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"DOWN-TO-EARTH TEACHERS" - A CASE STUDY ON  
TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN  
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Abstract			
<p>Teacher-student relationship is a significant factor impacting teaching and learning in any level. However, it has been neglected in research. It has been ignored particularly in higher education thinking that it is not so important when teaching adults. Especially at present when efficiency and neoliberal views seem to dominate higher education, human relations and their influence on learning has not been of great interest to researchers. The relationship might be particularly important to international students who come from different contexts and have no network of relations in the country where they study.</p> <p>The aim for this research is to look into the diverse views of international students about their Finnish higher education. It should shed light on the following question and sub-questions:</p> <p>Main question: How do international students describe the teacher-student relationship in a Finnish University?</p> <p>Sub-questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. What have students experienced positive and challenging in the student-teacher relationship in Finland?</li><li>2. How do students view an ideal teacher-student relationship in the context of higher education?</li></ol> <p>The context of the research is Finland and more specifically, two universities. The research was a qualitative case study and data was collected with thematic interviews from seven international students from University of Oulu and University of Jyväskylä. The data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis.</p> <p>The four aspects of teacher-student relationship: body, caring, power and cultural aspects form the theoretical framework of the study. Using case study as the research method, this study unveils, firstly, that compared to their previous experience, informants find their relationship with teachers informal. This informality is identified through teachers' "down-to-earth" characteristics, through caring and by students having equal power relations with teachers. Secondly, the teaching methods are more associated with student-centeredness. Thirdly, informal teacher-student relationship is reflected in student-centered teaching methods. Besides the need for more positive feedback, informants share that calling teachers by their first name is a challenging experience. In addition, too much student-centeredness might lose its significant positive impact. There should be a balance between teacher-centered and student-centered methods and the teachers should take into account that students in an international group come from very diverse backgrounds. Finally, what contributes to an ideal teacher-student relationship varies from one informant to another, but in general, a good relationship is a combination of both cognitive and affective aspects of the act of teaching and learning.</p>			
Keywords    teacher-student relationship, teaching, learning, student-centered, teacher-centered, higher education, Finland, case study			



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher-student relationship is one factor that brings significant impact on students in their learning process. Especially when academic environment changes to where teacher-student relationships are positive, it creates the impulse for academic and personal development. I have gone through two different pedagogical cultures and got interested in investigating how teacher-student relationship in the context of higher education in Finland is viewed by other international students.

Coming from a different context gives me both advantages and disadvantages in looking into this topic. As an outsider, researching a foreign education context proposes the researcher with many challenges to gain an in-depth understanding of the teacher-student relationship. This relationship is situated in the context of the structures of higher education which has long been founded and built on specific socio-historical referents. Understanding these foundations is mandatory for understanding the teacher-student relationships though it is not easy for an outsider. On the other hand, my previous experience from a different way of perceiving has also offered me a “fresh eye” looking into another operating model, which enables me to reflect, compare and contrast the Finnish context with the Vietnamese one where I come from.

Compared to my previous experience in Vietnam where teacher is considered to be an authority figure, teachers that I have been in contact with here in Finland are more facilitative and friendly. For example, in this academic culture, your opinions are acknowledged; your personal accounts are taken into consideration. Students call teachers by their first names, and they can stop teachers speaking, or disagree with teachers. In the class discussion, teacher is a member of the group, in a class activity teacher is a partaker, and in a class presentation, teacher can be an audience. When meeting teachers in their office rooms, they then turn to be co-learners and friends who care about students' emotions and welfare. All these roles created in me curiosity, admiration and the feeling of connection. It is a positive experience to me to notice this much difference in the teacher-student relationship compared to my previous one. To give a concrete example, my teacher at Finnish University sent me an email informing about the birth of her newborn baby, which all brought me the feeling of closeness. It further underpins my assumption about a friendly teacher-



student relationship in Finnish academic culture and creates a motivation to me to investigate this research topic.

Having a positive attitude toward Finnish teacher-student relationship, I must at the same time be aware of my position and judgment about teacher-student interaction in this context. The same interaction could be perceived differently by different agents. It is also a part of personality that one might feel positive towards certain practices and others might feel negative about them. Understanding this helps me stop making taking-for-granted assumptions and avoiding misinterpreting classroom relationships.

### **1.1 Overview of the study**

Being aware of cultural bias and my personal bias, I would take a careful step in investigating how other international students perceive the academic culture here in a Finnish university in general and teacher-student relationship in particular. This research applies qualitative method which utilizes thematic interviews and analysis in the aim of understanding different views of seven international master students from the faculty of Education in the University of Oulu and University of Jyväskylä concerning teacher-student relationship in the context of higher education in Finland.

Through the internationalization of higher education, Finnish universities have been attracting students all over the world. This in turn creates a multicultural student profile which needs to be acknowledged to enhance high quality teaching and learning. Many researches have been conducted on teacher and teaching in higher education, but studies on the teacher-student relationship, which is an important dimension and pivotal aspect, has been neglected and research in this area remains scarce in number.

University is an institution where knowledge is produced, and teaching and learning takes place. Understanding how students view their relations with teachers will help bring better communications for pedagogical situations. Therefore, research in teacher-student relationship needs to be increased to facilitate and improve the education practices.

## **1.2 Research questions**

The aims for this research are looking into the diverse views of international university students concerning the Finnish higher education. Ultimately, it sheds light on answering the following:

How do international students describe the teacher-student relationship in a Finnish university?

This main question is broken down into two sub-questions, which are: 1. What have students experienced positive or challenging in the teacher-student relationship in Finland? 2. How do students view an ideal teacher-student relationship in the context of higher education?

## **1.3 Organization of the study**

Chapter 1 gives an overview of researcher's journey and interest towards the topic and research focus and specifies research questions.

Chapter 2 provides a contextualization of the Finnish higher education where internationalization prevails. It describes Finnish teaching and learning characteristics one of which is to view education as an academic discipline.

Chapter 3 represents a glimpse of various aspects of theoretical concepts and frameworks on which the study is founded. These consist of higher education pedagogy and discussion on teacher-student relationships.

Chapter 4 introduces the qualitative methods employed in the study and highlights research procedures carried out.

Chapter 5 discusses key findings from the research data and links them to research questions and theoretical foundations.

Chapter 6 discusses the validity and reliability of the research and draws implications and recommendations for future teacher-student interactions and for future researches in the same field.

## **2. CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH: FINNISH HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **2.1 The internationalization of higher education in Finland**

With a great eagerness to adopt the Bologna process which aimed at creating a European Higher Education Area and harmonizing European degree structures, Finland is considered to be yearning for topping the European universities (Ahola & Mesikammen, 2003). Along with the internationalization of education, Finnish universities have been witnessing an increasing number of multicultural classrooms.

Universities in Finland are aiming at becoming internationally strong and attractive institutions, which is founded on the ideas of promoting multicultural higher education community (Ministry of Education, 2009). Quality in research and education is said to be the key element for attracting foreign students. The internationalization policy leads to the increasing number of international students in classrooms which creates a need for cultural awareness in teaching and learning practices. This in turn creates a demand for Finnish academic environment to make a move from “self-congratulatory homogenous culture to genuine appreciation and recognition of the importance of internationality, language skills and multiculturalism” (ibid, 2009).

### **2.2 Teaching and learning**

Postareff (2007:13) contends that approaches in teaching can be divided into two broad categories: the student-centered and the teacher-centered ones where the former is more associated with high quality teaching in higher education. Many universities emphasize and design programs or training for enhancing pedagogical practices that promote student-centeredness. To foster this approach, it is primarily important to offer teachers opportunities for reflection and conceptual change in their pedagogical approaches. Emphasizing the teaching strategies without initial change in the conceptions will only change the teaching approach on a superficial level (ibid, 2007:61). In the context of Finland, these programs are not compulsory, neither yet widely implemented. Postareff suggests that teachers should be intrinsically motivated in order to understand these pedagogical courses to gain better picture of the art of teaching and to improve students' learning in higher education.

### **2.3 Teacher autonomy**

One crucial discussion about the Finnish education system concerns the autonomy of teachers in deciding what to teach and how to teach, which is regarded as a part of academic freedom. It is clear that any kind of freedom is ultimately based on trust and responsibility – which is frequently ignored in the discussion of quality in education. Therefore, the issue of teaching autonomy is not only connected to political aspects, but it is a moral principle that embraces the concerns over involved people. According to Goodlad (1988:49), academic freedom of faculty and members of lecturing staffs includes the autonomy in teaching agenda and teaching methods, namely such aspects as course approval (courses that are approved to comply with institutional standards), validation and accreditation. Validation means the verifying of the certain programs that they have been up to the agreed standards, and accreditation is the recognition of the provider and certificates that are issued.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 3.1 Higher education pedagogy

In this chapter, insights into “andragogy” or adult education are presented. Theory and principles of andragogy carry a significant weight on the teaching and pedagogical relationship between teachers and students, where educational intentions are not primarily maturity-driven. Adult learners are more independent than young learners and have a certain understanding of their own educational objectives and learning features.

