Rethinking Teacher Education in Europe and beyond. Editorial introduction

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This special issue of Education Inquiry contains six articles (one of them in the form of a discussion paper) concerning teacher education policies and developments in Europe. Although only six articles, their geographical distribution covers roughly the European space, and thematically they address several themes contributing to the ongoing international teacher education debate with new ideas.

Discussion on teacher education in Europe – and in the specific context of the contemporary processes of European integration – has been going on for at least two decades and its intensity does not let up; rather the contrary. However, neither the course of the discussion nor the European integration process has been linear. There were ups and there were downs. Therefore, it is time to rethink the logic of teacher education developments within the national as well as European context over the past decade or two, but also to focus on the current issues and dilemmas. When we planned this special issue, we gave attention to the following thematic areas:

- Policies and reforms in teacher education in particular European settings (e.g. at the national level);
- Issues of regulation, quality assessment/control, structures and governance;
- Professional formation and its institutional settings and links (universities, colleges, schools);
- Teacher education and the nature of professional knowledge;
- Teacher education and the formation of the professionals of the future – issues of identity, representation, knowledge and inclusion;
- Teacher education in Europe – internationalisation, knowledge transfers and research.

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Research on teacher education greatly expanded its focus over the last decade; inter alia, the issues of teacher education policies began to be systemically addressed. The advancement of the process of European integration has undoubtedly contributed to this. When looking at the progress made in the field of educational research, we can’t oversee that the teacher education themes are more and more intertwined with other key topics in social sciences. Thus, ‘voices’ from teacher education (as well as education research) institutions began to articulate positions on the European policies of teacher education. For example, already at the end of the previous decade, the TEPE Network (Teacher Education Policy in Europe) stressed the need to improve the image of teaching, the status of the teaching profession and the importance of involving Teacher Education institutions as partners in the process of policy development. The network also highlighted the need to advance research in and on Teacher Education, promote mobility and the European Dimension in Teacher Education and support the development of cultures for quality improvement in Teacher Education (Hudson and Zgaga 2008). The operation of this network continues and is becoming more widely recognised.

Developments and changes in teacher education policy are not without contradictions. Recent research has revealed a number of dilemmas to which they have led. A few years ago Gert Biesta noted: ‘policy developments […] not only frame teacher education predominantly in terms of competencies and scientific evidence, but […] also do so within a language that focuses predominantly on learning’. But the language of learning ‘runs the risk of forgetting what characterises education – namely the fact that education always needs to engage with questions of purpose, content and relationships’ (Biesta 2012, 8; our emphasis). Several authors in this special issue heed this warning and use these questions to guide their in-depth research of teacher education in particular contexts.

The six articles deal with practices, experiences and problems in the different European education systems (England, Greece, France, Scotland and Sweden). Further, authors analyse in one or another way the developmental trajectories and reforms of teacher education at the national level, including the impact of the transnational, in particular the so-called ‘European initiatives’ of the recent period. All authors deal – directly or indirectly – with the various aspects of initial and in-service teacher education as well as with the issue of the ‘universitisation’ of the field of teacher education which occurred, in most countries in Europe, 20–30 years ago. In this broad context, special emphases are also given to questions of inclusive education and cooperation between universities and schools. Besides initial teacher education in the broader sense, a particular emphasis is also placed on early childhood education and the challenge of ‘acquiring scientific acceptance’ and legitimacy to this field. Almost all articles address the dichotomy of ‘academic’ and ‘professional’ within the contemporary ‘universitised’ teacher education. Of course, none of them circumvent the theoretical and other broader aspects of the ongoing discussions on teacher
education as well as the wider European and global dimensions of the issues under discussion.

