Teacher readiness: the case of Swedish Secondary Teachers

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to present a case study based on a small cohort of Swedish upper secondary school preservice teachers' perspective on their readiness to work as teachers. The article explores their reasons for wanting to teach in secondary schools, their experiences in the teacher education program, their hopes and concerns about teaching and their expectations of support as beginning teachers working in the profession.

Based on the preliminary findings all preservice teachers' indicated confidence in their technological and pedagogical content knowledge (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), and a confidence understanding the relationship between theory and its application to practice. They felt they had been well prepared by the four year teacher education program although there were some concerns expressed about assessment procedures. Especially encouraging was the preservice teachers' confidence and expectations to affect positive change in supporting young people in their transition to adulthood. Surprisingly none of the participating preservice teachers mentioned pay as a motivating factor for their choice becoming teachers. There was an expectation to be provided with a mentor to support them in their probationary year.

Introduction

The call for a better educational system, with better teachers, better schools is currently hotly debated in Sweden. The recent PISA findings are fuelling the debate showing that Swedish 15 year olds perform poorly in areas such as mathematics, science and reading comprehension. According to Skolverket (Department of Education) (2013a, p. 8), from18 OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries, among them the neighboring Nordic countries, Finland, Denmark, and Norway, performed "significantly better than Sweden in all three subject areas". Interestingly, and despite the negativity surrounding the current Swedish schooling system there is a positive trend showing that more young Swedes are choosing to become teachers. Latest figures from Skolverket (2013b) show that to be a teacher ranks for the first time in the top 10 among Swedish students. According

to current Minister of Education, Jan Björklund (2013), teacher education programs have noted an increase in its enrolments of 27% in the past twelve months.

In Sweden as in most countries teachers' readiness to teach is determined by the successful completion of a formal university teacher education program followed by a probationary period before full registration is granted (Uusimaki, 2011). The probationary period or as it is known in Sweden, the 'induction program' takes one year to complete (Skolverket, 2011). Once the 'induction program' has been successfully completed beginning teachers are eligible to be registered with the Swedish National Agency for Education and to seek permanent employment (Skolverket, 2012).

Teacher registration was introduced in 2011 with the aim to "raise the level of skills among teachers and preschool teachers in order to improve the quality of education" (Skolverket, 2012, para 1), and in particular, targeting unqualified teaching staff or 'vikarie' working in preschools and school settings. Interestingly, and according to Skolverket (2012, para. 5) "exemptions will only be allowed if there is a shortage of qualified teachers or preschool teachers or on exceptional grounds". In other words, those without formal teaching qualifications are still accepted to work in schools and preschools. Currently and concerning is that there are a number of persons' without formal teaching qualifications teaching in Swedish Pre- Primary-, Secondary and Upper Secondary classrooms (Lärarnas Riksförbund (Teachers' Union) (2013).

In general teacher education programs in Sweden are anywhere between 3-5 years in duration and these do not differ from other countries in terms of the content taught, for example, theoretical and practical studies including technological pedagogical content knowledge (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), educational studies and field experiences or practicum (Uusimaki,

2010, 2013). There are currently four teaching degrees to choose from in Sweden[1], (1), preschool education (2) primary school education, (3) subject education, and (4) vocational education (Regeringskansliet, 2010). In contrast to Finland there is no competitive examination to enter teacher education programs in Sweden (OECD, 2012).

There are many reasons why people choose to become teachers. Interestingly, international comparisons suggest that those seeking to work as teachers have similar motivations why they want to work as classroom teachers (see Watt, Richardson, Klusmann, Kunter, Beyer, Trautwein, & Baumert 2012). Research (see Uusimaki, 2010; Watt et al., 2012) suggest that common motivations among many seeking into teacher education programs include positive personal experiences of schooling, family influences, caring for and helping children to learn, and enabling change in society. A commitment to the social good and/or, where teaching is seen as a 'calling', is especially encouraging as it has been shown that such individuals because of their altruistic reasons tend to stay in the profession (Uusimaki, 2011). Reasons why someone seeks to become a teacher is important to all stakeholders in education and especially for those teacher educators and school staff involved in supporting the beginning teacher during the transition phase into the profession (Crosswell & Beutel, 2011). Unfortunately, research suggest that the retention of beginning teachers has been and continues to be problematic with many leaving the profession after 5 years (Crosswell & Beutel, 2011; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Johnson, Down, Le Cornu, Peters, Sullivan, Pearce & Hunter 2010).

Some of the challenges and anxieties associated with beginning teachers transitioning into the profession are quite common across cultures (see Crosswell & Beutel, 2011; Johnson, Down, Le Cornu, Peters, Sullivan, Pearce & Hunter 2010; Paulin, 2007; Uusimaki, 2011, 2013). For

[1] Within each of these programs there are specializations to choose from (see Regeringskansliet, 2010)

example, beginning teachers often experience a sense of helplessness and uncertainty as they begin to negotiate their daily tasks and roles in the classroom, and where many experience a mismatch between their 'idealistic motivation' and the realities of the classroom. Other concerns relate to how many schools lack quality induction programs and/or do not provide the beginning teacher with a mentor. It has been noted that the culture and the school structure often play a role in 'deskilling teachers and robbing them of the enthusiasm to proceed with their job creatively' (Kanpol, 2007, p.1). This often leads the beginning teacher experiencing high levels of stress and feelings of isolation from both colleagues and the school community (Johnson et al., 2010; Uusimaki, 2010).

