

# Good Teachers and Good Teacher Educators: A Glance at the Current Teacher Education in Finland

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**ABSTRACT**— *In this article, our purpose is to discuss two perspectives of the current teacher education: teacher selection and teacher education in their pursuit of preparing good teachers at Finnish universities. How to define a good teacher? How to educate good teachers? The core question is how to draw from the history of teacher education and combine the new knowledge to serve the current demands of the profession in the best possible manner.*

**Keywords**— teacher, teacher education, Finland, teacherhood, love

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The origins of teacher training in Finland can be traced to the 1860s. The training of teachers was designed in keeping with the viewpoints of contemporary Finnish educationalists. Johan V. Snellman, who was a supporter and enthusiast of Finnish language and culture, was convinced that the establishment of decent teacher training colleges would ameliorate the quality of education. According to another important personality in the history of Finnish education, who is considered the father of Finnish elementary education, Uno Cygnaeus, teachers should be trained by strict religious principles. At the time, Christianity had a strong foothold in Finland and formed an important part of educational goals too. He defined the first principle for teachers' college students as follows:

The college should not only arouse religious mind in students and a severe understanding about the important vocation of an elementary school teachers but also prevent them from being proud and overly self-esteeming.[1]

The Finnish School System was changed comprehensively at the beginning of the 1920s when the foundation for the existing teacher training was laid as two notable plans were finished: the Act on Compulsory Education that came into effect in 1921 and the plan concerning the development of teacher training in 1922. The Act on Compulsory Education obliged municipalities to arrange education for all children aged 7-12. It meant that new schools were established both in country sides and cities, and the lack of teachers was substantive [2]. At the beginning of the 20th century, new teacher training colleges were established [3].

In 1974, all the seminars were abolished and incorporated into universities. This reform created university-level departments where teachers for the lower grades of the comprehensive schools were trained. This innovation was completed in 1979 when the reform in the basic degrees started at the universities. In the field of education, the basic degree in Finland is a Master's degree and the Finnish teacher education has the academic position nowadays. When aiming at a master's degree and being fully integrated in the university system, teacher education has a research-based approach in Finland [4].

However, despite many complimentary statements and evaluations [5] [6] [7], today's Finnish teacher education still struggle with several dilemmas [8] [9] [10]. The teacher's profession interests the Finnish youth—it is a dream profession for many young people. Numerous good applicants apply to teacher education year after year: usually, only fewer than 20 % of them can be admitted to the education. Some applicants even apply several times and the entrance test for teacher education has multiple phases. Through the selection for teacher education, we control the quantity and quality of the group of people who are allowed to become teachers and to work as teachers in our schools [11]. Through this process, we are able to distinguish those who are expected to be good teachers from the unsuitable ones. In spite of numerous new research on applicants' career choice motives [12] [13] [14] and selections for teacher education

nowadays [15] [16], we do not know particularly well which kind of selection criteria would be the best nor what kind of consequences this selection process has. The selection procedure of teacher education has been constantly under renewal and student selection also constitutes one essential development goal in the present teacher education [17].

In this article, our purpose is to discuss two perspectives of the current teacher education: how to define a good teacher and how to ensure the preparation of good teachers at Finnish universities? The core question is how to draw from the history of teacher education and combine the new knowledge to serve the current demands of the profession in the best possible manner.

## **2. WHO IS A GOOD TEACHER?**

Who is a good teacher, then? Some features of one could be pointed out. In the 1860s, Uno Cygnaeus, emphasized a teacher's own being by stating that the teacher's decency is the most dependable guarantee for the success of educational aspirations. It was important that student teachers were educated by means of strict discipline and order to become ideal teacher personalities. The goal of the teacher training was to develop into "God's workers, teachers with a vocation" [1]. Indeed, teachers' were considered exemplary people for the whole nation and therefore their work was not just seen something one does but adopting certain kind of a role and identity [18] [19].

In 1850–1917, teachers were expected to be loyal, diligent, upright, physically healthy, and regular [20]. Later on in 1917–1958, teachers had to be reputable, healthy, and musical, too [2] [3]. Then in 1959–1970, the emphasis was on teachers' good performing skills and behavior, but still, teachers were expected to have a healthy body and regular character along with musicality. In 1970–1986, teachers had to have hobbies, and be straight-A students, extrovert, and suitable. The present criteria for student selection emphasize motivation and suitability that seem quite broad compared to previous criteria [21] [22].

