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Quality teacher education: Threats and possibilities

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INTRODUCTION

Quality teacher education is seen as a key element in efforts to raise the quality of education in schools and classrooms. However, while there is consensus on its importance, there is less agreement on what counts as quality and how it should be assessed. Cochran-Smith (2021) argues that quality is a matter of global concern. She asserts that it is a multifaceted concept that should be examined in terms of who defines it and how. There is, therefore, a need to consider the political, the social and the cultural context, the ways in which the teacher as a professional is understood as well as the standing of the teaching profession. Quality indicators tend to focus on standards rather than seeing quality as educational transformation (Brooks, 2021). This view is in line with existing literature which points

to standards-driven education systems ‘as a means of improving the quality of education provided and to increase student achievements’ (Townsend, 2011, p. 488). As Imig and Imig (2007, p. 107) state, ‘Everywhere there is the quest for greater quality in education – and, therefore, teacher education is the focal point for attention and concern.’ Thus, the debate is not only about what counts as quality in teacher education but also on how it is to be achieved, and for what purpose. For instance, issues such as teacher education providers, existing frameworks for teacher education and ways of assessing the quality of teacher education programmes have to be considered.

A ‘deficit discourse’ has been associated with teacher education which is seen as a ‘problem to be solved’ (Mayer *et al.*, 2021, p. 211). The discourse of quality is everywhere and it may represent

a threat to teacher education, particularly if it entails a reductionist view of teaching and the role of the teacher as a mere technician or doer whose job is to implement top-down policy directives and to document the outcomes of his/her work for accountability purposes. Aligned with such discourse is the narrow view of teacher training along with the idea that teachers can learn how to teach on the job, thus reducing the role of higher education institutions, for instance (see Newman, 2022; Flores, 2023). As Menter (2022) asserts, the concept of quality in teacher education is complex and has many dimensions at various levels, including the system, the institutional and the individual. As such, it is necessary to question what counts as quality in teacher education, particularly in contexts of reform, and to critically discuss the notion of ‘evidence’ by asking, ‘evidence of

what, generated by whom, and for what purpose?’ (Mayer *et al.*, 2021, p. 217). In this regard, it is necessary to look at what teachers need to know and to be able to do, along with the ethical, the social and the cultural dimension of their work and how their role is understood in curriculum development.

THREATS AND POSSIBILITIES

Considering the current challenges (e.g. conflicts, global migration, climate change, digitalisation and artificial intelligence) it is crucial to look at the threats but also the possibilities as far as teacher education, and particularly initial teacher education, is concerned. Such challenges call into question the purpose of teacher education and the kinds of teachers (and teacher educators) that are needed in such contexts. Is there a need to change or rethink teacher education in face of such challenges? If so, in which ways? Who should be involved and when? Whose voice is heard? In particular, to what extent do teacher educators and teacher education institutions participate in such processes? It is essential to include the voices of the various stakeholders and the broad political, social and cultural environment in which teacher education is embedded.

What we can see, in many contexts, is that the process of changing/restructuring teacher education is, most of the time, linked to an external impetus (e.g. the Bologna process and the crisis of teacher shortage). The lack of teachers is one of the more problematic challenges currently facing many contexts with implications for teacher education. I look at the Portuguese case to illustrate some of the current threats and possibilities.

TEACHER SHORTAGE AND INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION

Like in the USA and in other European systems, Portugal is facing the problem of teacher shortage. The official statistics point to the need to recruit over 34,000 teachers by 2030/2031, an average of 3,450 per year (Nunes *et al.*, 2021). Recently, in the annual ‘State of

Education 2021’, the National Council for Education in Portugal indicated that, in 2020/2021, 55% of the teaching workforce were 50 years old or above (CNE, 2022). As such, the crisis of the teacher shortage in Portugal is linked to the intertwined factors of the ageing of the teaching workforce and consequent mass retirement of teachers along with a decrease in teaching candidates. This critical scenario is related to issues of the lack of attractiveness of the teaching profession, challenging working conditions and the negative image of the profession in the media, but also to the lack of political investment on the part of government (see, for instance, Flores, 2020; Flores, 2023; Flores & Craig, 2023).

