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# A Lonely Profession?

## Finnish Teachers' Professional Commitments

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### Introduction

The teaching profession is often treated as an interaction located only in the classroom, with little attention paid to the factors beyond the classroom (e.g., Raiker and Rautiainen 2017; Seppänen et al. 2015). In Finland, where both the teaching profession and the educational system are highly regarded, both locally and internationally, Finnish primary education has been criticized for its lack of critical thinking and lack of flexibility. Its critics suggest that it needs more practices aimed at negotiation, cooperation, and interaction with the surrounding society (see, e.g., Husu and Toom 2016; Männistö et al. 2017; Matikainen et al. 2018; Raiker and Rautiainen 2017). The Finnish school is said to be the best system to educate young people for a society that no longer exists. As some educational research points out, this critical comment may be homing in on a conflict between the system's ideals and everyday school realities (see Simola 2015, 34–35).

Educational research into the Finnish school system is concerned to discover how the school reacts to the world outside of the classroom, to the local community and to societal changes, such as digitalization or the rapidly changing requirements of organizational operations. Recent studies have emphasized the importance of asking how teachers and schools are handling global realities, such as climate change, multiculturalism, and individualization (see, e.g., Välijärvi 2015). These are among the reasons why contemporary studies strive toward a more complex, social, and multidimensional teacher professionalism (see Fornaciari and Männistö 2017; Simola 2008, 2015). Many researchers, and the Finnish National Core Curriculum for

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Basic Education (2014), state that a more vital level of cooperation is required of teachers within and beyond the educational space (Lanas and Kiilakoski 2013; National Board of Education 2004, 2014; Simola et al. 2017; Toom and Husu 2012).

Traditionally, the teaching profession in Finland is seen as technical and static, a description that overlooks the recognized societally interactive and dialectical nature of the teaching profession. This position was given to teachers because the school was seen as the foremost institution unifying the polarized nation in the early years of independence after the civil war in 1918 (see, e.g., Raiker and Rautiainen 2017; Suutarinen 2006). However, in recent years, a more critical stance toward the profession has surfaced. Due to the rigid institutional traditions, Finnish comprehensive schools have been slow off the mark in responding to societal changes and demands, and it is worth critically reconsidering how the Finnish teaching profession functions in today's world (see Fornaciari and Männistö 2017; Lindén 2010; Rantala 2010; Simola 2015). The problem with the traditional, static educational ideology is that it can be reluctant to change, even when events occurring in society and the wider world require it.

In this article, the Finnish teaching profession and school reality are observed through the experiences of professional Finnish classroom teachers. My interest in the study was to find out what kind of descriptions teachers give regarding the main objectives of the teacher profession. While analyzing the data, I found it useful to divide the data into two different teacher work areas: teacher-pupil and outside-classroom dimensions. Following this notion, I formulated two research questions: (1) What is at the core of classroom teachers' professionalism? (2) How does the teaching profession relate to factors outside of the classroom? The experiences of the teachers are described empirically, through their own voices, with the objective of analyzing their working realities and illustrating how teachers engage in their profession. In this article, the concept of the teaching profession (in Finnish, *opettajuus*) includes a complex combination of the classroom teacher's work, position, and mission in society. There is no exact equivalent in international terminology (see Vertanen 2002, 95).

## Identifying the Teaching Profession in Finland

Over the years, the work of classroom teachers has been evaluated in many different ways and the aims of their work have been prioritized with differing emphases. The profession has been scrutinized in terms of their expertise, as an art form, as an applied science, as an ethical profession, and,

nowadays, from the perspective of a teacher as an active researcher (see Fullan 2001; Liston and Zeichner 1991; Luukkainen 2004; Noddings 1992, 2002). There are multiple theoretical and empirical analyses of teachers' expertise and characteristics, considered from various perspectives and at different levels (see, e.g., Blömeke et al. 2015; Kreber 2010). Even if it were possible to recognize the convergent elements present in the many research studies, no homogeneous analysis exists of core teacher competences that is based on empirical research (Husu and Toom 2016, 12–14).

