Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Improving the Quality of Teacher Education

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On 3 August 2007, the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on Improving the quality of teacher education

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 19 December 2007. The rapporteur was Mr Soares.

At its 441st plenary session of 16 and 17 January 2008 (meeting of 16 January) the Committee adopted the following opinion unanimously.

1. Summary and recommendations

1.1 Education has always been acknowledged to be not only a key aspect of personal development and growth but also a factor for the development of society itself. In a globalised and highly competitive world, education is even more crucial to the future of both society and individuals, given the wealth of knowledge and skills that people are now expected to have.

1.2 The EESC considers that education’s main purpose is still to train people to be free, critical, independent and able to contribute to improving the society in which they live, with the necessary skills to face new challenges, whilst understanding that they are part of a cultural legacy and share the same values and that the world in which they live does not revolve around them alone and should, therefore, be preserved for future generations. Education also has a duty to help set people free.

1.3 Against this backdrop, teachers are central to achieving this aim, because they have the task not only of passing on knowledge but also of interacting with children and young people in a society in which family structure has changed radically and now takes new shapes and forms.

1.4 The EESC welcomes the Commission communication to the Council and the European Parliament on how to improve teacher training and broadly agrees with its approach.

1.5 The Committee considers, however, that despite the Commission’s limited powers in this area, the communication could go a little further and address other issues which, because of their importance today, warrant particular attention.

1.6 Specifically, what new strategies can and should be designed for teaching in an environment of global change? How should the new issues arising from changes in family structures, with their new shapes and forms, be addressed? How can teachers’ ongoing training be guaranteed to form part of lifelong learning? Lastly, how can the teaching profession be made more attractive to young people, particularly in terms of remuneration and benefits, amongst other things?

1.7 The EESC is thoroughly convinced, as the Commission states in its communication, that in an increasingly complex and demanding society, the teaching profession should be seen as a crucial component in promoting high-quality education that is able to adapt to today’s requirements. This is why improving university-level education and professional teacher training and offering appropriate pay and career conditions are central to achieving this objective.

2. Gist of the Commission communication

2.1 The Communication identifies the quality of teaching and teacher training as a key factor in ensuring the quality of education and improving the educational attainment of young people. It lists a number of steps that could now be taken in this field, and ways in which the Commission can support that work.

2.2 The Commission considers that, taken as a whole, these proposals would help to ensure that teachers’ initial training and their professional development are coordinated, coherent and properly funded; to ensure that all teachers possess the knowledge, attitudes and resources that they require to be effective; to support the professionalisation of teaching; to promote a culture of discussion and research within the profession on teaching practices and to promote the status and recognition of the profession.

2.3 This will help improve the quality of education for all and enable Member States to achieve — at national level — the Lisbon goals for social cohesion and economic competitiveness and growth.
3. General comments

3.1 Over the years, the teaching profession has changed, not only in its working methods but also in its very role, as a result of developments in society and new expectations of schools. Teachers, who were once ‘purveyors of knowledge’, whose knowledge was expected to be absolute, have become teacher/educators or learning facilitators, able to give structure to the knowledge acquired by young people from other sources, which are sometimes more up-to-date than the teachers’ own.

3.1.1 In particular, the knowledge acquired from the Internet and the new information and communication technologies that are available to most young people today, and which they access and use without due consideration, raise problems that need to be addressed either in teacher’s initial training or in their ongoing training, so that they are able to assimilate this knowledge in order to incorporate it into young people’s education.

3.2 Schools in turn have become more democratic and more heterogeneous, the product of a society which has also become more diverse, more demanding and more complex. As a result, democracy, equality and diversity have become fundamental concepts of schools today; they are vital elements of inclusive schools that also embrace children and young people with disabilities. Against this backdrop, teachers now have a new task: to provide increasingly individualised answers that are tailored to each pupil.

3.3 The phenomena of immigration, social discrimination, poverty, youth violence, especially in urban areas, and greater job instability and long-term unemployment have ‘infiltrated’ schools and have made teaching more complex and difficult, as well as more unstable and insecure. Often, teachers do not know how to deal with these new phenomena and do not receive the support they would need to do so.

3.4 Similarly, new family structures reflecting the increase in the number of working women and of one-parent families and other forms of home life require teachers to demonstrate new skills, especially that of dealing with the parental responsibility chosen by each family.

