

Teacher Researcher Net – professional Reserve and Resource of Teacher Education at the University of Jyväskylä

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Abstract

The Teacher Researcher Net (TRN) consists of teachers working in different schools around Finland and partly abroad. The Teacher Researcher Net was founded in the beginning of 1994 at the Department of Teacher Education in the University of Jyväskylä. This Net works as a resource for developing teacher education, and a forum of collegial learning and empowerment. The range of the Network's research activities cover science teaching, village schools, pre-primary education, narrative research, assessment developing, mathematics teaching - especially "mathematics with an Hungarian approach", inclusive teaching, and last one Pedagogy of Joy (2007-2009). The Teacher Research Net has arranged Teacher Researcher Days (1994-1998), Teacher Researcher Summer Schools (since 1999) for post-graduates and in-service education for teachers in Finland and Estonia. Student teachers have also been able to include Teacher Researcher Courses in their advanced studies 1995. Publishing is the most essential part of the Net. The series *Journal of Teacher Researcher*, the discussion forum for students-, school-, and university teachers, was founded in 1995.

Background

"A scientifically educated teacher is most likely able to meet the challenges that the changing society and school are setting up. He/she owns such tools that do not become duller under new circumstances. With the help of his/her professional skills he is himself able to repair his old tools and to prepare new ones and to use them in a well-adapted manner (Viljanen 1985, 13)."

Formal Finnish Teacher Education for primary school teachers recently celebrated its 140th anniversary. Since primary school teacher education was established in 1863 there have been many stages in its development and the qualification requirements for teachers have changed many times, mostly due to changes in society and school organisation. Throughout its existence Finnish Teacher Education has been financed by the state government just as the school system has been managed by the municipal school government, closely monitored by the state. Whenever there have been changes and developments in the school system, this has resulted in increased bureaucracy for schools and teachers. This was especially the case in the 1970s, during and immediately after the

comprehensive school reform. Teachers felt that demands grew, but personal opportunities to develop their work became increasingly limited.

Twenty years after the comprehensive school reform the structures of the comprehensive school were in place and it was recognised to be the right time for internal school reform by teachers in schools and universities as well as in the school government. This reform could not be achieved by authorities outside of the school and with the power of the central school government breaking down, the responsibility for this reform was delegated to local authorities and schools where the curriculum, methods and assessment were concerned. This situation prompted teachers who wanted to develop their work to begin searching for opportunities to meet each other. It was within this context that Prof. Korpinen at the Department of Teacher Education in the University of Jyväskylä invited teachers to join the Teacher Researcher Net, a forum specifically intended for teachers who were willing to develop their work in a forum designated as a meeting place for teachers to support the development of schools.

The Teacher Researcher Net – a supportive Environment for Student Teachers

The goal of the Teacher Education is a teacher researcher who masters the methods needed in different circumstances, their applications and the measures required to achieve the changes desired. The Teacher Education consists of many branches of science that are combined to yield the appropriate knowledge needed in teacher's profession. It is possible for a student teacher to do action research on the different aspects of teacher's work together with a more experienced teacher. These research projects may employ also other teachers and postgraduate students. (Kohti opettajuutta 1993; Korpinen 1996a, 1996b).

The TRN was founded in 1994 to serve as a tool to share experiences between teachers and to encourage them to do research useful for teaching and learning (Korpinen 1994; Teacher Researcher Net/Tutkiva opettaja: <http://www.jyu.fi/okl/tuope>). The TRN is a professional reserve and resource of the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Jyväskylä. As a result of the TRN student teachers have been offered opportunities to do their teacher training studies and to write their theses by studying teacher researchers' schools and work. It has been possible to give a number of student teachers the extended field study model of teacher preparation. The department has built links with many public schools in Finland enabling continuous collaboration between the university and the work of teacher researchers. Indeed some of these schools can even be called university field research schools. Student teachers can freely choose the topic of their theses, and complete their practice in the school of a teacher who is a member of the TRN. In effect the student teachers integrate their theoretical pedagogical studies with practice in the TRN schools. This study model also offers students experience in collegial work, ongoing inquiry of teaching, and shared curriculum building. As a result the

students have more time to concentrate on supporting children's development, and to reflect on their own professional growth. We venture to call this research-based studying. One student teacher-researcher explains:

Throughout my studies the Teacher Researcher Net has been very important to me. I have had opportunities to meet teacher-researchers in a variety of situations, I have become acquainted with their own research and research based on their work and I also have been able to share my experiences on the pages of the Journal of Teacher Researcher. The atmosphere of the TRN during my studies has inspired me to inquire deeply into my own studies and action, as well as my growth as a village school teacher. With the help of these opportunities I have tried to develop my own studying and my personal study plan focussing on village school (Iso-Tryykäri 2000, 13; see www.jyu.fi/okl/tuope/).

