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## **Analyzing practice, research, and accountability turns in Finnish academic teacher education**

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### **Abstract**

This chapter considers the evolution of Finnish teacher education since it was placed in to universities according to a political decision over 40 years ago. While being a part of scholarly community and academic university education, it has both internally and also externally undergone several changes and developments. Finnish universities and faculties of education are autonomous in providing research-based teacher education, and they follow the qualification requirements and formal guidelines for university degrees in teacher education. All student teachers complete a five-year research-intensive master degree in order to receive a formal teacher qualification. They are educated by academic teacher educators who are active researchers in teacher education. Teacher education is highly appreciated, the entrance is highly competitive and only the best applicants are selected to study in teacher education programs. Although Finnish teacher education has its unique characteristics, it has always been in interaction with international research and educational policy trends related to teacher education. During its existence, it has experienced the influences of *practice turn*, *research turn* and quite recently the *accountability turn* (cf. Cochran-Smith, 2016), and they have been realized in a specific way in Finnish teacher education and educational policy context. This chapter explores the development of Finnish teacher education, strengths, challenges, and research through these internationally identified “turns” as broader theoretical framing lenses.

### **Introduction**

Finnish academic teacher education has been the focus of interest of policy makers, researchers, and practitioners before and especially after being placed to the university context after a political decision over 40 years ago. The national reform in basic education was implemented from the start of the 1970's and implied one comprehensive school and the curriculum for all primary and secondary students throughout the country. The reform in basic education was followed by the reform in

teacher education in the late 1970s, and the academization of the Finnish primary teacher education started in 1979. The reasons behind moving the Finnish teacher education to the universities were many. There was a need to raise the level of teacher education, to take into account the needs of the new comprehensive school, and to promote, but also benefit from, the general national appreciation of education in Finland. While the decision was largely political, it had several consequences during the following decades. Teacher profession has become very popular in Finland, Finnish school system has developed in many different ways, and research-based Finnish teacher education has consolidated its status and has also received a wide international appreciation. Somewhat shared understanding is that these “right” decisions made in the Finnish teacher education have contributed to the quality of the Finnish basic education and the success of Finnish pupils in the several PISA measurements (Väljärvi & Sulkunen, 2016). However, while the developments have been designed and decided in Finland from the specific and characteristic needs of the Finnish society and Finnish educational system, it is evident that those turns have also been influenced by the shared international trends and developments.

We argue that the turns in Finnish teacher education have emerged as repeated waves and been intertwined with each other in a variety of ways. While the practice turn dominated Finnish teacher education seminars before the academisation of teacher education, the Finnish teacher training school system has been a key component of Finnish teacher education. Also, and throughout the developments, these two poles reflect the theory-practice -gap emphasized especially in the 1990s in Finnish teacher education context. The major “research turn” in Finnish teacher education was the placement of teacher education in the university context. This development was intensified by the stance of inquiring teacher in the 1990s, the aggregation of research outputs and outcomes in the 2000s, as well as the increase of doctoral studies in teacher education departments. During the last decade, the “accountability turn” has took shape through various administratively initiated teacher education development projects, which have mainly been related to the teacher education curricula both nationally and internationally. Also, the establishment of the national Teacher Education Forum in 2016 can be seen as a sign of the accountability turn in teacher education. These have been conducted in the Finnish way – through shared negotiations and collegial collaboration.

In this chapter, we present certain key characteristics of Finnish teacher education, its major developmental lines, and also outline some historical trajectories. We analyse the developments in Finnish teacher education through the identified practice, research and accountability lenses or “turns” in relation to the international literature. We aim to show their unique characteristics in detail, and

also briefly discuss the next possible developments in Finnish teacher education in terms of these turns.

### **Finnish teacher education: key characteristics**

In Finland, teacher education takes place in the Departments of Teacher Education in the Faculties of Education in the respective research universities. There are altogether ten teacher education units in eight universities in which teachers are educated. All teachers – kindergarten, primary, special education, and subject teachers – are educated in these university departments. Primary school teacher education was placed to universities in 1979 through a political decision soon after the reform of Finnish comprehensive schools. In this move, Finnish teacher education received a similar status as all other disciplines in the universities. While receiving the higher status, it also brought the responsibilities to follow the same broad principles in teacher education as in education in all other disciplines. In the universities, teacher education departments follow the Government Decree on University Degrees, they are autonomous in deciding and organizing the teacher education, and they need to guarantee that they take the Decree on Qualification Requirements for Teaching staff into account in their teacher education curricula and studies. Development of teacher education is based on empirical evidence and teacher educators' research they conduct in teacher education. Teacher educators – full professors and senior lecturers – are researchers who lead research projects, publish in the international journals, supervise doctoral and master students, and do research-based development in teacher education.

