



FEATURE

Towards more positive conceptions and sustainability for teacher profession in Finland

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Towards more positive conceptions and sustainability for teacher profession in Finland

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An introduction

In Finland, the current societal discourse surrounding teaching and the teaching profession includes concerns such as teacher shortages and attrition. The profession is often framed in a relatively negative light, which makes it crucial to explore solutions and improvements in both teacher education and career support. As one potential solution, this paper discusses how Lesson Study and mentoring can be used to support future teachers' career engagement.

In our own educational research, we have examined the use of Lesson Study (LS) to strengthen student teachers' self-efficacy, as well as the application of strengths-based mentoring during teacher induction in Finland. LS is an internationally recognized and widely used method in teacher education and in-service teacher training and is based on an interactive and cyclical development process that focuses on the development of pupils' competences. Our findings highlight the importance of supporting teachers' positive perceptions of their profession during both the pre-service and in-service phases. We are particularly interested in whether a broader approach to positive guidance could influence teachers' career commitment and professional development. Additionally, we consider whether LS and mentoring could enhance the transferability of key teacher competencies and skills from teacher education into professional practice.

In this paper, we approach the topic through two dimensions of dialogue. First, we explore the potential positive effects of LS and mentoring during both the pre-service and in-service phases. Second, we envision how teacher education and induction could be further developed by integrating and implementing these two methods. We introduce this implementation as a *Collaborative Professional Development Model* later on in this dialogue paper.

Keywords: teacher training, teacher induction, lesson study, mentoring, sustainable teacher profession

Challenges in the Finnish field of education

In Finland, teacher education programs within the field of educational sciences continue to attract thousands of applicants annually. The sustained popularity of teacher education has traditionally been attributed to its capacity to integrate academic scholarship with practice-oriented training. In recent

years, however, the number of applicants has demonstrated a marked decline, which may be interpreted as reflecting increasingly prevalent negative perceptions of the teaching profession. The previous academic performance of those applying to teacher education has also declined compared to the average university student, which partly reflects the decreased attractiveness of the field (see Vilppu et al., 2022).

Contemporary public discussion has drawn attention to a range of structural and professional challenges associated with teaching, including inadequate remuneration, escalating work demands, expanding workloads, and insufficient resources. In addition, the most recent PISA 2022 results, together with the public debate they have generated, may further contribute to growing concerns regarding the capacity of teachers to effectively exercise professional agency within their work. From the perspective of student teachers, there exists a significant gap between teacher education and the realities of professional practice, which currently fails to address the challenges and structural issues associated with the teaching profession.

In recent years, the role of the teaching profession has become increasingly unpredictable due to various national and global threats and crisis situations. The emergence of local threats, the rise in violence, and overlapping global crises inevitably permeate everyday school life (Lerkkanen et al., 2025). Consequently, the complexity of the teaching profession has become difficult to manage, and the future of the profession increasingly unpredictable, placing teacher resilience under strain.

At present, teacher in-service training in Finland is fragmented and resource-dependent (Leskisenoja et al., 2019). The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) results show that, compared to other countries, Finland has a low take-up of professional development methods that respond to teachers' own development needs by providing direct ideas and stimuli for their own classrooms. For example, peer observation, which is the most common method of professional competence development internationally, is the least used in Finland.

There is a need for new forms of in-service training for teachers in Finland. Despite the growing need to develop their professional skills, Finnish teachers have few resources for in-service training, as their extra-curricular activities and the diverse needs of their pupils put a strain on their ability to cope (Taajamo and Puhakka, 2019). In addition, off-the-job training does not provide sufficient support for the transfer of skills into practice. The transfer effect is considered most effective if the training is long-lasting, expertise-rich, belief-challenging, interactive, and engages teachers in pupils' learning processes. In addition, training should be supported by school leadership (Timperley et al., 2007). Teachers' professional development in the future should be tailored to their own development needs and more closely linked to the context of their own work (Taajamo and Puhakka, 2019).

