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The role of teachers in the 21st century

ÉVA UJLAKYNÉ SZÚCS

Abstract: In the fast changing world of the early 21st century public education is also changing. As part of the changes the role of schools and education will also be different both in the educational system and in the society. Together with them the role of teachers will also change. In my essay I am examining how the new social challenges and demands towards education and teachers change schools into institutions with modern aims and social contracts. We are going to depict the characteristic features of 'ideal' teachers by exploring recent literature and the results of a survey. In the survey teachers reveal their professional aims and needs for the future. Finally, we are going to explore teachers' knowledge base in the 21st century.

Keywords: education – role of school – role of teacher – society – features of teacher

Résumé: A XXI. század elejének változó világában a közoktatás is folyamatosan változik. A változások részeként megváltozik az oktatás és az iskolák szerepe a társadalomban, és ezzel együtt a pedagógusok szerepe is. Dolgozatomban azt vizsgálom meg, hogy a társadalom új kihívásai és elvárásai az oktatással és a pedagógusokkal szemben hogyan alakítják át az iskolát modern célokkal és szerveződéssel bíró intézményekké. Megvizsgáljuk az "ideális" tanár jellemző tulajdonságait a szakirodalom és egy felmérés segítségével. A felmérés során nyelvpedagógusok nyilatkoztak arról, hogy milyen szakmai céljaik és szükségleteik vannak a jövőre nézve. Végül a pedagógus tudásának új alkotóelemeit vitatjuk meg és tárjuk fel.

Mots-clés: képzés – iskola szerepe – a tanár szerepe – társadalom – a tanár funkciói

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Introduction – the changing context of teaching

There have been a great number of changes in education systems worldwide recently. However, in Europe we have experienced a great change with the enlargement of the European Union and its consequences. The European Union has published several papers on the future of education, both at compulsory and higher education levels¹. In this essay we are going to examine the influence of the changes and its consequences on teachers in compulsory education.

If we aim to have a closer look at the characteristic features of the changes, we have to examine what they are. What everybody can see at first sight is that not only European societies, but also their schools went through relevant changes. Schools used to be the source of knowledge, a place where children were educated more or less without parental control. Schools used to prepare learners for exams (both final exams in secondary education and entrance exams for university admissions). Thus, teaching was mostly exam preparation or exam training, especially in the final years of the secondary schools.

Together with the changes, new *expectations appeared towards our schools*. Nowadays schools need to teach their learners how to gain information and how to select and use them. This happens so quickly that students learn how to use the Internet together with their teachers. Parents are involved in decision-making so they take part in the life of the school. It is no longer enough to send the kids to school in the morning, pick them up in the afternoon. Parents have to have a view of what is happening in the educational institution. Exam preparation is still important, but for example in Hungary the entrance exams are 'past tense', the final examinations (matura) have changed, and the concept of learning to learn has slowly become a very important element of teachers' job.

The changes that took place in schools have *changed the roles of teachers*, too. In the past teachers used to be the major source of knowledge, the leader and educator of their students' school life. Teachers would organise after-school activities. They used to be the authority in the class and often took over the role of parents. Nowadays, teachers provide information and show their students how to tackle them. Although they are still considered to be a kind of leader in the

¹ See *Sources*.

class, they can be thought of as facilitators in the learning process. They are supporters rather than educators and also advisors towards parents.

If we focus on the *teaching process*, we still realise that there are a great number of changes in this field as well, and all of them have an influence on the role of teachers. First of all, teachers in modern classrooms are no longer lecturers, they are facilitators, their main task is to set goals and organise the learning process accordingly. Then, in the past, teachers used to follow a syllabus which was compulsory for them. Nowadays, teachers have a National Curriculum, a Core Curriculum and a local (school) curriculum that they have to consider, but – on the other hand – they have independence to choose the teaching materials (textbook), make up a syllabus of their own and teach their pupils so that they can perform well both at examinations and in life. Curriculum design is a task teachers have to be prepared for, although the present generation of teachers has been growing into making up syllabi for years.

Another difference between the past and present tasks of teachers is represented by the technical background they need to be able to use and handle effectively (computer, photocopier, power point, projectors, etc). Instead of teaching chalk face, they need to be an information technology expert, a technician or/and a photocopy master.

One of the biggest challenges for teachers is that their role in the *school management* has also changed. The school needs them as individuals, who can make decisions and cope with the stress of the changing world of schools. At the same time teachers need to be able to work in teams, co-operate with colleagues and parents, they have to write projects to gain money for the school programmes, they have to be PR experts and need to do all these things for a modest monthly income.

The main question is how these changes manifest themselves for the society, for the participants (teachers, learners, parents) of education. One of the mentioned European Union documents deals with teachers' role in the changing process². This summarises the characteristic features of future teachers who are to face a brand new situation in future education. According to the document, teachers realize the changes, but it is not sure whether they are able to face the new requirements or not. In the EU documents, a great emphasis is placed on both initial and in-service teacher education programs which are to prepare teachers to meet new demands.

² 'Teachers meeting the challenge of change' 1998. www.teachnet.gov.uk ; see other in sources.