##### 3.1.1 Andragogy – adult education

Comprehensive theory on adult education was foremost and insightfully developed by Knowles in 1977. His research has made a shift in education paradigm from pedagogy to andragogy in adult education, based on the premise that the theory of methods and principles in teaching young learners does not fit the characteristics of adult learners (Thompson & Deis, 2004). There are four thrusts that influenced the practice of teaching and learning in the eighties and nineties that lead to the emergence of “the modern practice” (Knowles, 1980). One fundamental thrust is the change from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. This shift is informed by the profound finding in the natural learning process which states that teaching and learning must be

“focusing on what happens inside the learner rather than on what the teacher does. Out of this line of thinking came a new emphasis on education as a process of facilitating self-directed learning and a redefinition of the role of teacher as a facilitator of self-directed learning and a resource to self-directed learners.” (ibid, 1980:19)

The basic assumption in andragogy according to Knowles is that when learners are undergoing the process of maturation, they have a psychological need to move from reliance towards aggregate self-directedness.

In a response to this, teacher has the responsibility to foster and nurture this movement from dependency to self-reliance (ibid, 1980:45). This new education paradigm suggests that teachers must be aware of the need of creating a psychological learning environment

where learners can feel being accepted, respected and supported. Students are free to express what they think without being hesitant, afraid of punishment or being ridiculed. It is different from traditional learning in a way that learners are seen as individuals with unique values, in a classroom where informality, friendliness, and support prevail more than in the conventional school environment where there is status differentiation between teachers and learners. And most importantly, it is the teacher's behavior that probably influences the academic environment more than any other factor (ibid. 1980:47). Later on, Knowles & Associates (1990) have composed comprehensive guidelines on adult teaching in various fields and study programs which highlight the ideal learning climate and the involvement of learners.

There are also other theories adding to what Knowles has said, stating that the world of teaching and learning is not fully reformed by this model of andragogy education, Pratt (1998) proposes a *General Model of Teaching* that acknowledges the diversity of purpose and procedure, context and content of education. In this model of five constituents which are teachers, learners, content, context, ideals, and purposes, he forms three relationships: between the teacher and learners, teacher and content, and learners and content (ibid, 1998:4). Pratt's implications rest on the assumption that there is no single or universal best practice of teaching adults, but rather education must address and value "a pluralistic view of teaching and a diversity of commitments and perspectives" (ibid, 1998:11). One profound finding from the research is the significance of the relation between teacher and the people they teach.

### 3.1.2 Teaching approach

Teachers' conceptions of teaching play as a pivotal factor determining teaching approach. These conceptions can be divided into two main categories (Kember & Kwan, 2000, as cited in Postareff, 2007, part 3:4):

- "teaching as transmission of knowledge" which includes two sub-categories: "teaching as passing information" and "teaching as making it easier for students to understand."
- "teaching as learning facilitation" (is also called a "two-way cooperative approach by Chalmers and Fullers, 1996:10) which consists of "teaching as meeting students'

learning need” and “teaching as facilitating students to become independent learners.”

Teachers who apply the former conception tend to adopt teacher-centered approach in teaching, and those possessing the later viewpoint, subsequently implement the student-centered method in teaching (ibid.)

### 3.1.3 Learning approach

One important condition for learning is the learner’s ability to identify their own learning style and individualized educational outcomes. Students commence their course of study with a set of beliefs about their nature of learning and their intentional goals (Biggs and Moore, 1993 in Chalmers and Fullers, 1996:5).

Students usually start their learning with the same approach they used in their previous learning tasks, and this is called “approach to learning” (Biggs, 1987 as cited in Chalmers and Fullers, 1996:6). When considering the level of learning, these approaches can be generally divided into three categories: surface approach, deep approach and achieving approach. As the name provokes, surface approach means a learning method that deploys an economic way of learning, meaning that learners strive to complete the task with as little time and effort as possible. This learning is based on the principle that learners aim at fulfilling the external purpose of the tasks and are not aiming at deep learning. The deep approach learning is seen as the celebration of engagement in the tasks with an intention of maximizing the meaningfulness extracted from it. This approach is characterized by a highly cognitive process, including transforming the material, critical analyzing, synthesizing and restructuring the knowledge that allows students to understand and interpret knowledge from multiple perspectives. Lastly, achieving approach is more or less similar to the surface approach in a sense that it emphasizes the external purpose of the task. However, it is different from the deep and surface approaches because learners’ goal is to achieve high mark. Nevertheless, it does not necessarily mean that high mark is attached to high levels of learning. In this case, learners will employ either surface or deep strategies in learning, according to the requirement of the test to increase their mark (Chalmers and Fullers, 1996:6).



Postareff (2007:65) further elaborates the link between teaching and learning by saying that when teachers use learning-focused teaching, students are more likely to adopt deep approach and when teachers use teaching-focused approach, students tend to employ surface approach.

## **3.2 Teacher-student relationship**

### **3.2.1 Previous studies on teacher-student relationship**

Initial and comprehensive study on teacher-student relationship has been conducted nearly forty years ago by Brophy & Good (1974). According to researchers, this relationship has been considered to be important to the students' motivation and quality of the teaching-learning process (Aultman, Williams-Johnson & Schutz, 2009; Noddings, 1992). This relation as well as relation between the parent and the child are called pedagogical relation and it has certain qualities. Especially with young learners, this relationship with teacher is more than a means to an end, and "the relation is a life experience that has significance in and of itself" (van Manen, 1993:73). Sharing this view point, Fraser et al (2006) posits that this relation does not only enhance the student outcomes, but it is also a worthwhile process goal of education. In this relationship, enjoyment, contentment, and satisfaction derive from love, respect, and affection between the teacher and the student. The present moment, rather than any future foresights or benefits are important (van Manen, 1993:74). Happiness in teaching prevails when teachers and students interact fully in the happenings at present and do not concentrate on what they may become.

This relationship is significant in a way that learners do not only learn from their teachers a body of knowledge or collective set of skills but also the way in which the substance is represented and embodied in the personal self of the teachers – their dedication, wholeheartedness, values, commitment and so on (van Manen, 1993:73). However, most of the researches in teacher-student relationships over the last ten years have primarily emphasized the professional aspects of teaching while they failed to acknowledge the importance of emotional and personal interactions between the partners in learning.

Researches on teacher-student relationship, in general, are mostly conducted on the comprehensive school levels of education (e.g., Hargreaves, 2000; Fraser, B.J. et al, 2006; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2006; Aultman, Williams-Johnson, & Schutz, 2009, O'Connor, 2010). Hargreaves (ibid) in his research argues that elementary teachers are characterized by a close relationship with students while secondary school teachers are more likely to keep a distance from them. He further illuminates that teaching is indeed an emotional practice; therefore, the boundaries between professional and personal aspects are not always clear cut. Teachers, to some extent, have tension between the pedagogical conservatism and close relationships with the students.

In a 25-year program of studies on secondary school classroom by Wubbels & Brekelmans (2006), a model for interpersonal behavior is proposed to describe teacher-student relationships. This model constitutes of two dimensions which are Influence (from Dominance to Submission), and Proximity (from Opposition to Cooperation). The study indicates that positive teacher-student relationships are characterized by a high degree of teacher influence and proximity.

In the context of education in Finland, most recently, Uitto (2011) in her dissertation on teacher-student relationship in different Finnish education levels, specifically looks into six concepts that are connected with teacher-student relationship: emotion, power, caring, personal-professional, gender and body. Using students' memories of teachers and storytelling as the method, she has classified teachers into four kinds: teachers keeping order and discipline, teachers treating students hurtfully or unfairly, teachers inspiring and appreciative towards their students, and teachers who influenced students.

Talvitie et al (2000:79) examine the influence of teachers and supervisors in shaping professionalism and personal characteristics of student teachers. The research shows that having a close cooperation with teachers enhances student teachers' pedagogical skills. Good teacher-student relationship is the encouragement for new pedagogical solutions.

Cultural background and expectations also influence aspects of teacher-student relationship. Students from different ethnic backgrounds or cultural groups have different perceptions about their relationships with teachers. Den Brok and Levy (2006) contends the asso-

ciation between the cultural composition of the class and student perceptions of interpersonal teacher behavior being displayed, and the extent to which individuals perceive their relationships with teacher differently shaped by their ethnicity-related expectations. Teachers respectively communicate in different manners to different students according to their ethnicity. Authors subsequently acknowledge the need for teacher awareness of these differences to implement better teaching practices and behaviors that can improve their relationship with students.

In general, however, this relationship is not much discussed in higher education where students are more independent in their learning and teachers' professionalism and scholarship of teaching and learning are, again, more emphasized.

### 3.2.2 Defining teacher-student relationship in higher education

Though researches in teacher-student relationship have been conducted recurrently, there has been no generally agreed definition for this relationship. Van Manen (1993:73) uses the term "pedagogical relation" which is best described as: "that between the parent and the child, or between the professional educator and the student when that relation is pregnant with certain qualities." This term also refers to the relationship between teachers and students.

Qualities of pedagogical relation differ fundamentally according to the maturity of pupils. For young learners, it is the adult's dedication and intentions for the child's mature development that are the qualities being embedded in this relationship. These qualities are not holistically and appropriately transferred to the context of higher education in which students are grown-ups with certain amount of penetrating maturity. Therefore, the model of institutional environment, relationships and interactions by Pratt (1998:4), which focuses on the teaching of adults and the diversity of commitments and perspectives, can better illuminate this relationship in higher level learners. Pratt advocates that there are three kinds of relationships in the teaching model which are between teachers and learners, teachers and content and learners and content.

