



Teachers' Perspectives on Education Policy in CROATIA

Vesna Kovač, Iva Buchberger, Branko Rafajac

University of Rijeka, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department for Education (Croatia)

vkovac@ffri.hr

Abstract

In this paper we present and interpret the results of the research aimed to investigate the features of education policy in Croatia from the perspective of Croatian teachers. Educational policy has been defined as a pattern of decisions that direct action in the field of education or indicate the direction of educational changes. In the theoretical part of the paper the global trends of educational policies will be discussed with special emphasis on those trends that have been outlined within the influential policy documents published by the relevant organizations and stakeholders in the education sector (OECD, UNESCO, EU, etc.). Special emphasizes will be given to the desirable characteristics of education systems and the factors of successful schools, especially those that were pointed out in the results of the PISA 2012 survey: for example, high level of school autonomy in decision-making, a high degree of participation of teachers (together with principals) in the decision-making on important aspects of the school and respect for the teaching profession in society.

The main objectives of the research was to investigate perceptions of school teachers in Croatia about (a) characteristics of education system, education policy and reforms; (b) their role in creation and implementation of key decisions at school or education system level. Further, their assessments were compared with assessments of teachers and associates at universities which conduct programs for teacher education and with policy makers involved in key decision making related to education policies. 624 subjects participated in the study (396 primary and secondary school teachers, 116 university teachers and associates, 122 decision makers). Data was collected using online survey. For the purpose of this paper, selected data related to teachers' perspectives will be presented and discussed. The results show that from teachers' perspective was not observed high prevalence of desirable characteristics of educational policy: so for example teaching profession hasn't been assessed as attractive; financial status of teachers is not satisfactory; the current educational reform does not lead to the improvement of the functioning of the education system and student achievement, and teachers do not participate sufficiently in decision making process. On the other side, survey participants positively assessed the policy makers' readiness for change and readiness to adapt to global trends of educational policy. The research results can contribute to the formation of guidelines for establishing a successful dialogue between the key decision-makers related to the field of education at the national level and teachers as key professionals whose potential for the adoption and implementation of the decision is still not evaluated and used in an appropriate manner.

1. Introduction

Most experts in the field of education policy agree on the observation that the ultimate goal of global education policies is to enable citizens to effectively take advantage of the global world economy [7]. This perspective draws the attention of decision makers to continuous improvement of education systems, emphasizing the concern for improving the quality of educational services, equitable access to education and stronger incentives for efficient education. These tendencies can be found in the contents of the policy documents signed by the important actors in global education policies. These contents are mainly related to the definition of the role of education in the global world and the role of teachers as basic implementers of new education policies. Thorough review and comment on significant (global) policy initiatives and documents related to the field of education, especially teacher education, is already available in more recent publications [1, 8].

Policy documents provide a list of indicators that are related to the level of quality and European dimension in education of school teachers in different national systems [1]. A significant share of these indicators is directly connected with the premise of establishing effective cooperation between universities, schools and other stakeholders in ensuring the quality of teacher education and strengthening the role and status of teachers and teaching profession in society. This enables the observation of the role of the authority in charge of education at the national and local level (through investment in education and strengthening the capacity of educational institutions); the role of universities and higher education institutions that educate school teachers (provide for professional competence attainment, cooperation in lifelong education and attracting the best candidates to the profession); the role of schools and educators (through the promotion of adequate management structures in schools); and other cooperating institutions or individuals in society who are interested *in* or responsible *for* the development of teaching profession.

Furthermore, recent research results of various aspects of management of education systems and school leadership [3, 4] point out that the crucial (successful) connection between individual schools and education system as a whole is made through the particular practices of school management. Through its series of comparative studies and publications dedicated to the school management, OECD particularly advocates the strengthening of the so-called *distributive management forms* of school and school systems [6]. Research are pointing on tendencies that more successful schools are those where teachers and other stakeholders make high estimation of their influence on decision-making process, which is characterized by the presence of (desirable) characteristics of the distributive type of management. In the context of Croatian education policy, there are no sufficient empirical data dealing with school teachers' estimation on education policy features, i.e. the presence of features advocated in the above mentioned policy documents. Moreover, there is no information about the degree of readiness of school teachers to participate in the creation and implementation of key decisions in education policy, nor on the realization of the necessary preconditions for their active role in the school management, as well as the preconditions for strengthening the practice of the distributive school management. Therefore, empirical research has been conducted to investigate the characteristics of education policy from the perspective of school teachers, who should have an extremely important role in creating policies for the improvement of education.

2. Purpose, Objective and Research Method

The main objectives of the research was to investigate perceptions of school teachers in Croatia about (a) characteristics of education system, education policy and reforms; (b) their role in creation and implementation of key decisions at school or education system level. Total of 396 school teachers participated in the study. Data were collected via using an online questionnaire in the form of Likert scale in which associates/informants had to estimate their agreement with the given statements, 1 meaning strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree with a specific statement. Data analysis was performed using the SPSS statistical program. Descriptive statistics (shown as the mean, standard deviation and percentages) was used in the analysis of the collected data. In order to determine the difference in estimates of certain statements with regard to the separate independent variables (discussed below), t - test for independent samples was used, while for the difference in estimates of certain statements of different groups of participants the analysis of variance for independent samples was used. Apart from attitudes, the questionnaire collected the following features of: gender, qualifications, work experience, type of school in which they are employed, subject area, and status with regard to the realized professional promotion, but the analysis of these variables generally showed no statistically significant differences in the investigated attitudes.



