

Teacher Preparation: A Comparison between British Columbia and Finland

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This project, which is so special to me, emerged from many years of experience in our education system as a student. I feel honoured to have been able to execute plans that had been in the works for a very long time, and could not thank the people who made this a reality enough.

When I first came across a small newspaper article about Finnish education, I was 17 and completely swept away by their educational philosophy. I had finally found a country that embodied exactly what I believed education could be. As I read more and more about what Finnish educators were trained to do, I felt increasingly compelled to discover how such a system functioned in practice.

As impulsive and whimsical as it may initially seem to hear of a 17 year old deciding to travel to Finland to look into an “interest” of her’s, that story does not fully illustrate the deep passion, thorough planning, and clear sacrifice I undertook in order to make this plan come to life. I took my perspective and intentions to understand Finnish Teacher Education as serious as I took my future, and had the project planned out far before I was offered help by the Ministry of Education. I was to fund this project completely on my own, using the money I had saved up from my 6 years of work. It was overwhelming at times trying to stay on top of school, participate in extracurriculars, and work a demanding job, but I understood it had to be done in order to be able to realize this goal. I spent many hours discussing my plans with mentors, friends, and family members trying to figure out the best way to go about a project which admittedly seemed impossible at times.

You can imagine how blessed I felt when six months before I planned to leave to Finland, I was introduced to Rick Davis through a teacher of mine who knew of my research plans. The Ministry of Education ended up playing a very supportive role in this project, providing me with resources and guidance to help me fully realize my project beyond what I was able to do alone. Although I still spent all of my savings on this project, the Ministry’s contributions helped me spend more time interviewing students and deeply understanding the cultures of each education system in this study.

That being said, enjoy this report, as a lot of time, energy, and heart was put into it each step of the way. I hope this inspires more proactive conversations regarding educational reform in British Columbia. I also hope this inspires young people to have the courage and resolve to pursue exactly what matters to them; change has never been an easy task.

Background

I cannot remember a time in my life when I was not thinking of educational reform. This intrinsic desire for transformation stemmed from the frustrations I encountered throughout my years in public education. Initially, I sought to gain a deeper understanding of curriculum, teacher's responsibilities, and the distinction between effective and ineffective teaching practices. As I became more aware of what I felt was lacking in our education system, I attempted to supplement these gaps on my own; I volunteered my time to tutor students, expanded my knowledge of different education systems, and even authored study resources to make learning more accessible and relevant to the average student. Though I was making a difference through these activities, I still felt it was not on a large enough scale. As graduation approached I realized my captivation with educational reform was something I could not ignore. Almost simultaneously, I discovered the Finnish education model, as it had gained overnight acclaim due to the recently published PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results. What intrigued me about Finland was not necessarily the PISA results, but after further investigation, its teacher education program. A few months of intense planning, inquisition, and fateful meetings later, I had planned a year of research comparing and contrasting British Columbia's teacher education programs with those in Finland. This project entailed data collection, interviews, and in-class observations at the University of Victoria (UVIC) and the University of Helsinki (UH) over a 10 month period.

Methodology

This study comprised of three tasks: data collection, interviews, and in class observations at UVIC and UH. My timeline for this work was a year, from September 2012 to September 2013. Within that year, I spent five months at the University of Victoria, and five months at the University of Helsinki. The remaining two months were allotted to compiling my final report and presenting my findings. The purpose of this inquiry was to shed light on the following questions:

- 1) What is the current state of teacher education in Victoria and Helsinki respectively?
- 2) What are the similarities and differences between the two systems?
- 3) Using the results from questions 1 and 2, what can we conclude through this comparison?

The data collection component of this work was conducted continuously throughout this study, utilizing relevant research when necessary from various studies to assist in depicting the current state of teacher education at each institution. The interviews contained a standard set of 24 questions for both Canadian and Finnish students to answer. Eleven teacher education students in total were interviewed using this common set of questions. In addition, several professors and policy makers were interviewed using a non-standardized set of questions specific to each participant. The student subjects were volunteers from each university who wanted to partake in this study. The additional subjects were purposefully chosen by the researcher due to their expertise in certain fields. The research plan was submitted to the UVIC Human Research Ethics Committee who concluded no formal ethics approval was required since this work did not involve a student, professor, or staff member at the University. A similar conclusion regarding an ethics approval was reached at the University of Helsinki.

