

Trust in teachers vital to success of Finland's education system

Jouni Valijarvi

EDUCATION has always been seen important in the Finnish society. Parents regard education still as the best policy to ensure a positive future for their children. Moreover, parents' trust in teachers is high.

Teachers have always played an important and respected role in society. This high respect shows still today, for instance, in national surveys on public ratings for various professions and occupations.

Teacher's profession has remained a popular choice among young people. For example, in a survey among secondary school leavers in 2004 teacher's profession was clearly the number one on their list of favourites. For the approximately 800 student places offered in primary teacher training programs in the Finnish universities there are annually 5000-6000 applicants.

What might explain this sustained, exceptionally high regard and general trust for teachers in Finland? At least the answer does not lie in their salary benefits: In a comparison across OECD countries (in 2006), in Finland primary school teachers' annual pay equalled USD\$35,798 on average, while the OECD average was USD\$37,832. Correspondingly, the average annual salary of upper secondary school teachers in Finland was USD\$42,440 and the OECD average USD\$43,360.

In Finland, all teachers since the 1970s, already, have been trained and educated in universities. Master's degree is a basic qualification for teachers, also for primary schools, and an obligatory requirement for a permanent appointment.

University-level education also means that research becomes an essential part of teacher education. Teachers are expected to draw on the latest research knowledge in their work. They can also do some small-scale research at their own school. Such skills are considered essential teacher competencies in view of school's capability to respond to the needs of our increasingly knowledge-intensive society.

In comparison to other countries, teachers' work is subject to fairly little control in Finland. The national core curriculum sets targets for teachers' work but the teacher can independently decide the methods to reach the objectives. Inspection of schools was abolished in the early 1990s. In Finland, we do not have any national examination system, either, so as to rank the schools, teachers or students on a regular basis.

In the light of PISA findings, Finnish teachers also have considerable say when it comes to deciding on school-based curricula, syllabuses, resource allocation and general policies at school. We can therefore say that in Finland teachers have maintained their position as autonomous pedagogical experts, unlike their colleagues in most other countries. Pedagogic freedom and autonomy are central motives for young people seeking entry to teaching and also for their job satisfaction.

PISA findings indicate that the Finnish education policy has succeeded in keeping the differences between schools with regard to student achievement the smallest in the world. The school's socioeconomic environment does not show in student performance, school resources or teachers' work conditions nearly as strongly as in most other countries. Schools' competition for the best students has remained at a reasonable level, although parents are increasingly interested in the quality of teaching and the choice of school for their children.

In Finland local, i.e. municipal authorities have traditionally had essential responsibility for organising education. All tuition from the primary level up to universities is free of charge. This applies to private schools, as well, which account only for about 2 or 3 per cent of the total educational provision.

A long-standing decline in tax revenue and the current recession in the world market

have meant an economic crisis to many municipalities. There is a danger that the quality of fully publicly-funded education will deteriorate. At the same time demands to teachers' work are rising due to the increasing immigration and also along with the growing proportion of children suffering from various behavioural and learning disorders. In addition, the ageing of population is further increasing pressures to redirect resources away from education.

The average size of teaching groups has been kept relatively small, so far, in about 20 students or less, which is quite a small number in international terms. However, in Finland group size is considered a crucial factor for teachers' work conditions and job satisfaction as well as for students' learning. It must be borne in mind that up to the ninth grade in the Finnish comprehensive school a teacher teaches the whole range of children, both the more slowly advancing and the most talented ones, in the same group. This sets high demands for the teacher's professional competence and calls for small enough teaching groups, but seems to yield excellent results as well.

A key question for the future development of teachers' expertise is how we manage to organise their in-service training more effectively than at present. The current model is too fragmented and gives least support to those teachers who would need it most. Special attention has recently been paid to the induction of newly qualified teachers, however, and various mentoring practices have been introduced for this purpose. The aim is to construct teachers' initial and in-service training as a continuum, which would follow the ideas of life-long learning.

Professor Jouni Valijarvi is director of the Finnish Institute for Educational Research.

This article appeared in Australian Teacher Magazine, 4 November 2009

http://www.ozteacher.com.au/html/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=405:trust-in-teachers-vital-to-success-of-finlands-education-system&catid=5:the-hard-word&Itemid=6