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## **Benefits and Challenges of Finnish Unified Comprehensive Schools (Grades 1–9) from the Perspective of Principals and Teachers**

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# Benefits and Challenges of Finnish Unified Comprehensive Schools (Grades 1–9) from the Perspective of Principals and Teachers

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This qualitative study explores the work experience of teachers and principals at Unified Comprehensive Schools (UCS). Data was collected in Finland by means of a questionnaire from seven different UCS. The study reveals several challenges and problems in UCS, e.g.: multiple buildings, rush and time management, combining subject teacher and class teacher culture, and increased workload. Nonetheless, more than half of the teachers enjoyed their diverse working environment and would rather choose to work at UCS than at lower (grades 1–6) or upper (grades 7–9) schools only. The greatest wish for development, and the solution to many problems would be having a single-bodied school ‘under one roof.’ If the implementation of UCS is successful it shall provide much improvement for pupils; unbroken learning paths from 1st to 9th grade, easy transition from one school level to the other, familiar school environment and collaboration among pupils of different ages. As for the school administration, UCS offers a unique opportunity for efficient and economic use of teachers, classroom resources and facilities.

*Keywords:* unified comprehensive school, leadership, teaching, learning, education

## Introduction and Theoretical Framework

This article presents a survey study on Finnish Unified Comprehensive Schools. In Finnish school policy, the Unified Comprehensive School concept was born after the Basic Education Act (1998) and Basic Education Decree (1998) reforms in 1998–1999. By those reforms, the division of *upper* and *lower* comprehensive school was removed from the legislation.

After the legislation reform, municipalities began to reflect upon organizing the teaching process in a way that would ‘break’ the level border between the 6th and 7th grade, while at the same time making it possible for classroom teachers and subject teach-

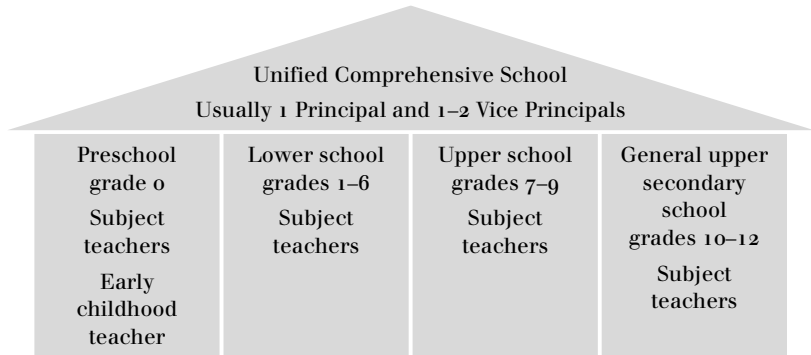


FIGURE 1 Unified Comprehensive School-model

ers to cooperate. Of course, one important goal was considered for economic reasons; administration of different school levels could be merged in this way. After *unified comprehensive schools* were established, the aim was to reduce the difficulties of changing school levels (Sahlstedt 2015, 13).

In Finland, the Unified Comprehensive School involves pre-school (grade 0), lower school (grades 1–6) and upper school (grades 7–9) in the same school unit, which administratively and functionally includes grades 0–9. In addition, the same unit may include general upper secondary school and thus comprise grades 0 to 12 (figure 1) (Tantt 2008, 122–123). The advantage of UCS is that there are no level borders in pupils' school path throughout their comprehensive school. In addition, teachers are quite familiar to the pupils and the learning environment remains the same (see <http://www.t-tiimi.com/syve/historiaa.htm>).

### ***Research Objectives and Research Questions***

UCS are to stay in Finland. It would be unfortunate if teachers perceived their work environment as 'heavy' at UCS. However, more and more Unified Comprehensive Schools are being established. With the intention to provide information about the situation and developing work in UCS, this survey study sought for answers to the following research questions:

1. How do teachers and principals feel about their work at Unified Comprehensive Schools?
2. What kind of challenges do teachers and principals experience in their work at Unified Comprehensive Schools?

3. What kind of benefits do teachers and principals experience in their work at unified UCS?
4. How should Unified Comprehensive Schools be developed?