Finnish Teacher Education

- 1) **Pedagogics:** Pedagogy commands approximately 20% of the 5 year Finnish teacher education program. This means (not all at once) that one entire year of this program is focused solely on this topic. “The educational views of teaching practice are mainly influenced by the curriculum of teacher education” (*Jakku-Sihvonon & Niemi, 2006*), and University of Helsinki’s intense focus on pedagogy is no exception, it is intentional. Finland places such a large emphasis on pedagogy because they stress that knowing the material well does not necessarily mean the student is equipped to teach the material well.

2) **Research:** Integration of research studies with all other aspects of the teacher education program as well as the writing of a master's thesis are considered the best features of the Finnish teacher education program. Scientific literacy of teachers and their ability to use research methods are said to be crucial in creating effective educators. Finns believe that student teachers who develop the ability to conduct and utilize the latest advances in educational research will continue these habits throughout their career, constantly updating their knowledge and incorporating new scientific findings in their work. The importance Finnish educators place on research studies is deeply reflected in these three teacher education guidelines UH's professors must reference in all areas of their work:

- "1) teachers need a profound knowledge of the most recent advances of research in the subjects they teach. In addition, they need to be familiar with the latest research on how something can be taught and learnt.
- 2) teacher education should also be an object of study and research. This research should provide knowledge about the effectiveness and quality of teacher education.
- 3) teachers should internalize a research oriented attitude towards their work: teachers learn to take an analytical & open minded approach to their works, that they draw conclusions based on their observations and experiences and that they develop their teaching and learning environments in a systematic way."

(Research-Based Teacher Education in Finland, Jakku-Sihvonen & Niemi, 2006)

3) **Collaboration:** Collaboration is apparent on four different levels and is critical to the success of the Finnish teacher education program. The first type of collaboration I observed was amongst the student teachers. In the classroom, these students are regularly expected to complete various project based learning

tasks in groups. Very rarely will a professor expect students to work on a project alone. Finnish educators believe that fostering strong collaborative tendencies is essential in creating strong teachers. The second type of collaboration I observed was amongst the professors and deans at the various teacher education programs across Finland. The close knit and communicative relationship each university has within itself as well as amongst the 8 different teacher education programs seemed remarkably effortless. This helps the deans keep their programs standardized and up to date with the latest teaching practices. I also observed collaboration between students and their professors. At UH, professors make it a point to be available for consult to their students and are extremely invested in their students' progress. Finally, and definitely the most unexpected place I found collaboration was between the government and teacher's union. Believe it or not, these two groups agree when it comes to their vision of education's future. Most tension between the two groups is based on compensation, and even then a strike is a rare occurrence in Finland (last one occurred in 1984). In fact, it is law that "[Teachers]...[must] be active in public debates and decisions affecting the development of schools and education. Teachers cannot be only implementers of decisions, but they must also be partners in their development." (Aloni, 2002; Aronowitz & Giroux 1991)

- 4) **Assessment:** Finnish educators don't give their students percentages or letter grades in the teacher education program; it is simply a pass fail system which in theory "removes the stress, competition, and distraction of grades and focuses the students' attention to the pursuit of knowledge" (*Kansanen, 2013*). Assessment is given as verbal or written constructive feedback. If a professor feels a student is lacking in a certain area then they will provide additional support or suggest activities for the student to do in order to get a stronger understanding of that particular topic. While interviewing Dr. Pertti Kansanen, a tenured professor at Helsinki University's education department, he explained his stance on assessment in the following quote: "Assessment is a form of control. I don't like control and if the students in class participate and actively discuss

then what is the point of it? There are many superior ways to have control of your lecture than using the threat of assessment...[Assessment] simply brings about stress which is not conducive to deep learning."

