

Teacher status in Finland

 for Education

Foreword

It is generally accepted that high quality teachers are a prerequisite for raising education standards and outcomes for children and young people. No society would discount the importance of education and investing in their future, but, in many countries, the teaching workforce is under pressure like never before: comparatively low pay; resource cuts; increased class sizes; more responsibilities; challenging student behaviour; greater student diversity. The teaching profession in many industrialised countries now faces a high degree of competition in attracting quality graduates. This is not the case in Finland, where teachers work in one of the most sought-after and respected professions in the country.

Kantar Public, an independent social research agency, was commissioned by Google to explore the factors that underpin high teacher status in Finland, and to specifically identify what learning could be applied across other countries.

A qualitative specialist from the Kantar Public Education Policy Group conducted a visit to Finland in March 2016, during which interviews were conducted with stakeholders from:

- Ministry of Education
- Finnish National Board of Education
- Kuntaliitto – The Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities
- OAJ – Trade Union of Education
- Oulu University Teacher Training School
- University of Helsinki
- Jokirannan koulu (comprehensive school in Kiiminki)
- Ressun peruskoulu (comprehensive school in Helsinki)
- Rantakylän yhtenäiskoulu (comprehensive school in Mikkeli)
- Hauhon yhtenäiskoulu (comprehensive school in Hauho)

To provide additional context to this qualitative research, a brief review of relevant literature (available in English and published between 2010 and 2016) was undertaken. This review was conducted to inform the development of discussion guides used in interviews and to aid analysis of the qualitative data collected.

Our thanks to all stakeholders participating in this research for their contributions and a warm welcome. Special thanks to Aija Rininen and Anneli Rautiainen from the Finnish National Board of Education for their support in helping organise this study.

“ I’ve wanted to be a teacher all my life. I can remember like in third grade [when I was 10 years old] just looking up to my teacher and I’d be like, ‘Oh damn, I want to do that someday’. ”

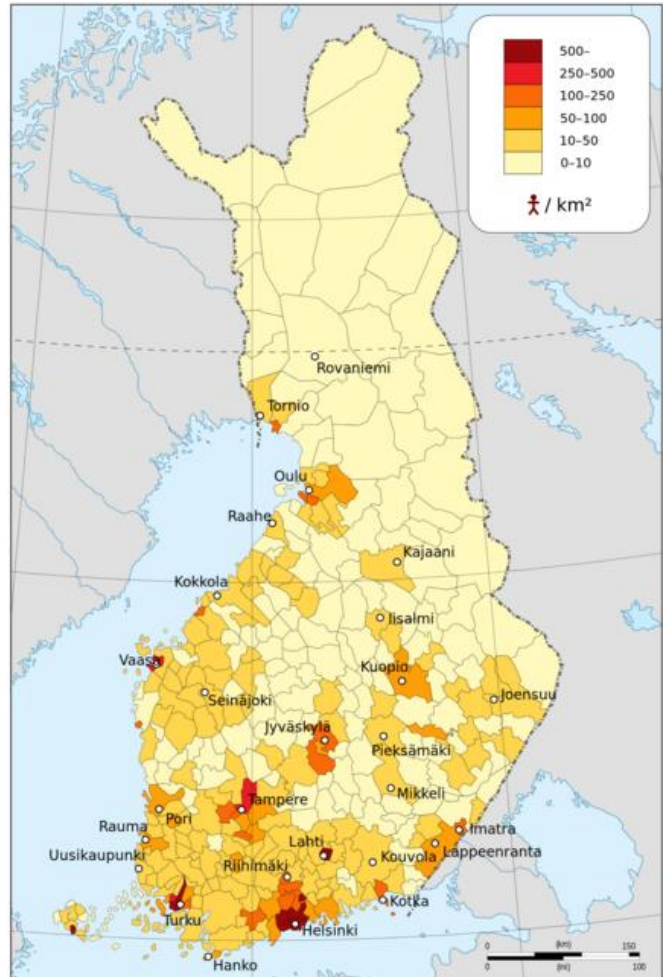
MA student at Oulu University Teacher Training School

“ You have the liberty. In Finland teachers are free to choose how to teach things – the didactical side. I can choose to do a project on something or I can just teach it the traditional way, or we can do something else. It’s all up to me. ”

Teacher, Hauhon yhtenäiskoulu

Finland – a country overview in brief

- Finland is a northern European country bordering Sweden and Russia with a population of **5.4 million people**.
- The majority of the population are Finnish by birth. With only around 4% of the population born outside of Finland the country is **relatively homogenous**. However, there are a number of **distinct ethnic and cultural minorities** (including Sami and Romani groups) within Finland and immigration has been a key source of population growth historically (and particularly within the last 30 years).
- Up until 1809 the majority of Finland was part of the Kingdom of Sweden, until it was surrendered to Russia. In 1917 Finland declared independence.
- Finland comprises **19 regions** (or maakunta) and Åland (an autonomous region), further subdivided into 70 subregional units and then again into **317 municipalities** (as of 2015) which provide basic services to citizens (social welfare, health, education etc.) and whose autonomy is safeguarded in the Constitution of Finland.
- A little over half of all municipalities have less than 6,000 inhabitants and within these live 10% of the Finnish population.
- There are **9 cities with a population over 100,000**; one-third of the whole Finnish population is living in these cities.



