

Liberal Arts and Teacher Education

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In this paper, we will compare different discourses about teacher education as expressed by students, departments and alumnae/i at liberal arts colleges in USA, with two contemporary texts about teacher education in Sweden. The studies show (1) that the decision to become a teacher is an active choice made by these students during their time at the college, (2) that education programs in liberal arts institutions in USA stress that teacher education should be intellectually demanding with strong connection between theory and practice, and have a critical focus, and (3) that the graduates found student teaching, the relationships they had with professors and their fieldwork experiences to have had a dramatic impact on their success as teachers. Liberal arts colleges are a central part of the educational system in USA. They provide undergraduate studies in various areas and are often characterized by high ambitions and aims concerning good practices of education. Compared to teacher education in Sweden this is very interesting because it seems as the same issues concerning teaching and research are being discussed in both places.

Introduction

The development of any teacher education program is taking place in a field of tensions between different agents' interests and goals. In this paper, we will compare different discourses about teacher education as expressed by students, departments and alumnae/i at liberal arts colleges in USA, with two contemporary texts about teacher education in Sweden.

The paper reports results from three different, but interrelated studies of discourses on teacher education at liberal arts colleges. The results from these studies are used for reflection on discourses about teacher education in Sweden as expressed in the latest evaluation made by Swedish National Agency for Higher Education and the suggestion for a new reform presented in fall 2008.

First, eleven pre-service teachers (senior undergraduates and graduate students) have been interviewed. The interviews focus on questions about the students' socioeconomic and educational background, their visions, expectations, fears and intentions about their future work as teachers and their experiences from the teacher education. The study show that the decision to become a teacher is a very active choice made by these students during their time at the College.

Second, the structure, goals, and effects of a sample (N=10) of education programs housed in liberal arts institutions in the United States. The study, based on an analysis of the institutions' websites, publicity materials, course catalogues and of phone interviews with faculty, shows that they all stress that teacher education should be intellectually demanding and have a critical focus. It should also be multidisciplinary and have a strong connection between theory and practice and between abstract and concrete knowledge. Teacher education should also, according to these institutions, participate in the improvement of schools in the surrounding community.

Third, a survey given to graduates from one of the colleges asks them about how prepared they felt to teach and whether they have pursued certification. The majority of those surveyed teach in urban schools. Of the recent graduates (18 respondents who received their teaching certificates between 1999 and 2008), sixteen presently teach full

time, one is pursuing an advanced degree in developmental psychology and one is in an area unrelated to the field of education. Overwhelmingly, the graduates found student teaching, the relationships they had with professors at college and their fieldwork experiences to have had a dramatic impact on their success as teachers.

Liberal arts colleges are a central part of the educational system in USA. They provide undergraduate studies in various areas and are often characterized by high ambitions and aims concerning good practices of education. Compared to teacher education in Sweden – and the other Nordic countries – this is very interesting because, even though very different in organization and prerequisites, it seems as the same issues concerning teaching and research are being discussed in both places. Our ambition with this paper is to make a contribution to this discussion.

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