Supporting teacher professional development through Lesson Study and mentoring

In our own research, we have found Lesson Study and mentoring to be effective methods for developing and supporting teacher professionalism. Therefore, we are interested in further investigating the potential of these methods to enhance teacher development on a broader scale.

The LS development process always takes place in the context of the teacher's own work, such as in the classroom. According to Fernandez and Yoshida (2004), the LS cycle traditionally includes the stages of planning, teaching and observing the study lesson, reflective discussion, revising the study lesson and re-teaching the study lesson. The LS method is a development process that is approached through research. The aim of the development process is not only to develop knowledge but also to produce new knowledge to support teaching and learning (Fujii, 2014). The method provides an interactive and expert environment to develop content knowledge, pedagogy (Lewis et al., 2019) and tools to support pupils' individual skills or learning difficulties (Ylonen and Norwich, 2012). Although the use of the Lesson Study method in developing teachers' professional skills has generally been met with positive experiences, there has also been criticism of the method's effectiveness in improving student learning. For example, in the intervention research implemented by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), there was no evidence that using LS could improve student learning in maths and reading (Murphy, 2017).

In addition to lesson study, our focus also extends to mentoring, which is understood as a collaborative and developmental process whereby a more experienced individual supports the growth and learning of a less experienced peer through guidance, reflection, and shared expertise. The goal of mentoring is usually to increase competence and success in work or studies. The concept of mentoring can be understood differently depending on the culture and context, but traditionally a mentoring relationship is formed between two individuals, one of whom has more expertise than the other and the mentoring relationship is built on mutual discussion and interaction. In the Finnish teaching context, peer group mentoring has also been widely used and studied. In its various forms, mentoring is commonly used worldwide in supporting new teachers. (e.g. Heikkinen, Jokinen and Tynjälä, 2012; Olsen, Bjerkholt and Heikkinen, 2020; Tonna, Bjerkholt and Holland, 2017).

Although LS and mentoring differ in their structure and implementation, they also share several key similarities. Both mentoring and LS share the common aim of teachers' professional development by collegial support and guidance. Both approaches also emphasize a cooperative relationship between colleagues. LS and mentoring are also linked by the historical premise of a more hierarchical mentoring relationship. However, in current thinking, both approaches are associated more with a peer and collegial approach. New knowledge is constructed collaboratively, and all participants in the process can learn something new, even if one person has more experience or knowledge about teaching and learning. This collegial and collaborative approach is exactly what we hope to see more widely utilized in teacher education and professional development.

Both methods are also characterized by a long duration, which generally increases the effectiveness of interventions. In contrast, both current teacher education and in-service teacher training usually consist mainly of short-term interventions. We recognize this as a challenge and encourage all stakeholders in the field to consider how teacher education and in-service training could be developed towards more sustained and long-term approaches.

According to research both mentoring and LS can support work engagement and enhance professional skills and competencies. Both methods have been found to be meaningful and integrative ways to develop the dimensions of teacher competence because of their interactive nature.

In our own research we have studied teachers' self-efficacy within the LS and character strengths combined with mentoring. Both self-efficacy and teachers' own character strengths are connected to teachers' professional development. Character strengths, such as perseverance, curiosity, and empathy can play a key role in teacher development. Strengths-based teacher development often benefits pupils as well. We argue that reinforcing positive perspectives contributes to enhanced teacher commitment and fosters the development of more positive professional self-concept. From a broader perspective, LS and mentoring can both support the features of teachers' well-being at work (see Seljo, 2024; Yrjänheikki, 2025). In the following section, we discuss how these methods can be combined and further developed into a concept that supports the professional sustainability of both student teachers and in-service teachers.