Objectives of the Teacher Researcher Net

The TRN is a resource for the development of teacher education. It is a forum for pedagogical dialogue between teachers, student teachers, and teacher educators.

The objectives of the TRN are:

1. to develop teacher education to meet the demands society and the school system set for schools, i.e., to continuously develop teaching and the curriculum;
2. to create active, cooperative relationships between teacher researchers in different kinds of schools around the country;
3. to offer opportunities for student teachers to work in different environments at teacher researchers' schools (i.e., teaching practice and Master thesis studies);
4. to create an evaluation system between schools and academic teacher education;
5. to offer teacher researchers, student teachers and teacher educators an open forum for discussion (i.e., the Teacher Researcher Conference) and a channel for publication (i.e., the Journal of Teacher Researcher);
6. to enhance appreciation of teachers' work in our society;
7. to improve teachers' opportunities to develop their own work;
8. to support projects of teacher researchers and to develop teacher researchers to become a significant part of the educational paradigm in Finland, and
9. to offer teacher researchers opportunities for postgraduate studies at the university.

The main emphasis of the TRN is on the value of partnership between teacher educators in the university and teachers in schools. Teachers from schools need encouragement to share their ideas in scholarly forums. Teacher educators from academia need encouragement to engage in research and writing that is valued less than other research, given present forms of the current restrictions on academic publishing and research and their consequences. In addition, the TRN described above aims to support student teacher's knowledge of the theory and practise of learning.

Action in the Teacher Researcher Net

The TRN can be seen as a forum for the educational reform movement. The members are ordinary teachers (pre-school, primary, secondary, vocational, and university teachers), student teachers and teacher educators who develop their own work, especially the curriculum, by the means of action research and classroom studies. This kind of research helps to bridge the gap between theory and practise enabling teachers to build their own theory of practise with different dimensions: ethical, aesthetic and intellectual action. Important dimension is also interaction between individual and environment. (Lankshear & Knobel 2004, 11-18.)

The nature of the activities in TRN has gradually changed. Open conferences were organised between 1994 – 1998 and Summer Schools for graduate students have been arranged since 1999. The first teacher researcher conference of TRN (1994) in Jyväskylä introduced development activities closely connected with everyday school life. The presentations dealt with such topics as the Strategy of Action Research in a Teacher Researcher's Work (Prof. Ulla Suojanen), the Challenges of Language Learning and Teaching (Docent Sauli Takala) and the School as a Learning Centre (Prof. Paavo Malinen). The teacher researchers were divided into nine working groups with the themes: curriculum planning at school, language teaching and learning, science teaching and learning, the meeting of a novice and an expert in a teacher's work, development of student evaluation, drama in teaching, elementary instruction in years 1-2, computers in learning and teaching, and the challenges of special education. The teacher researchers gave introductory presentations dealing with these themes and they also discussed their own research and work experiences. In addition, the information specialist Ms. Anja Agander introduced the university library to the participants and the director, Erkki Kangasniemi EdD guided a tour in the Institute for Educational Research.

The following year (1995) focused on the same themes, but from slightly different perspectives. For example, there were presentations on the themes of Teacher as a Postgraduate Student (Prof. Kaarina Mäkinen), a Teacher-Researcher and Didactics (Prof. Erkki Lahdes), Cooperation between University and School: the Development of Science Teaching from Daycare to University (Prof. Tuula Asunta) and Contemporary Trends of Educational Science from the Viewpoint of a Teacher's Work (Prof. Sinikka Ojanen). The themes of the working groups followed those of the previous year but, also new themes of international cooperation and special questions of learning (e.g., qualitative learning, social conflicts and survival strategies) were included. The Finnish MP and member of the Committee for Education and Culture in the Parliament, Ms. Aino Suhola, brought a more social and cultural point of view with her presentation "From School to a Cultural and Activity Centre". Guided by Director Sauli Rask, the conference participants also had a chance to visit the new, modern setting of Kuokkala school.