5) **Practicum:** Finnish students do a total of 3 months (11h a week) of practicum during their 5 years of professional training. During their practicum, Finnish student teachers must teach Finnish and math as well as six additional subjects. They switch subjects halfway through their six week practicum. The Finnish practicum is short, intense, comprehensive, and efficient. In addition, it is a requirement to complete your practicum in groups of two for your bachelor's which ties back to the importance Finland places on collaborative skills. The Finnish practicum also contains an extremely supportive mentoring system which uses trained supervisors and class teachers as key components in practicum reflections. These mentors support their student teachers outside the classroom with valuable input, years of experience, and new methods of teaching. "Together [the class teacher and supervisor] aim at realising two curricula, both of them influencing the students' actions. University based supervisors are more affected by academic views and focus more on teacher education curriculum whereas the local mentors represent school pedagogy and are more familiar with their own curriculum." (*Jakku-Sihvonen & Niemi, 2006*) Finnish teacher education programs focus on this dynamic relationship because it is vital for their students to see "theory and practice in constant interaction with each other" (*Lavonen, 2013*).

Target Area	School Pedagogical View	University Pedagogical View
pedagogical decision-making	intuitive, rational	argumentative, focusing on forming a synthesis
pedagogical context	professional	academic
curriculum	school curriculum	teacher education curriculum
goal-oriented	geared towards the needs of pupils	geared towards the needs of teacher education students
teaching process	teaching	supervision

(Research-Based Teacher Education in Finland, 2006)

"The ultimate aim of reflective supervision is both to enhance prospective teachers' professional autonomy and identity as well as to bring about new practices in our schools."

Jari Lavonen

Dean of Education, Helsinki University

6) **Admission Standards:** Finland looks beyond a student's academic performance to many other factors that make that candidate "suitable" for the teaching profession. Many times students who I interviewed said they didn't have the best scores on the entrance exam they wrote, but they supplement their scores with plenty of volunteer experience/ experience working with children and gained admission. It is not uncommon for some students who attend this program to have applied more than once, returning the next year with more experience under their belt. Admittance into the program values many different aspects of a student, not just academic performance. They understand that good scores or grades does not necessarily equate into good teacher and therefore gauge the student based on suitability for the job. Additionally, Finnish schools only create space in their education programs balanced with the number of available positions in the teaching field.

Finnish Teacher Education: Results and Observations

The first thing to note is that "teachers do not work and reflect in a social vacuum. They act within institutions, structures, and processes which have a past and a social momentum" (*Jakku-Sihvonen & Niemi, 2006*). Culturally, Fins see the teaching profession just as we see the medical profession. It is apparent that educating their next generation is as vital and honourable as it is to keep their population healthy. This value is reflected not only by the sheer amount of students applying (*University of Helsinki* receives roughly 1000 applicants annually, and admits about 100 to their program, 10% acceptance rate), but also by the high standards and comprehensive curriculum their students must complete. The Fins believe just as one undereducated or underprepared doctor can negatively impact people's

health, one improperly trained teacher can harm the intellectual and emotional growth of many children. Like we ensure that doctors are up to date with the latest research in their fields, Finland demands the same of their teachers. Just as we have learnt to trust our doctors' professional opinion, it is critical we find a way to trust in teachers and their professional opinions as Finland has done. But how? "The solution is not to copy [the Finnish] education system and paste it elsewhere, rather it is to deeply understand the purpose of education, the nature of humans, and power of collaboration. It is then each region's decision as to how they want these values to manifest" (*Lavonen, 2013*).

An additional value Fins place a high importance on fostering is a student's sense of "self efficacy". Self- efficacy, the measure of the belief in one's own ability to complete tasks and reach goals, is a topic of high priority and research in Finland. Every educator I interviewed regarding quality teaching practices stressed that they always rooted their actions with the knowledge that their practices should always enable students to have a higher level of self-efficacy. Any practices, like a percentage/letter grade assessment, that reduced this sense of ability, were simply avoided.

In conclusion, a notable word of advice Finnish professors and policy makers unanimously stressed was the fact that any kind of lasting reformation is a unified task. What they meant by this is, if successful and lasting change were to occur, it would have to be reflected in all different levels of education (elementary, secondary, post secondary, and government policy). Ideally, these changes should happen at the same time and essentially towards the same direction. "All levels must also be in agreeance on a shared vision to work towards." (*Sahlberg 2013*) In addition, along with all of these conditions, comes the requirement of having a high degree of patience. Moreover, Finnish policy makers stressed the importance of giving any changes time to unfold because "nothing revolutionary can happen over night." (*Lavonen 2013*)

