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A Narrative Approach to Perceptions of Teacher Quality in Finland

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Abstract

Finland's students have performed among the best in the world in reading, mathematics, and science as measured by international standardized assessments throughout the past decade. Some Americans have suggested this is attributable to the fact that only the top 10% of applicants are accepted to primary teacher education programs in Finland, reasoning that quality teachers offer quality teaching, which produces quality students. However, the education literature does not reflect a consensus on what qualifies as quality teaching. In fact, American and Finish educators' views on *quality teaching* varies quite significantly. Consequently, it is worth interrogating what *quality teaching* means to Finnish educators. This study used narrative inquiry to explore the perceptions of six primary Finnish educators (two university professors, two pre-service teachers, and two current teachers) about what *quality teaching* means. The themes of professionalism, autonomy with curriculum, research-based approaches, genuine care and concern, and humility were identified.

Keywords: International education, teacher quality, preservice teachers, narrative inquiry, primary education.

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Introduction

Students in Finland's educational system achieve consistently high scores on standardized assessments, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). Explanations for the achievements of Finnish students are abound in American popular and trade media. For example, Hancock (2011) attributed student achievement to the trust that Finns place in teachers. Taylor (2012) noted, among other facts, that Finnish students do not begin their schooling until the age of seven, rarely have homework, and enjoy an average of 75 minutes a day of recess. Strauss (2012) attributed much of Finnish students' success to the fact their only standardized assessment is a college matriculation exam. Faridi (2014) suggested that one secret to student success in Finland was the requirement that all preservice teachers publish their theses. Some have suggested that the success of Finnish students is largely attributable to the fact that only the top 10% of candidates are accepted to primary teacher education programs, reasoning that quality teachers offer quality teaching, which produces quality students. However, the education literature does not reflect a consensus on what qualifies as quality teaching. It is worth interrogating what *quality teaching* means to Finnish educators.

In this study, I explore the narratives of six Finnish educators in order to draw out their insights and perceptions about research-based approaches (Author, 2017), assessment, moral and ethical matters, and what constitutes quality teaching in Finland. This paper focuses solely on the perceptions of quality teaching in Finland. I begin with a review of the literature regarding quality teaching in the United States and Finland then describe why and how I used a narrative approach to answer the research question. Next, I present data from participants' narratives that shed light onto what quality teaching means to them. In the analysis, I explore the themes of professionalism, autonomy with curriculum, research-based approaches, genuine care and concern, and humility, and then conclude with the significance of this study and next steps.

Literature Review

What constitutes *quality teaching* remains an open question; defining *quality teaching* is a contested process that relies on ethical and normative perspectives (Kansanen, 2004). In other words, because different individuals and groups of people have varying perspectives, they are likely to have varying views on what quality teaching means. The literature sometimes reflects an assumption that quality teaching is delivered by quality teachers, although there is no consensus on what this means, either (Wang, Lin, Spalding, Klecka, & Odell, 2011). Does teacher quality concern teachers' knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions as evidenced by their own standardized assessment scores and qualifications? Or does teacher quality concern teachers' performance, influenced by their experiences both in and outside of the classroom? Ultimately, "what constitutes quality

teaching and how particular notions of quality teaching are related to specific teacher learning opportunities" is unclear (Wang et al., 2011). The meaning of quality teaching is a subject on which international education research could be informative.

The aim of international education research is to "understand broadly educational practices and processes in a global context rather than promote a uniform or universal notion of the field" (Brown, 2010, p. 129). Borders limit research, and it is when researchers cross borders that a "cross-fertilization of ideas" can take place (Kridel, 2010, p. 899). Developing an understanding of other nations' educational systems can increase the understanding and appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of one's own systems (Bignold & Gayton, 2009). Consequently, "U.S. researchers [look] to other nations' problems to contextualize their own and to be able to better respond to growing national pressure to raise standards in the profession" (Dolby and Rahman, 2008, p. 694). In the subsections that follow, I review the literature on quality teaching in the United States and in Finland.

Quality Teaching in the United States

The connection between quality teaching and quality teachers is often assumed and there is little question that quality teaching and quality teachers have an impact on students' wellbeing and academic achievement. For instance, Magen-Nagar and Shachar's (2016) study points out that quality teaching effects students' satisfaction and sense of belonging, which consequently reduces the risk of dropping out of school.