The meeting of 1996 was organized in Savonlinna in conjunction with the Savonlinna Department of Teacher Education in the University of Joensuu. The general theme was Teacher Researcher and a number of foreign experts (Prof. Gary Knowles from the University of Michigan, Prof. Michael Eraut from the University of Sussex and Prof. Adra Cole from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) attended the summer conference.

In the summer of 1997 the conferences continued in Jyväskylä. This time the theme was *Becoming International – Naturally*, and the keynote speakers came from the USA and Sweden. Among the participants there were Estonian guests from the field of teaching and school administration and Swedish teacher students of Special Education from the University of Stockholm. The content of the programme became more didactic. Experts helped the participants to examine some special methods such as the Reggio Emilia movement (Lecturer Karin Wallin) and Cooperative Learning (Prof. Nancy Schniedewind). When familiarising themselves with cooperative learning, it was not enough for the participants to sit and listen but they had to concretely practice for several hours. The workshops introduced Finnish-Estonian cooperation research and development projects, Finnish-Swedish cooperation, EU projects in teacher researchers' school work and some international experiences of teacher students as well as the popular Reggio Emilia workshop.

In 1998 the action of the TRN focused on defending *small schools*. This involved the gathering of many accounts and stories of the life in small schools and enlisting the press and the media in direct action to publicise the threat that small schools faced. Many information and educating sessions were arranged for teachers, parents and municipal decision-makers. In Finland the 1990s was a period of economic recession resulting in severe cutbacks in education. Hundreds of country village schools were closed which in turn resulted in a serious fight on behalf of country schools.

The TRN produced many topical publications and many teacher students concentrated on village schools in their Master's thesis studies (Nykänen & Väkeväinen 1998; Hytönen & Rovasalo 1998; Viertola 1998; Peltonen 1998; Sairanen 2001; see www.jyu.fi/okl/tuope/). In addition, many articles written by experts were published in reports edited by Prof. Eira Korpinen: *The Many Faces of Village School*, (Kyläkoulun monet kasvot 1998a) and *A Developing Village School* (Kehittyvä kyläkoulu 1998b). Such active publication activity about a single theme would not have been possible without the financial support of Ms Aino Suhola MP. This theme has aroused public interest again later and Rajaseutuliitto (the Border district association), for example, financed an empirical survey in which the future of about 80 schools in the border municipalities was examined (Rajaseutu-lehti 2/2001; Korpinen 2001). Overall, this time period typically represents the approach of critical pedagogy.

Since the summer of 1999 the Teacher Researcher Summer Conference has been a *Summer School* mostly directed at postgraduate students. In the summer schools the postgraduate students have presented studies they have been working on and problems encountered

during the research process. At the same time, there has been a chance to get to know some other cultures; for example studying and teaching in American higher education was introduced by Prof. Heta-Maria Miller.

At the beginning of September 1999 *in-service education days* were organised at the Pedagogical University of Tallinn, Estonia. The earlier contacts of Estonian educators with the teacher researcher conferences must have been one reason why the Estonian school administration had contacted the Finnish Ministry of Education and requested that the TRN organises in-service education for Estonian teachers. This was to be done under the framework of the neighbouring regions' cooperation and was financed by the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Finnish Ministry of Education. Approximately 30 teacher researchers from Jyväskylä and other parts of Finland representing different levels of education from early childhood education to higher education participated in the training. Each teacher researcher gave a presentation and organised workshops in their areas of expertise for over 200 Estonian teachers from all over the country. The summaries of these presentations have been collected in a Finnish-Estonian publication *Searching for Teacher Researcherhood in Finland and in Estonia (Tutkivaa opettajuutta etsimässä Suomessa ja Virossa 2000)* edited by Eira Korpinen.

