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# **Stability, structure and development. Features constituting Finnish teacher education**

di Jessica Aspfors, Sven-Erik Hansén e Johanna Ray

## **Introduction**

Finnish education has since the beginning of this millennium caused a wide international curiosity because of Finnish students' top scoring in international student achievement tests, like PISA. Despite limited evidence-based knowledge of all contributing reasons behind the success, one factor often pointed out is the design of the teacher education. Since late 1970s teacher education in Finland has been fully integrated into the university system, including a research-based approach and a Master's degree for almost all categories of teachers. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) single out teachers' expertise as the main factor in explaining educational results which illustrates the necessity of investing in teacher education. From an international and comparative perspective it is therefore of interest to examine to view features characterising the professionalization process of teachers in Finland through scrutinising teacher education and the following continuing or in-service education.

The overall aim of the article is to provide an analytical overview of the present state of Finnish teacher education, comprising historical and future views. The design of teacher education at large will be highlighted, by focusing on questions such as: 'what is the organisation and structure?' 'What are the requirements to become a teacher?' 'How are newly qualified teachers (NQTs) supported?' And 'what kind of debates and reforms are going on?' However, our ambition goes beyond only describing the state of affairs. Despite an unanimous appreciation of its design, both nationally and abroad, Finnish teacher education also has its weaknesses. In order to give a more balanced picture we will therefore also touch upon some of the problems and challenges facing teacher education in Finland.

Our contribution will be structured according to in three themes starting with 1) a brief overview of the design and characteristic features of Finnish teacher education followed by an analysis of 2) the research-based approach and of 3) the transition from education to work. The analysis will foremost concern primary and secondary teacher education provided by universities.

## **1. Characteristic features of Finnish teacher education**

Some of the crucial features constituting Finnish teacher education will be addressed. Hereby, we concentrate on: university pathways to teaching and/or special courses and competence profiles, recruitment and requirements and debates and reforms.

University pathways to teaching and/or special courses and competence profiles: The restructuring of teacher education in Finland has been an integral part of educational reforms closely tied to political, economic and social reassessment and reconstruction in a larger societal context. As in many other European countries,

education after the Second World War was given a new political priority because of a growing awareness of the important role played by education in social and economic development. Expanding educational research revealed shortcomings in school structure, for instance problems with (i) partly parallel routes for students through the compulsory education, (ii) insufficient adaptation of curriculum content to the developing late modern society, and (iii) a teacher-centred teaching approach. Under notions like academisation and professionalisation great efforts have been made to reform Finnish education system in general and teacher education in particular (Hansén, 1995; Sjöholm and Hansén, 2007).

Teacher education in Finland has, as Välijärvi and Heikkinen (2012) point out, historically taken shape gradually and separately for each school type. The bisection of the education system into folk school and secondary school originated already from the mid nineteenth century. The partly parallel routes also divided teacher education into two main routes, teachers for folk schools graduated from teacher education colleges (seminariums), whereas secondary school teachers have been qualified at universities. The divided education system was changed by an Act in 1971. The aim was to unify the education of primary (grades 1–6) and secondary school teachers (grades 7–9 in lower secondary and grades 10–12 in upper secondary classes) with an academically equal standard. The qualification of both categories of teachers was transferred to universities and a Master's degree was established as the basic level of qualification. The structure of teacher education follows standard designs for higher university degrees and this concept has since then been prevalent (*ibid.*).

Within this concept different categories of teachers are qualified according to various paths. Primary school teacher education is organised in faculties of education or in equivalent departments while secondary school teachers study their subjects in a subject department and take their teacher education courses in a teacher education department. Thus, the secondary school teachers are socialised into at least two different disciplinary traditions, and they themselves will have to make the necessary connections and distinctions between the two. This dual focus can be noticed in their perceptions of their roles as teachers. Some see themselves primarily as teachers in a specific subject, whereas others consider themselves mainly as teachers, not primarily as subject specialists (Aspfors *et al.*, 2011).

The major subject of primary school teachers is pedagogy, theoretically as well as practically oriented, aiming at qualifying teachers in a general sense. In addition to the major subject, prospective primary school teachers study the unit of subjects taught in the Finnish comprehensive school to an equivalent of 60 ECTS or sometimes even more. These studies contain subject-matter studies, subject-specific didactics and school subjects, sometimes in an integrated manner. Student teachers also choose minor or secondary school subjects on two levels, 25 or 60 ECTS. The later alternative qualifies for teaching the subject in grades 7–9. Students who are qualifying for secondary school teacher's competence select between e.g. English, Mathematics, and History as the major subject, and correspondingly select minor subjects usually matching the choice of the major subject (Jakku-Sihvonen and Niemi, 2006; Välijärvi and Heikkinen, 2012).

