

# The strengths of Finnish teacher training

*Pertti Kansanen*

## **1. The current situation**

Ever since the OECD published its first set of PISA (Programme for International Student Development) results in 2001, an exceptional amount of active international interest has been shown in education in Finland, the country's schools, their pupils and teachers and the training of teachers. Delegations from a number of countries have visited our schools to learn about the way in which they function, and the interest has subsequently expanded to cover the whole of our social system in an attempt to determine the reasons behind the success of our pupils by comparison with those in other countries. Innumerable conferences and symposia have been arranged on the topic of the PISA findings, they have been discussed in large numbers of academic papers and newspaper articles and spokesmen for the Finnish educational system have been invited to international meetings of all kinds.

One common feature of all these forms of publicity, however, has been the admission that we do not in fact know the reason behind this success. The publication of the first results was greeted in Finland with expressions of great amazement, which has simply persisted in the light of more recent findings of a decline in this success, albeit not a very dramatic one. The situation has

been sufficiently interesting, however, that new discussions and explanations have constantly arisen. Numerous quite plausible views have been put forward, but they have consistently met with equally plausible counter-arguments, and in spite of the decline in the published results the overall ranking of the Finnish education system has remained high. Since one aspect that is frequently brought forward when considering the reasons for the success concerns the professional skills and training of the teachers in Finnish schools, I shall concentrate here on the connections between the teachers and their training and the performance of Finnish pupils in the PISA evaluations and the significance of these factors for the successful results obtained.

## **2. The attraction of the teaching profession**

Teaching has traditionally been a popular occupation in Finland; in fact, one might say that it has been very popular, although admittedly more so among women than men. This becomes more obvious when one compares the situation with that prevailing in other countries. The desire to qualify as a teacher has diminished all over Europe in general terms, and there are surprisingly few candidates for teacher training in the

other Nordic countries, for instance. It is also claimed that the quality of the applicants - whatever that may be - has declined. In Finland, however, there have consistently been plenty of applicants, so that for many years now there have been about 1,500 young people annually applying for the 120 places available for the training of comprehensive school class teachers at the University of Helsinki. Applications for training as a subject teacher have to be submitted to the faculties responsible for the subjects concerned, but it is clearly extremely difficult to gain a place at that level, too. The consequence of this, of course, is that only the very best students with good marks in the matriculation examinations stand a chance of competing for teacher training places and only about 10% of the applicants can be accepted. The exact proportions vary from one subject to another, but the process is in all cases a highly selective one. Our teachers are thus without doubt competent and talented, which places us in a favourable position internationally.

We Finns have a great respect for schooling and for education in general, although one would not always realize this. The Mexican scholar Eduardo Andere (2014), who has been studying the PISA evaluations for a long time and is familiar with the Finnish school system, names a number of factors that he believes can explain the country's success: educational policy is close based on monitoring of the teachers and their teaching, the available teaching technology is similarly based on monitoring of the teachers and their teaching, a good balance prevails between control and trust, the teaching profession is a life-long undertaking and not just a job, there is a positive atmosphere in the schools and in the interaction between teachers and pupils, and the work that takes place in schools is driven by a high level of

motivation. Andere's comments are very flattering and hard to believe, but they are based on extensive comparisons.

### **3. Research-based teacher training**

In the majority of western countries teacher training takes place in the universities, although there is some variability, especially where infant teachers are concerned. It should be remembered, however, that this does not automatically guarantee high-quality instruction. On the other hand, Finland is in an unusual position in this respect, on account of the reform of the university degree system that took place in 1979, which gave teacher training that same status as any other university subject, the implication being that student teachers have a main subject in which they are working for a master's degree. For class teachers in the comprehensive school system this is normally education, while for subject teachers it is the principal subject that they propose to teach. This dualistic model divides students up as far as the content of their studies is concerned, but the academic basis follows the same principles in all cases.

There are certain important perspectives involved in this integration of teacher training into the university system. The curriculum is taken to be a training for research, but without forgetting the practical and professional aspects. In other words, qualified teachers are expected to be capable of understanding and adopting for their own use the results of research in the field of education. The aim is to produce teachers who have the skills and ability to examine their own work and develop their own theories regarding it on the basis of their own experiences.

Thus education is to be investigated and developed in the context of university stud-

ies on the principle that research and teaching form a single entity. The department's staff – its professors, lecturers and postgraduate students – are expected to carry out research, collaborate in international research projects, attend international conferences and publish papers in the best possible international journals. The department's research should also be evaluated in the same manner as that carried out in any other university department. The evaluations available so far have been encouraging: in spite of the short period for which this system has been functioning the results point to a good average level and the international ranking of educational science as a university discipline, of which research into teacher training forms one part, has been relatively high. The listing of facts of this kind might seem trivial, but it is rare by international standards for teacher training to be looked upon as an academic subject to such an extent. It is a consequence of the status of teacher training within the university and can thereby serve as an object of international comparison.