3.5 Initial teacher training has not always kept pace with these changes. An initial training that was for a long time overly academic is now often excessively teaching-centred, with much less emphasis on teachers’ knowledge of the different subjects. What is really needed is a new balance between these two strands of teacher training.

3.6 Indeed, initial teacher training should be a balanced combination of scientific and educational knowledge because this balance is precisely what defines the teaching profession. This training should also, however, include a psycho-sociological and even anthropological component that helps trainee teachers to acquire the knowledge and techniques needed to be able to teach in multicultural settings, making use of an inter-cultural approach, in which they will have to manage and solve situations of conflict and similar problems. This initial training should also teach future teachers how to listen to young people in order to involve them in finding the best solutions. In this connection, it is important to bear in mind the rights to which children and young people are entitled under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, whereby all children and young people have the right to education, leisure time, proper treatment and a say in their own life circumstances.

3.7 Whilst the EESC agrees with the Commission’s idea that no initial training can provide teachers with all of the knowledge and skills necessary for a life-time of teaching, the fact is that the longer and more in-depth the initial training is, the more willing teachers will be to make use of ongoing training. This fact has not been given due prominence in teacher training policies.

3.8 Furthermore, initial teacher training should include more wide-ranging aims than simply knowing what and how to teach. It should convey the idea that teachers are professionals who give thought to what they are doing and are able to assess the contexts in which their work takes place, to define the required strategies and to evaluate the results. Training should also get across the idea that education can and should be a tool for social cohesion, social and economic development and for training people to be active and committed, to respect cultural and environmental diversity and even to build a better world. Indeed, it is teachers who really create social cohesion.

3.9 With regard to ongoing training, this should be based not only on the individual needs of teachers as professionals who recognise the limitations of their own knowledge and who are aware of current social and technological developments; it should also address the collective needs of schools as communities that form part of a broader community involving other players and stakeholders.

3.10 In many countries, ongoing training is a recent development and should continue to be encouraged as a key component of progress for the teaching profession. Ongoing training is one of teachers’ professional duties and is acknowledged to be crucial to their work. It should, therefore, be given the time, space and resources it requires to become a permanent aspect of the job.

3.11 Ongoing teacher training in vocational and technological subjects should keep pace with technological developments. It should involve partnerships with business in order to familiarise and update teachers with the latest technological developments.

3.12 One of the most serious mistakes made in ongoing training policies is to think that training can be standardised within a given subject area. Whilst this aspect cannot and should not be discounted, it is worth pointing out that such training must match the needs of the community in which the school is located and must reflect the school’s own educational aims. Only in this way will each country or region be able to meet the challenges relating to their social and economic development and take account of the new concerns facing society.
3.13 The conditions for entering the profession and for career development, the specific support provided for working in this field, pay that reflects the profession’s social importance and social recognition for the work that is done are some of the factors that can help, in addition to teacher training, to attract the most able people into teaching, which is acknowledged to be a difficult and testing profession and thus help to improve education, ensuring that it is rigorous and of high quality.

4. Specific comments

4.1 The Commission communication highlights the fact that teachers’ education and professional training are closely connected to other key policies, such as the European Youth Pact (1), policies on innovation, research, business (2) and multilingualism (3) and to the recognition of professional qualifications (4).

4.2 The EESC broadly agrees that these policies overlap with the issue in question but considers that it would be useful to emphasise other aspects, which should definitely form part of any teacher training, whether initial or ongoing:

4.2.1 The Millennium Goals, to which all EU members of the UN are committed and which, in order to be achieved, require highly qualified teachers whose training must form part of a common strategy.

4.2.2 The Lisbon goals, which emphasise the importance of knowledge, and thus of education, based on the premise that Europe’s greatest asset is its people. Raising young people’s awareness of sustainable development and the social market economy is a task that falls under the Lisbon strategy and should form part of young people’s education.

4.2.3 The gender aspect, not only because most teachers are women but also because this is a key issue in European policy on socio-economic development and social cohesion.

4.2.4 The general education of young people in all its aspects: physical, intellectual, creative, innovative, active and socially useful. Thinking about the general education of children and young people requires cognitive ability, teaching/educational training and the ability to work as part of a team and these skills can only be gained by means of a demanding initial training and the appropriate ongoing training.

