removal of any requirements at all for formal pre-service qualifications. The trend towards increasing the amount of school-based learning is found across Europe but there are distinct divergences in how this is being implemented and what it means in terms of change to the structures of pre-service programmes and consequently to teacher knowledge. The importance of those who teach teachers and the need to pay attention to the quality of their work is also a pan-European trend but national responses to this have, again, been divergent.

Yet the dominant direction of these trends – better qualified teachers who have followed higher level pre-service programmes, more emphasis on the practicum and more attention to the educators of teachers – sounds very good in principle and, if well implemented, will surely result in a stronger pan-European teaching force for the decades to come. There are, however, some caveats here: they are occurring in the fast changing educational contexts of a Europe still scarred by the economic downturn of the last decade and now experiencing unprecedented social and technological change. As the European Commission report of 2015 states, in some countries responses to the economic crisis have had a negative impact on the status of teaching and there are resulting problems with teacher recruitment and retention. And, as identified earlier in this paper, under the broad patterns of convergence and divergence - nationally and transnationally - are the complex realities of teacher education as experienced by student teachers and teacher educators in the schools or teacher education institutes / universities in which they work. These 'lived realities' are often much slower to change than analysis of broad policy trends might suggest.

In these complex circumstances, it is important to maintain visions of teaching as an art, informed and developed by research across the career-course, and to acknowledge the profound contributions which teachers make to the common (public) good and to developing

social cohesion. If these are our visions of teachers and teaching then we need to ask the following questions about the trends identified above: are all governments within the European community willing and able to make the necessary investments – financially and ideologically - to ensure that teaching remains an attractive and viable profession which recruits and retains the best qualified, committed and able workforce possible? In terms of pre-service education programmes, how can we balance the necessary emphases on relevant educational research with growing emphasis on the practicum within Masters and degree level qualification structures? Are school teachers and teacher educators alike willing to make the necessary professional changes and commitments to support students on a practicum which provides both experiential *and* research-informed learning? Can each member state ensure that student teachers are taught and guided by the best quality teacher educators and mentors in both university and school-based elements of their programmes, given that this initiative too involves considerable financial investment and professional commitment? If we can get the answers to such questions ‘right’ then there is huge potential for strengthening teacher education across Europe, thus improving the status of teaching as a profession and subsequently developing better learning opportunities for the children in all our schools.

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Appendix

Questions for considering and strengthening learning in the practicum

Based on *Workplace Learning in Teacher Education* - Olwen McNamara, Jean Murray and Marion Jones (editors), Springer (2013) with particular reference to chapters 1 and 17.

- Where is the practicum placed in the programme?
- How long is it?
- What does the practicum 'curriculum' look like?
- What does it involve in terms of activities for the student teacher?
- (How) does it relate to previous learning in the TEI?
- What kinds of teacher knowledge are valued during the practicum?
- Who teaches / mentors / supports the student?
- Who is in charge of the practicum?
- Who assesses its outcomes?

The 'practicum' curriculum is essentially about workplace learning; it therefore needs to:

- be carefully planned and implemented;
- be created by effective partnerships between teacher education institutes and schools;
- involve clear responsibilities, roles and resources;
- be the product of careful planning of the practical classroom elements;
- have clear links within pre-service programmes;
- ensure that links between practice and research are clarified.

In implementing this curriculum and assessing its mentors and school-based teacher educators therefore need to:

- make appropriate use of observation, feedback, reflection and collaboration;
- use both formative and summative assessment for student teachers;
- ensure mentoring and other support matches the individual learning needs;
- evaluate provision against learning outcomes;

- ensure that they have appropriate professional development support for their work.