



FIVE DECADES OF PERSISTENT DECONTEXTUALISATION OF ACADEMIC TEACHER EDUCATION IN FINLAND

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Abstract: Aiming at constructive criticism, this article analyses the historical development of Finnish teacher education from the perspective of decontextualisation. The article suggests that essential contexts for teacher education are daily schooling, the historically constructed structures of school, and finally the whole society. The results indicate that as an unintended consequence of the academisation of Finnish teacher education, the socio-historical context of teaching and learning has narrowed, and ties between educational theory and practical schooling have loosened. This may hinder the good intentions underpinning the Finnish teacher education system and produce a discourse that unreflectively silences the complexity of education.

Keywords: Teacher education Decontextualisation, Foundations of education, Theory and practice

1. Introduction

Finnish teacher education is often referred to as a high-quality system. For example, the success of Finnish students in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test has been explained by the master-level studies that all Finnish teachers have to engage in (e.g. [Sahlberg, 2011](#)). In this sense, the Finnish teacher education system is rather unique. All class teachers, who teach the first six grades of comprehensive school (primary), study education as their major. Subject teachers, who are orientated to teach in secondary schools, study their teaching subject (mathematics, Finnish language, history, etc.) in the respective departments. Both teacher groups are eligible to continue to PhD studies in educational sciences (and subject teachers also in subject departments).

In order to become qualified teachers, students must undertake pedagogical studies (60 ECTS credits) at the faculty of education. These studies consist of numerous individual courses, such as educational psychology, subject-specific courses, and teaching practice periods at university-based training schools.

Finnish teacher education ensures that it attains the same status as traditional academic disciplines and that teacher education today follows academic guidelines that entitle teacher training institutions to be an undisputed member of academia ([Kansanen, 2014](#); [Niemi & Jakku-Sihvonen, 2006](#)). Finnish teacher educators publish in international journals and recognise the importance of research in their work ([Hokkila, 2012](#); [Santti et al., 2014](#)). Furthermore,

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research-based thinking is reportedly approved and also applied by schoolteachers, who have the ability to associate theoretical views with their daily teaching practice on the basis of their education (Sitomaniemi-San, 2015; Westbury et al., 2005). Although Finland is not the only country to follow a research-based agenda (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Munthe & Rogne, 2015), Finns tend to regard themselves as forerunners in education and consider that others can learn something from their exceptional and ‘miraculous’ educational culture (Niemi, Toom & Kallioniemi, 2016; Sahlberg, 2011; Santti et al., 2021”).

Hence, internationally, Finnish teacher education enjoys an excellent standing and the professional status of schoolteachers is strong. Yet, encouraged by the words of an international evaluation report (Jussila & Saari, 2000) that ‘it is always possible to make good even better’, we note that Finnish teacher education can also be seen from a different standpoint. Some scholars have asked whether the success story of Finnish teacher education is also a rhetorical construct that cherishes the discourse of a trouble-free system (Puustinen et al., 2018; Santti et al., 2018”). The fact that teacher education belongs to academia does not guarantee that the research-based approach is enacted plausibly, or that the system would be free of discontinuities. As Sjølie (2017) notes, there is a risk of unreflectively adopting a discourse of ‘harmony and coherence’ and not speaking about the complexity and internal tensions of education (see also Labaree, 2017). In addition, in Finland, the same teacher training institutions that have professional school functions to educate large numbers of teachers must at the same time meet expectations imposed by international research communities.

The starting point of this paper is that there are concrete reasons to believe that the Finnish success story is more than mere rhetoric but, at the same time, it emphasises the need for self-critical analyses. The study revolves around the concept of *decontextualisation* created by Simola (1995) in his Foucault-inspired historical study on Finnish education discourse from the 1860s to the 1990s. According to Simola, decontextualisation can be defined as a process during which the socio-historically formed institutional context of teaching and learning in school vanished from official Finnish texts on education from the 1970s on (e.g. Simola, 1998a, 748–749). We suggest that essential contexts for teacher education are, for example, the daily life teachers face at school, the historically constructed institutional structures of school, and finally the whole society.

Researchers such as Biesta (2005, 2014) and Hordern (2018, 2021) have pointed to the same kind of phenomena. Biesta argues that learning-based discourse overemphasises the cognitive activity of individuals in education. This tendency obliterates and obfuscates the institutional, cultural and political contexts of education and leaves students entrusted with the responsibility to take care of their individual educational duties. In this learner-centric discourse, problems are defined as questions of individual adaptation, adjustment and selection. In parallel with this, Hordern (2021) stresses the need for educational knowledge that includes awareness of the political and social context of schooling. By distinguishing between the terms *knowledge about education* and *knowledge for educational practice* (Hordern, 2018), the need for analytical tools to conceptualise the complexity of education amidst societal and institutional purposes, obligations and expectations becomes visible.