A remarkable change that served to homogenise different categories of teachers took place in 1994. It was decreed that pedagogical qualification, within the course module Pedagogical studies for teachers (60 ECTS, integrated in the above described programme for primary school teachers) for one form of educational institution automatically gives the pedagogical qualification to teach in other educational

institutions (Westbury *et al.*, 2005). The change means that this course module is included in all teacher programmes (primary school teachers, secondary school teachers, special-education teachers etc.). The module contains courses in education, general didactics, and subject matter didactics including guided teaching practice. Although the module to some extent is differentiated for different teacher programmes, it contains several common elements in order to make it interchangeable between them (Sjöholm and Hansén, 2007).

Altogether eleven Finnish universities, of which one is Swedish speaking, and five vocational teacher education institutions are today responsible for qualifying teachers for all levels. The institutions themselves can within and beside the regular programmes initiate and run different kinds of specialisations, for instance drama education, sustainable developments, or internationally oriented profiles (Väljörvi and Heikkinen, 2012). In close connection to Finnish teacher education is the established system of Governmental teacher practising schools. Most of the guided teaching practice takes place in the practising schools, but some of the practice periods are allocated to municipal field schools. A distinct feature in practice oriented activities is the three part meetings where teacher educators from the institution of teacher education, together with lecturers from the practising schools meet student teachers in various constellations. These meetings offer an arena where theoretically and practice oriented parts of teacher education interact in a natural way around teaching activities.

The revision of Finnish teacher education in the 1970s happened to become more or less identical with the Bologna reform of higher education Master's programmes in 2005–2006, aiming to harmonise higher education in Europe. The only main difference is that the new design of Bachelor's degree has been emphasised. In Finland the reform process has been supported by a national curriculum networking project (Jakku-Sihvonen and Niemi, 2006).

Recruitment and requirements: For many young adults in Finland, going for a career as a teacher is very desirable, making the teacher profession an attractive choice (Sahlberg, 2012). This is especially true for the primary school level (grades 1–6), which is why the number of applicants for this category of teachers every year nationwide highly exceeds the number of students that can be accepted. Referring to the hard competition for those hoping for admission into primary school teacher education, this part of the article focuses on distinct features of the student recruitment system at universities in Finland, offering such programmes.

To exemplify the popularity of the teaching profession it can be noted that approximately 800 study vacancies offered in teacher education annually have about 5000 applicants (Väljörvi and Heikkinen, 2012). The high rate of applicants undoubtedly accentuates the need for a carefully-prepared student selection. However, there is also a strong and long-living Finnish discourse stipulating that applicants' teacher suitability shall always be assessed before admission, regardless of applicant numbers (Valli and Johnson, 2007). This means that applicant screening is implemented for less popular teacher education programmes in Finland as well (for example, subject teacher education for mathematics in secondary school). Most universities define clear cut-off points (score limits) beyond which applicants cannot be accepted – even if this means that the maximum number of students allowed might not be reached.

Currently, primary school teacher education is offered at seven Finnish-speaking universities as well as at the Swedish-speaking university in Finland. Each of these has their own applicant selection procedures. Since 2007, however, the first selection

round for all applicants who are aiming at a primary school teacher career in a Finnish-speaking school consists of a literature test. The test, which is taken at the same time by all applicants, is based on articles on different educational matters and has a multiple choice design. Applicants get access to the texts about one month in advance. Before 2007, pre-selection criteria consisted of grades, previous teaching experience and other qualifications, making it intolerable difficult for young adults without additional credited experience to enter teacher education. With regard to applicants' test scores, a limited number of persons are invited to take part of university-specific admission screening, which constitutes the second selection round. In total, applicants may apply for up to three primary school teacher education programmes, but they are only allowed to attend one university-specific entrance exam and – if successful– may only enter the programme in question. The university-specific applicant screening is usually done by specifically prepared teacher educators.

