

VOCATIONAL TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN A POLICY LEARNING PERSPECTIVE

INTRODUCTION

The professionalization of teachers and trainers is a key objective of European co-operation in the area of education and training. In recent years the ETF has worked with some aspects of the challenges for teachers faced by countries in transition. The ETF has concentrated on development work related to teachers as stakeholders in vocational education and training reform, challenges for teacher professionalization strategies in schools and horizontal learning in communities of practice among teachers and teacher educators as a new approach to the continuing professional development of pedagogical staff.

This policy brief looks at how the ETF has approached the need for vocational teacher competence enhancement. Most of its work covers teacher development in general, which perhaps reflects the fact that there are probably not big differences between general and vocational teacher development ■

THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF TEACHERS IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Vocational teachers and trainers are essential to supporting skills development in the workforce. In industrialised countries, about two thirds of the workforce are intermediate-level workers and employees, who have learned a substantial part of their occupational skills and knowledge through the support of teachers, trainers and instructors from the domains of non-academic vocational education and training (Cedefop, 1998). In spite of this, in many countries vocational teachers have a low professional status which is accompanied by a fragmentation of the profession through the variety of existing profiles and methods of teacher training and recruitment.



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Teacher and student roles are changing as a result of new approaches to learning. With a growing attention to active learning, responsibilities are shifting from the teacher to the learner, with the teacher becoming a facilitator of learning processes rather than a transmitter of expert knowledge. Capacities for change and adaptation as well as learning-to-learn have become important competences per se that learners should develop. Self-directed learning is apparently a necessity for an increasing part of the population in changing societies. Another challenge is the necessity to co-operate with employers and local stakeholders ■

THE ETF APPROACH TO TEACHER DEVELOPMENT IN PARTNER COUNTRIES

It is not meaningful to simply jump from the international discourse on active learning to the challenges of transition countries without reflecting on and mediating the barriers which exist. The ETF approach therefore concentrates on the area where these two discussions come together. They meet in fact in the concept of policy learning¹. This concept supported by recent

work (e.g. ETF, 2007) argues that systemic reforms of vocational education in transition countries (and indeed any kind of major reform in any country) will only be successful and sustainable if policy development, formulation and implementation are firmly based on broad ownership and embeddedness in existing institutions.

In recent years the ETF has concentrated on a functional view of teachers' work. A sharpened focus has been put on the important role of teachers in facilitating policy learning in countries in transition and on continuing professional development in schools and thus on teachers already employed. This is based on the realisation that ongoing reforms require an instant effort to develop teacher competences. Continuous lessons learned from reform experiences show that large scale macro-reforms tend to fail if the involvement of teachers (and school leaders) in curriculum and broader school development is not a key plank of the change strategy.

¹ Policy learning can be defined as 'the ability of governments, or systems of governance, to inform policy development by drawing lessons from available evidence and experience' (Raffe and Spours, 2007).

INFORM

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However, this is also informed by new research on vocational teachers. Grollmann (2008) has analysed the competences of vocational teachers and points out that the quality of teachers' work is probably more influenced by the institutional environment in which they work than their formal teacher education. Increasing degrees of institutional autonomy trickle down to the level of individual teachers. Not least in vocational training systems, professional quality and excellent performance rest on the concrete working conditions of teachers in vocational institutions and the specific demands on teachers' work. Strategic school development is therefore a promising strategy where the development of schools and curricula, as well as the organisation of learning and teachers may go hand in hand. However, teachers and teaching would also benefit from looking beyond their particular school or colleagues for professional guidance in situations where their immediate surroundings do not provide this. In short, professionalization is a remedy to ad-hoc standards, in favour of a network of well-established practices ●

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING REFORM – PROFESSIONALS AND STAKEHOLDERS

In modern vocational training systems, teachers are both professional educators and key change agents. Continuing innovation and development has become a core task of the modern professional teacher. The professional expertise of teachers committed to change and modernisation is also an important source of knowledge for

policy-makers leading the development and implementation of national policies. A key question therefore is how to involve teachers actively in vocational training reform so that ownership is better translated into quality learning in the classroom and professional expertise from teaching and learning processes can guide system reform.

Successful reform can only happen with the engagement and commitment of teachers, as they will be the ones to make it happen in practice in their daily work with students. However, this is no longer simply a matter of establishing broad ownership and acceptance.

What makes the situation different today is that the new professional profile of teachers includes innovation and development as a key competence. Teachers are no longer the executors of education programmes decided in detail by others. They have to adapt learning processes and outcomes to the specific – changing – needs of their students and local labour market situations. Teachers are stakeholders in their capacity of education professionals. The current reforms in education and training are not one-off events designed by external experts but ongoing change processes set within a broadly agreed reform agenda. Such processes can be quite radical and require further detail based on local innovation processes. This is the reason why teachers, who are actively engaged in local innovation and experimentation, are an important source of expertise for national policy-makers. Reform strategies should capitalise on engaging teachers working inside their schools. Such an understanding of reform puts policy learning, capacity building and policy advice at both national and school-levels in a new perspective and with considerably more urgency than before. Reform processes require a continuous interaction and dialogue between national and local partners. Strong pressures exist to include teachers among the principal stakeholders in reform ●

VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS AS LEARNING ORGANISATIONS – VEHICLES FOR POLICY LEARNING?