In the context of teacher education, decontextualisation connects to the concerns about the marginalised status of the foundations of education in English-speaking countries (Barrett & Hordern, 2021; Lawn & Furlong, 2009). The role of the *foundations of education*, which refer to ‘auxiliary sciences’ of education such as philosophy, history, sociology and psychology (Carr, 2006; Lawn & Furlong, 2009), has been questioned by contesting their relevance to educational practice (Carr, 2006; Winch et al., 2015). The foundational basis of education has also been tempered by political decisions and various nationwide educational programmes. In many cases, teacher education has been aimed at rendering a more technical and practice-based enterprise by imposing various standards and enhancing the control over teachers, which stands in sharp contrast to what the foundations of education usually support (Barrett & Hordern, 2021). The foundations of education endeavour, amongst other things, to provide teachers with an understanding of the social, cultural and political nature of education, the lack of which can be seen as one indicator of decontextualisation.

To sum up, we deploy the decontextualisation thesis and examine whether the research-based agenda of Finnish teacher education has accelerated the process of decontextualisation and, if so, what kind of decisions, interests and contingencies can be found. In doing so, we wish to provide analytical tools for understanding teacher education internationally as well, in other educational contexts with other challenges. We will begin with Simola’s original findings concerning the historical development of the Finnish education system, and the conceptualisation of decontextualisation from the 1990s. We will then reinterpret recent empirical

research studies concerning Finnish teacher education from the perspective of decontextualisation. The empirical studies we analyse focus, firstly, on committee reports and plans produced by teacher educators themselves; secondly, on syllabi and textbooks for teacher education; and thirdly, on how student teachers and in-service teachers perceive the education they have received.

2. The academisation of Finnish teacher education and the decontextualisation thesis

The present-day teacher education system in Finland was constructed during the 1960s and 1970s. The decision to educate elementary school teachers to master’s level marked a significant departure from the international trend (Simola et al., 2011, 235–236). With a wider and more scientific degree, teachers were expected to be able to develop their own work and follow new academic research. Since the 1990s, terms like *teacher as a researcher* and *research-based teacher education* have been used in describing the Finnish system. Consequently, all teacher educators were expected to carry out academic research, and duly became part of the academic playing field. The above-mentioned developments have been defined with the concepts of the academisation and disciplinisation of teacher education (Santti et al., 2018; Simola, 1993).

When probing the half-century development of Finnish teacher education from the 1960s on, it can be argued that it has transformed from craft-based apprenticeship to professional and academic study in quite a short period of time. This development is particularly clear in class teacher education, whereas subject teacher education has been organised at universities since the 19th century and has changed more slowly (Puustinen, 2022). The three components of subject teacher education – a



major in the subject department, educational studies, and teaching practice periods at training schools – still follow the 19th century structure, even though the content of educational studies has clearly become more theoretical.

After 1978, class teachers were also educated at universities, and achieved full academic status with studies at master's level. From the 1990s, university-based teacher educators started to earn their doctoral theses and altered their professional interests in a more research-based direction (Santti et al., 2014[”]). Simultaneously in the 1990s, schoolteachers were given more responsibility and authority to take care of planning and development work, including local curriculum work (Simola et al., 2009, 2011). Thus, there are concrete developments indicating that the academisation of Finnish teacher education has occurred in actuality (Furuhaugen et al., 2019; Santti et al., 2014[”], 2018). When contextualising Finnish teacher education, we apply three clusters of knowledge traditions in the study of education by Furlong and Whitty (2017). In the first cluster, *Academic knowledge traditions*, education is seen as a true academic and independent science in the Bernsteinian understanding (2000, see also Barrett & Hordern 2021; Hordern 2017) of education as a singular science. The second academic knowledge tradition sees education as a region consisting of a cluster of other 'pure' disciplines (such as sociology, psychology or history). Conversely, in the second cluster, *Practical knowledge tradition*, education is seen as a craft. Thus, various competencies and standards of the teaching profession are emphasised, and professional practice-based knowledge is perceived as paramount in educational studies. The third cluster – *Integrated knowledge tradition* – is a mix of these two quite different traditions. In this cluster, the academic

and practical traditions are fused and linked together rather than seen separately.

Even though there are other aspects and conceptualisations, such as status or identity, that can be used for analysing the development of Finnish teacher education, and the knowledge traditions described above are not exclusive or clear-cut, we can see that knowledge establishment is a useful concept for understanding the changes that the Finnish teacher education system has undergone. As noted, Finnish teacher education has transformed from a practice-based knowledge tradition to an academic tradition with a strong emphasis on research-based thinking. This process has strengthened the picture of the autonomous and self-sufficient nature of Finnish teacher education (Simola et al., 1997). Thus, the current Finnish teacher education culture is tightly connected to the academic knowledge tradition and to the idea of autonomous research-based educational thinking as a singular educational science. Since teacher education has its professional mission to educate prospective teachers, some tendencies are also characteristic of the *Integrated knowledge tradition*. A clear indication is the eagerness to emphasise the distinct connection between theory and practice in teacher education and in teachers' everyday practice (Santti et al., 2018[”]; Sitomaniemi-San, 2015; Westbury et al., 2005).