Since 1974, every teacher in Finland has to complete a university-level degree. Researchers describe the contemporary teaching profession in widely different terms. Husu and Toom (2016, 9) define the teacher profession as a demanding, knowledge-intensive, academic, and relationship-based profession. Luukkainen (2004) has developed a comprehensive model of the teaching profession in which conceptual elements such as social awareness and future orientation are more strongly emphasized than they were previously. Furthermore, Luukkainen (2004) contends that the significance and content of collegial cooperation will increase and come to hold an even more vital position. The Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education of 2014 states that an open and interactive operational culture must prevail in Finnish schools (see the National Board of Education 2014). This culture must support interaction within the school, with the pupil's home, and with the rest of society (Husu and Toom, 2016; National Board of Education 2004, 2014; Sahlberg 2015; Toom and Husu 2012). Finnish teachers are encouraged to collaborate with their colleagues, with other important institutions, and with companies and actors in their communities (see, e.g., Toom and Husu 2012, 44; Vitikka et al. 2012). Schools are outlined as multiprofessional environments with special education teachers, school psychologists, public health nurses, and social workers. Similar guidelines have also been established internationally (see, e.g., Leana 2011). Furthermore, the need for school units to become more cooperative in the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries has been highlighted in international surveys [see TALIS: Teaching and Learning International Survey 2008, 2013 (Ben, Andrés, and Steffen 2012; OECD 2014)]. These surveys show that those teachers who interact and collaborate more with their school principals, with colleagues, and with other operators are more efficient and more satisfied in their jobs. Several other researchers have also pointed out that the social aspect of the teaching profession requires multiprofessional capabilities, the ability to cooperate with colleagues, and the ability to pursue active social interaction (see Lonka and Vaara 2016; Toom and Husu 2016).

In summary, to meet the requirements originating from the society of our time, the modern teacher in Finland is described as a professional with wide-ranging understanding of societal, ethical, and global questions and with wiliness and skills to develop the working culture and cooperation in school units (see Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 2018) The context is such that Finnish teachers' work is relatively open and is based on the trust that exists between the political, administrative, and individual school decision makers (Toom and Husu 2012, 41). Despite this, studies show that Finnish teachers frequently feel constrained in their jobs and that they do not cooperate or use the freedoms and autonomy that they have (see Lanas and Kiilakoski 2013, 343–60; Sahlberg 2011). In addition, some studies show that adjustments for teacher work made in teacher education or in the core curriculum take effect slowly and are experienced as inadequate by the teachers in the field (Kyriacou and Kunc 2007; Simola 2015).

## **Data and Methods**

### **Why Study Subjective Teacher Experiences?**

In Finland, there is no teacher evaluation system, and the national core curriculum for basic education offers teachers remarkable freedom in carrying out their work. Society has always trusted the devoted and accomplished Finnish teacher base. It has been suggested that Finnish teachers have greater autonomy than most other teachers do around the world. Because of the distinguished academic status and the commitment level of the Finnish teacher in developing the profession and teacher education, authentic teacher experiences have had an essential role. In the Finnish culture the form and areas for development in schools and in teaching are individually considered by the teachers and can vary widely between school units and individuals. This is why in Finnish school culture it is valid to study subjective teacher experiences and professional thinking in order to understand what is really going on in the field. This is also why a recognizable research tradition exists in Finland concerning teacher experiences. Among other research, teacher experiences have been studied to understand teacher behavior with pupils with psychiatric disorders (Ojala 2017), to describe freshmen teachers' experiences in their novice year (Blomberg 2008), or to explore teachers' tacit pedagogical knowing (Toom 2006). Following these precedents, this article reaches out into the world of teachers' experiences described by themselves in the interviews. The aim was to understand more deeply the connection