Calls for better pay have consistently been and continue to be the argument in most countries to attract better quality teachers into the profession (OECD 2012, Watt, Richardson, & Tysvaer 2007). However, in Finland, where teaching is considered as a high status profession, 'often' has very little to do with the pay, or the holidays (Sahlberg, 2010; Uusimaki, 2013). Sahlberg (2010, p. 3) states that "high social prestige, professional autonomy in schools, and the ethos of teaching as a service to society and the public good" are the main reasons why teaching is the preferred career choice among young people. The Finnish model has been, and continues to be, of interest to most countries including Sweden seeking to enhance the professional status of teaching. Nonetheless, there is a valid reason for the call for better pay for Swedish teachers especially since Swedish teachers' salaries are below the OECD average[2] (Wintour, 2012).

This case-study (Merriam, 2002) explores a small group of Swedish upper secondary preservice teachers' perspectives about their sense of readiness to begin teaching. The use of

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[2] Teachers in Finland earn more than Swedish Teachers OECD

case-study is especially helpful in this study where the focus is on a small group of beginning teachers and their reasons to teach. This study is part of a longitudinal study and only the initial findings from a questionnaire are presented.

Method

An invitation to respond to a questionnaire via email was sent to 15 upper secondary preservice teachers at the end of the teacher education program. Eight preservice teachers (2 females and 6 males) between 23-29 years of age responded to the questionnaire. In addition to the questionnaire, participants were provided with an information sheet that explained the reason for the study and the assurance of the protection of their identities. The return of the questionnaire was indicative of the participants' consent to participate in the study.

Data collection

The questionnaire was used as the primary source of data. The purpose of the questionnaire was to understand preservice teachers' perspectives (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) about their readiness to teach. The questions were deliberately designed to be open-ended to provide preservice teachers' possibilities to freely express themselves. A sample of the questions can be found below (Table 1.)

Table 1. Questionnaire

What is a good teacher?
Remember to when you first began in the program think back to why you wanted to become a Secondary (or Gymnasie) Teacher. Now that you are about to graduate as a Teacher has your reasons changed about why you want to become a teacher or have they stayed the same?

Think back on the teacher education program and recall some of the most fun and or memorable moments describe these and explain what influence these have had on your sense as a beginning teacher?

Think back on your experiences in the teacher education program and recall some of the more challenging situations describe these and whether you think these situations have influenced your development as a teacher?

In what ways do you feel that you have been supported during your time in the teacher education program?

How prepared do you feel you are to teach in the classroom?

What kind of support do you want from your school to help you in your induction year?

Data analysis

The questionnaire responses were collated and read by each of the two researchers to become familiar with the data as outlined by Cresswell (2009). The data was then translated into English and coded separately by the researchers, where after comparisons were made and discussed. From these discussions a number of themes emerged and were checked against the original questionnaire data. The questionnaire responses supported the themes agreed by the two researchers and supported the preservice teachers' perspectives on their teacher readiness.

Findings and discussion

The following four themes emerged from the participating preservice teachers responses, (1) The good teacher and reasons to teach, (2) Making sense of the teacher education program, (3) Confidence, and (4) Expectations of support.

The good teacher and reasons to teach

Most participants' responses suggested that a 'good' teacher was someone who was inspirational, flexible, and passionate about his/her subject, understanding learning, how students learn, and how to engage students in their learning. They believed that a good teacher is not afraid of taking a stand on issues, is willing to share personal experiences and has an ability to listen. The below quote was reflective of most participants' thoughts about the good teacher,

> A good teacher is a person who engages students in learning, and is committed to the profession. It is a person with a sense of humor about him/herself but who is serious about his/her work. It is a person who retains at heart, a deep love for and curiosity about their subject. And, it is a person who is capable of learning a lot of names very, very quickly. (David, 2013).

All participants did not believe that their reasons for wanting to become teachers had changed from when they began in the teacher education program. Their reasons to become teachers included, "the importance of helping and supporting young people in their learning", to be able to "inspire", to "share ideas" and a "passion" for their subjects. There was an overwhelming sense of urgency to affect change in the educational system. Ann explains,

> To change the existing school system with those fixed patterns that exist in our schools, to contribute to our society. I want to spread my ideas of what "education" should be and how we can get there. (Ann, 2013)

None of the participants mentioned salary as an important factor for their choice to become teachers. The only mention of pay was mentioned by one participant who thought that it was 'great to be paid for something one was passionate about'.   Clearly, for some participants teaching is a vocation and for others a calling (Uusimaki, 2011).

Making sense of the teacher education program.