There are UCS all over the world, so their development will benefit not only Finnish school children and teachers, but also UCS in other countries. The main question is: how can we make the Unified Comprehensive Schools a better place for everyone.

### Theoretical Framework

In the recent years, a number of UCS have been established in Finland. The reasons have often been economy, cost-effectiveness and reduction of administration.

One positive thing related to UCS development has been an increase in expensive school buildings occupancy rate. For example, high-quality gyms and handicraft classes are now being used efficiently by many grade levels and pupils of different ages. Flexible and effective teaching arrangements are possible in UCS. It is clear that teachers' knowledge of pupils is increasing: familiar teachers teach and guide their pupils throughout grades 0–9 and possibly even in general upper secondary school.

Transition to the Unified Comprehensive School-model (figure 1) has not been easy. Separate criteria for teachers' pay cause a lot of work, especially if the same teacher teaches in both lower and upper school of comprehensive education and in general upper secondary education.

Different salaries and educational responsibilities amongst teachers prevent developing a pleasant atmosphere within the school community. Also, taking into account the age difference of pupils is challenging for teachers in different situations (Sahlstedt 2015; Rajakaltio 2011).

According to Sahlstedt's (2015) dissertation (data from the years 2005–2010), there were differences between respondents' answers: 85% ( $n = 275$ ) of the parents and 71% of the pupils ( $n = 871$ ) were satisfied with Unified Comprehensive Schools. 70% of the parents and 60% of the pupils were in favor of building UCS.

On the other hand, teachers ( $N = 64$ ) were more critical towards the UCS: 53% were satisfied and only 29% supported the establishing of the UCS. Teachers viewed the school primarily from the perspective of their own work. Although UCS provide pedagogically rich and versatile working environment, their structure is heavy.

## Implementation of the Study

### *Research Methods*

Research was qualitative (Alasuutari 2011; Denzin and Lincoln 2011; Metsämuuronen 2003). According to research literature, a qualitative approach is very suitable for the kind of research where we are interested in people being involved in natural situations and in their causal relationships. The survey was conducted in spring 2019, by using the Microsoft Forms electronic questionnaire. Participants were principals and teachers working in UCS. The survey contained six multiple-choice questions and eight open-ended questions.

### *Participants of the Study*

Participants in this study come from the surroundings of Seinäjoki and Oulu in Finland. A total of seven UCS were selected. Principals of those schools were first invited to participate in the survey by telephone. After consent was given, further instructions were sent to them by email. Research permits were requested from the local school administrations as well. Due to a low number of participants, names of their schools are not given, to secure anonymity. No distinction was made as to whether the respondent was a principal or vice principal, so the term ‘principal’ is used throughout this text for all school leaders.

The purpose of this study was not to compare the differences between two cities, but to seek information on the benefits and challenges faced by the leaders and teachers of the participating Unified Comprehensive Schools.

Informing the principals and teachers about the study was similar. It was first sent by email to the UCS principals, with reply links. They were asked to forward the questionnaire containing the same reply link to their vice principals, and a different reply link to their teachers. Information was similar to the one sent to the principals.

Teachers’ questionnaire was answered by 47 teachers (32 women and 15 men). The age distribution of the teachers is presented in table 1, as well as their work experience. Most respondents were experienced teachers. Over half of respondents had more than 11 years of teaching experience and about a third even more than 20 years.

The questionnaire for school leaders was answered by 16 leaders (7 women and 8 men). More than half of the leaders were 46

TABLE 1 The Age of the Participants

Age group	Teachers	Principals
26–35	14	1
36–45	14	5
46–55	11	9
Over 55	8	1
Total	47	16

TABLE 2 The Work Experience of the Participants

Work experience	Teachers	Principals
Under 5	4	0
5–10	11	4
11–15	10	1
16–20	7	3
21–15	6	6
Over 26	9	2
Total	47	16

years of age or older (table 1). Every leader had experience in leading a school for more than 5 years (table 2), most of them for over 16 years.

The UCS model is relatively young in Finland, so all the schools involved in the research were established in the 2000s.