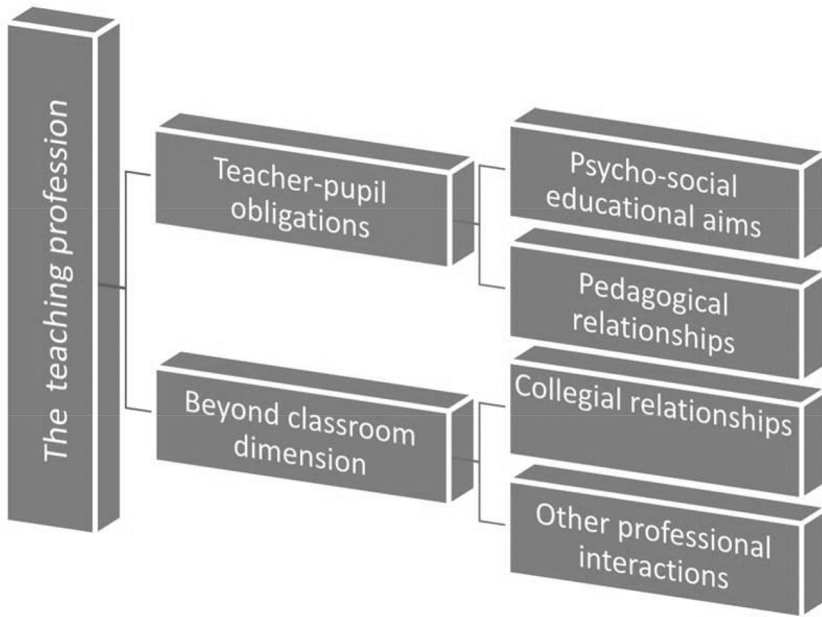
between teacher work in reality and teacher work described in national core curriculum and in other professional literature.

The data for this article were collected from 13 Finnish teachers in 2015 and 2016. The interview material consists of 13 one-hour-long individual and partly structured interviews. The interviews were held in Finnish, with both the researcher and the informants being native speakers. The participants were classroom teachers of different ages drawn from several comprehensive schools in a major city in Finland. The interviewees were randomly chosen. All the participants had an academic education as classroom teachers; however, they were at different stages of their professional careers. The identity of the participants has been protected by deleting the identification details and randomly assigning a number to each participant (teacher 1, teacher 2, etc.). The purpose of these interviews was to uncover some of the factors at the core of the teachers' professional thinking. By asking searching questions, the aim was to engage the teachers in pondering about their values and objectives beyond the concrete everyday work of teaching. In this way, it was hoped that the essence of the teaching profession would be revealed. The interview questions related to three main areas. Participants were invited to comment on (1) their reasons for choosing a career in teaching, (2) how they perceive themselves as teachers and their professional goals, and (3) how they see their role in relation to the working community and how they see the school environment in general. Whereas an early study using this data focused on the agency of Finnish teachers (Fornaciari and Männistö 2017), this study focuses on the professionalism of Finnish teachers. The precise research questions for this article are:

1. What is at the core of classroom teachers' professionalism?
2. How does the teaching profession relate to factors outside of the classroom?

A qualitative content analysis approach was used to analyze the data. As the objective was to gather information related to the vision and understanding of teachers regarding the teaching profession, the analysis can be described as text-driven. Text-driven analyses are built around text-based patterns that suggest possible paths for interpreting the data (see Krippendorff 2013, 356). This kind of analysis can also be called an "interpretive" or "qualitative analysis" (see Hirsjärvi and Hurme 2015; Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1277–88).

After a careful reading and summarizing of the data, two descriptive categories were generated that together formed the framework for the article



**Fig. 1.** Descriptive categories of the teaching profession

and the material collected (see fig. 1). These categories provided a way for presenting the phenomenon at a general level and defined outlines for the two themes analyzed in the study (see also Marton and Booth 2013). The two general categories were described as teacher-pupil obligations and the dimensions beyond the classroom. The ethical and pedagogical elements of the teacher-pupil relationship were emphasized in the teacher-pupil category, whereas in the beyond-the-classroom category, the classroom teacher's profession was scrutinized from the perspective of cooperation, work community, and social thinking. In this research, the beyond-the-classroom dimension thus refers to descriptions of the classroom teacher in relation to factors extraneous to the classroom and the teacher-pupil relationship. The interpretative part of the research aims to raise interesting observations that stand out in both categories for discussion. Quotations are included in the analysis and form part of the presentation of the research material. This means that the results do not only reflect the researcher's interpretation of the quotations.

