UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

Erasmus+
Enriching lives, opening minds.



A narrative of provision for equity and diversity in Finnish teacher education

Sonja Laine
Katriina Maaranen

Co-funded by
the European Union

[ED-TED project]

This narrative is a first output from the EU-funded Erasmus+ project '*Equity and Diversity in Teacher Educators' Professional Development*' (ED-TED). The ED-TED project aims to establish a European professional network of higher education teacher educators to support teacher educators' professional development as they strive to have the requisite competences to address issues of equity and diversity throughout teacher education programmes. More information and regular updates on the project can be found here.

A key initial step in the project involves exploring existing provision for teacher educators and student teachers in teaching for equity and diversity across the seven participating countries—Germany, Finland, Flanders, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Portugal. Following a systematic approach detailed below, we identified and assessed the quality of provision at three levels in all project countries: macro (national policies), meso (teacher education programmes and institutions), and micro (practices). This mapping initiative serves a dual purpose: to contribute to an online resource bank with equity and diversity practices in and for teacher education, and to inform policy recommendations for enhancing teacher educators' competencies at local, national, and European levels.

This narrative describes, interprets, and contextualises the findings from the mapping activity for teacher education in Finland. As a living document, it will be regularly updated based on ongoing consultations with key stakeholders throughout the project's next stages.

[Teacher education in Finland]

The key principle of Finnish education system is to offer equal educational opportunities for all. Education from pre-primary education to higher education is free from charge in Finland. Compulsory education starts in Finland with comprehensive school typically the year child turns seven years, whereas it ends when the child turns 18 years. The comprehensive school consist of grades 1 to 9, after which the youth can choose general or vocational upper secondary school. All children who are permanent residents in Finland must attend compulsory education. Pre-primary education which has also been compulsory since 2015 is offered to children year before comprehensive school starts and it is aiming to improve children's opportunities for learning.

Teachers in Finland are educated in the Universities that offers teacher education. However, the width and the type of the education depends on the level which the education gives qualification for. Teacher education departments offer education for teachers on early childhood and care (min. Bacherlor's degree in ed.sciences), class teachers working in grades 1-6 (master's degree in ed.sciences), and special education teachers (master's degree in ed.sciences). Moreover, subject education teacher programs are for those who wants to become subject teachers in their field in comprehensive schools and/or upper secondary schools (Master's degree from own field + 60 ECTS ed.program). Finnish teachers can be considered as highly educated professionals.

Preservice teachers all need to take an entrance exam to be accepted to the university. Yearly approximately 10-20% of the applicants are accepted. The most popular programmes are special education teacher program and primary school teacher program. There are less applicants for early

childhood education programs and some of the secondary school subject teacher studies (less interest for science subjects compared to e.g. languages).

[Research project methodology]

The mapping process across all project countries followed a consistent methodology, combining the analysis of key documents at the macro and meso levels with an exploration of practices through focus group interviews with student teachers and programme leaders. This section provides details on the sample used for the Finnish case narrative.

A comprehensive understanding of the policy frameworks, objectives, and measures regarding teaching for equity and diversity was obtained through the analysis of legislative acts. We examined the National Core Curricula for basic and upper secondary education. Also the teachers' ethical guidelines were included at this point. There are some ministry funded projects that have provided material and guidelines for teachers and/or teacher educators. These were also included.

At the meso level we asked all eight Finnish universities that provide teacher education to participate in the focus interviews. We gained participants from all of them, either teacher education leaders or preservice students. From the leaders we asked to share specific documents in their own institution. We received equity and non-discrimination plans or equivalent documents.

We conducted two focus group interviews for seven program leaders and three focus group interviews for nine pre-service teacher students. The programme leaders were invited personally, so the selection was convenient. The programme leaders suggested student teachers, who were then invited to the interview.

We also conducted a more in-depth case "study" of one primary school teacher education program in order to list all the materials, courses and training offered to students and teacher educators on the themes of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). A national webinar with 17 attendees was arranged in May 2024. This provided some additional views and verified the existing understanding.

Macro level provision

The Finnish education system has been developed consistently and continuously towards equality. The establishment of comprehensive school system in the end of 1960s and early 1970s was the first big transition, as different tracks were abolished. In 1980s the level groupings within the comprehensive school were also abolished. The most recent act towards equality was the renewed legislation concerning special education teaching and support in 2010. It decreased the number of special schools and special education groups dramatically, as almost all students are nowadays integrated in their neighborhood schools. This was the most significant change towards inclusive education. Since the change, there has been a strong emphasis towards "one school for all". Currently, the Basic Education Act, and accordingly national curriculums, are being revised. The changes will enter into force in August 2025. The changes targets support in learning and school attendance. The aim is to strengthen early support and teaching arrangements that supports the prerequisites for learning.