Teaching is a highly qualified profession in Portugal if we consider that, since 2007, a Master’s degree is required as the professional qualification to become a teacher from pre-school to secondary schools. In order to become a teacher, there is a need to complete first a three-year degree (Licenciatura) on a specific subject (or Basic Education for kindergarten and primary school) followed by a Master’s degree in Teaching (usually a two-year programme). A national framework does exist which stipulates the teaching profiles, the length of the programmes, its curriculum components and the corresponding number of credits, the resources and the conditions for teaching practice, among others. Higher education institutions have to design and implement initial teacher education programmes following the national legal framework (Decree-Law No. 79/2014). Currently, the curriculum of initial teacher education includes five components: subject teaching (content knowledge); general education (e.g. curriculum and assessment, developmental psychology, school as an organisation); specific didactics (didactic content knowledge); initiation to professional practice (classroom observation, supervised teaching practice); and the ethical, social and cultural dimension (e.g. awareness of the main problems of the contemporary

world, including fundamental values of the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic, freedom of religion and of speech, and respect for ethnic minorities and for the values of gender equality). As initial teacher education occurs at master level, the research component was tacitly assumed by institutions and encouraged by external assessments (Flores *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, student teachers are expected to develop pedagogical inquiry projects in their practicum, i.e. an action-research approach rooted in a conceptual, methodological and axiological framework aimed at promoting inquiry competences, multifaceted professional knowledge, and a transformative vision of education.

However, recently, a new law was issued (Decree-Law No. 112, 29th November 2023, altered by Decree-Law No. 23, 19th March 2024) in the context of teacher shortage with the purpose of accelerating student teachers’ entry into the job market by introducing more flexible ways to educate candidates coming from different paths and increasing professional responsibilities in the practicum. The new policy was not without controversy as it represents a drawback in terms of initial teacher education. The most problematic aspects relate to the reduction of training for candidates with teaching experience (candidates who have six years of teaching experience are exempted from doing the practicum) and for candidates who hold a post-graduate degree in the subject field (who have to do a reduced version of the Master degree programme). Other problematic elements are associated with the reduction of credits in the general educational component (such as curriculum and assessment, psychology of education, school as an organisation, inclusion), and with a more intensive school-based practicum where student teachers are hired as teachers and assume professional responsibilities similar to those of qualified teachers.

At the time of writing, and despite higher education institutions having started the restructuring of all initial teacher education programmes in late 2023, the

process of changing/adapting has slowed down. The process has been delayed and, in the meantime, a new government was elected in March 2024. Therefore, the future of initial teacher education remains uncertain. What is certain, though, is the crisis of the teacher shortage that needs to be faced in a serious and systemic, but also realistic, way.

A consistent political response is needed, one which considers the complexity of the problem but also the importance of investing in quality teacher education. The risk of looking for quick fixes and emergency solutions – within a quantity rather than a quality approach – is real. It is essential to recognise the complexity of teaching and the key importance of teachers and to avoid solutions that may lead to their de-skilling and deprofessionalisation. Meijer (2021), in the Dutch context, examines how policies deal with issues of quantity and quality within a trend to oversimplify teaching, which includes issues such as lowering the threshold for entering teacher education, allowing for short and stackable tracks and lowering the standards to solve the shortage of teachers. In a similar vein, Darling-Hammond, DiNapoli and Kini (2023, p. iii), discussing the problem of teacher shortages in the USA, argue for the need to develop a ‘Marshall Plan for teaching’ focusing on ‘the powers of the federal government on working closely with states to support teaching supply and quality’, including the following areas:

- i. increase educators’ net compensation through tax credits, housing subsidies and salary incentives
- ii. strengthen recruitment by making teacher preparation debt-free
- iii. support improved preparation by expanding high-retention pathways into teaching and clinical preparation in partnership schools
- iv. provide high-quality mentoring for all beginning teachers; v) increase investments that enable educators to expand and share expertise
- v. incentivise the redesign of schools to

support teaching and learning

vi. rethink school accountability.

As Goodwin, Madalinska-Michalak and Flores (2023) suggest, there are enduring dilemmas or tensions in teacher education, for instance the view of teacher as technician vs. teacher as professional, and teacher shortages as an issue of quantity or quality, to name two examples. They also assert that initial teacher education is key in shaping the future of education, with a focus on sustainability, innovation and culturally-responsive transformation.

POSSIBILITIES BEYOND EMERGENCY RESPONSES

After the new policy was issued in Portugal in 2023, higher education institutions were given a short period of time to revise their programmes and submit them to the national agency that is responsible for external assessment and accreditation. The deadline for submitting the new curriculum plans has been postponed and the new programmes would be in place in 2025/2026. However, the new government has not addressed the topic of teacher shortage and teacher education yet.