However, previous literature indicates that there is far less agreement about what quality teaching means and what constitutes a quality teacher. Rice (2003) argues that teachers with higher literacy levels and verbal abilities are more likely to see increased student achievement. But can we link teacher quality to specific characteristics of teachers? According to Goldhaber (2013), there is "considerable heterogeneity of teacher effectiveness that is not strongly related to observable teacher characteristics or credentials" (p. 31). Connected to this line of thinking, Croninger, Buese and Larson (2012) associate quality teaching with students' instructional needs. Their study data suggests the importance of teachers' ability to "meet the demands of a newly implemented curriculum and the assessment timeline—and still present students with a coherent and appropriate set of lessons" (p. 1).

Other research, however, directly questions the connection between teacher qualifications and teacher quality. Rice (2003) argues that certifications along with advanced degrees do not correlate with teacher quality and that the "qualifications identified in the [No Child Left Behind] NCLB legislation are more reflective of a 'minimally qualified teacher' than a 'highly qualified teacher.'" Rice (2003) also argues

that state mandated assessments of teaching abilities—including the National Teachers Examination—are not indicative of increased student achievement. Mertz (2017) offers a counter claim to this that suggests there is evidence that supports that National Board Certified teachers produce higher student achievement results than teachers who do not have this certification.

Beyond teacher qualities and certifications, another issue addressed in previous literature is the impact of teacher education programs. Rice (2003) argues that the more selective universities are, the higher those teachers' students perform. The more selective and prestigious the university, the better the students of its graduates perform academically (Rice, 2003). Goldhaber, Liddle, and Theobald (2013) share a similar thought:

> The difference between teachers from the average program and the program judged to be the most effective is about as large as the regression-adjusted difference between students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches and students who are not. (p. 30)

Some states, including Texas, Colorado, Louisiana, and Tennessee, have started evaluating teacher education programs based on how well their trainees' students perform on standardized assessments (Goldhaber et al., 2013).

Furthermore, Valli, Croninger, and Buese (2012) investigated the link between quality teaching and high-stakes test-based accountability. Croninger, Buese and Larson (2012) even conducted a study based upon the assumption that quality teaching can be measured through student achievement results.

Quality Teaching in Finland

Prior research about teacher quality in Finland differs from prior research about teacher quality in the United States. Discussions surrounding the meaning of teacher quality in Finland do not include mention of standardized assessment results or value-added measures also. There is also no connection between teacher quality and where teachers had their training or what certifications they hold—which might have to do with the fact that teachers in Finland are highly respected and are only 1 of 10 applicants accepted into 1 of 8 university-based teacher education programs (Sahlberg, 2011; Stewart, 2012). What we learn about quality teaching in Finland through the literature review primarily focuses on *student learning* as a result of quality teaching. The notable difference in the literature review is that quality teaching in the United States is heavily based upon students' standardized assessments results—in addition to certifications, quality of teacher education program, etc.—while quality teaching in Finland is primarily concerned about students learning outcomes, the aim and content of what is taught, teachers' pedagogical skills, and how content is taught.

Finnish educators recognize the importance of teacher quality and, according to Parpala and Lindblom-Ylänne (2007), believe that "the quality of teaching is related to the student's learning outcomes. Good teaching supports and aids students in achieving high-quality learning" (p. 355). Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne (2011) look at how emotions and confidence play a role in their research on pre-service teachers' development and, in part, noted that teachers with higher confidence had more self-awareness, while teachers with lower confidence levels have lower perceived teaching skills.

Finnish educators believe that teachers should have pedagogical and scientific knowledge (Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2007). Quality teaching consists of an in-depth curriculum, not a broad-based one, meaning it is better to go more in depth with fewer subjects than to cover too many subjects on a surface level. Further, there should be a well-established connection between the aim and content (Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2007). Along this line, teaching methods employed should be aligned to the given objectives.

Beyond what Finnish teachers teach, the how is also important. For Finnish university professors who educate preservice teachers, good teaching is a combination of many factors, including the method of implementation (Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2007). While teachers in Finland typically form their beliefs based on a mix of teacher-centered and student-centered theories (Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2011), "child-centered practices were predominant among the profiles of higher classroom quality" (Salminen et al., 2012, p. 801).