Towards positive conceptions and sustainability

What should be aimed for in teacher education and in-service training, especially during the induction phase, to best support teachers in professional engagement and development? First of all, we think that there should be an aim for a change in our thinking and beliefs. A change in thinking and beliefs leads to changes in actions, and changes in actions ultimately lead to a different operational culture. We need to start thinking about teaching and the teaching profession in a new way, which also requires new approaches to teacher education and in-service training. We propose that teacher education, in-service training, and broader societal discourse on teaching should be more strongly grounded in positive perspectives. This may include, for example, highlighting the resources within the teaching profession, recognizing the strengths of student teachers, or supporting the self-efficacy of in-service teachers. Yet, recognizing and emphasizing positive, strength-based or encouraging perspectives does not imply denying or downplaying the existence of problems or challenges. Instead, recognizing resources, strengths, skills, and competence may help us to tackle those challenges.

In addition to a shift in thinking, there is a need for practical frameworks. We need to find structures that support teacher learning during their studies, at the beginning of their careers, and also at later career stages. Such new structures can only be implemented if they are not very expensive or complicated, as the lack of funding is one of the crucial challenges in in-service teacher training. We aim to develop an intervention model that can be effectively applied throughout the various stages of a teacher's professional journey and effectively supports teachers' commitment to their profession and work. Based

on the examination of LS, mentoring, and other forms of professional guidance and support, it appears that at least the following criteria must be met for an intervention to be effective.

A long-term horizon: Sufficient duration is a prerequisite for the effectiveness of the intervention. By duration, we mean at least several months, or even years.

Concreteness: The intervention is directly related to the teacher's work or is a part of it. Guidance or training is not a separate event from the teachers' work. The focus of teachers' work and professional growth is pupils' learning. Professional growth is seen as the capacity to connect practical knowledge to theoretical phenomena related pupils' learning. Concreteness should also be reflected in the way meta-level issues are handled, such as limiting working hours or dealing with difficult matters.

Need-based: The professional goals of the guidance or support are not determined by the principal or any other higher authority, but by the participants themselves. Students' or teachers' own development areas naturally emerge when the guidance or support takes place in a real work environment. However, a scientific approach is also part of the process once the practical needs have been determined.

Peer-based: Guidance and support are not based on a hierarchical setup. The trainer and the participant possess different amounts of professional expertise and experience, but both are equally important creators of new knowledge and thinking. Pre-service teachers may, for example, have current theoretical insights from their academic training, whereas in-service teachers may contribute practical expertise based on their professional experience. During the intervention, new knowledge is collaboratively built in confidential interaction, where the trainer is also regarded as a learner. Peer-based learning also facilitates peer observation, a valuable yet often underutilized practice in in-service teacher training.

Positivity: Guidance and support focus on identifying and supporting the student's or teacher's skills, abilities and strengths. This reinforces the development of a positive professional self-perception. A positive approach increases motivation and engagement with the profession when the teacher may begin to see more possibilities rather than challenges in their future career. Moreover, fostering positivity contributes to a culture of appreciation and psychological safety within educational communities. When teachers feel seen and valued for their strengths and competencies, they are more likely to take the initiative, collaborate openly, and invest in their own development.

Supportive school management: Positivity can be considered also from the school management point of view. The genuine interest and positive attitudes of school leaders towards the professional development of teachers can inspire them to develop their own skills. Professional development is often seen as a question of value; what does our school or municipality value in the decisions regarding financial resources?

As one may notice, these criteria are often met in the LS method, various forms of mentoring, and several other forms of guidance. However, the challenge, at least in the Finnish context, is often the lack of financial and time resources. Many training programmes and interventions, even the successful ones, are often forgotten once the funding ends. Also, we often assume that professional learning is

only effective and useful when it involves a so-called external educator. Instead, we rarely take advantage of sharing knowledge, skills, and experience collegially. The use of existing expertise between colleagues for educational purposes is still an interesting path to discover in Finland.

From these premises, we have considered what kind of sustainable and more positive model could be implemented in teacher education and in-service training in the future. We will present our ideas for the development of such a model in Figure 1 and explain this further.

