



Teaching: A practical or research-based profession? Teacher candidates' approaches to research-based teacher education[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teacher candidates appreciate research based teacher education differently.
- The concepts Teacher as a Researcher and Personal Practical Theory are unclear.
- Theoretical and practical elements of teacher training are not constantly integrated.
- Respondents do not always see connections between education and teacher's daily work.
- Open section answers indicate need for more practical education.

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses teacher training in Finland from the teacher candidate's perspective. The focus is on two key concepts, the Teacher as a Researcher and the Personal Practical Theory, which characterise the agenda of Finnish teacher education. Cluster analysis divided the respondents into five groups, and each cluster had a short textual description. Qualitative data were included in the summary. According to our analysis, the main concepts of the Teacher as a Researcher and the Personal Practice Theory are unclear to teacher candidates and are appreciated differently. Subject teacher candidates in particular, who come from other academic cultures, might consider these concepts educational jargon that have no substance. We also argue that teacher students are not always able to connect the theoretical parts of their studies with practice. These results challenge the claim that Finnish teacher education has resolved the demanding relationship between theory and practice.

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1. Introduction

Finland's education system is internationally well-known as the epitome of organisation in which good learning results and egalitarian objectives meet. Although Finnish learning outcomes in the PISA testing of 15-year-olds have fallen during recent years, Finland is still among the best-performing countries (Vettenranta et al., 2016). Circumstantial evidence suggests that the decision to train

all teachers to Master's level is one reason behind these good learning outcomes (Kansanen, 2014). Finnish teacher education has sometimes been called the model for educating prospective teachers (Kansanen, 2014; Niemi & Jakku-Sihvonen, 2006; Sahlberg, 2011; Toom et al., 2010; Westbury, Hansén, Kansanen, & Björkvist, 2005).

In earlier papers, we have studied the history of Finnish teacher education (Sääntti, Rantala, Salminen & Hansen, 2014; Sääntti & Salminen 2015) and the rhetoric behind it, especially the relationship between theory and practice (Puustinen, Sääntti & Salminen, 2015; Sääntti, Puustinen & Salminen 2018). Based on these studies, we conclude that rhetoric, more than reality, might best serve the interests of Finnish teacher education; especially those of teacher educators and educational scientists. Recent Finnish teacher education research has emphasised its unanimous praise, which has resulted in the research-based paradigm being favoured (for example, Niemi, 2011; Sahlberg, 2011; Tirri, 2014). Therefore, given

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the exemplary reputation of Finnish education, the system needs to be critically explored. We also need a fresh view with a larger sample than the those used in previous studies.

Finnish teacher education follows a research-based approach. Teacher education studies are structured according to a systematic analysis of education. Educational research and the teaching of student teachers are said to be integrated. Thus, all teaching is based on scientific evidence, and theory-based pedagogical thinking is incorporated into teachers' every action (Kansanen, 2014; Niemi & Jakku-Sihvonen, 2006; Westbury et al., 2005). The particular starting point of this study was the close reading of teacher education programmes' degree requirements at the University of Helsinki. We detected two main goals shared by all the teacher programmes: the Teacher as a Researcher (TAR) and the Personal Practical Theory (PPT). The first goal, TAR, is the embodiment of research-based teacher education and is mentioned explicitly several times in the degree requirements. The second goal, PPT, aims to combine the different elements experienced by the students during their education.

In this article, we study how student teachers experience their teacher education programme from the perspectives of TAR and PPT, both of which represent current teacher education. We divided our research question into three parts: First, based on a survey, we formed typologies to identify the stances of teacher education candidates towards the institutional goals of their education. Then, we analysed how this formulated typology could be explained. Finally, to deepen our analysis and to understand what factors might explain the different attitudes and experiences, we analysed the open-ended questions section of the survey. However, our focus remains clearly on the quantitative data.

Before introducing our data and methods more specifically, we consider theoretical viewpoints and briefly introduce the Finnish teacher education system.

2. Theoretical considerations

2.1. Research-based teacher education in Finland in the context of teacher education paradigms

Historically, Finnish teacher education has developed in a unique way. The status of teacher education and that of the teaching profession has systematically risen (Säntti et al., 2018). In the 1960s, the government imposed new theoretical requirements for teacher education, as Finnish society was rapidly changing. At the end of the 1970s, teacher education reached an academic level at which class teachers began to study for the full-scale academic degrees that subject teachers also required. In the wake of this theoretical stance, a new research-oriented teacher emerged. The theoretical views were intensified in the 1990s, when research-based teacher education, the present agenda, was introduced (Kansanen, 2014; Säntti et al., 2018; Toom et al., 2010). This process is seen as the academisation of teacher education (Simola, 2015).

