

FINNISH TEACHER EDUCATION –CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

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INTRODUCTION

The focus of our article is to view the features characterizing Finnish teacher education and bring forward current challenges concerning the content and structure of the education. Although focus is on Finnish teacher education, our experiences from other countries reveal that teacher education faces the same kinds of challenges elsewhere. Although the underlying contexts are different, some of the challenges seem to be internationally quite common in character, that is, the question of how to organize teacher education within higher education institutions. Other examples are the question of the level of academisation, i.e. a research-based approach or a practice-oriented approach, and of the relationship between subject didactics and general pedagogical qualification, to mention just a few. Some of the problems are more context-specific and occur in various ways in different settings, while others seem to be more generic in character. Based on Finnish teacher education, our expectation is thus to discuss teacher education in a wider and more generic way. Our ambition is through the Finnish case to contribute to the discussion of new paths when old ones no longer function properly, and to create new appropriate means in changing societal conditions.

Against this background, the aim of this article is to present characteristic features of Finnish teacher education, and to identify some challenges and possibilities and ways of dealing with them.

The article starts with a brief characterizing description of the present status of teacher education in Finland. We concentrate on the large teacher education programmes, the primary and secondary school teacher qualification. The ambition goes beyond describing the structure and content of teacher education, and our intention is also to highlight the challenges that Finnish education is facing. Several issues can, as suggested, be exposed, but we have restricted our analysis to three crucial areas: research-based design, theory and

practice orientation, and the transition from being a student teacher to entering the profession.

Characterising Features of Teacher Education in Finland

Finnish teacher education has been since the late 70s a fully integrated part of the university system, organised within faculties of education or corresponding institutions. In all teacher education, primary school teachers and secondary school teachers alike, the degree programme is set at the Master's level, which today is 300 ECTS according to the Bologna programme, and takes about five years to complete. Education is the main subject or discipline in the degree programme for primary school teachers, whereas secondary school teachers major in one of the subject matter disciplines in faculties of arts or sciences, e.g. different languages, history, mathematics, and biology.

Today's teacher education has at least intentionally abandoned the concept of mainly relying on knowledge and skills generated through experience (for instance, primary school teacher education was earlier provided by seminar institutions outside universities). Today, instead, teacher educators are expected to be well read in educational and neighbouring sciences, subject and subject didactics, and are thus supposed to use educational theories as guiding principles for teaching and other educational practice. While western teacher education programmes might claim to be scientifically oriented, Finnish teacher education, in addition, also claims to be research-based (Jakkusihvonen & Niemi, 2006; Kansanen, 2014). This approach is relatively new for primary school teachers, while secondary school teacher education has been attached to a Master's degree for more than one century.

As part of the academisation process, teacher education institutions are at the same academic level as other traditional academic units, with professors, senior lecturers and doctoral programmes. Some of the professors are appointed in applied education and didactics, and some in specific subject didactic fields. All teacher programmes contain an obligatory course module called "Pedagogical studies for teachers". The course module "Pedagogical studies for teachers" (60 ECTS) has a similar structure in all teacher programmes (primary school teachers, secondary school teachers, special-education teachers, etc.). This module contains courses in education, general didactics, and subject matter didactics, including guided teaching practice.

Although this module is to some extent differentiated for various teacher programmes, it has to be so general in character that it offers formal pedagogical competence to every kind of teacher and gives teachers a so-called “general teacher qualification”.

Subject matter student teachers take their subjects at the subject faculties at university, usually two to three subjects, of which one is the main subject in which they write their Master’s thesis. The students receive their subject didactics and the entire pedagogical qualification at faculties of education or corresponding institutions. At the same kind of faculties, primary school student teachers get their entire qualification in pedagogical education and subject didactics. Their main subject is pedagogy in which they write their Master’s thesis and at the same time they get a broad competence covering subjects provided in primary schools. Students further choose one or two subjects in which they specialise.

To complete the overview, a Master’s based teacher education approach means for student teachers in general a five year teacher education. It enables possibilities to get sufficient knowledge and skills in applied or general didactics, comprising educational psychology, social psychology, societal education and explicit research based activities, as well as subject specific didactics.

POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES

Referring to the stated aim and the three identified areas, we first discuss the research-based Finnish teacher education, due to the internationally considered unique design of a Master’s based education for most categories of teachers. Secondly, we focus on the internally well-known issue concerning the question of how to deal with the relationship between the studies at university and the teaching practice periods within teacher education. The structural frame of Finnish teacher education supports a close relation between theory and practice since governmental practice schools are connected to university where the main part of the students’ teaching practice takes place. Thirdly, we discuss the student teachers’ transition from teacher education to their professional work as teachers. Despite the academically recognized design of teacher education, it does not have the capacity to prepare for and anticipate all the unexpected situations teachers will meet in their daily work. In order to

face this challenge, a support programme for mentor education has been launched and is planned to be nationally established.

