TEACHER EDUCATION POLICY IN EUROPE:
a Voice of Higher Education Institutions

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Contents

Researching Teacher Education and Teacher Practice: the Croatian Perspective[1]

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1 Introduction

The discussions of why, how, who and for whom to do research in teacher education have dominated the educational sciences in the last decade, attracting widely polarised views. The critics raise issues at several levels. One relates to the general approach in the field which seems to consist of non-cumulative research data. Others point out problems with the external validity of data and their limited possibility to generalise from one context to another. Another set of issues relates to teachers' or policy-makers' motivation to apply new knowledge or to perceive it as useful. Still others point out that the main problem lies in the ineffective communication of research findings to the wider public (Brusling, 2005). Such serious critical arguments might give an impression that this line of research is at a dead end and carries the danger of being at least temporarily abandoned. But, in spite of such controversies, it seems that the evidence-based approach to teacher education and its importance for the effectiveness of teaching and learning has come into the focus of the broader public from policy-makers at the highest level to school authorities and school practitioners. This topic has become the central theme of several conferences at the EU level leading to the conclusion that not only researchers should expand their study of teaching and teacher education but that research competencies should also become the standard component of the teacher's toolkit (Niemi, 2005). At this moment, we can only speculate what was 'the tipping point'' (Gladwell, 2006) which helped to bridge the gap between theory, research and practice. Perhaps it was the use of new concepts describing desirable social goals such as the 'knowledge society'', 'learning society'' or 'lifelong learning for all''. Concepts from

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economics such as cost-benefit analysis, accountability, quality management have also taken hold in education, especially at the higher education level. This line of thought supported the establishment of generally recognised quality indicators in education and gave rise to a series of international comparative studies on the effectiveness of education in terms of learning outcomes. Contributions to strengthening research in teacher education might also have come from the implementation of practices such as the benchmarking of teacher education and teacher practices between education systems or analysing experiences from other fields. In fact, the notion of evidence-based practice was derived from a comparison with medical practice (Brussling, 2005). We could still add many items to our list of hypothetical factors which have contributed to recognition of the importance of research in and on teacher education which in itself might become a new interesting research topic.

In this paper our main interest lies in the examination of different aspects of research related to teacher education in Croatia. Our aim is to investigate whether the current process of the transformation of teacher education is supported by relevant research which might provide a more solid base for long-term planning, decision-making and the immediate improvement of school practice. In order to gain a clearer picture of the general conditions in which teacher education research is conducted, a SWOT analysis is performed. It is based on discussions with colleagues, a review of policy documents, and personal experience in the area. The main points of the analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. SWOT analysis of the current situation of teacher education research in Croatia

Strengths – new research centres and specialised research groups in teacher education, involvement of international stakeholders, postgraduate research-oriented programmes for teachers.	**Threats –** insufficient recognition of the importance of the evidence-based approach in TE at different levels, a lack of funds, a lack of institutional networking.
Weaknesses – insufficient number of trained researchers, a lack of a strategic approach to TE, insufficient research methodology in undergraduate study programmes, a lack of expert project reviewers, a lack of a scientific database in the field of TE research.	**Opportunities –** international co-operation and networking, motivation of local communities and schools to participate in teacher education research, specialised journals.

In this presentation we focus on outlining the major research trends in Croatian teacher education with some illustrations in each research stream and also try to propose a categorical framework for a future in-depth analysis of the field.

2 Domains in teacher education research

Teacher education research usually falls into two broad categories labelled 'research on teacher education and teaching practice' and 'research in teacher education and teacher practice'.

Research on teacher education can be further categorised according to different criteria. One of them is the use of research results at three levels:

a) at the macro level for defining policy and supporting decision-making;
b) at the intermediate level for curriculum development of pre-service and in-service teacher education; and
c) at the micro level for practice evaluation purposes conducted in specific settings such as university classrooms, practicing schools etc.

The second criteria could be an orientation towards outcomes/products or processes. The research orientation also defines the methodological approaches – qualitative or quantitative methods and the sources used.