The idea behind research-based teacher training is that teaching is grounded in research data, evidence. Teachers must be expected to assess the reliability of the information they receive and distinguish between information emanating from different sources. Estimation of the reliability of the material content of the teaching would seem obvious, as teaching materials are revised almost automatically to conform with the available research data, but pedagogical information and content is rather different; this has traditionally been passed on by following the example of experienced teachers, adopting various recommendations and applying various didactic theories. Now, as the volume of pedagogical research data has increased, the emphasis has shifted to study-

ing such data and thereby reducing the importance of various established doctrines.

The key pedagogical issue is how the goals that have been laid down can be achieved by means of teaching. This apparently simple question is extremely difficult to answer. Although the volume of pedagogical data is increasing so that we know much more about the matter than we used to, it still does not provide teachers with instructions as to how they can achieve their goals. Teachers have to make their own decisions and choose between the alternatives available. Exaggerating slightly, we could say that where teachers were previously guided to act in a certain manner, according to a particular didactic theory, we are now aiming at a situation in which they are themselves able to decide on their actions. We are moving from descriptive information to normative decision-making, but this way of thinking is only in its initial stages within didactics on a global scale.

The goal of research-based teacher training is thus to train autonomous teachers who are capable of reaching their own decisions through the processes of pedagogical thinking. They should be "practitioner-researchers" who possess the ability to examine their own teaching and are capable of viewing their work in a broader research context. This is a very challenging goal; it requires practice in both teaching and research, and above all in the combining of these two viewpoints. We assume that teachers will gradually be able to develop their own theories as to how this takes place in practise and test and refine these in the course of their work.

Research-based teacher training contains within it the whole content of a traditional teacher training curriculum: the material to be taught, the pedagogical principles for teaching it and the necessary teaching

practice. These things are aimed at successful performance in the everyday routines of teaching and may be regarded as representing the basic model for teacher training which is not likely to vary very much from one country's system to another. The history of the development of this model may be described as having set out from the content of the subject or subjects to be taught, and there are still many people who think that the maximum possible command of the subject matter is a sufficient qualification for working as a teacher. One should not underestimate this aspect, of course, but it is also important to recognise that the next developmental stage was marked by the introduction of didactics, i.e. the question of the optimal means by which such goals can be achieved. The third stage then led to teaching practice, which in turn passed through a complex process of development from listening to and following teaching events to active teaching under the guidance of an experienced supervisor.

In addition to this basic level, the Finnish model of research-based teacher training features a conceptual level of reflection on one's own activities and consideration of pedagogical issues. We are not unique in developing teacher training in this way, of course, as curricula aiming in this direction are becoming more common, but we do have something that is difficult to find elsewhere, namely the essential link with research that pervades all stages and courses in the training provided. The aim of this is on the one hand to encourage pedagogical thinking, in which pedagogical information is linked to decisions made within the teaching itself, and on the other hand to support the task of producing a degree dissertation to complement the study programme. I would emphasize that we understand this in practise as a piece of research that is based on empirical

data, so that the process has practical teaching at a school affiliated to the faculty of education essentially incorporated within it. It has become evident that this arrangement has almost died out elsewhere, but for some reason it has survived in Finland and has now been rediscovered and recognised as one of the strengths of our teacher training as a whole. Teaching practice is arranged in connection with teacher training in most places, of course, but our system based on a permanent school operating for the purpose acts in many ways as a guarantee of high quality, especially when it is filled out with additional teaching practice at local authority schools, which recommendations state should amount to a third of the total time spent on teaching practice.

#### **4. The university connection**

There are some countries in which teacher training takes place in universities, but this does not necessarily mean that such training is academic in nature. In many cases it is built up of separate courses and is somewhat dispersed, while the research element is dubious, is minimal in extent or fails to lead to any academic qualification beyond some kind of certificate or diploma. Finnish teachers complete a full master's degree and are entitled to go on to a doctorate in education without any further preparatory qualifications. I have tried, together with Professor Sven-Erik Hansén of Åbo Akademi, to analyse the structure of university departments of teacher training in Finland, and we have arrived at three alternative models: the integrated model, an asymmetrical matrix model and a matrix model. In the integrated model the department is a single entity, its activities have a common purpose and it is administratively a single unit. It is a strong, independent organization and has an inter-

disciplinary body of knowhow. Its didactic expertise, in general and for individual subjects, is of the highest possible quality and its links with the subject departments ensure that the quality of the content in those respects is up to the same standard. In the asymmetrical matrix model the course is led by the teacher training unit but some parts of it are delegated to other instances, in our case to the subject departments.

It should be noted that in Finland we rely mostly on the integrated model, which is then filled out with expertise acquired from the subject departments. By contrast, a matrix model is one in which there is only some kind of coordinative body – a central office, as it were – that outsources the required teaching to various other parts of the university. Frequently specialization in didactics is a secondary consideration in such cases, there are few specialized duties and there is no systematic research into teacher training. The asymmetrical model will presumably prevent the effective development of teacher training, while this duty belongs automatically to the professors, lecturers and post-graduate students in the integrated model. We assume that the integrated model is the most fruitful from the point of view of teacher training, although the matrix model is surprisingly common internationally. The Swedish model, for instance, is very close to being of the matrix type.