I am not going to give an exhaustive definition of the concept, but try to elaborate how this concept is understood and dealt with in this study. Teacher-student relationship in higher education is defined as the relation between teachers and students that is formed by and developed through the assigned institutional educational tasks, and bounded by institutional organizational characteristics. Institutional educational tasks are composed of the academic interactions in teaching and learning respectively by teachers and students, and institutional organizational characteristics refers to the academic culture, class size, time for courses, and so on.

What makes teacher-student relationship in higher education different from that of lower level of education will be discussed below.

### 3.2.3 Aspects of teacher-student relationship

There are many elements in the formation of teacher-student relationship. In this research I am going to focus on four elements including body, caring, power, and cultural traits. These elements serve as fundamental aspects determining the teacher-student emotional and professional interactions and involvements. These four elements shaping the relationship are put under close observation with cultural expectation/preconception aspects which are interwoven in the teacher-student relationship.

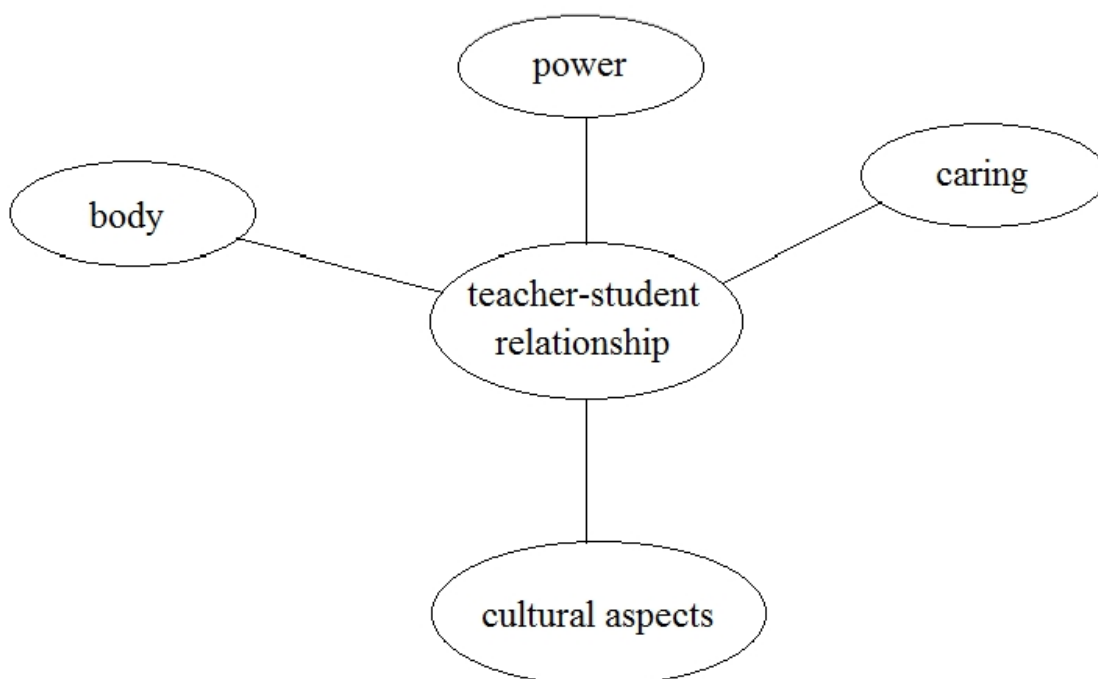


Figure 1. Aspects of teacher-student relationship

#### ❖ Body

Body can be understood as “body as an active and intentional reaching out from its physical existence” (Estola and Elbaz-Luwisch, 2003). The aspect of teachers’ body in the relationship with the students denotes a variety of features such as teachers’ appearances, expressions, gestures, voices, and the manner teachers dress or touch (Uitto, 2011:65). These intricate gestures implicitly reveal teacher’s affection, care and interest towards students.

Pratt (1998:209) advocates that teachers take certain roles and from these specific roles they develop particular responsibility and form relationship with their students. Most of them characterize their relationship with students as friendly but impersonal (at arm’s length or business-like). If the relationship falls into a personal one, it becomes that of friendship which extends beyond the boundaries of teacher and learner.

### ❖ Caring

Caring has always been considered an important aspect of education. Generally speaking, effective teaching is systematic, stimulating, and caring (McKeachie & Kulik 1975; P. A. Cohen 1981; Marsh 1982 as cited in Brown & Atkins, 1988, p.5). O'Connor (2008) has emphasized that caring for and about students is an integral part of secondary teachers' work and it also acts as a motivation for their teaching. According to Noddings (2001), caring is a two-way relation which involves two sides: the person who cares and one being cared for. Subsequently, Kim & Schallert (2011) share the same viewpoint that "caring could not be considered a one-way characteristic of what teachers do and are, but rather that it is dependent on students' reciprocal responses."

In the fore-mentioned study of *General Model of Teaching* (Pratt, 1998), care is again prevailed profoundly in teacher-student relationship. A teacher affirms that "the best thing I can possibly do as a teacher, is care about my students and have them learn to respect themselves" (ibid, 1998:8). This view on teaching clearly posits that content is a means while the learner is the end.

Interestingly, to which extent teachers should be caring for and about their students is another topic of further discussion. Caring for students requires university teachers to balance between the two flows: one directing outward, towards students' learning, and the other directing inward to the "the inner landscape of a teacher's life" (Hubert, 2010).

### ❖ Power

The use of power in teaching practice is often considered to prevail in the classroom due to the fact that the relationship between teacher and student is asymmetrical. This relation is asymmetrical firstly in the sense that the teacher is an adult and the student is a younger one. Secondly, it arises from different school tasks and obligations assigned to each party that need to be fulfilled (Knowles, 1980:66; van Manen, 1993; Uitto, 2011:34).

In higher education, the age-related power asymmetry seems to lose its significance as students are grown-ups and the learning environment is directed toward mutual respect and

understanding. Relating to different school tasks, according to Pratt (1998:214), there are four types of power presented in teacher-student relationship:

- Social or institutional title and role: the pattern of communication which call attention to teacher's official titles or designations,
- Language or symbol system of content: teacher making no effort in translating their expertise and knowledge into the language accessible to learners,
- Gatekeeper to practice: teacher making judgments about learners' readiness to move ahead in their career,
- Evaluation of learning: the authority of teacher over the evaluation of learning through shaping and directing learning and establishing what counts as legitimate knowledge.

These four types of power can, to some extent, combine and manifest themselves in teaching, and in addition, there are powers relating to class, race, and gender. Different teachers perceive the power relation differently: it is assumed not to be an issue, it is a part of teaching agenda, or it is the dominant theme relating directly to the goals of teaching (ibid, 1998:215).

#### ❖ Cultural aspects

Den Brok & Levy (2005) mention that studies investigating student perception about teacher-student relationship identify cultural differences in broad categories such as approach/avoidance, individualism/collectivism, and power distance. However, these dimensions have not been carefully measured and examined in terms of individual students. Assigning a group of students or individual students with certain cultural traits or characteristics might run the risk of stereotyping. There are always individual differences in the way students are influenced by their cultural background, or how they respond, and adapt to the new environment. Taking these into account, in this study, I am not going to have particular preconceptions about respondents' cultural-related characteristics. Rather, cultural aspects act as an environment for the recognition of variations in student perceptions, if any. In other words, this study represents an attempt to investigate the link between cultural aspects and conceptions on teacher-student relationship at the individual level. Respond-

ents at some point relate their current perceptions in the Finnish higher education context with their previous experiences at their home institutions.



## 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I am going to elaborate epistemological and ontological grounds which are two important types of philosophical assumptions that help me make informed choices about research approach in data collection and analysis.

### 4.1 Qualitative research

In relation of providing a definition of qualitative research, Mason advocates that:

“There have been many attempts to define qualitative research, yet there is not a consensus on this question because “qualitative research – whatever it might be – certainly does not represent a unified set of techniques or philosophies, and indeed has grown out of a wide range of intellectual and disciplinary traditions.” (1996:3)

Many authors, indeed, also concur on the breadth of the term “qualitative research”. Denzin and Lincoln (2000:8) find that “qualitative research is many things to many people.” The word *qualitative* implies the prominence of the quality aspects of entities and research is more driven by the processes and meanings that cannot be measured by numbers, quantities, intensity (ibid). They contend that “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (ibid:3). Therefore, the basis of qualitative research is to understand a phenomenon instead of giving explanations. The purpose of this research approach is not directed toward finding causal links or giving generalization but to gain insights into a research object as opposed to quantitative research paradigm which is more concerned with testing hypotheses and evaluating theories. To facilitate the ideas of qualitative, personal experience, interactions, and meaning creation, qualitative research emphasizes the importance of studying research subjects in their entire settings and applying holistic approach.

#### 4.1.1 Case study

Baxter and Jack (2008) discuss that “case study is an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources.” The varie-

ty of sources is ensured by the multiple lenses under which the phenomenon is perceived, conceptualized and understood. A case can be a person or a thing, and according to Miles and Huberman, a case is a “phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (1994:25) and it simultaneously is the unit of analysis. The two outstanding authors who study in depth about case study are Robert Stake (1995) and Robert Yin (2006). Their views and methods of case study will be further discussed in the next chapter.