This study's limitations must be acknowledged. As it focused on only 13 teachers from a single city, albeit from different school units, generalizations to larger populations cannot be made. In addition, the primary data sources were one-off interviews, so potential shortcomings in the material must be considered as well. It is also clear that there were expectations about the interviews and the subjects that would be discussed during the interview sessions. However, during the interviews, themes and ideas originating from the interviewees were pursued and the researcher consciously avoided controlling and directing the discussion (see Hirsjärvi and Hurme 2015). The interviews were confidential and many of the class teachers told the researcher that they enjoyed the peaceful, reflective period of conversation, which their hectic everyday work schedule seldom allowed.

### Ethical Obligations in the Core of the Teacher Profession

Based on an analysis of the data, two different outlines were created for this article to illustrate two different dimensions in the teachers' profession. As mentioned earlier, these were named teacher-pupil obligations and beyond-the-classroom perspective. This division was created because the material gathered through the interviews gave particular references that the teaching profession takes place especially in the teacher-pupil relationship whereas participants' thoughts regarding the working field outside of the classroom such as collegiality provided an interesting contrast. The attitude seemed to dissent from the current outlines for the teaching profession.

According to the data, at the center of the teacher profession are the ethical-educational obligations of the teacher-pupil relationship. Ethical-educational elements were the most prevalent factor in the professional experience of the participants. Generally, being ethical is related to acknowledged principles of helping, countering disparity, having regard for the group and for the common good, and so forth (e.g., Hargreaves and Evans 1997, 4). These ethical requirements are considered also in many other studies an essential part of the profession (e.g., Carr 2000, 39–41; Fullan and Hargreaves 1992). In this study, all the participants spoke very strongly about their own educational ethics as expressed through their pedagogical relationship with their pupils.

For many years I took part in school management teams and other action outside of teaching in the work community. I left them because I wanted to teach and it needs all of my energy—being a teacher



requires lots of physical and intellectual resourcing. It is not a normal nine-to-five job—teaching is a vocation. (Teacher number 7)

The pedagogical relationship can be described as unique to the teaching profession, and it cannot be equated with any other human relationship (see Van Manen 1994, 135–170). In this study, the pedagogical relationship came into focus when the teachers spoke about their work and gave the grounds on which their work with their pupils is based. The sincerity of the participants in this matter was indisputable. For example, as the participants pondered on whether the didactic decisions they make in their work are acceptable and just, the solutions they arrived at could all be interpreted as ethical statements. This reflection was present in almost every discussion. They were in agreement that the work of a class teacher may include many things, but it is definitely not just delivering information or knowledge. The words “joy” and “virtue” occurred in many of the discussions.

The teaching of life-skills to the children and just being with them . . . the skills they most need are skills to be able to cope with other people and to pay attention to other people . . . helping others, especially those who don't get the support they need from their homes . . . most of the pupils will get along whoever the teacher is . . . not necessarily with the subject matter, but just in life as such, understanding what it requires. (Teacher number 5)

The endeavor to pass on something of value, something that is good and important to the pupils, is an important part of the job to many of the participants. This was expressed in several ways.

There is something good and worth evolving in everybody. The primary schools' only mission is to find something to praise in every student. If this mission is impossible within the school practices, the teacher must rethink these practices. (Teacher number 11)

A strong pursuit of equality is the basis for the values of the Finnish comprehensive school (see, e.g., Raiker and Rautiainen 2017). The participants illustrated this pursuit on many occasions in the interviews. Strong endeavors to treat all students with their multiple needs equitably were at the core of this pursuit. One teacher described this endeavor as sometimes hard to fulfill in real classroom situations.

I see this as a meadow where I pick up items so as to show the best qualities of each and every one. None should be in the shadow of another, and they should not lean too heavily on the other, I hope to enable them to stand on their own two feet. There is not an equal portion for everyone, but the portion each one needs. But it's not easy because some of them have such great needs for an adult that they inevitably get more attention. Sometimes this gives me a bad conscience. (Teacher number 9)

The structure and targeted learning outcomes of the modern school were considered problematic in relation to the strongly experienced ethical and pedagogical aims of the profession. The teachers' ethics oblige the teachers to understand the power and responsibility of their position and also to know when it comes to an end.