It would be important to draw on teacher educators’ and higher education institutions’ accumulated knowledge and expertise so that pedagogical and scientific matters have more importance than bureaucratic, administrative and quick-fix solutions. Thus, higher education institutions and teacher educators do have a key role to play in influencing policy in order to avoid emergency responses and a drawback in what we know in relation to teacher education, the process of learning to teach and the teaching profession. One important sign has been the approval of a Recommendation (CNE, 2024) by the National Council for Education in Portugal on the core dimensions of the teaching profession. The Recommendation aims to influence public policies in regard to teaching and teacher education. It includes in total 29 recommendations around four essential dimensions of the

teaching profession, including:

- i. the valorisation of teaching as a profession
- ii. the continuum of teacher education,
- iii) the conditions of the exercise of the profession and iv) teacher professionalism.

Among the 29 recommendations are:

- To reinforce the continuum of teacher education – initial, induction and inservice – through policies consistent with the complex and multidimensional nature of the teaching profession;
- To rethink the model of initial teacher education in light of the comprehensiveness and multidimensionality of teacher professional knowledge, reinforcing the importance of the Educational Sciences and promoting the multiple competences and literacies inherent to the teaching profession;
- To create partnerships between higher education institutions and schools to educate the future teachers based on a logic of project and on the articulation of different spaces and times for teacher education;
- To recognise the importance of a solid initial teacher education at a higher education level that enables the learning of the profession in its various dimensions (intellectual, relational, technical, research-based, ethical, social, cultural, emotional);
- To recognise and promote teacher agency valuing the role of teachers as critical and reflexive professionals in curriculum development, in pedagogical innovation and in the consolidation of the teaching profession;
- To implement mentoring and pedagogical supervision programmes to promote dynamics of collaboration, reflection, innovation and inquiry in teachers’ practice;
- To support the creation and consolidation of professional learning networks and communities to

foster the collective and research-based dimension of the teaching profession and to reinforce teachers' professional identity.

Such recommendations are powerful, but it remains to be seen what the government is going to do about them. It would be essential that public policies draw on these recommendations if we are to enhance the status of the teaching profession and if the discourse of the 'importance of teachers' is aligned with consistent actions and initiatives towards its valorisation and social recognition.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a need to unpack what counts as quality in ITE and how it is shaped, particularly in times of teacher shortage. In this context, it is important to discuss the content but also the process of policy development as well as the role of higher education institutions and the expertise of teacher educators. Menter and Flores (2021, p. 123) argue for a connection to be made between teaching, teacher professionalism, teacher education and educational research, stating that 'these relationships can provide key indicators for the evaluation of the condition of teaching and teacher education in any particular context'. They suggest a series of questions that may serve as the basis for such an evaluation, amongst which are:

- i. How is teacher professionalism defined and by whom?
- ii. What is the nature of the relationships between the respective communities of policy, practice and research?
- iii. To what extent is an inquiry approach embedded within, respectively, initial teacher education, teacher induction, continuing professional development?;
- iv. Who undertakes research into teaching and teacher education and what is its nature? Is a broad range of research methodologies employed?

Is there evidence of independence and criticality in the research undertaken?

How is such research disseminated and made use of?

A big risk is associated with the standing of the profession if an emergency policy for teacher recruitment and education means lowering the professional qualification to become a teacher. Nóvoa (2017, p. 1131) emphasises that 'There is no good teacher education if the teaching profession is fragile, weak. But there is no strong teaching profession either if teacher education is undervalued and reduced only to the mastery of subject knowledge or pedagogical techniques.' While flexibility and diversity are important, it is also true that there is a need to guarantee that all entrants into teaching possess the required/core knowledge and competencies to teach in a productive and meaningful way, without losing sight of the core features of teaching as a profession, such as the intellectual, the relational, the emotional and the inquiry-based dimensions of teaching.

As Menter (2022) states, maintaining quality as a contemporary challenge requires the continuing maintenance of quality research as well as the need to research policy and practice and to deploy a wide range of disciplinary methods. He asserts that 'one of the key elements in maintaining quality in the policy and practice of teacher education will be the continuing maintenance of quality research.' And this, he argues, implies developing research in, on and about teacher education (Menter, 2017) through 'a wide range of disciplinary methods, not only the usual approaches of educational research (action research, evaluation, sociology, psychology, etc.) but also comparative study, political economy, historical and cultural analyses, geographical and anthropological perspectives' (Menter, 2022, p. 101). Such an investment is key to teaching and teacher education in order to move beyond feelings of *déjà vu* in terms of research and public debates around the present and the future of teacher education. ■

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