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Developing competence-based teacher education in France

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Competencies

In most countries of the European Union, competences play a role in some way in the assessment of teachers' work

In France, all teachers at all levels of education, and all professionals workers in other areas of education, are required to have centrally defined competences. The aim being that all participants in the organisation contribute equally to the achievement of common goals, while always respecting the specificities of their profession.

Each of these competences is based on knowledge and its application, and is based on a basic professional attitude, but all are essential. These competences are tested during the teacher qualification examination and are also emphasised during subsequent supervision checks.

The common competences that are mandatory for all education staff are set out in a decree issued by the Ministry of Education on 25 July 2013. (Bulletin Officiel 2013)

Compared to other countries in the European Union, France places greater emphasis on neutrality and freedom of expression, IT skills and the correct use of the French language. (Falus 2011)

Brief history

In Europe, France was the first country to train teachers, the first such educational establishment opening its doors in Reims in 1684, at the end of the 17th century. (Németh 2015) (Despite this, more than a century later, when primary education began under Napoleon's empire, there were still no qualifications for teachers, who were mostly educated to baccalaureate level.

The Guizot law of 1833 was the first to stipulate that each commune was obliged to establish at least one school and that a teacher training college was to be set up in each department. In 1879, the option was opened up to women, and at least one teacher training school had to be established per department.

The law of 1882 made elementary education compulsory for children from 6 to 12 years of age, but also stipulated that education should be completely independent of the church and the different religions. (Mihály 2009)

In 1989, the decision was taken to create the IUFM (Institut Universitaires de Formation des Maîtres), which trained teachers in a university system from 1991 to 2005, then the IUFM was merged into the universities. Finally from 2011, in line with the Bologna process, the system of teacher training was defined as 3+2 years (Pálffy 2014).

General characteristics

The French education system is generally divided into regional school districts, yet it can be described as a centralised education system. In total, some 30 school regions in the mainland, Corsica and the overseas territories manage the tasks of the education and training institutions.

These institutions, known as ‚rectorat' (rectorate academies), have a wide range of powers. Teachers who are successful in a professional competition (concours) apply to the rectorat and are appointed by them. From 2010, in line with the Bologna system, all teacher candidates will be required to follow a five-year university course. The Master's degree (Décret masterisation 2009) undoubtedly provides a higher level of qualification, but practical training is not included in the programme.

Unlike in Hungary, both nursery and lower secondary teachers are called ‚professeur des écoles', and upper secondary and secondary school teachers are not distinguished, but are called ‚enseignement secondaire'. In France, schools do not only teach children in class, but also perform many other tasks. However, these are not organised and managed by teachers, but by specialised assistants, teaching assistants and colleagues specifically trained for these tasks (Falus 2011).

Input requirements

Anyone can apply for teacher training in France, provided they have a school-leaving certificate. There is no entrance examination or scoring. According to individual preferences, everyone chooses a university and enrols. Only those applying for a degree in physical education have to take an aptitude test. Universities charge a registration fee, which currently ranges from €170 to €380 per year. Of course, those who choose to study at a private university pay a tuition fee of between 1,500 and 30,000 euros per academic year (CampusFrance).

Those who choose a teaching career in three stages, first complete a three-year bachelor's degree (Licence), which leads to a two-year master's degree.

After the fifth year of university, the Diploma takes them to the third and final stage, when they start their career as a trainee. During the bachelor's degree, pedagogical subjects such as pedagogy and psychology are not included in the compulsory curriculum, but students are expected to know and apply such knowledge. Optional subjects include courses on pedagogy, but their number and quantity varies from university to university. Some institutions offer practical training and classroom visits, others not at all (Eurydice).

From the 2011/12 academic year onwards, one day of practical training per week has been made compulsory for all students in the second year of the Master's programme. Experience has shown that they often do not receive enough support to do this, often without a mentor teacher, and are left to work on their tasks alone with their peers. Despite the regulations, it is possible that school practice is completely missed and that trainee teachers are first in contact with children as employees. One reason for this may be that the university cannot afford to pay for the practical training and therefore does not allow it. Overall, there is a significant discrepancy between the requirements of the Regulation and the reality.

Output requirements

At the same time as completing the Master's degree, a teacher candidate must also take a qualifying examination, which consists of two parts: firstly, a subject test, which measures professional competence, and a pedagogical test, which is a situational test, depending on the educational establishment and the age of the children to be taught. The exam focuses on subject knowledge, with less emphasis on pedagogical competence.

Once they have obtained a master's degree and passed the qualifying exam, teachers can start working as trainee teachers. Jobs are allocated by the Ministry, which does not necessarily have to be accepted, but in many cases there is no choice and trainees can be placed anywhere in the country, far from their original place of residence.

Teachers are classified as civil servants and their position is in many ways secure and protected.

Promotion, Pay

The pay, promotion and grading of teachers in France are governed by the same - rather complex - system, regardless of the type of educational establishment or status. It is determined on the one hand by the number of years in the profession and on the other by the results of the qualifications of the supervisor. In practice, however, due to the existing shortage of subject supervisors, teachers are only subject to a complex evaluation every 8-10 years, but the head of the school evaluates the work of his/her colleagues at the end of each school year. Inspections and their positive results can accelerate progress in the grade, but neither lower ratings nor the absence of inspections can slow it down.

There is no compulsory in-service training, teachers can only be motivated by their own ambitions and needs to attend training courses.

Summary

The list of competences required of French educational staff is quite long, but the training system does not provide any support for their acquisition. (Bulletin Officiel 2013).

It is essential to reform teacher training as soon as possible. Courses should be introduced in initial and master's courses and practical opportunities should be created to acquire these competences. Teaching is not an attractive career for young people in France. Teachers are overworked, socially unappreciated and expectations are disproportionately high. There are more and more vacancies because the number of new entrants to the profession is lower than the number of retired ones and the number of children of compulsory school age is constantly rising.

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