In August 2000 courses on *Mathematics using the Hungarian Approach* were launched on the network. Over a number of years, Hungarian teacher researchers Ágnes Kivovizcé, Márta Oravecz and Veronica Dobsné Bányai have acted as principal instructors. The courses have focused on mathematics pedagogy for 6-10 year-old children and the participants have arrived from all around Finland. The courses are intended for teachers' pre-service, in-service and postgraduate education. This cooperation has also given birth to research activity, postgraduate studies and also research cooperation with Hungarian scholars. The activity has continued without interruption until 2005 and it has been financed by CIMO (Centre for International Mobility; see www.jyu.fi/okl/tuope/).

In the Summer School of 2001, the teacher leader of the National Writing Project, Susan Haris taught the basics of academic writing to our teachers and introduced the American school system. Her method of teaching followed the principles of cooperative learning and many participants were grateful for the improvement in their English skills during the summer school. Among the course attendees there were also doctoral students from the United States and Africa. The summer school students who were to defend their doctoral theses the following autumn had a chance to participate in a rehearsal public defence of a doctoral thesis.

Between 2000-2003 the TRN network's activity has focused on international cooperation mentioned earlier. One example is the *EU/Canada Project Advancing Inclusionary Practices in Post-Secondary Education* with cooperation between Canada, Ireland, Spain and Finland. Its objective is to exchange expertise in alternative models of inclusion. (Husso & Heimovaara 2005)

Other international projects are the Science Summer School and Mathematics using the Hungarian Approach mentioned above. These projects have enabled Finnish participants to travel abroad and foreign partners to visit Finnish members of the TRN. (Korpinen 2005)

In autumn 2003, the TRN's activities concentrated on *140th Anniversary of Finnish Teacher Education* and our department here in Jyväskylä. In the summer one member of the network, Tarja Ihalainen M.Ed., made a field trip to central Europe and gathered material for further research. She followed the same route as Uno Cygnaeus (1810-1888) searching for examples and models for Finnish teacher education in the mid-19th century (Nurmi 1988). Ms. Ihalainen gave a presentation on her findings from the journey in the main celebration of the 140th anniversary. The field trip has been described in more detail in the *Journal of Teacher Researcher* (Korpinen & Ihalainen 2003).

The 140th jubilee celebration lasted for two days and included many lectures, artistic performances and numerous workshops of different didactical fields. One of the workshops was *Teacher as a Researcher and Developer of his/her Work* organised by the TRN. The participants were about 30 teachers from all over Finland who represented different levels of the educational system from primary school to university. A number of representatives from the National Board of Education took part in the workshop. Teacher researcher, Teija Vallandingham M.Ed. introduced the history, activities and publications of the TRN and acted as a chairperson during the lectures given by several other teacher researchers whose work history varied from that of a student teacher to a retired writing professional. Most of the speakers had already published their research work in the *Journal of Teacher Researcher* (Halmio1997; Pyykkö 2001; Pölkki 2001; see www.jyu.fi/okl/tuope/). To commemorate the 140th anniversary, the TRN published descriptions of different activities and everyday work taking place in the celebration of the Department of Teacher Education in Jyväskylä (Korpinen & Hyvärinen 2003).

Publication –A Form of Professional Development and a Way to Empowerment

The *Journal of Teacher Researcher* was founded in 1995. It provides a channel of publication for teacher researchers, student teachers, and teacher educators. Since its founding, about 40 reports have been published. During its second year (1995) the TRN considered the opening of a channel for the publication of the work of teacher researchers necessary. Teacher researchers are understood very broadly in this context, from student teachers to retired professors. The academic level of the publications is not the most important criterion; the intention is to demonstrate how interesting, important and contemporary the research themes are.

A wide range of studies have been published in the *Journal of Teacher Researcher*, varying from the student teacher's first seminar papers and Master's theses to Licentiate theses

and Doctoral dissertations and even senior researchers' work. The TRN has tried to include all of these different levels even in the smallest compilations, although traditionally they do not normally meet in academic publishing. With these publications it has been a conscious goal to establish a shared and equal platform for discussion for all, from novices to senior researchers.

The themes and functions of the publications have varied over the years. The first theme was "*Developing Science Teaching*" which, at the time, was also a focus area in the curriculum development both in teacher education and in schools. Some examples of this theme are publications by Bader, Sommerfeldt, Asunta & Nick 1995; Asunta & Hakkarainen 1996; Bader, Asunta & Nick 1997; Asunta & Hovila 2000a and 2000b; Asunta & Kalermo 1999 and Ahtee & Asunta 2000.