Assessment is a topic touched upon in the literature review. Quality teachers are expected to be aware of various assessment methods for student learning (Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2007). Also, the evaluation of education should be aligned to the given objectives (Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2007).

The differing views on quality teaching between the United States and Finland, as well as limited previous research on quality teaching in the Finland educational system frame the primary research question that is the subject of this study: How do Finnish educators perceive "quality teaching"? The perceptions of Finnish educators are particularly important for understanding quality teaching in Finland because we can learn from their country's success. Especially for countries who often base quality teaching upon student performance on standardized assessments, like the United States, we can better understand what Finland is doing that help made them one of the top performers in mathematics, reading, and science.

Research Method

This study utilizes qualitative narrative inquiry, pioneered by Connelly and Clandinin (1990), to explore Finnish educators' perceptions regarding quality teaching.

Narrative inquiry can be simply explained as “stories lived and told” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Peoples’ lives are comprised of personal and social experiences that they live, tell, relive, and retell (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry is not only a means of understanding the experiences of others but also a means for individuals to shape their own lives through the stories they tell and retell. All human beings live out stories that they proceed to share with others. Each time people share a life story, they relive it. Through the telling and retelling of stories, people create and reconstruct personal meaning.

Narrative inquiry was influenced by Dewey, who believed that we learn from all types of experiences we have. Experience, in Dewey’s opinion, is comprised of both continuity and interaction. Because we live through experiences and think about these experiences narratively, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) reason it is logical to study experience narratively as well. By studying experience, we can “better [understand] educational life” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2).

Schön was another influential factor in the development of narrative inquiry. In particular, according to Schön (1983/1995), both the means and the end are intertwined with the doing and thinking. When doing and thinking are intertwined within research, it is helpful when a research can adjust the course of action. Through this connection between thinking and doing and the flexibility it affords, Schön “[legitimizes] our professional memory and [makes] it possible to return to experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 38).

Dewey’s beliefs about situation, continuity, and interaction form the framework for this study. Connelly and Clandinin (2000) refer to these beliefs as temporality (continuity), sociality (interaction), and place (situation) and, together, they create a metaphoric three-dimensional space for narrative inquirers to “[bind] the phenomenon, shape what passes for evidence, and determine what makes defensible research texts” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 49). Narrative inquirers find themselves within this metaphoric three-dimensional space, moving inward and outward, backward and forward. For this study, temporality involves the past, present, and future of participants’ lives, as well as the university’s teacher education department. Participants’ internal conditions and relationships with one another and myself form the sociality. The university and its surrounding area comprise the place of this narrative.

Participants

Participants were six Finnish educators connected to one of Finland’s eight university-based teacher education programs. The participants included two professors,

Aino and Kerttu; two current primary school classroom teachers, Millo and Minea; and two preservice teachers, Aada and Arttu (all names are pseudonyms). All participants had experienced Finland's highly acclaimed educational system firsthand, as students, teachers, or both. Both classroom teachers, both professors, and one of the preservice teachers are female; all six participants are Caucasian and Finnish citizens. These individuals present a female to male ratio of 5:1 or 83%, which is similar to the actual female to male ratio of 79% of teachers in primary schools in Finland (Corselli-Nordblad, 2013; Deretchin & Craig, 2007).

Before collecting data, I discussed with the participants the formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission form. Participants agreed to be audio recorded and I used pseudonyms in place of real names to protect confidentiality.

Data Collection

The focus of narrative inquiry is on participants' personal experiences and seeing the world from participants' perspectives. The participants' lived, told, relived, and retold narratives of experience are the phenomena studied (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I gathered data through written communication with the participants, as well as informal observations, document collection, in-person individual interviews, and focus group interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and I also utilized field notes of my observations and kept a journal to record my emerging interpretations.

This study began in the fall of 2014 and continued through the spring of 2015. The primary means of communication was electronic mail. I had a two-week in-person visit in February that with a focus group discussion that included all participants. This was followed by shadowing experiences in participants' normal environments for anywhere from .5 to 3 days each. For the two professors, this meant I observed classes they taught at the university. For the two current teachers, this involved spending full days in their classrooms in primary schools. For the current preservice teachers, I had the opportunity to observe a unique set of classes as well as a full-time student teaching practicum experience. Upon completion of the shadowing experiences, I interviewed each participant one-on-one.

