

# A Finnish Intervention

## Translating “To Teach: The Journey in Comics” by Bill Ayers<sup>1</sup>

ANNI VAINIO

ANTTI JAUHAINEN  
*University of Helsinki*

**W**E SHARE OUR EXPERIENCES FROM A COLLABORATIVE WRITING PROJECT with the aim to help ourselves understand learning better, as well as create a process which would build something others would be able to enjoy, and which would support their teaching as well as learning.

As students and teachers living in the northernmost EU country, Finland, we are well aware how our country and its neighboring Nordic-countries are often referred to as attaining the pinnacle of social democratic achievements—the combination of market-based economy and ambitious state-directed wealth redistribution, put into place since the second World War after growing demands from people's movements, supported by the social democratic parties.

This reference is unfortunately often made without knowledge as to what the situation is actually like. For example, in Finland, a high level of equality and more just wealth redistribution may have been closer to reality at some point, but the situation is far from that today. Although Finnish youth rank among the top in civic knowledge surveys, according to social justice oriented studies, societal work is exceptionally low. Meanwhile, the gap between the rich and the poor is growing faster than in any other Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) country, with wide unemployment having lasted now for decades, and political leaders more focused on what is called "free" trade, inflation and the conveniently miscalculated public debt ratio, than welfare and equality.

The effects of this are known and felt in everyday life in Finland. The situation of the poor in Finland, who are seriously disenfranchised from mainstream society, is seemingly of little concern in wider public discussion. Racism as well as extreme right-wing economic ideas and harsh attitudes are growing in popularity, and the newest data shows that for example young people have suffered seriously from the effects of economic inequality. These are rapid and unprecedented economic and political shifts, speeded by neoliberal policies that have disrupted

or collapsed the previous achievements in providing more equal access to basic services such as health care or housing.

It is within this context that in December 2012 our varied group of teachers and students finished a collaborative translation project, during which we translated, "To Teach: The Journey in Comics" (authored by Bill Ayers) from English into Finnish. It is a book meditating on what seemed to us the essential questions, thrills and mysteries of teaching and learning.

Overall we were a group of 11 students of behavioral sciences at the University of Helsinki. Many of us study or have studied to become teachers, as all teachers are required to accomplish a Masters level degree at a university. We undertook the whole project out of our own interest, which also meant we didn't have any money or practical support for this translation and publication. Even though there are benefits to operating outside of the system, foremost the ability to maintain the wonderful personal autonomy and freedom from tedious and ritualistic practices that seem mandatory in "official" projects, it still needs to be said that lack of money and other resources should not be romanticized.

Working in our free-form fashion meant that we could meet and discuss the translations at our own leisure over dinners and debate different aspects of our work-in-progress. As we worked together we also learned how important it is to share tasks and hold up to promises. This was sometimes difficult, as working like this—collaboratively—was new to many of us. The key thing always is openness, talking about why the project and the group is important and what kind of strengths and weaknesses everyone has, and how we could support one another in different areas. It is important to be open and honest about all of these, as that way all can participate in exactly the way they feel comfortable.

The book itself, "To Teach", is a wonderful and quite epic story of professor William Ayers' first year as an elementary school teacher. It recounts in a vivid way the situations any teacher can recognize, as well as putting forth serious questions about important moral concerns. The book charmed our group of students of behavioral sciences and we had numerous conversations about it. Ultimately we decided to form a study group around the book and translate it into Finnish.

The book sums up many of the challenges that a teacher who aims to respect children faces in his or her work. The book's approach is unique; instead of dancing the routine of abstract, alienated pedagogical philosophy, it always roots its ideas in tangible, down-to-earth examples. The book is written and drawn as a comic. It is easy to approach and inviting to those readers who shun the idea of wading through hundred of pages of scientific text. We translated the book so that as many people as possible could take interest in it.

As the market-obsessed ideology of control and greed pushes forward in far too many aspects of people's and communities' lives, teachers and schools find themselves in a precarious position. Top-down standards, diminishing resources and outside control of teaching are all increasingly prevalent. In this reality, organizing together for social change is crucial to remembering the meaningfulness and value of teaching, learning and the uniqueness of childhood itself.

"To Teach" shows in serious as well as humorous ways how all children are human beings with wild and wonderful potential that deserve support, respect and love, and who have so much to give to people around them. In a deeply troubled society this can definitely be challenging. With different alienating and bureaucratic labels being continuously attached to children in schools the importance and uniqueness of students is often all too easy for a lone teacher to forget. Creating support groups together with other teachers and organizing groups

within communities can be powerful tools to combat this—not least because of all of that is fun and empowering.