- Finland has an **industrialised and mixed economy** which is highly integrated in the global economy. Technology and the knowledge economy have played a strong role in supporting economic growth and Finland was **ranked first globally both for innovation and for their education and training system** in a recent report on competitiveness from the World Economic Forum.¹
- In Finland, the average household net adjusted disposable income per person is USD 28,238 a year, which is **less than the OECD² average**. There is a considerable gap between the richest and poorest with the top 20% of the population earning almost four times as much as the bottom 20%.
- Finland is a **bilingual country** and municipalities must provide educational and cultural services in both Finnish and Swedish.

¹ http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GlobalCompetitivenessReport_2014-15.pdf

² The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) 'provides a forum in which Governments can work together to share experiences and seek solutions to common problems'. Their role includes the analysis and comparison of data across 35 Member countries

The Finnish education system

Governance of education in Finland

There are two-tiers of national education administration in Finland:

1. The **Ministry of Education and Culture** is responsible for education policy, the preparation of legislation and making decisions around the state funding of education.³
2. The **Finnish National Board of Education** is the national development agency working under the Ministry and holding responsibility for the national core curriculum, qualifications and teacher development.

The Finnish National Board of Education establishes the priorities for the education system and sets out the national core curriculum. However, governance of education has been based on the principle of decentralisation and increasing public governance since the early 1990s. Municipalities hold responsibility for determining local education priorities, for interpreting the national core curriculum to develop a local curriculum, for allocating education subsidies, for staff recruitment⁴ and for quality assuring education provision. Within each municipality a Director or Head of Education holds responsibility for the education provided within that municipality. Municipalities and the local Government sector are supported by the **Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities** who advocate for their interests, offering services to develop and strengthen local self-government.

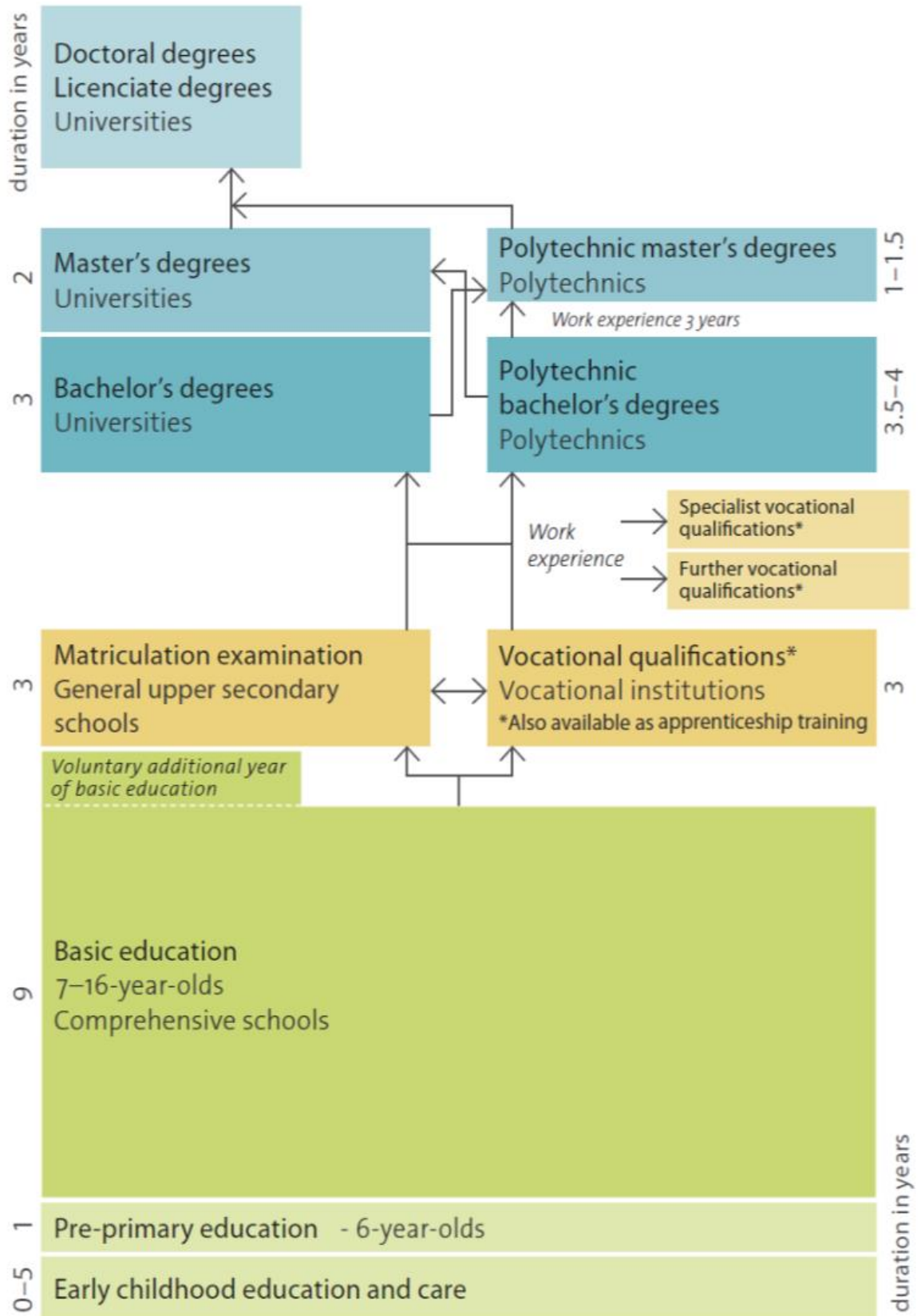
The other key strategic education stakeholder within Finland is the **OAJ** (the Trade Union of Education) which counts over 95% of Finnish teachers and head teachers as its members. The OAJ inputs into education policy through participating in working groups, lobbying and advocating on behalf of teachers' working conditions.