RESEARCH-BASED TEACHER EDUCATION

The ambition behind a research-based approach is a pronounced research orientation intertwined with a practice emphasis in the preciously mentioned practice schools which are pedagogically subordinated to the teacher education institutions at the universities. As an academic endeavour teacher education is by definition research-based. Research is largely central to the function and identity of the university, and a Finnish researcher Kansanen (2014), referring to Griffiths (2004), attaches four characteristics to it: *research-led*, meaning that the study programme is structured according to a systematic analysis of education; *research-oriented*, referring to an integration between teaching and research on teaching; *research-based*, pointing to the ability of pre-service teachers to practice argumentation, decision-making and justification in solving pedagogical problems; and *research-informed orientation*, aiming at equipping pre-service teachers with formal research skills. The ambition is to work to fulfil all four characteristics to various extents. The first one, *research-led*, relies on well-proven experience. The requisites for the other three criteria, structurally and in terms of competence, are met by Finnish teacher education institutions, since teacher education requires fully academic institutions, research qualified staff, and the expectations of conducting research. The characteristics provide a structured concept for grasping the idea of a research-based teacher education even if they represent an idealistic view.

Research activities form an obvious part of the teacher educational programme, containing explicit courses in research methods, including quantitative and qualitative aspects. The entire programme is also expected to be closely based on and implicitly permeated by current research. The explicit part of this orientation comprises carrying out independent studies by using scholarly methods for a Bachelor's and a Master's thesis. On the Bachelor's level, the first explicit part of the research orientation is related to writing a thesis. The thesis is usually a small empirically-based investigation conducted in a school context. Closely related to the thesis, students participate in various kinds of activities like courses in research, methods, and seminars where they act as respondents and opponents. At this basic level, students primarily get acquainted with the idea of research and focus is on how to compose a thesis,

utilize scientific literature, and produce scientific texts. On the Master's level, these activities contain a quite similar repertoire but with more advanced theories of science, advanced courses in research methodologies in both quantitative and qualitative approaches, as well as formal aspects of thesis writing. The requirements of the thesis are much higher both empirically and theoretically compared to the thesis on the Bachelor's level. The seminars are important and form the core in research activities. Students have to participate actively; they defend their own thesis and oppose their fellow students' theses. Writing theses on both levels also means that every student teacher will get an individual supervisor who is responsible for and whose duty it is to guide the student along the whole writing process.

What is the professional idea behind this emphasis on a research-based approach? The ambition is not to prepare professional researchers, but to qualify teachers able to work as autonomous, responsible, and reflective professionals. A research approach aims at enhancing both an individual and a collective development. On an individual level, it concretely means developing the ability to analyze, i.e. to deconstruct problems and to reconstruct solutions, to develop critical awareness, and to promote intellectual and personal development. Furthermore, the ambition is to promote the teachers' ability in didactical decision-making and to inspire them to become good consumers of research. On a collective level, the idea is to expose perceptions for collective examination, to develop the ability to think systematically together and to practice and develop a professional language, and not least to contribute to opening for the transforming potentiality of collective reflection (Hansén, Eklund & Sjöberg, 2015; Westbury, Hansén, Kansanen & Björkqvist, 2005).

The listed aspirations apparently reflect an idealistic view of a research-based teacher education. However, the crucial issue is how student teachers themselves perceive this approach in relation to their future profession. Eklund (2010, 2014) in several studies during recent years has investigated students' views of research-based teacher education. In a study carried out at Åbo Akademi University, a total number of 69 student teachers wrote essays about the concept of research-based teacher education. The results revealed three patterns of views. The first, *a positive attitude*, represented the majority of the students. Student teachers stressed that writing a thesis equipped them with deep knowledge in a subject and the fact that education on the Master's level

provides higher status. They further emphasised that thesis writing promotes personal and professional development, a well-tuned professional language, and ability to continue with practically-oriented research. According to the second, *a negative attitude*, student teachers claimed that the relation to the teaching profession is weak, and that explicit research activities take up too large a part of the education. They also complained that thesis writing caused pressure and performance anxiety, and a too theoretical education for what they consider to be a practical profession. The third, *alternatives*, included suggestions such as extended practice and practice-related work, as well as more practice-related courses, for instance in special education and pre-school education.

