Northwest Journal of Teacher Education

Volume 11

Issue 1 *Focus on Teacher Education and the
Northwest Association of Teacher Educators*

Article 2

January 2013

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Recommended Citation

Hewson, Kurtis and Poulsen, John (2013) "Making the Grade: Examining Teacher Education," *Northwest Journal of Teacher Education*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15760/nwjte.2013.11.1.2>

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Making the Grade: Examining Teacher Education

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Abstract

High quality teachers make a difference. Marzano notes, “the single most influential component of an effective school is the individual teachers within that school” (2007, p. 1). There are a multitude of considerations that impact the effectiveness of an individual teacher, but arguably the quality of a teacher’s educational training program is of paramount importance. The initial theory and practical training that pre-service teachers receive not only prepare educators to enter the classroom but can have a profound impact on their later growth and development as a professional.

However, despite the impact that pre-service teacher training may have on developing effective teachers, what constitutes a quality teacher education program is not commonly agreed upon. As Linda Darling-Hammond (2000) comments, “Education schools have been variously criticized as ineffective in preparing teachers for their work, unresponsive to new demands, remote from practice, and barriers to the recruitment of bright college students into teaching” (p. 166). Educational programs can be considered fragmented, with various aspects of the content, pedagogical coursework and field experienced viewed as disconnected, with a divide existing between university and school based training (Darling-Hammond, 2000). The research objectives of this paper are to examine: (1) the pre-service education model developed at one Alberta, Canada university, an undergraduate program that strives to achieve program coherence between the teaching skills required by provincial legislation, course content and field experiences; (2) the government standards for beginning teachers, (3) student personal responses of their sense of readiness compared to the government standards (comparing the education program to government requirements), and (4) potential use of a reflective tool shared in further forging program coherence. The results show a clear-headed view of the students’ own “sense of preparedness.” They can distinctly see where they have strengths and where they have areas that they intend to work on.

Introduction

It is no secret that quality teachers matter. It has been noted, “the single most influential component of an effective school is the individual teachers within that school” (Marzano, 2007, p. 1). Although there are a multitude of considerations that impact the effectiveness of an individual teacher, one factor that must be examined is the quality of a teacher’s educational training program. The initial theory and practical training that pre-service teachers receive not only prepares educators to enter the classroom but can have a profound impact on their later growth and development as a professional. In short, not only do teachers matter but the pre-service education they engage in matters as well. However, despite the impact that pre-service teacher training has on developing effective teachers, what constitutes a quality teacher education program is not commonly agreed upon. As Linda Darling-Hammond (2000) comments, “Education schools have been variously criticized as ineffective in preparing teachers for their work, unresponsive to new demands, remote from practice, and barriers to the recruitment of bright college students into teaching” (p. 166). Often educational programs are considered fragmented, with various aspects of the content, pedagogical coursework and field experience viewed as disconnected, with a divide existing between university and school based training (Darling-Hammond, 2000). This paper will examine the pre-service education model developed at one Alberta, Canada university, an undergraduate program that strives to achieve program coherence between the teaching skills required by provincial legislation, course content and field experiences. By focusing upon conceptual coherence in the teacher education program, this model aims to provide pre-service teachers with the education fundamental for not only success in beginning teaching experiences within the province and abroad, but instill a pedagogical foundation congruent with continued growth and professional learning.

Program Coherence

Coherence in the foundational framework of any teacher education program is critical. Graham (2006) suggests that traditionally, “Teacher education programs have been described as fragmented, lacking coherence and consistency and as not providing powerful learning to pre-service teachers” (p. 1128). Feiman-Nemser (2001) further contends that, “The lack of articulation and the fragmented nature of most conventional pre-service programs underscore the need for conceptual coherence” (p. 1023). At the University of Lethbridge, an institution located in the Canadian province of Alberta, program coherence is fundamental, as the program design focuses upon three essential elements that are interconnected throughout the five-year undergraduate program.

Although overcoming fragmentation in a teacher-training program can be difficult (Giannakaki, Hobson & Malderez, 2011), the University of Lethbridge model aligns these elements in the design and delivery of the Bachelor of Education degree, forging explicit links between the three, particularly within the Professional Semesters, where course content and field experiences connect theory and practice. Considering that typically, “the weak relationship between courses and field experiences is further evidence of the overall lack of coherence” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1020), thoughtful consideration to all three

elements of the program model ensure cohesiveness and overall program coherence for its students.

Teacher Quality Standard

The Teaching Quality Standard is a ministerial order number 016/97 that was approved on May 14, 1997. This made law the Teaching Quality Standard in Alberta, Canada. It clarified and defined what quality teaching meant, as well as requiring all teachers to meet this new standard.