Data Analysis

Since the focus of narrative inquiry is on participants' personal experiences and the goal of narrative inquirers is to view the world from the participants' perspectives, there were no predetermined outcomes (Syrjälä & Estola, 2013). Participants shared their stories of experience within the Finnish educational system, which I then interpreted and re-interpreted alongside them.

Upon transcribing the audio recordings of the focus group and individual interviews, I lightly coded themes embedded within participants' responses and noted redundancy and intersection in the raw, unorganized data (Carspecken, 1996). When participant stories were "juxtaposed with one another, they [opened] up the inquiry spaces in human experience studies and [led] to the creation of robust story constellations that capture unique combinations of narratives lived and told at particular junctures in time" (Craig, 2007, p. 177). Commonalities among narratives connected these story constellations, while differences are what kept each narrative unique.

Two processes I employed to analyze the data included broadening and burrowing. Broadening is a way of situating participants' stories within the larger context and can include information about "a person's character, values, way of life or, perhaps, about the social and intellectual climate of the times" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 11). For this study, this mean situating participants' narratives within Finland's performance on international standardized assessments. Burrowing, on the other hand, places a focus on the "emotional, moral, and aesthetic qualities" of events in participants' lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 11). In Craig's (2007) view, "this involves listening closely to how individuals string their life experiences together and make personal sense of them" (p. 179). Narrative inquirers need to maintain a balance between detailed accounts of experiences and theory and abstraction; similarly, they also must maintain a balance between both broadening and burrowing.

Having spent the majority of my life in the United States, I did not want to unintentionally misinterpret aspects of the Finnish culture. Since "our recognition of relevant cultural typifications is contingent upon our familiarity with the culture of our subjects" (Carspecken, 1996, p. 99) and "researchers will often reconstruct tacit features of a culture for the first time and thus produce formulations that may seem strange even to the people being studied" (Carspecken, 1996, p. 140), it was imperative for me to collaborate with participants. Upon the preliminary analysis, each participant reviewed their own section. Participants either confirmed that the analysis accurately demonstrated what they were trying to convey or they suggested changes. In the few instances where participants suggested changes, they were satisfied with the resulting narrative. Ultimately, these "member checks" helped to uphold the integrity of the research, as the "intention is to reconstruct the meaning in acts of schooling from the point of view of the actor rather than judge the act from an external point of view" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988, p. 271).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is an important quality to establish in any qualitative research. In order to increase the trustworthiness of my interpretations, I included multiple perspectives, namely, the voices of multiple professors, preservice teachers, and alumni of this university's teacher education department. Another key consideration in this research was to steer away from "the Hollywood plot" or "narrative smoothing," "where everything works out well in the end" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 10). Avoiding the Hollywood plot in narrative inquiry concerns both data collection and narrative writing (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). While collecting data, I remained as alert to participants' untold stories as I was to the stories they shared. To help illustrate the participants' truths, I included many snippets from the interviews. Additionally, since "excellence is understood differently depending on the way we are attuned to the world," I invite readers to interpret the data from this study and draw their own conclusions (Aoki, 1990, p. 5).

Analytical and interpretive tools to support trustworthiness included acknowledging my personal biases, data triangulation, a thick description within participants' narratives, multiple perspectives, open-ended questions, and historical and narrative truth.

Participant Narratives

Aada

Aada, a warm young lady in her fifth and final year of teacher education, was accepted to the university on her first attempt. She laughed as she explained that she gave herself an advice in case she became a teacher someday:

> Actually when I was in fourth grade, I wrote in my diary that if I become a teacher someday, I have to remember a couple of things that are important for a fourth grader, for a ten-year-old child. I wrote that, it's very important to listen to children and what they think. Also that sometimes you have to have parties and something like that.

During her in-person interview for entrance into the teacher education program, interviewers asked Aada about her interest in educational research. Her response included an explanation about how teachers need to research in their classrooms daily. When I probed her about research-based approaches, she gave an example of how this could be as simple as surveying students about who their top three friends in the classroom are, seeing what students are left out,with and finding ways to help fix those dynamics in class. Another example she provided was how teachers meet together to improve the curriculum because it takes a lot of critical thinking.

