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Fifteen years of the TEPE network: then – now – tomorrow

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Dear colleagues, dear participants,

I would like to extend yet another welcome, this time on my behalf, as one of those who have been with the TEPE Network from the very beginning. And I would like to emphasise that this time the Network is celebrating a modest anniversary - this year marks 15 years since its inception. Metaphorically, then, one could say that the Network has graduated from primary school. It is therefore probably right to take this opportunity to recall the past steps and the context in which they were taken, while considering what new steps need to be put on the agenda for the coming years.

The TEPE network was founded in October 2006 at Umeå University, Sweden. As a small initiative group of five or six colleagues from three or four countries, we found at our first meeting that the development of European cooperation in teacher education had reached a level where new ambitious goals had to be set, such as:

- 1) mapping and analysing trends in Teacher Education across Europe,
- 2) engaging in the joint design of new curricula for undergraduate (initial) teacher education and addressing the issue of their comparability and compatibility at European level in order to better promote participation in exchange programmes, in particular the Erasmus programme,
- 3) supporting for the development of Masters and Doctoral level programmes in Teacher Education,
- 4) developing targeted policy recommendations and concrete strategies for teacher education institutions,
- 5) networking these institutions across Europe and influencing policy-making processes at institutional, national and European level.

In short, the idea was that teacher education had become too important an area to leave only to institutional and political decision makers, but that those most directly affected should also be involved in policy making: Teachers and teacher educators, including teacher education researchers. The conviction that teacher education policy must be research-based was therefore taken seriously by this group, and the expansion of the network in the following years confirmed that many colleagues across Europe wanted to contribute to these goals.

It is not my intention now to analyse the performance of the network during these fifteen years; I prefer to leave the critical evaluation to other, unbiased reviewers. Nevertheless, I cannot completely disregard some facts: The network has grown considerably in the fifteen years, conferences have been held continuously and in different parts of Europe, a considerable collection of monographs and journal articles has been edited and published, the knowledge gained has been used by many teacher education institutions, in some countries it has also influenced national and sometimes international strategies, for example, in occasional cooperation with European Commission and the Council of Europe, but also across European borders in cooperation with UNESCO. But as I said - in the minutes available to me I would rather focus on two other issues: first, remembering the context in which the TEPE network was born, and second, reflecting on the context in which we find ourselves lately; including looking at the challenging tasks ahead. I think that some of these tasks are very directly linked to the theme of this conference.

The middle of the first decade of this century was a very different time from today, both on a general level and in the specific area of teacher education. In the past, teacher education was generally excluded from the university environment, it had a lower status than other public professions, and it was generally excluded from international educational cooperation. However, in the 1990s this tradition was radically challenged (Sander, 1999; Zgaga, 2010). The beginning of the participation of teacher education institutions in various European Commission programmes, including Erasmus (Delmartino & Beernaert, 1998), certainly contributed to this. The first major project in this area was the Thematic Network on Teacher Education in Europe (TNTEE; see Hudson & Zgaga, 2017), which took place in the late 1990s and culminated in an influential policy document in 2000 entitled *The Green Paper on Teacher Education in Europe* (Buchberger et al., 2000). The Tuning Project (Waagenar, 2019), which began in 2000 and aimed to modernise a whole range of university courses and included teacher education and educational sciences from the outset, cannot be bypassed.

Ten or more teacher education institutions participated in the TNTEE and Tuning projects and for the first time faced the question raised by increased European integration in the 1990s: How to connect and strengthen internationally isolated, fragmented and neglected teacher education? How to educate a "European teacher" (Schratz, 2005)? The timing was opportune: on the one hand, Europe faced the challenge of building a "knowledge society and economy" and realised that this goal was not possible without a thorough strengthening of the education sector; on the other hand, European countries joined forces in the Bologna Process to achieve "comparability and compatibility" (Wächter, 2004) of their education systems, curricula and educational qualifications. By the middle of the first decade of the new millennium, it was

already clear that longer and more academically demanding bachelor's degree programmes for initial teacher education were coming, including the right to obtain master's and doctoral degrees in teacher education and educational sciences at teacher education institutions. Teacher education has therefore gained significantly in its status.

This, then, was the context in which the TEPE network was founded, and it is certainly not surprising that one of its first tasks was to strengthen the 'voice' of teacher education institutions in discussions about teacher education policy (Hudson and Zgaga, 2008). In subsequent years, this 'voice' has been expanded to include a range of issues such as (to name but a few) the quality of teacher education, learning spaces with technology in the classroom and in teacher education, building partnerships in teacher education; sustainability and ethics in teacher education and in education policy, and so on.