At times, I recognize the need to stop and scrutinize myself in order to understand how much I can bear and at what point I say "enough." You can't venture into waters that are too deep for you. In some situations it seems that the child is in an abyss and I am there to grip and hold them. . . . I've had to say many times, "I'm your teacher, not your mother." (Teacher number 5)

In summary, having ethical-pedagogical aims in the educational work was the most important issue in the professional experience of the participants. This manifested in the participants' strong drive to pursue a comprehensive and all-encompassing education. In some points of view this derived from philosophical orientation to the profession.

I see that the mission in elementary school is to provide mental tools to cope in the modern world—it requires morally strong and independently thinking youth. Nowadays the "big stories" are told and the reality is way more superficial and complex than it used to be, so the school has to offer stable ethical and moral guidance. My aim is to raise strong moral subjects with adamant human values. (Teacher number 12)

To cultivate this kind of critical awareness, one participant described a situation in which she guided one student toward ethical and social pondering.

We were discussing about migration and one student stated; *when we take migrants into our country it will raise my parents' tax GNP and*

*it means less money for our family. Then I asked a counter question; what if so? And answered myself; maybe we get a few less Christmas presents, maybe we won't get the newest iPhone this Christmas and we'll have to wait the year after. Major part of these migrants come here in search of shelter and food. Are these two needs comparable?* (Teacher number 6)

In the prioritization of the ethical-pedagogical education, the emphasis was on being able to give valuable guidance to their pupils so as to develop the capacity to treat fairly the surrounding society. Connected to this, to learn to work in a group, to develop good manners, and to pay attention to other people seemed important educational tasks to many of the participants. Throughout the interviews it came across many times that teachers feel a strong commitment especially to the educational mission of the comprehensive school. The teaching of subject-specific learning contents of the comprehensive school was, throughout the interviews, seen as a secondary objective in being a classroom teacher.

I need to be an example of a good and positive life, so to say, sometimes I'll have to play enthusiastic even when it's not the best day. (Teacher number 8)

So, we don't have that much learning of content, but my duty is to see to, to ponder, and to help in cases when one doesn't immediately understand or else one is not naturally willing. . . . I know that I have four years in which to solve the problems of 20 pupils; I have to be able to do it. That's my primary obligation . . . they'll learn to recognize foxes and hares, I'm sure. It's not the facts, but the ways of learning, the abilities and learning styles that have to be discovered. (Teacher number 7)

### The Contradictory Beyond-the-Classroom Framework

In this section, the aim is to identify the dimension considered beyond the classroom in the professional conceptualizations of the participants. Elements beyond the classroom included interviewees' thoughts on the working community, policy makers, students' families, colleagues, principals, and other professionals. Discussions on the syllabus, connections to authorities, and the information coming from socially involved, interested parties were also considered beyond-the-classroom topics, that is to say, diverse experience

linked to the profession that did not concern the basic manifestation of the profession described earlier as the teacher-pupil obligations.

The idea of scrutinizing a beyond-the-classroom framework arose because ideas about a multiprofessional working community and cooperation played a big role in the discussions. The class teachers in this study experienced their involvement outside of the classroom as being remote, problematic, and estranging. In many interviews, the discussion was triggered by an ignorance of how other teachers worked or by the superficiality of their collegial relationships. All participants responded reluctantly to the discussion on schools and education that is currently going on outside of their professional domain. In addition, many of the participants had experienced the swiftly changing demands from policy makers regarding teaching content as injunctions from a higher level rather than as cooperation with their principal or the educational authorities. Some experienced the loud discussion on reforms in teaching as oppressive and obligating.

These bloody educational scientists tire me out. These dudes seem to keep themselves employed by inventing something new. “Hey, let’s reform!” “Hey, let’s renew the syllabus!” “Let’s digitize and throw the school desks out!” “Hey, let us get used to this former one . . . not all the time something new. . . .” Ah, will anything change that much anyway? (Teacher number 3)

In addition, the different sets of instruction, such as the laws, statutes, and regulations from the national board of education, were a cause of friction, expressed when pondering the teachers’ social role and educational task. Many of the class teachers were indignant and distressed about the factors controlling their teaching, such as the syllabus and other demands. The general experience was that nobody except teachers themselves can really know what’s the actual situation in the field and what is adequate for teachers.