Structure of education in Finland

In Finland there are broadly three stages of tertiary education: pre-primary education for children under 7 years old; basic education for children aged between 7 and 16 years old; and upper secondary education with either general (academic) or vocational pathways for those who have successfully completed compulsory education. These stages are illustrated in the diagram below.

³ Approximately 25% of pre-primary and basic education is funded by the state with the remaining 75% funded by municipalities through local taxes and accessing of grants

⁴ Staff recruitment is typically delegated in turn by municipalities to school principals



Early childhood and pre-primary education

Early childhood education and care (for children aged below 5) is provided through day care centres and family day care, following a localised version of the Early Childhood Education and Care national curriculum guidelines. While this 'educare' provision is not free, it is heavily subsidised and the charge varies depending on the size and income of the family.

At age 6 all children have the right to attend pre-primary education, which is provided free of charge in day care centres or schools. As in many other countries, the focus here is on developing basic skills and knowledge through play. A total of 62,500 children attended pre-primary provision in 2015.

Basic education

Between the ages of 7 and 16 years old, children participate in basic education in comprehensive schools which is provided free of charge. For the first six years of basic education students tend to be taught by the same class teacher across subject areas and by subject specialists for the remaining three years. Schools work toward a localised curriculum that is drawn up in consultation with the municipality and maps on to the framework of the national core curriculum. The school curriculum will detail the values and principles of teaching and learning within the school, as well as the educational and teaching objectives.

There are no national tests for students in basic education; instead teachers are responsible for assessing students on a continuous basis and on final assessment in Year 9. The grades received by students on completion of basic education are given by teachers – these grades determine the post-compulsory education routes open to students. There is also no schools inspectorate; instead schools are encouraged to self-evaluate and the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre coordinates national evaluations in core subjects once a year with a random sample of schools. There are no school league tables or comparisons made between schools on the basis of student outcomes.

Municipalities will assign school places to students based on proximity, so much so that students typically have attended schools that are nearest their home. A total of 531,000 children attended basic education provision in 2015.

Upper secondary

Nine in ten young people who complete compulsory basic education go on to general or vocational upper secondary studies immediately following basic education. General upper secondary education aims to continue providing students with broad-based knowledge through combining compulsory courses covering core subjects with a small number of elective studies. Around 55% of young people take the general upper secondary tract. Vocational education and training covers eight fields of learning (the most popular being technology and transport), leading to more than fifty vocational qualifications which include over a hundred different study programmes. Initial vocational education in Finland is popular, with almost 40% of young people opting to take this tract. Both upper secondary routes are provided free of charge.

Completion of the Finnish Matriculation Examination (undertaken in the General upper secondary education tract) or a post-secondary level vocational qualification provides general eligibility for higher education (which is also free of charge though highly competitive).

Source: http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Koulutus/ammattillinen_koulutus/?lang=en

Finnish education policy

The primary objective of Finnish education policy is to offer all citizens equal opportunities to receive education. Under the Constitution of Finland⁵ there is a commitment to equity in access to education:

‘Everyone has the right to basic education free of charge. The public authorities shall guarantee for everyone equal opportunity to receive other educational services in accordance with their ability and special needs, as well as the opportunity to develop themselves without being prevented by economic hardship.’

The principle of equity and equality in accessing high quality education is evident in all facets of the Finnish education system. Education is free at all levels from pre-primary education to university. School meals, textbooks and transportation to and from schools are free in pre-primary and basic education. Children with additional or special educational needs are primarily supported within mainstream settings. Guidance and counselling – accounting for wider child well-being – is a core part of

⁵ <http://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/1999/en19990731.pdf>

a teacher's role. It is also ingrained in teacher pedagogy and the values framework within the national core curriculum and local curricula.