4.3 The communication outlines the profile of teachers in the European Union, highlighting three key aspects: gender, age and remuneration, but does not explore in detail the link that might exist between these three factors.

4.3.1 Whilst it is true that women are always in the majority in all areas of education, their number is inversely proportionate to the social importance and/or the remuneration offered in each sector. Consequently, from pre-school to higher education, the proportion of women falls.

4.3.2 The image of the teaching profession is less attractive today and cannot compete with careers that are more alluring to graduates with the same qualifications. It is thus no longer attracting younger candidates. The profession has clearly become more demanding, in terms of both initial training and social responsibility, but this fact has not been reflected in better working conditions, career prospects and remuneration.

4.3.2.1 The pure sciences and information and communication technologies have been affected particularly badly by this competition, resulting in a widespread shortage of teachers in these subjects.

4.3.3 The EESC also wishes to point out that some of the assertions made in the communication are not supported by detailed analysis, thus concealing the more complex reality of a number of situations. When teachers’ salaries are compared with the average national income, for example, account should be taken of the value of salaries in relation to GDP and the relationship between salaries and career length and a comparison should be made with other professions that have equally rigorous academic requirements.

4.3.4 In Europe, the teaching profession is today clearly ageing and there are justified fears concerning its ability to replenish itself, given that so many teachers are between 50 and 64 years old. Europe should draw up a forward planning study on the potential consequences of the age pyramid.

4.3.5 It is, therefore, crucial to make the teaching profession more attractive to young people, which will, of course, require not only greater investment but also and, perhaps even more importantly, making social and cultural changes in order to improve teachers’ standing in society.

4.4 The Commission communication sets out a number of measures in the field of education policy that could help to improve teacher education, in particular as regards lifelong learning, the necessary skills, reflective practice and research, qualifications, teacher education in higher education and teaching in society.

4.4.1 The EESC agrees with the ideas set out in the communication, but considers that they should only be considered within a structured framework and should be grounded in different contexts in which they apply. All of the ideas are important, of course, but require society to adopt a different view of what it means to be a teacher today, against a backdrop of increased knowledge and more techniques and means to access knowledge.
5. The EESC’s recommendations

Consequently, and reaffirming that it broadly supports the Commission communication, the EESC considers that the approach to the issue of improving the quality of teacher education should go beyond their initial and ongoing training and thus makes the following recommendations:

5.1 Society should adopt a more favourable view of the teaching profession, given the latter’s particular importance to achieving the goals set by the Lisbon strategy and since it is teachers who have the task of developing the EU’s most valuable asset: its human resources.

5.2 A new recognition of the teaching profession requires a reassessment of salary levels, team-work and ongoing training, access to the profession and career progression, and of working conditions and specific support for the sectors and areas that need it the most, in order to attract enthusiastic and competent young people into the profession.

5.2.1 This reassessment should entail a detailed document setting out the skills expected of teachers, in terms of academic knowledge, a sociological understanding of the different population groups in Europe and in terms of educational methods.

5.3 Although education does not specifically fall within the European Union’s remit, improving open coordination, gathering and sharing information, exchanging good practice, launching specific programmes to upgrade the teaching profession’s profile could all be means of helping Member States to implement active policies to achieve this goal.

5.4 Teaching is an extremely responsible job and strategies must, therefore, be developed to support young teachers at the start of their career, through assistance provided by more experienced teachers who, due to work-related strain (physical or mental), should moreover not be obliged to perform the same duties until they reach retirement age.

5.5 The existence of multidisciplinary educational teams, whether or not coordinated by teachers, is today a key tool for any educational project that takes on board the new social situations (family structures and organisation, working time and arrangements, long-term unemployment, immigration, in particular those resulting from a poor knowledge of the language and culture of the host country) or specific permanent situations (children and young people with special educational needs due to a handicap, combating sexism and consideration of gender equality). In this context, initial teacher training should include sufficient awareness of these issues. Moreover, it is essential to train specialist teachers for children and young people with special educational needs, which could also be achieved by offering Master’s or PhD degrees in this area.

5.6 Another social situation becoming increasingly common in schools is youth violence, which should be addressed from a multidisciplinary approach aimed at understanding this phenomenon, which tends to occur mainly in urban settings.

5.7 Furthermore, investment in auxiliary teaching staff is crucial to ensuring support for educational tasks that the school is obliged to provide but which go beyond the normal duties of a teacher.