How can a strategy based on the engagement of teachers and trainers as stakeholders and professionals be developed in schools to create an environment where

teachers and trainers can play these roles? The concept of the school as a learning organisation coupled with the creation of teacher teams inside schools may help create the conditions for schools to become and remain innovative and for teachers to engage in continuing expertise development. This would give practical meaning to policy learning at school level.

The most substantial requirement for countries in transition is to strengthen the capacity to formulate national reform agendas, and to shape reform initiatives which fit into contexts and therefore establish better conditions for ownership and sustainability. This requires the organisation of policy learning platforms and environments in the countries so that a critical mass of key actors and stakeholders gradually develop vocational policy understanding and competence. How can teachers as stakeholders and professionals become concretely involved in policy learning and support the development of national reform agendas, and how can schools be developed into policy learning platforms?

Teacher 'teams' have become a key concept in recent pedagogical debates in Western Europe. Vocational schools have witnessed the development of a new pedagogical scenario: from teaching and instruction with the teacher in the central and performing role to a setting where the focus is placed on the students' learning processes and on forms of organisation which support this learning. The characteristics of teamwork are that the focus is placed on the students' subject-related and personal learning



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processes and the teachers' own co-operation culture and mutual relations. Teachers must therefore work with the same demands and challenges as the students with regard to co-operation, responsibility, self-reflection and evaluation. In practice, this means that teachers work with their own meeting culture, mutual communication and mutual relations. It is this duality, where both students and teachers find themselves in a learning process, which makes teamwork a dynamic way of organising teaching.

The "learning organisation" has been on the agenda in EU school development projects in recent years. The concept seems to cover perspectives in demand in the future, i.e. an organisation which is subject to a continuous transformation and development process and which is able to systematise and evaluate its experience in making learning an ongoing process in the widest sense of the word. In the team-based organisation there is a direct connection between "the learning team" and the "learning organisation". The team represents a platform which is able to compile, elaborate on and assess pedagogical experience in a more subtle and complex way than what is possible for the individual teacher.

In this sense, the team can be said to be a connecting link between the learning of students and the learning of organisations. By virtue of its organisation, the team is ready to become a dissemination forum between the learning processes at student level and the learning of the organisation as a whole.

The capacity to interconnect student learning, team learning and the learning of the organisation means that the organisation is aware of the value of teams. A future-oriented vocational school will capitalise on developing teachers who function as team workers and process owners. In partner countries, there is a great willingness to develop the teacher role and to create new pedagogical practices². The ETF will give priority to strategic school development in the coming years ●

² Testing ideas of schools as learning organisations has been started e.g. in Croatia. At the ETF VET TT NET conference in Tirana on 20-22 January 2006, Maja Jukic, teacher at the vocational school in Slavonski Brod, Croatia, organised an excellent workshop on how to proceed when building up schools as learning organisations.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Communities of practice have started to emerge as a method for the continuing professional development of vocational teachers. Such communities may be both cost-effective and interesting for practitioners as a platform for reflective practice, a foundation for professionalism, and for sharing with others in the professional field. This merits more attention both at policy, provider and practitioner levels.

While in most partner countries the professional development of teachers is only seen as continuing training of teachers provided by external delivery systems, the concept of 'continuous professional development' is a more promising strategy and may re-establish the social recognition of teachers as professionals and stakeholders of reform. In order to test an innovative teacher professionalisation strategy in South Eastern Europe, the ETF carried out the regional 'LEARN' project from 2007 to 2009. The project built on strengthening the national vocational training centres (or their equivalents) to enhance their capacity to:

- help schools continuously innovate and adapt to changing conditions and local needs;

- cope with the challenges of new policies through school-based development work, innovation of teaching and learning, and increased preparedness for international network learning and project co-operation;
- nurture their own and local school expertise by actively taking part in knowledge sharing based on horizontal learning processes.

The project used the principle of 'community of practice' as an instrument for network learning where participants share a given practice, are able and willing to learn together, actually work together on improving practice, inventing new procedures, models, tools, etc. and share the results of their mutual work. Shared learning activities based on the exchange of experience and the improvement of school practice and teacher competences go hand in hand.

For the ETF there is a more fundamental lesson for policy facilitating. Thinking in terms of participating in communities of practice may help us shed light on aspects of organising education and training in order to achieve certain learning outcomes and the role of teachers and trainers as professionals in such learning processes. Furthermore, it may help us to reflect on the role of teachers and trainers as stakeholders in education reforms and also inform us more generally about how stakeholders learn policies ●



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CONCLUSIONS

Focusing on teachers and teaching and learning processes situated in schools opens up a discussion on how to organise policy learning processes within vocational schools. As key stakeholders, teachers and school leaders should contribute to the formulation of policies and establishment of platforms for the discussion of initiatives, thus enabling the ownership and sustainability of reforms. The focus on teachers in a policy learning perspective is central to the discussion on stimulating change in partner countries.

However, a critical factor in all this is the ability of school leaders to develop and manage the professional development of teachers. They will need additional resources and more autonomy to manage such processes. This requires new approaches to school empowerment within decentralised

training systems, national school grant schemes for local pedagogical development and targeted training for school leaders to enable them to stimulate the internal updating and enhancement of teacher competences. It also requires institutional capacity building of pedagogical support institutions in between the levels of policy and practice. The LEARN project is only the beginning of empowering these support institutions.

Concretely, creating a learning culture will be an important area to be addressed. Given the structure of vocational training institutions, a learning culture will bring an individual perspective to policy learning. This could also contribute to a better school environment that is conducive to creating and maintaining teams of teachers involved in policy learning activities ●



photo: ETF/A. Ramella

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SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

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