

Challenges of initial teacher education in the context of higher education reform in Serbia

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DOI: 10.26907/esd14.3.04

Abstract

In the last few decades, many European countries have introduced changes in the regulation of education and higher education systems, accepting the provisions of the Bologna Declaration. The purpose of this declaration is to create a single European Higher Education Area with comparable and compatible academic standards and quality assurance standards across Europe. Serbia subscribed to these changes in 2003 reforming its higher education system in accordance with the declarations. Study modules have been reformed with the aim of achieving higher quality and more applied knowledge of students. The changes that have taken place have been reflected in the fundamental goal of an initial teacher education to create quality graduate teachers who are able to ensure high quality learning outcomes for all the children and young people with whom they work. The aim of this paper is to examine the effects and the challenges of initial teacher education in the context of higher education reform in Serbia. The changes that have occurred need to be seen from three angles: the initial education being implemented in several faculties within the six state universities; professional teacher training and self-evaluation and quality management of the teaching process. In the Republic of Serbia initial teacher education is realized in several forms. The primary form of initial teacher education is carried out at teaching faculties while the secondary form of initial teacher education is through the training of teachers, which is regulated by law. Some of the difficulties faced by initial teacher education programs are: the competitiveness of teaching careers with other careers that are better paid. The results in a lower student response, but also affects the funding of the teaching faculty itself. Taking into account the importance of education and its impact on society, it is necessary to monitor changes in the field of teacher education continuously and systematically in order to find ways to overcome various challenges and difficulties.

Key words: initial teacher education, Serbia, challenges, difficulties.

Проблемы педагогического образования в контексте реформ высшего образования Сербии

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Аннотация

За последние несколько десятилетий многие европейские страны внесли изменения в регулировании систем школьного и высшего образования, приняв положения Болонской декларации. Цель данной декларации – создать единое европейское пространство высшего образования с сопоставимыми и совместимыми стандартами качества. Став участником Болонского процесса в 2003 году, Сербия приступила к реформированию своей системы высшего образования в соответствии с подписанной декларацией: в учебные дисциплины были внесены изменения с целью достижения более высокого качества образования и формирования прикладных знаний у студентов. Произшедшие трансформации связаны с главной целью педагогического образования, которая заключается в качественной подготовке выпускников, способных обеспечить высокие результаты обучающихся. Цель настоящего исследования – изучить проблемы подготовки учителей в контексте реформы высшего образования в Сербии. Происходящие изменения необходимо рассматривать в трёх аспектах: базовое педагогическое образование (программы подготовки реализуются соответствующими факультетами в шести государственных университетах); профессиональная переподготовка (повышение квалификации педагогических кадров и осуществление ими самооценки); управление качеством образовательного процесса. В Сербии существуют такие формы подготовки учителей, как педагогические факультеты и курсы переподготовки. Основная проблема при этом – неконкурентоспособность самой профессии учителя из-за недопустимо низкой заработной платы, что отражается и на наборе студентов. Очень невысока и заработная плата профессорско-преподавательского состава в вузах. Учитывая значимость образования и его роль в обществе, необходимо постоянно отслеживать изменения в области педагогического образования с целью решения различных проблем и трудностей.

Ключевые слова: педагогическое образование, Сербия, современные вызовы, трудности.

Introduction

Education is often seen as a pillar of society but also as a crucial factor in ensuring economic productivity and competitiveness in the context of ‘informational capitalism’

(Ball 2008, quoted by Maguire, 2015). Due to the complex impact of education on society, and vice versa, it is important that special attention is paid to educating teachers, as someone who educates young people, transfers values of the system to students, prepares them for the world in which they live and develops their critical thinking. Teacher education needs to be seen from the point of selection, recruitment, organization, orientation and evaluation of the curriculum, and the reflection of the quality of teacher education can be seen in PISA and TIMSS research. The achievements of our students on these tests are low, and the reason for this is that the education system that is applied in the Republic of Serbia is stereotyped, traditionalistic and authoritative. The style of work which is used give us a student who remember more but understands less; he knows but does not know how to use the knowledge. The results indicated the necessity of changing the education system. It is understood that changes to reflect world trends in education are accepted in the Republic of Serbia as an inevitability conditioned by the need to match education in developed countries. Since 2000, a number of reform initiatives have been undertaken to improve the education system in Serbia and bring it in line with contemporary European education policies aimed at fulfilling the Lisbon Agenda (Đević, Anđelković, & Marušić, 2011). The international context, which is determined by the increasing internationalization of education and globalization, places quality and excellence at the center of educational reform. However, many changes have only just begun (Đević, Anđelković, & Marušić, 2011).

The structure of the educational system in Serbia consists of compulsory education (preschool and primary), secondary and tertiary education. Compulsory education lasts nine years (from the age of six to fifteen) and is legally prescribed and regulated. Primary education takes place in two cycles: the first cycle (class teaching) lasts from the first to the fourth grade and the second cycle (subject teaching) from the fifth year end to the eighth grade. After completing elementary school, students take the final exam on the basis of which grammar schools, secondary vocational and art schools are ranked and enrolled. The final exam assesses the degree of achievement of general and specific standards of achievement in primary education and upbringing (Law on the Foundations of the Education System, 2009). Vocational schools can last three or four years, depending on the subject area. Grammar school last four years. After finishing four-year secondary school, students can enroll in college. Enrollment in studies depends on success during the high school, as well as on the achievement in the entrance examination from a subject whose contents are close to the content of future studies. Studies can last from three (bachelor) to five or six (master) years, followed by specialization and doctoral studies (Law on Higher Education, 2010).