During my visit to Finland, I got to see Aada during her second (and final) student

teaching experience. Throughout the day in her classroom, students partook in a narrative practice where they spent about ten minutes sharing what they did over the weekend. Beyond this, students had an art lesson where they used wire cutters to cut chicken wire and then form animals native to Africa. During the mathematics lesson, one student—who is on a level II intervention—had help from a teacher's assistant. The last period of the day was dedicated to religion and ethical studies. Religious students generally opt to attend a class specific to their beliefs, while the ethics course Aada taught was chosen by students who did not identify with a religion.

Arttu

Arttu was always on the go—in fact, when he was late to our first meeting, I began to wonder if I had the right time and place. As he explains, it turns out his schedule was packed, "Here in university actually I spend very much my time concerning university things. It's not like I'm here from 10-4 and then do something else." Arttu was a leader in student counsel, involved in musical projects, and was also a volunteer soccer coach.

A notable part of the shadowing experience with Arttu were his classes, which began with his leadership. Part of the beginning of the class that Arttu led included a narrative exercise in which classmates went around in a circle and shared about how their weekend went. Regardless that everyone had switched to speaking Finnish, I was quite confused about where the professor was and only understood once I introduced myself to the lady sitting to my right.

While chatting with Arttu's professor during the break, I came to realize the uniqueness of the educational psychology program. Instead of accepting 100 students, like the general education program, only 20 are accepted. Arttu's cohort had 16 total students, although previous years had no more than 10. In this special cohort, students work together throughout their five-year program. They self-design their major subject courses and study social skills and group dynamics. Students even provide input into their own grades, but they demand a lot of themselves and professors sometimes tell them that their self-evaluations are too harsh.

During each of Arttu's classes, students stayed together as a group for about 30-minutes and then broke out into their smaller groups of four to continue working on the same larger project that they hope to eventually publish. The professors for each course differ, but each offers their own unique perspective. During the first class, students had help from an art and didactic professor; during the second class, they had help from a social studies and civics professor.

Generally speaking, students enter the educational psychology program hoping to become primary teachers once they graduate. After all, students will become certified

teachers. However, Arttu and some of his classmates are not so sure anymore that they will become teachers. While Arttu's cohort was only a year and a half into their program and have had only one student teaching experience, many had realized there is a large gap between their teaching abilities and expectations for an ideal teacher. Living in this tension was quite uncomfortable. Ultimately, Arttu still expected to become a class teacher, but had he not ruled out the possibility of doing something else:

> I think I want to be class teacher. But I also think it would be also one of the hardest choices. I think it requires a lot to be a primary teacher… I think [my peers] are also very demanding about what kind of teacher they want to be. And if you notice that you cannot be [a] teacher like you have imagined in school, it's very hard for yourself, especially the first years in school, it's very hard. Everybody knows this because there is some research that has been done about how teachers are doing so much work. But when you get your routines it gets easier. I want to be a class teacher, yes. But I'm also open to other options.

Minea

Minea is a spirited teacher who had not always planned on joining the profession. In fact, she has spent three years at the university studying mathematics before deciding to quit. Minea explained, however, that did not last for long:

> Then before I graduated from the education department, I decided to finish the degree at mathematics. I went back very humbly. I took the courses that I needed to take [to finish] the degree. I [will have] the ability to teach mathematics in high school just like I originally planned… I always thought that I wouldn't go back to mathematics. I felt it was a failure for me emotionally. When I had grown up a bit and I was more of an adult, I swallowed my pride and went back and finished the courses I had not yet done.

Despite her non-linear university studies, academics were always easy for Minea.

Minea has worked at the same suburban school since she graduated that houses approximately 150 students and is one of the smallest—if not the smallest—in Finland. Most of the classrooms in her school are age-integrated and Minea and her partner teacher are responsible for 28 first grade students who are six and seven years old. Nine of their students were immigrants, most of whom are Somali war refugees, and none of whom spoke Finnish at home. Most of her students came from low-income families and lived in city-supported housing in the neighborhood where her school is located. Some of her students came from single-parent households as well. You could tell Minea genuinely cared for these students. She never raised her voice at them, always sat with them during lunch in order to get to know them better and model proper lunchtime etiquette, and tutored her

students with limited proficiency in Finnish afterschool. Minea is scientifically minded. She shared thoughts on how she could use classroom data for research and often shares recent research articles with her colleagues—especially in regards to mathematics.