3. Analysis and interpretation of results

3.1. Teachers' assessment of the characteristics of education system, education policy and reforms

All statements of desirable characteristics of the educational system, educational policy and reform in Croatia are extremely low estimated by school teachers (Table 1). This fact undoubtedly indicates a serious disturbance in the system and calls into question the basic assumptions necessary for the successful implementation of any quality attempts within the education area.

Table 1. Teachers' assessment of the characteristics of education system, education policy and reforms

Statements	M	SD
The system of teacher education is good quality.	2,61	0,965
Current reforms in the educational system are leading to better functioning of the education system.	2,60	1,001
Current reforms in the education system are leading to improving students' achievement.	2,58	1,038
The objectives of educational policy are clear.	2,21	0,966
Higher education institutions for teacher education collaborate with schools effectively.	2,18	0,93
Promotion system for teachers in the profession is effective.	2,13	0,94
Public opinion about educational reform is positive.	2,12	0,801
Educational reforms are well planned.	2,06	0,921
Education is primarily viewed as an investment in people.	1,96	1,159
Educational policy makers cooperate with schools effectively.	1,60	0,798
Teaching profession in society is perceived as attractive.	1,54	0,765
Teachers are provided with an opportunity to acquire appropriate social status.	1,47	0,719
Tangible assets for reform are provided.	1,42	0,612
Position of the education sector in society is satisfactory.	1,38	0,646
Financial investment in the education sector is sufficient.	1,28	0,524

Although policy issues like raising the social status of teachers, greater appreciation of the teaching profession and high quality teachers' education considered to be one of the most important strategic guidelines for (European) education policies, attitudes to these items in the survey indicate an undesirable trend of permanent decline in social prestige and economic status of teachers / teaching



profession which causes further negative effects (Table 1). Another problematic issue visible in low estimation of selected items and relevant for further consideration is related to teachers' distrust in education policy purpose and objectives in general.

3.2. Assessment of assumptions, motivation and activity of teachers in creation and implementation of decisions in domain of education policy

Estimates of statements related to the motivation and actual role of teachers in the creation and implementation of key decision in education policy are relatively low (Table 2). Estimates of statements related to motivation, awareness and activity associated with decision-making and implementation within the educational institutions vary in the range of average values ($M = 3.50$ to 3.80), which is not encouraging. This example relates to the statements dealing with information, incentives for inclusion, respecting teachers' opinions and motivation to participate in creation and implementation of decisions. Statements related to the position and role in educational reforms at the system level are mostly estimated low. Among them, statements related to active involvement of teachers in implementing educational reforms ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 1.167$) and the availability of information necessary for the successful implementation of educational reforms ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.045$) have the lowest estimation.

Table 2. Teachers' assessment of assumptions, motivation and activity of teachers in creation and implementation of decisions in domain of education policy

Statements	M	SD
I am regularly informed on important issues of school performance.	3,54	1,203
Director encourages me to make changes at the school level.	3,39	1,277
My opinion is respected in making key decisions at the school level.	3,19	1,201
My role in the implementation of educational reforms is important.	3,14	1,298
I am motivated to participate in the creation of key decisions in education policy.	3,08	1,183
I am motivated to participate in the implementation of key decisions in education policy.	3,05	1,192
I actively participate in the implementation of educational reforms.	2,91	1,167
Information needed for the successful implementation of educational reforms is available to us.	2,88	1,045

4. Discussion and conclusions

Although the collected data are not significantly different from the results of similar studies in other national systems, and lack of compatibility between "policy " and " practice " are quite a common phenomenon in the context of educational policy, the results should be seriously considered. Experts from the Centre for Education Policy in Belgrade [5] report similar results: based on the analysis of data collected via interviews with focus groups of teachers in Serbia, the authors highlight the dissatisfaction of teachers with the implementation of educational reforms, distrust in the decisions of politicians, opinion that key decisions are made by individuals who are not familiar with the school and teaching practice, the need to improve the bad image of education created in the media and a low



level of motivation of teachers to participate in the changes as a result of bad experiences with previous reforms. Participants in both pieces of research share the opinion on the lack of continuity in adoption of education policies, unclear objectives of education policy and their role as an actor in the process of decision making at the educational system level.

Low estimations of assumptions, motivation and activity of teachers in education policy design, which is in influential policy documents cited as a prerequisite for successful education policy, undoubtedly point to the necessity of a stronger (political) commitment and connection of all relevant stakeholders of the educational system. With reference to the Fullan [2] assumption about the necessity of linking all levels of management of the education system in order to ensure successful and sustainable educational reform, one of the most important message of this research should be referred to decision-makers at the highest (national) level of authority: school teachers in Croatian schools should be more involved in the process of creating education policy, starting with the creation of better conditions for the strengthening of their role in decision-making process at the school level. Empowered and involved teachers can provide more appropriate decision-making, aimed at improving school and teaching achievements. Due to the fact that this research sought only a general estimation of participants on some issues involving the process of decision making at the school level or the system, it is important to specifically examine the actual methods and the degree of their participation in these processes.

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Note: The survey titled "Investigating teachers' competence and role in the creation and implementation of educational policy" is part of the scientific research project "University and the external environment in the context of the European integration process", (009-0000000-0931), which has been supported by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports of the Republic of Croatia in a period of 2007-2013. The survey was conducted in September 2012.