The present-day teacher, even at the elementary and early childhood education level, has received an academic education that includes courses in research methodology and educational theory. Most notably, class teachers are required to write a Master's thesis in education. The subject teacher programme, in which students major in other disciplines, includes a seminar entitled *The Teacher as a Researcher*. Students carry out their own research on their chosen educational research theme. These studies make tangible the aspiration of Finnish teacher education that teachers achieve full academic status (Kansanen, 2014; Toom et al., 2010; Westbury et al., 2005; Tirri, 2014).

Admittedly, the Finnish system is only one way of organising teacher education. Various other categorisations delineate how

teacher education can be organised according to some leading principle. Zeichner (1983) presented a classic grouping by introducing four alternative paradigms of teacher education: the Behavioristic, Personalistic, Traditional-Craft and Inquiry-oriented paradigms. This categorisation still seems to have explanatory power (Taylor, 2008; Zeichner & Conklin, 2005) and is actively referred to in current Finnish teacher education (Jyrhämä et al., 2008; Krokfors et al., 2011).

Next, we try to define Finnish teacher education according to its conceptual orientation (Zeichner & Conklin, 2005). For Zeichner, this conceptual orientation is a 'paradigm' that represents a 'matrix of beliefs and assumptions' behind different teacher education programmes. Feiman-Nemser (1990) in turn consider these various orientations and paradigms to reflect 'a cluster of ideas about the goals of teacher preparation and the means for achieving them'. When Finnish teacher education is represented as research-based, this orientation is called an 'organising theme' (Krokfors et al., 2011). Nevertheless, whether a teacher education programme is understood in terms of a paradigm, orientation, leading principle or organising theme, it should reflect what that particular teacher education programme envisages and aims to achieve (Krokfors et al., 2011; Zeichner & Conklin, 2005).

By juxtaposing various researchers' different categorisations, we can find similarities. For example, Zeichner's personalistic (Zeicher, 1983) and Feiman-Nemser's personal orientations (Feiman-Nemser, 1990) represent a teacher education paradigm in which personal and developmental matters are central. The focus of these models is student teachers' growth (through nurturing) as a teacher. Taylor (2008) uses the term 'enabling students' individual growth as teachers when representing a similar personalistic view.

The traditional craft teacher education paradigm sees the educator as a competent craftsman, and regards teaching as a craft, in which the pedagogical knowledge (perhaps acquired by trial and error) of experienced educators is appreciated (Feiman-Nemser, 1990; Zeichner, 1983). This seems to resemble Moore's training discourse (Moore, 2004), which profiles teachers as 'competent craft persons'. Taylor (2008) also acknowledges this approach with the term, 'cascading expertise', in which information and expertise are transmitted from experienced teachers to novices.

The current agenda of Finnish teacher education corresponds to Zeichner's inquiry-oriented paradigm (Zeicher, 1983) and Feiman-Nemser's technological orientation (Feiman-Nemser, 1990). In Zeichner's view, teachers are prepared to analyse their actions and the ensuing consequences. Although Feiman-Nemser's technological orientation sounds rather strange, its agenda includes the idea that knowledge is 'derived from the scientific study of teaching' and uses 'research-based principles and practices', which are actually a more accurate depiction of Finnish teacher education than that of Zeichner.

In more recent categorisations, the Finnish teacher education paradigm appreciates Moore's 'teacher as a reflective practitioner' (Moore, 2004). This reflective educational practitioner is not a mere recipient of professional knowledge produced by an educational scientist. Rather, the teacher is an autonomous actor who also participates actively in knowledge production. Taylor's concept of 'students as teachers and learners' (Taylor, 2008) also accurately reflects the basic idea of Finnish teacher education, in which students are expected to think critically and develop their own thinking. This resembles the concept of PPT, which is one element of research-based teacher education.

In 1981, Elbaz (1981) launched the term Practical Knowledge, which includes practical assumptions, rules of practices and images. These, in turn, are said to lie behind the decisions and actions that a teacher chooses to take. Korthagen (2011) speaks about PPT

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