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**Title:** Student Teachers as Readers : The Reading Experiences and Reading Pedagogy of Finnish and British Student Teachers

**Year:** 2023

**Version:** Published version

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**Please cite the original version:**

Aerila, J.-A., Kauppinen, M., Cremin, T., Siipola, M., Mukherjee, S. J., & Lähteelä, J. (2023). Student Teachers as Readers : The Reading Experiences and Reading Pedagogy of Finnish and British Student Teachers. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 48(9), Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.14221/1835-517x.6555>

2023

## Student Teachers as Readers: The Reading Experiences and Reading Pedagogy of Finnish and British Student Teachers

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### Recommended Citation

AERILA, J., Kauppinen, M., Cremin, T., Siipola, M., Mukherjee, S. J., & Lähteelä, J. (2023). Student Teachers as Readers: The Reading Experiences and Reading Pedagogy of Finnish and British Student Teachers. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 48(9). <https://doi.org/10.14221/1835-517X.6555>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.  
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol48/iss9/5>

## Student Teachers as Readers: The Reading Experiences and Reading Pedagogy of Finnish and British Student Teachers

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*Abstract: As the pedagogy of teachers depends partly on their earlier life experiences, investigating the prior reading practices of student teachers is crucial. This study investigated Finnish and English student teachers' (N = 353) own reading, the importance of their own reading to their reading pedagogy, and the relationship of these to teachers' content knowledge of reading pedagogy. The data were collected via an online questionnaire and analysed via quantitative methods. According to the findings, nearly all the student teachers enjoy reading, have a positive attitude towards reading, and consider the teachers' own reading important for the pedagogy they implement. However, even though a large number of the student teachers read during their free time, for many, reading represents a potential free-time activity that is valued, but for which there is no time. In the study, student teachers' reported free-time reading correlated with how many children's books the student teacher could name. In other words, it seems that the more pre-service teachers engage in their own reading (time used to reading for pleasure, level of experiences for enjoying reading) the greater their knowledge of children's literature, which is an essential part of the pedagogical content knowledge of literature teaching. Teacher education programmes should find ways to individualise reading instruction for student teachers as it will simultaneously scaffold the individuality of readers in the classrooms of these future teachers.*

### Introduction

Reading for pleasure is a fundamental right of every child; it is characterised as an act of voluntary, personal satisfaction (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Powell, 2014). Beyond the benefits of improved reading comprehension and an expanded vocabulary, engaging in free-time reading can yield cognitive advantages (Sullivan & Brown, 2015; Torppa et al., 2019) and foster social interactions (Cremin, 2014; Rothbauer, 2004). Teachers' understanding of children's literature and the pedagogy teachers implement impact young people's motivation

to engage in independent or free-time reading (Clark & Teräväinen, 2015; Cremin, 2019; Cremin et al., 2009, 2014). While community reading programmes, friends and supporting families can enhance children's interest in reading, the role of classroom teachers in guiding children towards high-quality texts and reading engagement remains crucial (Cremin et al., 2014, 2022) and is a question of social justice (Cremin et al., 2024).

Despite studies highlighting the significance of teachers' own reading, their knowledge of children's literature and the personal experiences with reading, the teacher's role in fostering children's reading engagement is underestimated in teacher education; unfortunately, many student teachers perceive themselves as less competent readers and do not engage in reading for pleasure (Vansteelandt et al., 2017). For most, it seems to be a question about attitudes and habits regarding reading.

Teacher education has the overarching goal of enhancing both the personal and professional development of future educators (Tarhan et al., 2019). Further, teacher education involves a dual focus: it aims to bolster student teachers' pedagogical skills and expertise while also advancing their academic achievements (Frontier & Livingston, 2011; Marzano, 2012; Marzano, Marzano, & Toth, 2013). Historically, a teacher's competence has been measured based on subject knowledge, certification, and teaching experience. However, contemporary research is starting to acknowledge the significance of teachers' attitudes and interests in relation to teacher efficacy (Ekstam et al., 2017). According to Krapp (2002), the pedagogy a teacher implements and their interest in teaching is intertwined with their more general attitudes, expectations and values. Additionally, teaching and being a teacher are social and public endeavours which are influenced by external perceptions, motivation to teach, commitment to delivering quality education, value-driven choices and moral considerations (Kelchtermans, 2009). Currently, there is research on student teachers' media use, media skills and multimodal literacy skills (Basilotta-Gómez-Pablos et al., 2022; Røkenes & Krumsvik, 2014). However, there is not enough research on how student teachers should be prepared in the domain of reading pedagogy (Dillon et al., 2011), and it seems that current research in reading pedagogy concentrates on teaching children to read (Clark et al., 2015; Kehoe & McCinty, 2023), not as independent readers who choose to read for pleasure.

