

EMPOWERED EDUCATORS

HOW HIGH-PERFORMING SYSTEMS SHAPE
TEACHING QUALITY AROUND THE WORLD

FINLAND: CONSTRUCTING TEACHER QUALITY

COUNTRY BRIEF



This paper is part of a series of policy and country briefs produced as part of *Empowered Educators* – a landmark, international comparative study of teacher and teaching quality in the world’s top-performing education systems, commissioned by the Center on International Education Benchmarking® of the National Center on Education and the Economy®. For a complete listing of the materials produced by the *Empowered Educators* project, including a searchable database of recorded interviews and authentic tools, please visit www.ncee.org/empowered-educators.

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Constructing Teacher Quality: The Case of Finland

Finland burst onto the U.S. education policy radar with its powerful performance in the first Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000, and has remained an object of study with its continued strong performance ever since then. How does Finland achieve this success? Two laws enacted in the early 1970s helped set the country on its path toward educational change. The first, the Comprehensive School Act of 1970, merged two strands of schools into a single, comprehensive system of grades 1-9 (ages 7 to 16), with the goal of providing an equal education for all students. The second, enacted in 1971, shifted the preparation of all teachers to universities; previously, elementary teachers had been trained in teachers' colleges or special-teacher education seminars. By 1978-79, new degree requirements mandated that all teachers would need to possess a master's degree in order to teach. Thus Finland's teachers, already held in high regard by the population, would be well-prepared to teach all students to high levels.

Since then, Finland has focused on preparing all teachers well with a research-based education program with strong clinical experience and, confident that the teaching force was well-prepared, creating a supporting environment for teachers to operate as capable professionals.

This brief will examine the policies and practices under way in Finland to strengthen teacher preparation, build a highly-effective teacher workforce, and produce strong and equitable levels of student performance.

Teacher Education in Finland

Finland has no alternative routes into teaching. Eight research universities, through their Faculties of Education, prepare teachers for K-12 schools in Finland. Entry into these masters-level teacher-education programs is competitive and consists of two rigorous steps. First, prospective teacher-education students must pass a national entrance exam, called the VAKAVA, that is the same for each of the eight universities. The three-hour exam requires students to read five to eight research articles (for example, a study of children's discourse in mathematics), and answer questions that draw on their abilities of inference and analysis. In 2014, more than 7,000 Finnish students took the VAKAVA, seeking one of only 660 positions in primary teacher education.

The second step of the process is an interview (or similar team or individual test, depending on the university). Based on the scores on the VAKAVA, universities invite about three times more applicants than in their final

In high-performing systems, teachers do not have to leave teaching and move into administration in order to advance in their careers.

intake (in Helsinki, for example, 360 applicants for 120 study places in primary teacher education).

Once admitted, all students enroll in a five-year master's degree level teacher education program: three years of undergraduate study and two years of master's degree coursework. For a primary school teacher qualification, students must complete coursework in the disciplines that are included in the current national framework curriculum for comprehensive school (e.g., Finnish, mathematics, history, science, drama, music, physical education); in pedagogy; in communication and language development; and in research and analysis.

One central focus of the coursework in teacher preparation is the ability to create learning-focused curricula, and how to assess students' growth and learning by engaging students in research and inquiry on a regular basis. The preparation also emphasizes learning how to teach diverse learners, including those with special needs. It includes substantial emphasis on "multiculturality" and the "prevention of learning difficulties and exclusion" in courses like "Facing Specificity and Multiplicity: Education for Diversities" and "Cultural Diversity in Schools" along with a course on "Education and Social Justice" as well as on the understanding of learning, assessment, and curriculum development. As Linda Darling-Hammond has argued: "The egalitarian Finns reasoned that if teachers learn to help students who struggle, they will be able to teach all students more effectively and, indeed, leave no child behind."

The primary school teacher education curriculum also includes a substantial amount of clinical experience, which takes place in specially designed teacher training schools that each university has as an operational unit. Teacher training schools are public schools that are subject to national curriculum and teaching requirements just like any other municipal school. However, teacher training schools have been particularly designed pedagogically and often also architecturally to support both pupils and teacher-students in their learning. Teachers in these schools are required to hold a strong professional record of teaching and advanced studies in educational sciences. As university units, teacher training schools are funded by universities through their overall budgets issued by the Ministry of Education and Culture.