The national core curriculum is developed by the Finnish National Board of Education and refreshed approximately every 10 years. The latest iteration of the national core curriculum is being introduced in August 2016. It includes the objectives and core contents of different subject areas as well as the principles of student assessment, special-needs education and student welfare. Though the Finnish National Board of Education holds responsibility for issuing the national core curriculum, it is developed openly and in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders including academic experts, representative bodies such as the OAJ, representatives of municipalities, teachers, parents and students. This national core curriculum is then used as a framework from which municipalities will develop local curricula tailored to meet the needs and interests of their communities.

As illustrated in the figure below from the Finnish National Board of Education⁶, the aim of basic education is to support students to become well-rounded people who can contribute to society.



⁶ http://www.oph.fi/download/175020_education_in_Finland.pdf

Teacher status in Finland

The importance of teacher status

In 2012 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published a report⁷ that identified the quality of teachers as the key to raising education standards. In other words, a high quality teaching workforce supports a high standard of teaching and learning – there is an equality of opportunities generated through setting a high bar in teacher quality. The most successful systems, including countries such as Finland and Singapore, deliberately recruit high achieving students into teaching. The challenge is that, across many industrialised countries, the teaching profession faces a high degree of competition in attracting quality graduates.

In Finland, teachers work in one of the most sought-after and respected professions in the country. The 2013 OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey⁸ found that primary school teachers in Finland had the highest level of agreement (57%) with a statement that the teaching profession is valued in society – over 20% higher than average. The high social status of teaching in Finland makes it an extremely competitive profession to enter: the elementary education departments in Finnish teaching universities (which train class teachers) only accept 10% of all applicants. **Why is teacher status so high, and what lessons can be learned from Finland in making teaching an attractive career choice? Or, in the words of a representative of the Finnish National Board of Education, ‘how do we make education a stronger brand’?**

Know your history

In order to understand, at least in part, the current high status of teachers, it is important to understand something of Finland’s history.

Until the early 20th century Finland was primarily an agrarian economy with formal education the preserve of the more elite sections of society. Teachers, alongside doctors and priests, were among the few educated groups in most villages and towns. Teachers have therefore always held a relatively high social status as holders of knowledge and, with that, the respect of their community and wider society.

⁷ Preparing Teachers and Developing School Leaders for the 21st Century
(<http://www.oecd.org/site/eduistp2012/49850576.pdf>)

⁸ <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/talis.htm>

“ Teaching has been a high status profession for decades, for hundreds of years. For example, when our parents were young, the most valued professions were a Priest and a Teacher, because they were the educated and civilised persons. ”

Head of Development, Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities

For centuries Finland was part of Sweden. Russia ended Swedish rule over Finland by conquering Finland at the beginning of the 19th century, and Finland became a Grand Duchy in the Russian Empire until independence was achieved in 1917. Throughout this period of being wedged between (and ruled by) two rival powers, teachers have played a critical role in helping to instil a national Finnish identity and sense of patriotism among a largely rural population. As is described within ‘Real Finnish Lessons’⁹ teachers hold a heroic image due to the role they played in building the nation’s resilience and ‘inculcating a national consciousness’. This role was formalised in early 20th century teacher education and training¹⁰ which strictly emphasised the development of character. It was during this time that education became compulsory, and that elementary school teacher training was established to increase the consistency of high quality education provision across the population.

Education was seen as a means for producing model citizens that could themselves educate, civilise and improve the morals of the population. Schools looked at achieving this through a Herbart-Zillernism inspired pedagogical approach which promoted activities and hobbies that built diligence and character, as well as regionalism to invoke a love of Finland.¹¹ This solidity – gained in large part through education – is seen to have been integral to the resilience of the Finnish people. The Finnish word *sisu* most accurately describes this strength in the face of adversity.

“ Cohesion is very important for us as a nation, as Finnish identity. It’s a matter of surviving. ”

Principal, Hauhon yhtenäiskoulu

With industrialisation of forestry and agriculture in the mid-20th century, ongoing technological developments and an increasingly global marketplace, education

⁹ <https://www.cps.org.uk/files/reports/original/150410115444-RealFinnishLessonsFULLDRAFTCOVER.pdf>

¹⁰ The 1920s were important because during that decade compulsory education came into effect and the elementary school teachers training was established in Finland to increase the equality and standard of primary education in Finland.

¹¹ Herbart-Zillernism was the main pedagogy at the teacher colleges of Finland until the 1940s (Halila, 1949b; Isoaari, 1961; Kuikka, 1978; Nurmi, 1964). National core curriculum not introduced until 1970.

continued to be seen as key to Finnish 'survival'. Education was seen as fundamental to Finland's successful economic recovery plan, introduced in 1978, which included a focus on increasing the knowledge-based economy within the country. As recently as 2015, The Strategic Programme of the Finnish Government¹² reinforces the importance of education through recognising that their competitiveness will be built on 'high expertise, sustainable development and open-minded innovations based on experimentation and digitalisation.'

