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Exploring the content of Subject Specific Competences in the context of Greek Initial Teacher Education

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Abstract

The paper explores Greek "responses" to European Union and Bologna Process policies seeking to promote Higher education curricular re-organisation towards competence-based methodologies. Our approach to research utilises a theoretical model based on concepts drawn from Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse. Data are drawn from a questionnaire survey conducted in the 18 Greek Education Departments. Academics respond to the current trends in curricula content, concerning the Subject Specific Competences for teacher education. Our substantive findings suggest that shifts in the content of curricular knowledge may represent a narrowing of the essential activities and professional responsibilities of future teachers. Moreover, a 'new professionalism for teachers' is contributing to the de-legitimisation of Education Studies as a strong academic and professional field.

Keywords

Curriculum, Competences, Teachers, Professionalism.

1. Introduction

In this paper, which aims to study the dominant knowledge content and shifts in initial teacher education in Greece, we present aspects of a Ph.D. study (Sarakinioti in progress; Sarakinioti, Tsatsaroni and Stamelos 2008; 2011), that considers European

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Union (E.U.) and Bologna Process policies promoting a re-orgnisation of higher education curricula, and explores national and institutional responses to such policies. Our approach rests on two basic assumptions. The first assumption is that education policy discourse and reforms in (higher) education are currently emanating from within fields of power that include global, regional, national and local contexts (Dale and Robson 2007). Therefore any analysis of educational change needs to address these contexts together. The second assumption stems from Bernstein's insight that everything that happens in educational institutions happens through the (re)-organisation of knowledge, therefore knowledge and its organization in the curricula must be at the centre of the analysis (Bernstein 2000).

The main justification for our choice to focus on initial teacher training as an academic field is the importance attributed to the wider education field at present by supranational organisations. For example, research findings are often appropriated by supranational (e.g., E.U.) and international (e.g., OECD) organizations and agencies in the creation of dominant official discourse about knowledge content organisation in the teacher education curricula. This trend is a crucial factor for renewing interest in school teachers, their education and their «professionalism» (Gewirtz, Mahony, Hextall and Cribb 2009).

In contrast to other more traditional academic fields, it is likely that the history of University Departments of Education - a history that shares certain features in countries that are otherwise very diverse – might affect the positioning of their academic staff vis-à-vis policies that are often contradictory, are formulated at different levels, and that place multiple demands upon them (Sarakinioti et al. 2008; 2011). Sometimes this is due to an over-emphasis placed upon research and its contribution to the recontexualising processes for the renewal of valid educational knowledge (Middleton

2004). At other times, academics might be required to develop (research or teaching) activities that are of relevance to school practice (Goodson 1999).

In the Greek University Departments for Primary and Pre-primary education, subjects on Educational Studies and Teacher Education historically coexist in the initial teacher education curricula. This particular nature of the curricula, being a determining feature of their development, has been reflected in the extreme shifts in the orientation of curricular subjects, initially towards the pole of 'pedagogy' ("the how"), and later towards 'subject specialisms' ("the what") (Stamelos 1999). The current context of teacher education and practice, affected as it is by international changes, raises the question of how the tension between an orientation to school/teachers' professional formation and an orientation to academic research /disciplines is being played out today in Greece. This question is important because it renews the interest in teacher education content and teachers' identities.

The paper is structured as follows. In the first section we comment briefly on the European educational policies' content regarding teacher education, and the competence discourse. In our research (Sarakinioti, in progress), the Tuning Project (2003) is used as a policy and methodological exemplar for understanding the current higher education curricular shifts to competence oriented knowledge "Recontexualisation" (Bernstein 1990). In the second section we elaborate on our theoretical and methodological approach. In the final section we present the data of our survey about the level of the importance and achievement that Greek academics recognised on the subject specific competences that the Tuning Project has identified as necessary for the subject field of Education. The final section contains some basic concluding remarks.

2. European education policies: A brief overview

The term European policies refers, on the one hand, to policies of the E.U. on education, as these are formed and promoted through the programme: "Education and Training 2010: Diverse systems, Shared Goals", in the light of Lisbon Strategy (European Council 2000; 2002). This programme, as Nóvoa (2002; 2007) notes, has for a decade constituted an "umbrella" for the political intervention of the E.U. in the field of education. One of the three strategic goals of E.U. education policy within this programme of work is: 'Improving the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems in the EU'. In this context, teachers and trainers are recognised as key actors (European Council 2002).