On an overall level, applicants are screened for appropriate academic, personal and social prerequisites for the teaching profession. There are, however, remarkable differences in the design of the university-specific entrance tests, ranging from relying on only one instrument (interview) to using up to four different instruments (written exam, interview, group task and work sample). Nevertheless, a common feature in Finland is that every single applicant is always assessed on-site. This means that it is not possible to enter teacher education solely on the basis of good grades or other pre-qualifications. Further, with only one exception, applicants for all primary school teacher education programmes currently offered are interviewed, making this the most common diagnostic tool. As a matter of fact, all aspirants are invited to take part in an interview at the Swedish-speaking university, i.e. there is no pre-selecting system such as the national literature test implemented at the Finnish-speaking universities. The final student selection depends on criteria, which every university decide on autonomously. These might include test scores from the initial literature test, ratings in the university-specific entrance tests, and selected school grades. Some universities have a special rate for students accepted only on the basis of their success in the university-specific admission screening. The basic formal educational requirement for all applicants is the upper secondary school matriculation examination, taken by the majority of students at the age of 18–19 years.

As a consequence of the competitive situation, only few applicants are successful the very first time they apply. Since there is no restriction as to how often a person may apply, repeated participation is rather common – even up to six times, as reported by Kempainen and Kuusela (2006)! Considering the fact that entrance examination tests are held only once every year, persons who fail several times would probably benefit from more targeted feedback and counselling. Such support is however not part of the university entrance system in Finland, indicating a possible area for improvement. The recruitment of persons who are interested in a career as subject teachers in secondary school differs somehow from the recruitment of students for primary school teacher education. For example, teacher suitability of prospective subject teachers might be assessed either before entering university, i.e. simultaneously when applying to the subject department, or university students majoring in a subject might be recruited at a later stage, provided that they also pass the admission tests conducted by the teacher education department.

Persons who have completed initial teacher education are fully certified for teaching positions nationwide, either for temporary employment or tenure. The

requirements are Master's degree including appropriate subjects and the course module Pedagogical studies for teachers. The amount of graduated teachers is carefully dimensioned to meet the needs. However, various factors like structural changes or redistribution of offered time between school subjects can cause disturbances in the supply of teachers and lead to shortages in some subjects or categories of teachers.

Debates and reforms: Since the reform of teacher education in late 1970s, no major structural reform has been carried out. However, alongside this stable structure, constant development of the content is going on: Courses are continuously reconstructed, new courses replace old ones, new literature is introduced etc. (Hansén and Forsman, 2009). It is striking to note that in 2006–2007 a ministerial committee was appointed and given the task of visualising Finnish teacher education up to the year 2020 and that one of the early decisions of this committee was to state that no major changes should be carried out with regard to the basic structure of Finnish teacher education (Ministry of Education, 2007). At first this decision stands out as conservative. Though, it can also be seen as quite reasonable as Finnish teacher education already was integrated within the university system. The vision of the committee was to outline the future development for teacher education within the functioning current framework of teacher education. The committee's suggestions deal with challenges that are familiar to teacher educators in many countries, for instance the questions of how to strengthen the knowledge base and to combine studies in education, subject didactics in theory and practice into an integrated whole, and of how to support NQTs.

Like in many other countries, particularly in the Nordic countries, Finnish teacher education has traditionally been a collective welfare and democracy project closely bound to the nation-state. However, this task is rapidly changing. Today we are increasingly becoming part of a supra-national community framing and directing national education systems. Policy recommendations, decisions and evaluations are formulated and conducted beyond the national level. Examples are the Bologna process, PISA, TIMSS, curricular recommendations, exchange programmes etc. (Hansén and Forsman, 2009; Simola, 2005).

When comparing the debate and reform tempo in Finland with other Nordic countries we can observe obvious differences. While Finland has followed the principles decided in the reform of teacher education in the 1970s, for instance Sweden and Norway have since then gone through four profound waves of reforms (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2009). A vivid political interest for teacher education has labelled the debate and frequent reform in these Nordic countries. Historically teacher education has been a battle field for competing political ideologies struggling for certain values. One consequence of a politically steered policy making is that teacher education is strictly regulated. Norway, for instance, follows a national curriculum which in detail steers the content. Finnish teacher education, however, has chosen a path of its own. Developing policies for teacher education relies mainly on teacher educators and politicians have high confidence in professionals within teacher education (Chung, 2009; Wågsås Afdal, 2012). Successes in PISA and other international tests have contributed to the wide trust in professionals. This also means that, compared to Sweden and Norway, the policy debate about teacher education is quite low-voiced in Finland.

## 2. Research-based approach

While western teacher education programmes widely claim to be scientifically oriented, Finnish teacher education, in addition, also claim to be research-based. This means that both teacher educators and student teachers are actively involved in doing research.

