Case Study - Finland

Finland - Professional Development

Professional development in Finland is presently in a state of flux. As Finland has a decentralised education system, municipalities (local authorities, or districts) are responsible for the professional development of teachers (as well as their initial induction) and ‘are required to fund three days annually of mandatory professional development or planning for each teacher’ (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018, unpaged).

The OECD’s 2013 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) nevertheless found that 28% of Finnish teachers reported ‘being not at all or only somewhat prepared for teaching the content of their subjects, while more than one-third of teachers report being not at all or somewhat prepared to teach their subjects’ pedagogy (36%) or practical components (34%), as compared with the average of 7%, 11% and 11%, respectively in TALIS countries’ (OECD 2013a, p. 1). The same report showed that teachers in Finland participate at lower rates than the TALIS average in a range of professional-development activities. These include courses, workshops, conferences and seminars. They also are well behind the average in terms of their forming professional networks with other teachers and undertaking individual or collaborative research. TALIS also identified as weaknesses ‘a lack of pedagogical leadership [and] few personal study plans for teachers’ (European Commission 2017, p. 7).

Despite some misgivings about the validity of some of these findings (see Niemi 2015, p. 284), they have contributed to a perceived need for reform in this area by Finnish policy-makers, and so a new Teacher Education Development Programme was launched in 2016. The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture set out its plans and objectives:

The objective of the teacher education development programme is that a systematic and coherent structure will be adopted in teachers’ competence development during their careers. Competence management should be goal-oriented. Higher education and other educational institutions as well as early childhood education and care units will prepare competence development plans in collaboration with their staff. These plans will underpinned by strategic plans and evaluations of competence by education providers. (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture 2016, unpaged website)

These reforms are the responsibility of a new body, the Teacher Education Forum. No state-level evaluation has yet been made available concerning their enactment. However, Niemi (2015) has identified four cases which demonstrate how practice is shifting to reflect new ideas of best practice that achieve the following in line with the Ministry’s aims. These:

1. support the school community to cross boundaries towards multi-professional cooperation,
2. design an innovative school community using a design-based approach together with many partners,
3. connect pre-service and in-service research-based teacher education in science, technology and math (STEM) teaching, and
4. promote induction for new teachers. (Niemi 2015, p. 286)

Sabbaticals for employees in Finland, including teachers, are a statutory entitlement: ‘an employee has the right to take study leave for at most two years during a period of five years, if his or her full-time employment relationship with the same employer has lasted for at least one year in one or more periods’ (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2017, p. 3).

Finland - Teachers’ Career Pathways

Teachers in Finland do not have a structured career pathway. This is often attributed to the high bar to entry to the profession and the autonomy they enjoy once in post (see e.g. Center on International Education Benchmarking 2018b; Natale et al. 2013; Hargreaves et al. 2008). Teachers in Finland may aspire to and become school vice-principals and principals.
Finland - Leaders’ Career Pathways

Like most countries, Finland does not have a multi-level career structure for school principals (OECD 2013b, Table 7.A.2, p. 578). Principals instead are located within a single career stage accorded a single salary scale. Progress up this five-step scale (in schools with general education programmes) is determined by length of service and administered by the Municipality. The school principal is employed by and subordinate to the Municipality’s chief executive officer. Entry to the principalship has been controlled by qualifications since 1992: since 1999, ‘all principals in lower and upper secondary schools in Finland are required to hold a five-year master’s degree from a university, be qualified teachers, have sufficient teaching experience, have received a national educational leadership certificate provided by the National Board of Education or an equivalent 25 ECTS credits in educational leadership offered by the Faculties of Education at the universities’ (Uljens and Nyman 2013, p. 41).

School leadership more broadly is understood to include the following roles: school principals and vice principals; in vocational education: heads of department and training managers; in municipalities: directors of educational departments; directors of educational and cultural services; heads of general education divisions and development managers (Finnish Ministry of Education 2007). As in Estonia, it is likely that there is some movement across these roles that is understood and/or experienced as career progression: ‘a principal may become, for example, the director of the municipal education department, or move to some other higher position in municipal administration’ (Finnish Ministry of Education 2007, p. 36).