It seems that the teacher's role and position involve so many status-related demands that affect even modern teachers' work [23]. Certainly, the traditions are deeply rooted but teachers' work involves such a high responsibility that concern today's teachers equally much as it did the teachers of the twentieth century. Namely, the teachers' authority and example that they set are of equally great importance [24]. Indeed, the original meaning of pedagogy is said to be grounded in the relational and intentional responsibility of an adult to a child [25]. Unpleasant memories, such as public humiliation in front of other people, ridicule, and fear leave lifelong negative impressions about teachers [26] [27]. Alternatively, encouraging feedback given by a teacher can even be a significant turning point for the rest of a student's life. Good teachers are aware of the importance of students' emotional health to their academic success and therefore [28], features such as compassion, love, and patience toward pupils should have an eminent part in a teacher's personality [29] [30] [31].

Since various eras, theories, ideologies, and ideas of man have their own emphases in the illustration of a good teacher, any ideal picture of a teacher's personality traits cannot be obviously drawn. Thus, there are many ways of being a good teacher: a good teacher is a personality who does not behave in a certain mechanical manner. Luckily good teachers are different because pupils are, too! At the same time, it is true that not just anyone can be a good teacher. A teacher's work involves plenty of emotional strain and every teacher feels frustrated occasionally. There are situations when teachers fail regardless of a solution they make. Teachers confront such problems and challenges that do not have any ready solutions [32].

Good teachers can inspire various learners and help them succeed, and thus, it is the question of looking at the school subject from a pupil's perspective, supporting the pupil, and foreseeing the critical points in learning, and the willingness to make the effort for pupils' learning. Pupils become enthusiastic when they experience successes, notice that they make a progress, and are convinced that they are cared for, understood, and appreciated. Good teachers can prioritize and find the joy in the smallest achievements.

Indeed, teachers are tested in the modern schools by the ever-increasing flood of information. Various demands are set for teachers by school authorities, pupils, and their parents. While working between a rock and a hard place, teachers should remember to take care of their coping in order to maintain motivation and activity in their work. Thus, teachers need good self-reflection skills, and a realistic attitude and appreciation of themselves as teachers and teaching. Good teachers are not perfect but they are humane toward themselves and pupils. Good teacher do not expect their pupils to be perfect either.

Pedagogical love as a form of good teacherhood means constant trust in pupils' learning and their talents and opportunities to be discovered. For instance, in situations where a learner's progress is slow or tangled, a loving teacher takes care that the learner does not lose his or her trust in his or her own learning when getting frustrated. When a teacher believes in a learner's abilities, the teacher will find it easier to convince the learner of them as well. Indeed, "the aim of education must transcend the development of academic competence" states Pajares [33] and continues that in order to

prepare caring and fully functioning individuals, schools and teachers “must be armed with optimism, self-regard, and regard for others” (p. 34).

Due to the academic education, teachers are able to reflect, develop, and renew the education system and teaching work in practice. Teachers are prepared to analyze teacherhood as teacher-researchers. A good teacher does not only work in the classroom and in interaction with pupils but is aware of the wider societal and communal perspectives of his or her work: more often than not teachers work in co-operation with multi-professional teams [e.g. 34].

### **3. WHAT IS GOOD TEACHER EDUCATION?**

Preparing good teachers means almost the same as preparing good personalities. Teacher training should take care of personalities along with teaching skills. An important part of a teacher’s work has to do with interaction with pupils, parents, teacher colleagues, and the wider context including for example business partners. A teacher’s ability to build a network where the school forms a part of the local community strengthens the cultural and social task of school. Current trends, such as internationalization and multiculturalism, require that teachers bear new kind of societal responsibility and active role as future makers [32].

