Teachers’ Perceptions of Immigrant Students’ Preparatory Teaching and Experiences of Cooperation in Basic Education in Finland

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Abstract—The Finnish school system provides immigrant children with preparatory teaching before they attend basic education. The teachers teaching these teaching groups are dealing with a heterogeneous group of pupils, which requires them special interaction and cooperation skills in order to make the everyday schooling work. How do these teachers perceive their work and cooperation? This was asked in this phenomenographic study, in which seven Finnish teachers of preparatory teaching kept diaries and were interviewed. Based on the results, cooperation seemed necessary and beneficial for the everyday practice at school but especially for the students’ holistic development and integration in the Finnish society. However, the level and availability of cooperation varied between teachers, places, and pupil groups based on which an illustration of the cooperation types in preparatory teaching was formed. The study also provided hands-on information about the work of this special group of teachers that is relevant to all working in preparatory teaching or with immigrant children.

Index Terms—cooperation, preparatory teaching, immigrant, integration, socialization, teachers, support.

I. INTRODUCTION

Teachers face many changes in their work along with the changes in society. This article discusses two changes: First, teachers must increasingly work in collaboration with changing partners. Collaborative networks are being created within the school and with parents and various societal quarters. The obligation of collaboration is written in the law on basic education (628/1998) and the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education compiled by the Finnish National Board of Education. Second, increasing immigration has set new pressures for developing teachers’ work. Finnish teachers have pupils from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Actually, within the last ten years, the number of pupils with Finnish as-Second-Language has doubled [1].

Why does immigration influence teachers’ work in Finland so much? One of the reasons is that “a young immigrant of compulsory school age (aged 7–17) permanently residing in Finland has the right to the same basic education as Finns. - - Immigrants may mean refugees, migrants, remigrants and other foreigners and, in some cases, asylum seekers as well. - - The law dictates that local authorities are obliged to organise basic education free of charge for school aged children living within their respective areas. In addition to instruction, other school services, including learning materials, daily meals and school health care, are provided free of charge. Pupils of immigrant origin have equal access to these services.” [2]

As the school readiness or skills in immigrnt children can vary considerably, some Finnish municipalities and education authorities offer preparatory teaching. The other option is to have special support in integrated teaching if preparatory teaching is not arranged in the area the immigrant child resides. The purpose of preparatory teaching is to help the child to settle in Finland and promote his or her Finnish language skills but also support the mastery of the child’s native language and culture, and make transfer to basic education possible [2]. In 2010, about 2,100 immigrant children attended to preparatory teaching in Finland [1]. The number has been steadily growing, along with the number of immigrants coming to Finland (which has risen from the 1990s’ 0.5 % into 4.9 % in 2012) [3]. Thus, teachers providing preparatory teaching also need to collaborate with various contacts and quarters. These two elements of teachers’ work, collaboration and immigration, intertwine in the work of teachers in preparatory teaching.

Next, we will introduce the main theoretical concepts of this study: immigration and compulsory school in Finland, and the role and manifestation of collaboration in teachers’ work.

A. Immigrants’ integration and school paths in Finland

Socialization in the new country is always an individual experience varying from a shock to an easy adaptation although refugees are likely to experience greater trauma than for example voluntary immigrants [4]. Likewise, according to Ogbu and Simons, voluntary immigrant minorities are not like not experience long-lasting school performance difficulty and long-lasting cultural and language problems while for example
refugees tend to learn only as much of the culture and language in their new country as necessary to achieve their temporary goals [5].

All these various backgrounds and reasons for coming to the new country influence the way the immigrants adjust and can function. Already parents’ social statuses can have an influence although it is not always that straightforward one [6] [7]. Of course, the immigrant policies, attitudes, and legislation greatly affect their socialization and integration in the culture, too, or as Gordon pointed out in her study of immigrants and education in the USA: “Lack of knowledge of other cultures, including their immigrants’ experience, fuels disrespect and assumes people of other origins do not have a history worth honoring” [8, p. 288].