The Teaching Quality Standard has three sections, with the first section stating, “Quality teaching occurs when the teacher’s ongoing analysis of the context, and the teacher’s decisions about which pedagogical knowledge and abilities to apply result in optimum learning by students.” This first point also requires teachers to, “meet the Teaching Quality Standard throughout their careers.” The second and third sections outline in some detail what quality teaching looks like. The second section focuses on Interim Certification and the third section deals with Permanent Certification.

Interim Certification is intended for teachers who have just graduated university. After graduating from a recognized teacher preparation program, these beginning teachers must complete two full school years of teaching in Alberta before they can be eligible to apply for Permanent Certification. In applying for Permanent Certification, the teacher maintains that, besides teaching for two years, they have met the Teaching Quality Standard.

There are differences between the requirements for Interim Teaching Certifications and Permanent Certification. Permanent Certification requires points a to k (11) whereas Interim Certification requires points a to q (17). These points are referred to as KSAs, an acronym for “Descriptors of Knowledge, Skills and Attributes Related to Certification.” Interim Certification explains its 17 points using 688 words whereas Permanent Certification uses 1526 words to illuminate its 11 points. Permanent Certification has greater specificity as well as assuming that Interim Certification has been met. The Act requires that, “Teachers who hold a Permanent Professional Certificate must demonstrate, in their practice, professional repertoires that are expanded beyond the Interim KSAs.” The Interim Descriptors of Knowledge, Skills and Attributes Related to Certification (KSAs) are found in the list below:

Alberta Teacher Quality Standard Interim KSA's (adapted)

1. Teachers make reasoned decisions about teaching and learning based on their ongoing analysis of contextual variables.
2. Teachers understand the legislated, moral and ethical framework within which they work.
3. Teachers use the programs of study to inform and direct planning instruction and assessment.
4. Teachers demonstrate knowledge of the content they teach.
5. Teachers identify and respond to learner differences.
6. Teachers plan for instruction, translating curriculum and outcomes into meaningful learning activities.
7. Teachers create and maintain environments that are conducive to student learning and understand student needs for physical, social, cultural and

psychological security.

8. Teachers establish relationships with students that respect human dignity.
9. Teachers use a broad range of instructional strategies.
10. Teachers apply a variety of technologies to meet students' learning needs.
11. Teachers gather and use information about students' learning needs and progress and assess the range of learning objectives.
12. Teachers engage parents, purposefully and meaningfully, in all aspects of teaching and learning.
13. Teachers identify and use relevant learning resources.
14. Teachers contribute, independently and collegially, to the quality of their school.
15. Teachers engage in assessing the quality of their teaching.
16. Teachers are able to communicate a personal vision of their own teaching.
17. Teachers achieve the Teaching Quality Standard.

The final KSA (number seventeen) serves as a validation that beginning teachers have achieved the standard with is law for Alberta educators. These Interim KSAs become the foundation upon which the teacher education program is built and serve as the measure for pre-service teachers making the transition from student to educator.

Professional Semester Course Content

On-campus learning is an important component of any teacher education program. As Linda Darling-Hammond (2000) attests, "Teachers who have greater knowledge of teaching and learning are more highly rated and are more effective with students, especially

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at tasks requiring higher order thinking and problem solving” (p. 167). The theoretical foundation of this knowledge is predominantly developed at the University of Lethbridge in the professional semester’s on-campus courses.

The University of Lethbridge houses a Teacher Education Program that is touted as being one of the best in Alberta. Anecdotal evidence of this come from hiring agencies that regularly suggest they often will short-list U of L students above graduates from other teacher preparation programs. The heart of the U of L program is held in its three professional semesters. Roughly described, the first professional semester (PSI) examines teaching lessons. In this semester, the focus is primarily placed on preparing, teaching, and assessment connected to individual lessons.

The second professional semester (PSII) is focused on teaching units of study. Students in this semester are required to create, deliver and assess student learning in a series of classes connected by theme or concept. The third professional semester (PSIII) requires that students focus on even longer-term teaching, assuming the role of an intern teacher in schools for the entire semester. In this third semester students perform much like a half time teacher.