“ As a small nation we cannot compete with human resources, we don't have many people, we don't have oil, we have only human brain and intellect that we should cultivate. ”

Professor, University of Helsinki

“ Finnish people have always appreciated education. It is the reason why we have succeeded in many domains, although we are a small country. ”

Principal, Rantakylän yhtenäiskoulu

The Finnish geopolitical context helps to explain why education holds such value within Finland, and why teachers have, at least historically, been held in high regard. Education cannot be seen in isolation however. Stakeholders interviewed as part of this research highlighted how effective education can only be delivered within a system that also supports individual well-being. The foundations of a strong education system are underpinned by social care, social welfare and health systems that help to address issues (poverty, alcohol misuse etc.) which have the potential to undermine education provisions. Until recently, education and these wider services have seen consistent investment and relatively little political interference. In the current challenging economic climate this is now changing and it remains to be seen how reductions in funding for both education and wider social support services will impact on the value of education and teacher status.

Only the strongest

Since the Act on Compulsory Education came into effect in 1921 only the strongest candidates have been selected to become teachers. Prospective teachers faced lengthy entrance examinations before being accepted into teaching colleges, and were then required to abide by a strict code of conduct – a code that is still

¹² http://valtioneuvosto.fi/documents/10184/1427398/Hallitusohjelma_27052015_final_EN.pdf/f1071fae-a933-4871-bb38-97bdfd324ee6

reflected in the contracts of all civil servants¹³. The stringent requirements for joining the teaching profession were reinforced in 1979 when it became a requirement for teachers to have a master's degree. In the current system, class teachers major in education, and they may specialise in teaching one or several subjects in their minor subject studies. Subject teachers instead major in specific subjects and do their pedagogical studies over a five-year programme or as a separate module after graduation. We have already highlighted how teachers held a high status in society. By formalising a requirement for teacher trainees to have university and master's level qualifications, teachers were effectively granted equal status with doctors and lawyers.

“ *In Finland, teachers are required to have a master's degree, including pedagogical studies and teaching practice. Teacher education is research-based. Added to wide expertise in learning and teaching, teacher qualification includes social, ethical and moral competence.* ”

Counsellor of Education, Ministry of Education

In the 1970s, basic teacher education was moved from teacher colleges into universities. At the same time, teacher training became more influenced by scientific content and pedagogical research. Only seven universities have teacher education programs which help to support quality control and deliver training to consistent, high standards. A focus on what works is reflected in how teacher training is delivered within these universities, with students learning about the theory of education and pedagogical content knowledge as well as subject-specific knowledge. Alongside this they complete a master's thesis to demonstrate their ability to conduct scientific enquiry and employ analytical and reasoning skills. These skills are seen to be crucial in a context where the national curriculum and local curricula allow a significant amount of freedom for teachers to determine how and what to teach.

¹³ As per the State Civil Service Act (750/1994)

“ *In Finnish teacher education and professional development, we don't want to educate teachers who just model somebody else's ideas or just use them. That is why this type of research is emphasised a lot in our teacher education. We are not expecting teachers to become researchers in a classical sense, rather that they have a critical and analytic mind set to their own practice; that they are able to read relevant literature or learn about different ideas and then develop and evaluate their own practices.* ”

Professor, University of Helsinki

Raising the entry requirements for teacher training is a brave move considering the potential for this to reduce the volume of applicants. However, in a relatively small country where the prestige of teaching has always been high, this change in requirements did not adversely affect the level of applications received to commence teacher training. Universities in Finland are in the enviable position of being able to select from the top candidates, ensuring that those teachers who subsequently go on to teach are capable of teaching to a high standard.

“ *It's a quite wonderful thing that even nowadays we have every year about 8,000 applicants who want to be teachers, and only 10% are accepted in each year. So, it means that among the good ones we can pick 10%. Which is rare [compared to other countries].* ”

Counsellor of Education, Ministry of Education

Autonomy and security

It is often the case that high professional standing is equated with high levels of pay and financial remuneration. Salary is not a key driver behind people wanting to become a teacher in Finland. The OECD report that, in 2012, the average salary of a teacher working in basic education for 15 years was in the region of \$38,000¹⁴; comparable with the national average salary. While teaching is not a highly paid career in Finland, it is competitive within a country where there is greater equality in pay between professions than is the case elsewhere. Where teaching does differentiate itself, beyond what has been discussed already, is in the quality of both work and life it affords.

The annual number of instruction hours teachers are required to deliver is among the lowest of all OECD countries¹⁵. There is no obligation for teachers to work

¹⁴ http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/teachers-salaries_teachsal-table-en

¹⁵ http://www.oecd.org/edu/EAG%202012_e-book_EN_200912.pdf

outside of their teaching hours (indeed they are largely paid solely for the hours spent instructing students in the classroom). As in many other countries, teachers get more days holiday than would be the case with alternative professions. Teaching is also seen to be a relatively secure career choice – once qualified you have a degree that enables you to work all over Finland – and around 90% of trained teachers remain in the profession for the entirety of their career¹⁶. This is attractive in a country where there is perceived to be a shortage of jobs and a high degree of instability in private sector employment.