It is worrying that the value of teachers' personal reading interests and knowledge of reading and literature are not recognised. One of the reasons for ignoring these aspects may be found in teacher education, as it seems to neglect the individual differences of student teachers (Kauppinen & Aerila, 2019; Lähteelä et al., 2020; Merga, 2015; Risko et al., 2008). However, several previous studies in different countries, including Belgium, Norway, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States, emphasise the importance of teacher educators supporting student teachers' engagement in reading (Applegate et al., 2014; Daisey, 2010; Granado, 2014; Perkins, 2013; Skaar et al., 2018; Vansteelandt et al., 2017). Individual differences in personal reading and knowledge of reading and literature in teacher education are also considered to be questions of equality, democracy and social justice, as stated in the UNESCO's sustainable development goals for 2030.

This study was carried out as a collaboration between England and Finland. It is part of a wider collaboration, the driving force behind which is the researchers' ties to teacher training and the aim of developing reading pedagogy and reading for pleasure in teacher education. The data used in the study are part of a larger body of research, of which the first research article (Cremin et al., 2024), is on the literature preferences of Finnish and English student teachers. The aim of this paper is to illustrate Finnish and British student teachers' own reading, how they see the relevance of teacher's experiences to the reading pedagogy they will implement in their classrooms and the nature of the relationship between their own reading and their content knowledge of reading pedagogy. Studies of student teachers' free-time reading and their related pedagogical perceptions are well-represented in previous

research, showing how essential it is to model the pleasure of reading and reading as a free-time activity to children and to understand the pedagogical effects of a teacher's own reading (Cremin et al., 2022; Kauppinen & Aerila, 2019). The research questions guiding this paper are as follows:

1. In what ways do student teachers' reading pedagogy reflect their own free-time reading, reading for pleasure and their attitudes towards reading?
2. How do student teachers assess the meaning of their own reading (past and present reading experiences) in their pedagogy of reading?
3. What is the relationship of student teachers' own reading and its meaning for their pedagogy with their content knowledge of reading pedagogy as measured by their ability to name authors/ poets/ illustrators that pupils in their classrooms would like?

The first two questions aim to investigate the personal reflections of student teachers on their own reading, and the third questions shifts the focus from personal reflections to a more general examination of the meaning of student teachers' own understandings of what literature children might enjoy. While knowledge of children's literature is a part of the content knowledge of literature teaching, the connection between own reading and knowledge of children's literature is worth of research.

### **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

The teacher's role in motivating students to read is central. Teachers act as role models, create supportive reading environments and encourage students' free-time reading (Aerila & Kauppinen, 2019; Cremin et al., 2014; Hellmich & Foya, 2017; Kauppinen & Aerila, 2018; Merga, 2017). Cremin and others (2022) illustrated the role of teachers using the concept of a Reading Teacher. They argue Reading Teachers are fellow readers to students, who offer diverse options on texts aligned with students' cultural identities, expanding access to choice-led recreational reading (Cremin et al., 2022).

Each teachers' ability to encourage students to read is linked to their personal reading habits and views of literacy as an adult (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Powell-Brown, 2004). Teachers who possess positive literacy attitudes and behaviours are more effective in encouraging students to read and in teaching them to read (Burgess et al., 2011). Teachers who read for pleasure and share their reading experiences with their students can enhance their students' interest in reading more spontaneously than other educators (Cremin et al., 2009, 2014; McKool & Gespass, 2009) as they are more adept at communicating the joys of reading to their students (Burgess et al., 2011). As teachers share their reading experiences with students, they not only facilitate spontaneous, meaningful discussions but also expand students' worldviews and their understanding of literature's relevance to their lives (McDowall, 2022). Pleasure reading can also be equated with information-seeking in everyday life (Cremin et al., 2023), further highlighting its importance in education.