Interestingly, only two schools in Finland in employ the Freinet pedagogy and Minea's school is one of them. The main idea behind this philosophy is that schools "should reinforce the positive traits of a child's personality by giving the child possibilities for creative work" (Nowak-Fabrykowski, 1992, p. 61). The Freinet pedagogy aligns well with Dewey's beliefs and the Montessori Method, as these three beliefs focus on how students learn, which is through experience. Dewey highlighted that "experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 2). Minea opted for engaging, hands-on, self-paced activities in her classroom over the use of traditional text books. Children also worked at their own pace and were free to move about the room as needed.

Minea and her partner teacher did not receive much information about this group of students when they transferred from Kindergarten at a different school to first grade in their school and, unfortunately, the group of students was much more challenging than a typical group of students. Consequently, Minea was in the process of referring many of her students for special education. While the paperwork is time consuming, Minea understands that this process is necessary in order to get her students the support that they need. She shared during our interview:

> We have a lot of language problems, mathematical difficulties, home situations, [and students who are] late every day. Something like that would prompt me to write a document from the first step. We open and write those documents quite easily.

While Minea believes in the power of the special education process, she is not much of a fan of assessment in general:

> I don't want [students] to stress about the grades because we have a few stressors out there who are very worried about how they're doing, what grade they are getting. I don't want them, not yet, to get used to that.

She believes that teachers who assess do so because of a lack of confidence.

Milla

Milla, now a first grade teacher, grew up attending one of Finland's 11 practice schools where university students lead the classrooms. In Milla's upper secondary school,

there were five periods to the school year and each period meant new subject teachers. So ultimately, she had quite a lot of teachers throughout her middle and high school years. Milla explained that teachers change more frequently than they did previously. “Nowadays the movement is quite a lot… [Teachers] move or have a baby, or study—something like that. The teachers change a lot.”

Milla was a strong student herself and usually received the highest grades. However, getting such good grades was a struggle for her because of her dyslexia diagnosis in primary school. She explained, “Writing and reading are really slow; I have to think a lot.” Furthermore:

> It’s more difficult for me to learn languages other than Finnish. It’s not as easier to learn Finnish or do Finnish [either]. I have to do mind tricks to do writing. I maybe can see a word, and then I check it if it looks like real or okay. I don’t know if it’s right. If I write some word, I have to read it two times. I look at it and I look it for a long time to get the right image in my mind.

Milla does not share that she has dyslexia with many people, in part because her older colleagues believe that you cannot teach if you have difficulties, “only perfect people can be teachers.” Thankfully, Milla recognizes that having a disability herself is advantageous:

> I am thinking that because of my disability or the kind of difficulties, I can understand more of my students [when] they say, “I can’t read or I can’t do that” because I know how hard it is. I have always done a lot of more work to reach those [grades] than a regular student. It’s always been such a love-hate relationship, school and learning.

Milla studied “handicrafts” at the university and was passionate about the positive impact handicrafts have for students of all ages. The walls of her classroom were decorated with beautiful projects and one of the days I spent shadowing her began with her first graders hammering nails into wood. Whether connected to Milla’s disability or not, she believed her students’ parents questioned her abilities as an educator. Consequently, she felt as though she must prove how her students are performing.

Aino

Aino’s class is part of a yearlong course students take, where they study mathematics units—such as number system, number sense, basic calculations, statistics and probabilities, problem solving, measurement, and rational numbers—in addition to concrete and mental strategies, inductive learning, affective factors in learning, learning difficulties, and applications and real life connections. At the beginning of each course,

Aino puts on a one-woman show. Even though some students think it is silly, they quickly realize the message Aino tries to convey: "… the feeling that they are going to manage and that mathematics will be something different from what they have experienced before."