The study shows that student teachers' views are divided, although positive ones dominate. Students understand, and for the most part, principally accept the concept of research-based teacher education and they see the point of it. However, at the same time part of them perceive that the approach does not give them enough practical tools before entering the reality of teacher's work.

To sum up, can Finnish teacher education be characterized as research-based? Referring to the four characteristics of a research-based teacher education approach, teacher educators are qualified as researchers (Ph. D.) and expected to conduct research themselves and utilize their own or others' research in their teaching. There is also a correspondence concerning research-informed and research-based orientation, meaning that students are equipped with formal research skills, and obtain qualification in practice argumentation, decision-making and solving concrete pedagogical problems in school contexts.

THEORY AND PRACTICE ORIENTATION

The relationship between what we carelessly call theory and practice is a crucial question for education aiming at professional qualification. However, the issue is what constitutes the tensional relationship between university campus studies and activities in practice within the framework of teacher education. The tension seems to be an eternal one, meaning that we tend to repeat the contradictory relationship and, without any deeper questioning, accept the state of affairs. A trivial distinction often made is the one where theory represents courses, seminars and different kinds of study activities, whereas practice refers to authentic encounters between student teachers and

students in schools and classrooms, decision-making and acting. The practice of teacher education forms a key role in how teachers will perceive their daily work. The importance concerns not only practice itself but also the interplay between theoretical and practical elements and their mutual support (Sjöholm & Hansén, 2007).

The short overview shows something of the complexity of the notion theory and practice and the relationship between them within the frame of teacher education. A research-based teacher education approach aims at qualifying reflective practitioners who are able to make sense of an integrated view of the relationship. Biesta and Burbules (2003) point to a similar view by referring to Dewey, who rejected the idea of a conceptual difference between theory and practice. According to their interpretation, the difference is gradual and functional, and appears only in emphasis. Dewey goes far beyond traditional ways of separating theory and practice by claiming that both represent two kinds of practices. In his view, theory is not only restricted to knowing and practice not limited only to action, but both contain a blend of knowing (theory) and action (practice). The same kind of mutuality has also been stressed by Carr and Kemmis (1986) when they state that theories are outcomes of some kind of practical activity and those activities are embedded in some kind of theoretical understanding.

The traditional sharp distinction can, according to the discussion above, not be taken for granted, and new constructive views of perceiving the relationship are evolving. An ongoing shift means that theory or knowing is viewed as permeated with practice or action, and practice or action with theory or knowing.

How has Finnish teacher education been dealing with this issue? We limit our discussion to crucial aspects characterizing the organizational solutions of the relationship concerning governmental practising schools, and the so-called three parts meetings.

Unlike most countries, Finnish teacher education has preserved the system of governmental teacher practising schools. These schools are closely connected to teacher education and offer the main part of student teachers' professional qualification in practice. Within the teaching practice there are three actors whose role and function is to assemble the university teacher, the teacher in the practice school, and the student or student group in three parts meetings.

These meetings form a natural arena for the interplay. The actors meet each other continuously during student teachers' practice periods and together they plan teaching and evaluate the activities carried out. As a concept, this system of governmental teacher practising schools and three parts meetings provides appropriate prerequisites for a stable encounter between theory and practice orientation. However, despite this good ambition, the real situations do not always fully reach the intentions since teacher education and practising schools work within quite different conceptual frames (Jakku-Sihvonen & Niemi, 2006).

TEACHER EDUCATION AND NEWLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS (NQT) ENTERING THE PROFESSION

Regardless of the praise Finnish teacher education internationally has received, not even a Master's based teacher education can prepare teachers in such way that they feel they are fully-fledged to meet the classroom reality. International research shows that many newly-qualified teachers (NQT) are facing concrete problems, daily challenges and unexpected situations which cause anxiety and insecurity. Many researchers have emphasized that during the transitional phase from teacher education to entering the profession, teachers perceive that they have not been sufficiently prepared for the demands of the teaching profession (Aspfors, 2012; Heikkinen, Jokinen & Tynjälä, 2012; Ulvik, Smith & Helleve, 2009). These kinds of experiences are well-known from research literature, often described as reality shock. For some newly qualified teachers these experiences can result in dropping out from the profession. At present, the Nordic countries are developing various kinds of support programmes through mentor education in order to bridge the missing link between teacher education and working life (Smith, 2015).