The approach of case study is based on constructivist paradigm. Discussing about paradigm, it is useful to refer to Guba and Lincoln’s (1998:200) acknowledgment of “paradigm as basic belief systems based on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions” and “as human constructions.” Ontology is concerned with the nature of existence, what things exist while epistemology looks at what is knowledge, how we know what we know and how knowledge is acquired. Methodological assumptions deal with the way the inquirer seeks to find what they believe can be shown as reality. The answers to these three questions are always human constructions, which means that these are the creation of human mind and therefore subject to human error (Guba and Lincoln, 1998:202). There are four competing paradigms in research which are positivism, postpositivism, critical theory and related ideological positions, and constructivism (ibid, 1998:195). As each paradigm responds to three questions of ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions, acceptance of a paradigm belief is the basis of researcher’s choice to make informed and sophisticated decision of how and why in conducting a research. The constructivist paradigm rests on the idea that the truth is relative, dependent on human’s constructions and perspectives. Qualitative paradigm is the suitable approach in my case study because it corresponds to my epistemological belief which rests on the ideas that there is no objective knowledge; rather phenomenon is perceived differently in relation to how an individual constructs reality.

Case study is an appropriate method to adopt in this research because of the following reasons. Firstly, the unit of analysis is the “teacher-student relationship” that occurs in the context of the higher education in Finland. The phenomenon is hardly independently separated or excluded from the context, especially when relationship is determined by the social and institutional norms and expectations. Therefore, the contextual background is relevant and worth covering in the research. Secondly, the weight in the study is placed on the

exploration of the phenomenon in the aspects of “how” and “why.” This study helps shed light on depicting phenomenon and finding explanations for the phenomenon’s characteristics. This again, emphasizes the interconnections between the phenomenon and the context. In other words, exploring the teacher-student relationship would not make sense without finding the reasons or factors that lead to the quality or the nature of teacher-student relationship.

#### 4.1.2 Type of case study

Case study is categorized into three types: explanatory, exploratory and descriptive according to Yin (2003). He also distinguishes between single, holistic and multiple case studies. On the other hand, Stake (1995) categorizes case studies into intrinsic, instrumental and collective case study.

My study can be classified as a descriptive study according to Yin’s categorization. This type of study is most appropriately used when researcher is looking for descriptions of a phenomenon in the real-life context in which it occurs. My study can also be seen as an intrinsic case study in accordance with Stake’s classifications. Intrinsic case study suggests a study that researchers conduct out of its own interest. The case study being researched is not representing other cases, but the case itself is of an interest. There are certain characteristics that the case illustrates which cannot be found in other cases. And above all, the purpose of the study is not to build theory (Stake, 1995). The focus of my study is to investigate students’ own perceptions of teacher-student relationship. My research is not aiming to find out consequential factors, test the respondents’ ways of thinking in relation with their background, or to make generalizations out of it. Instead, the study yields an attempt to get insightful understandings of the phenomenon – the teacher-student relationship – through international students’ divergent points of view.

#### 4.2 Qualitative content analysis

According to Titscher (2000), the first book written in depth about qualitative content analysis was published in 1952 by Berelson. This approach has been used and examined by numerous researchers and analysts to identify its methods, approaches and critiques. There are certain aspects of rigidity that qualitative content analysis does not exhaustively ad-

dress, for instance, neglecting context of text component, latent structures of sense, distinctive individual cases and things that do not appear in the text (Ritsert 1972, 19-31, as cited in Kohbacher, 2006). Following these critiques, Mayring's study of the approach of qualitative content analysis and method has overruled these drawbacks. The basic idea of Mayring is the applying of a systematic, theory-guided approach by using a category system which is derived from the step-by-step analysis of the material. Qualitative content analysis, according to Mayring, is described as "an approach of empirical, methodologically controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytical rules and step by step models, without rash quantification" (Mayring, 2000). To enhance this, the way materials are analyzed must be determined by rules of procedure, categories must be founded on theoretical framework; the nature of materials, and these categories are revised, and adapted at certain phrases of the analysis.

### **4.3 Procedures of content analysis**

There are two main approaches to content analysis: inductive category development and deductive category application, according to Mayring (2000). Inductive category development works with formulating a criterion of definition based on theoretical background and research objects or questions (*ibid*). The criterion of definition determines the aspects of the material that researcher will be looking into. As its name suggests, inductive approach will minimize the prior-decided the categories respectively and thoroughly, following the analysis of material. Deductive category application, on the other hand, starts with prior formulated categories or aspects of analysis. Then it tries to bridge these categories and aspects of analysis to the texts or material (*ibid*). Another approach is abductive which employs inductive and deductive analysis by using some categories from the theory but also forming new categories on the basis of data.

Coding – the process of defining categories – is an essential aspect of content analysis. Coding is "the process of transforming raw data into a standardized form." (Babbie, 2001:309, as cited in Kohlbacher, F, 2005). The work of coding involves determining categories by applying coding rules into qualitative data in order to form structures of data.

When the data are coded, they then go through the process of analysis. The three different analytical procedures in the qualitative content analysis are summary, explication, and

structuring (Mayring, 2000). Summary is the process of reducing the materials in a way that it still reflects the original message. Explication, in contrast with summary, attempts to explain, annotate the material. This process involves analyzing, making sense of the materials in relation with both the narrow and broad context in which it occurs. Structuring is considered to be an essential step in content analysis, which aims at forming a structure of material, starting with forming key categories, then follow the examples from the materials.

#### **4.4 Data collection: Thematic interview**

The dominant and preferred method for collecting data in a qualitative study has been the individual interview. There are also many kinds of interviews. I consider my research interview to be a thematic interview.

Thematic interview can sometimes also be called a semi-structured interview or in-depth interview. In general, this type of interview, according to Flick (2009:150), will make use of the flexibility that a standardized interview or questionnaire could not provide. This flexibility makes researchers open to the interviewed subjects' viewpoints in a way that they can share, express, or talk in-depth about topics or situations that are personally meaningful to them. However, in order that interviewees will not move very far away from the topic of research, it is necessary that the researcher makes sure participants are well-informed about the structures, and scope of the study. The process of planning thematic interviews starts with forming themes – which are abstract constructs – before conducting interviews. The themes will help both researchers and participants to better control the validity of the communication substance. Because of its flexible but systematic nature, thematic interview has gained popularity and preference among researchers of qualitative paradigm.

Thematic interviews are suitable for this study because firstly, this is a qualitative exploratory research which seeks to answer the question of “how” participants view their relationship with their teachers in their daily academic contexts. Allowing them to talk openly and freely, they will further clarify and explain “why”, which enables the researcher to understand their viewpoints. Furthermore, when talking about relationship, the subject matter is more embedded with the emotional aspects than questionnaire would be able to cover.

In qualitative research, collecting and analyzing data, finding themes, are fundamental steps before, during and after data collection (Ryan and Bernard, 2003:275). There are four themes that derived from the literature review of this research: teacher-student relationship, teaching methods, accessibility to teachers, and ideal teacher-student relationship. These four themes are further explored and examined through semi-structured interviews among participants.

## **4.5 Empirical research process**

### **4.5.1 Identification of research participants**

This study is interested in different meanings of teacher-student relationship; therefore it is important to choose participants who represent a variety of subjects' academic and cultural backgrounds. Invitations to participate in the research (see Appendix 1) were sent to potential participants and subsequently were followed by an informed consent letter (see Appendix 2) if they expressed a positive feedback in taking part in the study.

The number of participants of a qualitative research is not clearly pre-determined; neither can it be set according to any standard. It relies on the particularity of the research topic, nature of the data collected, the desirable goal of the researcher, and other factors. The bulk of the data should accumulate to a saturation point where more information would be repeating or abundant. At first, my desirable number of participants was eight to make sure that different aspects and conceptions would be penetratingly and fully captured. However, after interviewing the seventh participant, the data that I had gained reached to the salutation level.

The fact that participants are either sophomores or graduate students who have studied for at least one year in Finnish institutes ensures that they have sufficient time and experience with different teachers to gain a deeper perspective on the research topic. Adding to this, participants are coming from diverse cultural backgrounds (Asia, Europe, Africa, and America) and have experienced at least two different academic cultures (their home countries' and Finnish education experience).

There were two Finnish universities from which participants came. One university is in the Northern part of Finland and the other is more to the South. With participants who are studying at the University of Oulu, interviews were conducted face-to-face at the Linnanmaa campus. Students coming from the University of Jyväskylä, due to time and resource constraints, were online interviewed via Skype and they were recorded using Skype recorder program. One of the students is now residing in Germany after finishing her study in Finland in the autumn semester of 2012.

Faculty of Education at the University of Oulu offers eight degree programs, two of which are International Masters Programs: *Education and Globalization* (EDGLO) and *Learning, Education and Technology* (LET). Neither of the studies have a strong tradition, since the former commenced in 2006 while the later was first launched in 2012. International Master Program in University of Jyväskylä is Master's Degree in Education and Educational Leadership.