The special issue begins with three articles that analyse broad trends in the development of teacher education over the past decades and in the context of different countries (Sweden, Greece and France). The first article deals with the contemporary change in educational policy and management from the Swedish perspective. Sweden appears here as an example of a social democratic welfare-state that has been radically transformed in a neoliberal direction in the last two decades. Dennis Beach and Margareta Nilsson Lindström offer a detailed reading of teacher education policy recommendations and reforms from 1965 up to the most recent governmental documents of 2009. They note that approximately every 10 years the national teacher education policy has been effectively reformed. The early policies addressed the difficulties facing democratic school development in Sweden, in part linked to the limitations of teachers’ professional theoretical knowledge and the lack of a common pedagogical content for professional action and judgement-making appropriate for a more progressive, inclusive and democratic school system. Thus, the need to unify the teaching profession by forming common educational–theoretical content knowledge for all teachers has been emphasised. In their article, the authors show how complicated this ambition was and to what outcomes it led, not least because of changes in the political perspectives that dominated the various reforms.

The authors show that from 2000 onwards a neoliberal turn can be monitored also in teacher education and is reflected in recent documents (e.g. examination ordinances). Specialised contents about the sociological, political, philosophical, economic and ideological characteristics of teaching as a profession, or education as a professional field, and learning as a socially, culturally and historically embedded practice, are now absent in descriptions of examination requirements. Studies are now described as directly related to future professional work. According to the authors, the knowledge needs of the teaching profession are now defined more in organisational terms and in accordance with a New Public Management agenda than in relation to a collective professional identity and duties, and the educational theoretical and practical knowledge underpinning their realisation. Professional accountability is accepted as a primary standard of professionalism which is, according to the authors, problematic for a profession-for-itself. This brings us to the dilemma, which is indicated already in the title of their article: toward a profession in itself or for itself? It seems that this is an issue which will greatly determine developments of the coming years, and not only in Sweden.

The next article analyses in a similar way the case of Greece. Antigone Sarakinioti and Anna Tsatsaroni explore how university-based Teacher Education Departments promoted change to their undergraduate curricula over the last two decades. Like in many other European countries, Greece reformed teacher education at the turn of the 1970s in the 1980s by upgrading previous Pedagogic Academies from
their college status to university status. After a period of ‘search and transition’ (according to the periodisation by George Flouris), further profound changes have occurred in the 1990s. Authors analyse relevant policy documents as well as 18 teacher education curricula in two periods of their development, the middle of the 1990s (a period of ‘adaptation and stability’) and the late 2000s (a period of ‘modernisation and regulation’). In doing so, they pay particular attention to the impact of the modernisation of higher education in Europe, coming from both the European Commission and from the ‘multilateral’ Bologna Process.

Sarakinioti and Tsatsaroni treat teacher education as a privileged point of entry into the question of how transnational higher education policies influence the governance models, the redistribution of pedagogic means and the forms of educational knowledge. Under these new conditions, teacher education institutions which were traditionally rather closed become more open to change and transformation. In their research, they identified a number of incremental changes that occurred over the second and third period. By analysing student textbooks, they found, on the one hand, an increase in weakly classified modalities of knowledge organisation, oriented to school professional contexts, such as inclusive learning, openness to community, innovative pedagogic practices, problem solving and inquiry-based learning for future teachers; on the other hand, a strong ‘pedagogic voice’ in teacher education curricula has been preserved in the content organisation of the practicum programmes which are kept strongly classified and framed, referring to forms of ‘old professionalism’. At the end of their article, authors come to a similar conclusion, as found in the previous article: the marked shifts in teacher education may run the risk of thinning out teachers’ knowledge base and de-professionalising their practices and identities.

In his discussion paper, Bernard Cornu offers an excellent overview of reforms and changes in the French teacher education system over the last 30 years. This system has a number of special features that are associated with the characteristics of the national education system in general and in particular with its centralised nature. Nonetheless the developments of the last three decades have been marked by similar problems, dilemmas, tensions and breakthroughs as can be observed in other countries. In the late 1980s, initial education for primary teachers was upgraded to 4 years. However, like in other countries the traditional distinction between primary and secondary teachers – regarding both their initial education (e.g. non-university vs. university setting) and subsequent teaching in schools (e.g. professional preparation vs. specialisation in one subject) – was maintained. In comparison with other countries, the status of teachers is particularly noticeable: teachers in France are civil servants and the recruitment to the teaching profession differs a lot from other countries. All these special features have been, of course, reflected in developments and changes in the teacher education system.