The strategies of socialization can be divided according to how the person takes the new society and mainstream population and maintains his or her own cultural identity [9] [10] [11]: marginalization, separation, assimilation, and integration. Of these four, the goal of the Finnish immigration policy is integration referring to the balance between one’s own culture and the culture in the new country [11]. Berry’s categorization has been criticized for its orientation to the contact with the new culture being nothing but a question of one’s cultural identity and willingness to create social relationships with the mainstream population [12].

There are other ways of defining the nature and aptitudes of minorities. For example, Ogbu [13] [see also 5] divided minorities into autonomous, voluntary or immigrant, and involuntary or nonimmigrant minorities. The idea of the categorization is that various groups should be treated according to their needs, also when it comes to education of minority groups. Most importantly, Ogbu’s studies showed that in school performance between minority- and dominant-group students, the differences were caused by the treatment of minority groups in society at large and in school.

In Finland, immigrants’ integration process is commonly referred to with the concept of “domiciling” which actually comes to the law (1386/2010). Especially, the integration and participation in two cultures of school-age children can be supported via teaching of the target language and the child’s native language [14]. Education and integration encounter in the immigrant students’ school paths [15] [16]. Preparatory teaching is supposed to enhance immigrant children’s socialization because it aims at promoting students’ skills they need for studying at early or basic education. Furthermore, preparatory teaching enhances the development in the Finnish language [2] – and further on, the possibility to become equal members of the Finnish society [see also 17].

The experiences or perceptions of teachers who teach only immigrant children have not been much studied in Finland. Children’s study paths [18], language learning [19], or everyday life [20] in preparatory teaching are somewhat studied. Teachers’ work in the multicultural context has been the target of research mostly in classrooms with Finnish and immigrant students [21] [22].

B. Collaboration as a part of teachers’ work

Traditionally, teachers have worked in their classrooms alone [23] but the change toward more collaborative work methods started in the middle of the 1980s when education became more diversified [24] [25]. Today, inclusive education necessitates collaboration and teachers’ cooperation [26] [27]. Multiprofessional cooperation is also regarded as a means of renewing and developing education [24] [25].

The nature of teachers’ cooperation can be dissected through Hargreave’s definition of teacher cultures [28]. Individualistic teacher culture considers the teacher as a loner who does not use collaborative methods in his or her work. In an artificial cooperation culture, teachers follow the obligation to cooperate, given by the management. Instead, if cooperation is realized in disintegrated teams based on for example school subjects, balkanization describes it. In the collaborative teacher culture, teachers are willing to collaborate also in unforeseeable situations. The fifth form of collaboration is a moving mosaic in which teachers collaborate when necessary in changing compositions [28] [29].

In this study, cooperation was defined as working together and being in contact with various partners. One of the inside-school cooperation methods is collegiality. Little distinguishes various levels of collegial cooperation among teachers in relation to autonomous work and mutual dependency [30]. Superficial collegiality occurs at the level of colloquial ideas sharing and helping a colleague when needed. Collegial sharing is more regular cooperation (e.g., sharing of teaching materials). In seamless collaborative collegiality, interaction is profound and various forms of cooperation is applied. Partners find their cooperation enriching [29] [30] [31].

Another cooperation methods that can be applied inside the school are team work [29] [32] and co-teaching [33] [34] [35]. Creese divides teachers’ cooperation methods according to whether the cooperation supports a teacher’s work, whether it is committed collaborative working, whether it involves only little cooperation, and whether teaching is focused on the whole group of pupils or only a part of the group [36].

Teachers have to cooperate also with partners outside school. One of the most important partner group is naturally the parents. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s study showed that parents’ sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school positively influences children’s learning and school performance [37]. According to Epstein and Dauber, when teachers make parent involvement part of their regular teaching practice, parents increase their interactions with children and feel more positive about their changes of helping their children and about teachers, too. The best outcome is, naturally, that students do better at school, improve their attitudes and achievement [38] [see also 39]. This concerns also immigrant children and their education [40]. Rios agrees that the school, home, and the community must collaborate in order to support the pupil [41]. Immigration, foreign cultures,
II. METHOD

The purpose of this research was to study how teachers in preparatory teaching perceive cooperation within their current work units and how these teachers perceive their role in their collaborative networks.