In his dissertation, Simola (1995) studied Finnish national curriculum documents for primary and later comprehensive schooling from 1925, 1952, 1970, 1985, and 1994, as well as the committee texts on schooling and teacher education. He identified four changes in the official school discourse since the 1960s: individualisation, disciplinisation, goal rationalisation, and decontextualisation. These changes distinguished



the ‘New School’ from the old elementary school and constituted ‘wishful rationalism’ as a tacit discursive principle of the authoritarian approach to school reforms (e.g. [Simola, 1998a](#), 731, 734). First, the school’s mission turned away from shaping the school life of a group of pupils. Schools became committed to responding to the individual learning needs and abilities of every pupil, a process termed individualisation. Second, the knowledge base of teaching changed. The multiple, pragmatic and ideological combination of ethical, psychological, pedagogical and historical content was replaced by educational science that focused more narrowly on pedagogical ideals – ironically formulated as the ‘science of how the teacher should teach and how the pupil should learn in school – as if it were not in school’ ([Simola et al., 1997](#), 873; [Simola, 1998c](#)). Simola called this the disciplinisation of teaching knowledge. The third change concerned the rational orientation of discourse: the former ‘value-rational orientation’ changed to goal rationalisation, whereby predetermined goals have become the basis of all educational procedures. Finally, one more change was needed to make individualisation, disciplinisation, and goal rationalisation possible and credible. [Simola \(1998a, 748–749\)](#) called this the decontextualisation process, during which the socio-historically formed institutional context of teaching and learning in school vanished from official Finnish texts on education during the 1970s.

[Simola went on to study \(1998b\)](#) the role of contextual studies, namely studies that refer explicitly to the ecological, societal, cultural and institutional contexts of the teacher’s work,

between 1981 and 1996 in class-teacher education curricula. The study covered all of the socio-psychological, sociological, political, cultural, historical and even ecological content elements of class-teacher training programmes and obligatory textbooks in six universities responsible for teacher training, representing the vast majority of all class-teacher training in Finland. The results clearly showed that there had been a tendency towards pure pedagogy, a kind of abstract, non-historical and decontextualised science of teaching. This quest for ‘educational pureness’ refers to the *Academic knowledge tradition* and perceiving education as a singular science ([Furlong & Whitty, 2017](#)). Although there had been a slight increase in contextual studies in some departments since the mid-1990s, the historical dimension of schooling in particular still appeared to be lacking.

Simola and colleagues ([Simola et al., 1997](#), 888) pointed to three professionalist drifts in Finnish teacher education that produced decontextualised pedagogical discourse. The first was the pursuit of scientific legitimisation that aimed to create a body of knowledge that science would legitimise. The second drift was loyalty to the state and its official curriculum, and the third striving for distinction from rival disciplines.

The image of autonomous, genuine and self-sufficient didactics¹ may have been attractive to teacher educators who were struggling to achieve legitimisation as newcomers in the field of higher education. This may help to explain why the discipline of didactics rejected help from older neighbouring disciplines such as sociology and history ([Simola et al., 1997](#)). From the professional perspective, the strong commitment to educational



reforms and the official curriculum has also proved valuable and productive for teacher educators and educational science, as evidenced in the very rapid increase in professorial posts in teacher education: there were twice as many professorships in education in Finland than in the other Scandinavian countries combined in the 1990s (Simola 1993, 180–188).

When the aforementioned evolution is examined from the perspective of decontextualisation, the question arises as to whether the academisation process has increased or decreased decontextualisation. It is important to note that while decontextualisation is closely connected to the academisation process, our aim is not to question the academic base of teacher education and teacher's work per se. Instead, we apply Erich Weniger's (1957) idea of two opposite, yet still similar, pitfalls in teachers' work: the tyranny of experience and the tyranny of theory. Weniger (1957, 18) used the concept of the tyranny of experience to criticise views that mere experience would be enough to justify practical actions. However, in Weniger's view, there was no educational theory without educational practice, and practice always included some kind of theoretical elements. Hence, if theory loses touch with practice, its impact declines or ceases, which is an indicator of the tyranny of theory (Weniger, 1957, 22).

Next, we move on to analyse empirical findings from studies that were conducted after the 1990s. As noted, our aim is to examine whether the tendency for decontextualisation is still visible in Finnish teacher education.

