



IMPRESSIONS, MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the Teacher Education Policy in Europe (TEPE) annual conference

“Challenges of distance teaching in teacher education and education”

20-22 May 2021, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Over the past year and a half, the pandemic has posed serious challenges to many professions, including education in general and teacher education in particular. COVID19 created an unprecedented and unimagined disruption without preparation. As in schools, in teacher education daily routines were challenged and we needed to rethink both our understanding of what teaching in schools looks like and what teachers need, and our Understanding of TE pedagogy which is traditionally based on close interpersonal interaction and classroom teaching practice.

In this turbulent period and given the circumstances and the need for ‘emergency distance learning’, many teacher educators did their very best with full dedication to their responsibilities towards students, schools and society. At the same time, the question can be raised whether we can do better next time. The answer to that question depends on the extent in which we are able to learn from our past experiences. Research and exchange of our experiences can support this learning process.

The Teacher Education Policy in Europe (TEPE) network has been actively involved in efforts to learn from our past experiences and to strengthen knowledge to meet the new challenges. In doing so, we are aware of the importance of bringing together experts from different fields in a broad international forum. Among others, on 15 April 2021, with the help of colleagues from Tallinn University, we organized a *webinar on the dilemmas and challenges teachers and schools face during the pandemic to ensure quality education for all, and how teacher education can support this*. A month later, on 20-22 May, we held our fifteenth annual conference entitled *Challenges of distance teaching in teacher education and education*, organized by colleagues from the University of Ljubljana. It was attended by over 200 participants from 34 countries. In this document we summarize the main findings and recommendations that emerged from the presentations and discussions at both events.

Main messages from the TEPE webinar on 15 April 2021:

What dilemmas and challenges do teachers and schools face during the pandemic in providing quality education for all and how can teacher education support this?

The presentations and discussion during the webinar confirmed that the key dilemmas faced by teachers and schools during the pandemic are covered in particular in the following issues:

1. Teachers’ new role and competences:

- to share agency with students,
- the skills and ability to support self-regulated learning,

- didactical competence and online pedagogy.
2. Students' needs:
- need for personalised learning paths,
 - low socioeconomic background factors that limit students' participation in learning,
 - the unequal position of students with special needs.

Main challenges:

Based on the webinar contributions, a number of main challenges could be formulated:

1. The digital challenge: the need to strengthen digital competence of teachers and to develop appropriate didactics for digital classrooms and distance learning in initial teacher education.
2. The mental wellbeing of students and teachers: avoiding burnout of teachers, noticing and addressing mental health problems of students.
3. The challenge of agency and self-regulation: raising teacher awareness and encouraging and empowering students to take on responsibility for teaching and learning.
4. The challenge of socioeconomic backgrounds: the need to raise awareness regarding the impact of socioeconomic backgrounds on the ability of learners to engage in digital learning arrangements, leading to appropriate decisions at both the individual (teacher's) and institutional level regarding the design of learning environments that strengthen equal opportunities.

Main messages from the TEPE annual conference on 20 - 22 May 2021

Challenges of distance teaching in teacher education and education

The conference was inspired by an introductory keynote by professor Michael Apple, nearly fifty presentations in parallel sessions, discussions in each parallel session and a concluding round table. In the presentations and discussions a number of topics were covered:

1. General societal concerns regarding *learning outcomes*, especially relating to growing inequalities in society.
2. Concerns regarding *education, knowledge and power* given the growing dependency on technological (and commercial) platforms, that might turn education into a profit model contributing to increasing existing inequalities and threatening the moral purpose of education.
3. Concerns of individual students and student teachers during distance learning regarding their *learning opportunities* (e.g. regarding teaching practices during lockdown).
4. Concerns and needs of teachers/teacher educators in dealing with the lockdown and providing distance learning which required the *flexibility and agency* to be able to deal with the unexpected.
5. Concerns of teacher educators in *designing distance learning arrangements* that would fit both with the needs of student teachers and with the aims of the TE programmes.

The different conference activities and discussions contributed to answering the following questions:

1. *What are the implications of distance teaching for the teaching and learning process?*

New opportunities for teaching -learning practices require new focus:

- Recognition of the importance of social interaction and new ways of communication between all parties (school, university, homes);
- new teaching approaches, pedagogical repertoire – at the university and at schools;
- new competences required in futures: managing in uncertain situations; cross-curricular competencies, agency of the actors, constant improvement of the system etc.

2. *How to find ways for flexible personalized learning and students' agency?*

For flexibility of the learning process and creation of personalized learning paths to become realistic scenarios, it is essential to:

- solve the tension between highly designed curricula and the need to strengthen the agency of student teachers in taking ownership of their learning and teaching;
- adopt effective distance learning solutions that build on the existing (and available) technology; focus should be on the actions that technological devices enable, rather than the devices themselves;
- rethink teacher education courses in the direction of greater personalisation, flexibility and the ability to mediate teaching through technology;
- strengthen self-regulation of the learners – but also teachers – as a crucial element.