This was a qualitative study. The methods were selected based on the idea of phenomenography and research on people’s perceptions [48]. This was considered a suitable research approach because teachers’ descriptions of cooperation could be seen as their current opinions on the issue. The purpose of this study was not to find generalizable findings, but to understand the teachers’ experiences.

The data were collected in the spring 2012 among seven teachers working in Finnish schools providing preparatory teaching. The data comprised teacher diaries about cooperation and theme interviews. Five of the teachers worked at elementary schools and one at middle school, and one taught a group consisting of both elementary and middle school-age immigrant pupils.

Two specific methods were selected to obtain teachers’ perceptions according to the principles of phenomenography [48]. The first set of data was collected in the form of diaries. Teachers were asked to keep diaries for two weeks. During this period, they were asked to mark with whom and how they cooperated, what was the reason for cooperation, and how they perceived the cooperation contact.

The diary data were complemented by interviews. This was considered necessary to specify and expand the researcher’s understanding about the teachers’ perceptions written in diaries. The semi-structured theme interviews further discussed teachers’ perceptions of cooperation. In this way, the two sets of data complemented each other and formed an entity.

The teachers were given instructions of how to keep the diaries. The instructions were brief asking them to describe cooperation at their work daily. A definition of cooperation was given: “working together with and various contacts related to various organs and partners in your work”. Some specific questions were also given to help writing, such as “With whom did you cooperate today? When? How (e.g., by telephone, email, meeting)?” Also teachers were asked to describe their own experiences of the cooperation (“How did you perceive the cooperation?: How it should be developed?: etc.)

The theme interviews focused on the teacher’s description of teachers’ work in preparatory teaching and perceptions of cooperation, its nature, sufficiency, challenges, benefits, and future. They were also asked to talk about issues related to their work and cooperation that were not possibly asked or discussed within the predetermined themes.

The data were analyzed according to the principles of phenomenography [49] [50]. The analyses started from creating a general picture of the research theme based on the data and proceeded into grouping of entities and finally to categorizations. Teachers’ perceptions were divided into main categories describing the teacher’s job description, the present situation of cooperation, the teacher’s role, and the future of cooperation. These main categories were further divided into subcategories. This article is focused on the results of two main categories: the present cooperation and the teacher’s role in it.

When analyzing the reliability of the study, the combination of two methods was regarded beneficial [51]. Diaries helped analyzing the interviews, and the data complemented each other. Also the two sets of data assured of the participants’ openness: they talked about their genuine experiences and reflected upon their willingness of and actual cooperation openly. Data excerpts are included in the results section to support the researchers’ interpretations and to provide an idea of how the participants talked about their work.

III. RESULTS

A. Teachers’ perceptions of cooperation in preparatory teaching

Participants of this research reported that cooperation was a salient and recurrent part of their work. They realized that the purpose of their work is to teach the Finnish language and enhance pupils’ integration in the Finnish society and school. The holistic nature of their work as teachers in preparatory teaching was also perceived as the reason for the amplitude of cooperation contacts. Teachers named in their diaries and interviews altogether 67 various partners. Some of the partners may refer to a same instance but regardless of the interpretation, they confirmed the multiple contacts teachers have to cooperate with in preparatory teaching. Likewise, it is possible that the number of partners can vary, for example, by
the time of the year, teacher, immigrant groups, or place.

Roughly, the partners can be divided into two groups: cooperation inside the school and with outsiders. According to the data, teachers collaborate considerably with the teaching and assisting staff at school. Outsiders refer to contacts related to a pupil, the pupil’s family, and support network, organs related to immigrants’ integration in society, and contacts related to teachers’ professionalism and teacherhood. In this study, cooperation with partners outside school was reported clearly more intensive than cooperation inside school. This was probably due to the occasion the diaries were kept: the end of the spring. The teachers were busy finding schools for their pupils for the next fall. What was notable in communication with a pupil’s home was that in preparatory teaching it happened either directly or via the organ supporting the family.