I am interested in two institutions obviously because the first one is where I am doing my Masters studies. The latter is where I and EDGLO students had a seminar on "Education for All" which was held in October 2011. This opportunity has led me to build a network with Education students in Jyväskylä which made it possible for me to contact the students who participated in the research.

The informants, whose names have been changed are as follow: Daniel, Linsey, Mary, Lucy, Jenny, Kate, and Helen. The youngest one is 23 years old and the oldest one is 39 years old.

#### 4.5.2 Carrying out of interviews

As I mentioned before, my research method is an in-depth thematic interview which used semi-structured questions (see Appendix 3). Before conducting interviews with participants, one pilot interview was carried out with a student in my class. The aim of this interview was to explore how questions instilled students' thoughts and emotions and to see if participants would hesitate answering certain issues. It is crucial for the researcher to bear in mind that though there are previously thematized categories, the interview process must

facilitate the thematization of the subject's experience. The interview is a dialogue and the product of this process is the understanding and reflection jointly constituted by both interviewer and interviewee.

Talking about teacher-student relationship more than often instills discussion about emotional moments in participants' experience with their teachers. In order to allow space for students to express their thinking and feeling freely, I listened to the stories and followed their stream of thoughts and shared experiences. Some of the participants became highly emotional when they recalled a particular teacher's image and their course of action.

Also, ethical issues came up when informants shared negative experiences about their teachers. The role of the researcher is to make sure that not any of the participants' identity or that of the teacher will be disclosed. When participants trust in the research ethics which researcher is committed to, that obligation weights double.

My role as an interviewer had different manifestation at the interviewing spot. There was one informant who shared views with me especially confidently and I was more or less having a tense period, and somehow I almost lost track of what should be our next topic of discussion.

On the other hand, there were a couple of informants who were shy and were hesitant about whether what they said would be reported to the faculty. One informant mentioned, repeatedly, emphasized most of the positive sides and for example was saying:

*“If there are students who were wondering about choosing amongst different countries, I would definitely recommend them to study here in Finland. Not only because of the updated content, syllabus, the learning environment, but also the teacher-student relationship thing, the teachers, staffs they are friendly, approachable, and helpful. Things are better than I expected.”*

To make sure that respondent's view was exhaustively incorporated, I sometimes reminded her that it was a research topic about what I expected to have a full view, both positive and



negative and that information would be only used for the research, and I inserted: “I am not making an advertisement for Finnish education system.”

#### 4.5.3 Ethical issues in qualitative interviewing

Mason (1996:55) points out that there will always be ethical concerns connected to any one particular project. These concerns might be anticipated in advance, but also the researchers find themselves making intellectual and practical decisions on the spot. To be well-prepared for this, they must think what kinds of ethical issues might arise, and their possible responses to them. This will help researchers to ensure that they are thinking and acting in an ethically principled way in the face of the unexpected.

The power relations of the interview interaction can be more complex and multi-directional than expected assuming that the interviewer exercises power over the interviewee (for example, in setting the agenda and in controlling the data.) (Mason, 1996:56) Kvale and Brinkmann (2009:1) also acknowledge that interview is far from being a conversation between two equal partners because the researcher defines and controls the situation. Therefore, the researcher needs to ensure that the researcher controls her power during the research process.

Mason (1996:56) further contents that the ethical consideration must go beyond the consent form. When asking people to participate in the study, the researcher needs to consider the question of how much choice potential interviewees really have about participating, taking into account the persuasive influences which might operate on and lead them into saying yes. In this research, the interviewees are international master students whose consents are not influenced by my position. Then, of importance is the question whether the consent the researcher has gained is actually *informed* consent, if the researcher adequately informs interviewee about all the aspects, renegotiating consent at any point, and sharing researcher’s perspective on what counts as data. It must be clear if the interviewee gives the permission to interpret and analyze, and publish and reproduce the data. Though it is impossible for the researchers to compose a fully informed letter, it is their responsibility to ensure that they adopt an ethical form of practice. With a clear comprehension of this ethical issue, I did my best thinking about informants’ position, their preferences, and fully understood their right not only during interviews but also during the carrying out of the

research. For instance, I informed that if they would like to receive information on how the data is presented, or how they are being interpreted and analyzed in the research, I am more than happy to fulfill their wishes.

Due to my particular research topic, ethical issues must be even more emphasized because I tackled with emotional data. When I gained students' trust that is adequate for them to express their relations with teachers, it must be ensured that as a researcher I am obliged to protect their emotions as well as their identity and also the identities of those they referred to.

#### **4.6 Example of data analysis**

In this part, an example of the transcription, coding and analysis process is shown. This will help make this process transparent and it is also useful in looking into reliability and validity. Firstly, researcher listens to the whole interview recording for at least one time to make sure that core content and interviewee's overall message is caught. Next, every single utterance is put down on the paper to make sure not running the risk of losing any important words or meaning. It is highly recommended that it should be transcribed right after the interview is conducted so that students' gestures, body language are fully incorporated into the understanding and the text. In addition to this, listening to the full sentence and full thought stream of the interviewee is necessary in getting the correct message and in enabling researcher to make certain changes in case of participants' choice of words. As most of the participants are using English as a second language, language mistakes are inevitable; however, misunderstandings are few as informants mostly have strong English background. Besides, personal information and identities and those who they refer to must be carefully and exhaustively excluded from the texts. Finally, transcription texts are re-read thoroughly.

As mentioned above in the session 5.4.2, as interviews are the expressions of subjects' experience, the initial themes set before the data collection process will be constantly supplemented with more themes and subthemes as the research process goes on and new themes emerge from data. Below is an example of how the process is step by step carried out.

Firstly, recordings are transcribed in their original articulation:

Kate: “you know, *there is this hierarchy thing and we had to have **great respect** or we had to **fear the teachers**, we could not approach them, we could not ask thing freely and we were kind of reluctant to go there if we had no other option at all, we go there. But here it is different, even such a stupid question, though we **won’t hesitate to ask them.**”*

The text is edited as: “you know, [in my country], *there is this hierarchy thing and we had to have [a] **great respect** or we had to **fear the teachers**, we could not approach them, we could not ask things freely and we were kind of reluctant to go there [meet the teachers]. [But] if we had no other options at all, we go there. But here it is different, even such a stupid question, ~~though~~ we **won’t hesitate to ask them.**”*

Informant mentions about the happenings in her country without indicating the context, and makes it unclear to readers what she means when saying “to go there”. Therefore, some texts are added, in the example above, e.g. “in my country”, or “meet the teachers” to make it clearer for readers to follow. Some mistakes were also corrected as needed. Then, key words are bolded and highlighted to group them into different categories or themes. This helps researcher to keep track of all the information and themes and to eliminate irrelevant info. For the process of data analysis, there were particular and previously thematized categories before the interview, but new ones emerging during the interview or from the collected data were also incorporated.

## 5. INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

It is worth mentioning that the process of categorization was complicated due to overlapping themes and characteristics. There are statements which can be placed under several categories. My attempt was to spot the most exact underlying messages and classify them in the most suitable way possible. Therefore, excerpts can be more general than the categories to which they belong to.

### 5.1 Informal teacher-student relationship

My first question to informants (see appendix 3) was about how participants perceived teacher-student relationship in their present institutions. All of the participants found teachers to be friendly and encouraging. It came naturally that they gave some general terms indicating their relationship with teachers in general.

In this section, the two aspects of “body” – which is considered as active, implicit, intentional reaching out from physical appearance (Estola and Elbaz-Luwisch (2003) – will be presented and analyzed on the basis of examples from the materials. All informants find their relationships with teachers informal. This informality is characterized by teacher’s accessibility, teacher-student talks, teaching interactions in both formal and informal contexts.

#### 5.1.1 “Down-to-earth” teachers

The category “down-to-earth” is used here by repeating one informant’s descriptions – Daniel’s. What is meant by “down-to-earth” is the image of friendly and reachable teachers.

Daniel: *“Teachers are **down-to-earth** and they really don’t have this concept of hierarchy and there is no distance between teacher and student and relationships are like **warm**. I would say these are the initial things that I notice right away.”*

Below is another example of how informants describe the same features of friendliness, approachability and low hierarchies.

Kate: “They are **really friendly and approachable**. So that is a huge difference. There is no different between a teacher and a student at all [...]. It is **surprising** because in my department, there is a famous professor, but he is not having that kind of pride like they are **open** to the students. We are not afraid of him, they are **approachable**. Everybody, professors, staffs. I think that is how education system should be.”

Generally, most of the informants share the same views about their teachers that teachers appear to be close to students physically (*distance*) and emotionally (*the relationship is like warm*). Adjectives like: *approachable, open, friendly*, etc. come up and are being repeated. Living in different countries, experiencing different teacher-student approaches, students start to compare their current experience about teacher “body” with their previous one. This is typical, according to Estola and Elbaz-Luwisch (2003), teacher “bodies” are socially, contextually, culturally, and historically constructed, therefore, we take certain characteristics of “body” for granted. When experiencing a different academic culture, we tend to compare and these considerations will help us understand why teachers from different cultures have different “bodies”. Being aware of the contextual differences will help to enhance students’ expectations and find their way to comprehend and react.

Lucy: “I think X [name of a teacher] sometimes he gives us a hug, and it is a sign that there is appreciation and **friendship**. But it is something in respect to the **culture**. I cannot expect the same for every teacher.”