Initial teacher education in Serbia

The education policy controls the work of teachers through the management of their education and training, competency checking, defining the role in administration, planning and management as well as determining the conditions for their progression (Papanou, 2003, cited by Marušić, 2013). Initial teacher education has the fundamental goal of graduating teachers who are able to ensure high quality learning outcomes for all children and young people with whom they work (Kane, 2005).

Forms of teacher education

In the Republic of Serbia initial teacher education is achieved in several forms.

- The primary form of initial teacher education is carried out at 36 teaching faculties within six state universities. These faculties are: Faculties of Sciences, Faculty of Physics,

Faculty of Chemistry, Faculty of Biology, Faculty of Geography, Faculty of Philosophy, Pedagogical Faculties, etc. Teachers at the Pedagogical Faculties are qualified, according to our education system to teach students in the first cycle of primary education (up to 11 years). Study programs at pedagogical faculties last 4-5 years. Study programs implemented at the other faculties mentioned above last four or five years and after the completion of these studies, the student is given the professional title of a teacher of a specific subject area (for example: teacher of physics, mathematics, computer science, history, etc.). The diploma states that the teacher is qualified to work with students from 11 – 19 years.

- The secondary form of initial education offers appropriate didactic-methodical subjects and school practice as a practical work with students at faculties which enroll teachers. This form is typical for students of technical and technological faculties to teach vocational subjects, or for students who have not completed a primary teaching course.

Professional practice is an essential component of teacher education in both forms, and within which students use their theoretical knowledge directly in practice.

Teacher training

Initial education alone cannot meet the needs that arise later in the teacher's career and therefore, the need to provide support in lifelong learning in the course of his career has been recognized (Marušić, 2013). Teacher training is regulated by law (Đerić, Milin, & Stanković, 2014). After employment, the school is obliged to allocate to the student a mentor who prepares them for preparation for the state exam (license) and refers them for examination. The exam consist of the questions of the knowledge of the law, pedagogical situations and practical work with students. After obtaining a license to work in a school, a graduate has a legal obligation to regularly improve through various programs approved by the Institute for the Advancement of Education. In 2002, for the first time, the legal obligation of continuous professional development of employees in education was introduced, and it was defined in 2012 in the *Strategy for the Development of Education 2020*. This strategy envisages certain strategic policies, measures and actions aimed at building a national system of professional development of teachers for all levels of education, and the policy is to establish a built-in teacher quality evaluation system. Based on the strategy, an *Action Plan* for its implementation was also defined, providing in detail the necessary changes related to the teacher training policy. Teacher training is done through programs that are accredited for the next 2-3 school years. The program proposal can be submitted by teachers and professional associates (pedagogues or psychologists) employed in primary and secondary schools, and teachers employed in higher education institutions. The minimum number of team members to implement the program is two. When registering a program, the area for which the program is related and to whom the program is intended (for teachers, school principal, professional associates, etc.) is immediately defined. There are 17 areas: librarianship, upbringing, children who need additional support in education, social sciences, health education, elective and optional subjects, informatics, mathematics, education in the languages of national minorities, general teaching issues, preschool education and education, natural sciences, Serbian language and literature, foreign language, vocational subjects in secondary vocational education, arts, physical education and programs approved by the Pedagogical Institute of Vojvodina. The competences and priority areas under which the program is supported are listed when the Program is registered. There are four competences: for a narrower professional field, for teaching and learning, for supporting the development of the

personality of children and students, and for communication and cooperation. The priority areas are:

- Improving the digital competencies of students and teachers and the use of information and communication technologies in the realization of educational process;
- Methods of work with students who need additional educational support (work with children from vulnerable groups, children with disabilities, migrants ...);
- Improving the competencies of teachers in the field of planning and realization of teaching oriented outcomes (raising the level of didactical knowledge relevant to the objectives and outcomes of the subject/area);
- Strengthening the educational role of an educational institution through the development of a program to prevent violence, discrimination, abuse and neglect.

The Institute for the Advancement of Education of the Republic of Serbia is responsible for verifying and evaluating all applications submitted.

Monitoring the quality of teaching

Due to the complex causal relationships between teacher education and its impact on society, it is important to monitor and ensure the quality of the study program. Evaluation of study programs is carried out through internal and external evaluation. Internal evaluation is carried out by students assessing the quality of teaching and teachers in order to improve study programs, while external evaluation is done through the accreditation of study programs by a government agency. In this way, it seeks to continuously improve and innovate study programs by following both national and international trends in the development of education. An example of this is the introduction of subjects for the inclusive education of future teachers.

Difficulties

Difficulties faced by initial teacher education programs include the competitiveness of the teaching profession with other careers that are better paid (which entails a lower student response) and also the funding of the teaching faculty itself. In the Republic of Serbia, faculties are financed based on the number of enrolled students or the number of created modules.

In addition to difficulties in terms of finance and competitiveness, there are difficulties in monitoring and including rapid changes in information and communication technologies and their impact on young people. Teachers need to be prepared and trained to use new technologies in their classroom, to respond to student questions regarding the application of technologies and new scientific achievements. For this, it is necessary that the changes in education systems be more dynamic, but also supported by scientific evidence.

Conclusion

The issue of teacher education is complex because of the causal link with the society in which it is located. That is why there is a need for continuous and systematic research in this area in order to find directions for improving the initial teacher education and finding ways to overcome various challenges and difficulties.

Acknowledgment

This paper was written as part of the project "Quality education system in Serbia's European perspective", no. 179010, financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

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