The resources diminish and the demands get bigger and bigger. “You should be able to encode, use the iPad and animation, and the camera and everything else . . . blogs and vlogs, etc. . . .” Mentally, all the time, I feel I should know something more . . . especially concerning IT. It takes such a lot of time. Inadequacy overwhelms me. (Teacher number 4)

The real world is pretty far from the one presented in many studies or administratively developed lists of demands. You can put many nice

things in a piece of paper, but how many of them have been put into action in real schools? Have they thought about the practice at all. (Teacher number 13)

Sometimes these expectations coming from the pupils' parents or from the administrative level were creating heavy pressure among the dutiful teachers.

One time at the refresher course I felt like oh my god, nobody can stand this job—the expectations are out of proportion. (Teacher number 5)

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, throughout the interviews, the professional interaction with colleagues was described as somewhat superficial. One participant told how, during a long teaching career, there had never been any relevant discussion in the work community. In the data, interaction with colleagues was mainly interpreted as a friendship-based relationship, which might or might not arise, rather than as an organic part of the job.

During my 32-year career I have never had any truly significant pedagogical discussions with other teachers. (Teacher number 7)

Several participants expressed a distinct need to avoid disagreement and conflict in the workplace. If there happened to be several different ways of thinking about a particular matter, the normal cooperation might appear less easygoing. There were even references indicating that the teachers' lounge is not the most pleasant and accepting environment:

My being very different from the others would cause difficulties . . . so if you start to do your own thing. . . . Once we had a teacher in our school whose methods were a bit different, so the atmosphere immediately became: "Go away, away. . . ." So, it's quite important here that no one stands out or behaves like a strong [and independent] character . . . maybe we lack a cutting edge. (Teacher number 2)

In some interviews, also, the hectic, everyday, teacher-pupil-based working routine was considered problematic because it inhibits the creation of a more cooperative and dialogic work community.

There is no time here to talk about things. Especially this year, no, no! I talk more about my work with my close friends and relatives. It's a pity.

Talking here is somehow so technical, if at all. Very seldom do we reach such depths as we have in this interview . . . no. (Teacher number 5)

Generally, according to the data, work communities of class teachers do not appear to be dynamic and collegial, let alone nests of multiprofessional cooperation. The demands of a collegial and innovative work community are well known, but the need for it was not acknowledged. Kaartinen et al. (2008) have identified similar results. A truly interesting observation was the somewhat reserved attitude toward external dimensions affecting the class teacher professionally. Furthermore, when considering interactional and cooperative activities that occur outside of the classroom, the participants in this study were most affected by the cooperation and activities they enjoy with the pupils' families. This was especially true in relation to the demands of their job as a class teacher. Relationships with other class teachers and authorities were not considered important. This apparent indifference is particularly striking.

However, three of the class teachers definitely considered themselves part of the public professional discussion; they saw the dialogue with authorities around the syllabus as a cornerstone of their professional thinking. These three teachers regarded the challenges arising from the regulations, the syllabus, and the need to understand the use of the textbooks as essential aspects of their professional commitment. From their perspective, the interaction with the outside world and the boundary conditions of teaching, such as equality, and the new technologies were all of great importance. One could see that social themes and responsiveness in teaching were at the heart of these class teachers' professionalism.

I am in a really important position. I engage with social issues in my work so I choose subject matters that involve us with our society. For example, we have this issue of refugees. . . . And so we use the right kind of material. I don't use the textbook much. . . . I am impulsive, and I like to throw myself into things. (Teacher number 8)

### Professional Sovereignty with Multidimensional Thinking

In pedagogical research, the class teacher's professionalism has generally been observed through the teacher-pupil relationship. This is understandable because often, as in this study, the class teacher's profession is seen primarily as a personal relationship with the pupils and as one that affects them from

an ethical perspective. In this study, ethical-educational and professional obligations are expressed in the teacher-pupil relationship as having a correct attitude toward the pupils and as supporting neutral and universal values in education. This relationship can be disturbed by external factors such as the academic community, targeted learning outcomes, and demands from parents and authorities.