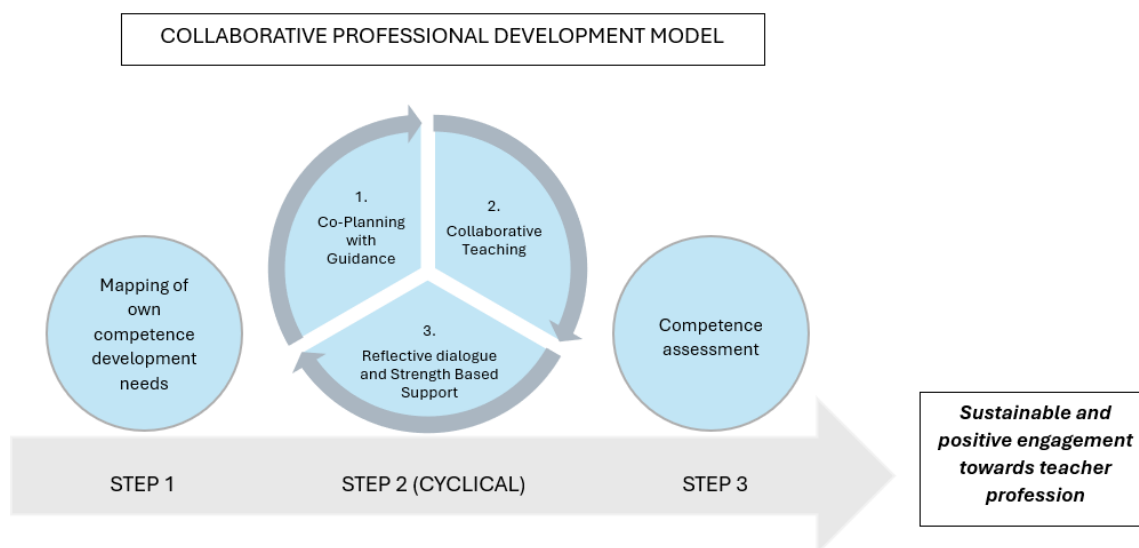


Figure 1: Collaborative Professional Development Model

This Collaborative Professional Development Model presents a sustainable and collegial approach to supporting student teachers in the later phases of the studies and early- or mid-career teachers through collaboration with a more experienced trainer-teacher from the same work community. For the model to be successfully implemented, the teacher in training should have some experience gained through teaching practice. Therefore, this model is best suited for application closer to the induction phase.

Our suggested model is not based on the current Finnish teacher education system. Instead, we have chosen to approach teachers' professional development from a broader perspective, acknowledging that the existing system may also evolve. In particular, the long-term nature of the model contrasts with many current practices that rely on short-term teaching practicums. The model emphasizes shared responsibility, reflective practice, and strength-based growth supporting long-term, peer-based professional development embedded in everyday teaching practice.

Before starting the three-phased cyclic development process the teacher is encouraged to identify their own development needs. These needs may be identified, for example, through questionnaires or interviews conducted both during pre-service and in-service phases. Based on teachers' own needs, professional development goals are formed, which become the focus of the three-phased long-term cyclic process.

Phase 1: co-planning with guidance

The trainer-teacher and the teacher collaboratively plan lessons. The teacher holds primary responsibility for the planning, while the trainer-teacher provides guidance and support. This phase encourages pedagogical dialogue and shared reflection, helping the teacher build confidence and clarity in their instructional choices.

Phase 2: collaborative teaching

Teaching is carried out together in a collegial manner. Both the teacher and the trainer-teacher share responsibility for instruction and classroom dynamics. This phase promotes mutual learning and professional trust, allowing real-time collaboration and modelling of effective practices and pedagogical decisions.