According to Applegate and Applegate (2004), the quality of literacy education depends on the reading practices of teachers. As teachers' reading proficiency improves, their effectiveness in the classroom increases, and they provide meaningful literature instruction for their students (McKool & Gespass, 2009). Teachers who can provide their students with engaging texts, instruction in independent reading strategies and behaviour modelling can foster a literacy-rich environment that encourages students to engage in more literacy-related behaviours (Moses & Kelly, 2019). Similarly, teachers' knowledge of books can be instrumental in cultivating a lifelong love of reading in students (Doiron, 2003). According to Burgess (2011) and others knowledge of children's literature is an asset for teachers if they plan to encourage students to read. Teachers scoring higher in knowledge of children's books

also seem to employ the best practices related to book usage in the classroom more often than teachers scoring lower in knowledge of children's books.

There are few studies regarding the reading of student teachers. In a study by Vansteelandt et al. (2017), almost half of the student teachers had negative attitudes towards reading. Additionally, Cremin et al. (2024) investigated the book choices of student teachers and found that they were too dependent on a small number of well-known writers, included a limited knowledge of children's texts and relied on a silent canon. Further, a recent study by Spann and Wagner (2023) indicated that student teachers (EFL) reading habits showed a consistent prevalence of aliteracy, demotivation and disinterest in literary reading. There are also research results that show how teacher education can influence the reading of student teachers. It seems that by enhancing student teachers' experiences of pleasure in reading and proper text choices, it is possible to increase the use of more reflective, caring and child-centred approaches to teaching (Tovey, 2021). A study by Aerila et al. (2020) showed that in teacher education, it is possible to increase the time spent on voluntary reading. In their study, the implementation of audio books enabled the student teachers to find new places for reading. Further, Margallo (2012) noticed that student teachers found enjoyment of reading during their studies, although the reading materials were mostly academic, and their reading served primarily as a means of acquiring educational knowledge for their future teaching practices. Moreover, it lacked the social dimension of reading, which would enable them to become part of the reading community (Margallo, 2012).

In general, the personality and the personal interests of the teacher are essential elements in what constitutes professional teaching and who the teacher is (Kelchtermans, 2009). Therefore, the personal growth of student teachers as readers and positive experiences in reading during teacher education can have positive effects on the personal interests of students (Cremin et al., 2024) and cultivate beneficial reading habits in student teachers by the conclusion of their studies in teacher education (Ramírez & Vásquez, 2023).

## Methodology

In total, 353 student teachers (168 British and 185 Finnish) participated in this study. The data for the study were collected using the questionnaires in England and Finland from the autumn of 2020 to the spring of 2021. The study participants were in their first year or in the start of their second year, meaning that they had not yet had their literacy courses at the university.

The data were collected via an online survey (in England, Qualtrics, and in Finland, Webropol); the participants accessed the survey by clicking on a forum link on their own devices at a time convenient to them. The process of data collection varied slightly in each country. In England, the data collection was implemented among student teachers ( $n = 168$ ) seeking the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) for primary education in three universities – two in the southeast and one in the southwest of England. Each university posted information about the study on their student forums, with an invitation to participate and a link. In Finland, the participants were from five universities located in southwest, western and central Finland; they were studying to be either primary school teachers ( $n = 128$ ) or early childhood educators ( $n = 28$ ). In addition, 29 participants were studying to be one of the following: crafts teachers, special educators or subject teachers. In Finland, the researchers sent the online questionnaire to the student organisations of the universities; these organisations then forwarded it to students via their email lists.

The study follows the ethical guidelines of both countries. Answering the questionnaire was voluntary, anonymous and not part of any course. No identifying

information was collected, but demographic data regarding the students' ages, genders and their year of study were collected. Further, the online questionnaires were designed to allow participants to withdraw at any time or decline to answer any question. In England, prior to the survey being conducted, the research plan was accepted by the ethics panels of the universities involved. In Finland, the National Board of Research Integrity did not deem this necessary.

