Promising Practices

Increasing Specialist Subject Training and Knowledge Requirements for Prospective and Current Teachers in Norway

Country category: Norway

Teacher education pathway category(ies): Equipping teachers with what they need to know and do; Supporting beginning teachers

Stakeholder category(ies): teacher educator; new teacher; teacher candidate

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This case study describes a “promising practice” drawn from an OECD review of initial teacher preparation in Norway from 24-27 April 2017.

The OECD Review Team – Hannah von Ahlefeld (OECD), Philippa Cordingley (Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education), Liesbeth Hens (Ministry of Education and Training, Flanders) and Danielle Toon (Learning First) – identified a number of “promising practices” in each country. These practices may not be widespread or representative, but seen in the context of other challenges, they represent a strength or opportunity to improve the country’s initial teacher preparation system – and for other countries to learn from them.

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Promising Practice 2.
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Context

New research evidence has discussed that subject-specific professional development actually has a greater impact on student outcomes than professional development in general pedagogy (Cordingley et al., 2015[2]). However, in Norway those teachers who report a high level of professional development in subject-specific areas are lower than the average of teachers that took part in the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) (Figure 1).

As part of the Promotion of the Status and Quality of Teachers strategy (Ministry of Education and Research Norway, 2017[4]), Norway is increasing specialist subject training and knowledge requirements for prospective and current teachers. The government first introduced new subject specialisation requirements for newly qualified teachers in 2010, and is now expanding them to all teachers. Over a ten-year transition period, primary school teachers are required to have at least 30 credits in the relevant subject in order to teach mathematics, English and Norwegian. Secondary school teachers, meanwhile, will need at least 60 credits.

The government in Norway is also tightening entry and exam requirements for teacher education. Norway’s policy, which is trending in other countries currently undergoing reform of initial teacher preparation, reflects the prevailing wisdom in the wake of the McKinsey report about recruiting top graduates to the teaching profession (Barber and Mourshed, 2007[5]). Indeed, while in most OECD countries individuals are selected into initial teacher education (ITE) programmes on the basis of their grade-point average in upper secondary education, three-quarters of countries have additional selection criteria for entry into ITE programmes, such as interviews, standardised tests, competitive exams and mixed criteria. (OECD, 2014[6]). Nonetheless, an ITE programme may not be highly selective, but may still do an excellent job of preparing teacher candidates (Feuer et al., 2013[7]).
What are the specialist subject training and knowledge requirements?

Following the Promotion of the Status and Quality of Teachers strategy, initial teacher education (ITE) programmes will prioritise Norwegian, English, mathematics, Sami and Norwegian sign language as subject areas. There are different numbers of subjects required based on the type of programme: teaching for years 1-7 (four subjects); teaching for years 5-10 (three subjects); teaching for years 8-13 (two subjects).

The programmes aim to balance the subject knowledge, didactics and pedagogical knowledge needed for teaching, but how to do this is an ongoing debate in Norway (and in many other countries). National regulations and guidelines on initial teacher education (Ministry of Education and Research Norway, 2011[8]) stress the integration of subject knowledge and subject didactic competencies. A mathematics subject in secondary preparation, for example, should cover academic mathematics and mathematics didactics, with both topics taught by the same teacher educators.

Strong academic performance in upper secondary mathematics is required to enter primary and secondary school teacher education. Since 2016, teacher candidates in Norway must obtain a minimum grade of four on a scale of one to six (two is the passing grade) in mathematics, and a minimum grade of three in Norwegian and in English, to enter an ITE programme. Eventually they may need a grade four in Norwegian and English as well. Prospective teachers who do not meet this requirement must take a preparation course before starting any teacher training programme. The aim is to recruit students with strong academic profiles and reduce the dropout rate. National examinations in maths for primary and secondary school teacher education have been piloted, and is from 2019 part of the initial teacher education programs with maths as one of the subjects. The pilot confirmed
that many teacher candidates struggle with basic concepts in mathematics. The two exams cover core parts of the mathematics curriculum and mathematics didactics.

Why is it an opportunity?

The OECD Review Team in its visit to Norway from 24-28 April 2017 concluded that subject specialisation in teacher training is an opportunity in that it could:

- Reinforce the preparation in subject knowledge and theory. Norwegian stakeholders feel that teachers are generally well prepared in subject knowledge and theory; and the specialisation requirements provide an opportunity to reinforce the commitment to a depth of subject knowledge in teacher education.

What are the threats?

However, the OECD Review Team also noted there could be:

- Issues with balancing breadth and depth. Some stakeholders expressed that there was a risk that specialisation in the five prioritised subjects will cause knowledge in other subjects, such as science, history, arts and crafts, to suffer.
- Limited coherence between theoretical and practical training and in some places between pedagogy and didactics. There are mixed messages, lack of dialogue, and limited co-design between universities and schools and within some universities. “applied knowledge” for teaching is contingent on the skills and experience of individual teacher educators, and the willingness of individual schools to work more closely with universities. Stakeholders raised concerns that candidates may experience “practice shock” because of having to adapt teaching to the needs of different students and break down concepts in class (i.e. pedagogical content knowledge).

For more information


Ministry of Education and Research Norway (2011), National Guidelines for Differentiated Primary and Lower Secondary Teacher Education Programmes for Years 1–7 and Years 5–10. General provisions, Ministry of Education and Research Norway, Oslo,