Up to a few years ago mentoring in Finland had not been systematically organised during the first years, i.e. the induction phase, of the teaching career. Inducting NQTs was the responsibility of individual schools and varied considerably – if, indeed, they were inducted at all (Heikkinen, Jokinen & Tynjälä, 2012). One reason for the lack of any systematic support was a general belief that the newly qualified teacher had already achieved a high level of professional competence during the pre-service teacher education. As already discussed, Finnish teacher education has a reasonably high academic status and the teaching profession is quite autonomous. This common belief has, however, been challenged by a number of national research reports (cf.

Aspfors, 2012; Heikkinen, Jokinen & Tynjälä, 2012), which have indicated that new teachers also in Finland need support. As a consequence of this critique, the situation has changed, and according to a national report 2007, teachers benefit from being supported continuously from pre-service to in-service with the aid of mentoring as a key component in the induction phase.

What kinds of concrete measures has the Finnish teacher education system developed in order to support newly qualified teachers to face the challenges and to retain them in the profession? A national initiative for supporting new teachers in Finland was started in 2010, implemented through a national consortium project called *Osaava Verme*. Finland chose a concept of peer-group mentoring (PGM) instead of a classical convention of one-to-one mentoring. In contrast to many other induction and mentoring programmes, a collaborative approach is characterized by no formal evaluation, standardization or control. PGM affords means for new teachers to collaborate, reflect and learn together in a supportive environment (Hansén, Forsman, Aspfors & Bendtsen, 2012; Heikkinen, Jokinen & Tynjälä, 2012).

Peer group mentoring can be organized in several ways, and within the national project, *Osaava Verme*, usually groups of 4-10 NQTs are formed and facilitated by a more experienced teacher, a mentor. The formed groups have during an academic year about 6-8 meetings lasting for about 1.5-3 hours. The discussions between the mentor and the group of teachers concern, for instance, challenging classroom situations, and may contribute to developing new solutions. The themes are usually initiated by the NQTs themselves and thus guarantee that the discussions concern relevant and current issues. The underlying idea behind peer group mentoring is that the concept offers opportunities to share and reflect on various kinds of experiences, discuss problems and challenges, encourage each other, and learn together. Sharing experiences contributes to wellbeing and a feeling of community. According to current research findings, wellbeing is one factor promoting the retention of NQTs in the profession. According to Tynjälä, Heikkinen, Jokinen, Aspfors, and Hansén (2012), peer group mentoring is a flexible and simple social innovation that can be applied in different education contexts. The particular strength of peer group mentoring is that it supports both professional developing and coping at work. The peer mentoring model is considered to be a clear recognition of the high professional autonomy of Finnish teachers

because PGM is based on the assumption that teachers are competent professionals with high expertise within their area (Väljjarvi & Heikkinen, 2012).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have presented a selection of characteristic features of Finnish teacher education, and presented ways of dealing with some common challenges and possibilities. The challenge is to balance explicit research-oriented activities in a way that promotes student teachers' professional development. According to current research, most student teachers perceive research activities as closely connected to their professional identity. Teacher education equips teachers with appropriate possibilities to carry out their work as professional practitioners. However, some students claim that research activities are distanced from the teacher's daily work and that a teacher's work is of a practical character. A challenge for teacher education is thus to meet the needs of all student teachers and to consider alternative ways of accomplishing research-oriented activities corresponding both to research-based concept and practically-oriented requirements.

In our analysis, we have challenged the traditional view of theory and practice and argued against this sharp distinction. An expression for this ambition is visible in the title theory and practice orientation, which shows a softening of the dichotomy. We support the presented views of perceiving the relationship as reciprocal, meaning that theory orientation is viewed as permeated with practice, and practice orientation with theory. In Finnish teacher education, two structural measures have been taken in order to establish possibilities to meet the challenge. The first one is the system of governmental practicing schools connected to institutions of teacher education. The second one, a consequence, is the established, systematically organised three-parts meeting.

As shown, newly-qualified teachers are facing concrete problems, daily challenges and unexpected situations causing anxiety and insecurity. This reality shock is in many cases causing drastic consequences like leaving the profession. In Finland, peer group mentoring has been developed within the frame of the national mentoring project, *Osaava Verme*. This approach deviates from the established one-to-one mentoring by offering opportunities to reflect and learn together as a group in a supportive environment.

Finally, we have revealed three characteristic features of Finnish teacher education and identified challenges and possibilities and ways of dealing with them. Every feature points to the necessity of being open to the transforming power of research-generated knowledge. Furthermore, the whole of teacher education remains in a constant flux, meaning that new challenges are occurring and new possibilities for solving them are needed in order to maintain and further develop the quality of teacher education.

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