The author presents a major reform of the early 1990s, when specialised University Institutes for Teacher Education (IUFMs) were formed: they were in charge of initial
professional training for both primary and secondary teachers, but they were also contributing to in-service training and to educational research. This was an important shift towards unifying and strengthening the education of all teachers. The new system was based on clear principles and high ambitions, which the author presents in detail while not overlooking the ongoing debates and controversies – political, ideological, academic, professional – that accompanied its implementation. IUFMs had a status that was very similar to the status of universities, but the government only decided in 2005 to integrate them into universities. In addition to existing problems and dilemmas, it was a gradual ‘masterisation’ of the initial teacher education (an impact of the Bologna process which began to intensify in the middle of the previous decade in several European countries) that contributed to a new reform. The author notes that at that time universities looked more ready to integrate teacher training in their specific mission; however, the development of professional competences, which was an important mission for IUFMs, was reduced after this integration. This has led to a new reform in 2013, when IUFMs have been replaced by the new ESPEs (Écoles supérieures du professorat et de l’éducation) as ‘internal schools’ in universities. In conclusion, the author assesses ‘achievements and mistakes, successes and failures’ trying to gain some important lessons for the future.

In the fourth article, Inger Erixon Arreman and Per-Olof Erixon deal again, on the one hand, with the changes in initial teacher education in a perspective of the last three to four decades, but also focus on a specific problem: they rethink Swedish early childhood education in the context of the developments and reforms of the post-1960 higher education as a whole. Social, political and labour market changes of that time had a strong influence on university level education for many professions, and this trend influenced in addition to other ‘non-academic’ studies (e.g. teacher education programmes) the development of early childhood education. Thus, a final degree project became compulsory for a degree in vocational programmes already by the reform of 1977. Similar to some other national systems, it has also been the case in Sweden that the final degree project throws into sharp relief the tensions between the academic and vocational orientation of early childhood teacher education programmes.

Relying on Michel Foucault, the authors identify the origin of these tensions in power relations in the academy. Drawing on a survey at one Swedish university, they analyse policy discourses and teacher educators’ perceptions of the final degree project in early childhood education in the recent period. Their analysis shows significant differences in teacher educators’ perceptions of the final degree project. These differences are importantly related to the diverse disciplinary roots of individual teachers (those located in the natural sciences, as compared to those from social sciences, and humanities). They stress that early childhood education is not ‘a discourse community’ or ‘an academic tribe’ in the sense that was given to this notion by Tony Becher. Early childhood education lies in their intersection and
succumbs to all the turbulences occurring in the academic space. The authors conclude that new and more creative ways of dealing with the final project need to be developed which do not give total supremacy to the academy, rather they recognise professional values and knowledge, as these are connected to social solidarity and ethics in public service occupations. These are feasible and in line with current demands for a higher education degree in the field.

The last two articles are dedicated to more specific but no less important issues. First, Nataša Pantić and Lani Florian treat teachers as agents of inclusion and social justice. Their approach emphasises the need to develop teachers’ capacity for working with other agents in order to remove the structural and cultural barriers for some students’ learning and participation. They stress that this approach is needed if teacher competence for addressing the structural and cultural barriers to inclusion embedded in their schools and education systems is to be developed. The authors link current thinking about the competences required of teachers who are being prepared for inclusive education to theories of human agency in order to consider how teachers might be prepared as ‘agents of change for social justice’. They note that preparing teachers as agents of change to promote social justice and inclusion requires clarity not only about what teachers need to know, do and believe but how they will exercise their agency as teachers when adopting this approach. In their argument, they lean on the previous discussion and derive the concept of ‘teacher agency’ on the basis of a broader concept of ‘human agency’ as developed in this discussion.

They convincingly show that preparing teachers to act as agents of change for inclusion and social justice challenges some of the well-established ways of thinking about teaching as an individualistic teacher–classroom activity (‘pedagogy’ as a practice related exclusively to classrooms). By contrast to traditional ‘pedagogy’, developing competence of teachers as agents of inclusion and social justice involves working collaboratively with other agents, and thinking systematically about the ways of transforming practices, schools and systems. The authors conclude that there is enormous value for trainee and novice teachers to have opportunities to engage in collaborative teaching with the support of specialists as part of their professional development, building confidence and broadening their repertoire of responses to the difficulties students experience in learning. They warn that teachers are rarely systematically prepared for dealing with various external reasons for the pupils’ underachievement, or for the relational aspects of their job within given education systems. Their warning should be seen also as a call to rethink teacher education programmes seriously and to overcome existing fragmentation.