Universities provide research-intensive and academic contexts for teacher education. University education in different disciplines and in teacher education is research-based, and students learn about research results, learn to do research in their own field, and learn an inquiring stance towards their own practical profession during their studies. The student teachers normally complete their degree in teacher education (300 ECTS, European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, European Commission, 2017) in five years. It includes major subject studies in educational sciences (140 ECTS), compulsory multidisciplinary studies in subjects taught in comprehensive school (60 ECTS), optional studies including optional minor subject (75 ECTS) and orientation studies (25 ECTS). The major subject studies include bachelor thesis (in the third study year) and master thesis (in the fourth or fifth study year). Student teachers complete three teaching practicums during their studies. An integrated practicum during the first study year, a multidisciplinary practicum (12 ECTS) in university teacher training schools during the third study year and advanced practicum (8 ECTS) during the fourth or fifth study year in the municipal field school.

Teacher training school system is a unique characteristic of Finnish teacher education, and since 1970s when teacher education was placed into university context, the teacher training schools have administratively been part of the universities. The schools provide education for neighbourhood children similarly with regular Finnish schools. In addition, their special responsibility is to organize teaching practicums for student teachers, provide supervision for student teachers during the practicums, and develop these in close collaboration with the Departments of Teacher Education. University schools participate in the teacher education curriculum work and develop teaching practice and supervision in line with the needs of teacher education institutions. Teaching practice periods and their organization as a part of the schools' activities characterize university schools and differentiate them from regular schools. The schools follow the Finnish National Core Curricula as all the other schools, and teacher candidates teach a significant part of the lessons at schools. Throughout the practicums, student teachers are supervised and supported by the teachers in teacher training schools. Besides supervision, the university schools and teachers in them are intended to be active in research, professional development, and in-service teacher education. Teachers at teacher training schools are the ones who actually make real the Finnish research-based teacher education curriculum, and build the links between research and practice. Their role in supporting student teacher learning to become qualified teachers is crucial in this process.

### **Turns in teacher education: practice, research, and accountability**

Teacher education has always been a focus of interest and actions among educational policy makers, and this can be seen in the various reforms that have been conducted in teacher education internationally but also in Finland. For example, the discussions concerning the context, curriculum, qualifications, length, regulation and funding can be found all over the Western world (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Menter, 2016). In Finland, the broad reform in teacher education has been made in 1970s, when teacher education was completely moved to the university context and to their faculties of education. The reform in teacher education was related to the extensive reform in Finnish basic education, in which a same comprehensive school system with the same curriculum, resources and teacher qualifications was established for all children throughout Finland. After the 1970s, Finnish teacher education has experienced mainly reforms related to harmonization of degrees and curricula in teacher education in Finland (KATU-project, 1976-78), or in relation to Bologna process on European Union level (VOKKE, 2004). In the international comparison, these changes and

reforms are relatively typical. They are – in one way or another – related to the broader changes and regulations of the educational system as a whole.

International research in and on teacher education has identified certain broad trends or turns that emerge in teacher education. These are called as “the practice turn”, the research or university turn”, and “the accountability turn” (Cochran-Smith, 2016). In principle, the turns describe the facets that are all central and important aspects in teacher education. The facets are essential in how they become realized and regulated in teacher education and by whom, and in what kind of balance they are in relation to each other.

### ***Practice turn in Finnish teacher education***

Before the broad primary teacher education reform in Finland in 1979, teachers were educated in the three-year seminars and their education was mostly practical. Thus, one can say that everything started from the “practice turn”. Teacher candidates had to manage the school curriculum and its’ contents, and study educational studies, languages, and a broad variety of arts studies. They had to be exemplary and moral in their character and behaviour. The starting point for the Finnish teacher education was practically emphasized, and these trends can still be found in the history of Finnish teacher education. Although teacher education has been in the universities for over 40 years, and all Finnish Departments of Teacher Education have the University Teacher Training Schools, there is an ongoing discussion about the relevance and amount of the student teachers’ school experience and relationships with the schools during teacher education. In Finnish teacher education, the amount of the teaching practice or the intensity of collaboration with the schools during teacher education are not regulated, but they are decided in the Departments of Teacher Education and in the curriculum committees in collaboration with the University Teacher Training Schools (cf. Murray, 2016; Reid, 2011).

