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TEACHING PROFESSION

Recruiting a teacher

In Finland, the professional relationship between a principal and a teacher starts with the recruiting of the teacher, which is a responsibility that usually falls upon the principal. A political body usually approves permanent contractual employment relationships, or municipal rules of procedure might subject the decision to the head of education and culture department, for instance. In reality, the true recruitment decision belongs in the realm of autonomous leadership and management of the school, which allows the exceptional possibility for the principal to develop his or her school.

There have been significant changes in the opening of vacancies in the educational field over the last decades. Until the late 1990s, principals were responsible for declaring also permanent vacancies; they simply estimated the staff needs in their schools and notified their superiors, after which they ran the practicalities of the recruitment process.

Nowadays, opening new teaching vacancies is more carefully regulated and it is based on a larger scale estimation of the employment needs usually done by the education provider. This is the result of the general decline in the financial situation as well as school mergers and school closures, which have meant that many teachers have been relocated or, in the worst case, made redundant. Teacher recruitment, in other words, has become part of the human resources administration of the education provider, which has weakened the autonomy of principals in selecting their own educational teams.

Still, the actual teacher recruitment is one of the most important responsibilities in school leadership and management. Whether it is a permanent contractual

employment relationship or a substitute teacher's position, the principal makes the actual decision based on person assessments and job interviews. In large school units, these recruitments take place on a weekly basis. Especially in basic education hiring substitute teachers in times of flu epidemics, for instance, is a necessary, and sometimes daily, procedure to ensure student safety in the absence of permanent teachers.

Estimating the employment needs of a school or schools is the first step of recruitment planning. It is sensible to carefully analyze what kind of skills the school community might be lacking and what the staff needs are on different school grades and/or subjects. When this phase is complete, an open vacancy – or vacancies – is declared.

After the groundwork the vacancy is, thus, declared in an advertisement that clearly states what the vacancy is about, what the qualification requirements are and what the duration of the application period is. Usually the school secretary makes a summary of the applicants that shows each applicant's educational background and work experience. The principal focuses on the applicants' conception of learning, as well as their other skills and interests. The aim of the process is to create a comprehensive picture of each applicant and in the end, a sufficient number of applicants are invited to a job interview. About five interviews for one job opening is a good rule of thumb; many more than that shows a lack of prioritizing.

There are countless ways to interview and equally many sets of questions for job interviews. Nowadays many schools assemble an interview team that includes teachers and the principal and sometimes even students have their own representation. On the other hand, sometimes the principal still conducts the interview on his own or together with the vice principal. For example, when it comes to filling a short-term substitute teacher's position, an interview team is hardly a necessary choice. The interviewees, on the other hand, can also be invited to both individual and group interviews.

The main aim of a job interview is to create a broad professional and personal picture of the interviewees. This includes their professional expertise; the way they view their teacherhood; their student assessment and teaching methods; their relationship with students; and their own mission as teachers. Furthermore, it is important to find out about their role in guiding students; their international competence; and, finally, their capabilities in maintaining their own welfare and ability to work. The role of a teacher as a member of the workplace community should also be discussed in the interview.

There are at least three things that the interview should cover: the applicant's conception of learning, their view of their role in the teaching process and their grasp on aiding the overall development of the student. The applicant's competence in their subject is important, but information and knowledge are under constant change and these skills can be updated with in-service training. On the other hand, a teacher's pedagogical principles and his or her view on teacherhood are usually rather permanent and reflect a person's values and concept of human nature.

The most important goal in the recruitment process is to find a good – preferably the best – teacher for the students; not someone who fits within the principal's personal comfort zone or would make an easy colleague to other teachers. Recruitment decisions, especially when it comes to permanent positions, always involve both internal and external pressure. The best and most sustainable result is reached, however, by creating one's own independent course of conduct that considers the school's operational culture and values; the applicants' skills and educational perspectives; and the direction of development or possible need of specific skills in the school or within a certain subject group.