The survey for the data collection consisted of questions regarding respondents' own reading, the meaning of this for their pedagogy in the classroom and their content knowledge of reading pedagogy. The data consist of answers to six questions in total, which were formulated in such a way that they considered the fact that the students had not yet had any studies related to the pedagogy of reading. Student teachers' own reading (RQ1) and their assessments of the meaning of their own reading for their reading pedagogy (RQ2) were examined using four Likert-scaled (1–7) questions: *How often do you spend time on reading for pleasure? How much do you enjoy reading? How would you rate your reading attitude? To what extent are your past and present reading experiences relevant to your role as a teacher?* Their content knowledge of reading pedagogy (RQ3) was examined using one open-ended item: *Name six authors that children would probably like.* In the results section that follows, the research questions are answered both by investigating the data as a whole and by comparing the results for Finnish and British student teachers.

The data were analysed with the IBM SPSS Statistics 29 program. First, student teachers' own reading and their perceptions of the meaning of teachers' reading to the pedagogy they implement was analysed. Second, student teachers' content knowledge for reading pedagogy was investigated based on who could name six authors of children's literature and who could name fewer than six authors. The analyses were done separately for Finnish and British data to see if the data are similar for conducting the analyses with the whole data. As there were some differences between the data of the two countries the analyses were run separately for the two datasets. The analyses were conducted using the independent samples Mann-Whitney U test. This test was used since the dataset was rather small and not normally distributed. The limit for statistical significance was set at  $p < .05$ .

## Findings

### Student Teachers' Own Reading and Its' Meaning for Reading Pedagogy

The results (Table 1) show that the student teachers assessed their own reading mostly as positive, with their attitudes being the most positive ( $M_{UK} = 5.83$ ;  $M_{FIN} = 6.17$ ). Further, almost all of them assessed their enjoyment of reading as high ( $M_{UK} = 5.66$ ;  $M_{FIN} = 5.79$ ). On average, students rated the amount of free-time reading the lowest ( $M_{UK} = 4.24$ ;  $M_{FIN} = 4.58$ ), and the variation was the widest regarding free-time reading ( $SD_{UK} = 1.86$ ;  $SD_{FIN} = 1.91$ ) and knowledge of children's literature ( $SD_{UK} = 2.30$ ;  $SD_{FIN} = 1.95$ ). It seems that some of the student teachers fall under the category of potential readers who appreciate reading and would like to read often, but for one reason or another, read infrequently. Additionally, most of the student teachers recognised that a teacher's previous experiences with reading and how much they enjoy reading are important.

There were some differences and similarities between British and Finnish student teachers' own reading, their knowledge of children's literature and between their assessments of the meaning of previous experiences and the pleasure in reading. The student teachers read and enjoyed reading equally in both countries, but their attitudes towards reading were slightly different. The student teachers from Finland rated their attitude towards reading more positively ( $p = 0.016$ ) and named more authors of children's books than the student teachers from the UK ( $M_{UK} = 3.78$ ;  $M_{FIN} = 4.53$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ). In addition, the British participants thought more strongly than Finnish participants that their own reading experiences are relevant to their role as a teacher ( $M_{UK} = 5.73$ ;  $M_{FIN} = 5.24$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

All the observed effects were small ( $r < 0.3$ ), but the differences in reading attitudes, knowledge of children’s literature and the meaning of previous experiences were statistically significant.

e	British pre-service teachers			Finnish pre-service teachers			Mann-Whitney U test			
	Scal	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
How often do you read for pleasure?	1–7	168	4.2	1.8	185	4.5	1.9	17131.	.09	.09
How much do you enjoy reading?	1–7	168	5.6	1.4	184	5.7	1.3	16324.	.34	.05
How would you rate your attitude?	1–7	167	5.8	1.3	183	6.1	1.1	17411.	.01	.12
To what extent are your past and present reading experiences relevant to your role as a teacher?	1–7	153	5.7	1.3	185	5.2	1.4	11167.	<.001	.18
Authors named	0–6	168	3.7	2.3	185	4.5	1.9	18331.	.00	.16

**Table 1 Student Teachers’ Own Reading and the Meaning of Their Own Reading for Reading Pedagogy**

**The Relationship of Teachers’ Own Reading and Assessment of Its Meaning with Reading Pedagogy and Content Knowledge**

We investigated the student teachers’ reading pedagogy content knowledge by asking them to name six children’s authors they thought their future pupils would like. There was a large variation in the number of the authors named (Table 1).