In all, the teachers perceived cooperation positively. Some of them considered it as a part of the work while others regarded it natural for their personalities. All of them agreed that even minimal cooperation can have a far-reaching significance for a pupil. Teachers themselves also benefit from cooperation in the form of help, support, and ideas. They can also plan and work together. Some of the teachers emphasized the importance of cooperation with an assistant or co-teaching. Furthermore, their perceptions showed that cooperation inside the school can enhance the self of equality in teachers who work in preparatory teaching, because otherwise their task is quite differentiated:

But the fact that you share things with various experts and that you see each other. That is really important. - - For example, the ordinary first-grade teacher you do not necessarily see it if you do not already have a problem student there that how important those others are there. But in a situation in which everything is extraordinary, you need other people.

In my opinion, there is no doubt that the pupils benefit more and me too, because I think through these cooperation partners I become supported in my work too.

The closest cooperation and the best knowledge emerge when we contemplate together. - - Especially in my own group because there are at least us three [referring to the teacher of the preparatory teaching group, the teacher of the first grade, and the teacher with Finnish-as-the-second-language] discuss the issue and pretty much know the pupils. - - This way we form the whole picture. And it would be so very one-sided if I was there doing alone.

The teachers specifically emphasized the benefits cooperation brings to their work. Cooperation was seen as an element enabling the operation of the teaching group. Cooperation provided teachers with such information about pupils’ families and home surroundings that they would not, because of the language barrier, get from parents. The immigrant authorities and organs and, for example, coaching were considered supporting teachers’ work:

When you think about the everyday life so that everything goes well, then, of course the people at reception centers or immigrant offices and social workers, without them this would not work. The same goes with school transport service. That [cooperation] is the basis of the functional everyday life.

On the other hand, cooperation was sometimes quite challenging. In this study, teachers reported of being more satisfied with cooperation inside the school and with organs outside school. Insufficient resources, specifically lack of time, hinder cooperation within the school and especially mutual planning. Mostly, this concerns lessons that were integrated with the general education. Problems with the flow of information and general education teachers being unwilling to take pupils from preparatory teaching classes in their own classrooms challenged the realization of integrated lessons, as some teachers described:

Sometimes, we have those feelings when we have integrated lessons, PE, and the student goes there and comes back saying that “there is no PE lesson”. Well, they have not remembered to let us know that the lesson is cancelled. So you have to come up with ways of having PE in the classroom. And it is always that the plan A, or B, or even C will hold true.

And at the beginning of the fall, I had to struggle a bit to get our students to some lessons. Some teachers are quite ready to take them, perhaps ones who have had immigrants before. But for others, it is a difficult step and they are quite sticky about having integrated students in their classrooms. Somehow they are afraid of how they will get along with these students.

Cooperation with partners and organs outside the school involved plenty of challenges and some obstacles, too. Unawareness of how everything can be handled in practice was mentioned as a real challenge, for example the availability of interpretation services or contact details for cooperation references. As in cooperation inside the school, the biggest challenge in cooperation with other partners was the lack of time. In addition to the difficulties in reaching partners and having time to work with them, teachers reported of problems in the flow of information. Every now and then, their saw their work wasted, nor could they be certain that all important information had reached them or the school. On the other hand, obligation to maintain secrecy was sometimes considered hindering cooperation that would aim at supporting a pupil. These problems were described in the data as follows:

This scares me sometimes, what I am responsible for without realizing it. - - This is because there are those regulations of professional secrecy, so I think these organs should contact me when they have questions concerning our pupils. For
example, when someone lifts from the store and gets caught, they call both the police and school. Because they are instances who educate and controls. Likewise, you would think that health personnel would enhance the flow of information. Of course, I realize that no one should talk about health issues to others but this is ridiculous as it is now.