University of Victoria Teacher Education

- 1) **Pedagogics:** Pedagogy commands roughly 40% of University of Victoria's four year Bachelor of Education (BEd) program and 45% of UVIC's sixteen month PDPP program. This means, in the BEd program, approximately 1.6 years of the 4 year BEd program focus on pedagogics and approximately 7 months out of 16 are spent focused on pedagogics in UVIC's PDPP program. It is apparent UVIC, like UH, places a high value on pedagogics in both of its BEd and PDPP programs. The only concern I found with UVIC's pedagogics education pertains to its PDPP program. As it only has 16 months to cover what UH covers in 5 years, it simply did not appear to be enough time to learn all that needs to be learnt in a deep and meaningful way.

- 2) **Research:** Research studies encompass a minimal portion of UVIC's teacher education program. The writing of a master's thesis is not required, although UVIC recently introduced a "Transformative Inquiry" course in an attempt to increase the amount of inquiry/research based activities their students must complete. British Columbia's teachers use professional development days to update their knowledge with the latest advances in education and learn how to incorporate these findings into their practice. Several professors at UVIC noted that they would ideally have research studies command a much larger portion of their teacher education program but due to several limitations, have not been able to get to that point yet. General UVIC students who I interviewed didn't seem to have knowledge of a real "research" portion of their studies, as well as didn't seem to have an opinion on how it would tie back to their learning or enhance their professional development. Due to the inquiry project that students in the TRUVIC program were required to complete, the students in that cohort had a better understanding of how their research projects contributed to their professional development in a significant way.

- 3) **Collaboration:** I observed a varied level of collaboration while at UVIC. Amongst

students the level of interaction and group work seemed to depend on the professor who was in charge of the class. On one end, I saw a highly active, connected, and collaborative group of students when I observed students in UVIC's TRUVIC program. On the other hand, I saw students who operated on a highly individual level, rarely interacting or collaborating with their peers in the general teacher education stream. Many of the students in the TRUVIC pilot program mentioned the importance of their well connected cohort. Not surprisingly, these TRUVIC students appeared much more aware of their learning, and were better able to articulate their opinions throughout my interviews with them. It was more difficult for me to observe collaboration amongst professors and staff in UVIC's teacher education department than it was at UH's, simply because the department's building was not by any means conducive to a collaborative environment. This issue became apparent through my interviews with UVIC teacher education faculty members, as they highlighted the lack of a common area for professors to collaborate with each other in. Furthermore, staff members mentioned how the secluded structure of their building automatically isolates the professors not only from each other, but more importantly, from their students.

- 4) **Assessment:** UVIC professors grade their students using percentages and letter grades. Peculiarly, while every UVIC student interviewed expressed the need for a different form of assessment when they start teaching their own students, they never questioned the percentage/letter grade system when it came to their own assessment. An example of this disconnect is apparent when I asked one UVIC student how she would like to assess student's achievement: "Definitely improvement. It's important for students to set their own goals...I find letter grades take away from the learning and then [the students] lose the meaning in their work." (Carly, 2013) I am unsure as to whether this incongruence was due to the fact I never directly asked these students of their opinion of how they are assessed in the teacher education program, or if they simply have two different opinions on assessment dependent on the age of students.

- 5) **Practicum:** UVIC students complete a total number of 3 1/2 months of practicum in their 16 month PDPP program and 4 1/4 months in their 4 year BEd program. Practicums are completed individually and involve the student teacher, the class teacher, and a professor from UVIC. Generally speaking, UVIC students who I interviewed had very positive opinions regarding their practicum. Most interviewees mentioned how relieved they felt to finally leave the theory portion of their education and jump into the practice. However, during these interviews, the students also made it very clear to me that they felt majority of the theory training they received was not relevant to what works in the classroom. TRUVIC interviewees expressed the highest levels of satisfaction regarding their practicum as they felt there was less of a disconnect between theory and practice as opposed to the students who were not in this cohort.
- 6) **Admission Standards:** UVIC previously based its admission 70% off of GPA and 30% off of the student's performance in an interview. This year's admission process will no longer include an interview process. According to UVIC's teacher education admission statistics for 2012, 65% of applicants were offered admission into the program. A total of 499 students applied to the program and 325 of them were gained admission. The interview process consisted of three questions that were provided to the applicant well in advance of the interview. The questions focused on understanding the student's motivation and suitability for the teaching program, not necessarily the profession. The admission process was summarized by one UVIC participant who was accepted into the program: "[UVIC] looked at my transcripts and emailed me for an interview...they asked three questions and then I was accepted, easy. How would I change the process? I would let [the applicants] demonstrate who we really are by not giving us the interview questions beforehand. I also want [the interviewers] to ask more questions about the applicant's motivation and not give people the chance to memorize an unauthentic cookie-cutter answer." (Carly, 2013) Like Carly's response, many UVIC students that I interviewed expressed concerns regarding their admission