In order to find out the relationship between teachers’ own reading and perceptions related to previous reading experiences with content knowledge, we divided the student teachers into two groups: those who could name six children’s authors according to the question, and those who could not. The results (Table 2) show some connection between student teachers’ own reading, the perceptions related to previous reading experiences and their knowledge of children’s literature. When comparing the results of British and Finnish student teachers, the results are almost identical regarding the following perspectives: 1) The student teachers’ who could name six children’s authors read more often in their free time than those who could mention fewer than six children’s authors (for the Finnish data the p-value was almost significant). 2) The student teachers who were able to name six children’s authors enjoyed reading more and rated their attitude more positively than those who named fewer children’s authors (for the British data the p-values were almost significant). However,



among Finnish student teachers, the participants who mentioned six children’s authors thought more often that previous reading experiences were relevant to their role as a teacher when compared with the participants unable to mention six ( $p = 0.002$ ). This was not the case with the British student teachers, who thought that previous reading experiences were relevant regardless of their knowledge of children’s literature. All the observed effects were small ( $r < 0.3$ ).

		6 authors named			< 6 authors named			Mann-Whitney U test		
		<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
How often do you read for pleasure?	UK	62	4.63	1.91	106	4.02	1.79	3905.5	.039	.159
	Finlan	87	4.87	1.68	98	4.33	2.06	4908.5	.071	.133
How much do you enjoy reading?	UK	62	5.95	1.21	106	5.49	1.49	3835.0	.060	.145
	Finlan	86	6.15	1.06	98	5.48	1.53	5261.5	.002	.225
How would you rate your attitude?	UK	62	6.11	1.10	105	5.66	1.40	3812.5	.051	.151
	Finlan	86	6.43	0.89	97	5.94	1.22	5173.0	.002	.226
To what extent are your past and present reading experiences relevant to your role as a teacher?	UK	62	5.94	1.13	91	5.59	1.39	3176.5	.169	.111
	Finlan	87	5.61	1.20	98	4.92	1.52	5372.5	.002	.231

**Table 2 The Relationship Between Teachers’ Own Reading and the Assessment of the Meaning of their Own Reading with Reading Pedagogy Content Knowledge**

## Discussion

This study investigated Finnish and English student teachers’ perceptions of their own reading, the importance of teachers’ own reading to their reading pedagogy and the connection of these to teachers’ reading content knowledge, which was investigated by asking the students a question related to children’s literature. The findings show that almost all student teachers enjoy reading, have a positive attitude towards reading and consider the teacher’s own reading important for the pedagogy they conduct. These findings stand in some contrast to other research. In particular the results are more positive with regard to student teachers’ own reading and reading pedagogy (e.g., Spann & Wagner 2023; Vansteelandt et al., 2017). The link between the teachers own reading and their reading pedagogy is an important one. The notion of the Reading Teacher (e.g. Cremin et al., 2022) becomes relevant where teachers’ own reading repertoires and identities are understood as an important influence on their pedagogy in fostering reading for pleasure. As our results show, those who want to become teachers read themselves, are interested in children's literature and find reading meaningful. However, the research results also show that while a large number

of student teachers read during their free time, this is not the case for all of them: for some, reading is more of a potential free-time activity that is valued, but for which there is no time, motivation or need. The lack of need in particular reinforces the requirement for teacher educators to support preservice teachers in this way and to make clear the relevance of preservice teachers own and wide personal reading repertoire (e.g. Cremin et al., 2024) and reader identity.

One of the main findings of the study is that student teachers differ in the amount of free-time reading they engage in; thus, it might be necessary to look for ways to encourage student teachers to read on their free time both by providing materials and offering more innovative ways to increase reading (e.g., digital platforms, audiobooks, and digital literature) during teacher education (see also Lähteelä et al., 2021). Encouraging reading might prove to be effective considering that student teachers' attitudes towards reading are positive and even those who do not currently read feel that they enjoy reading. Just like the pupils in their classrooms, student teachers have individual reading needs, skills and habits (for more about individualised reading, see Kucirkova & Cremin, 2018). Therefore, teacher education should have ways to individualise reading instruction for student teachers as it will simultaneously scaffold the individuality of readers in the classrooms of these future teachers. There are certain themes in teacher education, such as human growth and well-being, which are studied in and motivated by fiction. For example, the meaning of social-emotional skills in human interaction as well as emotions in learning are themes which fictional literature can bring a more personal touch to and greater involvement.