The “practice turn” takes many shapes in academic Finnish teacher education, and a permanent question has been to find the meaningful solution for the practical experience of the teacher’s work for the student teachers. Student teachers emphasise the importance of the practice studies in teacher education (Saariaho et al., 2018). They perceive that they receive confirmation and confidence for their professional choice to become teachers when they succeed in the practice of teaching. The challenges of the practice turn and the solutions related to it are often considered and balanced with the identified theory-practice gap in teacher education (cf. Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985;

Wilson et al., 2001; Ronfelt, 2012). The “practice turn” has taken different shapes in the history of Finnish teacher education, but the key question has always been as follows: How are student teachers able to implement the knowledge and skills learnt in teacher education in the practice of teaching? Student teachers do observation tasks in the classrooms, shadow the more experienced teachers, interview pupils in the authentic school settings, and organize after school activities for the pupils. The amount of student teachers’ teaching practice days has varied during the decades, and they have had more or less teaching practice in their teacher education curriculum. Adding or decreasing the number of practice days as such is not essential, but rather, what is done and how during the practice days is crucial (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Payne & Zeichner 2017; Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012; Tatto, 2015).

Despite the variation in the practice days and practical experience, the first key principle in the Finnish teacher education has been to build and maintain the link between theory and practice throughout the teacher education studies to make sure that the theoretical studies do not remain separate from the practice of teaching. The second key principle related to “practice turn” in Finnish teacher education has always been to educate the student teachers as pedagogically thinking teachers, who are able to conceptualise practice of teaching, understand it comprehensively and approach it in an inquiring manner (Kansanen et al., 2000; Husu, 2002; Toom et al., 2010). The third key principle related to “practice turn” in Finnish teacher education is the engagement in research, meaning that student teachers can collect the data for their bachelor or master thesis from the school while doing their teaching practice, and thus, concretely perceive the links between the theory and practice. The concerns related to the “practice” of schools have varied during the decades, and currently they are related to the capabilities in responding the needs of diverse pupils, increasing inequality in schools, and supporting pupil learning in a meaningful way (Seppänen et al., 2015; Kosunen, 2016).

### ***University/research turn in Finnish teacher education***

In 1970s, there was a clear “university or research turn” in Finnish teacher education, when teacher education was moved to the university through a political decision. It was also decided that all primary and secondary teachers needed to have master’s degree and complete master’s thesis in order to receive a formal teacher qualification and license to teach. Since the 1970s, the role of university has been really strong and unquestioned in Finnish teacher education, and the “research turn” has strengthened – broadened and deepened – during the years in the university. In Finland, teacher education is organized only at the universities. The curriculum of teacher education follows the

general regulations set for the university level bachelor degrees (180 ECTS) and master degrees (120 ECTS): general studies, major subject, minor subjects, practicums, bachelor thesis and master's thesis. The academic circumstances including lectures, seminars and small group activities form the frame for teacher education studies. The curriculum has developed significantly since the early years of the teacher education in the university, and the research-based understanding of the organizing theme, aims, and pedagogies of teacher education has developed (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Kansanen et al., 2000; Brew, 2003; 2006; Elen et al., 2007; Toom et al., 2010; Mena, 2017). In the beginning, the curriculum was more or less technical, and it has gradually become more cultivated and more relevant for the student teachers learning to become teachers due to the research conducted on the student teacher learning and the relevance of the teacher education pedagogies for their learning. During the forty years, many reforms in line with the international developments of teacher education have been implemented (Tatto & Pippin, 2017).

The “research turn” in Finnish teacher education has deepened, and the understanding of the research-based teacher education program has broadened and developed further systemically on institutional, curricular, and teacher educator – student teacher levels (Kansanen et al., 2000; Heikkinen et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2016; Westbury et al., 2005) during the 40 years of academic teacher education. The idea of pedagogically thinking teacher as a key aim (Kansanen et al., 2000; Husu, 2002) was developed and integrated to the curriculum of the Finnish teacher education. The curricular structure in teacher education follows the scientific structure of the educational sciences and allows student teacher learning of both scientific and practical knowledge and skills relevant in teacher's work. The aim is that student teachers learn key knowledge, skills and attitudes for their work as teachers (Evens et al., 2018; Soini et al., 2015; Toom, 2017; Toom et al., 2017; Skourdombis, 2019). The learning contents are defined based on the empirical research evidence on teacher's key knowledge and skills (Blömeke & Kaiser, 2017; Brown, 2017) and understanding for teacher learning and professional development (Clandinin & Husu, 2017). Finnish teacher education curriculum in relation to the international curricula (Kansanen et al., 2014), teacher educators' perspectives on teacher education (Krokkfors et al., 2011), and student teacher learning in teacher education (Soini et al., 2015; Toom et al., 2017) have been investigated extensively, and the results are systematically utilized in the development of the Finnish teacher education.