Student-teachers engage in three sets of experiences in teacher-training schools. The first, in the first year of preparation, consists of a few days of observations and three weeks of practice teaching, conducted in pairs. The second, in the third year of preparation, consists of one planning week and six weeks of practice teaching, which includes 50 lessons conducted in pairs. The third, in the fourth or fifth year of preparation, consists of five weeks of teaching, in which students are solely responsible for instruction.

The preparation program also places a heavy emphasis on research and analysis. All courses integrate educational research, and students complete a master's thesis

The Viikki Teacher Training School

The Viikki training school, one of two training schools associated with the University of Helsinki, was established in 1934. The current school was built in 2003 with special features that would support learning about teaching. The school is an ordinary school in that it serves students who live in the neighborhood. It is a “comprehensive school,” serving children in grades 1-9. An associated kindergarten abuts the main building, so that children can also attend as 5- and 6-year-olds. However, the main purpose of the school is also to support the learning of prospective teachers. As Principal (for Grades 1-9), Kimmo Koskinen explains, the school is constantly hosting student-teachers: “We have student-teachers here all the time. The term starts in ... the middle of August and it ends here in the beginning of June. There [are] only two weeks in August and a couple of weeks in May where we don't have student-teachers.” Koskinen estimated that at any one time, the school typically has between 30 and 36 student-teachers placed in various classrooms throughout the grades.



Among the special features of the school are a suite of rooms for student-teachers, including a room with tables for meetings among student-teachers; lockers and bookcases for materials and resources; a coatroom; and lunch space. An entire room, equipped with the latest technology, designed for meetings between student-teachers and practice teachers, underscores the importance that is placed not only on learning to teach but on analyzing teaching. During a recent visit, researchers observed student-teachers meeting with their practice teachers in the room to debrief a lesson plan and to talk about next steps. This attention to the cycle of planning, action, and reflection/evaluation is modeled throughout the teacher education program, demonstrating what full-time teachers do in planning for their own students. Graduates are expected to eventually engage in similar kinds of research and inquiry in their own work as teachers. These meeting sessions underscore the notion that learning in practice does not happen “on its own” without opportunities for teachers to analyze their experiences, relate experiences to research, and engage in metacognitive reflection. In some ways, it models what the entire system is intended to undergo: a process of continual reflection, evaluation, and problem solving, at the level of the classroom, school, municipality, and nation.

that involves original research. The idea behind this approach is that teachers are autonomous professionals who are reflective and systematic in their practice, and are prepared to use a research-based approach in their work. Many students at some point of their careers go on to earn doctorates.

In the Classroom: Support for All Students

As graduates of teacher preparation move into their full-time teaching positions, the emphasis on preparation, equity, research, collaboration, and scholarship that began in their preparation programs plays out such that teachers in schools maintain a strong sense of professional ethic, a commitment to equity; a feeling of responsibility for student learning, and a sense of autonomy and purpose. In light of these policies aimed at promoting equity, continuing professional development, teaching as a profession, and the commitment of the overall teaching workforce—the result is a continued high-quality teaching corps throughout the system.

With its commitment to equity, Finland has designed a system to provide each student with the support he or she needs to succeed. In practice, this means that the nation has turned the notion of “special education” on its head: rather than provide support to students who have demonstrated failure, Finland provides appropriate levels of support to each student to prevent failure. In all, about 30 percent of Finland’s students each year receive some sort of specialized support, perhaps the highest level in the world. And the proportion of students who receive such support is lower in secondary schools than it is in elementary schools, suggesting that the focus on prevention might be effective.

A recently enacted law establishes three tiers of support for students, analogous to the Response to Intervention (RTI) approach increasingly used in the United States. The first tier consists of *good quality education*, which may include differentiated learning, flexible groupings, and co-teaching; the second—and newly added—tier consists of more *intensified support* in the form of a learning plan; and the third tier consists of *special support* in the form of an individual education plan.