Another quite extensive theme has been *village schools*. This theme in particular was intended to publicise and defend the future and maintenance of such schools. The first publications were compilations edited by Prof. Korpinen (1996b, 1998a, 1998b). and following this a number of different studies were launched including a variety of different topics from the work of village school teachers (Nykänen & Väkeväinen 1998; Sairanen 2001b; Iso-Tryckäri 2000), and pupils of the village schools (Hytönen & Rovasalo 1998) to preschool pupils' development (Peltonen 1998; Puurunen 2001), and to the development of the whole school through action research (Viertola 1998). Finally, the surveys exploring particularly the future of the village schools in the Finnish border municipalities followed (see Rajaseutu -lehti 2/2001). Overall, the village school publications were aimed both at influencing and participating in civil discussions fighting for regional equality in education.

The *development of preschool education* is the third theme of current interest in educational politics addressed in the Journal of Teacher Researcher series. The first publication was the Licentiate thesis "*Preschool Pupils in a Village School*" (Esioppilaat kyläkoulussa) by Peltonen (1998) followed by an edited publication "*Preschool Education. Now!*" (Esiopetus. Nyt! by Korpinen 2000b). Other studies include "*A Preschooler in the Village School*" (Eskari kyläkoulussa by Puurunen 2001) and "*Self Images of Preschoolers and Early Years Pupils*" (Esi- ja alkuopetusikäisten minäkuvia by Jokiaho 2002; see www.jyu.fi/okl/tuope).

The *development of evaluation* is the fourth major theme opened for discussion in the journal. The publication *Always Current Evaluation* (Aina ajankohtainen arviointi) edited by Törmä (1998a) contains a varied collection of addresses about developing student assessment. Myllyniemi's (2000) research deals with teachers' self-evaluation and development of their own work in the context of early childhood education whereas Jokiaho's (2002) research introduces children's self-evaluation skills and self-image. Seikkula's (2000) published doctoral thesis examines social languages of the evaluation meetings from the perspectives of parents, teachers and students.

The voice of the teacher and the student teacher is heard most clearly in the published *biographies and autobiographies*. They include Meriläinen's (1996) autobiography of a student teacher, Halmio's (1997) biography of a teacher researcher, Puurula's (1997) and Törmä's (1998b) teacher autobiographies, Heikkilä's (1999), Iso-Tryckäri's (2000), Pölkki's (2001), Pyykkö's (2001) and Hyvärinen's (2002) student teacher autobiographies and Riitahuhta's (1999) dialogical biography of a teacher researcher. Lehtimäki and Oksanen (2003) describe the development of student teachers to tutors supporting pupils' self-esteem. (see www.jyu.fi/okl/tuope/).

Biographical and narrative methods were also applied in the research of special groups of teachers: bullied teachers (Lahti & Louhiranta 1999) and survivor children of the alcoholic families (teachers' data, Löytönen 2000). The *pedagogic-didactic viewpoint* of teaching is represented by the studies on reading in the early years (Heikkilä & Hippolin 1997), on the influences of the Reggio Emilia movement (Ahola & Rissanen 1999) and on physical education and role plays (Keskinen & Takala 1998) and by an edited publication dealing with dysphasia and dyslexia (Matikainen 1999).

Edited educational publications (Korpinen 2000a, 2000b), *anniversary volumes* (Korpinen & Puurula 1999; Korpinen & Ihalainen 2003; Korpinen & Hyvärinen 2003; Korpinen 2005) and *conference publications* (Ahtee & Asunta 2000) form a group of their own among the work published in the Journal of Teacher Researcher series. As a whole, the scope of the TRN publication themes has been extensive thanks to the writers varying from the student teachers to senior researchers.