The Finnish teacher education was transferred to research intensive universities in 1960s, early 1970s. Since then, all Finnish teachers complete a five-year Master's degree to be qualified teachers. The only exception is early childhood education teachers, whose education became university level, three-year Bachelor's degree in 1995. Currently, there are eight universities in Finland offering teacher education. The Decree on Qualification Requirements for Teaching Staff (1998) requires early childhood education, classroom, special education, and subject teachers to have appropriate bachelor's and master's degrees in education. Accordingly, Finnish teacher education programs consist of bachelor's and master's degrees, lasting three and two years respectively. These programs include practicums, which typically consist of around 10 total weeks of teaching practice. Practicums are usually conducted in schools which are administered by universities, known as 'teacher training schools'. For their practicum, student teachers are assigned to a supervising teacher who instructs them and oversees their work.

The legislation of a teacher's qualification gives the broader frames what must be included in the teachers' studies. There is no national level curriculum for teacher education, and universities have a high degree of autonomy in developing their own curricula. Furthermore, the universities can, for example, have different emphases on some issues. Teacher education curriculums are developed and renewed at regular intervals (in every 3 to 4 years) which allows them to remain up-to-date and dynamic. Teacher education curriculums are developed through multilevel collaboration between teacher education professionals. Curriculums are developed in accordance with relevant legislation and core curriculum for basic education. Furthermore, instances like the national level teacher education forum and ministry of education offer recommendations and guidelines for teacher education development. Strong emphasis on research-based teacher education allows concentration on educationally, societally, and pedagogically relevant content.

In Finland, equity and diversity in teacher education are affected by different laws. Anti-discrimination is a part of the Constitution (1999), which states that "No one shall, without an acceptable reason, be treated differently from other persons on the ground of sex, age, origin, language, religion, conviction, opinion, health, disability or other reason that concerns his or her person." Basic Education Act (1998) regulates education in pre-schools and grades 1 to 9. Equity and diversity are included in the act; for example, children have the right to receive free basic education and the right to attend their local school in their own residential area. It further addresses important aspects about the support for learning and special needs.

The Act on Equality between Women and Men (1986) requires education providers, including universities, to assess and promote equality. The act has been amended with the requirements for educational institutions in 2016. Similarly, Non-Discrimination Act (2014) requires education providers to promote equity and prevent discrimination. Education providers must draft and maintain Equality and Non-Discrimination Action Plans. The government provides guides and directions for drafting the action plans. As the legal requirements set only the baseline, the action plans are unique to each university. These plans can also include calls for professional development of teacher educators, as each university assesses what actions are needed to maintain or address equity and non-discrimination practices.

Early childhood education, basic education and general upper secondary education have national core curricula, which guide also teacher education. For example, the value base of national core curriculum for basic education emphasizes the uniqueness of the students and students' right to high quality teaching. It highlights the importance of equality and democracy and seeing cultural diversity as richness and sustainable lifestyle as a necessity. In the core curriculum it is stated that basic education is developed according to the principle of inclusion. Furthermore, in Finland teachers are regarded as ethical professionals and four principles of ethics are brought up: dignity, truthfulness, fairness and responsibility. To summarize, there is a strong emphasis toward equity and diversity in the Finnish context of education and teacher education.

Student admission is regulated in Universities Act (2009), according to which factors relating to the health and functional capacity of an applicant may not preclude admission. Admission may only be revoked for health reasons when reasonable accommodation cannot be provided. Teacher students must have sufficient cognitive skills, social skills, and mental well-being to work as a teacher. To be accepted as a student teacher, the candidates must take part in two-phase entrance exam: the first phase includes either ranking based on the grades of the final examination in upper secondary school (Matriculation examination) or taking part in a written examination. Based on the success of the first phase, double amount of candidates compared to study places are invited to an interview. About 10-20 % of the applicants for Master's degree programmes, are accepted to the study programme.

In Finland, there are very few national level policies that support the professional development of teacher educators in equity and diversity. Laws that govern education relate to equity and diversity mainly through non-discrimination. Interviewed program leaders in teacher education consider these laws important, as they set the standards on which policies are built. Due to the high autonomy of universities, the development of teacher educators' competencies falls under the administration of universities, faculties, and teacher education programs.

Teacher educators considered extensive autonomy and the lack of national regulation positive factors for equity and diversity because new courses and subjects can be developed and implemented quickly. On the other hand, national level regulation could be used to ensure more equity and diversity.