3. Decontextualisation in teacher education discourse

In their study, Santti et al. (2018) show how Finnish teacher education has constructed a

narrative of success. In their historical analysis of teacher education documents (committee texts and evaluation reports), this development culminates in the reports published in the 2000s. In these documents, it is stated that teacher education has managed to combine theoretical and practical educational issues in keeping with the *Integrated knowledge tradition* (Furlong & Whitty 2017). When the academisation of Finnish teacher education began in the 1960s, theory and practice were considered separate issues, but over the years they gradually converged in daily schoolwork and in teacher education, if the teacher education documents are to be believed. If this claim holds up, then Finnish teacher education has found the solution to the perennial question troubling educational researchers, also known as the theory-practice debate (e.g. Barrett & Hordern, 2021; Biesta, 2007; Broekk & Van Hout-Wolters, 2007). Finnish teacher educators are expected to research and produce theoretical conceptions. Thus, they seem to appreciate the research-based approach, although they are sceptical as to whether their students share their view (Krokfors et al., 2011). However, it is in teacher educators' interests to assume that their students and future schoolteachers also pursue similar academic activities in their studies and daily schoolwork. In effect, this is said to be the reality in Finnish education (Santti et al., 2018). Regarding schoolteachers as educators with a theoretical and research-based mindset, and who engage in serious research, is central to the legitimisation process of teacher educators who are newcomers to academia (Labaree, 2004, 12, 33; Simola et al., 1997). This legitimisation is closely connected to the construction of a didactically orientated educational science as the knowledge base of the teacher's work (Simola et al., 1998). During this



process, the ties to the traditional knowledge base of teachers, consisting of a combination of ethical, psychological, pedagogical and historical content, were loosened. An unintentional consequence may have been a situation in which the needs of schoolteachers are predetermined mainly by academic interests, which teachers may find alien or irrelevant to their own working orientation. This in turn may enhance decontextualisation.

An interesting comparison emerges when the structures of Finnish and Swedish teacher education are compared in the quest for the ‘ideal teacher’. These two countries share similar visions of a democratic welfare state, with the principle of equal educational opportunities provided by the state. However, teacher education has evolved very differently in the two Nordic countries. In Sweden, the state has controlled teacher education, and hence different political orientations have also been distinguishable in teacher education and teacher ideals. When Social Democratic governments have been in power, the ideal teacher has been a social actor and a reformer (progressivist orientation). During Centre-right liberal government times in Sweden, the teacher ideal has reflected the idea of the teacher as a subject expert (academic orientation). In Finland, contemporary political guidance and direct state control have been practically non-existent. The Finnish teacher ideal has developed gradually, and in a more continuous fashion, into the prevailing research-based teacher ideal, adhering to academic standards. While this issue has naturally been favourable, it is conceivable that the approach has made Finnish teacher educators unaware of political and ideological issues and reduced their awareness of the societal pressures that their Swedish colleagues have been forced to recognise. If this political unawareness coexists with the

state-loyal attitude, there is a danger that Finnish teacher educators will see their main task as legitimators of educational reforms. There are reasons to believe that this has fostered decontextualisation in the situation whereby state control has been disguised and embedded in teacher education structures (Furuhausen et al., 2019; Simola et al., 1997).

4. Decontextualisation in teacher education syllabi

Thus far, we have introduced major cultural issues that may have produced decontextualisation. Besides these broader and deeper socio-historical matters, there are weaker signs which point in the same direction. In a Finnish study, Kinoss et al., (2015) studied classroom teachers’ curricula in three Finnish universities from the 1980s to the 2010s. They concluded that Finnish research-based classroom teacher education concentrated on methodological studies to understand and grasp the complexity of education. The same shift in emphasis is visible in subject teacher education, in which theoretical and methodological content have increased, and practically orientated studies decreased (Puustinen, 2018). A recent report (Jyrhamäki, 2021), commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Culture, examined how teachers’ pedagogical studies are constructed in Finnish universities. While all universities, with the exception of one, require student teachers to take a course that deals with social, historical or philosophical aspects of education, these courses typically consist of 5 ETCS credits, which presumably fragments the viewpoints that each of these ‘auxiliary sciences’ can offer.

The role of educational psychology, however, is much broader. Thus, the current situation seems to resemble Simola’s (1998b) findings in the 1990s. In this respect, Finland seems to have followed the



same path that [Labaree \(1992\)](#); see also [Simola, 2015](#), 115) considered that American teacher educators had taken in the 1960s. In order to support their professional status, teacher educators tried to construct a ‘science of teaching’. This construction turned towards empiricism, positivism, and educational psychology, which – at least in Labaree’s interpretation – offered the most suitable pattern because it had already established a model for carrying out academically credible research.

Based on the aforementioned observations, one can argue that the methodological emphasis reflects the research-based agenda but, at the same time, it disregards other ways of knowing, such as studies of the sociology or history of education, which are central to understanding contextual matters in education. [Sitomaniemi-San \(2015\)](#) confirmed this finding when she studied Finnish research-based teacher education. Thus, the methodological emphasis, which is appreciated as belonging to a research-based approach, seems problematic since it offers vague and unspecified analytical tools for studying historical, political and cultural contexts. [Autio \(2006\)](#) has called this strong faith in methodology the *culture of the method*, which reflects the instrumental pursuit of studying education in the name of methodological purity.