Significantly, teachers have the primary responsibility for determining the need for student support and the form that such support takes. This effort is not left until the formal evaluation and tests are completed, or until annual exams are over. Rather, teachers approach these issues as important to address in the moment—an instantaneous, “real-time” response to student needs. In the classroom, this means that teachers are consistently re-arranging student groups, identifying children who need help, paying special attention to the student who has questions; misunderstands; to the student whose attention lags; as well as if there are more considerable challenges with comprehension, analysis, or understanding. Teachers might meet with children before or after school, during lunch, or during the day. The school day is organized so that these small groups can occur when needed—all this support would be considered general, first tier support for all children.

To provide additional support, schools also employ one or two *part-time special education teachers* in addition to the class teacher. (The term part-time refers to the fact that these teachers' time is distributed to various classrooms throughout the day; they are full-time teachers.) Part-time special education teachers have graduated from the special education teacher education program and thus, have five years of specific training for this position. The part-time special education teacher might co-teach, or give small group instruction to children who need additional support (mostly at the second, "intensified support" tier).

In addition, teachers also have a more collaborative strategy available for more persistent challenges or to help children whose needs are broader or more lasting. Teachers work together in multidisciplinary teams—consisting of the class teacher, the part-time special education teacher, and the school counselor, along with some people outside the schools, such as social workers from health services, representatives from the health and mental health community, or from public housing, if necessary—to try to address any issues that might be beyond the immediate purview of the school itself. Therefore, teachers have at their fingertips a wide array of means and supports to draw upon to help children in need.

Teacher Appraisal and Professional Growth

In Finland, the work of teachers is not measured using standardized test outcomes or universal appraisal procedures. Rather, the assessment of teachers is focused on professional development at the individual level. Teachers are considered valued professionals who are capable, autonomous, and independent, and in fact, fully responsible for their work in the classroom. In general, teachers' work is evaluated by their principals, and often involves a one-on-one private conversation that may focus upon issues like individual growth, participation in professional development, contributions to the school, and personal professional goals.

Formal evaluation is relatively rare. Indeed, middle school teachers surveyed by TALIS reported that they receive very little formal feedback, and few schools have formal teacher appraisal systems. Almost 28 percent of middle school teachers in Finland teach in a school where the principal reports that teachers are not formally appraised by the principal. Thirty-seven percent of Finnish middle school teachers report that they have never received feedback on their teaching in school. The focus is on "steering"—the guidance and direction of a professional career—rather than on "accounting"—an attempt to ensure that teachers are meeting certain specified goals or outcomes.

In the city of Helsinki, however, principals do use a common form to appraise teachers' practice. This form focuses upon some key features of

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teaching that are considered important and valuable. The form, however, does not require any “standardized” data—no student test scores, no value-added data, no quantitative indicators—but rather focuses upon four categories: “personal performance”; “versatility”; “initiative”; and “ability to cooperate.” In addition to analysis of teacher’s general classroom practice, the “versatility” of the teacher refers to whether she or he uses or has mastered “good pedagogical skills”; can “acknowledge and meet diverse students in different circumstances”; and can “acknowledge diverse learning needs.” The form asks teachers and principals to consider the degree to which the teacher demonstrates “initiative” (which includes, for instance, “using new and meaningful working methods and practices” and “active participation in in-service training, [within-school] work groups, development initiatives, or district workgroups”). This suggests that the conception of evaluation in Finland relies heavily upon local, personal, qualitative information about a teacher’s practice, growth, and professionalism.

Anna Hirvonen, principal of Myllypuro primary school in Helsinki, described her use of the City of Helsinki’s teacher evaluation form to guide her work:

“ I have, every year, a discussion, called Evaluation of Personal Performance (EPP) with every teacher where I evaluate how [a teacher’s] personal objectives have been reached in terms of ability to cooperate, versatility, initiative and performance. The City of Helsinki has given us the criteria and description of every factor, according to which these aspects are looked at, in practice the factors overlap and are open to interpretation. Furthermore, there is a five-step scale from “Not fully meets the objectives” to “Excellent performance” where to place all these. The situation itself it is very, very, demanding professionally. If I have worked with some teachers for years and seen how they work and what they do, it is easier, but especially with the beginners, it is really demanding. ”

Teachers’ schedules in Finland enable teacher collaboration and support their professional growth. The school day allows time for planning, collaborating, and meeting with other teachers to discuss challenges or successes, and other professional work, such as reading and doing research.