Teaching the ropes of everyday school life

Introducing new teaching staff to their work has become one of the main focuses of school management and leadership. In many ways, it has become a systematic procedure that involves, in addition to principals, teacher colleagues as

well as representatives of the education provider. Introduction work is more than initial familiarization with the new working place; it is a larger scale operating model and can be considered part of the professional development of a teacher.

At the early stages of an employment relationship it is not necessarily important to talk about the strategies of the school or the education provider, but primarily focus on grasping the everyday conventions of school life. Lack of knowledge causes many everyday problems, which can easily be prevented by offering new teachers concrete and relevant information on the school's procedures. Having to look for appliances and instruments that are relevant for one's work, or having to wonder around searching for classrooms and other workspaces can really hinder getting started with one's actual work in a new work place.

Schools have numerous rules and schedules that new teachers must be made aware of. Alongside the official operational culture, there is at least one unofficial version or it or one hidden curriculum that either the teachers or the students have and that new teachers eventually encounter. It would be good to give them information concerning this unofficial, sometimes even unspoken school culture, too.

One of the main elements of teaching new teachers the ropes is to ensure they know the practical principles concerning absences; collaboration between school and home; working hours; and taking part in school events. For example, when drawing up plans for the introduction of new staff members, a principal can make an annual timeline that includes all the necessary information for new teachers.

The principal should consider who should take part in the introduction of new teachers, and the process should take place over several meetings. In latter meetings, the introduction could also include the strategic goals of the school or the education provider or the larger-scale objectives of the school. To ensure the safety of the students and the staff, the introduction process should also include a so-called "safety walk" in which new teachers are familiarized with the school building and the safety procedures.

The principal must see to it that there is time allocated for peer mentoring in teachers' working hours. One's colleagues are the best experts on the practical policies of teaching and the use of teaching aids. The introduction process can be finalized with a discussion in which the new teacher can give feedback on the introduction process and he or she can, perhaps, also offer his or her view on the school's way of doing things. Hearing new teachers' perspectives on the school reality can provide principals with useful development ideas, as one's own critical analysis on the school is reduced as work becomes more familiar and routine-filled.

Organizing schedules and teaching

Teaching schedule is the most concrete management tool for principals. It defines the amount of work teachers and students do annually. The length of the school year is 190 days in Finland and the distribution of lesson hours determines how many lesson hours each grade consists of. The schedule must include the subjects defined in the distribution of lesson hours and the subject contents and courses set in the curriculum. On top of this, each school adds their own areas of emphasis and additional studies or optional courses.

The planning work for the annual schedule starts once the education provider finalizes its budgetary estimates for the year, which determines the lesson hours for basic education and the number of courses for upper secondary school. Based on the budgetary estimates, principals define the teaching resources of their schools for the following year. As the available resources are gradually declining, this stage often involves prioritizing the focus of teaching and possible areas of development. Basically this means that in addition to compulsory teaching, which is automatically provided, the possible extra resources are directed at a particular emphasis provided by the curriculum or some courses are offered, instead of once a year, every two years.

Having drawn up the first draft of the teaching resources for the following year, the principal presents it to the teaching staff. At this stage, he or she should clearly

express the basis on which the schedule will be created, how much teaching will be offered and when the final schedule will be ready. Often this happens alongside with ongoing negotiations concerning needs for additional funding and various kinds of project funding. The teaching staff also engages in a discussion about the internal prioritizing of the school, for instance, whether an area of development should be made visible in the teaching schedule, or if the focus should be in the quality execution of the basic teaching responsibilities instead. The education provider may also present the school some strategies that affect the making of the schedule.

The actual making of the teaching schedule starts once the principal has presented the general outline of the schedule work to the teaching staff. In grades one to six of basic education, the first priority is to work out the distribution of teaching spaces that might otherwise later overlap, and to set the teaching of those teachers who divide their working hours between more than one school. Drawing up the schedule for grades seven to nine of basic education and for upper secondary school has these same challenges, in addition to finding the most suitable placements for elective courses. In most schools the principal gives the teachers and subject groups an estimate on how many working hours are available for the year to come, and the teachers sometimes work out the initial distribution of working hours themselves. In these cases, the principal must ensure that this is done on a realistic and equal basis. If the teaching staff's suggestion is changed, the principal must present them with the appropriate grounds for it.