## Results

### *How do the Teachers and Principals Feel at Their Work at Unified Comprehensive Schools?*

The answers in the table 3 show that the feeling at UCS is good. Only one of the principals felt *passable* at his/her work. Almost all principals and teachers felt *good* or *excellent*. Eight of the teachers felt *satisfactory* and two felt *passable*. No one said *I'm not feeling very well*. The result is promising when compared to the results of Sahlstedt's (2015) dissertation in which only about half of the teachers were satisfied with the UCS.

Table 4 summarizes answers to a question in which school form the respondents would like to work if they could choose. Less than half of the teachers (47%) would prefer to work in a single comprehensive school (SCS, either lower or upper school only) and 53% would choose the UCS for their workplace. Most principals, almost 70%, would choose the UCS and over 30% chose the SCS.

TABLE 3 Feeling at Work at UCS?

How do you feel at your work in UCS?	Teachers	Principals
Excellent	11	5
Good	26	10
Satisfactorily	8	0
Passably	2	1
I'm not feeling very well	0	0
Total	47	16

TABLE 4 Choice of the School Model

If you could choose whether you would work at?	Teachers	Principals
Unified Comprehensive Schools	25	11
Single Comprehensive Schools	22	5
Total	47	16

### *Challenges of the Unified Comprehensive Schools*

The aim of the study was to find out what kind of difficulties teachers and principals experience in their work at UCSs.

Teachers' most difficult and often mentioned challenge was that the school operated in several buildings.

*Teacher 2* Combining two far away units' the result is two nodding units.

*Teacher 14* Cooperation between schools suffers when they are separated.

Other concerns included younger pupils learning bad habits from older pupils and the age gap between pupils.

*Teacher 41* Younger pupils learn bad habits from older ones (of course good ones, too)

*Teacher 38* The most challenging thing is to see how the world of the pupils in grades 7–9 influences the ones in grades 5–6. They no longer play like children, as they played in grades 1–4. Some of them take on the role of a teenager too early.

Teachers also criticized communication. They felt that messages and information were not transmitted from one building to another.

*Teacher 17* Long distances between buildings pose a challenge for collaboration and communication.

According to the principals' answers, the biggest challenges were time management and constant rush.

*Principal 4* Always rush and stacking. There is not enough time to spend on pedagogical issues.

*Principal 6* Management of time so that you are able to perform essential tasks within your working hours.

Leading different kinds of groups and achieving unity was also challenging. A good, though heavy, description is given by one principal:

*Principal 8* Fragmentation, work is one shred. There is a lot of pressure from the administration to do things, which are not necessarily related so much to the everyday school life. [...] Special needs education (administration & pupils) take undue time. A few special education classes give one as much work as 16 ordinary classes.

### ***Benefits of the Unified Comprehensive Schools***

UCS have been established in Finland permanently, so one of the main ideas of the study was to gather information about what kind of useful opportunities UCS-model offers for teaching and education in the opinion of teachers and principals.

According to teachers' answers, UCS positive features would include unbroken study paths from pre-school to general upper secondary school and opportunities for teachers to cooperate between school levels.

*Teacher 2* Transition of ideas from one school level to another. Unification of pupils' school path. Teacher's collaboration.

*Teacher 7* The unified learning path from grade 1 to grade 9.

Teachers are more aware of a pupil's school path, and it is easier to follow over a longer period than for the duration of a single comprehensive school. Unbroken study paths make difficulties related to changing school levels easier or even prevent them completely. Although pupils move from one school level to another, they are allowed to continue in the same buildings and classrooms and are taught by the same familiar teachers. This increases their sense of security.

*Teacher 1* Pupils receive teaching and education from familiar teachers after lower school in grades 7–9.



*Teacher 17* The transition from lower school to upper school is easier. Familiar teachers teach throughout primary school + general upper secondary school.

One good educational point that I found in teachers' answers was that pupils of different ages learn to work together.

*Teacher 4* Pupils' tolerance education; older pupils help younger ones. Everyone takes everything into account, etc.

The most positive aspect for teachers is an increased cooperation between them. This was emphasized by almost half of the teachers. Collaboration, and especially co-planning, was seen as an important part of the teacher's work.

*Teacher 47* Collaboration with class teachers and subject teachers. It is also allowed to teach lower school pupils.