In 2005, the European Commission described the "Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications". This policy document underpins the development of policies in the effort to improve the quality and efficiency of educational systems as: a well-educated teaching force, qualified at higher education level; a profession placed within the context of life -long learning, where there would be a continuum of initial training, induction periods and continuing education; a mobile profession; and a profession capable of collaborating effectively with the local community, with partners and stakeholders in education, such as parents, teacher education institutions and diverse representative groups. In this context (European Commission 2005), three key competences are described as necessary for teachers. Firstly, teachers should be able to promote teamwork by supporting the potential and the independent growth of every learner in ways that increase the collective intelligence, by demonstrating self confidence when engaging with others, and by collaborating with colleagues in order to enhance their learning and teaching practices. Secondly, teachers need to be able to engage with a variety of knowledge types and to reflect on them so as

to develop and apply a wide range of teaching and learning strategies. Finally, teachers need to be able to manage information and to guide their learners in the networks where information can be found and built upon.

On the other hand, the term also encompasses the Bologna Process, which aims to create a European space of Higher Education. These two bases for policies in education, though distinguishable, essentially share common basic principles, goals and practices. For this reason in our study they are used in the plural and without distinction as 'European Policies'. These macro-agencies have established a widened network of political power and action which is expected to operate with the purpose of creating the conditions for quality improvement, effectiveness, transparency, compatibility, comparability and competitiveness of H.E. educational structures and training in Europe.

The set of activities at the core of the European education policies agenda for consensus-building among the educational structures in Europe entails the re-organization of Higher Education curricula. The E.U**.** amplifies and controls the current curricula discourse through the funding of a variety of actions and programmes for the assessment of good practices and the development of learning outcomes and qualifications methodologies in higher education curricula in a range of disciplines. The field of Education and Teacher Training is among them (CHEPS 2007; Tuning Project 2003). In this context, the Tuning Project for adjusting H.E. curricula, with reference to the creation of European policies for H.E., is indicative of the ways participating agencies of power and interest act.

The Tuning Project was proposed and coordinated by two European universities (Deusto, Spain and Groningen, Holland), with more than 175 European universities

participating in the project. Indicative of its character is the fact that it enjoys the approval of the European Commission, and that all the phases of the project have been funded through Socrates-Erasmus (Tuning Project 2003; 2007). Furthermore, it functions in conditions of dialogue and mutual feed-back with the Bologna Process, especially after the Berlin Communiqué in 2005, as is evidenced in their respective references in various working papers. For instance, in a working document of the project (Tuning Project 2005a), it is stated that Tuning is at the heart of the Bologna-Prague-Berlin-Bergen process, linking the political objectives set out in the Bologna Declaration of 1999 to the Higher Education Sector. Equally, very significant working documents of the Bologna Process (Adam 2004; BFUG 2005) extol the contribution of the Tuning Project through its piloting work, as well as through the diffusion of the methodology of 'competences'[1] as a basis for curricular re-organisation and assessment, and as a way of achieving comparability of European programmes of study. Tuning extends its research in 9 subject fields, including Education, and forms partnerships with 19 subject networks.

We recognise the Tuning Project as a representative example of European education policy because it operasionalises the "language of competencies" (Moore with Jones 2007; Muller 2008) in concrete curriculum methodology and, furthermore, it constitutes an example of how the "Open Method of Coordination" (European council 2000) operates within the wider European Educational Space (Alexiadou 2007; Sarakinioti et al. 2011).

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[1]"Competences represent a dynamic combination of knowledge, understanding, skill, and abilities. Fostering these competences is the object of educational programmes. Competences are formed in various course units and assessed at different stages. They may be divided in subject-area related competences (specific to a field of study) and generic competences (common to any degree course)" (Tuning Project 2005b: 379).

3. Theory and Methodology of the Study

Our approach to research utilises a theoretical model based on concepts drawn from Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse (Bernstein 1990; 2000). The model directs us in describing, analysing and explaining changes in educational knowledge forms of teacher education curricula and assessing their consequences for teachers' future professional identities. To produce the entire model we combine the concepts of classification [T+/-] and framing [F+/-] (Bernstein, 1971) with those of introjection [I] and projection [P] (Bernstein 1996; 2000). The former two concepts relate to boundary maintenance between and within categories, therefore to power and control relations. Regarding orientation to meaning in particular, the question is always whether a given curricular form serves to initiate an individual or a group of learners into a symbolic system of meanings (introjection) or, in contrast, into specific functional meanings and contexts of application and use (projection). The model describes eight basic curricular forms, representing academic and professional modalities of knowledge organisation (Sarakinioti in progress; Sarakinioti and Tsatsaroni 2010).