5.8 Initial training should take account of all of these assumptions and should, therefore, be of high quality, in terms of academic content and of the educational/teaching content and also of new skills such as the abilities to work as part of a team, to interact with other social stakeholders, in particular families, and the ability to instil the desire to learn in other people. This training should include methods for leading activities and group dynamics, which can prevent and defuse latent social conflict.

5.9 The EESC therefore recommends that the teaching profession be considered to warrant a lengthy initial training, high requirements and a better understanding of the relationships between schools and society, including the world of work.

5.10 With regard to ongoing training, this should be considered to be an integral part of a teacher’s career progression, and so Member States should design programmes to implement a system that meets the needs of both teachers and schools.

5.11 If ongoing training is to succeed and be effective in meeting its aims, teachers must be actively involved in it from the development and planning stages through to implementation and it should focus primarily on schools and on the specific aims of each school’s educational project.

5.12 The socio-economic stakeholders and the union organisations representing teachers in particular should be viewed as valued partners in the process of defining the aims of teachers’ initial and ongoing training schemes and in evaluating these schemes.

5.13 Ongoing training could have a component of parent and teacher participation in order to involve these in the school’s educational project, with a view to understanding the variety of factors affecting their children’s studies and thus playing a role in their children’s education outside the home environment.

5.14 Ongoing training should also provide a forum for discussion within the profession and it would thus be desirable to involve other educational stakeholders and take account of the possibility of involving different schools in a broader framework.

5.15 Lastly, European programmes should encourage experience and information exchanges between schools located in different countries but which share similarities. Experience-sharing between schools in host countries and schools in immigrants’ countries of origin, for example, would be a useful way of understanding the difficulties faced by children and young people from this social group and of developing strategies to overcome obvious problems.
5.16 Furthermore, the Lisbon strategy framework should be used to encourage, in particular with regard to study leave and cross-EU teacher mobility, e.g. via study leave, as a vector (or vehicle) for experiences and innovation to improve lifelong learning.

5.17 Lastly, appropriate education indicators should be identified and recognised in all EU countries to assess gains and to help educational systems achieve the common aim of improving qualifications and social cohesion.


The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Dimitris DIMITRIADIS

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions Promoting young people’s full participation in education, employment and society

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On 5 September 2007, the Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on
Promoting young people’s full participation in education, employment and society

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 19 December 2007. The rapporteur was Mr Trantina.

At its 441st plenary session, held on 16 and 17 January 2008 (meeting of 17 January 2008), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 137 votes to none, with 3 abstentions.

1. Summary of recommendations

1.1 The EESC agrees with the need to prepare a truly European transversal youth strategy and is ready to contribute to this process with its means such as direct contact with grass root organisations and sensitisation of EU institutions of problems and solutions on grass root level.

1.2 The EESC believes that the process of building a successful and sustainable transversal child and youth strategy should be facilitated through a permanent structure within the Commission (coordinating the work of various DGs involved) or an interinstitutional group and should be based on setting up of a monitoring mechanism with clear targets and deadlines.

1.3 The EESC believes that the first step to increasing employment in the EU — before doing the utmost to mobilise older workers — is to get young people into work on a massive scale, since this would have a far longer impact, both sociological (independence, social, birth-rates, family, etc.) and economic, in terms of growth, social financing, consumption, savings and investment (building, etc.). It urges Member States and European institutions to take the necessary steps to reduce youth unemployment in Europe, mainly through quicker and more efficient implementation of the European Youth Pact and Member States’ Lisbon Strategy national reform programmes.

1.4 The EESC urges that the situation of young people in rural areas and poor urban areas be given greater consideration. The EESC calls on Member States to rise to the challenge of eradicating child poverty and asks for measures to be added in order to improve participation of young people with disabilities in society on equal terms.

1.5 The EESC recommends that the Commission continues to work on the recognition of voluntary youth work through engagement with employers’ organisations, workers’ organisations, representatives of the formal education system and appropriate NGOs.

1.6 The EESC repeats its main points on the subject of voluntary activities of young people, mainly that:

— the Commission should announce a Year of Volunteers, and publish a White Paper on voluntary activity and active citizenship in Europe;

— the Commission and Member States should raise the awareness on the contribution of youth work to the development of young people and the skills, values and attitudes gained through active involvement in youth organisations and youth work activities.