The Financial Basis

In 2004 TRN is celebrated its 10th anniversary. How is it possible that it is still alive? When the net was founded, the idea was at first to establish an association for researching teachers. An association with accepted rules, annual payments and of course registration arrangements would have offered a more secure and a more permanent basis for action; however, having asked over 100 teachers what kind of connection they would like to have, we found that the clear answer was not association but a broader connection, a kind of a net organisation. The decision was made respecting the teachers' opinion and the outlined action started. However, this meant that there was no guaranteed money for action, and there has been just a very small group of unsalaried people responsible for the activities. All Finnish teachers and professors have given their lectures free of charge. Many student teachers have taken part in the TRN and supported its activities with their voluntary work. The authors of this article have been active in the TRN from the very beginning and are the founding members of the Journal of Teacher Researcher.

The TRN has occasionally received recognition for its action from many public communities. Financial support has been given by the Finnish Cultural Foundation (Suomen kulttuurirahasto) in 1995, the Finnish Academy (in 1996-97), the Development

Foundation of Municipal Affairs (Kunnallisalan kehittämissäätiö) in 1996, the Finnish Parliament (representative Aino Suhola) in 1997, Kauko Sorjonen's Foundation (in 2000), and CIMO between 2001-2005. The Ministry of Education, the National Board of Education, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have also supported the in-service education of teachers in the TRN. The University of Jyväskylä has provided the physical facilities for the TRN.

Conclusion and Future Prospects

Networking and equal cooperation-partnerships are important starting points to create a new definition of teachers' professionalism with teachers' work changing from action alone to action together. For an individual teacher the Net is a source of empowerment through which his/her professionalism grows and in which s/he can share it. (Hargreaves 2000; Day & Sachs 2004.) We can examine the meaning of networking in the light of the TRN's objectives introduced earlier. The development of the curriculum has been and still is a starting point and an umbrella concept which contains teachers' preservice and in-service education, research and development work, especially the action research approach which includes the idea of continuous development. The Net has built a bridge between the institution of teacher education and the teachers working in the field schools. The seminars, summer schools, workshops and alike have provided a platform to meet and discuss the current educational phenomena and to support the teachers' career and their academic educational goals.

The network has responded to the social challenges deriving from changes in the surrounding society by addressing issues such as the meaning of the village schools and the development of preschool education. At the same time when responding to the global challenges coming from society, schools' internal pedagogy has also been the focus of development in TRN, for example through following the development of evaluation, the Reggio Emilia approach, cooperative learning and Mathematics using the Hungarian Approach (Korpinen 2005).

Nor should we forget the benefits of the TRN for student teachers. The schools of teacher researchers in the field have provided a valuable context for learning to teach and to become socialised in the teaching profession with inquiry-oriented teacher education (Joensuu & Miettinen 2005). This activity has become concrete when integrating simultaneously the Master's thesis studies and teaching practices under the guidance of enthusiastic and qualified teacher researchers. After the student teachers' hard work, the TRN has offered a publishing arena for some interesting theses in order to make the student teachers' research visible and available for wider audiences outside of the university.

Networking among teachers is not enough. The nature of education differs from the hectic and short-term profit-seeking orientation of the markets since the fruits of education are not seen until dozens of years later. In addition to the professionals, education also needs

support from a larger cooperative network including parents, pupils, students, enterprises and civic organisations. This kind of trend has been widely accepted (see Hargreaves 2000; Hargreaves 2003; Tripp 2004, 190-214.) Different cooperation partners are needed to protect the resources of education. Equal interaction and collaboration between these different interest groups guarantee everyone equal participation in the construction of a democratic civil society. The role of education is to safeguard continuity, development, change and regeneration in the society. It is the aim of the TRN and the Journal of Teacher Researcher to actively strive towards these goals.

Evaluative Feedback from International Panel of Experts

The research activities of University of Jyväskylä were evaluated by an international panel of experts, and the Teacher Resereacher Net was part of the evaluation process, too (University of Jyväskylä, Evaluation of research activities 2000-2004, 2005). They assessed: "We admired the Department's strong collaborative arrangements with practitioners through the Teacher Researcher Network. This Network has succeeded in producing a range of publishing material, some of it authored by teachers". The international panel of experts see the teacher researcher network with social impact as strengths of the Department's research: "As well as its own publications, the Network generates considerable and wider publicity for the Department and its research. The Department should consider building on this success in a strategic and coherent manner." They gave this recommendation: "The Department should build on the successful example of the Teacher Researcher Network, in order to improve further its wider social impact".

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