Practicum

The final pillar of the Teacher Education program at the University of Lethbridge is the practicum experience for students. It is no surprise that the practicum experience is a highly valued and rich learning opportunity for students. As Munby, Russell and Martin (2001) share, the, “... overwhelming evidence of a decade of research on teacher knowledge

is that knowledge of teaching is acquired and developed by the personal experience of teaching” (p. 897). Smith and Lev-Ari (2005) also report, “... high agreement among educational theorists that the practical part is a strong and valued component in the education of teachers” (p. 292) and that the, “... view that comes out strong and loud is that the practical aspects of the preparation for teaching are more highly valued than other elements of the programme” (p. 299). Graham (2006) lends further support to this assertion, claiming that the student teaching experience “is eagerly and anxiously anticipated by pre-service teachers, and remembered as a significant milestone by in-service teachers” (p. 1118). However, it is critically important that the practicum is carefully planned and tightly aligned with the other components of the teacher education program (Darling-Hammond, 2000), as quite often field experiences can be fragmented (Graham, 2006).

One of the defining features of the practicum that contributes to the program coherence at the University of Lethbridge is the involvement of the faculty instructors in field experiences. Zeichner (2006) suggests that strong support from permanent faculty and the institutional budget devoted to practicum success for students is important. Course instructors supervise their students in the field, helping to bridge the gap that can exist between practical teaching experiences in the practicum with educational theory learned on-campus. The quality of the one-to-one discussion of experienced teaching events is a critical factor that helps beginning teachers make practical use of theory (Ingvarson, Beavis & Kleinhenz, 2007). In addition to teaching faculty participating in the practicum component of the program, professionals from the field, in the form of secondments, master teachers and sessional instructors, comprise a portion of the teaching staff and like tenured faculty, supervise students out in classrooms. As Feiman-Nemser (2001) asserts, “When the people

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responsible for field experiences do not work closely with the people who teach academic and professional courses, there is no productive joining of forces around a common agenda and no sharing of expertise” (p. 1020). This professional partnership ensures a strong connection between the field and the on-campus learning, forging a strong connection between theory and practice.

“The practicum does not only serve as a bridge between theory and practice in the learning of teaching, but it is the context in which student teachers develop a personal teaching competence” (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005, p. 291). With this in mind, the assessment of student teachers in the field is tightly aligned with the Interim KSAs described in the Alberta Teacher Quality Standard. Smith (2010) reminds us,

It is therefore suggested that it is necessary to create a common basis for assessment to avoid that it is done intuitively by those who carry the assessment responsibilities. The quality of assessment needs to be strengthened, so assessment fulfills the formative as well as the summative function in the best possible way. (p. 41)

The Interim KSAs form the foundation for the formative and summative practicum feedback that student teachers receive in the field and are standardized for all supervisors and teacher mentors.

Method

A class of students (N=10) were asked to complete a reflection in which they examined their sense of teaching readiness compared to the Provincially Mandated Knowledge Skills and Attributes (KSAs). The reflection was completed on the last day of their penultimate practicum. That is, as part of the processing of their learning that took place at the end of their second last practicum, (just before their last

practicum) the students were asked to examine the KSAs with reference to their own sense of readiness.

Specifically, the students were asked to indicate with a zero, one or two how well they felt they had met specific KSAs, where zero=not at all, one=minimal or in progress, and two=attained or achieved. On the back of the page students were asked for general comments and then to address the implications of the KSAs regarding their final practicum, PSIII. Essentially, the students were asked to engage in the process of metacognition with particular attention to the KSAs. It was expected that this question would be part of the process of goal setting for their final practicum. The students knew about the KSAs and were familiar with them, as the KSAs had formed the foundation for their formative and summative assessment during their first two practicum experiences. The purpose of the reflection was primarily to envision a self-diagnostic tool for students to determine areas of focus for PSIII based on the KSAs as well as reflecting upon the KSA frame that will be the criteria once employed in the field.

The assignment also gave valuable information regarding the program, as it pointed to how the students were making purposeful connections to the KSAs. This kind of instrument could be used to further to help define the program and strategic planning in relation to the KSAs.

Results

The students overwhelmingly responded with a sense of readiness. All students indicated that they felt they had met the majority of the KSAs. The mean of their personal responses to the 16 listed KSAs ranged from 1.67 to 1.93 (of a maximum of 2) indicating that the students felt that overall they felt they had achieved the majority of the KSAs. All students indicated that there were areas in which they felt they had not achieved the KSAs, in that they were in progress with achieving some specific KSAs. They indicated these areas as potential focus for their goals for their final practicum.