In their study, [Salminen and Santti \(2012\)](#) studied Finnish pedagogical textbooks from the 1960s to the 2010s. The study challenges the idea that theory and practice are ‘fused’ in Finnish teacher education when it comes to these textbooks, and illustrates how the earlier normative base, Christian Patriotism, has gradually been replaced by another, namely the readiness to adopt the role of the teacher as a dynamic agent of change. It is problematic if this attitude implies an uncritical,

permanently positive stance towards reforms or fads coming from school administration in the name of change. In this case, the modern and research-based teacher would be a caricature of an autonomously thinking educator. This thinking also reflects the binary logic that the old teacher was stagnant, speculative and backward, while the new teacher is forward-looking, rational and development-friendly ([Sitomaniemi-San, 2015](#)). [Salminen and Santti \(2012\)](#) conclude that this tendency represents a new kind of normativity which seduces teachers to develop themselves and their school continuously.

In the long run, societal and historical substance has gradually diminished in pedagogical textbooks ([Salminen & Santti, 2012](#)). As one Finnish textbook ([Lahdes, 1987](#)) put it in the 1980s, ‘to understand the problems of education, it is central to study the context in which this education takes place’. It seems that the introduction of comprehensive school in the 1960s and 1970s provided the impetus for political and social awareness in pedagogical textbooks, while subsequent textbooks have been silent on these contextual matters. Either society is largely represented in the current curriculum or, alternatively, society imposes blurred and undefined pressure for change in education. In textbooks, interactions at the class level and between teacher and students have taken the place of wider structural and ideological issues.

Some years later, [Kansanen \(1993\)](#), one of the main advocates of academisation in Finnish teacher education, suggested distinguishing between the concepts of ‘school pedagogy’ and ‘didactics’ (see also [Simola, 2015](#); [Simola et al., 1997](#), 120–122). Both concern the teaching process, but the subject of school pedagogy refers to the school as a social system, with its framework



limiting the pedagogical possibilities of both teachers and pupils. It thus seeks to construct a theory of schooling. Didactics, on the other hand, concerns the individual teacher and pupil, and involves attempts to construct universal models and theories of teaching. However, as [Kansanen \(1993, 25\)](#) pointed out, ‘whenever we try to apply these models in practice, we need the help of school pedagogy and theories of schooling, i.e. sociology and history of education’.

In textbooks and in the culture of the method, one can notice when certain substance and disciplines, which we call contextual studies, are excluded from teacher education. In our view, different kinds of discontinuity also occur in teaching practice periods. Teaching practice is a crucial point of contact where theoretical questions can be studied in real-life educational contexts. To this end, it poses a true educational opportunity to merge theory and practice. A study by [Santi and Salminen \(2012\)](#) “deals with teaching practice in one Finnish university from the 1980s to the new millennium. The study argues that since all university-based teacher educators have concentrated on research tasks, they have opted out of the mentoring of teaching practice periods and left this task to the teachers at university-based training schools. Mentoring teaching practice periods had already been dropped from professors’ duties in the teacher education decree in 1973 ([Simola, 1995](#)). Consequently, theoretical understanding has been withdrawn from teaching practice and, at the same time, teacher educators have lost touch with what is happening in classrooms.

The development described above may have thrown the connections between theoretical aspects of teacher education and daily schooling off track and challenges the idea that the guidance

given by mentor teachers during teaching practice periods would be based on relevant theories and scientific knowledge, not on mere personal experience (see [Ertsas & Irgens, 2017](#)). A recent study ([Sjøløe & Østern, 2021](#)) from Norway noted that mentor teachers focused on practical issues of schooling in their supervision, but did not help mentees draw connections between the theoretical aspects of teacher education. More research would be needed to shed light on the extent to which similar discontinuity challenges the Finnish system. In sum, the goals of teaching practice periods have escalated and deepened. At the same time, guidance by teacher educators has diminished and the duration of teaching practice periods has decreased. These developments question the merger of theory and practice and, on the other hand, may foster decontextualisation.

5. Decontextualisation through the eyes of student teachers and in-service teachers

In the previous sections, we investigated the aims of Finnish teacher education and the content of the studies. Even though we interpret that some developments seem to be more rhetorical, discursive changes also have practical impacts that may or may not be aligned with intentions. Next, we connect the analysis in the previous sections to studies that examine how student teachers and in-service teachers perceive their pedagogical education and the meaning of educational research and theory.

A few studies have considered research-based teacher education from the point of view of student teachers. Two studies from the same research team ([Byman et al., 2009](#); [Jyrhamä et al., 2008](#)) found that most students who were surveyed appreciated the research-based approach of their education, and that this kind of approach is appreciated amongst student teachers as a general framework



for teacher education. However, there was some variation amongst students' views. Deviation is more visible in another study that also suggests that some pre-service teachers find the objectives of the research-based approach unclear. [Puustinen et al. \(2018\)](#) surveyed how student teachers ($n = 905$) viewed their pedagogical studies at the University of Helsinki. The respondents were subject teachers and class teachers. The degree requirements had two main goals in common – the teacher as a researcher, and personal practical theory. The results of the study were not straightforward, largely because of the varying academic backgrounds of the student teachers and the phase of their studies. Nevertheless, the results challenge claims (e.g. [Westbury et al., 2005](#)) to the effect that the practical and theoretical parts of pedagogical studies would be fused, and thus differ from earlier findings.