Data from the Trade Union of Education in Finland reveals that Finnish primary teachers spend approximately 718 hours per year in the classroom; lower secondary teachers spend 657 hours; and upper-secondary teachers spend 647. In a typical school day there may be up to 90 minutes unstructured recess time, including lunch break. Recess is considered necessary, and is seen as an opportunity for all children to go out or play with friends—as well as providing an important break for teachers who often spend that time either in quick consultations in teachers’ lounge with colleagues or preparing for the next class.

Teacher pay and benefits.

Upon graduation, new Finnish teachers can expect to make a reasonable salary that is commensurate with other “white collar” professions. Since teacher education is paid by the public, the government has a precise policy to prepare teachers for labor market needs, not for surplus as it is in many other countries. As a consequence, teachers’ statutory salaries are “almost equal” to those offered to Finnish workers in other valued fields requiring similar levels of preparation. For instance, in 2008, general practitioners in Finland were paid an average of USD 65,000, and nurses an average of USD 34,000. As of 2010, teachers’ salaries were generally in line with those with similar education. But for Finns, more important than salaries are such factors as high social prestige, professional autonomy in schools, and the ethos of teaching as a service to society and the public good. Young Finns see teaching as a career on a par with other professions where people work independently and rely on scientific knowledge and skills that they gained through university studies.

In Finland, compensation grows with experience and is nationally consistent. Salaries are determined by the level of schooling at which they teach: mid-career teachers in secondary schools make about 7 percent to 10 percent more than those in primary schools; there is a similar 7 percent to 10 percent increase between lower and upper secondary. By the time they are experienced teachers, they will have increased their salaries by approximately one-third. Top-scale salaries are 58 percent (lower secondary) to 77 percent (upper secondary) higher than starting salaries.

Challenges and Improvements

One of the challenges for the capacity of the teaching force in Finland may well be the horizontal nature of the teaching profession: as one policy document notes, “in terms of promotion, the teaching career in Finland is flat.” In Finland, the professional development continuum may in some ways—at least informally—reflect the relative horizontal nature of the teaching career in that there have been few formal accommodations for new teachers and their novice status and rare opportunities for more veteran teachers to explicitly and publicly shift their status in ways that reflect either their mastery of the field or their work. Yet at the same time, the opportunities for professional development are more local and organic, and democratically organized.

Up until recently, both formal induction—in other words, support and professional development targeted at new teachers—and systematic professional development have not been a strong part of the education system in Finland—and in some ways, this may contribute to (or reinforce)

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a conception of a teacher's career as remaining at a kind of status quo. Opportunities to participate in formal, external continued professional development vary considerably in Finland—as do opportunities for formal induction for new teachers.

Employers, in most cases municipalities, have legal responsibility to offer professional development opportunities to teachers and principals. At the same time, teachers have a moral responsibility to continuously improve their work. For instance, teachers are required by contract to participate in three professional development days a year; it is considered the responsibility of the individual teacher or school principal to determine how to use that time, and even whether there is funding for professional development beyond those three days. But many teachers are reluctant to use that time because it takes away from their work in the classroom.

A recent report suggests that in 2013, more than 80 percent of teachers participated in some form of professional development (lasting more than three hours) during the past year. Data from OECD's TALIS survey confirmed that trend: participation of middle school teachers in professional development was approximately 79 percent among Finnish lower secondary school teachers (the OECD average was 88 percent).

These figures reflect the success of an effort by the Ministry of Education and Culture to develop new strategies for professional development. In 2007, a survey revealed that only two-thirds of teachers had participated in professional development, and so the Ministry set up a working group in 2008 to determine some measures to improve the situation and to consider legislation regarding professional development. The final results of the working group, in 2009, was a decision not to make professional development obligatory but rather, to set up a new *Osaava* (in English, "skillful") program that would promote teachers' participation in professional development on a voluntary basis. Funding was allocated to this program in the amount of 10 million to 15 million USD per year from 2010-2016.