And now we are fifteen years later; the zeitgeist has completely changed - both in general and in the specific area of teacher education. The turn of the millennium was generally marked by optimistic expectations of European integration, cooperation, and economic and cultural development; but towards the end of the first decade of the new millennium, the world was suddenly marked by a global economic crisis with many consequences, which in the second decade also manifested in phenomena such as Euroscepticism, migrants, resistance to otherness, illiberal politics, Brexit, reclosing national borders, and so on. All of this has left its mark on education as a whole, including teacher education. I wrote elsewhere seven years ago that teacher education has often found itself in "heavy seas" in the past (Zgaga, 2014), but in the last year the hurricane waves we have known in the past have been compounded by the waves of the COVID-19 epidemic. At this point, I think we should begin to reflect on the current context and tasks facing teacher education policy today. I can by no means imagine that I will be able to provide an answer to these complex challenges in the next few minutes, but I am convinced that our three-day conference will make an important contribution to understanding and resolving some of these issues.

The first months of last year were an unexpected and unpleasant surprise all over the world. For a long time we did not believe that stories such as Boccaccio tells at the beginning of his *Decameron* could be anything but fiction. But modern human ideas of what is fiction and what is reality have proven to be just as problematic as they were in the past. And this is also true in the field of education. In more and more countries, kindergartens, schools and colleges have been closed, virtually all over the world and literally overnight. At the same time, the technological equipment of our civilization was almost universally presented as a consolation, on the basis of which "learning and teaching from home" was supposed not be a problem at all. Fiction. First, but not least. Of course, over the last few decades we have encountered various issues in relation to the use of ICT and "distance learning"; at the outbreak of the epidemic we were neither without knowledge nor without experience in this respect. But even when schools were at their most advanced in this regard, the use of ICT was only a *support* for pedagogical work, *not a substitute* for it. What has been forgotten is the old humanist insight that evil and good are not to be found in the material, "objective" world, for example in technical means, but in the human, social world: the insight that the "evil" that can be

associated, for example, with the use of technical means is primarily a matter of social action and social structures.

Today, more than a year after the outbreak of the pandemic, we have more and more experience and more and more research-based evidence of *how profound and severe the consequences have been for the younger generations who have been forced to "home schooling"*. For example, earlier this week, survey results were published in our media¹ suggesting that during the epidemic, the gap between children from families with higher education and children from families with lower levels of education widened. The motto of "quality education for all" (Sustainable Development Goals, 2015) that has guided us in recent times faces a serious challenge. This is the first of the crucial points to which all attention must be paid, both in research and in practical work in schools, and not least in teacher education institutions.

Another broad subject, to which much attention should be given in a similar way, and with as many parties as possible, is the question *why in some countries the schools were closed so long?* Was this justified? What were the consequences? How to deal with similar cases that may still occur? Slovenia is one of those European countries where schools were closed the longest. Despite warnings from teachers and experts that some specific aspects of closed institutions were highly controversial, it was only after an appeal that the Constitutional Court ruled that government regulations on closed institutions for the education of children with special needs were *unconstitutional*.

This raises the third important question. It is quite clear and indisputable that a pandemic requires a limit on physical contacts in the population. (But let me make a note here: *physical* contact and not *social* contact! Among the victims of the pandemic was obviously language: there was much talk – and still is – of "social distancing" rather than "physical distancing.") However, with the perfectly understandable demand for such a restriction, physical restriction, it is also clear that not all contact can simply be restricted. Medical personnel need to be in contact with patients, firefighters need to be in contact with the people who need their help, and so on. So it is a question of *priorities* - and negotiating priorities requires a political decision. The question therefore is: *why has education ended up at the bottom of the priority list* in many countries? Perhaps because of the fiction that teachers can do anything through technological means? Because of the belief that Zoom can completely replace educational institutions and the teaching profession? Because of a complete lack of understanding of what the educational profession is actually about?

As I read the abstracts of the papers for this conference, I was pleased to find that many of them also address the issues that concern me. I hope, therefore, that this conference, in parallel with many other activities around the world, will contribute to the progressive clarification of these questions and dilemmas. Teachers at all levels and in all subject areas, including teachers of teachers, have a very long agenda ahead of them. It will be necessary to

¹ Vox populi – Izobraževanje v epidemiji [Education in the epidemic]. *Dnevnik*, 17 May 2021.

clarify the extent of the decline in knowledge in certain areas and what pedagogical strategies are available to us to compensate for this decline more quickly. It will be necessary to clarify how to deal with the consequences that have arisen at the social and emotional level of children, young people, university students and so on. It will have to be clarified what kind of educational policy we need in the current situation. And finally, teacher education institutions will have to find ways in which both initial and in-service teacher education can respond more effectively to the problems we face in the present.

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