**You have an acute problem, you cannot get interpretation. - - If you need to discuss the matter immediately, I will not be able to discuss it with parents until next week. These kinds of practical problems...**

Home-school cooperation was challenged with linguistic and cultural differences. Teachers argued that parents’ language skills were not necessary sufficient to handle everyday matters. This led to communication via an interpreter and a family’s support network. Accurate communication necessitates that the interpreter and parents understand each other and that the teacher explains the issue in a way that the interpreter understand. As the teachers were aware that immigrants often do not know much about the Finnish culture, they realized that misunderstandings could happen and parental involvement was difficult. Cultural differences also occurred as parents’ unwillingness to talk about problems at home and approach the teacher. The teachers described the issues for example in the following manner:

What is the most challenging is that the parents do not know how the Finnish school system and culture are like. So it is very difficult to explain here that what it means that you child goes to preparatory teaching, or the child will continue in preparatory teaching and that it does not mean the same as to repeat a year, that in Finland, the school system is quite flexible. And that there are different kinds of children and they are provided with various support, and that it is not a shame if the child does not learn.

**B. The role of the teacher of preparatory teaching within the collaborative network**

All teachers contemplated their role in their collaborative networks. Regardless of the multiple partners and multiprofessional cooperation, teacherhood itself appeared autonomous and individual. Teachers perceived their role as autonomous and either voluntary decision of working alone or negative experience of loneliness.

The data showed that teachers in preparatory teaching must be initiative. Some of the teachers had noticed that they need to adopt an intrusive attitude, and make themselves and their groups visible in order to create cooperation. The reason for this was the perception that others knew relatively little about immigration and preparatory teaching:

**Perhaps, it must be that we have bring ourselves forward so that people notice us and know that what this class is doing and what we are like.**

Most of the teachers had experienced their role in cooperation and in the school community in general at least partly outsider and lonely. Loneliness appeared as autonomous working and lack of peer support because the different content of the work compared to teachers of general education. However, not all considered this feature of their work negative, but merely empowering, as the following teacher’s notion illustrates:

This preparatory teaching is a sort of lonely island within the school. So I take care of this package independently.

Some teachers contemplated their role in relation to the cooperation with other instances. The data revealed that the problems in the flow of information affected negatively their perceptions of their role. Teachers were required to be initiative and declare their position. Work experience had increased teachers’ self-assurance:

I was regarded as an outsider for a while because they thought that this does not concern the school - - But then I had my foot in the door and said hey, tell me so that I know how to react, remember that I am a person who also needs to be told. Then it started to work. But sometimes I have to remind people that I exist.

I feel that I have a place in the network of teachers of preparatory teaching. And I can have genuine interaction from that direction, or that I do not feel outsider there.

**IV. Conclusion**

Co-operation is a focal part of teachers’ work in preparatory teaching but it aims at students’ holistic support. In addition, cooperation can, at its best, enhance teacher well-being and satisfaction at work. Based on the perceptions of the teachers in this study, the conclusion is that the partners in and the level of cooperation depends on the teacher himself or herself, the pupils and their situations, school practices, place, and time when studied. In all, teachers were more satisfied with the cooperation inside the school than with outside partners. Cooperation is strongly future-oriented, too, as its purpose is to prepare students to the Finnish education and eventually to become active citizens.

It can also be noticed that the operation of preparatory teaching would not be possible without contacts outside the school. Already cultural and language differences necessitate it. Some teachers also mentioned cooperation with other teachers teaching immigrants as one form of cooperation.

Perceptions of the factors hindering cooperation also varied among the participants of this study. In-school cooperation was mostly impeded by the outsider’s role the preparatory teaching group often has causing problems in the flow of
information between teachers. But the same problem was also noticed with other partners. Lack of time makes contacting the right persons difficult, and cooperation with homes is challenged by linguistic and cultural differences.

It seemed that teachers of preparatory teaching in this study considered themselves initiators. According to their perceptions, this role became more evident along with work experience. As the perceived roles and the levels of cooperation varied, it was possible to distinguish various types of cooperation in preparatory teaching. They are illustrated in Figure 1. The basis of this illustration is the way the teacher of preparatory teaching emphasizes cooperation insider the school and with partners from outside the school.