Well, it's contradictory. In addition to the pursuit of extensive learning outcomes, the teacher work requires a lot of administrative assignments, assessment, communication with parents and other professionals, and so forth. In the end, it takes away resources and time from creative and in-depth interaction with the pupils. (Teacher number 9)

The majority of the participants in this study felt that their professional sphere was specifically in the classroom. Other discussions were seen as outside of their professional space. This was especially expressed in feelings related to difficulties with collegial (work community) discussions and as reticence toward the authorities and researchers regarding their intentions to direct the profession (see also Tomperi 2000, 28–36). Despite this being their experience of the situation, the majority of the participants had no desire to intervene in the decision-making process. This is an interesting notion because both the actual teacher education curriculum and the national core curriculum strive heavily toward a multiprofessional and cooperative teaching profession and emphasize teachers with wide societally and institutionally reciprocal attitudes (see, e.g., National Board of Education 2014; University of Jyväskylä 2017).

In the beyond-the-classroom framework, the teaching profession is generally expected to be interacting both within and outside of the teachers' work community and enjoying lively discussions regarding the teaching profession and their shared conventions in its practice (e.g., Boylan and Woolsey 2015; Bruno-Jofré and Johnston 2014; Clandinin and Husu 2017; Kelchtermans and Deketelaere 2016; Toom and Husu 2016). In contrast, in this study, it appeared that the ethical-educational aims of the teacher-pupil relationship forced some of the teachers to refrain from stating an opinion, from getting involved in any social activity, or from engaging critically with their profession. This all seems to be at odds with the teacher's ethical duty to strive for objectivity. Among the teachers, excessive questioning is probably associated with political or ideological activity, which would therefore not serve the pupils' best interests and would be regarded as ethically conflicting.

Responsibility for the pupils, as experienced both individually and corporately, was one apparent reason for not separating oneself from the professional thinking or dividing the workload. The lack of a collective spirit among teachers can, in part, be caused by their experience of the profession as a one-man mission. This research indicates that class teachers conceive of their profession as a confidential relationship with their pupils, and their professional ethics lean strongly toward this interpretation. This is no surprise and it emphasizes the widely acknowledged main purpose of the teaching profession: its ethical-educational function. Current educational research shows that the ethical emphasis in schools is crucially important and is effective in the pupils' lives (see, e.g., Juujärvi et al. 2010; Toom and Husu 2012, 43). It is also a reflection of the North European-Lutheran *bildung* tradition, where education is seen as action firstly with ethical ideals and secondarily with objectives for cognitive development (see, e.g., Saari et al. 2017). In this tradition, education concentrates mainly on exaltation of the pupils' spiritual life, whereas worldliness issues such as politics or economics align outside educational functions. On the other hand, this is also what prompts educational research to concentrate tightly on the classroom realities, on classroom interactions, and on other psycho-didactic spheres.

## Discussion

This research emphasis leaves the interpretation of the dynamics outside of the classroom to a fringe arena and enhances the encapsulation of the teaching profession within the classroom, reasserting that it is an individualized, personified, and even mythical activity. If the nature of teacher work is narrowed to only having reflections in the classroom reality, it is in conflict with the national core curriculum and other teacher education outlines, where the teacher is fabricated as a school reformer and a learner who is willing to challenge conventional thinking (see, e.g., Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 2018; Sitomaniemi-San 2015). In addition, solely individually experienced responsibility, lived through among participants of this study, does not help schools to become cooperative, societally interactive, or dialectical, as suggested in authoritative and academic papers and both teacher education and national core curriculum (see, e.g., Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 2018; National Board of Education 2004, 2014; Toom and Husu 2012).