There are many practical applications to drawing up schedules. Electric management tools help in collecting data and executing the finished schedule. More traditional tools such as pens, paper and magnetic boards can be useful, too. Making the teaching schedule is teamwork and shared leadership at its essence; the planning of school operations, often spiced up with pedagogical realizations, has moments of joy in store for its makers.

The making of teaching schedules happens in very different ways and at different times in Finnish schools. The only rule is that the schedule should be ready

before the start of the school year. For students, the schedule should be as functional as possible and for the teachers, it should divide the workload in as balanced a way as possible so that they can manage both their teaching and the additional duties assigned to them. In ensuring this, the principal does not only support the teachers' welfare but he or she also sends a clear message of equal treatment and appreciation of their work efforts.

Once the challenges of shared teachers, teaching spaces, optional courses and possible pedagogical experiments have been solved, the making of the schedule moves on to the next level, which is the placing of compulsory teaching. In a way the process starts with solving the most difficult problems and then moving on to placing the rest of the teaching in as balanced a way as possible. This is easiest when the school has full autonomy over its own teaching staff; extra commitments, whether internal or external, make the schedule more rigid and force compromises that are satisfactory at best.

If there is flexibility in the existing schedule, the students can test the new schedule as the old school year is close to its end. Teachers should also look through their new schedules and report possible mistakes. The schedule draft is edited based on the teachers' reports and possible pre-selection of courses, and the final version is then made public. Sometimes the schedule needs further fixes during the school year, but usually it stands unchanged.

Planning the teaching schedule allows the incorporation of different pedagogical operational models, merged courses, multidisciplinary themes and alternative work methods. The major part of the work, however, is pragmatic, mathematical thinking, which should combine time, space and people into a well-functioning framework.

Additional duties

In addition to organizing teaching, the principal has to organize the additional duties of the teachers. This involves considering the amount of time they must have

for preparation work and what the goals of their additional duties are. The job description of a teacher includes much more than just teaching and student assessment. In Finland this is partially because of the limited availability of assisting staff. Therefore teachers often have additional duties that would be better suited for other types of personnel.

Teachers, with their varied skills, are, however, the driving forces of any school. When recruiting teachers, the principal should take their special expertise and skills outside their teaching profession into consideration. Schools need people with organizational skills and the kind of drive that makes them also embrace the responsibilities not directly linked to teaching. This aspect of a teacher's job is what creates communal spirit and enhances the school's operational culture.

The non-teaching duties of teachers have various contexts; they include development projects; organizing school events and festivities; maintaining and acquiring teaching appliances and equipment; different student guidance responsibilities; and responsibilities related to international projects, among many other things. In this respect, there are major differences between basic education and, for example, upper secondary schools, where a significant part of a teacher's salary comes from non-teaching duties.

Rotating responsibilities and defining working hours is relevant in planning teachers' non-teaching duties. From the point of view of developing the entire work community, it is sensible to rotate the teachers' non-teaching duties on a regular basis; otherwise they are easily repeatedly assigned to the same people. The idea of rotation also creates a feeling of a just division of labor and challenges teachers to take the position of learners every now and again.

Defining working hours is a significant issue both when it comes to teacher salaries and their capacity to work. Teachers are known to put in countless hours of meaningful work. To prevent burnout or doing additional working hours not approved by the supervisor, it is important to define clear working hours. Aiming to reach a balanced amount of working hours for all teachers is vital; it guarantees good-

quality teaching and the teachers' ability to take part in the non-teaching operations of the school.

Many school projects and operations have a positive basis from a principal's perspective, as they are initiated and carried out by the teachers in so much as to require their superior merely in making these operations official. This is where the professional skills of the teaching staff meet the trust of their supervisor in a perfect way. The portion of non-teaching duties can be quite significant for some teachers; thus, the concept of overall working hours as a basis of teachers' salaries is often mentioned in the general discussion around the possible working hours reform. This would be a functional model, as it would allow the work community to build new kinds of job descriptions and would bring much-anticipated facilitation to the planning and execution of schoolwork.