The last article of this thematic section is devoted to school–university partnerships. Nigel Peter Michell Fancourt, Anne Edwards and Ian Menter present and comment on the recent development of the Oxford Education Deanery launched in November 2013 as an expansion of an initial teacher education
partnership to include wider school–university collaboration in professional development, and in research. The term Deanery has an ecclesiastical root, as a group of parishes working together, but here echoes its earlier use in a medical context – the Oxford Medical Deanery – to describe regional university-linked postgraduate education networks for staff working in health services. In their article, the authors draw on research undertaken between 2012 and 2014 which elicited the motives of different participants in the Education Deanery. In their analysis, they follow cultural–historical understandings of motivated action, the different incentives that shaped participants’ engagement with the emerging Deanery, and, drawing on narrative theory, how these motives have been brought together to create a common narrative that gives direction to the Deanery as it continues to develop.

The Deanery is an expansion of an existing strong initial teacher education partnership, to include other school–university collaborations in continuing professional development, school development and research in schools. We could say that this is a good case to show what an important role education departments – and not only medical faculties – can play within universities, if they are aware of their links to and integration with local community and broader practice and policy environments. At the same time we can’t forget that the Deanery was set up in a changing – and challenging – policy landscape, when the value of school–university partnerships has been questioned and when some governments look to such models of teacher education that require little, if any, university involvement. The Oxford Education Deanery is an excellent response to these challenges. It is designed to promote ‘collaboration among schools, rather than competition between them’ as recently formulated by Oxford’s Vice-Chancellor. Last but not least, some of that optimism, which we obviously need in the discussion on teacher education in the future, is also reflected in this statement. We must not overlook the argument in the conclusion of the article: the Deanery ‘is a replicable model for other universities’.

In this special issue, we have only touched on the large-scale trends and problems in the development of teacher education in Europe. Certainly, insights into the analysis of the reform trends in some European countries as well as in the analysis of some specific aspects of teacher education are useful; both for researchers and for policy makers, for students and for practitioners. Moreover, ‘teacher education practices in different countries can be described as “translations” of European policies, with innovative potential in glocal developments’ (Caena 2013, 106).

Of course, the problem is wider: it should be approached in global frames. Various national practices offer inspiring ideas to ‘reconsider the teacher education programmes in supranational scenarios’ (Vaillant and Manso 2013, 109). However, such a major task is not feasible within the limits permitted by a journal size; yet, we may contribute to its gradual articulation. Over the last three decades and on a world scale, teacher education has made great progress, while at the present stage we are facing new problems and dilemmas. The ‘universitisation’ process of teacher education has
led to the fact that ‘we cannot discuss the present and future of teacher education in Europe outside the context of the general changes in European higher education’ (Zgaga 2013, 347). On the other hand, the shift of policy making from the national to the European and transnational level brought some embarrassment which was previously not anticipated. Precisely in such situations, it is important to look beyond narrow national and — as in today’s Europe — regional boundaries. It seems that in the middle of the second decade of the new century we are faced at a global level with the tasks whose dimensions are not yet completely clear.

It is in this ‘confusion’ where the key tasks for researchers in teacher education are hidden. In a recently edited monograph on ‘teacher education in a transnational world’, the editors observed that ‘the absence of a unified document bringing together analysis of programmes, practices, and theories on teacher education with respect to what we are calling a “globalising and transnational world” is telling’: we are ‘evidently not yet in a position to put forth a comprehensive discussion of the issues involved in what, to many, seems an inevitable transformation’ (Bruno-Jofré and Johnston 2014, 3). And yet, transformation is inevitable; the increasing expectations and requirements from teacher education call for clarification for hard work and, hopefully, meaningful policy decisions.
References