According to [Puustinen et al. \(2018\)](#), some respondents recognised the concepts of teacher as a researcher and personal practical theory and appreciated their relevance. However, many respondents did not recognise the terms, and in some cases the open-ended answers revealed that the meaning of the terms was unclear to students. The findings indicate that the teacher as a researcher agenda or forming personal practical theory could not have supported the connection between theory and practice in the way it is presented in the committee texts and teacher education curriculum. Some respondents also questioned how realistic it would be to conduct action research as part of a full-time teaching job. Regarding decontextualisation, we argue that these results indicate how the way in which a teacher's work is envisaged in the committee texts differs from the way it is perceived by student teachers.

Given the established position that the research-based approach holds, it is surprising that little systematic and large-scale empirical research has been devoted to how the research-based approach is realised in teachers' work ([Kansanen, 2014](#)). In his report, [Kiviniemi \(2000\)](#) concluded that in-service teachers noted that the theoretical aspects of research-based teacher education are too far removed from the reality of school. In a more recent assessment, [Heikkinen et al., \(2015\)](#) found that school-level educators in Finland have difficulties combining theoretical knowledge with educational practice. Moreover, even if teacher education succeeds in providing students with a research-based work orientation, teachers may not be able to put this into practice in their workplace ([Nikkola et al., 2019](#), 300). To gain a more nuanced view of the thinking of in-service teachers, we draw on our own study in which we interviewed 25 in-service class teachers ([Koski et al., 2022](#)). These results are complemented by results from a research project that focused on history teaching in primary and upper secondary schools.

The in-service class teachers who were interviewed understood the meaning of educational science and theory in multiple ways ([Koski et al., 2022](#)). Some teachers understood the meaning of educational science broadly. For them, educational science and theory amounted to something that enabled understanding a teacher's work from different perspectives and within different contexts. In our view, these students represented the embodiment of the ideal teacher of Finnish teacher education. However, for a larger group of informants, the meaning of educational science was primarily instrumental, which reflects the previously mentioned culture of the method. These respondents required precise tools or



techniques that could be used in pedagogical situations, and felt that these were missing in their teacher education. Only a few respondents considered educational science insignificant. Regarding the publicly stated aims of Finnish teacher education, the results were not encouraging. The informants engaged in educational research only rarely due to a lack of time and opportunities. Furthermore, teachers reported that their work conditions did not support a research-based work orientation and they rarely described in-service training as research-based. The interviewed teachers did not recognise work-related situations in which the pedagogical decision would have been based on theoretical knowledge.

The findings regarding history teaching support the previous results (Puustinen, 2022). In interviews, teachers acknowledged that history was an interpretative subject and favoured pedagogical methods that would support disciplinary history. These aims are also stressed during teacher education and, to some extent, in national core curricula. However, the observed lessons followed the traditional method of teaching history, namely transmitting facts without a disciplinary approach. This imbalance indicates the same divergence between the rhetoric of teacher education and daily schooling as the other results we have investigated in this paper. Based on our interpretation (Koski et al., 2022), the class teachers lacked analytical tools that would help them recognise and thus understand the contexts of their work. Similarly, history teachers were seemingly lacking tools to separate societal and institutional pressures, like historical culture and assessment, and teaching tradition from the disciplinary pedagogy they were aiming for (Puustinen, 2022).

The aforementioned notions are by no means unique, and resonate with classical studies concerning teaching (e.g. Jackson, 1968; Lortie, 1977). However, in the Finnish context, where theoretical and practical aspects of teacher education are said to be well-connected and university-based teacher training schools offer exceptional opportunities to create these connections during pedagogical praxis, one could expect at least somewhat different results. Although there are some indications that teacher education can support student teachers' ability to use educational research skills in developing their expertise (Heikkilä et al., 2020), it is conceivable that the somewhat critical results concerning student teachers as well as in-service teachers could be explained by the change in pedagogical studies. The increase in methodological content and the decrease in teaching practice periods and historically and socially orientated content may have narrowed the education's connection to daily schooling and societal conditions.