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Similar to other studies (see Uusimaki, 2011, Watt et al, 2012) the journey through the teacher education program had been both 'fun' as it had been challenging for all participants. The following response highlights the learning opportunity, Steve experienced.

> For me being in a chaotic and messy classroom made me realize that a strict, disciplinarian attitude would be counter-productive at best. Mismanaging my time and failing to complete a big assignment at university made me more humble and understanding about students who miss deadlines. (Steve, 2013)

There were a number of highlights during David's journey in the teacher education program, including the positive impact of Facebook,

> I just counted, on Facebook, the number of friends I've made since starting the program in 2009. I got to 75. And that's just on Facebook. Thanks to becoming a teacher, I am now in three separate quiz teams, a Sunday league football club, and a book circle. I count as close personal friends, people I never would have met if I had stayed with my previous profession. When I am asked to think of memorable moments during my time at the program, I think of new friends and what I learned from them. How discussing performance and public speaking with a drama teacher made me realize the importance of clarity and structure in your presentation. How chatting with sports and music teachers allowed me insights into thinking about how to reach and teach our students, why we do things, and not just how. And of course, the many hours I've spent in classrooms, teaching kids from wildly different backgrounds, have all been incredibly fun and demonically challenging. (David, 2013).

Confidence

All participants expressed a confidence and a readiness to teach in their subjects, and at the same time they were expressing a humility and awe to be able to finally teach for 'real'. The following response by Roger exemplifies participants' sense of readiness,

> I am both ready and not so ready to teach. It is very humbling to take on such a major task as teaching. I acknowledge that I will continue to learn and I hope I will be able to continue reading and learning whilst I teach. (Roger, 2013).

Some of the concerns participants expressed related to assessment procedures this was not surprising with the many changes that have occurred in the Swedish school system particularly around assessment (see Skolverket 2011). Other areas of concern related to relationship building with parents, conflict resolution, developmental talks with students and their parents as well as the different administrative tasks that are part of the teacher's work. Participants felt that these areas were not given sufficient time in the teacher education program.

Expectations

There was an expectation among all participants that they, once placed as teachers in a school, would be supported and provided with a mentor during their first year of teaching. Other expectations mentioned included support in 'cracking the code' of the school culture in order to be able to 'fit in'.

Findings and discussion

The findings of this study show, in line with other studies, (see Uusimaki, 2010; Watt et al., 2012) that the reasons for becoming teachers were a desire to affect change, to help and inspire students to learn, and a passion for their subjects

The expressions such as, *passion for teaching* and *to affect change* is especially encouraging in times of so many ongoing discussions around schooling. These expressions may be perceived as naïve and/or idealistic and very common among beginning teachers. Yet research (see Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Johnson et al., 2010; Crosswell & Beutel, 2011) show that beginning teachers tend to stay in the profession when schools provide high quality induction programs in combination with experienced mentors who encourage and embrace their enthusiasm.

Providing opportunities that challenge preservice teachers is one of the most important roles of university teacher education program (Darling-Hammond, 2000) as it helps the future teacher to see beyond his/her own perspective and to be understanding and empathetic to the challenges their future students face.

The integration of technology, pedagogy and content knowledge (TPCK) (Mishra & Koehler, 2006) could be found in the teacher education course and as such the preservice teachers experienced it as nothing unusual. It was encouraging to see preservice teachers' use of Facebook to connect, build relationships or share ideas.

Their mixed feelings of readiness and unpreparedness regarding their work as classroom teachers are understandable as teacher education neither can nor ever will explicitly contain all the aspects of being a teacher. Nonetheless, the positive attitude towards their future work is prevailing, even though the preservice teachers are aware of the working conditions they will encounter. What is of interest was to note that the preservice teachers in this study chose to become teachers other than for financial reasons.

As stated earlier in this paper this is part of a longitudinal study and only data from the questionnaire have been presented. It is not the intention of this small-scale study to

generalize to Swedish preservice teachers' perspectives about their reasons to become teachers.

Conclusion

There are many reasons why people choose to become teachers: it has to be acknowledged that personal experience of schooling whether good or bad, is for many people one determinant to become teachers (Uusimaki, 2011). Surprisingly, this very small study has shown that none of the beginning teachers suggested that the salary or the lack of salary had been the motivating factor for choosing to become teachers. Rather their reasons were about a commitment to the good of society and most often a want to support children in their journey towards adulthood. Such individuals, due to their altruistic reasons, tend to remain in the profession (Uusimaki, 2011).

These idealistic and somewhat naïve teachers will face many challenges as they begin their journey in the profession. And it will be up to the different Swedish educational stakeholders including the trade unions to determine the future working conditions enabling teacher commitment to the profession.

With 2014 being an election year, the unfortunate and ongoing debate among Swedish politicians is about whom to blame for the decline in learning outcomes among Swedish students rather than providing a real space where education is discussed and where policies are formulated by educators themselves (e.g., educational researchers, teachers, Principals) and not by politicians without educational experience. The problem with a debate about good or bad schools and teachers is that everyone has an opinion that more often is based on personal schooling experiences and not on research.

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