In the contemporary research that outlines strategies for the teaching profession today, class teachers are also given a big role outside the classroom, as



in the discussion on changes affecting the school system and the teaching profession (see, e.g., Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 2018). As mentioned, the caricature of today's teacher describes a cooperative, socially interested, and aware teacher agent (see, e.g., Cochran-Smith and Zeichner 2009; Husu and Toom 2016, 21). The observations outside of the classroom open up huge horizons that obligate an intensive dialogue with colleagues and the rest of society (see, e.g., Niemi et al. 2016). However, according to this study, the class teachers working in the schools are neither willing nor prepared to fulfill these expectations. In this perspective, there appears to be a noticeable conflict between the ideals of the latest national core curriculum (2014) and how the teachers interpret the curriculum and express it in their teaching. According to this study, a strongly binding and personally experienced ethical commitment to the pupils might be one reason for the diffusion of the official interpretation of the class teacher's role. By focusing greater interest on the elements outside of the classroom, it might be possible to realize the ideal of "school cooperation," which has been the ultimate, although not yet fulfilled, objective of the twenty-first-century school development discussion in Finland (see, e.g., Kupiainen et al. 2008; Raiker and Rautiainen 2017; Sitomaniemi-San 2015).

Furthermore, the class teachers interviewed for this research represent a dynamic teaching profession, which means they have great interest in professional development and are devoted to their careers. The elements on which this research focused identified the need for more research concentrating on the environment outside of the classroom. This might lead to a deeper comprehension of the class teacher's profession and to a greater concentration on vocational/professional aspects instead of the personal interpretation that pertains. This kind of approach could encourage teachers to share greater responsibility with professionals from other fields and increase open and vigorous cooperation with their own colleagues. According to other studies, the relationships that teachers develop with their school principal and other teachers are valuable and will be increasingly important in the future (see Mancuso et al. 2011; Pyhältö et al. 2011). Positive interpersonal relationships can negate the otherwise detrimental effects that classrooms of challenging students can have on a teacher's feelings of self-efficacy.

In the battle against burnout, diminishing job satisfaction, and feelings of insufficiency among class teachers, it is necessary to emancipate class teachers to direct their energies outside of the classroom as well. In considering the well-being of teachers, it is *de rigueur* that the work community and cooperative activities provide the space, support, and emotional resources necessary

(see Lanas and Kiilakoski 2013, 343–60; Repo and Värri 2000). Moreover, to diminish the experience of the profession as an “individual responsibility” as described in this article, the future teacher should be encouraged and guided to comprehend the profession as cooperative and interactive work, both within the school unit and with the surrounding society. It is likewise important that class teachers take part in the discussion about what kinds of innovation and content the school really needs. A new emphasis on professionalism outside of the classroom could, in addition, encourage individual schools to become social units that not only react to change but are also capable and willing to anticipate, evaluate, and offer a critical view on the phenomena of our time. That is to say, their autonomous position could be widely beneficial. Also, broadening the concept of the profession toward a more communal and interactive direction might enable the teachers’ job to be a little less demanding. This could be a challenge to be taken up by teacher education as well.

Education is an area of human activity where questions of ethics and morals surface, and the class teacher embodies these ideals. To fulfill these expectations, teachers must act in an equitable and ethical manner. This is why education, by its very nature, is much more than a purely informative practice. Moral- and value-bound questions concerning good and bad behavior and mind-sets that are right or wrong are at the core of educational activities and are closely connected with contemporary phenomena and movements in the surrounding society. Despite growing claims that the modern school should be increasingly focused on technical knowledge and expertise, among the participants of this study, the ethical objectives of the teacher’s job were seen as the most important. In this sense, the participants in this study appear to be in opposition to postmodern social development where schools are seen as preparation centers for the working sector. Yet several participants felt that their ethical and educational values were threatened by these instrumental objectives.

The findings of this study illustrate the actual thinking of those engaged in the school reality and indicate how teachers are deeply committed to their work and feel individually responsible for their pupils’ growth. This stance, however, does not resonate with contemporary policy-level descriptions outlining the teaching profession. Despite the extensive autonomy Finnish teachers have, the unspoken effort to meet the expectations drawn in the contemporary policy documents wears the devoted teacher out. Other studies have shown, as well, that unfortunately the most conscientious teachers are the ones who tire the most (see, e.g., Simola 2015). Therefore, the teachers themselves should be more involved in pointing out the targets for development in their

work. Then again, it would require a change in the teachers' own professional thinking toward dimensions outside of the classroom.

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