Data come from a survey questionnaire for recording the Education academics' views on curriculum changes in light of global and European trends and policy reforms in higher education. It is based mainly on the curriculum methodology of competences that the Tuning Project (2003) promotes as a desirable form of pedagogic discourse in higher education institutions.[2] As we have already mentioned, in our survey, Tuning curricular methodology plays the role of a research axis that links European policy to the Greek higher education field. It can be seen as a recontextualisation of the European

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[2]The questionnaire for our study is in four parts and is largely based on the research tools of the Tuning Project (Sarakinioti in progress). Here we draw data from Part 3, which includes questions on the importance and the achievement of 29 subject-specific competences that the Tuning Project (2003) has identified for the field of 'Educational Studies and Teacher education'. Competences were translated and adapted to the needs of this research and the Greek educational context.

policy discourse that takes the form of a research instrument and simultaneously constitutes a means for articulating and defusing its discourse: a policy technology in Ball's terms (2008) and a powerful form of pedagogic discourse in Bernstein's terms (2000).

Out of the total population (N=422) of teaching staff in university departments of education, 164 responded to the survey (39%). Exploratory factor analysis techniques have been applied to the variables both for importance and for achievement leading to the extraction of two main factors. The qualitative treatment of data required us to work with Bernstein's (2000) approach that demands the development of external languages of description (Brown 2006; Singh 2008), in order to move between the theory, the analytical model and the empirical field (Dowling and Brown 2010). In that context, we have developed a re-classification schema that categorises the 29 Subject Specific Competences of the Education field into 'Competencies of Professional type 1' [T+,F+P] and 'Competencies of the New Professional type' [T-, F+, I] (Sarakinioti in progress; Sarakinioti et al. 2011)**.** Given that the 'language of competencies' (Moore with Jones 2007, Muller 2008; 2009) has - by definition - strong framing and a projected orientation to meaning, the criterion we used to classify the competences into these professional types of the theoretical model is the degree of classification [T+/-] each of them presupposes. Table 1 presents the re-classification of the subject-specific competences of the Tuning Project (2003).

Table 1: Re-classification of subject-specific competences

	Subject Specific Competences
Competencies of Professional type 1	1. Ability to analyse educational concepts, theories and issues of policy in a systematic way.
	3. Ability to reflect on one's own value system
	4. Ability to question concepts and theories encountered in education studies.
	8. Understanding of the structures and purposes of educational systems.
	16. Commitment to learners' progress and achievement
	17. Competence in a number of teaching/learning strategies
	18. Knowledge of the subject to be taught
Competencies of the New Professional type	2. Ability to identify potential connections between aspects of subject knowledge and their application in educational policies and contexts
	5.Ability to recognize the diversity of learners and the complexities of the learning process
	6. Awareness of the different contexts in which learning can take place.
	7. Awareness of the different roles of participants in the learning process
	9. Ability to do educational research in different contexts
	10. Counselling skills
	11. Ability to manage projects for school improvement/ development
	12. Ability to manage educational programmes
	13.Ability to evaluate educational programmes/materials

	14. Ability to foresee new educational needs and demands
	15. Ability to lead or coordinate multidisciplinary Educational teams
	19. Ability to communicate effectively with groups and individuals
	20. Ability to create a climate conducive to learning
	21. Ability to make use of e-learning and to integrate it into the learning environments
	22. Ability to manage time effectively
	23. Ability to reflect upon and evaluate one's own performance
	24 Awareness of the need for continuous professional development
	25 Ability to assess the outcomes of learning and learners' achievements
	26 Competence in collaborative problem solving
	27. Ability to respond to the diverse needs of learners
	28. Ability to improve the teaching/learning environment
	29. Ability to adjust the curriculum to a specific educational context.

