Perceptions of excellent teaching: an international comparative study

Andrea Raiker and Matti Rautiainen

Introduction

This paper considers perceptions of excellent teaching amongst pre-service teachers attending universities in England and Finland by exploring how different cultural backgrounds might predispose them towards being either ‘cultural workers’ or ‘competent technicians’ (see for example Freire, 2005). In England, ‘excellence’ or ‘excellent’ are words that appear regularly in government documentation on education, for example when reviewing the curriculum review in England (DfE, 2012a) or in relation to teacher education (DfE, 2010). In the introduction to the UK government’s White Paper The Importance of Teaching (2010:16), the policy document outlining significant changes in teacher and pupil education, appears the statement ‘There are many excellent teachers, working hard and succeeding with children and young people.’ The document continues to argue that although there are many excellent teachers, schools, school leaders, third party organisations and initiatives such as academies, ‘...we can do much better.’ An assumption can be made that ‘we can do better’ in terms of achieving excellence in these areas. However nowhere, in this or succeeding documents directing educational change in the UK, is excellence defined. An assumption is made that there is shared understanding between politicians, teaching professionals and families of what constitutes excellence in teacher education. In other words, conceptions of excellence are implicitly and collectively understood. The assumption appears to be that ‘excellent teaching’ will spontaneously emerge in practice.

The Finnish approach is somewhat different, starting from the premise that the primary aim of teacher education is to achieve the goal of excellent teaching in schools. It is acknowledged that excellent teaching is, in itself, a relative concept, dependent on those matters valued by individuals as well as their community. What should be learnt is a matter of those things that are regarded as worthy of learning and how they are to be studied and also taught. In other words, for a teacher to be capable of giving excellent teaching, s/he must form a conception during her studies of what excellent teaching is in theory and in practice, as well as of how s/he assesses the quality of one’s own teaching against conceptions of excellence. What interests Finnish educators is how well student teachers form conceptions during their education of what good teaching is in theory and practice, and how significant a role they see it playing in the profession of teacher. They understand the absurdity of this, as the obvious response is that surely it is always the aim of teacher education to produce graduates who can deliver excellent teaching. Finnish educators would affirm that this is the aim, but then question who determines the criteria of excellent teaching and how well a teacher education programme provides the skills to understand those criteria. In other words, they contemplate the nature of teacherhood and whether it lies closer to Paolo Freire’s (in Leach and Moon, 1999:53) ideal of critical pedagogy with the “teacher as cultural worker”, or to the concept of teacher as competent technician, who can modify previously given instructions so that s/he become part of one’s own classroom activity. Finnish educators are also interested in how aware student teachers become during their studies of the opportunities and limitations of their own teacherhood, and how do they conceive of their work as teacher. In other words, conceptions of excellent teaching should be made explicit as an essential aspect of teacher education. Only then can ‘excellent teaching’ be achieved in practice (See curricula for teacher education in the Department
of Teacher Education at the University of Jyväskylä

The UK approach to excellence is far more pragmatic, redolent of the neo-liberalistic ideology driving its approach to education. It has focused on the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) scores over the last decade. The UK government’s use of fifteen year olds’ declining performance to drive educational reform suggests that excellence is conceived in terms of positioning in international test leagues. The drawbacks of tests such as PISA, for example issues with eradication of cultural bias, decontextualisation and the secrecy behind the whole process (Svøberg, 2007), do not appear in government documentation and discussion. Nevertheless, Finland is referred to frequently because, since the first PISA exercise in 2000, it has been top or close to the top of the league tables in the three subjects tested: mother tongue, mathematics and science. Yet Finland was surprised that its children performed so well (Välijärvi et al., 2007). The aim of Finnish education was not to come top of the league tables but to ensure that all children were included, that no child was left behind and that the door to future and further education was never closed (Sahlberg, 2011). This is still the case (FNBE, 2011).

Thus, it appears that conceptions of excellence may be different in England and Finland, arising out of philosophical, historical, socio-economic and political differences, in other words, from cultural backgrounds. If this is so, student teachers in Finland and teacher trainees in England will have conceptions of excellence in teaching integral to their habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). As cultural fields (ibid.) in Finland and England are different, it could be assumed that pre-service conceptions of excellence in teaching are different too. This assumption was tested in a preliminary investigation involving the collaboration of two academics, based in Education Departments at the University of Bedfordshire in England and the University of Jyväskylä in Finland. Teacher trainee and student teacher conceptions of excellence in teaching were explored by focusing on the following research questions:

- What are teacher trainee and student teacher conceptions of excellence in teaching at the two research sites?
- How can these conceptions be used to enhance teaching at both research sites?

Methodology

As institutions in two different countries were involved a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2003) was seen to be appropriate. In Finland, 18 secondary history student teachers in the last year of a 5 year Masters’ course (all the students in the cohort) submitted written assignments in which they defined and described teaching excellence, their own pedagogical thinking and the related practical solutions they have used and developed during their teaching practices. Student teachers’ assignments were subjected to qualitative analysis (Brenner et al., 1987).

In Finland, secondary student teachers gain qualified teachers status through the successful completion of a Masters course in their major subject including pedagogical studies (60 ects) as minor. Pedagogical studies are decentralized for four years for most of students. In England, secondary teacher trainees acquire qualified teacher status through success completion of a one year Postgraduate Certificate in Education. As there is not a PGCE course in history at Bedfordshire, 18 teacher trainees engaging on the English PGCE strand were selected for comparison (all the
trainees in the cohort). Their journeys to teacherhood would be four years, not five, but they would be in their last year of education prior to being fully qualified and teaching in secondary school. English was chosen as the comparative subject, as this falls into the social science disciplines.

These teacher trainees were read a pre-paper prepared by the Finnish author containing his analysis of the Finnish student teachers’ perceptions of teaching excellence, evidenced by discourse extracts and supported from scholarly texts and research articles. The English trainee teachers were then asked to create mind maps focused on ‘teaching excellence’. They were also asked to provide spoken statements on their perceptions of teaching excellence and being a teacher. These statements were recorded by the English author. The English mind maps and Finnish discourse extracts were submitted to the same content analysis so that similarities and differences in perceptions could be identified.

The Finnish and English education systems

The different ways teacherhood, that is the conception of the teaching profession and teacher education, has developed in Finland and England plays a central role in explaining the present state of schools in the two countries. They also provide a context for examining the conceptions of the teacher trainees and student teachers included in this study. The aim of this section is to provide, in brief, background on the Finnish and English cultural foundations underlying school, teacherhood and teacher education: the contexts where one trains to become a teacher and where one acts as a teacher. Teachers and students do not create their work out of nothing. The reflection underpinning their work is embedded in numerous social and cultural meanings which become clearer when viewed through the lenses of historical, social, political and economic analyses.

The statutory age for starting school in England is 5; in Finland children begin school the year they celebrate their 7th birthday. Thus there appears to be differing epistemologies underpinning who should be responsible for early years’ education: the family or teachers. Furthermore, in England teachers do not have the autonomy in curriculum and standard-setting enjoyed by their Finnish counterparts; early years’ education is therefore more government-controlled. This continues to be the case throughout the 6 years of primary education and 5 years of secondary education that comprise compulsory education. In Finland, compulsory education known as basic education covers only 9 years, again six in primary but only 3 in secondary education. Whereas in both countries, pupils can continue their secondary education until 18 or 19 years of age, in Finland there are no national examinations at the end of compulsory education. Teacher assessment determines whether pupils attend general (academic) or vocational upper secondary school; in England, pupils sit the GCSE examination to enter sixth form (academic), further education or other post-16 provision. However, appropriate attainment in national examinations to gain university entrance is required in both countries, the Matriculation examination in Finland and A levels in England.

In Finnish schools the borderline between lower and upper school teachers traditionally lies between class 6 (age 12-13 years) and class 7 (age 13-14 years). In present-day schools there is somewhat more ‘border traffic’ than earlier, and it is not at all unusual for a class teacher to have lessons in the upper school (classes 7-9) and a subject teacher in the lower school (classes 1-6). As in England, underlying the Finnish system is the principle of increasing the intellectual content of study according
to the number of years at school. Where school begins without subject differentiation, by the end of lower school it has already become tightly segmented around subjects.

Unlike England, schools are very similar all around Finland. There are few private schools; these stress alternative pedagogical principles, for example, Rudolf Steiner schools. This can be compared with the extensive English independent or private school system running parallel to the state system. Independent schools do not receive their funding from local or central government. Approximately 506,500 children attend the 1,234 independent schools registered with the Independent Schools Council (ISC, 2011). Parents pay fees for their children to attend a private school. For example fees to attend Bedford School are £10,300 per ten week term (Bedford School, 2012) though as for most private schools bursaries are available for the most able children. Independent schools may be day schools, boarding schools or a combination. A few have religious affiliations or, like Finnish private schools, follow particular pedagogical or philosophical models. For example, Summerhill School in Suffolk is run on the humanist principles established by A.S. Neill. However the curricula of most independent schools are focused on academic subjects. Independent schools gain the highest percentage of pupils gaining A and B grades at A level. Their pupils therefore have the best chance of entering their university of choice.

In Finland the emphasis is on comprehensive education for all. When the comprehensive system was introduced into Finnish schools in the 1970s, a decade later than in England, the transmissive pedagogy of former elementary schools was changed to one based on learners’ needs. The comprehensive school brought about four changes in the discussion of goals and objectives. 1) Objectives were focused on learning, 2) learning was seen as something broadly based and of a high level, and not as learning of basic civic skills and attitudes, 3) objectives were expressed precisely in the form of the learning of an individual pupil, and 4) the most important measure of successful school operation was achievement of the objectives set. (Simola 1995:95). Along with these changes, schools moved strongly towards autonomy and away from government control of pedagogy, curricula and assessment. This can be contrasted with the autonomous experimentation seen in English schools during the 1960s and 1970s, followed by increasing regulation and control by government in succeeding decades (see below)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sociopolitical dimension</th>
<th>Discipline school</th>
<th>Competition school</th>
<th>Cooperation school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>Working-life bias</td>
<td>Communality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manners</td>
<td>Entrepreneurship</td>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional values</td>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>Hope</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nostalgia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogical orientation</th>
<th>Teacher-led into subjects</th>
<th>Constructivism</th>
<th>Individual learning</th>
<th>Collaborativeness</th>
<th>Problem-derived</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

*Table 1: Three school realities.*
Over the last fifty years the three conceptions of school outlined above have appeared in the discussion of the Finnish school system (Suoranta 2003:137–138). The discipline school binds citizens to society; it resonates with the direction taken by English schools since the early 1980s. It is based on established teaching curricula which are implemented in school as standard subjects according to strict and defined study programmes. The discipline school is characterized by its mass form, its closed introvertedness and formal classroom teaching. These are replaced in the competition school by individualism, openness and multimodal teaching. Both types of school are to be found in Finnish schools today but through individual school choice, not government imposition. In contrast there are few examples of the cooperation school (ibid.) despite interest in it. The theme is subject to continuing investigation and discussion.

The strong and historically developed features of Finnish school culture and the teaching profession are powerfully present in everyday school life. However the culture has its drawbacks. The hectic nature of the school day does not encourage a working culture based around collaboration; instead, teachers often work in isolation. As they attain Masters to qualify as teachers, tradition holds that teachers are masters of their profession at entry. They are expected to fit into the school’s ethos and organisation, and ‘get on with it’. There is no equivalent to the newly qualified teacher status (NQT) with its embedded process of mentoring and support. On starting their first posts, new Finnish teachers perceive established communities in the school of which they are not a part (Blomberg 2008.) The tradition of “going it alone”, which for the subject teacher might be the result of being the only teacher of a particular subject in the school, transcends the shared understanding of pedagogy permeating the Finnish teacher training approach.

In larger secondary schools in both Finland and England, the subject areas constitute their own groups, within which there may prevail very powerful conceptions and norms in relation to how a subject is taught, is learned, and how this work is connected to the school as a whole. Grossman and Stodolsky call these the subject subcultures of the school (1995:5–8) The subject subculture is reinforced in turn by the significant learning experiences which take place during the training programme and which have a strong effect on professional socialization. The subject is not necessarily the most important apportioning factor, but it does have an impact in certain situations.

Interestingly a process of professional opening-up is taking place in the professional identity of the subject teacher in both countries: the teacher of a subject is becoming a learning supervisor and school developer. In this England is lagging behind Finland. Change in subject teacher status has come about through the movement of teacher education out of universities and into secondary schools, many of which have converted to academies in the last decade. The process in England in was initiated by amendments to the Education Act (2002) whereas change in Finland took off in the 1990s and still continues. Both countries have responded to social change, transformation of conceptions of learning and teaching as well as the demand for reorientating the culture of schools in a more community-based direction. However, England has had the added stimulus of declining pupil performance in international tests such as PISA. In this new situation, the expertise of the teacher in both countries is becoming defined along three dimensions: the intellectual, the pedagogical and the ability to work in a community. According to Kohonen, in Finland this change will mean huge challenges, especially for in-service training (2000, 33–35). As tradition strongly influences perceptions of teacher identity in Finland, there is considerable resistance to any changes that might undermine the high status enjoyed by teachers in Finnish society. In England, issues lie in teacher
resistance to government’s intentions to introduce regional differentiation in pay and conditions of employment, and in the perceived negative impact of academies and free schools on the comprehensive system and standards of achievement.

Even though Finland has a uniform basic school, the education of teachers remains clearly differentiated and resembles the English categorisation of primary and secondary school teachers. Class teachers (in England primary school teachers) study education as a major, subject teachers (in England secondary school teachers) study education as a minor and the studies of these two groups hardly coincide at all during teacher education.

Comparing Teacher Education in Finland and England

In both England and Finland, there is clear delineation between primary and secondary teachers and hence of primary and secondary teacher education. However, unlike Finland, where the university Departments or Faculties of Education decide when a trainee is ready to be a teacher, English teacher trainees have to attain Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), a set of descriptors against which trainees have to prove competence and compliance. QTS is attained through successful completion of a course of initial teacher education (ITE). In Finland, student teachers study academic aspects of Education at their university and gain practical expertise predominantly in university teacher training schools (TTS). Basically, the TTS supports and complements the teacher education and research activities of the Faculty in which the discipline of Education resides. Theory and practice are seen as being conceptually inseparable. Integration of theory with practice is seen as fundamental to promoting teacher autonomy and professionalism (Heikkinen et al., 2011). Therefore the relationship between university teacher educator and training school teacher is regarded as crucial to student teacher development. Both supervise the student teacher from different but overlapping perspectives.

Conversely, the range of organisations and institutions in England and Wales able to deliver ITE is wide, with each course specific to a particular age group and, for prospective secondary teachers, to subject. Since 2010, funding has been removed for students awarded less than the degree classification of Lower Second class honours who have been accepted for ITE. Interestingly, in Finland only the highest achieving students are recruited onto teacher education programmes. A typical example of the high number of applicants is given in Table 2 which shows the total student intake at the University of Jyväskylä for 2011. The high number of students applying to the Faculty of Education at the University in relation to those received by other faculties should be noted. The figures demonstrate that the Faculty of Education could only accept under 5% of those applying. National figures (FNBE, 2011) show that overall, student teachers are recruited from the top 10% of Matriculation pupils in the country.

All courses offer development of subject knowledge, skills and classroom practice. ITE can be completed alongside the attainment of a degree, on completion of a degree, whilst teaching part-time in schools, or through attending a full time course leading to Bachelor of Education with QTS (for primary teachers only). The QTS standards (DfE, 2012b) prescribe the minimum competences to be demonstrated by all teachers, regardless of number of years teaching. Achieving QTS involves teacher trainees attaining a set of values and a range of standards under the headings of Teaching and Personal and Professional Conduct. As teachers they will continue to be assessed against these
standards until the government decides to review and change them. In Finland, a student teacher is considered to be an expert in teaching and learning once their Masters degree has been awarded. Despite the lack of national control of teacher education, Finland’s variance between schools’ performance was small, only 8% of total variance in reading literacy and the smallest variation in PISA 2009 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Places</th>
<th>Applicants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>4831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>2967</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Technology</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics and Science</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>2381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business and Economics</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>1036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social sciences</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>2386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport and Health Sciences</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>2364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,461</strong></td>
<td><strong>16,793</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: Student intake at the University of Jyväskylä for 2011 (JYU, 2010)*

It is interesting to note that teacher training institutions in England and Wales once had the freedom now enjoyed by Finnish educators. The 1944 ‘Butler’ Education Act established primary education in law, set the tripartite framework for selective secondary education and gave local education authorities (LEAs) oversight of the curriculum. Teaching and learning was considered the business of teachers, Secondary teachers required no formal, accredited training in pedagogy to teach. The 1960s was a period of experimentation involving LEAs working together with universities and schools, for example, the secondary Humanities Curriculum project, aspects of which are still in evidence today in the form of dialogic teaching and the use of philosophy for children to explore problematic social and emotional issues. But ‘progressive’ education had powerful detractors. The publishing of the Black Papers One and Two in 1969 which attacked what the authors saw as the excess of progressive education, the William Tyndale affair of 1975 which promoted rumours of anarchy in the education system, and Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan’s 1976 Ruskin College speech which launched his ‘Big Debate’ on education, saw the beginning of the end of teacher and teacher educator autonomy. Public respect for teaching as a profession decreased. In 1983, the Conservative Government’s paper ‘The Content of Initial Training’ signalled the end of university control of teacher education. With the Education Act of 1988 prescribing the curriculum and the 1994 Education Act establishing the Teacher Training Agency to control teacher-training supply, funding and content, teacher and school education was confirmed as being manifestations of government ideology. That ideology is neo-liberalism, defined by performativity. According to Ball
‘performativity is a technology, culture and mode of regulation that employs judgments, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change… [representing] the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation.’ The quality assurance/audit-driven approach of prescribed curriculum and assessment, league tables and inspection of schools and teacher training providers by the Office of Standards in Education (Ofsted) was not tempered by the ascendency of the Labour Party in 1997 and Tony Blair’s proclaimed emphasis on education and of ‘raising the bar and closing the gap’ (DCSF, 2006). As Thomson et al. (2010:653) put it in concluding their research:

We showed that the policy mantra of raising the bar AND closing the gap is an ideological construct which sutures together these two goals in conceived policy space, then mandates a technology of targets and tests. This translates into everyday educational practices geared to the transmogrification of students into data, and their teachers into alchemists, in the perceived space of contemporary English schooling.

In conclusion, it can be said that the general view in Finland is that teacher education is best delivered through universities that organize and control teaching practice through on-site or proximal teacher training schools. In England and Wales, greater emphasis is being placed on school-led and school-centred initial teacher training with the possible endowment of teacher accreditation by providers other than universities. As we stated in the introduction to this paper, the teacher education systems in both Finland and England and Wales are directed at achieving excellence. As the teaching as a profession and teacher training in the two countries are viewed and structured differently, and are underpinned by differing philosophical, historical, socio-economic and political, an assumption could be made that descriptions of ‘excellent teaching’ would vary. It could be further assumed that Finnish student teachers would see themselves more as Freire’s ideal of teacher as cultural worker whilst those in England and Wales would hold perceptions of teacher as competent technician acting on the instructions of others. The preliminary study described and critically evaluated below was designed to scope definitions of excellent teaching and concepts of teacherhood to provide parameters for further research.

**Preliminary investigation into teacher trainee/student teacher concepts of ‘excellent teaching’**

The data collected from final year Finnish secondary student teachers is taken from essays in which they describe their own pedagogical thinking and present the related practical solutions they have used and developed during their teaching practice. The name given to this written output is *Teaching Philosophy* and every would-be secondary subject teacher in the Teacher Education Department of Jyväskylä University has to write just such a document at the end of their pedagogical studies. The reports are 2-3 pages in length and a maximum of three pages has been set as the limit. In addition, the reports include appendices where student teachers present their practical teaching. This study makes use of the reports written by prospective history and social studies subject teachers in 2011.
Findings

Towards insight

Despite the differing socio-political systems in the two countries, transmissive teaching based on behaviouristic principles of transfer of knowledge has been replaced by a transactive approach based on individual constriction of knowledge i.e., learning does not take place as a transfer but as a cognitive process based on the dialogue between pupils and teachers. Unlike behaviourism, the basis of the transaction orientation comes from humanistic psychology. From the viewpoint of teaching, the choice between these two orientations is fundamental.

“Now, therefore, there’s a reason for seeing a lesson in a new light, as an emotional charger for my studies, and also as the only encounter which information networks cannot replace; in other words, as a real, physical encounter and meeting together. The teacher’s challenge now is the meaningfulness of lessons, studying to learn and using these means to also build a bridge to pupils who do not experience factual learning in any way as meaningful – maybe just because of the wrong angle taken when looking at it and approaching it.” (Finnish student teacher M4)

The words and phrases used in the mind maps produced by the English teacher trainees resonated with the sentiments expressed by M4 but were expressed in terms of dispositions to learn (Crick, 2006). Lessons were seen as places to ‘create clear and inclusive environments’ (E1:6) in which ‘to cultivate curiosity and encourage a desire to know’ (E3:4), to challenge perceptions (E3:6) and to ‘make learning exciting’ (E2:6). In their teaching the large majority of Finnish student teachers strive to act in a transaction oriented way, but at the same time many of them describe the contradiction associated with this, which appears on the one hand in relation to action but also to thought: it is difficult to see oneself, let alone the pupil, as someone capable of acting in a dialogue.

“In teaching my own subject the emphasis is on supervising learning. True, teaching in its traditional teacher-led sense seems to predominate in my own practices, perhaps unnecessarily.” (M2)

Conversely and surprisingly the English teacher trainees, though acknowledging that their role involved transferring knowledge and skills, placed less emphasis on behaviouristic approaches. The phrases ‘supervising learning’ (M2), learning ‘structured around authority’ (M13) and ‘empathising instructor’ (M16) do not appear at all in the English data. The phrase most similar used by the English teacher trainees was ‘professional role model’ (E3:10) which suggests a social dimension. Despite the prescriptive environments in which English trainees teach, it appears that they are not aware of its constraining influence, or do not regard it as worthy of mention. Finnish student teachers, despite their greater autonomy, suggested that a dichotomous relationship towards one’s own profession is typical of the teacher. In its basic character, the profession in Finland is conservative, though there is a growing belief that it should be more reactive, even dynamic, reflecting the impact of major upheavals in social development and new scientifically produced knowledge during the last 20 years. At the same time, the cultural changes in school have been slow, thus making teacher education into an intersection where dealing with one’s own school experiences and the new orientation in the teacher education programme generates confusion and conflict between thought and action. (Rautiainen, 2008; Klemola, 2009; Nyman, 2009; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2011). Conversely, cultural changes in English schools have happened swiftly and continuously
with teachers and teacher educators having to cope with and embed several initiatives yearly since the Education Reform Act of 1988 (Alexander, 2010).

However, it is clear from the data from both countries that teacher trainee/student teacher understanding of the ultimate aim of teaching could be described as an attempt to develop children’s thinking so that they can achieve insight, meaning that new learning has occurred, learning that is meaningful to the children. Content analysis demonstrates that the basis of pedagogical thinking of both teacher trainees and student teachers is a belief that excellent teaching is child-centred (Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrases used by English teacher trainees</th>
<th>Phrases used by Finnish student teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop ownership of learning</td>
<td>Presenting in different ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop individuals as people</td>
<td>Pupils the most important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalise learning for achievement</td>
<td>Pupil’s development and growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalisation for meaning</td>
<td>Get away from teacher-centred learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage independence</td>
<td>Pupil playing greater part in lessons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop thinking</td>
<td>Help pupil shape knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assess each child to promote learning</td>
<td>Work together as empathising instructor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Evidence of a shared child-centred pedagogy

Interestingly, the word ‘insight’ did not appear in the English teacher trainees’ discourse. Although the English trainees had clear understanding of ‘pedagogy’, and used the word in both their verbal interactions and on their concept maps, there was no sense of deeper epistemological understanding. In contrast, this was clearly evident in the Finnish student teachers’ discourse and is indicative of studying at Masters’ level. For example, for M8:

“The most important aim of concrete teaching given in lessons is to create insights for the pupil. Insights help the pupil to analyze the information sensibly in her head, whereby she remembers it easily and possibly also makes use of it in the future. Sometimes the insight does not take place until after the lesson when the subject dealt with in the class appears in another context in the pupil’s life. The insight is the result of the pupil’s thinking. For the pupil, that thinking is one of the important processes that helps structure information in the pupil’s head and it is possible to utilize it afterwards, too. In my opinion, that thinking of the pupil is the most rewarding thing from the point of view of a teacher’s work. I think the greatest prize in teaching is to see the pupil thinking and learning. If the insight does not happen, then you cannot assume that any learning has taken place.”

This one discourse extract epitomises the difference between Finnish and English systems of training secondary teachers. In England, graduates who have at least half a bachelor degree in English can embark on a one year PGCE course. The PGCE course is intense and practice-focused which allows little time for meaningful engagement with the philosophy, psychology, sociology and history of education. The aim is to support teacher trainees in attaining the QTS standards. In Finland, mother tongue specialists (that is, specialists in Finnish language and literature equivalent to the English PGCE English language and literature specialists) would be developing their knowledge and understanding in philosophy, psychology, sociology and history of education as well as knowledge and understanding of Finnish language and literature over 5 years. It is possible for graduates in
Finnish to enter teacher education after their three year subject courses e.g. a prospective secondary history teacher to begin teacher training after completing a history degree. However, such prospective subject teachers are expected to achieve the same number of credits in pedagogical studies as direct applicants. The course taken by student teachers following either route attracts 60 ECTS (120 CAT points). It is successful completion of this course that attracts the award of Master in Education and license to teach. Typically, Finnish student teachers take two years to complete the course, making their journey to teacherhood five years, the same as direct applicants, but one year more than their English counterparts.

**Learning and teaching**

If the goal is to have insights, then the question automatically follows as to what kinds of pedagogical choices make this possible.

“In investigative learning the route from source to knowledge is created on the pupil’s terms and not by just “pouring” the knowledge into the pupil’s head without there necessarily being any act of insight. Investigative learning allows the pupil to construct and analyze her knowledge in exactly the same way as is done in real historical research. In this way different interpretations and viewpoints arise, both of which are central to defining the nature of historical knowledge.” (M7)

Although investigative learning means different things in different contexts, for Finnish student teachers it is primarily an attitude towards and perspective on learning. For most student teachers, acquiring this pedagogic perspective during their studies is a long process, and one where there are considerable doubts as to whether they can really be transferred into practice. English teacher trainees do not appear to have the same doubts because they see pupils’ learning being predominantly dependent on their (teachers’) own attributes as being certain sorts of people, not on a particular pedagogical approach such as investigation learning. This insight was the most striking to emerge from the content analysis. None of the following phrases, or phrases having similar meanings, appeared in the Finnish lexicon:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>honest</th>
<th>respected</th>
<th>tolerant</th>
<th>conscientious</th>
<th>intuitive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fallible</td>
<td>likeable</td>
<td>respectful</td>
<td>takes on extra</td>
<td>approachable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4: Phrases indicating the subjectivity of English teacher trainees*

These phrases are equally applicable to non-educators. A reason why such subjective phrases were used by the English teacher trainees and not their Finnish counterparts may be because the English teacher trainees are more introspective because they are required to measure themselves against standards. Finnish student teachers, on the other hand, have a greater training in objective thinking because they engage in ‘educational sciences’, including empirical research.

However, both teacher trainees and student teachers used words and phrases that described specifically teacher attributes:
Phrases used by English teacher trainees | Phrases used by Finnish student teachers
---|---
encourages | direction pointer
empathetic | discussion opener
supports | leader
motivates | supporter
inspiring passion and creativity | interested in other teachers’ work
challenges | develop with pupils
reflective practitioner | reflective
supporting ethos and community | learning to give world view, knowledge and skills, ethics and values

**Table 5:** Phrases indicating teacher attributes

The difference here is that the English teacher trainees used mostly verbs, indicating what a teacher should *do* to be excellent, whilst the Finnish words and phrases have greater emphasis on what a teacher should *be*. The Finnish contribution resonates with a point made earlier, about the hold of tradition on Finnish education. From the viewpoint of a teacher’s professional growth in Finland, an interesting situation arises. In practice, teaching practice is intended to rehearse teacherhood with a strong link to tradition. At the same time, the theoretical studies in pedagogy carried out at the university direct students towards a new way of seeing and doing things. Simultaneously, then, student teachers confront two discourse spaces, two realities in which school represents the everyday world in which one has to live and the new viewpoint a theoretical ideal that is seen to be too often removed from day-to-day school life. This also gives rise to unnecessary confrontation where certain things are seen as good and their opposites as bad (for example, behaviourism vs. constructivism). There is more of a sense of the Finnish being ‘supervisors of learning’ and the English being ‘facilitators of learning’. Again, this is surprising when the socio-political background of English teacher trainees is considered.

In their conversation, both sets of teacher trainees and student teachers often associate excellent teaching with multifaceted and varied teaching. When asked to justify their choice of teaching methods, variety is discussed: the English teacher trainees used the word ‘differentiation’, the Finnish student teachers the phrase ‘something for everyone’. As grouping for differentiated learning is not usual practice in Finnish schools, it is not surprising that the term was not used by the Finnish student teachers taking part in this study. Interestingly, to Finnish eyes, variety in teaching methods suggests student teachers’ lack of ability to see the relationship between the teaching objective and its most appropriate teaching method. It is the Finnish view that this is bound up with their tradition of the teaching profession. A didactic but academically gifted student teacher may able to create a varied lesson consisting of different phases. However, s/he may have neither deep understanding of the underlying epistemology of teaching and learning nor of the next steps to take when pupils have difficulties with what is being taught (Nikkola *et al.*, 2008.)

**Conclusions**

This paper considers secondary teacher trainee/student teachers’ perceptions of excellent teaching at universities in England and Finland by exploring how different cultural backgrounds might pre-dispose teacher trainees/student teachers towards being either ‘cultural workers’ or ‘competent
technicians’. There are clearly limitations to the findings of this small study caused by varying data collection methods and the differing systems of teacher and school education in the two countries are acknowledged. However, some useful if partial answers to the two research questions can be proffered. The resulting findings will be used to develop a research design for more extensive research into teacher trainee/student teachers’ perceptions of ‘excellent teaching’. The outcomes of both this study and the planned wider research will be integrated into the international education elements of teacher education courses at both universities.

**What are teacher trainee and student teacher conceptions of excellent teaching at the two research sites?**

In some ways, teacher trainee and student teacher conceptions of excellence in teaching are remarkably similar. They are grounded in child-centred learning, the promotion of thinking and personal conceptions of teacherhood. Although the cultural backgrounds suggest that English teacher trainees would fall into Freire’s ‘competent technician’ category and Finnish student teachers into the camp of cultural workers, this does not appear to be the case. Both groups are enthusiastic, even passionate, about their chosen profession and both in different ways appear to be prescribed by external factors, tradition in Finland and government in England.

**How can these conceptions be used to enhance teaching at both research sites?**

These conceptions can be used to enhance the teaching of education in a number of ways. Firstly, the findings of this investigation can be communicated to the teacher trainees and student teachers participating so that they can question them and relate them to existing learning, both of their own conceptions and those in the other country, to gain insights. However we suggest that the English approach of *laissez faire* with ‘excellent teaching’ spontaneously manifesting itself in practice should be replaced with identified elements being explicitly articulated and taught from a philosophical perspective. As the Finnish student teacher M8 observed in the discourse from his philosophical assignment quoted above, gaining insights is important for learning. We maintain that insights into education systems and practices other than one’s own will develop conceptions of teacher identities as these are socially and culturally constructed. Insights will also inform understanding of why teachers teach as they do, and of the possibilities for positive change to benefit learners. We would suggest that it is difficult to gain insights into the social and cultural constructs of what teachers do and are in one’s own country until teaching and learning approaches in other countries, approaches that have arisen from differing historical, socio-economic and political processes and events, have been considered. Reflecting on one’s own practice in one’s own country can lead to ‘not being able to see the wood for the trees’.

We propose that knowing and understanding aspects of teaching and learning in other countries is not simply an academic exercise. Globalisation and mobility have resulted in many countries, including those comprising the UK, becoming multi-cultural and multi-ethnic. This can be seen in schools in both countries, particularly in English cities such as London and Birmingham, and in Helsinki. We suggest that insights into the heritages and the diverse experiences of the children we teach will not only enhance a personalised approach to their learning; insights will also support greater levels of trust, tolerance, respect, and understanding of national and global citizenship.
The next step is for us to design and carry out research that will probe more deeply into teacher trainee and student teacher conceptions of teaching excellence. We also intend to involve the students participating in dissemination of this and other teacher and school education research at a virtual research seminar to be held during the summer of 2013 with the view of establishing lasting relationships between young teachers and the schools in which they practice. As the English saying goes: ‘From little acorns, great oak trees grow’.

References


University of Jyväskylä (2012) Curricula for teacher education in the Department of Teacher Education [accessed 1st November 2012]