“ *In this very challenging economical time, still the teacher profession is a pretty secure profession in Finland. People appreciate if they have a secure profession and the unemployment rate in many other areas of employment it's much higher than in the field of education.* ”

Special Advisor, OAJ – Trade Union of Education

Perhaps most influential, however, is the autonomy that teachers are afforded in Finland. ‘Trust’ was a word that was used over and over by every single person interviewed as part of this research. The Ministry of Education and Finnish National Board of Education trust municipalities in implementing local curricula; municipalities trust schools in interpreting the local curricula; and schools trust teachers to teach in the way that is most beneficial for their students. This high degree of trust is evidenced through a system where there is no standardised testing of students (teachers assess students against their own individual progress) and no external assessment of teaching practice (head teachers are all ex-teachers and provide pedagogical quality assurance).

“ *In Finland the teachers are trusted. There is very little supervision of teachers, very little evaluation of teachers, we don't compare our schools, the schools don't compete with each other and this has very much to do with teacher appreciation.* ”

Special Advisor, OAJ – Trade Union of Education

The quality of practice, and associated outcomes, are seen to be the responsibility of schools to monitor, and that the drivers of these should be the curriculum and pedagogical excellence tailored to the needs of students, not seemingly arbitrary targets. This autonomy allows teachers to feel in control over their work and with the authority and support to innovate, teaching in a way that best supports the students they work with. It also enables schools (and teachers) to influence the

¹⁶ <http://www.ncee.org/programs-affiliates/center-on-international-education-benchmarking/top-performing-countries/finland-overview/finland-teacher-and-principal-quality/>

curriculum, focusing on priority areas that are relevant for their community (e.g. digitalisation, support for under-achievers, multicultural issues etc.).

“ *I think no human enjoys a profession that is heavily controlled and tested and you are punished and you don't have any agency.* ”

Professor, University of Helsinki

What this autonomy leads to is an environment that fosters creativity, collaboration and ownership among teachers. The Finnish system is seen to equip and empower intelligent people who desire to employ their skills in ways that achieve the broad outcomes prescribed in the national curriculum. They are not following a 'recipe book' but rather inventing their own recipes, they are not working towards any external targets but rather towards supporting the particular needs and interests of individual children and local communities. In this sense it is easy to see why teaching is attractive to young people. It affords a level of independence and respect, focused on a virtuous cause, which few other professions can give.

“ *It's like being a designer and an artist and you need that kind of expertise, like artists have the background knowledge but then you shape it yourself. I sometimes use the metaphor of being a designer, a designer of learning.* ”

Professor, University of Helsinki

Curriculum and pedagogy

The final piece of the jigsaw that helps to explain the status of teachers in Finland, and one which has received little attention to date, is how and what students are actually being taught in school. The national core curriculum provides basic guidelines that the local municipalities, school officials and teachers use to build the local curricula. Indeed, one of the key ideas on which the curriculum is based is that teachers are the experts in teaching and that they have the freedom to use the core curriculum as a guiding framework rather than as a prescriptive set of requirements. Fundamentally the core curriculum can be seen to be a 'pedagogical guiding document'¹⁷ which serves as a means through which the Board of Education can communicate new perspectives in teaching and learning, and in turn a tool which schools and teachers can use to review and revise their own practices.

¹⁷ Vitikka, E. (2004). Opetussuunnitelman perusteiden tehtävät. Teoksessa E. Vitikka & O. Saloranta-Eriksson (toim.). Uudistuva perusopetus. Näkökulmia opetuksen ja opetussuunnitelman kehittämiseen. Opetushallitus. Jyväskylä: Gummerus.

“ A curriculum for us doesn’t have any standards or lesson plans or anything like that. We talk a lot about values, pedagogy and working culture. And the core of the new curriculum for basic education is growing as a human being, as a citizen. ”

Counsellor, Finnish National Board of Education

In Finland, the current approach for organising teaching and learning is mostly subject-based. There are 18 different subjects within the current iteration of the national core curriculum, which details the aims and content for each school subject separately. However, while subject content knowledge is important, the Finnish national core curriculum is actually organised more around competencies and student centred goals. This is reflected in the embedding of more collaborative, open-ended, multidisciplinary tasks within the curriculum, which encourage students to see the connections between different subjects and draw on their individual strengths and passions.

