

Council of the classroom

ATEE President Dr Justina Erčulj and Lecturer Marco Snoek discuss the benefits of ongoing teacher education, and the challenges facing the profession...

In the debates on the quality of education in Europe, the teacher is recognised as the most important factor within schools, influencing the quality of learning. This is confirmed in numerous studies, and as a consequence, it is of vital importance to invest in the quality of Europe's teachers. Both national and European decision-makers and policy-makers have recognised this issue and have developed policies accordingly. One example is the EU's Thematic Working Group on the Professional Development of Teachers, where the Association for Teacher Education in Europe (ATEE) is represented as one of the key stakeholder organisations. It is also reflected in the decisions from the European Council and recommendations from the European Commission on the quality of teacher education and on the lifelong learning of teachers.

'If we want to solve the financial crisis and improve our competitive position with respect to the economies in other areas of the world, investments in the quality of education are essential.'

Both national governments and teacher education institutions strive to increase the quality and quantity of teachers in schools. The need to counter teacher shortage in many countries (due to the retirement of many experienced teachers) has led many countries to new flexible fast-track routes into the teaching profession, while, at the same time, there is a struggle to maintain, and even increase, standards.

Although there is a general consensus that teacher learning is a process of lifelong learning, a continuum of teacher learning through the professional career is missing in many places. Systematic induction programmes that support teachers in the first steps of their teaching career exist in only a few countries. Continuum professional development is also often a matter of personal initiative and not something that is systematically integrated into the structure of the profession.

As teaching and supporting individual children in their development asks for a high level of expertise and the ability to adapt teaching strategies to the specific context of a child and a school, teachers need to have (collaborative) professional autonomy to make professional decisions, based on thorough knowledge of learning. From this perspective, it is important that teachers take collective responsibility for the quality of their profession. This asks for strong professional bodies like the General Teaching Councils in Scotland and Ireland. Similar initiatives exist in Portugal and the Netherlands. Policies that focus on strengthening the qualities of teachers need to take this professional autonomy into account.

Similar to the quality of teachers, it is necessary to address the quality and continuous professional development of teacher educators, as they are the key players in strengthening the quality of teachers. This has been addressed in the Council Conclusions on the professional development of teachers and in the peer learning conference of the EU's Thematic Working Group on the Professional Development of Teachers, which was held in July 2010 in Reykjavik. ATEE has already done considerable work on this through the Research and Development Centre on Professional Development of Teacher Educators and the publication of the book 'Becoming a Teacher Educator' (Springer/ATEE).

The role of research

Research can support the quality of teachers and teaching in two ways:

- Educational research can give a better understanding of the processes of teaching and learning and provide evidence for effective teaching strategies. This kind of research needs to be made available for teacher education curricula and for teachers in schools, so both the practice of schools and teacher education institutions can be informed and guided by research. This still asks for considerable effort as many teachers, and teacher educators, still experience educational research as something that is of great distance to their daily work.
- Practice-based research by (student) teachers can also play an important role as it stimulates more reflective and inquiry-based attitudes in teachers and ce

support innovations in schools that are evaluated and based on evidence and data collection. The trend in many European countries towards initial teacher education at Master's level fits into this movement on practitioners' research. However, the daily context of many schools still has a very poor connection to research. Higher ambitions with respect to (Master's degrees of) teachers will only work if the school environment allows and stimulates a more inquiry-like stance of teachers, and engagement in R&D is a natural aspect of the teaching profession.

All kinds of mixed strategies are, of course, possible where schools and research institutes work together on research that is closely related to the daily practice and dilemmas of teachers.

For teacher education the consequence is that, on the one hand, curricula need to be informed on new outcomes of educational research, so student teachers can work with the latest proven teaching strategies, while, on the other hand, student teachers need to be engaged in practice-oriented research to develop an inquiry attitude as part of their profession. Teacher educators need to be role models in this.

‘Although there is a general consensus that teacher learning is a process of lifelong learning, a continuum of teacher learning through the professional career is missing in many places.’

Funding and the financial crisis

The financial context of education varies strongly between countries in Europe. In this respect no general conclusions can be made. It is clear and understandable that national governments have to be very careful with their finances and, in many cases, as all other sectors in society, education will suffer from that.

However, high-quality education is the key element in strengthening economies in a worldwide competitive knowledge society. If we want to solve the financial crisis and improve our competitive position with respect to the economies in other areas of the world, investments in the quality of education are essential. This will also mean investment into the quality of teachers and teacher education, while respecting professional autonomy. One element of this concerns the quality of teachers' education and lifelong professional development, but another element concerns the attractiveness of the profession, as this will impact the extent in which the best students are attracted to it.

In the struggle to tackle financial problems, this long-term perspective is often neglected.

Government/EU policies to support teacher education

Based on the aforementioned information, the main elements are to:

- Use/develop a long-term perspective on the importance of education for the economy, the competitive position of Europe and cohesion in society;
- Recognise the lifelong continuum of teacher learning and stimulate cooperation between teacher education institutes and schools that support and strengthen this continuum;
- Recognise the need for collaborative professional autonomy and stimulate teachers and teacher educators to really take professional responsibility for high-quality education;
- Create opportunities and conditions for teachers to engage in lifelong formal and non-formal learning activities;
- Create opportunities for teachers and schools to engage in educational research that is relevant to their daily practice and to stimulate research institutions to translate and connect their research to the daily life of teachers;
- Create opportunities for teachers, schools, teacher educators and teacher education institutes to engage in initiatives that support the above.

The main challenges

The main challenges in reaching the above goals are:

- Governments that are too narrow minded to recognise the long-term impact of education on the economy and society;
- Governments that are too obsessed by the PISA studies and only focus on the results in reading, writing and mathematics, disregarding the need for creativity, cultural and social competences and entrepreneurship that are needed in the 21st Century;
- Research universities that are too focused on the academic rat race of international reviewed publications and forget to make their educational research outcomes relevant to teachers in schools;
- Teacher education institutes that educate teachers at Bachelor level and that need to upgrade their teacher educators (to Master's and PhD level) in order to upgrade their students.

See also the conclusions and recommendations of the ATEE conference 2010 on Responsibility, Challenge and Support in Teachers' Lifelong Professional Development.

Dr Justina Erčulj
President

Marcó Snoek
Lecturer, Amsterdam Institute of Education, University of Applied Sciences
Former Member, ATEE Administrative Council
Association for Teacher Education in Europe (ATEE)
Tel: +32 479 604119
ateesecretariat@gmail.com
www.atee1.org/home