### 5.1.2 Caring as an aspect in teacher-student relationship

Data clearly shows that informants celebrate the caring and informal relationship with teachers. Although the concept of caring is a dual-dimensional encounter (Nodding 2001), the data yielded illuminates that teachers are more considered as the actor of caring than being cared for. Caring in most cases is the act of really listening to students’ perspectives and considering students’ background.

Lucy: “...teachers call you by your name, and they know your name, they know where you are, they **listen** to what you say and then they **refer** it to the classes. So you can see that they **really listen** to what you say in class and they think about your background: what you

*studied, your **own experiences** back home, and this is something that makes me feel that they care.”*

The illustration above further deliberates the concept of care in higher education and adult education where it has a special shade of meaning. Caring aspect is important also in andragogy which contends that teacher needs to take time to get to know individual students by at least knowing students' names and to show an interest and respect toward students. Instead of perceiving it essential to transmit a set of knowledge or wisdom, teachers should appreciate students' contribution by the act of genuinely listening to what students say (Knowles, 1980:47).

### 5.1.3 Equal power relation

Lucy: *“And I think the teacher-student relationship is very **egalitarian**, there is **not** a huge sense of **superiority**.”*

Referring to the power model proposed by Pratt (1998:214), the way the teachers are addressed prevails whether or not there is a celebration of symmetric power relation between teachers and students. Unlike many places where teachers should be addressed with a title of Mr., or Ms. or their academic title like “Prof”, teachers in Finland enjoy being addressed with their first names, which contributes greatly to feeling of an equal relationship. This will be further discussed in chapter 5.2.1.

In addition to the way teachers are being addressed, the fact that teachers very often admit their mistakes has a meaning in the teacher-student power model.

Kate: *“And we ask something, if they don't have the answer at the moment, they will check it out, they spent time on the question we have and try to give us a solution. If they don't know, they will **tell openly** that they don't know the answer and they tell it later.”*

Daniel: *“And I also like the idea how they **admit lack of knowledge** when they don't know something. They easily and clearly say it. You may ask a question and they talk about something and they say I am not sure or I don't know. But where I am coming from it is*

*almost like this sense of shame when you say that you don't know if they are teachers. So they will become offensive when you ask a question that they don't know or they would neglect it by saying you are **challenging their authority**. So that would somehow stop you asking future question in a way."*

This extract clearly shows that teachers consider themselves as co-learners and not as the transmitter of knowledge where teachers have more authority and power. Identifying themselves as co-learners, teachers have given students the comfortable environment where they both create and construct knowledge. Students, when feeling safe asking questions, will be more open to think freely without borders, which is the premise for creativeness and challenging what have been taken for granted.

## **5.2 Teaching method: student-centered**

To begin this section, I would like to quote a famous saying of Alexandra K. Trenfor: "The best teachers are those who show you where to look, but don't tell you what to see."

In the context of Finnish higher education, Daniel expresses that: "*generally teaching method is **student-centered**. They encourage student' participation in class, teachers give students their own work to do, so that they have more to say in the class and they actually demand more. Their methodology is directed towards learning. They really encourage the idea of **independent thinking** like most of the time they ask: what do you think about something?"*

Teachers' acknowledgment of students' views shows that what students think counts. Clearly teachers whose responsibility is to involve students actively in their own learning by cooperative activity will help students accumulate understanding of the world in different ways. Teaching methods do not only celebrate student-centeredness but also student-empowerment. These methods are connected with the approaches proposed by Kember & Kwan (2000) which state that teaching can be carried out as learning facilitation. This approach encourages students to become independent thinkers.

Daniel: “*here, they give you published materials, but they still want to know you what your **critical thoughts** are about that you have read. So I really like that because it encourages me as a student to actually acknowledge or realize that I, I as an individual as much as a publication with somebody with authority who has written something which may be valid. I still come from a different perspective or background which that particular author may not know, and my opinion on what they say still count, so for me it was an important lesson for me to learn.*”

It is useful to go back to the ‘conceptions of learning’ which is defined as the beliefs about what learning is and how learning takes place (Chalmers and Fullers, 1996:5). There are six conceptions of learning, forming a hierarchy from lowest to highest level of learning: a quantitative increase in knowledge, memorizing and reproduction, applying knowledge, making sense of abstracting meaning, interpreting and understanding reality in a different way, and changing as a person (ibid). The higher the conception of learning, the more learning involvement is needed which requires higher level of cognitive processes and correspondingly, the learning process is moving towards deep learning. The first three conceptions of learning are more focusing on quantity and the later three mean changes in the quality. “Critical thinking” that informant Linsey articulated is associated with *understanding* rather than the *knowing more*, which means that the classroom educational objective is the celebration of deep qualitative learning.

### 5.2.1 Student-centered learning and – facilitation

Daniel: “*So it actually requires more responsibility on the students because the regulations is on you. Where I come from, teachers are those like put down the laws... So for me, they put **more responsibility** on the students*”

Daniel contends that the method where teacher is a facilitator actually demands more from students. It reflects the student-centered approach which emphasizes that students take responsibility for their own learning (Cowan, 1998:142)

Kate: “*the program is all about critical thinking and critical engagement which encourage people question what is being told and info that they are given and I think especially to a*



*student coming from a more western they would feel that they had the right or they were allowed to question what teacher saying or info that they are being given.”*

Critical thinking is emphasized as a crucial learning skill which is encouraged to be acquired and mastered at school.

An additional aspect of teaching and learning in Finnish environment that shows the student-centered approach is assessment.

Lucy: *“And one thing that writing feedback because also it not just a matter of grades or how much I am learning. If I get feedback, I have the feeling that teacher is checking how I am **improved**; it is a very personal thing. So in that sense, it is really positive... And also conversations at Pedó café, and things like that, it shows that there is a good relationship, friendly relationship between teachers and students.”*

Helen expresses that back in her home country, multiple choice tests are mostly used for evaluations. This is done because it saves time and is believed to promote objectiveness in marking. However, in the educational sciences, the validity of multiple choice tests could be put under question. Assessment in universities falls into two main categories: qualitative and quantitative assessment. Quantitative assessment is used when objectives of teaching and learning are defined by means of concrete skills or knowledge while qualitative emphasizes student’s learning process, thinking, motives, etc. (Hakkarainen, 1992:136). The traditional assessment methods primarily focus on what is learnt and what is not after the influence of teaching. However, education is more associated with how students have developed, and how they have recognized and fulfilled the potentials than what is required after the learning process. Assessment, therefore, must hold the value of the learning process itself. The method of assessment determines the way students devote themselves in studying. When assessment demands qualitative learning processes, students develop in qualitative learning outcomes.

### 5.2.2 Good teacher-student relationship facilitates learning

Teachers who place importance on building a positive relationship with students will subsequently encourage students to be more involved in pedagogical conversation (Aultman, L.P. et al, 2009:636-646). Positive relationships with students help learners to hold interests and inspire them to be engaged with the subject matter. The excerpt below illustrates very well that most of the time, through personal interest in each student that teachers care for, teachers encourage learners to be involved in conversations.

Daniel: *“the concept of knowing and the concept of being learning is almost an uncomfortable thing to do. It means you need to challenge your own thoughts about what you know about things so if on top of that you have a learning environment which is not comfortable because the teacher is very hierarchical and they demands respect or they are dominant and so on, then it makes learning even **harder** so I find the idea of having sort of low and **down-to-earth** and **warm** and **relaxed** relationship between the teacher and the students make **learning easier** because it makes students be able to challenge what they are learning, challenge the thing they really want to ask. There is a different when you have a teacher who is not very warm, it is hard for you to feel free, for example to ask questions and things like that. And learning does not take place without asking questions ...”*

The research and extracts clearly show that positive relationship with teacher is essential for having a good environment to study. If asking question is interpreted as challenging teachers' authority, there will be no room for questioning in classroom. According to many educational researches, learning takes place as a constructive process between teachers and learners. Knowledge is not created by books or the imparting of teachers' expertise, rather it is a two-way knowledge creation and constructing between teachers and learners.

Jenny: *“In this university, or at my faculty, teachers have brought really **comfortable learning environment** for students.”*

At this point, it is worth noting that students' perception of their learning environment at higher education level has a stronger impact on learning outcomes than their previous academic achievement (Lizzio *et al.* 2002). Students emphasize that they do not want to be treated as objects and should be recognized as a person.

Helen: “*It is important because I don't want to **feel like an object**. So if they treat you like a mass of students and they don't ask you about your opinion, and they don't consider your roles in the process, it is less motivating. So I really like us when they ask us will you be able to answer to them. Or they know about me as their students and they say hello to me on the hallway, I think it made you identified more with your university. So you don't feel like you are a neutral student like in a bigger mass, but if you feel like you are **recognized as a person**, you are **much more motivated** to be identified with the university.*”

Participants' views show an association between the teacher-student relationship and the way of teaching. An equal relationship between teacher and student is premise of the student-centered approach, or the latter is the foundation for the equal relationship. Positive relations between teachers and students as well as understanding students' world are considered as features of good teachers.