3. *How to support vulnerable groups of learners, to deal with inequality, consider individual needs of students and take care of the well-being of all parties?*

The situation in which teaching and learning takes place "from home" has greatly exacerbated the problem of inequality and posed new challenges to the implementation of the principles of inclusion and quality education for all. The key challenge that needs to be addressed in the process of initial and in-service teacher education is how initial and post-initial teacher education curricula can support (student) teachers to deal with the fact that:

- low socioeconomic background factors can limit students' participation in learning process (lack of ICT tools, lack of domestic support, etc.);
- students with special needs find themselves in an even more unequal position in "home schooling", which requires appropriate adjustments;
- online environments may be easier for some students, but social interaction is paramount and can not be compensated by ICT resources alone;
- maintaining positive relationships with students and families is essential, especially during distance learning; as many students are not reaching the expected levels necessary for independent learning, parents play a crucial role in the process, and even more so when it comes to distance education.

4. *Implication for teacher education - what is missing in our TE programmes?*

The challenges above bring new opportunities for initial teacher education regarding:

- the organisation of (distant) studies, specially practicum (and cooperation with schools) during initial teacher education;
- identification and provision of new competences and roles required by:

- student teachers,
- teacher educators,
- tutor/mentor teachers;
- the identification and provision of teacher educators' competences for hybrid teaching.

These questions require serious consideration and an effective answer from all partners involved in the educational process: teachers, schools, educational decision-makers, as well as from teacher education institutions. The latter can also make a significant contribution in the field of researching the challenges facing the entire field of education today.

To be able to formulate effective answers to these four questions, teacher education should become more adaptable and responsive to the needs of society. The pandemic has shown that many schools and teachers have been innovative in a very disruptive context of a lockdown, but teacher education institutions have yet to grasp and analyse the impact of these changes in practice. At the same time, traditional professional development offerings have become outdated and irrelevant to many active teachers. By critically reflecting on disruptions such as the lockdown, teacher education systems need to innovate and improve their capacity for resilience in the "risk society" (Beck, 1992).

Recommendations

The TEPE annual conference 2021 showed that long-term lessons can and must be drawn from the emergency response to the COVID crisis for the development of the social and moral framework of teacher education programmes in Europe.

Such programmes must take into account:

- the larger societal picture, with its tension between the public value of education and the political and economic perspectives on education;
- the opportunities and obstacles for different groups of learners that are created by technology;
- the agency of (student) teachers to adapt to changing circumstances;
- the need to facilitate different learning aims covering the whole rainbow of the purposes of education: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together;
- the design challenges in creating blended learning environments that support these learning aims by combining the strength of both off-line and on-line opportunities.

This leads to the following *recommendations for different stakeholders*:

1. To teacher education institutions:

- redesign teacher education to create space for student teachers to develop agency and direct their own learning paths;
- incorporate into the curriculum design skills for blended learning environments that support learning opportunities and agency for all students and promote both personal learning pathways and social cohesion for all students with diverse backgrounds and needs.

2. To teachers and schools:

- continue to engage in finding new solutions to new challenges; think critically about them, share them as examples of good practice with colleagues in other schools as well as with colleagues in teacher education institutions;
- collaborate closely with teacher education institutions as for teacher education institutions, responses from teachers and schools are very important, especially in relation to the implementation of the practicum and, in general, the reception of student teachers who come to schools with different tasks and questions.

3. To educational decision-makers (regional, national, European level):

- open up quality criteria for teacher education in such a way that they create space for and support the development of the agency and collaborative professional autonomy of student teachers;

- encourage and support national and European teacher education networks and communities involving different stakeholders including teachers and teacher educators;
- recognize the importance of teacher and teacher educator agency and quality as key to the quality of (blended) education, rather than focusing on rules and regulations;
- recognize teachers and teacher educators as key actors in the development and design of new learning arrangements in response to the needs of students, schools and society.

4. To teacher education researchers:

- put research in education (in general) and research on/in teacher education (in particular under the aggravated conditions that have marked the last school year) at the top of the research priorities;
- strengthen cooperation with all actors in teacher education.

5. To European educational policy makers:

- The EU discourse should go beyond a mere skills and competency approach when it comes to developing a European education policy, and rather consider a more social and ethical approach to education. Considering the European Pillars of Social Rights and the planned establishment of the European Education Area in 2025, the Covid 19 pandemic could be seen as an opportunity to rethink the European political project towards a new social Europe, in which the creation of a European Education Area plays a crucial role. Centuries-old European concepts such as Bildung and paideia provide a strong ethical framework and could serve as a resource for reviving a common cultural heritage and strengthening European identity.

6. To all:

- Be vigilant against developments that could endanger the social and moral character of inclusive and democratic education for all.