Research in teacher education and teacher practice has several aspects:

a) Research related to subject-content knowledge – meaning that teachers should understand how knowledge is generated in their specific academic disciplines and should have knowledge of the most recent research results in research in the subjects they teach. They should develop critical scientific literacy and be able to teach their students how to critically read and evaluate scientific data.
b) Research related to the educational sciences – meaning that teachers should be able to understand and participate in research related to different variables in educational contexts.

c) Interdisciplinary research connecting subject-content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge (teaching methodologies).
d) Evaluation research – meaning that teacher education should prepare teachers for using research methodology to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching. It also means that teachers should learn how to interpret the data obtained, how to communicate and how to make evidence-based decisions.
e) A research-oriented attitude and the value of lifelong learning – meaning that teacher education should support teachers in developing new aspects of their professional role. They should perceive themselves as agents of change in a changing society and be analytical, open to new experiences, innovative and committed to lifelong learning.

3 Research on teacher education

a) Policy-oriented research

Recently the Croatian education system has changed at all levels, including the teacher education system. The Bologna Process has profoundly transformed initial teacher education, also with affects on in-service teacher education. It should be noted that the changes in initial teacher education also started from within, due to internally recognised needs for improvement. Policy-oriented research had an important role in those developments. That kind of research is relatively new in our educational tradition and the support of international programmes, experts and funds (EU-CARDS, World Bank, OECD, OSI etc.) played an important role in initiating such studies. Some of these programmes also supported institutional capacity-building, such as the *Centre for Research and Development in Education* in Zagreb. The Centre started its first larger scale educational policy-oriented research programme in 2003 with a set of interrelated research projects in curriculum development, teacher education, external evaluation of educational outcomes, and structural aspects of the school system. As an illustration of the abovementioned projects is the large-scale study *Development of a model of teacher lifelong education* carried out from 2001 to 2006 (Vizek Vidović, 2005). This study combines multiple sources and a multiple methods approach to examining Croatian teacher education within the EU context. The methodology used consisted of a content analysis of relevant national

and international documents, an analysis of existing statistical data combining with large-scale surveys of student teachers, practicing teachers and university teachers. Based on the results of this study general recommendations for the development of initial and in-service teacher education model were proposed.

Some research projects on the national teacher education system, supported by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sport and by international institutions and grants, were also carried out at the universities. The projects *Programme for the acquisition of educational competencies of subject teachers* (Domović, 2005) and *Structure of lifelong teacher education* (Radeka, 2007-2010) fall into that category. Further, some studies were initiated by the Ministry itself, such as *Teacher Education in Croatia and Other European Countries* (Domović and Oldroyd, 2005).

b) Curriculum development and Bologna Process monitoring studies

Implementation of the Bologna Process has had special significance for initial teacher education for various reasons. First, the education of prospective primary teachers has been upgraded from vocational college to the university level. So, the duration of education of all school teachers (classroom and subject, primary and secondary level) has been equalised with other university programmes leading to an MA degree. Moreover, the third cycle (Ph.D. programme) has been opened to primary teachers, an opportunity which did not exist before. Those structural changes were accompanied by the new requirements for teacher educators and for curriculum development. Structural changes were also introduced in the education of prospective secondary school teachers. All teacher faculties educating secondary school teachers adopted a two-cycle model and in some cases a simultaneous model has been replaced by a consecutive one. The implementation of these changes was facilitated by the participation of Croatian experts in EU projects supporting and monitoring the Bologna Process. These projects also had a strong research component providing indicators for comparisons and benchmarking.

Examples of such EU projects in which Croatian representatives are participating are *The Tuning Education Structures in Europe – Phase III: Validation, Dissemination and Further Development and Phase IV Curricular*

Reform Taking Place: Learning Outcomes and Competencies in Higher Education (Education group).

Some projects in this category were aimed at regional co-operation, such as: *Improving of teaching quality in South-East Europe, Enhancing the professional development of education practitioners and teaching/learning practices in SEE countries, Tuning Teacher Education Curricula in the Western Balkans,* and *Regional Tuning – Towards the European Higher Education Area* in which Croatian experts have been participating.

Special projects have also been developed aimed at curriculum development of teacher education in specific fields. Croatian experts were mostly engaged in projects related to the foreign language teacher education (for example, the *Tempus project – Foreign languages at primary level: training of teachers).*

There are also projects which are oriented to the curriculum development of in-service teacher education and training. These projects can be categorised as need assessment screening. Recently, national agencies (Education and Training Agency and the Vocational Training Agency) which are responsible for in-service teacher training have begun systematically collecting evidence to support their strategic planning in this area.

c) Small-scale research conducted in specific settings such as university classrooms, practicing schools

Such research has a relatively long tradition in Croatia and the results of these studies are usually published in several specialised Croatian journals such as: *Metodika, Odgojne znanosti, Napredak, Metodički ogledi, Strani jezici* etc. At the moment, it is difficult to categorise them by topics because there are no systematic bibliographies or meta-analyses in the field. Regarding research methodology, an inspection of several volumes revealed the use of both qualitative and quantitative methodology. In that respect, it can be observed that the most advanced research methodology, including experimental designs, has been used in research into the teaching of foreign languages.