4. Data Presentation on Subject Specific Competences

Exploratory factor analysis techniques have been applied to the variables both for importance and for achievement, leading to the extraction of two main factors[3]. The Principal Component Analysis (PCA) method led to the extraction of two main factors since the rest of the factors had eigen values less than 1. These two factors explain 62%

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[3]Factors have also been discussed in the chapter "Changing Knowledge in Higher Education" (Sarakinioti at al. 2011: 69-89).

of the total variation of the data, which is deemed a satisfactory threshold for data variability. In order to have meaningful interpretations, we have retained only those factors with loadings greater than 0,50.

Table 2: Description of Factor A

	Importance	Factor loading
	3. Ability to reflect on one's own value system	0.57
	6. Awareness of the different contexts in which learning can take place.	0.51
	7. Awareness of the different roles of participants in the learning process	0.51
I	**11.** Ability to manage projects for school improvement/ development	0.51
T	**19.** Ability to communicate effectively with groups and individuals	0.56
	20. Ability to create a climate conducive to learning	0.59
E	**22.** Ability to manage time effectively	0.56
	23. Ability to reflect upon and evaluate one's own performance	0.76
M	**24.** Awareness of the need for continuous professional development	0.74
	26. Competence in collaborative problem solving	0.81
S	**27.** Ability to respond to the diverse needs of learners	0.82
	28. Ability to improve the teaching/learning environment	0.75
	29. Ability to adjust the curriculum to a specific educational context	0.62

Variance explained by the factor	**24%**

Filtering the results through the re-classification of competences into those of 'Professional type 1' and those of 'New professionalism' (see Table 1), the variables grouped in Factor A are presented by number in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Factor A by type of professionalism

Description	Factor A items
Competencies of Professional type 1	3
Competencies of the New Professional type	6, 7, 11, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29

Factor A groups almost exclusively competencies of 'New Professionalism'. Most of them are school-oriented competencies that describe skills promoting students' learning and managing the educational context effectively. Indicatively, competencies of this kind are the following: Awareness of the different contexts in which learning can take place, ability to create a climate conducive to learning, ability to respond to the diverse needs of learners, ability to improve the teaching/learning environment, ability to adjust the curriculum to a specific educational context. Also, Factor A groups competencies that describe aspects of 'performativity' (Ball 2003) for individuals, learning processes

and schools, that is, reflection on values, school improvement, professional development, effectiveness, evaluation of performance and problem solving. Table 3 presents Factor B.

Table 3: Description of Factor B

	Achievement	Factor loading
	3. Ability to reflect on one's own value system	0.59
	5. Ability to recognize the diversity of learners and the complexities of the learning process	0.56
	6. Awareness of the different contexts in which learning can take place.	0.72
	7. Awareness of the different roles of participants in the learning process.	0.69
I	**9.** Ability to do educational research in different contexts	0.53
	10. Counselling skills	0.53
T	**14.** Ability to foresee new educational needs and demands	0.69
	15. Ability to lead or coordinate multidisciplinary educational teams	0.56
E	**16.** Commitment to learners' progress and achievement	0.56
M	**17.** Competence in a number of teaching/learning strategies	0.67
	19. Ability to communicate effectively with groups and individuals	0.78

S	**20.** Ability to create a climate conducive to learning	0.82
	22. Ability to manage time effectively	0.63
	23. Ability to reflect upon and evaluate one's own performance	0.73
	24. Awareness of the need for continuous professional development	0.60
	25. Ability to assess the outcomes of learning and learners' achievements	0.69
	26. Competence in collaborative problem solving	0.71
	27. Ability to respond to the diverse needs of learners	0.79
	28. Ability to improve the teaching/learning environment	0.81
	29. Ability to adjust the curriculum to a specific educational context	0.74
	Variance explained by the factor	**38%**

Filtering the results through the classification of competencies into those of 'Professional type 1' and those of 'New professionalism' (see Table 1), the variables grouped in Factor B are presented by number in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Factor A by type of professionalism

Description	Factor B items
Competencies of Professional type 1	3, 16,17
Competencies of the New Professional type	5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 14, 15, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29

Factor B groups mainly competencies of 'new professionalism' for future teachers. The majority of them, as with factor A, are skills for improving the educational environment, and for conducting and facilitating learning processes for students; e.g., 'ability to recognize the diversity of learners and the complexities of the learning processes', and 'ability to assess the outcomes of learning and learners' achievements'. The three competencies of 'Professional type 1', contained in Factor B are: Ability to reflect on one's own value system, commitment to learners' progress and achievement, and competence in a number of teaching/learning strategies. It is worth noting that these are all skills identified with 'Professional type 1', describing skills to do with interpersonal relations and the micro-level of educational practice. Finally, Factor B groups items of 'New professionalism' that describe competences to do with educational research, counselling and leading/coordinating multidisciplinary educational teams.