By tradition teacher education for teachers qualifying for lower grades have been experience-based, and characterised by a hands-on approach focusing on the daily activities in classrooms and schools rather than on academic lectures. The introduced research-based approach has challenged the traditional model and caused tensions between the two. However, the tension is diminishing and the former tradition regarding practice as a highway to ‘the making’ of a teacher, has gradually been replaced by an expanding culture of academia. The positive potential of practice can, referring to Berliner (2005), only be utilised if it is firmly rooted in a research-based approach. This process involves theorisation on the basis of practice as well as turning theory into practice. Theory is embedded in practice and practice in theory, and research is thus inseparably tied to teachers’ actions (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Hansén and Sjöberg, 2006). Despite the fact that several decades have passed since the integration of these two approaches, teacher education has for a long time been struggling for a stable and recognised position within the academic world.

A significant feature characterising the Finnish approach is reflection as a tool to gain knowledge and understanding of action and interaction in the teaching-studying-learning process. The underlying ambition is to educate reflective professional teachers – not professional researchers – able to understand and act, and to justify their actions by drawing upon research-based evidence and thinking (Niemi and Jakku-Sihvonen, 2006; Kansanen, 2006). Conceptually, reflection is closely connected to a research-based approach. At a more pragmatic level, the approach implies assisting student teachers in internalising an open-minded and inquiry-oriented attitude towards their work, able to give pedagogical reasons for their daily actions, capability to deconstruct problems and conflicts, and to reconstruct appropriate solutions (Niemi and Jakku-Sihvonen, 2006). Reflection is therefore aimed at providing a stable ground for educational decision-making that is based on rational argumentation (Kynäslähti *et al.*, 2006).

The research-based approach is supported by the staff structure. Every teacher education institution has a staff structure corresponding with other comparable university units. Professors in education for example are in charge for various fields of applied education. Institutions are also provided with professorships in the didactics of central school-disciplines (e.g. foreign language education, mathematics education etc.). Parallel to research, professors have the responsibility to guide students in the research-oriented aspects of their education. Lecturers, responsible for the main part of teaching courses are research qualified and many of them are also actively involved in networks and research. Teacher educators compete for funding under the same conditions as other university institutions. This approach further means that the programme strives to be built on stable results from research in combination with tested experience. Finally the approach requires that student teachers explicitly are engaged in research activities, taking courses in research methods, participating in seminars and defending theses on Bachelor’s and Master’s level (Hansén and Wenestam, 1999; Kansanen, 1997; Niemi and Jakku-Sihvonen, 2006).

### **3. Transition from teacher education to work**

From an international perspective the practices of supporting teachers vary from country to country. In some countries the support consists of statutory induction programmes as part of the qualification process (cf. UK, Canada, New Zealand). In other countries the support is organised as voluntary, in-service training. Nevertheless, many countries still fail to offer adequate support for their new teachers. So far only 15 out of 32 EU countries have mandatory induction programmes (European Commission, 2013). Finland is one of the countries without mandatory induction in terms of one or two year probationary or guidance period monitored by authorities such as local or regional school authorities, state inspectorate etc.

Regardless whether induction is mandatory or voluntary the need for supporting NQTs remains important. Increasing research evidence shows that NQTs need support during the first phase of their career, especially in developing a conscious and strong professional identity as well as self-efficacy as teachers. Indeed, experiencing mastery during the transition from education to work contributes to reducing attrition, which is important as an increasing number of teachers in western society are leaving the profession during the first years (Alhija and Fresko, 2010; Smethem, 2007; Tynjälä and Heikkinen, 2011). The situation is particularly alarming as studies have shown that the most capable and successful teachers are the ones who tends to abandon the teacher occupation (Rots et al., 2007). Support for professional development is therefore essential for encouraging teachers to stay in the profession.

Teaching profession is in many ways elusive. In a Finnish study (Aspfors, 2012) new teachers' induction experiences have been investigated and the results revealed that teachers were surprised at tasks and elements of the profession that teacher education not sufficiently had prepared them for. There are for instance no exactly set working hours besides teaching hours in the class, no clear job description as to what tasks are required. It is largely up to the individual teacher to define what constitutes a job well done. Because of this, teachers, and new teachers in particular, struggle with setting limits to their own commitment and between their private and professional lives. The profession can also be described as complex, in that there are many circumstances that need to be simultaneously taken into consideration. The hectic pace of the work day combined with lack of routine does not allow much time for reflection. With the focus on survival, and without time for reflection, it is very difficult to develop professionally. Thus new teachers struggle in their work with balancing between different competing tasks, demands and priorities.