The principals also mentioned the unbroken study paths for the pupils. Thirteen out of sixteen principals included it in their reply.

*Principal 4* An unbroken study path for the students. Transition from the lower school to the upper school is easy. Teacher knowledge of the students grows during the nine school years. Students are familiar with school practices, whether they are in the upper school or in the lower school.

The second most often mentioned advantage (in 8 principals' answers) was the effective use of teachers' skills at different school levels, and the opportunities for professional cooperation. Dual qualification of teachers (qualification as both class and subject teacher) increases teachers' 'utilization rate.' Integrated school also has a positive impact on the employment situation, when lessons can be divided between lower and upper school, and general upper secondary school.

*Principal 1* Common and diverse operating culture at school. Helping with the employment situation: principal can divide the lessons for the teachers between upper and lower schools.

*Principal 7* Small upper school and small general upper secondary school, lessons are enough for teachers when we work together. For students, an easy transition from upper school to general upper secondary school.

Four principals believed that cooperation among teachers is one of the UCS strengths. A common and diverse operating culture that crosses the boundaries between lower school and upper school education is the UCS goal (Sahlstedt 2015, 13).

*Principal 6* That's how the lower school was once planned. I think the best thing is the cooperation between the class teachers and the subject teachers.

### ***What Should be Developed at Unified Comprehensive Schools?***

Participants in the study had long working experience in UCS. Next, we focused on their potential focus related to development resources.

Teachers hope for a well-functioning everyday life at school. Most teachers need common guidelines to clarify goals and assessment, as well as school rules and everyday practices.

*Teacher 1* More consistent practices, uniformity of assessment.

The second most mentioned item was the development of cooperation among teachers. Teachers want more time and working models for cooperation, so that the UCS idea can be seen. Teachers also mentioned that, because of the separate school buildings and units, collaboration required more effort. Their goal was a truly cohesive school and eliminating of fragmentation.

*Teacher 3* Time for cooperation.

*Teacher 4* Really working collaborative models.

*Teacher 9* For our school, when the buildings are separate, the collaboration requires effort. There should also be more consideration for common themes and activities in the curriculum between grades 1–6 and 7–9.

The third issue that needs to be developed is school buildings. Separate buildings slow down teachers' access and make everyday activities more difficult when, for example, the principal cannot always be reached. Indeed, Teacher 24 states: 'At the moment, I do not even feel like I am in a Unified Comprehensive school, because lower and upper school teachers work in different houses.' When we are planning new UCS, we should take the area's growth forecast into account, to get the right size for the school – 'all under one roof'!

*Teacher 21* Three separate buildings are inoperative, the principal is rarely present because there are several buildings and jobs both in the primary and secondary schools.

*Teacher 22* Separate buildings and teacher rooms challenge unity and flow of information.

However, the fact is that school buildings and their location are practically the only two development objects that the school staff can do nothing about.

According to the principals, the most development was needed in the UCS's legislation and in the collective agreements. The UCS practices vary between municipalities and schools, and are unclear. In the UCS, the principal's workload is particularly high, since on both school levels there are issues that need to be taken care of, and these issues cannot always be combined. The labor division between school management is also challenging.

*Principal 1* UCS is not properly recognized in collective agreements. The practices are therefore unclear.

*Principal 5* Principal's salary. There are several school grades in an integrated school, so this does not work with the one school's special education and student welfare services resource.

Another area of possible development is creating genuine UCS and developing their culture. The principals' replies state that UCS quite often continue to operate as two units. Principals find a solution for this in discussing education goals and in more co-planning for those teachers who teach on both school levels.

Four principals mentioned that unprofessional attitude between subject and class teachers needed improvement. Several principals thought that subject teachers are not very flexible in making plans for the whole school.

*Principal 4* [...] Subject teachers and class teachers are sometimes unprofessional. Removing this is a good area for improvement.

*Principal 11* The subject teaching system should somehow be made more flexible.

A unique feature of integrated school is cooperation of students of different ages, which is hardly achieved on one school level.

*Teacher 9* Utilization the strengths of the students of different ages. Older students help/teach younger students. [...]