A good teacher should:

- enter a unified or integrated relationship with each learner, as what he chooses to call a *congruent* person;
- demonstrate *unconditional positive regards* for the learner, accepting each one and caring for them as a separate person;
- experience an *empathic understanding* of the learner's world, as seen from the inside.

(Rogers C., as cited in Cowan, 1998:143, emphasis in original)

### 5.3 Both positive and challenging

#### 5.3.1 Calling teachers by their first name

Students views differently about calling people by their first names. There are participants who were glad about this practice and consider it as a sign of equal relation between teach-

ers and students like the students who praised “down-to-earth” teachers. However, to some participants, it creates confusing moments. Daniel and Kate both share the same feeling that:

Daniel: *“As the same time, it is also a challenge to someone who is not used to such culture, for example, I **struggle and I still do when calling teachers by their first name**. It just **feels wrong** because I am not used to the idea. It is a part of you. You are brought up with the idea that the elders are respected and you call them by their last name so to just change that in your mind to use it anytime I try I feel that I am **treating them like my peers**, it is **just hard to do**. Like I said, it is positive when it comes to facilitating learning making the environment more relaxed but it is also challenging for students who are coming from a cultural background to get used to the ideas of calling the teacher by their first name.”*

Informal teacher-student relationship, by Mary, is interpreted as a sign of disrespect. She is in favor of maintaining and expecting her students to adhere to the practicalities she is used to in her context by expressing that:

*“There is a lot of respect between students and teachers in S [name of a country], but I **don’t see any respect here**. It is more like friends. In a way it is good because it acknowledges students’ freedom, but I am **not going to adopt** that kind of. There should be certain kind of courtesy between the teachers and students because **it is important to respect other people**. They don’t even say “hello,” and “goodbye” when they come and go. Only a couple of students did. I felt they did not **respect** the teachers.”*

### 5.3.2 Too much student-centeredness

Although student-centeredness was considered positive by most students, there were students who thought it can be taken too far. Several students were hoping more structures and clear answers to their questions.

Linsey: *“I know that the current new H [name of a master program] group are struggling because of the fact that there is **not enough structure** and they are expected to learn by*

*collaborating and presentation and no teacher-centered learning. I came for a conversation with A [name of a teacher] about this that not to make it completely rigid, but then also make it not so free so that nobody feels that they don't know what to do, or lacking of instruction.*

*Jenny: "If something is too student-centered and you don't have a strong group, that can be a problem. For my group, they were quite collaborative and knew what to do, but that is something that you need to see at the other groups when they come along. So I think maybe it is also a **problem of too student-centered too**, is there enough facilitation to make people feel secured. And if you come from a different culture where you **don't feel secured if it not structured**, then you know it would be a problem."*

*Mary: In my home country, the students always expect the teachers to give something to us. I think this kind of system does not give me an answer. It makes me **confused** more. For example, in leadership, they interpret in too many ways, but it was really confusing, if there was something more structured, or directive, I could be less confused. And I think, in a way, I **need some answer**, it is **too free**.*

*Jenny: "But sometimes, maybe because of the traditional mind as well, and many other people, they are feeling that where is this discussion is going, where is the answer, what are we supposed to reflect, things like this so it is maybe it is student-centered in a way that there is a lot of discussion but I think sometimes, in my opinion, teacher should facilitate the classroom teaching so that students are just not **drop in the mud**, at least they must know how to swim, to **find the land to land on**, but it is not like similar compared to my traditional experience in J [ name of a country] "*

The desirable view of teaching and learning is to share responsibility between teachers and students (Chalmers & Fuller, 1996:11). It means that students and teachers both need to impart conceptions of teaching and learning where they consider each other's role as cooperative and facilitative. When teaching method goes to the extreme in the student-centeredness, the responsibility the teacher holds seems to be insufficient and maybe thought of being too elusive. Participants' difficulty in learning, due to the lack of structures and guidelines, is one example of the discrepancy between teachers' and students'

conceptions of teaching and learning. This difficulty is significant especially in a class that is composed of many different conceptions of learning, or where students are not ready for independent learning or not taking responsibility for their own learning. Chalmers and Fuller (ibid) attribute this fact to the operation of previous education system that focused on subject matter rather than the promotion of the skills involved in learning. In this case, students' strategies are heavily influenced by previous education environment where teachers instruct students to follow certain school of thoughts and give answers to subject matter. Another reason behind this is the nature of education in schools and universities that requires students to memorize and reproduce the knowledge that they have learned from the teachers. They then carry this model of a school and university culture with them and fail to cope with the new situation. No matter what are the reasons behind, teachers' task is to address the problem positively by acknowledging the various backgrounds and encouraging students to examine their approaches of learning.

### 5.3.3 Lack of feedback

Hoskins & Newstead (2009:33) assert that a part of students' motivation to learn derives from feedback given both in a form of a grade and written feedback. This idea is further emphasized by Lucy, who says that:

*“This feedback thing is connect to our relationship with the teachers because it **shows how much they pay attention** to you, what you are producing and to your own development, like **individual development** so in that sense I say it should be improved.”*

Chalmers & Fuller (1996:41) pronounce that there are generally two major functions of assessment. Firstly, it is the official validation of students' learning through giving them a grade to certify how much students have fulfilled the course objectives. Another task of assessment is to support students' learning. This is a less formal task that informs of how students' learning has been improved and suggests individualized learning methods and study plan. When teachers put an emphasis on giving grade and fail to acknowledge the evaluation's role as learning supporters, students consequently do not get information on their progress in mastering certain skills or learning tasks. Also, time appropriateness is essential in giving feedback. Feedback is most effective and worthwhile when it is given

out at a relevant time so that students can adjust their performance, or at least they still can envisage the subject matter after the submission of the answer.

#### 5.4 Ideal teacher-student relationship

The question of an ideal teacher was posed to explore students' appraisals about an ideal relationship with teachers. One must remember that there is no formula on how to be a good teacher or how to build a good teacher-student relationship, but there are certain similar expectations that informants agree on. This part of the research aims at elaborating on informants' views on their expected relationship.

Mary: *when **each other is respected** by other, it is better to have **friend-like relationship**. And sometimes I think it is good to make some appointment, I mean to create some events so that we can sit down and talk and share and receive some comments or advice from the teachers.*

Daniel: *For me, what is the ideal is the **flexibility**. What I expect from ideal teacher-student relationship is generally I would prefer a teacher who is more like the way I describe teachers here but I think it is also flexible in a way that it is also whenever context changes, if you travel to another place, the context culture, you read about how culture works there no matter how great what your practice is, if it is too interfering with the culture, it may not work anyway. So it would be negative even though it is not negative in itself. But **it is perceived negative because it clashes with the culture**. Yeah, so the ideal teacher-student relationship should be **similar to that we have here**, but I also understand that **there are also cultural context where you still need an authority figure** because maybe that is missing when people are looking up for an authority figure."*

Daniel emphasizes teacher's flexibility and sensitivity to cultural backgrounds and acknowledges that change in the content can create tensions.

Mary: *I remember Z [name of a teacher], she said in the end of the course: "I am enjoying teaching even though I use the same material for every year, but I learn from the students*

more.” *That kind of attitude is my ideal, not as I should train them as I want. But I think set the goal is important, if I always accept their ideas, they don’t know where to go.*

Jenny: *“Ideal is a very simplistic form. For me ideal is like as if student is a button, and then teacher has a needle and a thread and teacher role is to facilitate, because button is saying “I am over here and I have this kind of opinion, so if the teacher with the student could weave the thread through the button to make something out of the learning then it is **facilitating**, also **collaborative**, and **student-centered** in a way. Because at the end, teacher is a needle, and needle does not stay in this picture but what is left is what is made out of the student, what student brings and they are connected. So if the teacher could act as a linking like a needle between the student opinion and some of the concepts and some stuff like that.”*

Student-centeredness is emphasized also in the descriptions about an ideal teacher. In the same way teachers’ enthusiasm, collaboration and facilitators’ role are pointed out.

Kate: *“an ideal relationship with teachers is one which **helps me learn better and more easily**”*

Jenny: *“There was a picture that the teacher was holding the baby and at the same time he tried to teach us. That was really really nice picture that I have. I don’t know how effective learning was on that particular day, on that particular class but having X [name of a teacher] welcoming this which allow our classmate be there present, she does not need to stay at home with the baby and that she was able to come, she was eager to learn, she was ready to share the moment with everybody, it was a welcoming I very enjoyed because X somehow respected our classmate who has a family and as a same time very passionate to learn. We have a Facebook group for our classmate, and we just feel like a family, and X makes us feel so as well.”*

Analyzing Jenny’s extract, what students remember about teachers, beside the teachers’ expertise, is their classroom conduct. Having a teacher that is humane welcoming students, passionate about their works, and willing to facilitate students’ learning is an important element in this relationship.



## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### 6.1 Evaluation of the research

Lincoln and Guba (1985:124) discuss at length about some problems concerning the concept of generalization and conclude that “there can be no generalization” (ibid) in qualitative research. Particularity of local context creates impossibility of generalization. This study, investigating student perceptions about teacher-student relationship does not aim at generalization. The existence of different aspects of research phenomenon is dependent on the subjects of the study. Each issue is studied in depth with regards to participants’ meaningful experiences that they make sense of. Individuals have different perspectives and the interview data of each participant represents their most memorable and meaningful insights of a particular teacher which might or might not apply to others. Participants speak also about their most memorable teachers that come to their mind in that particular moment. Therefore, information about teacher-student relationship in Finnish university context in this research might not be the characteristic of the whole Finland higher education, neither does it represent the general perception and the way international students in general make sense of their own experience. However, the research outcomes could sometimes be transferred to a different context. Transferability is enhanced by a thorough study of the research context in which phenomenon is located. Therefore, the more precisely the research context is described, the better the results can be interpreted in the context. Therefore, the person who wishes to “transfer” the results to a different context is then responsible for making the judgment of how sensible the transfer is.

Validity is best understood as trustworthiness of the way references are drawn from the data collected (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:644). Lincoln and Guba suggest that educational researches have their own specialty different from researches in other disciplines, therefore, they have developed a set of standards to examine the soundness of educational researches. The two major standards to ensure the quality of educational research are that researchers do not influence or manipulate the conditions of study and they do not impose their views or prior categories on the result of a study. I took a genuine interest in the topic with a defined agenda of exploring and depicting the phenomenon. The data is studied thoroughly following research conducts, and underlying messages from the discussion are

shared and cross checked with the informants, which means that data manipulation is impossible.

## **6.2 Conclusion**

Finland stands out as a unique case of its own kind of teacher-student relationship. This relationship is the embodiment of teachers' openness, friendliness, facilitative role and students' positive appreciation.

The three concepts of body, caring and power are overlapping and interrelated when studying teachers' role. One body act can result in a form of caring and expression of power in teacher-student relationship. However, cultural context has an effect on how physical appearance, caring and power are acknowledged and interpreted.

The principles of andragogy where learning environment must celebrate respect, collaboration, openness, informality, acceptance, inquiry, etc. have been manifested significantly in the data. Teachers do not only communicate their interest and enthusiasm in the subject matter but also show a concern that individual students learn, share their views and make their opinions acknowledged.

Teachers are expected to be committed to student-centered learning, or facilitative teaching. On the other hand, there should be a step by step preparation towards student-centered teaching and learning approaches, especially for those who are used to a different academic environment. This step by step approach makes students familiar and prepared during the classroom hours avoiding the feeling of lack of instructions. Educators tend to assume that learning approaches will change respectively when students enter higher education level; nonetheless, this assumption is not supported by research and evidence (Chalmers & Fuller, 1996:13). Therefore, instead of hoping that students learn and adopt new strategies by the time, it is advisable that university teachers encourage them to change their learning conceptions and show them innovative working approaches and respective skills. Mutual understanding can also be achieved by teachers' adjusting the way they think about teaching and the way they teach according to the students' backgrounds.

There is a link between teaching method and teacher-student relationship: the more equal teacher-student relationship, the more teaching method is student-centered. The explanations behind this connection may be an interesting topic to explore more closely, but it can be attributed to the fact that when teachers do not practice power over students and have a friendly relationship with them, they are more likely to understand students' needs and their learning traits. This understanding will lead them to the adjustment in teaching approach and methods.

Feedback plays a vital role in enhancing student motivation to learn, and it expresses care towards student development. Therefore, it should not be neglected to evaluate a whole range of aspects such as student's individual effort, personal meaningful direction, potential self-efficacy, etc.

What students learn from teachers is not only the discipline, the academic content, or things that teachers deliberately set out to teach, but also the pedagogical way teachers fulfill their tasks. Students' memories about their teachers describe the means but not the ends. Having supportive and caring relationship would benefit students in terms of academic achievement and personal development.

Teacher education usually puts too much emphasis on the cognitive processes of the students but not the emotional or the human part. Higher education teachers should also be encouraged to work with non-cognitive classroom goals.

There can be no universally applicable criteria of what constitutes an ideal teacher-student relationship due to the fact that there are many complications involved in this relation, for instance, the institutionalized education culture, individual traits, and so on. However, there are sufficient similarities in students' enunciation of their ideal relation with teachers that makes some universally applicable criteria possible. Those are such human skills as listening, empathy, encouraging, inspiring, etc. and most important, a genuine kind of attitude towards learners must come from the heart.

## 6.3 Implication and recommendations

### 6.3.1 Implications

If teaching and learning is described with the metaphor of the stream of water, teacher-student relationship is the riverbed that keeps the flow running. Teacher-student relationship has vital impact on students' learning. Creating a comfortable learning environment fundamentally contributes to students' motivation to learn eagerly and effectively. Some recommendations about teacher-student relationship are suggested below:

1. It would benefit students if they were introduced to Finnish conception of teacher-student relationship step by step and if they were encouraged to open dialogue from the very beginning. Having an orientation into academic culture which highlights this relation would enable students to know what is being expected, and subsequently would facilitate students' active role in handling and fostering their learning experience as well as relationship.
2. Teacher-student relationship can last for a lifetime. Teaching is a noble profession. It is not only the knowledge substance that students receive but it is also the tact of teaching that matters. I believe that behind every teacher there is a person, hence, it is also rewarding to learn how students carry their memories about teachers for the rest of their lives. Giving an opportunity for students to express their feeling or their emotional moments about a teacher's image or action is valuable and memorable for both teachers and students.
3. What is remembered about teachers and relations with students are non-academically related. Teachers, mostly, are not remembered by their big words or their professionalism. Rather, students talk about them as personalities.

### 6.3.2 Recommendations for further research

The topic of teacher-student relationship in this thesis is carefully studied by taking students' perspectives into consideration. It is highly recommended that further research would increase the knowledge by investigation of students from diverse academic backgrounds as well as putting weight on teacher perspectives. It would be interesting to see how teachers, on the other side, conceive their relationship with students and whether

teachers would also have different ways of working with students of different backgrounds. Relationship, as always, is a two-way interaction; therefore, having different angles on this particular topic would allow us to grasp a more sufficient picture. In addition, the double perspective would also give an insight for both teachers and students to foster their relationship with each other. Understanding the other party's view helps to develop relationships.

As noted by Välimaa (1992), researches have been focusing on the advances and implementations of innovations in higher education, albeit topics such as the environment for these innovations have not been much touched. It is true that if teachers have more positive relationships with students, improvements are more likely to be implemented, suggestions and new ways of doing will be constantly engaged. Human relations are central for everyone's wellbeing, creativity and learning; that is why they should get enough attention. It is important to consider practices that are attributable to the teachers' autonomy in classrooms, their freedom in choosing new academic practices together with students.

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## **Appendices**

Appendix 1: Research informed consent letter

Appendix 2: Consent form

Appendix 3: Themes for interview

## **Appendix 1**

### **RESEARCH INFORMED CONSENT LETTER**

I am Le Thi Minh Hieu, a student of the Master degree programme in Education and Globalisation at the University of Oulu, Finland. I would like to contact you as I am doing my Master thesis pertaining student perception of teacher-student relationship in Finnish Higher Education. The purpose of the study is to investigate how students conceptualize their relationship with teachers in order to highlight how different aspects are intertwined in this relationship and to better inform pedagogical approaches and teacher-student interactions at universities.

For this research, we would like to ask for your permission in conducting in-depth interview(s) with you regarding your teacher-student relationship experience at the university at any time of your convenience.

The study adheres to the conventional research ethics. Therefore, the information you provide will be kept in strict confidentiality and your anonymity will be guaranteed. The information that you will provide will only be used for the purpose of the study specified above.

If you would like to know more about the research project, or the results of the study upon completion, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you very much for your cooperation. I am very grateful of your kind support in this meaningful and important study.

Yours sincerely,

Le Thi Minh Hieu

## Appendix 2

### CONSENT FORM

By signing this consent form, I confirm that:

I have read the information provided from the letter about the study being conducted by Le Thi Minh Hieu, under the supervision of Katri Jokikokko, Minna Uitto, and Rauni Räsänen.

I am aware that the interview will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy of my responses.

I was informed that I can decline to answer any of the questions, and may withdraw from the study at any time.

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree to participate in this study.

Yes       No

I agree to have the in-person interview and to have conversations audio-recorded.

Yes       No

I agree to have follow-up conversations.

Yes       No

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in the publication of the study.

Yes       No

I agree to have the name of my Faculty acknowledged.

Yes       No

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 3

### THEMES FOR INTERVIEWS

#### **Teacher-student relationship**

What do you think about teacher-student relationship here at the university?

How do you view/conceptualize it?

What do you think are positive/negative about teacher-student relationship here?

1. Body

- How is teacher physical appearance/gestures/body language?
- Do you keep a distance with the teacher?

2. Caring

- How do teachers care about your professional/personal issues?
- How personal a conversation with the teacher can be?
- How is the interaction with your teacher about your personal issues?

3. Power

- How hierarchy is the relationship with the teacher? Inside and outside classroom?

#### **Teaching method, teaching approach**

How do you view your teacher's role?

How do you view the teaching method? (Student-centered? Or teacher-centered?)

Could you illustrate/explain?)

#### **Accessibility**

Is it easy for you to talk with a teacher in classroom? And outside classroom?

Do they have time for you?

### **Cultural background**

How is teacher-student relationship here different from your previous experience?

Are there any expectations (before you came here) met/ unmet?

### **Ideal relationship**

How do you view/conceptualize it?

How do you think teacher-student relationship influences your learning?