During our focus group when I asked about research-based approaches, Aino stayed silent. Her reasoning was that she wanted to hear how the former and current students would answer. After listening to them, she chimed in:

> I have to teach what I have been researching, so I research things that I know that I'm going to teach. For example, learning difficulties are something that I have researched. But it is also important to research the students; how they are understanding and how they are feeling. As I told you earlier about the anxiety that our students have about mathematics, I've been studying their views of mathematics a lot. I wrote my dissertation on that so I wanted to find out some things, such as how to make their view better.

Beyond teaching and researching, and leading primary teacher education, Aino has obligations outside of the university. She implied that all educators should be involved in some way with society, and has found her niche by working with a group on the national curriculum.

Kerttu

Part of Kerttu's role entails supervising students' bachelor theses. The bachelor thesis differs from the master's thesis primarily in length (30 versus 80 pages respectively). If Kerttu received her *Dosentti* through a promotion, she would be able to supervise students' master's level theses. While she has numerous tier-one publications, primarily concerning research-based approaches and teacher's pedagogical thinking, and could technically have her Dosentti, she has high expectations for herself:

> Well, actually I could [become a Dosentti] right away, yes, because I do have enough publications… Formerly you were supposed to have as much publications after your dissertation that what it takes for the dissertation. For example, I had my, in my dissertation I had five articles. I should publish five more articles after the dissertation. It should be new entity in a way or not republishing the same things again like some people do that. That they modify the first article or first results and then they publish them again and again and again. I want to create something new, completely new.

Most Finnish educators are fluent enough in English that they read recent research published in English or even contribute to the field themselves. Courses with at least six or seven foreign exchange students, such Kerttu's class that I observed, then they will be

taught in English. Finnish students are encouraged to attend these courses because it helps the exchange students make friends and assimilate into the culture. Kerttu explained the opportunities to speak English are abundant:

> We have lots of visitors come to the university, different groups from all around the world, after the PISA results. We have lots of visitors. Then I also teach in the STEP program, which is for English-speaking subject teachers. I have a few courses for them. I do teach in English.

Interpretation

Participants' unique perspectives and shared narratives—using their own words—come together in this story constellation and shed light on what quality teaching in Finland means to a handful of the nation's educators. Participants' actions and words concerning their professionalism, autonomy with curriculum, research-based approaches, genuine care and concern, and humility, were particularly insightful.

The four study participants who were students—or recent students—within the university's teacher education program, are by nature part of a very elite group who had what it took to gain acceptance into primary teacher education. Perhaps connected to participants' track records, their narratives demonstrate that quality teaching extends beyond the 24 hours a week primary educators have in contact with students. Minea was a prime example of this with her expanded roles within the school. This observation also applies to Arttu, Kerttu, and Aino who wore many hats within their roles at the university. Arttu led his unique, student-designed cohort, played an active role in the student counsel, and more. In addition to fulfilling their research agendas, Kerttu gave tours on campus for international visitors and Aino oversaw the teacher education department. From my perspective as a researcher, all participants were welcoming and demonstrated high levels of maturity and professionalism.

Further, quality teaching in Finland can be understood through the considerable autonomy educators have—especially in regards to curriculum. Minea, Milla, and Aada exemplified this in their respective classrooms during my visit to Finland where they delivered content in unique, in-depth ways. Additionally, differentiation was noted through special education services and the projects students created at their own pace. Based among these shared stories of experience, we know that Finnish educators deliver lessons in unique, in-depth ways. For example, Aada opted to have her students make animals out of chicken wire to learn about Africa, Minea baulked at the idea of using a textbook, and Milla continually chose to integrate a fair share of handicraft activities, as evidenced by her classroom walls and enthusiasm about the importance of handicrafts for all children and adults.

Research-based approaches are another connection amongst students' personal narratives. Aada and Minea shared how research impacts their instructional practice, while Milla's narrative highlights Finland's training schools and Arttu's narrative demonstrates how he and his colleagues work collaboratively on a research project. Further, Aino and Kerttu are both active researchers who implement current research into their respective university courses. The goal of Aino's research—in regards to teachers' attitudes about mathematics education—is to minimize the anxiety preservice teachers have regarding mathematics education so that they do not pass this on to their own primary students.