Therefore, working in a teaching profession necessitates constant up-dating and continuing education. Teachers have to be able to renew and acquire pedagogical and subject knowledge and skills and seek answers to problems in their work through innovative experiments and research-based evaluations. Martti Haavio wrote already in 1948 how teachers are eternal pupils [35]. Likewise, in today’s teacher training, we talk about teachers as researchers of their work. Niemi and Jakku-Sihvonen [36] point out that

As professionals, teachers need countless practical skills that will enable them to mediate contents to individuals or groups and to construct knowledge jointly. This kind of knowledge can be described as procedural knowledge. Academic content and practical skills must not be seen as separate or exclusive; they are always complementary in the teaching profession. The following summary describes what kinds of abilities are needed in the teaching profession: 1) the ability to support different learners (age, gender, cultural background, learning difficulties etc.), 2) the ability to co-operate with other teachers in schools or other educational settings; 3) the ability to promote co-operation with stakeholders; 4) the ability to develop and improve curriculum and learning environments; 5) the ability to solve problems in school life or educational institutions and 6) the ability to reflect on one’s own professional identity. (pp. 44- 45)

Teacher training makes only a short period in student teachers’ professional development. Eventually, teachers go through a three-phased socialization process. First, they socialize in the professional norms and values during their own pupilhood at school. The second phase takes place at teacher training and in the theoretical world of it. Finally, they enter the real teaching world as budding teachers. Finlayson and Cohen [37] talk about two frames of reference: the college frame of reference and the school frame of reference between which the difference between the ideal and practical worlds exists. If teacher training does not provide with sufficient skills to renew teaching, the new teacher’s abilities to do that will remain weak. Several studies [38] [39] [40] [41] show that novice teachers’ problems at the field are quite imminent and require imitating more experienced teachers, and growing and developing. If the reformatory research-based teacher training is not balanced and convincing enough to avoiding old methods, education will be “ivory tower” education [42]. Then, student teachers end up doing the same teaching practices they have experienced as pupils. New teachers are especially vulnerable because they do not have the charisma or routines yet. They are “green” as Dreeben [43] put it or face “sink or swim” situations as described by Lortie [44]. However, student teachers should learn to perceive teachers’ work rewarding and far-reaching already during their education.

Teacher training must support student teachers’ self-confidence and personality development so that they trust in their abilities to cope with the teaching work [45] [46]. Although there are plenty of good guidance and teaching experiences and practices available in teacher training, new ones are constantly called for. Caring for student teachers is the lifeline of the quality and profitability of teacher training.

School system is the target of constant reformation. Good teacher education lays the foundation of the development and appreciation of school system through providing teachers with opportunities to develop more functional practical solutions to challenges they face in their daily work. Good teacher education provides student teachers with a combination of strong practical skills and wide, theoretical knowledge of school-related phenomena. Today’s research-based teacher education in Finland gives the stimulus of life-long learning and continuing education, and of doing school research: more and more Finnish teachers continue research on teacherhood and schooling issues graduating as doctors of education.

### **4. CONCLUSION**

The Finnish educational system has wanted to provide everyone, regardless of the place of domicile, economic or

social background, gender, age, or abilities, with the right to learn. But is that enough any longer? The constantly changing society requires new attitude of teachers. Certainly, it is important that everyone has the right to learn but the way everyone is taught is equally important. It means that teachers face the demanding reality of multicultural classrooms, diversity in pupils and their families, beliefs, values, and attitudes. Thus, in today's education, a great deal of contemplation should be focused on teachers' ability to confront various pupils, treat them with respect and care but simultaneously act as an authority [30]. Moreover, teacher education must provide student teachers with such skills.

The reality is that Finnish teachers still are politically quite conservative [47]. In Finland, teachers are, however, appreciated exceptionally much among every social class. The parents of Finnish pupils are especially satisfied with the comprehensive school and education provided by it but in addition they appreciate cooperation, evaluation, justice, and opportunities to influence in it. Satisfaction is clearly better than any other Nordic Countries [48] [49] [50]. Furthermore, the research-based approach in the current teacher education and teachers' work provide means to renew and analyze the education reality [4]. Given this starting point, Finnish teachers and teacher education have the most favorable premises of molding according to the current demands.

According to Bertrand Russell [51], education should “give a sense of the value of things other than domination, to help to create wise citizens of a free community, and through the combination of citizenship with liberty in individual creativeness to enable men to give to human life that splendor which some few have shown that it can achieve” (p. 305). Indeed, the educator's task is to provide pupils with such stimuli and environment where students are guided to limit their instincts by controlling enjoyment and vital-based values, in order to be able to achieve higher values and skills [52]. A teacher's love for a pupil embodies a continuous trust that there is more in a learner than is shown outside. Thus, pedagogical love may guide a learner to consider the better world as achievable [29]. Therefore, we need constantly ongoing definition of good teacherhood and evaluation of teacher education. Although the basic principles and features may remain unchanged, every new era sets new demands and foci on teachers' work and, consequently, on teacher educators' work, too.

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