The integrated model usually assumes a solution to the main subject issue that implies grouping the studies as a whole around this subject, while the matrix model frequently does not have a main subject or any other integrating factor but gathers the students' studies together from disparate sources. This makes it difficult to name anyone who is principally responsible for developing the course, and although professors may be appointed in this field, as in Sweden,

they may be working in different departments without any natural means of mutual contact. Such a situation is undesirable from a pedagogical point of view, whereas in the integrated model didactics and pedagogical research serve as unifying factors.

## 5. Conclusions

I have attempted here to maintain that one of the most important factors explaining the success of 15-year-old Finnish pupils in the PISA evaluations may be their teachers and the training provided for them. It is only possible to verify this claim indirectly, of course, by attempting to find features that are characteristic of our system and are absent from others. There are in fact a number of these features.

One such feature is the attraction that the teaching profession holds for young people, particular young women. For many people it is a calling rather than a job, and for most it is an occupation in which they believe they will be happy. The numbers of applicants for teacher training are high in Finland and have been for a long time.

A second feature is the academic nature of teacher training and its implementation in a genuine university context. It is as a consequence of this that research forms a guiding principle incorporating the notion of conceptualization of both thinking and action and the grounding of pedagogical notions in research evidence as far as is possible. All this means that students have an opportunity to develop practical theories of their own and to continue to develop these by studying their own work as it progresses.

Furthermore, our teacher training is based predominantly on the integrated model for a university department, in which the majority of the teaching is gathered together within the same unit. This guarantees that

there are members of staff who are responsible for the development of both research and teaching and that the research community achieves the necessary critical mass.

Finally one negative footnote: our ways of working have been criticised, too. Our teaching programmes are naturally being developed all the time, and we believe that this will lead to improvements. If, however, it should turn out in the future that the at-

tractiveness of the teaching profession remains high and our teacher training programmes are constantly being improved but the PISA results continue to deteriorate, the initial hypothesis regarding the excellence of our teachers and the training that they receive will have been disproved. We simply have to hope that this will not happen and that future developments will be favourable in this respect.

## Literature

- Aho, E., Pitkänen, K., & Sahlberg, P. (2006). *Policy development and reform principles of basic and secondary education in Finland since 1968*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Andere, E. (2014). *Teachers' perspective on Finnish school education: Creating learning environments*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Zeichner, K.M. (Eds.). (2005). *Studying teacher education: The report of the AERA panel on research and teacher education*. Washington, D.C. & London: AERA & Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hattie, J.A.C. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. London: Routledge.
- Hökkä, P., Eteläpelto, A., & Rasku-Puttonen, H. (2010). Recent tensions and challenges in teacher education as manifested in curriculum discourse. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26(4), 845-853.
- Hökkä, P., & Eteläpelto, A. (2014). Seeking new perspectives on the development of teacher education: A study of the Finnish context. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 65(1), 39-52.
- Jakku-Sihvonen, R., & Niemi, H. (Eds.). (2006). *Research-based teacher education in Finland – Reflections by Finnish teacher educators* (pp. 31-51). Turku: Finnish Educational Research Association.
- Kansanen, P. (2010). HORRIBILE DICTU: The success story of the Finnish school system. In A. Liimets (Hrsg.), *Denkkulturen. Selbstverdung des Menschen. Erziehungskulturen* (ss. 95-110). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Kansanen, P. (2012). Mikä tekee opettajankoulutuksesta akateemisen? *Kasvatus ja Aika*, 2/2012. [www.kasvatus-ja-aika.fi](http://www.kasvatus-ja-aika.fi)
- Kansanen, P. (2014). Teaching as a Master's level profession in Finland: Theoretical reflections and practical solutions. In O. McNamara, J. Murray & M. Jones (Eds.), *Workplace learning in teacher education. International practice and policy* (pp. 279-292). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Kansanen, P., Tirri, K., Meri, M., Krokfors, L., Husu, J., & Jyrhäma, R. (2000). *Teachers' pedagogical thinking. Theoretical landscapes, practical challenges*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Malinen, O.-P., Väistönen, P., & Savolainen, H. (2012) Teacher education in Finland: a review of a national effort for preparing teachers for the future. *The Curriculum Journal*, 23(4), 567-584.
- Niemi, H., Toom, A., & Kallioniemi, A. (Eds.). (2012). *The miracle of education: The principles and practices of teaching and learning in Finnish schools*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Sahlberg, P. (2011). *Finnish lessons. What can the world learn from educational change in Finland*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Simola, H. (2015). *The Finnish mystery. Historical and sociological essays on schooling in Finland*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Tirri, K. (2014) The last 40 years in Finnish teacher education. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 40(5), 600-609.
- Ususiautti, S., & Määttä, K. (2013). Significant trends in the development of Finnish teacher training education programs (1860-2010). *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 21(59).
- Valli, P., Perkkilä, P., Valli, R. (2013). How can I be a better teacher? Development of Finnish adult preservice teachers' pedagogical thinking. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 106, 1306-1320.
- Westbury, I., Hansen, S.-E., Kansanen, P., & Björkvist, O. (2005). Teacher education for research-based practice in expanded roles: Finland's experience. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 49(5), 475-485.