Aino's research and the simple research projects Aada conducts in the classroom are both examples of how Finnish educators use research to inform their practice as well as their genuine care and concern for students. In fact, genuine care and concern for students was a pronounced theme in most participant narratives. For example, Arttu led an activity in one of his university courses where students shared how they are doing. Both Minea and Aada taught ethics classes during my shadowing experiences. Minea never raised her voice at students, allowed them to move about the classroom as they desired, sat with her first graders during lunch as to model lunchtime etiquette and enjoy conversation with them, frequently utilized the special education system to get students support they will benefit from, and resisted assessments that would cause undue pressure or stress on her young students. These examples show how teachers are not only ethical role models, but how ethic/moral matters are a part of their culture and curriculum.

Another significant theme that came out of this research that exemplifies quality teaching is humility. Arttu, despite his hard work and dedication to his cohort's projects, struggled to give himself the highest score. Arttu, along with Aino, Minea, and Milla, stood out for their rather noteworthy humble attitudes. Arttu did not meet up to his own expectations for being a classroom teacher, Aino struggled with publishing research in English, Minea had a less-traditional path once accepted to the university, and Milla struggled with a disability that hindered academic learning and almost prevented her from reaching her dream of becoming a primary teacher. In each of these instances, participants use their beliefs to propel their lived experienced in a positive direction.

Significance

The insights participants shared shed light on the Finnish educational system, and specifically how Finnish educators perceive quality teaching. Overall, there are many commonalities amongst narratives that form a well-connected story constellation—especially in regards to participants' professionalism, autonomy with curriculum, research-based approaches, genuine care and concern, and humility. This research is one step in the fertilization of ideas across international borders, as it has a degree of portability.

This study adds more depth to previous literature about Finnish education, especially in regards to teachers' confidence, curriculum and autonomy with the curriculum, and the methods of implementation. When putting Minea's and Milla's narrative alongside each other, you can see that Minea is a much more confident teacher. While this research does not address the issue of which participants are higher quality teachers, we do see here that confidence is connected to perceived teaching ability and this fits Postareff and Lindblom-Ylänne's (2011) research that looks at how emotions and confidence impact teachers' development.

The scope of the Finnish curriculum and the autonomy teachers have with it was one of the themes identified in this study. The literature review highlights how Finnish educators, as a whole, prefer an in-depth curriculum as opposed to a broad-based one (Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2007). Participants' narratives—especially Minea's and Aada's—confirm this. Child-centered practices were also found to be predominant "among the profiles of higher classroom quality" (Salminen et al., 2012, p. 801) and this study highlights stories of experience from Minea's, Aada's, and Milla's classrooms that suggest this is how many Finnish educators perceive quality teaching.

Ultimately, while some aspects of the literature review were supported, participants' narratives offer a different perspective reference to views on assessment. At no point in the study did Finnish educators directly correlate student learning with teacher quality. Also, participants generally did not broach the topic of assessments unless it was in response to a specific question I had asked. This aspect of participants' narratives suggests that Finnish educators do not connect quality teaching to students' performance on standardized assessments, a teacher's qualifications, or value-added measures. Due to the limited data, it was not easy to see how participants' views of quality teaching connect with student learning outcomes or the alignment between the evaluation of education with the given objectives (Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2007). Many participants' views fit within the scope of Parpala and Lindblom-Ylänne's (2007) research on this topic, but more data would be needed to draw specific conclusions.

The findings from this study coincide with Kansenen's (2004) beliefs about the ethical and normative perspectives involved in defining quality teaching. While participant narratives cannot represent what quality teaching means for all Finnish educators, and while no educational system should be grafted onto another due to the complex cultural minutia, this study can provide insight for educators across the globe about what quality teaching means to a diverse group of Finnish educators at the primary level.

My hope for this study is that it gets educators to think about what quality teaching means to them in their specific milieu. Future research would best include a follow-up study with the same participants to see how, if at all, their views about quality teaching or

any of the study's themes—professionalism, autonomy with curriculum, research-based approaches, genuine care and concern, and humility—have changed over time. Doing so may provide more insight into what degree Finnish educators connect quality teaching with students' performance on standardized assessments, teachers' qualifications, or value-added measures. It may also further explain how much of Minea's genuine care and concern for students stems from the fact that her school employs the Freinet pedagogy. Lastly, it would also be beneficial to repeat this study with other groups of Finnish educators in different locations in Finland.

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