In the study, student teachers' own free-time reading correlated to how many children's books the student teachers could name, in other words preservice teachers who read more also choose to read more children's literature. The finding suggests that a positive attitude or perception regarding the pleasure and importance of reading is not enough. This indicates that teacher training should pay more attention to encouraging student teachers to read in their free time and familiarizing themselves with children's literature, otherwise children's equal opportunities for high-quality reading pedagogy will be at risk. This statement is supported by previous studies that indicate that the knowledge of children's literature is a key factor in encouraging pupils in classrooms to read alongside the role model of a Reading Teacher (Aerila & Kauppinen, 2019; Cremin et al., 2022). However, what preservice teachers read and what they encourage in the classroom should also be examined and supported by teacher educators to ensure diverse, contemporary authors, picturebook creators and poets are also being represented (Cremin et al., 2024). Further, from the point of view of the individual reading needs of today's pupils, it is worrying that some student teachers are not widely familiar with new and diverse children's literature. The significance of this result is emphasised by earlier work which indicates that the children's literature known to student teachers in the initial stages of their studies does not adequately describe the diversity of society (Cremin et al., 2024).

In the present study, the data collected from Finnish and English teachers were examined both as a whole and by country. The results show that student teachers closely resemble each other in terms of their own reading, reading attitudes, knowledge of literature and enjoyment of reading. However, the student teachers from Finland did not see the reading experiences of a teacher to be as relevant as did the student teachers from the UK. This difference between the two countries calls for further investigations.

This study contributes to the body of research concerning the reading habits of teachers and future teachers. Teachers' own relationships to reading matter when they strive to create innovative, multi-faceted reading pedagogy and long-lasting motivation to read among children (Cremin et al., 2022). Valuing books and versatile reading practices in school is a teacher's responsibility. A teacher who loves reading, reads a wide range of children's

literature, has content knowledge of children's books and various genres, and who stimulates conversation regarding books can support the diverse readers in contemporary classrooms. Future teachers gain their inspiration and ideas regarding their reading pedagogy during their studies in teacher education. Therefore, it is crucial that student teachers are taught that children's books are meaningful to human growth and learning during their studies. This is not only a question of supporting quality among student teachers but also of ensuring equal opportunities for children to become engaged readers in the future. As Peteille and Evans (2021) noted, improving teacher education benefits the education of young people while enhancing the quality of life of younger students and that of student teachers.

## **Conclusion**

The quality of literacy education and community-based, positive reading experiences has an impact on a child's emotional well-being and ethical-moral thinking (Mak & Fancourt, 2020; Merga, 2016) as well as their reading skills and positive attitudes to reading in general. As the pedagogy that a teacher implements partly evolves from their earlier experiences in life (Rothschild, 2000), investigating the prior reading practices of student teachers is crucial.

In general, teaching is a profession in which feelings and motivation play an essential role; thus, in teacher education, it is not enough to merely influence student teachers' thinking. According to Van Veen and Slegers (2006), there is a need in teacher education to take the personal dimensions (e.g., core qualities of the students, ideals, sense of identity, beliefs, competencies, behaviour and the characteristics of the environment) more seriously and to start from students' real experiences and what can be elicited from them as persons. This is supported by Kelchtermans and Vandenberghe (1994), who state that educating teachers is not only the link between practice and theory, but most of all the connection with the person who is the teacher. The challenge for teacher education is to take responsibility for linking the personal strengths of people in schools with academic knowledge (Korthagen, 2017). Considering how many positive effects student teachers' free-time reading has on their academic success and well-being – as well as how it can have a positive effect on teachers' ability to inspire children to read – providing positive reading experiences, encouraging reading during free time and getting to know children's literature should be essential aspects of teacher education.

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