The raw scores connected with the specific KSAs ranged from 1.3 to 2. A score of 2 indicated that students felt that they all had achieved this KSA. The score of 1.3 suggests that the students felt that they had not achieved that KSA yet. Four KSAs were rated as 2 out of 2 by the students. That is, all the students felt they had achieved the following: KSA 2 – understanding the legislated, moral and ethical framework within which they work; KSA 7 - creating and maintaining environments that are conducive to student learning; KSA 9 – using a broad range of instructional strategies; and KSA 16 - communicating a personal vision of their own teaching. One student indicated that this did not suggest that they were master teachers, rather that they felt confident that they had achieved the level necessary for interim certification. Another student wrote, “I learned so much!”

There were specific KSAs that received lower scores potentially indicating a weakness or lack in the program with regard to those specific items. The lowest rated

KSA (1.3) was #12 – engaging parents, purposefully and meaningfully, in all aspects of teaching and learning. One student indicated that in their opinion they had not addressed this KSA yet. Five of the ten students mentioned KSA #12 with regard to goal setting. A common thread was the opportunity of connecting with the parents in order to increase learning, “... to interact with and contact parents; need to realize and take advantage of their impact in students’ learning.”

Some students wrote positively about this KSA, indicating that the structure of the program provided them the opportunity in the form of one more practicum to become more involved with parents. Students indicated that achieving this KSA was important to them, “I need to learn more about relationships with parents and involvement.” The skew of this statement, is interesting as it suggests a very mature taking of responsibility for his/her own learning. The statement was not, “I need to be taught” rather it was a statement about their own journey and continuing growth. The second lowest rated KSAs (1.4/2) were 10 and 14. KSA #10 (applying a variety of technologies) was commented on by five students. Students were cognizant of the importance of technology as a learning tool, “I would like to work on technology and using it in my class.”

KSA #14 (contributing independently and collegially to the quality of their school) was commented on by six of the ten students specifically as an area of potential growth. One student indicated that this was going to be the focus of focus for their final practicum, “I felt like I started this [KSA 14] but didn’t have enough time to make sincere steps and changes. Hopefully PS3 will give me the opportunity

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to work on this goal. I am excited to spend several months in a new school.”

Another student voiced similar determination, “I plan on reaching out more to the school community.”

KSA 3, 4, 5, 6, and 13 all received an aggregate ranking of 1.8. These KSAs deal with using the programs of study, demonstrating content knowledge, responding to learner differences, planning, and using learning resources. Students felt that this was ongoing and though they felt that they could teach and were successful this was an area that some felt they could and should improve.

Discussion

This sampling indicates that KSAs 10 (technology), 12 (engaging parents), and 14 (contributing to school climate) possibly deserve greater attention in the PSII program or that there is a need to strategically plan for these to be addressed in other areas of the program. Comments from the students suggest that they acknowledge time limitations within their program thus far and that they expect to cover those three KSAs in their final practicum.

This reflection was completed on a small number of students as part of an investigation into the perceived efficacy of their own teaching and effectiveness of the program. It appears that the targeted students understand on a deep level how the program relates to the provincially mandated requirements for interim certifications. Moreover they seem to understand how their personal growth was assisted by the program structure. The process of completing the reflection could have been an aid

in the clarification of where they are in their development. The tool could prove to be beneficial for students intrinsically as they self-reflect on the provincial KSAs and gain a greater working understanding of the Knowledge, Skills and Attributes expected by Alberta Education.

Utilizing this reflective tool (or another of similar design) could prove to be beneficial to the University of Lethbridge program in several ways. First, it would provide another level of intentional coherence between the provincial KSAs, the course delivery and the practicum experience for students. It would provide a reflective connection between the three elements for the students and ensure an even stronger, practical understanding of the Knowledge, Skills and Attributes that will forge the foundation of their evaluation in provincial schools when they embark on their teaching career. Secondly, it could provide strategic planning data for the faculty in determining how and where in the program individual KSAs are strategically addressed and how effectively they are being addressed from the perspective of the students. Finally, the tool could be used reflectively by students to establish professional goals for future practicums and specific KSAs still needing to be addressed in their own education and growth in becoming an interim teacher.

Conclusion

Zeichner (2006) states that, “We need to continue moving teacher education away from the traditional sink-or-swim model of field experience and toward a model like the professional development school of partner school where university faculty and staff provide instruction about teaching that is situated in relation to specific teaching contexts and where

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expertise of P-12 teachers informs this instruction and the general planning and evaluation in the teacher education program as a whole” (p. 334). The University of Lethbridge program seems to have taken Zeichner’s statement to heart and constructed a program that provides development to students in a sequential and purposeful manner. Part of the success of the program could be attributed to the close attention to the provincially mandated requirements, and the connection between the on-campus classes. It could be argued that of greater significance may be the continued and required reflection by the students on their own development with an eye to the provincial required KSAs.

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