

Approaches to teacher training – transnational trends

by Pia Cort

In session III, focus is on the approaches to teacher training that were identified in the in-depth analysis. When I started out to analyse the cases it was actually from the perspectives of vocational and pedagogical update as can be seen from my background paper. During this analysis, it suddenly struck me that there were quite a lot of similarities to be found in the approaches to teacher training in the six countries. It also struck me that this is an area of great interest as we already from numerous reports can point to the skills that the VET teachers need to acquire but actually lack more knowledge on the methods by which they acquire these skills and which approaches are more adequate.

But let me first go into the contextual facts of these case studies because here some transnational trends also stood out. Across the countries, major reforms of the VET systems are pushing for new training activities, which qualify the teachers and other target groups to translate external requirements into internal implementation. At the heart of most of these cases, lies a political/national attempt to restructure VET and qualify teachers for an expansion of their functions and for new approaches to teaching. Here we come back to some of the challenges as defined at the Helsinki workshop: what are described in these cases are the introduction of student-centred approaches, modularisation, workshop instruction, working in teacher teams, vocational schools as more demand-driven and competitive, etc. If the teacher skills are not updated and expanded! to match these requirements, the reforms will literally fail!

So the framework for the training activities are more or less set at the political, national level and so are the objectives for the training. I'll give you some examples:

- In Denmark, a reform of the VET programmes was implemented in 2001. This reform is primarily pedagogical and requires new approaches to teaching. The teachers are furthermore to function as tutors for the trainees and guide them in their educational choices.
- In Finland, there is a movement away from an entirely school-based VET system to a system, which interacts with the world of work and where the students are to demonstrate their vocational skills. This requires that the teachers are able to plan, implement and assess skills demonstrations, and that they have a better knowledge of working processes in the enterprises.
- In Norway, the VET programmes have been restructured and are now based on the dual training principle: 2 years at school and 2 years in a company. This has accentuated a need for the quality assurance of training places and of the pedagogical skills of the workplace instructors.
- In Italy, a reform of vocational training and labour market policies calls for a better co-ordination and integration of training offers. This has called for a need to strengthen the vocational skills of the middle managers and of strengthening the inter-institutional networking and co-operation.
- And in Portugal, a policy initiative to encourage reading habits and practices in the Portuguese population calls for an expansion of the teacher functions. The teachers are now work as information guides in school libraries.

So these reforms push for new teacher skills and push for changing the practices found within the VET system. And the approaches to teacher training reflect these overall objectives. The teacher skills are to be kept in line with the overall objectives of the VET system. So when scrutinising the approaches to teacher training found within these ten case studies, we see that these are set off by new national requirements. And this is also reflected in the approaches to teacher training in the selected case studies:

First of all, the reforms influence the entire school system and not only the individual teacher. This calls for an organisational approach to training, and in the cases, we see that focus is not only on qualifying the individual teacher but on qualifying entire institutions. The training activities are to contribute to the development of the organisation as a whole, and therefore activities may include different personnel groups at the institutions. The underlying logic is that in order for these changes to take effect it requires development at more than one level of the organisation and it also requires an understanding of other functions in the organisation. Knowledge sharing and development of common goals are important in this process.

Furthermore, focus is not only on the individual institution but also on different kinds of institutions and private enterprises. In the Finnish cases, the approaches to teacher training reflect the overall objective to bridge the world of school and the world of work. These cases (META and TELLKÄ) include both teachers from the school and workplace instructors and aim at facilitating knowledge sharing between these two groups.

When analysing the methods in use in the various cases, it is also very clear that the training activities are planned close to the practice of the teachers and of the educational institutions. The objective is to change the practice of the teachers and the institutions and develop new practices, which are in line with the overall objectives of the system. So the framework is set – so to speak. However, although the objectives are set from above, the training activities are based on a bottom-up approach. The teachers are actively involved in the defining the training activities and voicing their skills needs. The approach is to make the daily practice of the teachers interact with theory and with the new skills requirements. How can practice be changed to match the new requirements? The teachers are actively involved in this process. The participatory approach is to create a sense of ownership among the teachers/participants and give them a sense of influence on the changes taking place. A more academic approach or an approach not based in daily practice and in the teachers' own experiences could easily provoke resistance/opposition to the changes that are imposed. So it is important to have a bottom-up approach and an approach that take point of departure in the daily practice as it is found at the schools in order for a restructuring to succeed.

Taking an intra- and interorganisational approach to training and making practice alternate with theory (on-the-job training alternate with off-the-job training) give rise to a need for new ways of communicating. Here I think of communication between teacher educators (or supervisors, external consultants, whoever may be responsible for the training activity) and the participants in the training, and among the participants themselves who may come from different departments or institutions and organisations altogether. ICT becomes an important tool to facilitate interaction and communication, and in all of the cases, ICT is used as a means of communication. Websites and conference facilities are established so that communication is possible during the entire duration of the training.

So the cases point to the following concepts or overall models for teacher training:

- that the training activities are tailor-made i.e. they are not standardised but meet the requirements of the system, of the schools and of the teachers – at the same time. Yes, there may be some in-built problems in this
- the training activities are modularised
- the training activities are based on the dual training principle i.e. training on-the-job alternates with training off-the-job. Point of departure is in the practice and experiences of the teachers and these “colour” the training
- the learning pathways have become more flexible and consist of both formal and non-formal learning activities.

These were some of the transnational trends in the approaches to VET teacher training that stood out quite clearly in these ten cases. These approaches are not without challenges for the institutions responsible for the teacher training activities! First of all, the fact that the objectives have already been set at a central level may give rise to a certain resistance to changes among the teachers. Furthermore, it is not easy to change practice. Many work routines and a lot of knowledge is what we call tacit. All teachers have their standards schemes to draw upon in a teaching situation – that is part of their professionalism. So it is important to create “ownership” to the changes among the teachers in order to dismantle resistance, and it is important to make the teachers reflect on their own practice and make their tacit knowledge explicit. Finally, there is a schism in training close to practice that has to be overcome: resources are limited and if the training activities are not fully supported by management and time provided for the teachers to commit to the training, the teachers will tend to prioritise their daily activities over training. So training has to be part of an overall organisational strategy and not an individual matter.

So to sum up, the transnational trends are towards organisational and interorganisation learning, training close to practice, bottom-up approaches/participatory approaches, interaction between on-the-job and off-the-job learning and ICT as a supportive tool. Overall the development takes place at different levels and the training activities reflect the interaction among these different levels:

System development
School development
Teacher development

And now, I’ll give the floor to my colleague, Hanne Niemann, who will talk about the Reform Competence Project and about the approaches to teacher training found within this project.

Thank you for your attention.

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