“ There are many lakes surrounding our school, therefore water is very important for us. Water as a phenomenon was studied from different perspectives: the different essence of water (physics), the significance of water for the body (health education), water in Finnish mythology (literature), conversation and climate change (biology) etc. The whole school took part. ”

Principal, Hauhon yhtenäiskoulu

Since the 1990s¹⁸ there has been more of a move to a progressive education style within the Finnish education system (both in the national core curriculum and teacher education). This is to be further emphasised through the New Core Curriculum for Basic Education in which multi-disciplinary learning modules will feature heavily. The new curriculum will also probably further shift the pedagogical paradigm within Finland, with teachers playing more of a facilitator role, helping students to access, navigate and interpret different sources of information.

“ The best teachers are those who show students where to look but don’t tell them what to see. ”

Principal, Rantakylän yhtenäiskoulu

¹⁸ The 1994 National Curriculum included a requirement that all schools design their own curricula in a way that would enhance teaching and learning according to constructivist educational ideas

“ *Schools should become learning communities. So, that means that also adults learn from children, children learn from adults, children learn from each other.* ”

Counsellor, Finnish National Board of Education

As previously mentioned, there is no standardised testing of students in Finland, apart from one exam conducted at the end of upper secondary education. There are also no rankings, no league tables, no comparison or competition between students or schools. This illustrates the high level of trust in teachers from both the state and society. It also removes the potential for teachers teaching to the test (and therefore emphasising knowledge to the detriment of learning experiences) or for students to be fearful about their progress against targets/peers. As the vast majority of students attend the school closest to home there is a high degree of integration between students of different abilities and socioeconomic backgrounds, and limited difference in the quality of pedagogy between schools. Together these factors help ensure schools focus their attention on developing well-rounded individuals who value their education as a way of learning about themselves, their society and developing holistically as human beings.

“ *If you're a success as a teacher you can see the results in the future. You cannot see it this week or next week. But if you're only testing how the kids perform this week or next week then teachers start to teach them things that can be tested this week, instead of things that they should need when they are adults.* ”

Counsellor, Finnish National Board of Education

“ *We don't compare. That makes fear; that makes stress. If you do that you lose that creativity and everything else with that.* ”

Teacher, Rantakylän yhtenäiskoulu

It seems important to view the above respect, credibility and autonomy afforded to teachers within the context of an education system that is grounded in the principles of equality of opportunity, holistic well-being and the development of well-rounded citizens. Teachers are not just there to educate children in respect of subjects or hard skills but also in softer skills (such as teamwork and communication), creativity, democracy and growing as a human being. These are core values instilled through a curriculum with clear roots in fostering patriotism, citizenship and Christian beliefs. It is logical that students who are raised in an educational system that actively supports a strong cultural connection to Finnish

values and principles, find the role of a teacher – including the autonomy that this offers and the respect this position confers – an attractive one.

“ I can actually remember the time of year when I found I wanted to be a teacher. I was 14 years old and had a history teacher who was great. He prepared his lessons very well, he was formal, suit and tie and so on, and talking very politely as if we were like him, so he was not superior. I thought he’s the kind of guy that I would like to be. ”

Teacher, Ressun peruskoulu

“ When our pupils studying here experience teachers who are positive persons and treat them well I think there is a seed sown. If they are positive and professionals you remember that when you have the choice of where you are going. ”

Principal, Hauhon yhtenäiskoulu

Looking to the future

Finland faces a number of challenges going forward that have the potential to influence teacher status. These relate to changes to school funding, in demography and in technology and the role of teachers in schools.

- **Changes to the Finnish economy:** after three years of recession the Finnish Government announced austerity measures in 2015 which will see cuts of \$900 million to education spending over the next four years. Maintaining the breadth of the education offering (e.g. providing general upper secondary education) in sparsely populated areas will become increasingly challenging within this context. In a country which has largely protected investment in education over the past 100 years, it will be interesting to see how reductions in resourcing for schools will impact on teaching practice and on the attractiveness of teaching careers.
- **Changes to the Finnish demography:** immigration has been a key factor in population growth and cultural changes within Finland over recent years, particularly in specific regions of the country. Given the historic homogeneity of the native population, this change in ethnic diversity within communities presents a key challenge for teachers. In addition to increasing the pressure on schools to integrate students that do not speak Finnish or Swedish (in a context of school funding cuts), it may also influence families willingness to support the policy of sending their children to the nearest school.

It is plausible that schools which see an influx of children from non-Finnish backgrounds may be seen as less desirable by parents, leading people to move house or challenge the policy of using the nearest school. Should schools become more unequal in the populations they serve this will inevitably have an impact on the desirability of teaching within more challenging schools.

- **Changes to the role of teachers in Finland:** the New Core Curriculum will emphasise a progressive pedagogical approach that is student-centred, experiential, collaborative and focused on developing critical thinking skills. To achieve this there will be a corresponding emphasis on teachers repositioning themselves as facilitators of learning and in the use of technology to support more personalised and independent learning. This has the potential to present a number of interrelated challenges for teachers.