process. It became clear that the students felt the application process may have been too simple, and the interview process too easy to fake motivationally.

British Columbia's Teacher Education: Results and Observations

Public education across British Columbia has had to deal with many obstacles not faced by Finnish educators including the difficulty of losing students to private schools, and strained union-government relations.

Regarding teacher education, an issue I found across the board at UVIC when interviewing both students and professors is how to successfully bridge the gap between theory and practice. Many UVIC students mentioned they felt most of the knowledge learned in their teacher education courses had little relevance to how teaching actually occurs in their practicums. An additional issue I encountered in my work was the student's lack of respect, not only for their peers, but professors as well. I feel it is worrisome that these harmful patterns of thought are reflected within the institutions that train teachers. In addition, every UVIC student interviewed mentioned that they felt not all of the students who made it into their education program should have gotten in. This was not due to the fact that they feel other students are not "intelligent" enough, but due to the fact that they felt some students are not actually motivated to become teachers. Many interviewees mentioned fellow classmates who entered teacher education because it was their back up plan, or just an easy program to do while they figured out what to do with their lives. This issue is caused by many factors both in and out of the university's control, but nevertheless, it is apparent that the admission process for our Teacher Education programs must be adjusted to weed out the students who do not actually have the interest and motivation to become a quality educator.

An overwhelming amount of comments were also directed towards the oversupply of teachers in British Columbia. Many students who I interviewed stressed how fearful they were of not obtaining jobs in British Columbia after receiving their diploma. Although some educators in BC's various teacher education departments argued that many students

find employment elsewhere globally or in fields other than teacher education, this discrepancy cannot be ignored. Furthermore, the negative impact of this oversupply was addressed from an equally valid perspective when students mentioned the resulting levels of competition present in their program. If ideally students are expected to collaborate with one another, form professional relationships with each other, and maintain these throughout their career, it is counterintuitive to put them in a highly competitive environment which is inherent given the current employment statistics.

Finally, many educators' concerns illuminated what they felt was one of BC teachers' largest challenges: professional development. The relationship between the two became apparent after observing Finland's teacher education program because professional development naturally strengthens quality teaching. Finland's mandatory integration of research studies and a master's thesis into its teacher education programs instills the habits of a research scientist into every student in their program. These habits include an embedded responsibility for teacher education students to constantly seek out recently published research and knowledge in their field. In addition, this self-improving habit is supported through Finnish educational policy, which requires every single teaching lounge in Finland to be stocked with the latest research published in this field.

Conclusions:

It is clear that there are marked differences between the University of Victoria's and the University of Helsinki's teacher education programs in the arenas mentioned above, but that is not to say one system is definitely better than the other. I feel the salient issues for British Columbia to focus on are with regards to assessment, teaching practicums, and admission standards. I feel if we focus on reforming these three areas first, we can make substantial positive movement towards a more purposeful and effective teacher education program. In the larger scheme of things, improving teacher education will do wonders on improving our education system as a whole. Furthermore, I think it is extremely important for British Columbia's various educational forces to work together towards a shared goal if we do intend to make some real, lasting changes. There is no formula for a "perfect"

education system, but that does not mean we should ignore the forward-thinking ideas Finland has brought to the table, regardless of the cultural differences we face. From the time I spent in Helsinki, I came to realize that the students in these teaching education systems aren't that different, and we have the opportunity to empower these students with the tools to fulfill arguably one of the most honourable profession's demands. Instead of increasing regulation and accountability, I feel, as Finland has done, we should work on fostering a new culture within the education world based on comprehensive teacher education, reworked professional development, and trust.