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EDITORIAL



Teachers and teacher education in uncertain times

Drawing on a range of international research perspectives, this Special Issue focuses on new insights into the challenges facing teachers, teacher educators and teacher education in uncertain times. Teachers and teacher educators, like the whole education system, have to respond to the growing complexity of the challenges that are encountered in the contemporary world. These challenges range from the technological revolution, which is now part of everyday life, to the explosion of the knowledge economy, political instability in many regions, significant changes in migration patterns and the growth of refugee camps, to the rise in terrorism and violence in society.

Change is not a new occurrence in the world around us; what is new is the accelerated pace and intensity of change. As such, a number of tensions and paradoxes have been identified pertaining to issues of autonomy versus increased control and external imposed policies; competing expectations of teaching and teacher education in terms of goals to be met impacting on teachers and teacher educators' work; achieving immediate results and preparing students for an era of migration and growing multiculturalism; the rapid change and increasing globalisation and a focus on standards for schools, for teachers and for teacher education; the advocacy of a need for an expanded professionalism within contexts marked by imposed curricula and high-stakes regimes (see, for instance, Day and Sachs 2014; Townsend 2011; Ben-Peretz and Flores 2018).

Education is always affected by the context in which it is enacted; that context may be local and may be impacted by regional/national social, economic, political, and historical aspects. However, it also is impacted by global problems and tendencies – the growing use of social media and electronic devices, a rise in national, political, cultural and social divisions, a rise in anti-intellectualism in public life, migration, climate change, and the changing nature of the labour market.

It is now widely agreed that teachers are among the most significant factors in children's learning and the quality of education within school systems. Despite the growing consensus that teachers matter, there are many debates as to why and how teachers matter, as well as how teacher quality and quality teacher education can be examined. What should teachers know, and what form of teacher education is best suited in times of uncertainty and instability. How can teacher educators contribute to the education of committed and knowledgeable teachers-to-be? What professional roles and core practices should be prioritised within programmes? How is quality teacher education defined and assessed? These questions should be pivotal to our research and inquiry, if our work in teacher education is to be significant in meeting the emerging needs of our schools and society. This Special Issue includes a set of papers that identify and analyse the contextual factors that impact on teachers and teacher education. They will enable a better understanding of the policy responses required to address the reality of teachers' work and life, and to the realisation of appropriate teacher education in contemporary times. As Ling (2017, p. 562)

suggests, looking at teacher education entails 'an iterative process rather than a linear one and needs to be backwards, forwards, inside-out and outside-in somewhat simultaneously, because it is complex, recursive and has multiple layers'. She warns there is a need to account for the 'broader issues faced within a supercomplex, twenty first century knowledge society, where the future is not only unknown but unknowable, and where the frameworks by which we make sense of our world are moving, blurring and shifting as well as being highly contested and contestable'.

The collection of papers in this Special Issue shows how different stakeholders deal with current challenges and demands in their work in a wide variety of contexts: Finland, Ireland, Israel, Poland, Scotland, Sweden, The Netherlands, Turkey, and the USA. The papers illustrate how teacher education is responding and adapting to current tensions, changes and expectations of teaching and the wider education landscape.

The issue begins with the paper entitled 'Teacher Educators as Reformers: Understanding Competing Perspectives', by Marilyn Cochran-Smith, Elizabeth Stringer Keefe, and Molly Cummings Carney from the USA. The authors look at teacher educators working as reformers rather than being positioned as the objects or targets of other agents' reforms or as the local implementers of larger policies. They identify three different approaches: entrepreneurial reform, managerial reform, and democratic reform, each of which entails ways of looking at who teacher educator reformers are; what they perceive to be 'the problem' of teacher education; what they promote as the solution to the problem and how these reforms are related to larger national and international policy and political agendas. Cochran-Smith, Keefe and Carney adopt a policy studies approach, and provide exemplars of the various approaches to reform. They argue that this kind of analysis is critical to understanding the current discourse of reform and the competing agendas that currently dominate the politics of teacher education.

In a similar vein, the second paper 'Ethical dilemmas in senior teacher educators' administrative work', by Mary Gutman, from Israel, focuses on the professional experiences of twelve senior teacher educators and particularly on ethical dilemmas they face in their administrative work. Findings pointed to four core values that were required of teacher educators to deal with different critical situations: perception of integrity, empathy and care, commitment to the institution and the need to promote initiatives. Gutman concludes that the concept of integrity is seen as the key issue in handling a number of dilemmas and is interpreted differently according to the personal qualities, experience, and educational vision of the study participants.

In the third paper, 'The shaping of pre-service teachers' professional knowledge base through assessment', Lena Sjöberg, from Sweden, examines the shaping of pre-service teachers' knowledge base by looking at the assessment practices in primary-level teacher education. The author focuses on the pedagogic discourses and what skills and competencies are legitimised in and through the assessment tasks. Sjöberg concludes that Swedish primary school pre-service teachers are primarily trained to work with subject didactics. She argues that focus is being placed on being able to plan, carry out, and evaluate teaching in light of descriptive and normative learning theories, as well as the current curricula. The findings show that teachers may be not sufficiently

trained to critically analyse the conditions in which they work, especially in view of current, global and local policy trends.