Teachers' knowledge base

All the above-mentioned changes have a common root. They show that it is not enough for teachers to be masters of their profession; they also have to be the artist of it. But what is the difference between a master and an artist? How can a teacher be both? What are the characteristic features of good or bad teachers/teaching? This is an evergreen question which often cannot be answered without understanding the real contexts of teaching. However, researchers have examined and described the different components of teachers' knowledge (like Roberts: 1998), the characteristic features of teachers (Hargreaves & Fullan: 1992, Falus: 1998). They have come up with the importance of content knowledge (teachers' subjects), pedagogic content knowledge (how to adapt content to the learners), general pedagogic knowledge (e.g. classroom management), curricular knowledge, contextual knowledge (the context of teaching: community expectations) and process knowledge (learning skills, observation skills, etc.). Among the characteristic features, cooperation, flexibility and the ability to relate learners appear rather important.

Teachers' needs and expectations

In the first years of the 21st century, 500 teachers have been asked to fill in a questionnaire about their teaching practices and professional needs in the southern region of Hungary³. The teachers were subject teachers of foreign languages and primary classroom teachers prepared for foreign language teaching to young learners. The main aim was to explore the differences in the ideas and practices of language teachers with different training backgrounds. Three hundred and twenty-five questionnaires were returned and a small section of the results will be presented here. The questionnaire included two groups of questions which aimed to reveal teacher's thoughts on the characteristic features of a good language teacher and their teaching arsenal (methods and aids they use). They were also asked about the professional needs of practising teachers. We would like to give a glance on the relationship between the answers of practising teachers and the image of future teachers in EU documents.

³ Ujlakyné Szűcs Éva (2006), *The Role of ELT Teacher Training to Young Learners in Lower Primary Teacher Education*, Unpublished PhD dissertation.

Survey Question No. 4: What are the characteristic features of good language teachers?

On answering this question, teachers were asked to mark the 5 most important features of good language teachers out of 16. About half of the offered answers were characteristic features of teachers in general. Most teachers marked elements like good teachers *'can explain well'*, *'use relevant teaching aids'*, *'make the learners work hard'*, *'prepare for the lessons'*, *'teach about the target language culture'*, etc. Teachers showed priority to content knowledge (their subject) over the general characteristic features like *'empathy'* or *'creativity'*.

More precisely, out of all the received answers, 50 % of the teachers marked only characteristic features of a language teacher (rather than general pedagogic features). About 90 % marked *'good target language competence'*. If we examine the elements provided for teachers to choose one by one, we can see that 82 % of respondents think good language teaching methodology is very important. *'Openness'* and *'empathy'* were among the 5 most important features only in 32-34 % of the answers. The characteristic features of modern professional teachers such as *open character, empathy, motivation*, etc. were ranked at the back of the list. The questionnaire results reveal that language teachers think that content knowledge is by far the most important, while pedagogic knowledge and methodology are not so relevant. It is a striking point in the light of the European Union documents and, also, according to some Hungarian experts who write about the most important features of teachers. Bárdos (1985), for example, as early as 1985, expressed very similar ideas to the EU documents. He says that the characteristic features of teachers shine through their content knowledge and determine the quality of teaching. Other Hungarian researchers like Mihály (2002), Petneki (2002), Poór (2003) and Nikolov (2003) – at the time of data collection – summarise the expectations towards future teachers, and they claim that future teachers need to be open towards the needs of the learners; they should be innovative and creative.

Survey Question No. 5: What are teachers' needs in in-service teacher training?

First we thought that the answer to this question would show how much teachers are aware of the fact that education and society and the requirements towards teaching are in the process of change. According to the questionnaire results, teachers think that *computer skills* are very important for them (47 % of the answers would need a good computer course). It is also interesting that 43 % of the answerers (who are foreign language teachers by profession) think they need to learn of *another foreign language*. About 31 % of the answers say that an up-to-date *foreign language teaching methodology course* could be useful, and 27 % would like to *improve their target language skills*. About one third of the answerers think that *syllabus-design (planning), textbook evaluation and classroom techniques* are necessary for their development as

practising teachers. Another interesting feature of the answers was that 29 % of the teachers would need self-management training.

Some of the answers (computer skills, methodology course, etc.) will definitely be very important in the future, and some of them are already part of our everyday teaching life (computer skills and foreign languages). They refer to the fact that teachers are mostly interested in practical, 'right-into-teaching' skills. These answers also reveal that the answerers are not very good at computing and they do not speak (more than one) foreign languages.

On the other hand, we can say that skills and competences which seem to be fairly important in the near future in education do not really appear among the needs of practising teachers. As we asked and interviewed some final year undergraduates as well in the data collection process, we can say that there are no significant differences between the needs of practising teachers and teachers-to-be undergraduates. Neither of the groups of teachers feels that convertible and renewable content knowledge, open and pedagogically well-trained teachers are the key figures of the future education.

Teacher Education for the Future

In my view, teacher education – rather than teacher training – needs to change in the near future. Some experts say it is too late to begin the changes, as we need new competencies in teaching right now. However, if teacher education in Hungary follows its best tradition, and it remains practical, flexible and child-centred, there is a hope that the next generation of learners will get the support and skills they need in life during their schooling years from their own teachers.

The need of a generation of teachers who aim to develop learners instead of teaching them, who help their pupils to become independent (learning to learn), who provide students with motivation and interest for life-long learning and urge them to become autonomous learners, is essential in the education of the future.

The responsibility of governments, higher education institutions, and mostly teacher educators both in pre-and in-service education, is huge. European Union member states take part in several projects which help us to prepare for taking the responsibility in achieving relevant change.

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