Phase 3: reflective dialogue and strength-based support

After teaching, the trainer-teacher leads a reflective discussion focused on the teacher's strengths, self-efficacy, and professional development. The role of the teacher educator is to describe their observations of the teacher's strengths and development during planning and teaching, and to challenge the teacher to recognize their own expertise. The frequency of this reflective phase adapts to the teacher's career stage:

- During teacher education: after each lesson or lesson sequence
- Early career: daily or weekly
- Later career: monthly

This model can be implemented at different stages of a teacher's career. As a result, its applications may look different in teacher education compared to professional practice. For instance, pupil assessment has been identified as an area where teachers in the induction phase often need support and guidance, and therefore the assessment responsibility may vary by career stage:

- During teacher education: Trainer-teacher holds primary responsibility
- Early Career: Assessment is shared between teacher and trainer-teacher
- Later Career: Teacher holds responsibility; trainer-teacher consults as needed

Another example is the need for work-life skills, which may also manifest differently depending on the phase of the teacher's career. These needs may involve topics such as workload management, self-management and emotional demands.

The three-phase cycle is repeated for a predetermined period, which must be sufficiently long to support effective professional growth. Once the cyclic development process has been carried out, the last step is the teacher's self-assessment. This reflection allows the teacher to evaluate their progress toward the goals set at the beginning of the process, recognize areas of growth, and identify new directions for continued development.

In this Collaborative Professional Development Model we present, the teacher educator is an experienced professional who is motivated to support the professional development of their own work

community. The educator's role is seen as more collegial and supportive in relation to the trainee, rather than a hierarchical trainer-trainee relationship. The model is grounded in the notion that the teacher educator, while supporting others, simultaneously engages in continuous learning and the ongoing development of their own pedagogical practice. This role, however, is demanding and requires a solid understanding of the model and its principles. Therefore, it is essential that the teacher educator is well-prepared and familiar with the approach before beginning the training process. In addition to a deep understanding of teaching practices, the educator must also possess at least a basic knowledge of teacher professional development and strength-based thinking.

One of the key advantages of the model is that it enhances pupils' support by ensuring that two professionals are available in the classroom. This not only benefits the teacher's development but also creates a more responsive and supportive learning environment for pupils. The model of two teachers can be especially beneficial in classrooms with a high need for support. Shared responsibility for teaching also ensures that pupils' learning remains at the center of professional development, rather than focusing solely on the teacher's individual actions.

We propose that professional development can have a broader impact on the entire work community, particularly when a professional culture encourages the sharing of learning and expertise. The school leadership has an important role in cultivating a school culture that values collaboration, continuous learning, and teacher well-being. It is also their responsibility to ensure the implementation of the model by allocating sufficient time and funding.

Conclusion

We consider it important to introduce more positive and sustainable approaches into education and teacher training to support the attractiveness of the profession and improve teacher retention. At the same time, we are aware of the challenges—particularly those related to the funding of in-service training. That is why we have chosen to propose a relatively simple and practical solution.

In this paper, we have explored a model grounded in the methods of LS and mentoring. Both approaches have been shown to enhance teacher self-efficacy, competence, and well-being. In our model, a teacher educator collaborates with a student teacher or an in-service teacher to co-plan and implement lessons, followed by feedback discussions that focus on strengths. The model emphasizes collaborative responsibility, reflective learning, and a strengths-based approach to foster sustained, peer-supported professional growth that is embedded in everyday teaching practice.

Our proposed approach offers promising support for both students and in-service teachers, promoting professional sustainability and long-term engagement in today's increasingly complex educational environment. While this dialogue paper is grounded in the Finnish context, we contend that the proposed approach may offer valuable insights for teacher educators and practitioners throughout the Nordic region.

Our discussion is grounded in previous research as well as our own reflections, underscoring the importance of conducting further studies to explore this topic in greater depth. It is essential to initiate

practice-based research to pilot and refine the model. We sincerely hope that the dialogue and potential development of the model will expand across the Nordic region, fostering broader collaboration and shared understanding among teacher educators and professionals.

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