Weniger's concepts of the tyrannies of theory and experience offer an analytical framework for examining these challenges further. While, according to Weniger (1957), neglecting new ideas by appealing to experience usually means legitimising lacklustre or poor practice (Ertsas & Irgens, 2017), on the other hand theory is meaningless without a connection to practice. Thus, the heavy emphasis on research abilities (Kinos et al., 2015; Santti et al., 2018; Sitomaniemi-San, 2015), and the loosening ties to classrooms, will not necessarily support theorising classroom experiences. Theory in the form of 'school-free pedagogy' (Simola, 1998c) may not offer meaningful tools for a practitioner. As Rosenlund (2016, 183) notes in the context of history teaching, if teachers are supposed to re-



design their instruction on their own or in discussion with colleagues, there is a risk that it will further strengthen the already dominant tradition. If a novice teacher cannot construct connections between education and the acute challenges she faces in the classroom, usable solutions have to be found elsewhere. A likely, and safe, source for these solutions is the tradition that is familiar from one's own time as a student, or that is passed down from more experienced colleagues (Rosenlund, 2016). As Lortie (1977) noted as early as the 1970s, teachers spend most of their professional career alone in classrooms full of students. There is no one at hand to help in questioning the tradition and to support their professional development.

6. Discussion

6.1. Decontextualisation – An unintended side effect of good intentions?

Finnish teacher education is unquestionably a successful and well-organised system. All Finnish teachers study for master's degrees and the professional status of Finnish teachers is strong from an international perspective. The status quo in Finnish teacher education is in many respects idealistic when compared with the situation in many Western countries (Barrett & Hordern, 2021; Furuhaugen et al., 2019; Levine, 2006; Munthe & Rogne, 2015). Teacher education is appreciated by politicians, school administrators, the media, and academia. Finnish teachers are educated to be scholars of educational research and there are no shortcuts to teaching qualifications. Furthermore, the Finnish teacher education system has a distinctive feature in that the teacher training schools are affiliated to universities. Ideally, university-based training schools can offer a first-class platform for merging teachers' academic knowledge with day-to-day schooling.

In this paper, we have examined whether and to what extent the decontextualisation thesis formulated by Simola (1998a) stands up to scrutiny from the perspective of more recent studies. In doing so, our aim has not been to point out shortcomings in Finnish teacher education, but to provide analytical tools for understanding teacher education and its challenges in other educational contexts as well. What our analysis indicates is that the Finnish teacher education system with its master-level degrees and university-based training schools is not being used to its full effectiveness and has some blind spots.

We have identified two kinds of decontextualisation. First, akin to Simola's (1998b) initial analysis, the disappearance of the socio-historically formed institutional context of teaching and learning in school; and second, the complex relationship between educational theory and practice, which challenges teacher education's ability to support theorising in practical schooling situations. The latter is highlighted, for example, by the fact that university-based teacher educators, not to mention professors, do not participate in the supervision of teaching practice periods. It is important to note that we do not claim that Finnish teacher education is overly theoretical as such, but aim to consider whether it offers enough meaningful theoretical windows and contact with teaching, learning, and school as a societal institution.

The Finnish objective of a theoretically sound education carried out under scientific traditions and procedures can surely promote educational expertise, foster a critical stance, advance the ability to identify the complexities of education and, in the best case, also guide everyday educational decision-making. But, as we have argued here, there are also tendencies that may



foster decontextualisation and thus blur the socio-historical awareness of those involved in teacher education. This balance between different academic scopes is visible in individual courses in teacher education, in the academic domains of professorships, as well as in the direction and nuances of various teacher education programmes. It is conceivable that learnification and the new language of learning as the megatrends of present-day education are shifting the emphasis to more individual-based perspectives ([Biesta, 2014](#)).

In our analysis, we have connected decontextualisation to the methodological emphasis of Finnish teacher education, as well as to the relationship between theoretical studies and teachers' daily work. This leads to considering the balance in student teachers' studies. If methodological studies are taking too much time away from contextual studies, this could imply technical mastery without knowledge of the substance and comprehension of the nature of complex educational questions. Naturally, these two lines are not mutually exclusive. In addition, it is problematic if the academisation process has put teacher educators in their academic ivory tower, and if the theory-based approach is not appreciated by schoolteachers or is taken as a misguided agenda in the pursuit of easy solutions in everyday schoolwork.

In their recent paper, [Barrett and Hordern \(2021\)](#) express concern about the role of the foundations of education in the USA and England. In their view, the foundation disciplines could strengthen teachers' professional knowledge and understanding of the social, cultural and political underpinnings of matters such as curriculum, pedagogy and policy (see also [Tozer et al., 1990](#)). However, the mainstream in the Anglophone world has moved in a practical direction, in which

skills directly linked to classroom practice have gained favour over theoretical understanding. Perhaps paradoxically, the academisation process of Finnish teacher education, and particularly the heavy emphasis on methodological knowledge, may have led to the same outcome. Finnish teachers seem to lack the tools to unpack the social, historical and political underpinnings of their work.

Weniger's tyrannies help to address why this paradox is only ostensible. It is probably safe to characterise non-academic, vocational teacher training as the tyranny of experience. Student teachers and novice in-service teachers learn by imitating and listening to older colleagues and – as Weniger noted – decisions are justified by appealing to personal experience. Conversely, the Finnish version of research-based teacher education may have led to the tyranny of theory. It is conceivable that the theoretical emphasis has created a decontextualised and 'school-free' bubble, ostensibly theorising teaching without any connection to actual school, institutional frames, and the surrounding society. The pursuit of education as a singular and pure science, with no relation to educational reality, may have led to the same result ([Furlong & Whitty, 2017](#)).