Induction forms the first part of teachers' continuing education. Conditions under which in-service education in general are offered in Finland varies for historical reasons between different categories of teachers. Teachers for the comprehensive schools and for upper secondary schools have, according to the legislation, a duty to participate in short term in-service education, three days each year, arranged by the owner organisation, in most cases the municipality. Usually other kinds of in-service education days are organised outside regular schooldays – i.e. in the afternoons, in the evenings, on Saturdays, or before or after the fall and spring semesters. This situation has caused dissatisfaction and low motivation among teachers.

Today some efforts are being taken to bring pre-service and in-service education closer to each other as the connection still is weak. The provision for in-service education has been poorly coordinated, and the quality of services has varied to a great extent. If teachers professional development is to be defined as a process



continuing through the career, different phases need to be linked into an integrated whole. Therefore a programme called Osaava Ohjelma (*Skilled Programme*) 2010–2016 has started as a national effort to coordinate and enhance in-service teacher education (Väljörvi and Heikkinen, 2012). A key element is to support new teachers through peer-group mentoring (PGM). This is implemented through a national consortium project called Osaava Verme, comprising all teacher education departments of the universities and vocational teacher education institutions in the country. The PGM model was developed during 2005–2010 through research projects involving the Finnish Institute for Educational Research and teacher educators. It is rather unique because, in contrast to many other induction and mentoring programmes, the Finnish model has no elements of assessment, standardisation or control. Instead, PGM affords means for both new and experienced teachers to collaborate, reflect and learn together in a supportive environment. The groups meet once a month and decide themselves about their study plan. As such, the approach is in line with general pedagogical trends emphasising a high level of teacher autonomy. It is based on the assumption that teachers are competent professionals with high expertise in their area (Aspfors and Hansén, 2011; Heikkinen *et al.*, 2012).

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

The focus of the article has been to provide a general picture of some features characterising the concept of Finnish teacher education. Within this scope we additionally have roughly presented the structure of student recruitment for one of the most popular teacher education programmes, and analysed two distinguished features of teacher education in Finland: the research based approach and the on-going efforts to develop measures of support for NQTs.

The goals of teacher education in Finland are set high particularly in academic terms. The strength of Finnish master-based pre-service education is shown in its capability to qualify reflective practitioners contributing to the recognised success of education. Teachers seem, according to research findings, to be able to internalise and apply a research-based approach to their work. This epistemic profile has been described as conceptually coherent, meaning strong emphasis on subject didactics, research competence, firm disciplinary focus, and a distinct academic professional identity. The profile provides opportunities for an inquiry-oriented attitude towards teaching practice and the use of an advanced scientific language. On the contrary, the profile that characterises for instance Norwegian teacher education for lower grade teachers, stresses a practice-oriented and a contextually coherent approach, i.e. to understand the practice of teaching in the actual context, to focus on school subjects, and use everyday language (Wågsås Afdal, 2012).

The question is whether research-based teacher education approach in Finland has a lasting effect on teachers' way of thinking and acting in their work. In her longitudinal study of the transition from student teachers to NQTs, Nyman (2009) found that some of the new teachers applied tools of critical reflection in their work and were thus able to benefit from what they had learned in their studies. Others, again, did not reflect on what they did, and returned to models of teaching from their own school days instead. Thus, in the current situation the outcome seems largely dependent on the individual teacher's capacity to apply critical thinking and

reflection to understanding their work. The question is whether something could and should be done to enhance the effects of education among the latter group of teachers, possibly in the form of continued support during the induction phase.

Finland has invested much of resources in its teacher education which undisputable is a strength. Because of the strong emphasis on pre-service education a close connection to in-service education, within the concept of lifelong learning, has been and to a great extent still is weak. The palette of in-service options is manifold but usually not coherently tied to pre-service education. An essential step to bridge the gap is however the Osaava Verme-programme aiming at supporting NQTs in the transition from studies to work.

In conclusion Finnish teacher education, despite discussed challenges and quiet debate, still remains in a dynamic and constructive phase able to generate teachers that can be labelled professionals. A phenomenon to be aware of, foremost attitudinal, is however the potential risk of a reactive attitude towards further development and challenges, and to lean back relying on the good reputation already achieved.

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