The fourth paper, 'Impact of in-service Master of Education programmes on teachers and their working environment', by Dubravka Knezic, Marco Snoek, Emina van den Berg, Arjan Heyma, Yolande Emmelot, and Henk Sligte, from the Netherlands, reports on master's level in-service teacher education programmes, based on a longitudinal mixed-methods study, and their impact on the development of professional and pedagogical skills of teachers, and in some cases also on their work environment. The authors argue that the Master's programmes provide teachers with more in-depth knowledge about teaching and learning and through their inquiry and research, they adopt a more critical stance to their work. Teachers are encouraged to redefine their role in relation to their students, to challenge routines, and to become more self-confident.

Similarly, Aileen Kennedy from Scotland, in her paper 'Developing a new ITE programme: a story of compliant and disruptive narratives across different cultural spaces', looks at the development of a MSc Transformative Learning and Teaching as an example of socially constructed ITE policy. Kennedy analyses three distinct cultural spaces in which ITE exists: the political space, the professional space and the university space. She discusses the ways in which the development of the programme has been supported or resisted in each of these cultural spaces, taking into account the pitching of the programme at Master-level, the student-centred and collaborative approach to assessment, and the relationship between university-based and school-based elements. The author identifies a series of compliant or disruptive narratives across the various spaces and concludes with a personal narrative representing her role in leading the development of the new programme.

The analysis of teacher recruitment in Ireland is the focus of the sixth paper 'Teacher Recruitment: Reflections from Ireland on the Current Crisis in Teacher Supply'. Teresa O' Doherty and Judith Harford discuss current critical situation of teacher supply in the Irish context stressing that, in the last two years, a bifurcation in the pattern of teacher recruitment and retention has emerged. They argue that primary level teaching has retained its popularity attracting high numbers of candidates but, at the same time, there are high numbers of primary level teachers leaving the system to work abroad. Conversely, evidence points to a significant fall in numbers applying for second-level teacher education programmes, as well as a shortage in key subject areas, leading to the so-called 'crisis' in teacher recruitment and retention. The authors discuss the implications of their analysis for the Irish context and internationally.

The seventh paper looks at the Finnish context taking a multi-perspective stance. In their paper 'Teachers' changing work and support needs from the perspective of school leaders and newly qualified teachers in the Finnish context', Vilhelmiina Harju and Hannele Niemi report on a study focusing on the early professional development needs of newly qualified teachers, both from the perspective of the NQTs but also of principals. The authors analyse quantitative and qualitative data collected from school leaders (N = 104) and new teachers (N = 145) in Finland. Findings show that new teachers require support when working with diverse student groups in order to provide holistic support for their learning. The need of support in facing conflict situations in schools and working with partners both

within and outside the school community was also identified in the data. Harju and Niemi discuss the implications of the findings for teacher education and induction.

The eighth paper entitled 'Challenges in Teaching English as a Foreign Language at Schools in Poland and Turkey' by Joanna Madalińska-Michalak, from Poland, and Bunyamin Bavli, from Turkey also focuses on the demands and current challenges of teachers in their workplace contexts. In particular, the authors look at the perceptions of English language teachers regarding the challenges influencing their effectiveness. Data were collected through a multiple-case study design in Turkey and in Poland. A number of shared challenges affecting teachers in both Poland and Turkey were identified, despite the contrast between these educational contexts. These common challenges included: students' motivation to learn; students' emotional inhibitions; teaching large classes; differentiation; the need for the quality in-service teachers' professional development; high teaching hours; provision of pre-service teacher education; attractiveness of the profession; and career-path incentives. As far as teacher education is concerned, the balance between theory and teaching practice, techniques and principles employed, instructional materials, duration of in-service training, theory based teacher education, and the quality and experience of the teacher education providers, all impact on the effectiveness perceptions of English teachers. The findings suggest that support provided for teachers of English as a foreign language must not only be flexibly aligned to local educational conditions, but also be underpinned by evidence-based, national strategies.

The eight papers included in this Special Issue illustrate the demands but also the tensions in teachers' work and in teacher education in different contexts. The rapid transformations in different spheres of the public life and in economic, social and political systems that have occurred since the early 1990s, at least in Europe, demand a current, comprehensive and analytical review of how these reforms are reflected in and are impacting upon teaching, the lives of teachers, and teacher education. Similar concerns related to teaching and to the education of children and young people may be found in different contexts. However, the pace and content of school reform and changes in teacher education may differ as the political, social, cultural and geographical elements are included into the equation. Thus, it is essential to share experiences and to learn from other contexts as we can better understand our own realities and contribute to enhance knowledge internationally and to find the best solutions for current problems in teaching and in teacher education.

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