The *Osaava* program developed a more clear and articulated "continuum" of professional development that would coherently support teachers' learning over the course of their careers: for instance, about 20 percent of the funding was specifically allocated to support a mentoring program for new teachers (which had been piloted in 2008 and was being developed nationally in 2010); for supporting the use of educational technology in teacher training schools; and for a program of 30 credits for long-term professional development for educational leaders. In addition, the program also was intended to target teachers 55 or older, as well as teachers with non-permanent status who (research suggested) were not participating as much in professional development.

Induction of new teachers is another challenge for Finland. Until recently, the formal development and support of new teachers has not been well-articulated. For instance, Finnish law has a probationary period in place for new teachers of six months, but there is no explicit mention of induction support. As in many states in the

United States, the schools and municipalities are primarily responsible for providing orientation and support for new teachers. Therefore, there have been fewer systematic supports or efforts in place around new teacher induction—and the quality and nature of those supports can vary considerably. Some schools, as part of their mission, have adopted advanced procedures and support systems for new staff, whereas other schools merely bid new teachers welcome and show them to their classrooms. However, support for novice teachers in Finland is slowly changing. For example, as mentioned earlier, the *Osaava* network created a new approach to induction. The network partners with all eight universities that prepare primary and secondary teachers (as well as the vocational teacher education programs, which prepare early childhood teachers), and offers support for monthly peer-to-peer meetings for new teachers that are led by more experienced teachers.

Looking to the Future

Two developments are under way now that could have an effect on teacher quality in Finland. The first is a proposal to create a national registry of teachers. Such a registry would make publicly available to parents and school faculty the certification status of teachers and enable the Ministry to track the supply and demand of teachers in various subject areas and specialization. Currently, the Finnish National Board of Education conducts surveys every three years to gather data on the teacher workforce; these surveys have informed Ministry proposals on teacher preparation. The proposal for an Open Access Qualified Teacher Registry would make such information more readily available.

The second development is a revision of the National Core Curriculum for comprehensive school and upper secondary schools. This process, which takes place about every ten years, involves curriculum groups, which include teachers, to develop the nationwide guidelines. Although this open process can be unwieldy, the wide engagement of teachers, leaders, teacher educators, textbook publishers, researchers, parents, students and others in the process creates social connections that facilitate the sharing of information and knowledge about the changes long before those changes are actually made. That means that those who are involved in supporting the work of teachers and students—like teacher educators and textbook publishers—are already getting a sense of where the revisions are heading and what kinds of changes they will need to make so that the whole system is “ready” at the introduction of the new local curriculum.

The Case for Constructing Teacher Quality

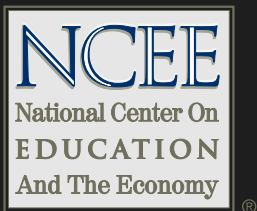
Finland over the past fifty years has indeed systematically “constructed” teacher quality. Over a relatively short time period, policymakers, politicians, educators and teachers have together worked in coherent ways to systematically deliberate and consider, and in turn create and build, the necessary supports, systems, and policies leading to a context in which teachers and children can do the hard work of teaching

Finland's education policies have not been rushed or pushed into place, but rather have been developed quite gradually and incrementally, allowing more time and space for teachers and educators (as well as schoolchildren) to respond and adjust to changes.

and learning, and ultimately can thrive. The policies have not been rushed or pushed into place, but rather have been developed quite gradually and incrementally. Such considered and stepwise implementation may also have resulted in more time and space for teachers and educators (as well as schoolchildren) to respond and adjust to changes.

Furthermore, the policies have often been developed in concert with teachers or by policymakers who themselves have been teachers or have had teacher training. In turn, as Finnish documents emphasize, “The aim of Finnish policy is coherent policy,” such that the majority of the specific, individual policy choices and decisions reflect a set of broad beliefs about the importance of equity, the centrality of children and their need for time, thinking, play, and choice, and a belief about teaching as professional and worthy of the utmost respect, value, and status. Six key themes seem to underlie this kind of construction of quality:

- the coherence and alignment of policies for teaching and teacher preparation,
- the continued emphasis upon the well-being of children (and their teachers),
- the focus upon teachers’ agency and professional responsibility,
- an investment in learning to teach in practice with considerable university support,
- the conception of professional development as local, organic, and just-in-time, and
- the constant consideration of equity through an emphasis upon education for all children.



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