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Becoming a Teacher in Challenging Times: Findings from Research Carried out in Portugal

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Initial Teacher Education

Debates about ITE curriculum organisation, its rationale, its key components, and its impact on the education and professional socialisation of pre-service teachers, amongst others (e.g. Darling-Hammond, et al 2010). Yet, the articulation theory/practice as one of the most critical issues or “the perennial problem” of ITE (Korthagen, 2010).

In Europe and elsewhere: diversity in its form and content (including different modes of government intervention) and concerns about its quality .

However...

teacher education can make a difference in quality teachers and quality teaching in schools.

ITE Framework: European and National Policies

Bologna Declaration (1999): institutions across Europe to undergo a process of restructuring of its degrees and courses (although the pace and priorities vary from country to country)

Its main goal is the harmonisation of higher education systems in order to achieve the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Amongst its main features are the mobility of students and academics in order to promote the free movement of human capital in Europe; the implementation of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS); the adoption of a two-cycle structure of university studies: undergraduate and graduate; and the quality assurance of higher education systems.

ITE Framework: European and National Policies

In Europe, the education of teachers has been considered as a “matter of priority” as they are seen as “key players in how education systems evolve” (see UC, 2007 and Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications)

The need for a well-qualified profession, within a lifelong perspective, and the idea of a mobile profession based upon partnerships have been understood as key principles at a European level.

The Portuguese Case: Policy Context and the Teaching Profession

Over the last few years ITE in Portugal has been subject to restructuring under the Bologna process. It has implied debates about the nature of teaching as a profession and the kinds of teachers that are to be trained within the context of current school curricula and challenges in the Portuguese society.

The Portuguese Case: Policy Context and the Teaching Profession

Unlike many European countries, in Portugal teacher surplus and unemployment amongst the new teachers are two intertwined realities that characterise the teaching profession with implications for the recruitment of student teachers in higher education institutions and for new teachers' job expectations.

Along with these are, more recently, a profound financial and economic crisis which has been affecting the Portuguese society at various levels (leading to salary cuts and higher taxes), including the teaching profession and ITE.

The Portuguese Case: Policy Context and the Teaching Profession

Alongside difficulties in recruiting and retaining student teachers in ITE programmes are the lack of student teachers' motivation due to unemployment and lack of social recognition of the teaching profession; the lack of funding leading to the definition of national priorities for In-service teacher education, transforming teachers' centres into "government agencies" to implement central policies, reinforcing bureaucracy and centralisation (two key elements of the Portuguese education system).

The Portuguese context

The situation before 2007: teacher career and teacher appraisal

Teacher Career Statute (1990) was based upon the principle of a “single career”.

All teachers would follow the same path in order to progress to the top of their career.

In general, progression was understood as a “matter of time” in so far as it was dependent upon years of experience, a number of credits obtained for attending In-Service education courses (1 credit per year corresponding to 25 hours of training) and the writing up of a critical reflection on one’s own practice.

The Portuguese context

The Teacher Career Statute (2007) and its main features

The new Teacher Career Statute was issued in 2007 and was justified by the government with the need to “promote the cooperation amongst teachers” and to “reinforce coordination roles” at school which require a new structure for the teaching career based upon the principles of differentiation.

It was also related to the need to introduce a “more demanding system for teacher performance appraisal with effects on the development of teachers’ career” making it possible to “identify, promote and reward the merit and to value the teaching activity” .

The Portuguese context

The Teacher Career Statute (2007) and its main features

Introduction of an “exam” on “knowledge and competencies” is now required for all those entering the teaching profession in order to “demonstrate the mastery of knowledge and competencies required to teach”.

A “probationary year” (in order to verify the abilities of the new teacher) was also introduced during which the new entrant is accompanied by a senior teacher with specialised training in educational organisation and curriculum development, pedagogical supervision and teacher training.

The Portuguese Case: Policy Context and the Teaching Profession

Professional Profile and Qualification

- the need of a Master degree for all entrants into the teaching profession regardless of the level of teaching
- associated with higher status for the teaching profession and higher qualification for teachers.

Professional profile includes four dimensions:

- i) professional, social and ethical dimension;
- ii) development of teaching and learning;
- iii) participation in school activities and relationship with the community;
- iv) training and professional development within a lifelong perspective (Decree-Law 240/2001, 30th August).

ITE Curriculum and Its key Components

ITE in Portugal has been characterised by *universitisation* which relates to the “passage to higher education, typically to university education, of all the components of teacher education programmes for all levels of schooling” (Formosinho 2002:3):

- higher status and recognition of the teaching profession,
- higher academic status for Education Departments and Education Faculty,
- the internalisation of the need for a lifelong perspective.

BUT... a number of risks... “the use of university autonomy to pursue individual interests and career rather than to develop the professional mission of teacher education courses; devaluation and/or mishandling of the professional certification process; mismatch between the experienced academic university culture and the advocated professional teaching culture” (Formosinho, 2002: 19)

ITE Curriculum and Its key Components

Following the Bologna process, a new policy on ITE was issued in 2007 (Decree-Law number 43/2007), aiming at contributing to value teacher socio-professional status and to improve the quality of teachers in order to face the challenges of training and education of the Portuguese society.

Higher professional qualification (at a second cycle level, i. e., Master degree); curriculum based upon learning outcomes in the light of teacher performance; research-based qualification; the importance of teaching practice (observation and collaboration in teaching situations under the supervision of a mentor/supervisor); school-university partnerships; quality assurance of teachers' qualification and of ITE, etc. are key assumptions of this new policy (ME, 2007).