Meso-level provision

Universities promote equity and diversity in their official documentation, such as guidelines for accessibility or equity. Universities have dedicated boards or work groups to fulfil the legal requirements on equity and equality. These boards draft the action plans together with staff and students. Besides equity and equality, themes like sustainability and accessibility are often included in the plans as well.

Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) are mentioned in the curricula of all teacher education programs. Most teacher education programs have dedicated courses for DEI issues. Additionally, some programs attempt to maintain equity and diversity as a cross-cutting theme throughout the studies. Some programs include additional or optional focus areas, such as intercultural, sustainability or gender studies. These programs also have a wider selection of courses on diversity, equity, inclusivity, and sustainability. Both the interviewed pre-service teachers and program leaders considered equity and diversity to be core values in classroom teacher education. For example, in one primary school teacher education programme, the courses directly related to DEI issues amount to nearly 20 ECTS (of 300 ECTS in total). In addition, students have practical training worth 20 ECTS, in which they also do encounter DEI issues. Besides that the institution has created a visible map to illustrate all of the courses in which the issues of DEI are dealt with to some degree. This includes most of the courses.

However, due to the extensive teacher autonomy in Finland, the commitment to promoting equity and diversity may depend also on individual teacher educators rather than purely program guidelines and curricula. Faculties that have teacher education programs offer opportunities for professional development in equity and diversity. Some program leaders reported that there are plenty of opportunities for professional development, but they are seldom used. Reasons for this may include the lack of allocated time and resources and the sentiment that research is considered more meritorious for one's career than teaching. Some policies may not be specific enough to facilitate upskilling teacher educators in equity and diversity. For example, some curricula do not mention anti-racism at all, despite calls for equity and diversity.

Some universities have established faculty level equity work groups that go beyond the legally required Non-Discrimination Action Plans to discuss questions of equity and diversity in science. Ministry of Education has initiated several projects to advance issues of DEI. For example, in2021-2022 HOHTO-project, a joint effort with six universities, aimed to upskill teacher educators' competencies in special education and inclusion. Another project for teachers was The right to learn in 2020-2022 which aimed to strengthen quality and equality in ECEC and comprehensive education by reducing and preventing learning differences and by strengthening support for learning.

Micro-level provision

The interviewed student teachers and program leaders felt that they, both student teachers and teacher educators, are generally quite competent with equity and diversity. However, novice teachers are concerned and overwhelmed about the demands of their future profession. Some teacher educators also felt that assessing teacher educators' competence on equity and diversity may result in overly positive results, as conceptualization of these topics is challenging. Furthermore, teacher educators felt that public discussion makes many demands for the teacher profession, as teachers are expected to be both educators and nurturers. Equity and diversity are some of the focus areas that teachers should address, but deciding which public demands to answer and how can be difficult.

Pre-service teachers have expressed the concern that their degrees might be too theoretical, with many wishing for more practical knowledge and experience. Despite this, pre-service teachers are generally satisfied with the theory and feel that there is a wealth of knowledge about equity and diversity in teacher education. From this perspective, practicums were seen especially important and useful. Some of the student teachers expressed that such experiences in which they were able to co-teach with special

education student teachers, were good practice for inclusivity. In generally the co-teaching practicums have received good feedback from student teachers. Future development should consider how practical experience could be utilized to upskill student teachers' competence with equity and diversity.

Both teacher educators and student teachers felt that there are some gaps with stated policies and the implementation of them. For example, despite equity and diversity being included in the TE curriculum, some teacher educators reported that there is some institutional racism in universities, which sets barriers for career development with non-Finnish teacher educators. As another example, student teachers have the legal right for reasonable accommodations in learning to account for diversity in learners. However, student teachers' need to request accommodation individually for each course. Currently, there are no systems in place to monitor or regulate the accommodations or their quality.

Even among teacher educators some dimensions of diversity tend to be backgrounded. According to teacher educators, language is often at the foreground of diversity, whereas disability tends to be backgrounded. Some teacher educators also identified challenges in how diversity is conceptualized, as words such as inclusivity are sometimes demanded but not defined in curriculum.

Program leaders reported that resilience is important in supporting equity and diversity in teacher education. By constantly engaging with diversity and equity research and promoting the research at their workplace, teacher educators have been able to maintain equity and diversity as core ideals in teacher educators' work. Due to the teacher autonomy in Finnish education, individual teacher educators could either promote or dismiss equity and diversity related practices in their work. Teacher educators have been able to develop their diversity and equity skills by interviewing students.

Challenges and policy recommendations:

One challenge across the entire school system is that the central DEI concepts are not clearly defined. For example, the concept of inclusion is not defined in Finland, which means it can end up meaning very different things to different people: ranging from a very narrow perspective to a broader view. This can lead to issues being viewed one-sidedly from a chosen perspective (most often from the perspective of learning support and language) without a broader understanding of diversity. At worst, the needs of some groups at risk of marginalization can be ignored. Clear definitions and shared understanding would be essential as Finnish society becomes increasingly diverse. This would allow common ground for reflection and development.