4 Research in teacher education

a) Research related to subject-content knowledge

In Croatia and some other countries (Buchberger, Campos, Kallos, and Stephenson, 2000) there was a long tradition of a dichotomy in the education of primary (classroom) and subject teachers (upper primary and secondary). Subject teachers were practically always educated at universities, meaning that their study programmes always had a strong component of research methodology in their specific subject/academic discipline and the requirements for their educators combined both teaching and research competencies. On the other hand, up until 2005 classroom teachers were educated at teachers' colleges which offered tertiary vocational degrees. In other words, classroom teacher education was more oriented to the acquisition of practical skills and their educators were not obliged to participate in scientific projects and research. Since 2005, when classroom teacher education was upgraded to the university level, the research component of the respective academic field has been introduced into the curriculum.

b) Research related to the educational sciences

In comparison to research in subject-content knowledge, the position of educational sciences research in teacher education was almost the reverse. In the education of subject teachers the dominance of academic disciplines was so strong that very little room was left for the teaching of the educational sciences and teaching methodologies (between 7% – 10 % of total study time) (Vizek Vidović and Vlahović Štetić, 2003). So, paradoxically, at the institutions where educational scientists were doing educational research in disciplines such as psychology, pedagogy, sociology, their results were rarely communicated to prospective teachers. The Bologna Process has offered a new chance for integrating the educational sciences and research into new curricula for prospective subject teachers. In developing new curricula, a general recommendation has been formulated stating that the scope of these topics should be increased by up to 20 percent and more. In approximately half of the programmes for subject teachers these recommendations have been taken into account.

Regarding the education of future primary teachers, traditionally more space in the curriculum was devoted to the educational sciences and teaching methodologies (between 40 to 60 percent). This ratio has been kept in the new Bologna programmes, also offering opportunities for developing entirely new courses in research methodology.

It should be emphasised that these structural changes in initial teacher education have opened up a whole new range of possibilities for the advancement of educational research by establishing the third cycle of studies – doctoral studies and master specialisations.

c) Interdisciplinary research connecting subject-content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge (teaching methodologies)

This field of research is still underdeveloped and consequently underrepresented in the curriculum. It should be noted that interdisciplinarity in teaching and research is missing in general, partially due to a lack of structural support. Until recently the categorisation of scientific fields, the system of research funding and the system of academic advancement did not support interdisciplinarity in teaching nor in research. The proposed new act on scientific fields developed by the National Scientific Council opens the possibility of establishing interdisciplinary scientific fields. It might be expected that in the future this will enhance the development of interdisciplinary research in the field of teacher education.

d) Evaluation research

This aspect of research in teacher education (also action research, reflections on school practice etc.) has recently been introduced into the courses of teaching methodologies or school practice, especially in the fields of foreign language and Croatian language teaching.

It should be pointed out that previously practicing teachers were chiefly acquainted with those topics through in-service training, especially when provided in co-operation with foreign experts.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

Regarding research in and on teacher education in Croatia it can be concluded that it is still quite underdeveloped. On the other hand, it can be also observed that recently the general level of awareness of different stakeholders about the importance of such research has been significantly raised. The structural changes introduced by implementation of the Bologna Process have created a framework for more intensive developments in this field.

The key factors which should be taken into account regarding the enhancement of teacher education research are as follows:

1. It is necessary to invest in capacity-building for teacher education research at the institutional level. Efforts should be directed to the development of an institutional infrastructure within and outside of universities. It means that the empowerment of existing as well as establishment of new research units is necessary.
2. Special attention should be paid to the development of research potential among teacher students at all levels with an emphasis on doctoral students. One important mechanism to achieve this goal is the academic mobility of students and university teachers. In that respect, capacity-building is also needed for student teacher educators, specifically for mentoring and supervising student projects and theses.
3. Financial instruments should be provided in order to support interdisciplinary research and the networking of expert groups at national and international levels.
4. In order to foster high-level attainments in teacher education research the concepts of research quality assurance and research benchmarking should be widely introduced and applied across teacher education.

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