Firstly: moving towards a (still) more progressive pedagogy may actually be undermining Finland's PISA test performance. Finland's PISA results fell in 2009 and 2012. It could be argued that the changes to the national core curriculum instigated in 1994 initiated a change in teacher training and practice that contributed to this decline. In other words, the previous success of Finland in PISA was a result of more traditional pedagogical practices delivered by teachers who had received traditional subject-focused training. Finnish citizens may gladly trade higher PISA performance for developing seemingly more well-rounded young people than would be the case under a more traditional system. However, might the declining performance in international tests impact on the trust placed in teachers by the state or society?

Secondly: historically, teachers have held a respected position in Finland for being a trusted source of information. With the digitalisation agenda this position is being challenged. Teachers will need to adapt to becoming a facilitator for student learning. In discussions with teachers in Finland it was apparent that schools are using technology in vastly different ways. Some schools have access to tablets and encourage students to use their mobile phones to conduct internet searches, to code and to undertake project-based learning through games such as Minecraft. In other schools there is a lack of IT resources and a serious dearth in teacher confidence in using technology.

“ *[Training] is important because teachers don't have that knowledge about how to use devices in learning. They know how to use devices in the office.* ”

Teacher, Rantakylän yhtenäiskoulu

The Strategic Programme of the Finnish Government highlighted the importance of modernising learning environments and embracing the opportunities offered by digitalisation in learning. Given the role technology is envisaged to play in the future it is critical that teachers are supported to harness this technology effectively. Children and young people will continue to utilise technology to play, network and access information. Teachers will either need to learn how to facilitate this or risk their credibility being undermined as students', parents' and society's expectations change.

“ *A formal education system is challenged by informal and non-formal education. Years and years and years ago there was one famous professor and students around the world they came around this professor to hear what he's saying. Now we have a student in the centre and he has resources, and thousands of* ”

professors, famous professors, they are available by clicking your keyboard. It is difficult for teachers but what is more important: that they concentrate on me or that they concentrate on learning?

”

Director, Oulu University Teacher Training School



Implications

This current research aimed to explore those factors that influence teacher status in Finland, a country which has played host to countless academics, educators and policy makers interested in understanding what the Finnish secret has been.

Excellent test results achieved without the need for competition, standardisation and test-based accountability. The common wisdom resulting from such visits was that success was facilitated by the establishment of the comprehensive school system, by the high quality of teachers (resulting from the MA requirement and initial teacher training), and by high levels of teacher autonomy and responsibility. It was not the intention of this research to investigate the factors underpinning the success of the Finnish education system, but solely teacher status.

Through our review of the evidence base, and through speaking with a wide range of stakeholders in Finland, we conclude that teacher status in Finland is underpinned by three pillars:

- The **respect** afforded to teachers due to their historic standing within Finnish culture but also the rigorous selection process and training undertaken, as well as the way in which teachers conduct themselves in and out of the classroom.
- The **autonomy** that teachers have to teach in ways that fit with the core curriculum but that play to their strengths, the strengths of their students and the needs of their local context. This autonomy results from the **trust** placed in educators, itself influenced by the quality and standing of teachers.
- A **national core curriculum** which is grounded in principles of equality, citizenship and patriotism, and which fosters a degree of self-reliance, creativity and moral conduct – all key qualities of a teacher.

Respect and autonomy have both been investigated in detail in previous research into teacher status within Finland, but it is interesting that no studies have explored the influence of the curriculum (or the pedagogical framework) itself. It wasn't within the remit of this research to undertake any robust assessment of the relative influence of different factors, but rather to explore what lessons may be learned from Finland that could be applied in other countries. Given the influence of the geopolitical context on teacher status within Finland it is impossible to disentangle this from other more recent developments when looking to understand teacher status. However what can be surmised is that teacher status can be strengthened through measures which are within the control of policymakers. Notably these include:

1. **Increasing the qualification requirements for teachers**, which should increase the status of teachers as schools will be unable to recruit less educated, and arguably less effective, teachers. By placing greater value on qualifications, policy makers would be making a statement about the worth of education and about the qualities they require in teachers.
2. **Investing in high quality initial teacher training and continued professional development** to provide teachers with a robust grounding in effective pedagogical practices. This training should foster an understanding of evidence based practice to support teachers to become more effective in independently driving up teaching standards.
3. Empowering schools (allied to the above measures, with a more capable workforce) to have more **autonomy over the way in which the curriculum is delivered**. While maintaining requirements around core learning outcomes, teachers could be given the power and support to deliver on these outcomes using approaches and tools that are tailored to local contexts.
4. Ensuring that the core curriculum on which schools operate **emphasise values and principles that support a sense of civic duty as well as teamwork, communication and interpersonal skills**. A curriculum which engenders a sense of respect for those performing a civil service, and a feeling of responsibility for supporting others, has the potential to increase the attractiveness of the profession.
5. **Developing and promoting a positive brand image** of the teaching profession that is reinforced (rather than undermined) through media coverage.

In reviewing the above suggested measures it is important to highlight that these are ones which the research evidence suggests would strengthen teacher status and not necessarily student outcomes (as would be evidenced through standardised tests of subject knowledge).