![Figure 1. Cooperation types of teachers of preparatory teaching](Image)

Next we will introduce the four types illustrated in the figure. When the teacher’s role is merely about transmitting information, cooperation seems mostly as sharing and transmitting information about schedules and other issues concerning the pupil and the group. Cooperation with homes is timely when having meetings regarding pupil evaluations every semester. The teacher does not repudiate the benefits of cooperation but acts mostly independently. Cooperation is considered an obligation.

The teacher who wants to share the everyday life at school emphasizes the importance of in-school cooperation. The teacher has a place in the work community, and he or she collaborates especially with other teachers and assistants who have immigrant pupils. The teacher also cooperates with partners outside the school but prioritizes the one taking place inside the school and with other teachers when it comes to the benefit of the pupil group and the teacher himself or herself. Cooperation helps the teacher to cope with the everyday work at school and preparatory teaching.

On the other hand, the teacher who is looking for support stresses cooperation with partners outside the school. This teacher feels an outsider in the work community and finds the support provided by other immigrant authorities helping him or her the best. Likewise, the teacher emphasizes that home-school cooperation serves both the pupil’s success and the teacher’s work. Cooperation enables the everyday work and enhances the teacher’s coping.

The teacher who prefers collaboration is active both when it comes to cooperation inside the school and outside partners. With his or her colleagues, the teacher shares information, ideas, and materials at the levels of planning and realizing teaching. Cooperation is a solution for maximal support of pupils’ holistic development and success.

V. DISCUSSION

Basically, immigrant children seem to do well in school at host countries in general but, naturally, specific outcomes vary by several factors (country of origin, policies of host country, parents’ socio-economic status, etc.) [52] [53]. However, international research on educational arrangements similar to preparatory teaching is scarce—especially when it comes to countries with relatively low number of immigrants (such as Finland is). For example, according to del Olmo, immigrant children are provided with a possibility to participate in an orientation program that aims at developing pupils’ language
skills before moving to general education [54]. It would be beneficial to learn about the experiences of arranging preparatory teaching in other countries with increasing immigration [55].

Teachers who work with immigrant children have a wide and multidimensional network in which they communicate with the home, school, and various societal instances. Cooperation is important already for the fact that it enables everyday work. However, a teacher’s willingness or unwillingness to cooperate does not alone determine the success of pupils’ socialization or integration. Teachers are personalities and everyone chooses the ways of working they find the most suitable.

However, this study showed that teachers need enormously information about their pupils, their living environment, and culture. In addition, they also have to pay attention to the chance of misunderstandings or different viewpoints in cultural encounters with families. This study drew a picture of the network teachers of preparatory teaching have to be aware of: the structure and nature of the field have similarities and differences depending on the location, cultures, and actors, but help understanding the multidimensional nature of teachers’ work in preparatory teaching.

This study also showed that willingness to cooperate does not necessarily guarantee that cooperation will take place. Feelings of outsider in the school community were familiar because of the special nature of the teaching group. Nor were the contacts outside the school always unproblematic. Indeed, more studies on the enhancement of the sense of togetherness and reciprocal cooperation in school communities are needed [47].

Cooperation is a resource that can support immigrant children’s integration in the Finnish culture. Preparatory teaching seems a good start and a fine way of enabling favorable development also when considered the prevention of exclusion among immigrants. Open-minded action, acknowledgement of school as one of the most important parts of children’s lives, and reciprocal flow of information between authorities would support the establishment and success of cooperation. Although teachers can be taught cooperation skills and provided with knowledge of immigration and immigrant education, it must also be noticed that, according to this study, cooperation in practice in preparatory teaching is best learned by doing. These teachers’ experiences are the most valuable, and the advice and knowledge they can share are important to all working and starting to work in preparatory teaching or other groups with immigrant children.

REFERENCES


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Laws and decrees referred in this article:

