

Taking Teacher Education Seriously

Notes from a visit at Vassar College 2008

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1 Introduction

In the fall 2008 I had the great opportunity to spend a semester as visiting scholar at Education Department, Vassar College.¹ The overall aim of this report is to describe and discuss the teacher education at Vassar College. More precisely, it will report on a study of different views on the recruitment of students to – and the design of – teacher education programs.

The title *Taking Teacher Education Seriously* is inspired by the title of a book co-edited by one of the professors at Education Department, Vassar College (Bjork et al 2007). I have chosen this title because it captures something very essential in the discussion about teacher education. It is, however, important to note that the expression can mean at least two very different things depending on the positions of those who take teacher education seriously. On one hand it can be done from a more or less “external” position. The design and quality of teacher education is an often debated issue. For example, during the last year issues as teacher certificate (SOU 2008:52) and a new reform of teacher education program (SOU 2008:109) have been discussed in Sweden. Even though it was not so long ago that teacher education was reformed (SOU 1999:63), it is now time to do it again. Governments tend to use reforms of the teacher education to influence the educational system. On the other hand, those who work with teacher education on a daily basis at the universities may take teacher education seriously in a different ways, to try to make their own practices and the conditions for the students as good as possible.

The debate about teacher education varies, of course, from time to time and place to place. In the contemporary discussion in USA, for example, the “external” voices have for some time now related the issue of teacher education reform to the “standards movement”, a movement that focuses on the centralized testing of all children’s knowledge in relation to central standards. This movement has in turn been criticized by those who work within teacher education programs (e.g. Bjork et al, 2007).

It seems as the discussion between different views is a struggle over the same kinds of issues in USA and in Sweden, but in a slightly different way. The recruitment of students is one of these issues. In the latest governmental inquiry about Swedish teacher education, for example, one of the main reasons for reforming the program is to strengthen the recruitment of competent students and they suggest, among other things, to implement an aptitude test:

One of the most important factors in achieving a successful school system is that the right people become teachers. With fewer and fewer people applying to teacher education programmes, the average level of prior knowledge among students entering these programmes has fallen. This negative trend needs to be broken. The proposal for a new and improved teacher education programme will probably attract more applicants and create competition for places, which will lead to a higher level of prior knowledge. In view of the great importance of the teaching profession for the general level of education in society, the Inquiry would like prior education requirements to be generally raised and proposes additional analysis on this point. In this connection it may also be worth considering some form of *aptitude* test for teacher education (SOU 2008:109, pp. 29-30, emphasis in original).

¹ This visit was financed by the Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education (STINT) and its Program for Excellence in Teaching.

In the search for different views on teacher education, and the recruitment of students, it is interesting to compare discourses formulated in different contexts. This study is, however, mainly built on conversations with faculty at Education Department at Vassar and interviews with the teacher students who attend the courses Education 300 and Education 301. The interviews with students focus on questions about (1) their socioeconomic and educational background, (2) their visions, expectations, fears and intentions about their future work as teachers and (3) their experiences from the teacher education at Vassar.

2 Teacher education at Liberal arts colleges

Liberal arts colleges are a central part of the educational system in USA.² In short, a liberal arts college can be described as “.../ a four-year institution of higher education, focusing its attention on candidates for the B.A. degree who are generally between the age of eighteen and twenty-one, an institution resistant to highly specific vocational preparation and insisting on a considerable breadth of studies” (Hawkins 1999, p. 23). They provide undergraduate studies in various areas and are often characterized by high ambitions and aims concerning good practices of education (Pascarella et al, 2004). The faculty is characterized both by a high academic standard and an interest in and high ambitions concerning teaching (Leslie, 2002). It has also been shown that professors tend to have very close relationship to their students and to be deeply engaged in undergraduate education. Even though liberal arts colleges often do not have any strong research environments, their students tend to continue to graduate school in a higher degree than students from other kinds of institutions (Astin, 1999). Furthermore, the education is often multidisciplinary and the students are recommended to take courses in different academic fields.³

The system of liberal arts education was developed during the 19th century in a social context of expanding population and an increasing need for higher education in industry, health care, law, teaching and so on (Lang, 1999). Although many of the colleges originally was catholic or protestant, they tend to move away from practices connected to their religious background towards a focus on values developed within natural sciences, and later on engagement in civil right and social justice (Gomes, 1999).⁴ In 1999, 64% of all college students in USA were involved in some kind of community-service activity.

One of the main characteristics of a liberal arts college is that their education is non-vocational. An expression used is that liberal arts colleges educate for life, not for living. This puts teacher education programs in an interesting position as an obvious exception from this rule. Many of the students continue their education at graduate level after graduation from Vassar. This means that, at liberal arts colleges as Vassar, the decision to become a teacher is based on a very *active choice* made by the students during their time at the college (c.f. Johnston, 2007). This condition contributes in specific ways to the development of the teacher education program at Vassar and contrasts significantly to the conditions at most universities

² The system of Liberal arts education does not yet exist in Sweden, even though an agreement between Uppsala University and Gotland University to develop the first institutions of this kind was signed in the fall 2008.

³ For example, the catalogue for the 2008/2009 academic year at Vassar states that “It is strongly recommended that students take courses in each of the four divisions at Vassar. Students are also expected to work in more than one department each semester” (<http://catalogue.vassar.edu/degreesandcourses.html>, visited September 16, 2008).

⁴ Vassar College belongs to the group of independent liberal arts colleges and has never been associated to either Protestantism or Catholicism.

in Sweden where the main recruitment of teacher students is done among students who have not yet started their university studies.

3 Approach and procedure

3.1 Introduction

The development of any teacher education program is taking place in a field of tensions between different agents' interests and traditions. There is always a potential discussion about the balance between different content areas, between knowledge of subject matter and curriculum goals, of learners and their development, and of teaching. Bransford et al (2005) stress that teacher students need education in three fields of knowledge in order to be prepared for teaching in a changing world; (a) knowledge of learners and their development in social contexts, (b) knowledge of subject matter and curriculum goals and (c) knowledge of teaching. Furthermore, there is a discussion going on about the length and organization of teacher education programs at liberal arts colleges and research universities (Bjork, 2007). All of this, and more, influence the work of designing teacher education programs (Darling-Hammond et al 2005).

Historically, different views on the goals of – and what to include and exclude in - teacher education has been dominating the discussion. Zeichner (1993) describes four different traditions of teacher education in USA. The first, *The Academic Tradition* emphasizes the subject matter produced by academic disciplines. The teacher should, from this perspective, be a scholar and subject matter specialist. Courses in for example Education has no or little place within this kind of teacher education. The second tradition, *The Social Efficiency Tradition*, on the other hand highlights the educational knowledge and seeks to base teacher education curriculum on results from scientific studies of teaching. Advocates of the third tradition, *The Developmentalist Tradition*, put the child and the child's development in focus. They emphasize what they see as the natural development in the child as the basis for teacher education curriculum. They are critical of the research within the Social Efficiency Tradition and the mechanical methods that they stress are the main results from that research. Fourth, *The Social Reconstructivist Tradition* emphasizes schooling and teacher education as forces in social and societal development. The content in teacher education should, according to researchers and practitioners in this tradition, be chosen in order to socialize teachers who can contribute to social change.

The four traditions described by Zeichner (1999) have grown out from different ideas and in different times in history. They have also dominated the debate about teacher education in different contexts. However, it is important to note that they do not necessarily replace each other; they may live side by side in the same systems. Zeichner stresses that

No teacher education program can be understood in relation to any one tradition. The four traditions focus our attention on different aspects of teaching expertise. All teacher educators are concerned about the particular issues that are emphasized in each of the traditions. It is the degree of emphasis and particular meaning given to these various factors within particular teacher education programs which give programs their identities (Zeichner, 1999, p. 8).

Since the design of teacher education programs may vary from time to time and place to place and be based on different traditions, ideas and visions, it is interesting to compare systems with each other. However, it is important to remember that the traditions described by Zeichner are American tradition and that they may not be easily translated to a Swedish

context. I will relate to them in order to describe the teacher education program at Vassar, but they can also be used as a point of departure in discussions about other systems.

3.2 Documents and notes from teaching and meetings

The main purpose of the analysis of documents and notes is to be able to describe the context in which the interviewed students attend their teacher education program. In this report this will mainly be used as a background and as a base for the formulation of interview questions. In order to give a very short overview of the organization of and activities at Education Department at Vassar I have used their Self-studies, the department's web pages,⁵ syllabi for spring and fall semesters 2008 and notes from teaching and meetings that I have participated in. I have also used pages with information about teacher certification in New York State⁶ and the accreditation and evaluation of the teacher education program.⁷

3.3 Interviews

The study has a special focus on the recruitment of teacher students and is mainly built on interviews with the teacher students who attend the courses Education 300 and Education 301. In the fall 2008 thirteen senior or graduated students, who have decided to become teachers, attended these courses.⁸ Eleven of these students participated in the interviews.

The interview study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Vassar under the following conditions: The interviews were performed in an office on campus and recorded using a digital sound recording device and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The risk for the subjects to be interviewed was no higher than a minimal risk as defined by the federal and state guidelines: "the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests".⁹ There was no deception of the participants involved in the project. In the room, where the interviews took place, the interviewer posed questions and follow-up questions and the participants were expected to answer these questions. In order to alleviate stress for the participants, they were informed about the study, and what was expected of them, before the interview. They got a summary of the project and they had opportunities to pose questions about it both before and after the interview session (see Appendix 1).

The data will be used for research purposes only. The results of the project will be presented in this report and in scientific articles. It will also be presented at an educational research conference in Norway in March 2009 (Almqvist et al, forthcoming). The data, which has been analyzed only by me, is coded without information about the participants and stored in a safe place. The key for the coding of data is stored in a different place. The participants' real names are not used when the results of the project are presented.

⁵ <http://education.vassar.edu/>, visited 2008-10-05.

⁶ <http://www.highered.nysed.gov/tcert/certificate/>, visited 2008-10-05.

⁷ <http://www.highered.nysed.gov/ocue/documents/RATEOverviewRevised10-17-03.pdf>, visited 2008-10-05.

⁸ A few of the thirteen students have already graduated from Vassar, but attended this course on the so called Dean's program in order to get their teacher certificate.

⁹ <http://www.nsf.gov/bfa/dias/policy/hsfaqs.jsp#sorts>, visited 2008-10-05.

3.4 Summary

In order to try to understand the teacher education program at Vassar College I will use different kinds of sources. My ambition is to look for views on the design of a teacher education program and to relate it to different traditions described in the literature. The sources I use are mainly documents and web pages produced by Vassar College, notes from teaching and meetings, and interviews with students.

4 The institution

4.1 Introduction

Vassar College, founded in 1861, is a highly selective residential liberal arts college. Initially, and until 1969, it was a college for women only and has as such been an important part of the development of opportunities for women to get access to higher education. It is a rather small college located in the town of Poughkeepsie in New York State.

One of the most obvious differences between Vassar College and my home institution is the size of it. At Uppsala University we have approximately as many students at the teacher education program alone as the whole amount of students at Vassar College: 2500. Since Vassar College is so small, it is also possible to gather all professors in one room, and there seems to be a rather well developed co-operation over the departments in multidisciplinary discussions and teaching.

My impression from taking part in everyday life at Vassar and talking to a lot of people working and studying there is that it confirms what is being stated in the literature about liberal arts colleges. The professors have very high ambitions concerning their teaching. Even though most of them have ongoing research, their main focus of interest seems to be teaching undergraduate students. They use the same kind of words when they talk about teaching as we tend to use only when we talk about research: excellence, elite, selectivity and competition. In light of this it is interesting to think a bit about recruitment of new professors to a place as Vassar. The interest of teaching is explicitly expressed at the Education Department, where the applicants must have been working as teachers at least a few years before they even can be considered for a tenure track, and teaching experiences seem to be important in recruitment of professors at other departments as well.

4.2 Education Department at Vassar College

The Education Department is a rather small department at Vassar.¹⁰ Almost all of the faculties have doctoral grades. They are involved in various courses at the department, in interdisciplinary programs and, of course, in the teacher education program. There is also a very strong engagement at the department in questions concerning inclusion and social justice in schools and society. At department meetings, in teaching, at the department's web pages, in most of their syllabi and other documents, these questions are repeatedly mentioned and discussed. All of those who are engaged in the teacher education program seem to share the ambition to contribute to the development of schools and society.

The teacher education program at Vassar College is, according to the text on their web site, based on the philosophy that "broad liberal arts education is the best foundation for teaching

¹⁰ <http://education.vassar.edu/index.html>, visited 2008-10-05.

whether at the elementary or secondary level; whether in public or private school. The student at Vassar who is preparing to teach works within a strong interdisciplinary framework of professional methods and a balanced course of study in a select field of concentration leading to a Bachelor of Arts".¹¹ The department offers education leading to initial New York State certification in childhood and adolescent education.¹²

The students at Vassar take a minimum of 3,5 units each semester, but most of them take at least five units. Teachers teach five per year. In the courses in Education, varying between ½ and 2 units each, the students encounter different perspectives on education, teaching and learning. They take courses with titles as Introduction to Psychology, Issues in contemporary education, Introduction to special education and so on (see Appendix 2 for courses required for teacher certificate).

The teacher students have to do a certain amount of fieldwork to receive their teacher certificate: A minimum of ½ unit of field work is required for admittance to all 300-level courses for students seeking teacher certificate. The Education Department is deeply involved in various kinds of field work and outreach programs, as for example Vassar After School Tutoring (VAST), where students at Vassar help children with their school work after school. This engagement gives the department some extra practical issues to handle, especially the work to help the students getting access to the schools. In order to make this possible the department co-operates with the districts and schools close to the college.¹³ Other departments are also involved in providing opportunities to do field work. Biology Department, for example, offers a Science internship course where the students do a project where they teach children in one of the schools in the area.¹⁴

To become accredited to educate teachers in New York State, the colleges have to apply to, and be evaluated by, one of three different organizations. Education Department at Vassar College has received their accreditation from New York State Regents Accreditation of Teacher Education (RATE). In the fall semester 2008 the department was asked to send in some complementary information about the teacher education program. I participated in the group at the department that gathered and analyzed this information.¹⁵ We used the results from a survey given in the spring 2008 that asked graduates how prepared they felt to teach and whether they had pursued certification. The results from this survey show that the graduates from Vassar found student teaching, the relationships they had with professors and their fieldwork experiences college wide to have had a dramatic impact on their success as teachers.

One specific aspect that is often mentioned and discussed in the literature about education in liberal arts colleges is the close relation between professors and students at these institutions. I would say that this is definitively true for the education at Vassar. The professors – both at Education Department and at other departments – seem to be interested in the education of students and they also like talking about their own teaching. The fact that the college is so small, and the professors so few, makes it possible to build these close connections to the

¹¹ <http://education.vassar.edu/index.html>, visited 2008-10-05.

¹² <http://www.highered.nysed.gov/tcert/certificate/>, visited 2008-10-05.

¹³ It can also be mentioned that this engagement does not end when the students graduate. Together with a few other teacher education departments on the east coast of USA – forming a Consortium for Excellence in Teacher Education (CETE) – the department is involved in activities as support groups for new teachers in urban areas.

¹⁴ I had the great privilege to take part in the seminars connected to the science education internship once a week.

¹⁵ Erin McCloskey, Colette Cann, Lynn Capozzoli and me. For more information about RATE, see <http://www.highered.nysed.gov/ocue/documents/RATEOverviewRevised10-17-03.pdf> (visited 2008-10-05).

students. The professors are more or less forced to become generalists and teach many different courses, which means that they can meet the same students in various courses over time.

4.3 Education 300/301

During my time at Vassar, I taught the course Education 300/301 together with two of the professors at Education Department. This course is one of the last course in the teacher education program at Vassar College and is focused on reflection over the students' teaching:

“This senior seminar focuses on the preparation of a personal portfolio that will analyze and reflect upon the student teaching experience. In this course, taken concurrently with the student teaching practicum, students will examine the linkages between theory, current research and classroom practice. Portfolios, in addition to containing personal reflection upon classroom teaching, typically include detailed sample lesson plans, evaluation rubrics, samples of student work and additional evidence of sound professional practice” (Syllabus for Education 300/301, fall semester 2008).

The students were expected to

- “Make linkages between educational theory and classroom practices to inform their instructional programs in accordance with the New York State Standards.
- Utilize current research to further inform their classroom practices.
- Determine appropriate strategies and techniques to utilize in developing classroom communities and management systems.
- Implement appropriate academic, school and emotional strategies for a wide range of learners.
- Develop a professional teaching portfolio, as well as a personal teaching statement.
- Reflect upon and critique their teaching performance” (Syllabus for Education 300/301, fall semester 2008).

The teacher students taught in elementary, middle or high schools in the area during fourteen weeks, Monday through Friday. Every Tuesday afternoon they returned to college for a two hours seminar where we discussed their teaching experiences in relation to the course literature. In some of these seminars we had invited guest speakers. The seminar discussions was centred on different themes each time: Philosophy of teaching, Community building in the classroom, Class management, Working with challenging children, Meeting the needs of special education students, Teacher relationships and collaboration, Applying theory to the classroom, Child-centered vs text book driven curriculum, Education and the law, Finding a job in the educational field, Teaching for social justice and Institutional contexts for teaching. Two days before these seminars they sent us short texts and questions they wanted to discuss. In the end of the course they handed in a portfolio each which we read and graded.

4.4 Summary and new questions

During my visit as a scholar at the Education Department at a highly selective, elite, residential liberal arts college, I had many opportunities to take part in everyday life at the department, to observe teaching, to teach, to attend various kinds of meetings and in other ways get to know the department. In short, the department can be characterized as a small, highly qualified and academically strong department with deep engagement in questions about social justice in schools and societal development.

From my experiences from everyday life at the department a number of questions about the students and their choices and expectations grew, and I decided that I wanted to interview these students. These questions concern their (1) socioeconomic and educational background, (2) visions, expectations, fears and intentions about their future work as teachers and (3) experiences from the teacher education at Vassar (Appendix 3).¹⁶

5 Student voices

5.1 Introduction

There is a rather large variation in the students' backgrounds. Eight of the eleven interviewed students (one man and ten women) say that they come from upper middle class and three say that they come from middle class families. The students represent seven states – mainly on the east coast of USA – and one foreign country. Two of the students have parents who have immigrated to USA. Eight of the students' both parents have education from college; the other three have one parent who has a college degree.

Three of the students have attended private schools all the way from elementary to high school; five only public schools and three have experiences from both forms. Most of the students liked their schools. Seven of them have only positive things to say and felt well prepared for college; three liked some of the schools and one had negative experiences from school. The students stress that these experiences have influenced their choices to become teachers; they want to offer as good – or even better – education to other children.

There is also a small variation between the students' reasons for applying to Vassar. Although all of them say that they wanted to apply to a small liberal art college, their way to this particular small college differed. Eight of them searched actively and visited many other colleges before they decided where to apply. The others have received their information about Vassar from family or friends. They all say that they wanted to be admitted to a liberal arts college because they searched for flexibility in curriculum; they were not sure what courses they wanted to take at college. It is worth noting that only two of them mention the possibility to get a teacher certificate as a contributing factor when they decided to apply to Vassar.

It is possible to get a very broad at Vassar College, but all of the interviewed students have chosen a rather narrow path. Since they have to take a major in at least one subject and since they have to take a certain amount of courses to get their teacher certificate, there is not room for a broad education. Some of them have also taken a correlate in other areas and a couple of them have taken a second major. Only four of the eleven students say that they have a broad college education with courses from different areas.

Consequently, and if we allow us to make a rough generalization, the typical student in this sample is a young woman from an upper middle class family on the east coast of USA. Both her parents have degrees from college. She has attended a good public school from which she has very positive experiences. She searched for a small liberal arts college with flexible curriculum and visited many colleges before she decided on Vassar. However, it is important to note that there are also important variations between the students in the sample, which makes it interesting to listen to the different voices of the students.

¹⁶ Some of my questions are inspired by the questions posed in the study by Johnston (2007).

5.2 *Vassar College – a learning community*

One of the things that all of the students talk about is that Vassar College is a very strong learning community. Even though different in goals and ambitions they have at least one thing in common, namely that they take their education very seriously. You do not get admission to Vassar if you do not do that. One of the students talks about two sorts of people who come to liberal arts colleges. One who does not know what courses he or she wants to take, who wants to explore the possibilities at college, and one who knows from the start which courses he or she wants to take. And, since these different kinds of students live together at a small college, they tend to meet different persons in discussions both within and outside of classes.

Not just knowing your own subject, but knowing other subjects and being able to discuss them in some degree of knowledge and understanding. It has a lot of strengths, it encourages individual thought and individual expression, it really allows you to pick what you're interested in and look into that in depth or even just on the surface (Kim).

Another very strong aspect of the education at Vassar, which all the students talk about, is the close relation between professors and students. All of them talk about how their professors are engaged in them far beyond the classroom.

I love how accessible professors are and they always encourage you to think, to sort of think beyond. They don't give you the kind of assignments that you just look up the answer in a textbook. They're there to help you beyond just being a professor, or a teacher. Not that they're a friend, but they're a guiding force and I've always felt that if I have a problem I can go and talk to my professors (Helen).

The professors are seen as competent, accessible, approachable and engaged teachers, but also as a "guiding force" beyond the walls of the classroom. A couple of the students mention that the support from their professors made it much easier to move from home.

The close relation to the professors is important for them. They say that they feel that their undergraduate studies are taken seriously by the professor in a way that is not so common at many other institutions, "They're not off with their Masters student, they're talking to us" (Mary). This is a huge difference from many other institutions, including the one that I work at in Sweden, where the amount of students are so much larger and where this kind of close relations can be very hard to achieve on the undergraduate level.

However, it is also important to note that the learning community at Vassar College to a certain degree is shaped by the fact that this is a highly selective elite liberal arts college. The selection is done already before the students come to college, which, according to some of the students, leads to a downside of the institution. They talk about the life at college as a life in a bubble, in some respects separated from the community outside the walls, or "on the other side of Raymond Avenue" (Olivia). On one hand this is seen as one of the things that make Vassar to a strong learning community where the students really can concentrate on their studies: "Vassar is the place where I feel that I have learned the most in such a concentrated amount of time" (Nicole). On the other hand it sometimes tends to become insular in relation to the surrounding community and world.

You do feel like you're part of a community, and not just in your own house, you're always, if you need something or you just don't feel like being alone you just open your door and there is someone next door, and, so that part I think is good. On the other hand it was very, it's very. Now when I live in the Town Houses so I have my own apartment so it is little different but it

became, in the dorms it became very, I realized, I don't know, you always felt the pressure cause you're always at school and even though you may be hanging out on a Saturday afternoon watching a movie or something you're in the same space that you work in (Lisa).

Vassar College practices a so-called need-blind admission, which means that the admission process focuses on the applicants' study results and not their socio-economic background. The ambition is to get the best students to the college and not the richest. They are trying to give the students who need financial aid different kinds of help. However, there is still a question of selectivity related to class and ethnicity, even though not as obvious as earlier.

It's funny, because when you first hear it, it sort of screams everything that Vassar is trying not to be. Because in order to maintain this stigma, no not stigma, that sounds bad, but this prestige of being a good place to get an education is highly selective. But once you get to Vassar, what they, what the professors challenge you to think is what does it mean to be highly selective and if you take a look around and see where we have selected from and who is here, is that necessarily one, what you want, and two, is it a good way, Why has it ended up that if you are to look at test scores or whatever the higher scored ones are upper class, white children (Helen).

Both faculty and administrators at the college and the student organizations make efforts to bridge the gap between the community within Vassar and the community outside. They arrange various kinds of activities and outreach programs, even though some students say that "some of the rich kids attend these programs just to get a nice resume" (Olivia).

5.3 Teacher education at Vassar College

The students who have chosen to become teachers are, as said above, interesting for many reasons. They have made a very active choice of career. Even though they have been admitted to a highly selective elite college, they have chosen a path which may not lead to high status or a lot of money. On the question why they have chosen to become teachers all of them say that they like working with kids. A few of them had made their decision before they even applied to Vassar. For them, their own experiences from schools, as tutors, leaders of sport activities and so on, were important factors in this decision. There is a strong engagement in educational issues among these students. They want to contribute to the educational system and to make it a bit better.

I want to teach in public schools. And my approach to that is because I come from a background of private schools, and really excellent private high schools, and Vassar and yes, they were amazing experiences but my question is why can't every school be highly selective /.../ why can't my students have the experiences that I had? (Alex).

On the other hand, some of the students made their decision to become teachers after they had begun their studies at Vassar. Some of them mention inspiration from classes in education or psychology, others that they enjoyed the field work they had done. They all talk about social engagement, to contribute to children's education and to make a difference.

On the question about what the students' family and friends think about their choice of career, they say that most people around them are supportive, even though some wonder why they have chosen such a low paid profession. A couple of the students' parents think that it is good that their children will get a secure job, while a couple of the others also think that it is good that their children have taken a major at a well known liberal arts college and thereby have other options if they decide not to work as teachers in the future. One student says that it has

become almost as a tradition in the family to get a very expensive education in order to get a low paid job and to save money to be able to pay for the kids' college education.

Of course, no teacher education is perfect and it is interesting to investigate what the students themselves value most and what they would like to change. Over all these students are very satisfied with their teacher education. Ingrid says

I think the program itself was extremely valuable, I learned so much you know, and I learned things, you know, even basic concepts or basic ideas that I hadn't necessarily learned or solidified in elementary school when I was there myself, became solid. /.../ So I like how each subject area, we have you know a teaching of math, a teaching of science, a teaching of reading slash social studies, which is a year long. And I loved it. We get each individual kind of subject area, content area that we are going to be teaching and have a good semester to focus intensely on it (Ingrid).

The students mention practical matters as learning how to make lesson plans, but also the focus on the relation between theory and practice, as two of the most important parts of the education. For those who have participated in some form of fieldwork, this seems to have been very valuable and for some of them it has been the reason why they decided to become teacher students in the first place. All the students agree that the teacher education program at Vassar has made them well prepared for teaching children.

On the questions about what they are most proud of and what they feel least prepared to do as a teacher, all of them say that they are proud of how they have learned to interact with the children. At the same time this also seems to be their biggest challenge. They talk about questions concerning classroom management and how difficult they find it to discipline the children. Even though they all say that they have learned much about this during the semester, it seems to be their biggest challenge to develop this further. Furthermore, they talk about the challenge of selecting content. They find it difficult to know what to bring up and not to bring up in education. There is too much they want to do. But there is also one issue that they seem to have decided not to do, and that is to teach to the tests.

My challenge will really be to learn how I can work within the system to do what I want (Olivia).

So, what do they recommend the Education Department to add, change or eliminate in the program? Over all they seem to think that the program is very good, but they also have some suggestions. First, they talk about the introductory course in psychology and that they miss the connection to educational practices in that course. They wish that there could be more educational and less general psychology. Second, some of the things they mention that they think was missing in their own program, as special education and some methods classes, has already been added to the program. Third, those students who will teach in secondary school wish that their field work and methods classes could have been placed in an earlier stage of the program. Fourth, they think that more transparent information about the program should be given and that the recruitment of teacher students should be made earlier. They think that this probably could lead to more applicants to the teacher education program.

5.4 Summary

Those students at Vassar College who have chosen to become teachers come from various socio-economical and educational backgrounds. They spend four years as students in a very strong learning community, learning various subjects, getting a major in one subject and a

certificate to work as teachers. Being part of Vassar College as a learning community is, according to the students, sometimes like living in a bubble isolated from the communities around them. On one hand they think that this is good because it makes it possible for them to focus on their studies. On the other hand, they say that it would be good with further attempts to bridge the gaps to the outside world.

One of the main reasons for these students to become teachers is that they want to work with kids. Some of them have earlier experiences from leading groups of children in sports activities, summer camps and so on. They also show a strong social engagement in this commitment and want to make schools a good place to be in for all kinds of kids. They like how the teacher education program connects theory about education with teaching practices, even though they have some complaints about one of the required courses in the program where this connection is difficult to find. Maybe it would also be good to try to arrange fieldwork experiences a bit earlier in the program, especially for those who will become teachers in secondary school. In the end of the teacher education program, their biggest challenge seems to be classroom management, but on the other hand this is also related to what they are most proud of; the interaction with their students.

6 Discussion

The overall aim of this report is to describe and discuss the teacher education at Vassar College. More precisely, it reports on a study of different views on the recruitment of students to – and the design of – teacher education programs. The professors and students at Education Department at Vassar have a strong social engagement and many of their discussions in various meetings and educational settings concern societal change. The department is committed to giving their students a solid academic education within their courses, but it is also deeply engaged in various outreach programs in the area around the college. Even though the students at the program come from different backgrounds, they share this social engagement and want to contribute to a schooling based on inclusion and social justice. They have strong support from the college in this ambition.

The course Education 300/301 “/.../ focuses on the preparation of a personal portfolio that will analyze and reflect upon the student teaching experience” (Syllabus for Education 300/301, fall semester 2008). The students take this course parallel with their student teaching practicum. My impression from teaching this course is that the students made very clear progress as teachers. During the seminars we discussed various issues relevant for teaching. The portfolios, with texts about their teaching philosophy and reasoning about classroom management together with lesson plans and pictures from teaching, were impressive. This was a very interesting way to evaluate the knowledge and skills that the teacher students had developed during their student teaching. It became an important tool both for our evaluation and grading and for the students to use when they apply for work.

At Vassar College, a well known, highly selective, elite, residential liberal arts college the recruitment of teacher students is done from all of those who have been admitted to the college. The students who chose to become teachers exclude careers in other fields. The results of this study show that the students have a social engagement and want to make a contribution both to the children and to society (cf. Johnston, 2007). Answers from graduates from Vassar also show that they seem to stay in the profession longer than the average teacher. The education at Vassar College, and other liberal arts institutions are known to take teaching seriously, and this is certainly true at the Education Department.

The findings in this study can be used to discuss the development of Swedish teacher education programs, which are also positioned in a field of tensions between different views on academic broad and/or deep studies, the importance of social engagement, how to recruit new students and so on. In the inquiry mentioned in the beginning of this report, it is stated that “One of the most important factors in achieving a successful school system is that the right people become teachers” (SOU 2008:109, p. 29). They recommend the government to consider implementing an aptitude test for teacher education. If this would lead to a better teacher education remains to be investigated and discussed. A test that measures aptitudes in relation to the complexity of teachers’ work and life would certainly need to be designed very carefully. I am not fully convinced, either, that the recruitment of other kinds of students would necessarily change as much as the Inquiry seems to assume.

The design of a teacher education program includes choices of focus, aims, content and organization. These can be understood in relation to different traditions. There is a strong connection to *Social Reconstructivist Tradition* (cf. Zeichner, 1999) at the Education Department at Vassar. Even though there is also a focus on, and efforts to offer, academically advanced education, social engagement for inclusion and social justice contribute to the identity of the program. However, it is important to remember that no “/.../ teacher education program can be understood in relation to any one tradition” (Zeichner, 1999 p. 8). The *Academic Tradition* is also visible and strong at Vassar. Professors and students talk about the undergraduate studies in terms we seldom use at Uppsala University when we talk about the same thing. They talk about undergraduate education in terms that we only tend to use when we talk about research and maybe also about graduate education. They talk about their undergraduate education in terms of excellence, elite, high status and so on. I want to stress that we can learn from this when we continue to take teacher education seriously.

7 Acknowledgement

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VASSAR COLLEGE
Department of Education
Consent Form

Primary Investigator: Dr Jonas Almqvist

Title of Project: Taking Teacher Education Seriously

I acknowledge that on _____, I was informed by Dr Almqvist of Vassar College of a research project having to do with the following:

1. The nature of the research project;

The project *Taking Teacher Education Seriously* is part of a larger study of teaching within the teacher education program at Vassar College. The project will have a special focus on the recruitment of teacher students and mainly be built on conversations with faculty staff at Education Department and interviews with the teacher students who attend the courses Education 300 and Education 301.

2. The basic procedures/types of questions and the participant's role;

The interviews will focus on questions about the students' (1) socioeconomic and educational background, (2) visions, expectations, fears and intentions about their future work as teachers and (3) experiences from the teacher education at Vassar.

3. How confidentiality will be maintained;

The interviews will be recorded for transcript purposes. The data, which will be analyzed only by the primary investigator, will be coded without information about the participants and stored in a safe place. The key for the coding of data will be stored in a different place. In order to do a follow-up study of the participants' careers after Vassar, the data will be stored at least five years, and so will contact information to them be. The participants' real names will not be used when the results of the project are presented.

4. The approximate duration of participation;

The first interview will take about one hour.

5. Contact information

Please contact the Primary Investigator if you have any questions or concerns about the project:

Jonas Almqvist

joalmqvist@vassar.edu

845-437-5395 (work), 845-240-0405 (cell)

Potential Risks: The risk for the subjects to be observed and interviewed is no higher than a minimal risk as defined by the federal and state guidelines: "the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those

ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests”.

I am aware, to the extent specified above, of the nature of my participation in this project and the possible risks involved or arising from it. I understand that I may withdraw my participation in this project at any time without prejudice or penalty of any kind. I hereby agree to participate in the project. (You must be at least 18 years of age to give your consent.)

Date: _____ (Printed name of Participant)

(Place: City and State) (Signature of Participant)

(Address: e.g., Residence Hall & Room #)

Required courses

Childhood Education certification (years 1-6)

- Psychology 105, Introduction to Psychology: A Survey (Psychology Department)
- Psychology 231, Principles of Development (Psychology Department)
- Education 235, Issues in contemporary education
- Education 250, Introduction to special education
- Education 290, Field work (1/2 or 1 unit)
- Education 300, Senior Portfolio: Childhood Education
- Education 350/351, The teaching of reading: curriculum development in childhood education
- Education 360, Workshop in curriculum development (1/2)
- Education 361, Seminar: Mathematics and science in the elementary curriculum
- Education 362, Student teaching practicum: Childhood education (2)
-

Adolescent Education certification (years 7-12)

- Psychology 105, Introduction to Psychology: A Survey (Psychology Department)
- Education 235, Issues in contemporary education
- Education 250, Introduction to special education
- Education 263, The adolescent in American society
- Education 290, Field work (1/2 or 1 unit)
- Education 301, Senior Portfolio: Adolescent Education
- Education 373, Adolescent literacy
- Education 372, Student teaching (2)
- Education 392, Multidisciplinary methods in adolescent education

English: Education 394, 374

Foreign Languages: Education 390, 370

Mathematics, Biology, Chemistry, Physics: Education 392, 372

Social Studies: Education 396, 376

Preliminary questions used to guide the conversation:

1. Background
 - a. How would you describe your socioeconomic background?
 - b. How would you describe your educational background?
2. Visions, expectations, fears and intentions
 - a. How would you describe yourself as a teacher?
 - b. What are you most proud of about your teaching?
 - c. Why have you chosen to become a teacher?
 - d. What do your family and friends think about your choice?
 - e. What do you feel least prepared to do as a teacher?
 - f. What surprised you most about teaching?
3. Experiences from the teacher education at Vassar
 - a. As you think back on your teacher education, what do you consider most valuable?
 - b. As you think back on your teacher education, what would you like to add, change or eliminate?
 - c. What do you want to say about your undergraduate education for teaching that I have not asked?