The “research turn” touches also the requirements set for the teacher education staff: most of them have a PhD degree, they do research in schools and in teacher education in the research groups with their colleagues, publish internationally and supervise doctoral students in their field. The strong role of universities in Finnish teacher education is clearly related to the high status of teachers and

teacher education in Finland, which is internationally unique. The research conducted at the universities produces evidence about the teacher education and school education, and thus, supports educating high-quality teachers and improving the capacity of education systems.

### *Accountability turn in Finnish teacher education*

In addition to the “practice turn” and the “university/research turn”, a third turn emerging in teacher education in developed countries is the “accountability turn”. It is related to the policies and practices that intend to reform and improve teacher education outside the institutions (Cochran-Smith, 2016; Avalos, 2017). In many countries this means monitoring the inputs, processes, practices and/or outcomes of teacher education institutions so that they would be approved and funded by the ministries of education. This has also led to the development of new standards, competencies, and auditing procedures that are applied for teacher education institutions who are willing to become accepted as the official teacher education provider. The “accountability turn” emerges relatively smoothly in the Finnish teacher education context, and the general accountability measures for universities apply also for teacher education. In terms of education, teacher educators are accountable of the applicants to the teacher education, progress of studies, and number of completed degrees. In terms of research, teacher educators are accountable of number of publications, doctoral degrees and competitive research funding. So far, teacher educators are not accountable for the graduating student teachers’ effectiveness, classroom performance, impact, or retention.

The elements of accountability have emerged relatively smoothly in Finnish teacher education, and they often have had a reformative function. In 1976-78, the national KATU-project intended to increase coherence in the degrees in the field educational sciences. In 2004, VOKKE-project focused on harmonizing Finnish teacher education degrees in line with the Bologna regulations in order to be more coherent nationally and aligned with the European frameworks. The National Teacher Education Forum established by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture in 2016 aims at developing the continuous development of teachers, establishing a mentoring system, and increasing the collaboration between teacher education and schools in the development of pre-and in-service teacher education. All the activities are done collaboratively by negotiating, by co-creating the development strategy for Finnish teacher education and by providing extensive funding for the development projects that teacher education institutions themselves have planned. It is clear that accountability is a powerful policy tool for reforming teacher education (Cochran-Smith et al, 2017), but the tone in how it is done can be really different. In Finland, the emphasis has always been in the collaboration and in the development.

## **Discussion**

Academic research-based teacher education has evolved over forty years in Finland and is nowadays highly positioned in our universities. There are historical, cultural, political and practical reasons, but during the last decades also a growing body of research-initiated reasons behind the developments conducted in teacher education (Husu & Clandinin, 2019). Naturally, and due to the intensive international interaction and collaboration of researchers in teacher education, many international trends have long influenced on the development of Finnish teacher education. As elaborated in the article, the emergence of the international trends or "turns" has been obvious, and they have had their unique flavour in Finland.

The recent recommendations concerning the next steps for the Teacher Education Forum launched by the evaluation group (Niemi et al., 2018) are primarily related to the accountability in teacher education, which is demanding to identify in Finnish context. In order to continue the reform, the evaluation group suggests to ensure the systematic monitoring for teacher education covering responsibilities, scheduled goals, and their observation on the level of municipalities, schools and teachers. They suggest national structure to support the change of teacher education and guarantee the reform of pre- and in-service teacher education throughout the teacher career. They also encourage to guarantee the implementation of the new pedagogical models created in the development projects. The report sums up by recommending to make major reforms in teacher education on macro-level in order to renew the pre- and in-service teacher education, and to make teacher education institutions fully responsible of the recommended change agenda (Niemi et al., 2018). The recommendations have a positive tone and intention, and the areas of development they are focusing on have been identified and agreed among the teacher educators. Their recommendations are ambitious, and at the same time, the way they are presented is relatively new in Finland. They raise questions, and perhaps also concerns, of the scope of freedom and autonomy of the Finnish teacher education and universities.

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