The juxtaposition of factors A and B gives some further data on subject specific competencies. First, the fact that Factor B contains a larger number of items compared to Factor A shows greater expansion and openness of the current curricula in Education Departments regarding what academics point to indicate as important competencies for future teachers. Nevertheless, Factor A items on importance are contained in Factor B on achievement. The only exception to that is the competence 'ability to manage projects for school improvement', which, despite the high importance attached to it, is not achieved. On the other hand, the competencies that are achieved but are not grouped in factor A on importance, are the following: Ability to recognize the diversity of learners and the complexities of the learning process, ability to do educational research in different contexts, counselling skills, ability to foresee new educational needs and demands, ability to lead or coordinate multidisciplinary educational teams, commitment

to learners' progress and achievement, competence in a number of teaching/learning strategies, ability to assess the outcomes of learning and learners' achievements. Finally, it is worth noting that the competencies of 'Professional type 1', relating to the macro level of education analysis and specialised academic knowledge, e.g., 'ability to analyse educational concepts, theories and issues of policy in a systematic way', 'ability to question concepts and theories encountered in education studies', 'understanding of the structures and purposes of educational systems', are excluded from both factor A and B.

To sum up, the results on the subject specific competencies of Factors A and B show that academics focus on certain school-oriented competencies of 'New professionalism' and that they marginalise competencies of 'Professional type 1'. Both shifts narrow the curriculum role prescription of future teachers.

Concluding remarks

There is a gradual recognition in the literature that the global and/or regional education policy contexts cannot be ignored in attempting to understand fundamental transformations in the production, transmission and acquisition of knowledge. Our approach to the analysis of European educational policy and the relationships it forms with the national policies of the member states brings to the forefront the question of knowledge. Using Basil Bernstein's theory (1971; 1990; 2000), we argue that the question of the way knowledge content is selected and transferred between and within the macro and the micro - levels of educational policy and practice is crucial for understanding the field of political interactions between national educational systems and the supra-national and international political agencies which in current conditions

articulate the dominant discourse on education. Especially the 'what' and 'how' of knowledge can provide research with evidence for identifying and studying changes in knowledge – i.e., the symbolic means of identity formation – introduced by national educational reforms, as a result of the interactions with the supra-national level of policies, in important areas of social activity, such as initial teacher education, reported in this paper with reference to Greece.

Regarding our substantive findings on subject-specific competences, we might say that there are indications that the apparently stable field of teacher education in Greece is shifting towards a more school-oriented professional role for future teachers. More specifically, the statistical treatment of the research data about subject specific competencies and its further analysis has revealed that: a) the competencies of 'Professional type 1' do not appear very popular among the academics; b) the flexible, 'new professional' competencies seem to be gaining ground in representing what is important in the education of teachers today; and, crucially, c), among the 29 subject-specific competencies of both types presented to academics, the most preferable for them appear to be those which describe knowledge and skills for future teachers which are related to managing the educational context and facilitating learning.

The narrower focus on the essential activities and responsibilities of teachers that is revealed in what is articulated as 'important subject specific competences' by the academics' responses in this study, allow us to comment that teacher education in Greece is a sector of higher education in a transitional phase towards a kind of "specialisation in generisism" (Sarakinioti in progress), that is the professionals' ability to transfer and use specialised knowledge in flexible ways, and their readiness for "continuous pedagogic re-formations" (Bernstein, 2000: 59). On the one hand, this trend could be seen as the Greek "understanding" and "response" to the developments

of E.U. policies on teachers' professionalism (European Commission 2005). One the other hand, in contexts like the Greek one, where university departments of education do not have a long academic and research tradition, the move towards what in the international sociological literature and in our theoretical approach has been referred to as 'New professionalism for teachers' is contributing to the de-legitimisation of Education Studies as a strong academic and professional field (Ball 2005; Beck and Young 2005; Beck 2008; 2009; Cunningham 2008; Sarakinioti et al. 2011).

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