ITE Curriculum and Its key Components

The new requirements for becoming a teacher point to the valorisation of the subject knowledge, an approach to teaching based upon research, teaching practice, and the mastery of the Portuguese language both oral and written as a common feature for all student teacher candidates.

ITE curriculum includes i) general educational training; ii) specific didactics (for a given level of teaching and subject matter); iii) professional practice; iv) cultural, social and ethical education; v) educational research methods, and vi) training in the subject matter.

The Study (underway)

Why do student teachers want to become teachers?

Why have they decided to enter a teaching degree?

What are their expectations and motivations for becoming teachers and for the ITE programme?

How do they evaluate/see their experience during the 2-year teaching degree and its key components?

Participants and Data Collection

Data were collected through questionnaires and written narratives at the beginning of the Year 1 of the Master degree in Teaching in 2010/2011.

In total, 63 students from different subjects (History and Geography, Physical Education, Portuguese and Spanish, Maths, Philosophy, Portuguese and Classic Languages, Biology and Geology) participated in the study.

6,5% are male and 43,5% are female.

The vast majority is between 21 and 24 years old.

Preliminary Findings

Reasons that have influenced the participants to enter a teaching degree:

Because I enjoy working with children and young people (95%)

It was a personal choice/decision (93,5%)

A sense of vocation (91,8%)

The opportunity of develop knowldge in a given field (90,1%)

Employment opportunities (78,4%)

Less valued were:

The influence of relatives , the influence of former teachers and teaching social status.

Preliminary Findings

Student teachers' goals for the teacher education programme:

- learn to help others who are having difficulty learning (98,4%),
- help children reach their highest potential (98,4%),
- learn how to improve student achievement (98,2%)
- learn how to promote understanding across diverse groups (95,2%)
- learn to prepare students to live in a democracy (93,5%)
- learn how to work collaboratively (92,1%)

Less valued are:

- become a community or school leader,
- improve my understanding of other countries and cultures,
- become knowledgeable about social issues that affect teaching and schooling.

Preliminary Findings

For me a good teacher...

helps students to develop competence as problem solvers and/or critical thinkers (100%)

teaches so that all students learn (99,3%)

maintains a quiet and orderly classroom.(98,4%)

helps students gain a sense of self-confidence and self-worth in the classroom (96,9%)

promotes an environment where students understand and respect one another (96,8%)

motivates students to become life long learners (95,2%)

is liked and respected by students (95,1%)

promotes students' social and emotional development (92,1%)

prepares students to participate in a civic society (92,1%)

promotes academic development and achievement (92%)

Preliminary Findings

For me during my ITE programme it is important to...

mastering grade level/subject matter areas (100%)

managing the classroom (98,4%)

addressing diversity in the classroom (98,4%)

assessing and monitoring students' work.(98,4%)

integrating technology in the classroom (82,6%)

developing curriculum (82,5%)

using data to support decisions about school improvement (82,5%)

encouraging parental involvement in schools (77,8%)

maintaining school safety (72,6%).

Preliminary Findings

Beliefs about elementary and secondary teaching:

Good teaching incorporates diverse cultures and experiences into classroom lessons and discussions (93,6%)

Realistically, the job of a teacher is to prepare students for the lives they are likely to lead (87,1%)

Teachers should teach students to think critically about government positions and actions (80%)

Whether students succeed in school depends primarily on how hard they work (73,8%)

However, they disagree that

Economically disadvantaged students have more to gain in schools because they bring less into the classroom (70,9%)

It's reasonable for teachers to have lower classroom expectations for students from low economic and deprived contexts (69,8%)

Although teachers have to appreciate diversity, it's not their job to change society (64,5%).

Preliminary Findings

Interestingly, they see themselves in teaching for a long time despite the challenging circumstances that characterise currently the teaching profession.

76,7% state that want to stay in teaching for a long time, because

they want to be teachers their entire career

they see teaching as a job for life

they have a passion for teaching

they seek stability in economic terms

they want to improve teaching

they want to contribute to a better society

they see teaching as a profession and not as a job

they feel they have a sense of vocation...

Final Thoughts

- The prevalence of the academic logic in detriment to the professional one (Canário 2001; Formosinho 2009)
- The nature of the academic culture (the cellular/department organisation of university departments and the valorisation of research in detriment to teaching), which makes curriculum articulation and the coherence of the ITE project rather difficult;
- The separation between two institutional sites for learning – schools and universities (Flores 2000; Braga 2001; Estrela, Esteves and Rodrigues 2002), and, consequently, the ways in which the professional practice is understood and put into practice (in which the lack of articulation between discourse and practice is prevalent).

The key role of the teacher educators: Faculty at universities tend not see themselves as trainers of student teachers nor as “committed researchers” (Formosinho 2009) into the professional worlds of teaching and teachers, including the self-study of their own practice (Loughran 2009).

Final Thoughts

Critical components within ITE curriculum:

- the development of educational research competencies
- the affective and ethical dimension of the teaching
- the coordination and articulation of the various ITE components
- the shared reflection of pedagogical practices (and of the content of each of the ITE components)

All this has implications for the formation of teacher professional identity and teacher professionalism within ITE, one dimension of which is the reflection on the prior beliefs and implicit theories student teachers bring to the ITE about teaching and being a teacher.

As Flores argued (2001: 146): “learning to teach entails a constellation of factors. It is a process that goes beyond the mere application of a set of acquired techniques and skills. Not only does it imply the mastery of practical and more technical issues, but it also encompasses the construction of knowledge and meaning in an ongoing and challenging dialogue with the practice”.