Recommendation:

- Key concepts should be clearly defined in relevant educational documents.
- Inclusion should be defined using the broad definition, meaning every learner's right to participation, togetherness, and equality, and that individuals' needs are taken into account.
- Commitment to DEI requires sharing discussions about beliefs, attitudes and values among faculty.

DEI issues are clearly present in Finnish teacher education curriculums and therefore also in teacher education in many ways. Furthermore, practicums are seen as valuable opportunities to practice for your future profession. Student teachers expressed that while theoretical and research-based information is important and valued, it would be necessary to strengthen the practical perspectives in these matters.

The essential question therefore arises as to how this combination of theory and practice could be further supported.

Recommendation:

- Teacher education departments and teacher training schools should strengthen and diversify their cooperation. This cooperation should include more time and room to share experiences, practices, contents, and perspectives, and reflect on both the current and the future. This would help to build common ground and goals, and clarify everyone's roles and responsibilities.

There has been a tradition of funding projects for different educational development purposes. The Ministry of Education and Culture funds continuous 1-3 year projects for developing schools, higher education, and/or teachers' professional development. This has led to many innovative practices that have had long-lasting effects. However, sadly many projects last a few years, and all the effort and material produced are forgotten after the project ends. This also has happened in the few professional development projects for teacher educators. There is no structured way to ensure that projects could live on after funding has ended.

Recommendation:

- The project funding should be longer so that it includes an implementation plan and period to ensure the long-lasting effects and implementation and/or dissemination of the materials, practices, and results.
- The project funding could also be developed into more permanent structures of educational development or teachers' and teacher educators' professional development.

Teacher educators do not have specific professional development opportunities in Finland. Their professional development is most often seen as research. There are no structures for professional development other than universities' own staff training. However, that includes mostly very practical language or digital technology training, etc. Besides that, many universities offer university pedagogy training which aims to enhance the pedagogical skills and knowledge for all university faculty. Thus, also that is not dedicated to teacher educators per se. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, there are some projects that have focused on teacher educators' professional development, but after the funding period, they have not been able to continue and share the knowledge or practices.

Recommendation:

- Clear and permanent structure of teacher educators' professional development.
- Universities could collaborate together in order to offer professional development nationally.
- Teacher education departments could collaborate with teacher training schools to offer professional development possibilities as well as share their knowledge and skills to keep up with recent developments.

Autonomy is a prevailing component of the Finnish education system, including the universities' autonomous state in Finnish society. The universities, including teacher education programs, are research-intensive and offer research-based education. This means that all teacher educators are also researchers. As teaching is based on research, many teacher educators are able to teach what they research. Autonomy can be viewed from meso and micro levels.

At the meso level, the universities and teacher education departments/programs are free to decide on the contents and focus/emphasis of the teacher education contents, as long as the qualification requirements based on the legislation are met. Thus, the autonomy allows the local institutes to decide on how much or how they deal with equity and diversity issues. From a strength and opportunity aspect, this can be seen as flexibility to use local decision-making power as well as allow innovative practices to develop. From the weakness and threat point of view, this could lead to a situation in which some teacher education departments/programs do implement equity and diversity themes weakly or narrowly.

At the micro level, autonomy of the teacher educators might lead to situations where some would like to focus their teaching on their own expertise area, but teacher education programs must ensure that all necessary contents are covered. Thus, in a professionally oriented, practical education such as teacher education, it is not possible only to teach what one researches, but also other contents. An individual teacher educator's autonomy to decide on what and how to teach certain course contents may lead to situations where the contents are dealt with from a very narrow point of view. The strength and opportunity aspect of micro-level autonomy is well-being and satisfaction at work, as well as possibilities to be creative and experiment when introducing the themes of equity and diversity. Autonomy at the universities on the micro level is so strong that it is possible that an individual does not partake in professional development opportunities, does not keep up with recent changes, and keeps up their knowledge and skills. From a weakness and threat point of view, it is possible that equity and diversity issues are integrated weakly or narrowly in the course contents.

Recommendation:

- Autonomy at the micro level is very good, but the employer could ensure that all teacher educators take part in professional development activities yearly to confirm that the faculty is up to date with what relevant knowledge is currently necessary.
- Autonomy at the meso level is very good, but the National Forum for Teacher Education could try to enhance similar themes and topics to be implemented at all teacher education departments/programs.

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Erasmus+ National Agency for Higher Education at the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.