*Principal 10* Using the skills of high-level pupils in the education of younger pupils is easy and beneficial for both younger and older pupils. Children learn from each other better. Children of all ages meet in a natural environment.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The results of our survey were compiled from the responses of 47 teachers, 16 principals and assistant principals, in seven schools. All respondents had many years of experience in working at UCS, so it is reasonable to consider that the results are based on experts' opinions on the situation in participating schools.

Despite considerable workload, teachers and principals who responded to our survey were very satisfied with their work. Average weekly working hours were often exceeded. Teachers mostly spent more than 33 hours at work, a quarter of them up to 40 hours.

The workload of principals appeared huge. Their workdays stretched over 40 hours, up to 48 hours per week. The teaching sector still seems to have 'teachers and principals with the calling,' but the risk of the burnout is high, especially for principals. This is also confirmed by national surveys (Opetusalan ammatijärjestö 2018). Therefore, cities and municipalities must make every effort possible to ensure the well-being of principals and teachers.

The management system of the UCS was very similar in all participating schools. The principal was assisted by 1–2 vice principals. They were supported by a school planning or management team together with school teachers.

Leading multiple school levels is challenging. New principals certainly need time and space to develop their leadership style. As research has shown, UCS's leadership culture is created from several elements, such as equality, community, appreciation, communication and humor (Lahtero and Risku 2014).

According to this study the most common challenges and problems faced by Unified Comprehensive Schools are:

1. multiple buildings,
2. rush and time management,
3. combining subject teacher and class teacher culture,
4. increased workload,
5. wide age range of pupils,

6. agreeing on common schedules,
7. communicating,
8. hard to reach the principal,
9. human resource management,
10. leading of different groups.

Getting the UCS under the same roof with a shared teacher's room was the wish of many teachers and principals. This would create the best conditions for daily encounters of all teachers and for creation of a common UCS culture. There is a large age distribution of pupils in comprehensive schools (grades 1–9), as well as great differences in skill levels among pupils. Centralization of special education classes in UCS close connection is not a viable solution for day-to-day management and workload. Because of many grades (even grades 0–12), teachers and principals already have enough work and differentiation of teaching even in mainstream pupils.

If UCS implementation is successful, it will offer great opportunities. Based on this study, they the following:

1. unbroken learning path from 1st to 9th grades,
2. easier transition from one school level to the other,
3. familiar school environment for the students,
4. utilization of the skills and strengths of teachers with different backgrounds,
5. professional cooperation opportunities for teachers,
6. collaboration among pupils of different ages,
7. flexible teaching arrangements,
8. improvement of teachers' knowledge of pupils,
9. fast data transfer and communication in student matters.

As can be seen, the above school strengths benefit the pupil first! In this study, participating teachers and principals were aware of the UCS-model benefits.

But are there sufficient resources to implement them? Can Unified Comprehensive Schools utilize the strengths of its various teachers? How can those strengths be further highlighted? These are questions that have to be posed to local-level educational leaders.

For local authorities as employers, the UCS offer a unique opportunity for efficient and economic use of teachers, classroom

resources and facilities. It is also possible to centralize pupils' welfare services for pupils of different ages. Based on these economic considerations, UCS built 'under the one roof,' with its functional facilities, is a sensible investment for the employer. In addition, this supports the well-being of the staff. Unified Comprehensive Schools offer their pupils a uniform, continuous and safe school path where they can work with schoolmates of different ages.

The achievement of the above aims is best supported by taking into account the potential of UCS in teacher education and professional development. Common courses for all students aiming at teacher profession would provide a good basis for the future collaboration of subject and classroom teachers.

Leadership of different groups must be open-minded. One principal does not have enough time to do it all, so a clear solution for UCS leadership is Collaborative Educational Leadership (Jäppinen 2014). On the practical level, this means responsible cooperation in the school management among the principal, assistant principals, school management team and teachers.

Ideally, classroom and subject teacher cultures will process an unparalleled working environment to UCS's operating culture, as Teacher no. 24 wrote in his/her answer: 'Opportunities for anything: Common education lines between grades 1–9. It can be used to benefit teachers' expertise. Pupils' learning path is safe as teachers become known over a nine-year period. Teachers' knowledge of pupils is growing as we work at Unified Comprehensive School.'

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