Other scholars and theoretical frameworks have conceptualised the same phenomena. Terms like 'habitual blindness' ([Cassirer, 1944](#), cited in [Ertsas & Irgens, 2017](#)), 'persistent tradition', and the 'grammar of schooling' ([Cuban, 2016](#)) conceptualise how the structures of schooling and teachers' daily routines include different historical sediments descended from earlier times. Within the framework of practice architectures, [Kemmis \(2009\)](#) has used the term practice traditions, which can 'encapsulate the history of the happenings of the practice, allow it to be reproduced, and act as a



kind of collective “memory” of the practice” (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 27). In this sense, schooling is a practice that has been reproduced for centuries.

An important argument in this study is that understanding schooling and the teaching profession, not to mention changing them, requires an understanding of the socio-historical conditions of education. The decontextualisation of educational knowledge can cut the ties between theoretical knowledge and practical schoolwork, leading back to the tyranny of experience in classrooms. Using the AngloAmerican term, the foundations of education are and should be about contextualising pedagogy, not for example history or sociology for its own sake. Hence, one lesson from the Finnish case is that simply adding more educational theory to teacher education will probably not break the traditions of schooling if the connections to schooling decline. This may hinder the good intentions that created the Finnish teacher education system, which is without a doubt excellent in many ways.

6.2. Limitations and future research

We have introduced several empirical studies which indicate that the decontextualisation thesis from the 1990s is still valid, and that Finnish teacher education equipped with a research-based agenda is not immune to the challenge that decontextualisation poses. With the analysis of the studies comprising our data, we can show that there are explicit signs of decontextualisation.

However, it is not possible to formulate a more specific analysis regarding individual courses or teacher education programmes. Our data only offer glimpses into teacher education and the viewpoints of student teachers and in-service teachers. The data do not include the perspectives of university-

based teacher educators or the mentoring teachers at training schools, for example. Our aim has not been to offer an all-encompassing view, and while our intention has not been to only seek evidence in support of our thesis, we may also have unintentionally shown a preference for it. Thus, we have tried to be cautious in our analysis and have chosen to generally conclude that it is conceivable to argue that decontextualisation is a relevant challenge for Finnish teacher education. We hope our considerations give rise to counter-arguments and further discussion. In order to conduct a more nuanced analysis, further studies would be needed. Just a few research avenues for the future could include studies concerning the orientation of educational research, the scope of professorships in teacher education institutes, and a wider analysis of teacher education curricula.

We are aware that the remedy for decontextualisation does not lie in merely adding extra courses on the history of education to the teacher education syllabus, or appointing a few professors in the sociology of education. If overly emphasised, such efforts could just as easily intensify decontextualisation and produce views that do not aid understanding of the complexity of education in the daily work of teachers. As Ball (2020) argues, studies such as the sociology of education may reinforce overly romanticised and naïve redemptive views, as well as have difficulties when it comes to distancing themselves from power relations and discursive possibilities to provide new research-related and practical avenues. Despite these reservations, we consider it important, yet challenging, to show future teachers that studies concerning historical, sociological and cultural issues in education are meaningful for making sense of contextual matters relating to pedagogy and schooling in real-life situations.



When the foundations of education (Barrett & Hordern, 2021) or school pedagogy (Kansanen, 1993) meet practical teaching and learning situations, there is a possibility that theoretical issues and practical considerations can merge. It may also help to recognise ideological tendencies in pressing and practical topics such as digitalisation, and to notice that similar ‘novel’ and ‘urgent’ issues have occurred earlier in the history of education.

We suggest that decontextualisation is not a process or phenomenon that is characteristic of Finnish teacher education alone, but of other teacher education systems and various professions as well. Bearing this in mind, we encourage empirical and theoretical analyses that cover various contexts. We believe it would be fruitful to compare the challenges faced by teacher education systems reaching from practice towards theoretical understanding, compared to those systems which aim to reach from theory towards the mastery of practical situations.

6.3. Conclusion

Internationally, Finnish teacher education is in an excellent position and the professional status of schoolteachers is strong. In this study, we aimed to offer insights into making an excellent system even better, and argued that Finnish teacher education with master- level degrees and university-based training schools is not being used to its full effectiveness. Our argument is justified by several studies that point to one of the challenges of academic teacher education – decontextualisation.

As an unintended consequence of the academisation of Finnish teacher education, the socio-historically formed institutional context of teaching and learning in school has narrowed, if not vanished, and the ties between educational

theory and practical schooling have loosened. This may hinder the good intentions that created the Finnish teacher education system and produce a discourse that unreflectively silences the complexity of education. In order to understand, not to mention change them, schooling and pedagogy have to be contextualised.

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