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“Reimagining Teachers and Teacher Education for our Futures”. Report on the international conference at the University of Helsinki

The international conference “Reimagining Teachers and Teacher Education for our Futures” took place at the University of Helsinki from 18 to 20 June 2024. The conference was organised by the Faculty of Educational Sciences of the University of Helsinki and its UNESCO Chairs Professor Hannele Niemi and Professor Arto Kallioniemi in collaboration with the UNITWIN UNESCO Network on Teacher Education for Social Justice and Diversity, the University of Lapland and GINTL (Global Innovation Network for Teaching and Learning).

Teachers are called upon to prepare students for the world of today and the world of tomorrow in the 21st century – within the framework of high-quality teaching. In 2021, the UNESCO International Commission on the Futures of Education took up this particular and quite challenging demand on the professionalism of teachers. In its groundbreaking and forward-looking report “REIMAGINING OUR FUTURES TOGETHER – A new social contract for education”¹, it emphasised that the professionalism and actions of teachers are becoming increasingly complex and challenging. “The report highlighted the crucial role of teachers not only in providing quality instruction, but also in shaping the critical, transversal skills that are necessary for our futures”². Complexity is reflected, for example, in the fact that teachers often have to teach

large numbers of pupils while also focusing on individualised teaching. Different stakeholders in the school community (including education policy-makers, authorities, parents, guardians, etc.) can have very different and often diverging expectations of schools and the actions of teachers. On the one hand, more and more pupils have access to education; on the other hand, there are too few teachers to teach the large number of pupils. In addition, teachers are to respond to crises (such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic or climate change) and yet, or perhaps because of this, inspire hope in students for the future. Furthermore, communities are becoming more socially, culturally and ethnically diverse: teachers are challenged to balance the demands of the global and the local and at the same time balancing the requirements. The conference addressed these facets of complexity and focused on the four challenges currently facing education systems, identified by the United Nations Transforming Education Summit in 2022 as follows

1. A shortage of teachers and other education professionals
2. Difficulties in ensuring adequate qualifications
3. The low status of the teaching profession and poor working conditions
4. A lack of opportunities to develop teacher autonomy, leadership and innovation

Around 200 academics from the international research community were able to choose between theoretical, empirical and practice-oriented contributions in around 60 sessions with different formats (format referring to paper presentations, workshops ...). In addition, three keynote lectures enriched the conference: Professor Diane Hirshberg, in her presentation “Decolonizing and Indigenizing teaching in Alaska”, discussed how the legacy of colonisation in Alaska is being addressed in the education system and developed future ideas for teaching that makes greater efforts to decolonise and indigenise teaching practice across the state of Alaska. In his presentation “Reimagining teacher Education for our Future: Trends from Africa”, Dr. Jeremiah M. Kalai explained how education, education management, school leadership etc. should be developed further in order to meet the requirements of Agenda Africa 2063 of the African Union. In her presentation “On Education Systems and Teaching in Developing Countries”, Dr. Ritva Reinikka elaborated on the fact that while more and more pupils are gaining access to education and schooling, many pupils are learning too little in school or even dropping out prematurely. Against this background, she outlined recommendations on how to make education systems and teaching in developing countries more conducive to learning and more effective. Anita Lehtikoinen took on the role of ceremonial speaker of the conference in her capacity as Permanent Secre-

tary of the Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland. She emphasized the importance of the conference for knowledge sharing and continuous development of education in response to the changing societies.

The conference received a lot of positive feedback: the coming together of academics, educational practitioners and government representatives was emphasised as particularly beneficial. Overall, the conference provided an opportunity to anticipate global and local challenges for national and international education systems and to make suggestions for the further development of teacher professionalism and teacher education. The conference website can be accessed via the following link: <https://www.helsinki.fi/en/conferences/reimagining-teachers-and-teacher-education-our-futures>

References

- 1 UNESCO (2021): REIMAGINING OUR FUTURES TOGETHER – A new social contract for education. Report from the International Commission on the Future of Education. Paris: o.P. <https://doi.org/10.54675/ASRB4722>
- 2 Access on 25.06.2024 <https://www.helsinki.fi/en/conferences/reimagining-teachers-and-teacher-education-our-futures/call-abstracts>

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