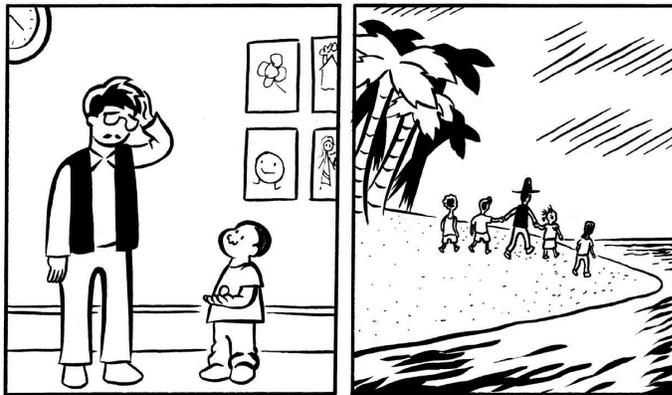
The book is excellent for anyone interested in education and life in schools, as well as to those who like comics—it is simply excellently drawn. Our hope is that the book will be used in teacher education as part of the curriculum of the university. The book lays out an excellent base for discussing and developing one’s own teacher identity with probing personal questions such as: Who I am and why do I want to teach? Why do I teach the way I teach? How much do I need to know, before I can teach others?

While translating and discussing “To Teach” we implemented the ideas of the book in practice. As a group we tried our best to share tasks and the overall workload, and the final versions grew better iteratively as we talked and pondered about the translation together. The undertaking proved to us that with boldness and perseverance, and by having fun, such projects can be made real.

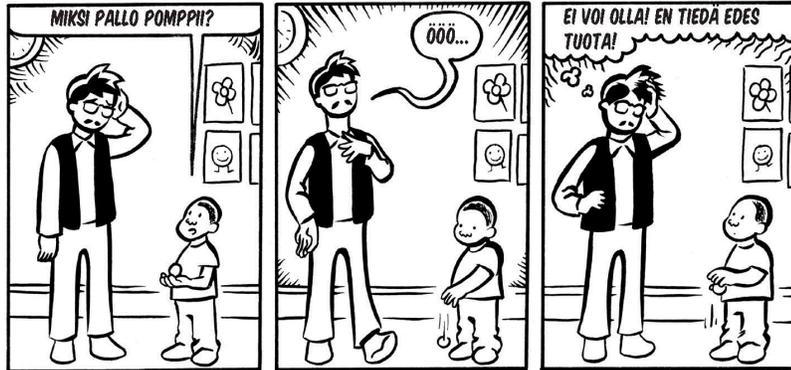
# 1

## ENSIMMÄINEN PÄIVÄ: MATKA ALKAA

SANAT "OPETTAMINEN" JA "OPETTAJA" HERÄTTÄVÄT LÄHES JOKAF-  
SESSA TIETYNLAISIA MUISTOJA JA MIELIKUVIA. JOILLEKIN NÄMÄ  
MUISTOT OVAT PITKÄSTYTTÄVIÄ, JOPA PELOTTAVIA – NIIHIN LIITTYY  
TYLSISTYmistä, RUTINEJA TAI JOTAKIN PAHEMPAA. MEILLE, JOTKA  
RAKENNAMME OPETUKSEN KAUTTA IHMISTEN ELÄMÄÄ, NÄMÄ MIELI-  
KUVAT VÄISTÄMÄTTÄ MUUTTUVAT JA KASVAVAT. VAIKKA NÄMÄ MIELI-  
KUVAT OVAT USEIN SELKEITÄ JA KONKREETTISIA, OVAT NE AIVAN YHTÄ  
USEIN HÄMMÄSTYKSEN SÄVYTTÄMIÄ. MIELIKUVAT OPETTAMISESTA  
VOIVAT SAADA MEIDÄT TUNTEMAAN SYVÄÄ KUNNIOITUSTA, JA VOIMME  
LÖYTÄÄ NIISTÄ SEIKKAILUJA JA HAASTEITA.



**OPETUSTAIPALEENI ALKU – ENSIMMÄISENÄ AAMUNA ENSIMMÄISEN LAPSIRYHMÄNI KANSSA...**



**ENNEN KUIN HUOMASINKAAN, JOUDUIN KAMPPAILEMAAN VAIN PYSYÄKSENI PINNALLA.**



**TÄMÄ OLI ENSIMMÄINEN KRIISINI. MITÄ ON OPETTAMINEN, JA KUKA ON OPETTAJA?**



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> With art by Ryan Alexander-Tanner.

