

Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating a Field-Based Teacher Education Program: An Introduction

By Hugh Munby

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The seven articles that follow this introduction provide different perspectives on the planning, implementation, and evaluation of a field-based teacher education program. Up to August 1997, teacher education at Queen's University had little to distinguish it from other programs in the Province of Ontario. Typically, teacher candidates entered the one-year program after completing a B.Sc. or B.A. degree¹; and the program consisted of on-campus courses in both the Fall and Winter semesters, punctuated by "practice" or "student" teaching practicums of four and six weeks in each semester. In 1997, we introduced an entirely restructured program with features that mark it as a major innovation in Ontario. Among these features are a 14-week practicum in the Fall Term, beginning on the first day of school, and

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school-based courses taken during the practicum, as described below. Because these features constitute such a radical departure from the customary program, it was deemed prudent to run a pilot of the newly restructured program in the 1996-97 academic year. The first of the articles that follow describes the implementation of the new program, each of the next five reports on one of the several loosely coupled evaluation studies that had the pilot program as its object, and the concluding article summarizes what we have learned from this experience to date. Our studies have involved school administrators and teachers associated with the pilot program as well as teacher candidates themselves; and the studies used different modes of data collection: focus group data, individual interview data, questionnaire data, and reflections on experience.

The features of the restructured teacher education program at Queen's University are described in the next section. The program's heavy emphasis upon learning from experience was mirrored in our approach to evaluating the pilot of the program. This learning approach was evident in our research team's use of a "student advisory committee," for example, to help us determine what modes of data collection would be acceptable to candidates in the second semester. Because the restructured teacher education program had already been approved by the Queen's University Senate, the pilot and its evaluation were not designed to determine whether or not to proceed. Instead, we wanted to confirm that the decision to restructure the program was appropriate. More importantly, though, we needed to know what elements of the new program needed to be improved for the 620 candidates registering in the following year.

Features of the Restructured Teacher Education Program

The major innovative feature of the restructured program is the extended practicum in the Fall Term (Faculty of Education, 1996). This practicum begins on the first day of school and is preceded by an intensive orientation period in August and followed by an equally intensive consolidation period of one week at the beginning of the January Term. Two field-based courses are taught concurrently with the extended practicum (Critical Issues, and Research, Theory and Professional Practice, described below). Teacher candidates return to the Faculty of Education during the Fall practicum for a two-week, on-campus period focusing on course work. Candidates are assigned in groups of about six or seven to Associate Schools, rather than to Associate (Cooperating or Supervising) Teachers for the extended practicum. Responsibility for teaching assignments within each school lies with the school liaison, principal, or department head. A faculty liaison is also assigned to each school. There are two additional practica: three weeks in midwinter, and four weeks in the spring.

In addition to these components, candidates register for the equivalent of two full courses in curriculum and instruction ("methods") courses, and for one half

course in educational studies. Also, candidates select a "Program Focus" such as Early Primary Education, International Education, Outdoor and Experiential Education, and Adolescents at Risk, to name just a few from the list of 23 offerings made available by the Fall of 1997. The Program Focus functions somewhat like a course and is also the occasion for candidates to develop a professional portfolio. The midwinter practicum may be conducted in an alternate setting related to the Program Focus and not necessarily in a school.

The two field-based courses taught during the extended practicum are introduced to candidates during the intensive orientation week in August. Candidates meet regularly as a group in their associate schools to work on these courses, and these working sessions are supplemented by sessions held on campus during the on-campus weeks of the Fall Term and the consolidation week in January. The first of these courses, "CRITICAL Issues" (often referred to as "CRIT" during the pilot year) has three major topics: equity, inclusion of exceptional learners, and legal issues. The second field-based course, "Research, Theory and PROFESSIONAL Practice" ("PROF") has reflection and action research at its center.

The overall intent of the program concerns learning from and in experience (Munby & Russell, 1994). In addition, the aim has been, and continues to be, that candidates regard their teacher education year as their first as a learning professional and not as their last as a university student. The concept of appropriate professional growth and development underlies many of the program activities.

The Aim and Character of Evaluating the Pilot Program

In the first article that follows, "Teacher Education Reform: Putting Experience First," the Dean of Education describes the origin of the program in theory and design, and briefly describes its implementation. In the position of incoming dean, she had particular challenges to meet in moving her colleagues toward a major structural change. The second article, "Gauging Field Support for a Proposed Innovative Field-based Teacher Education Program," reports on the results of taking a step that is uncharacteristic in the literature on change in teacher education programs. A program that involves substantial school experience depends greatly upon the support, co-operation, and goodwill of practicing professionals. The article describes the approach taken to evaluating the idea of the program from the perspective of those in schools who would be contributing their time, their classes, and their energy to the candidates registered in the program.

Although it was important for us to confirm that the model of an extended practicum and in-school courses was appropriate for preservice education, it was clearly crucial to identify problems in running the program before it was implemented for the entire enrollment of 620 teacher education candidates. Accordingly, in the 1996-1997 year, 62 places in the pilot program were made available to the incoming teacher education candidates. The pilot would address practical consid-

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erations that were novel to the Faculty of Education: Did the field-based courses “work” in the school setting? Were associate school arrangements adequate? Would electronic mail between associate schools and the Faculty of Education enable regular communication? And much more. In addition, there were questions about the arrangements for and success of the extended practicum, about the concept of learning in and from experience, and about the overall aim of professional growth and development. The article “Evaluation by Teacher Candidates of a Field-based Teacher Education Program Using Focus Groups” describes the steps taken to address these questions within the first six months of the pilot. The article illustrates the sort of news one receives when a team sets out to identify difficulties.

A feature of the program is the emphasis, in the Critical Issues course (CRIT), on issues like sexism, racism, equality, inclusion, and the law. A detailed study of the impact of a part of this course gave the team a measure of the success of the school-based courses generally. The article “The Challenges of Creating Inclusive Classrooms: Experiences of Teacher Candidates in a Field-Based Program” is based on case studies prepared by teacher candidates during their extended practica. It shows how the field-based course and the practica influence candidates’ beliefs and practices about the inclusion of exceptional learners.

The restructured program is committed to the importance of teacher candidates’ listening to the voices of their own experiences in schools, especially during the extended practica; and this commitment was manifested in the reflection and action research of the second field-based course, “Research, Theory and Professional Practice” (“PROF”). The evaluation of the pilot attempted to model this listening to voice. The article “One Teacher Candidate’s Experience in a Restructured Teacher Education Program” allows one candidate to lend an extended voice to the evaluation of the restructured program from a perspective that the team itself could not duplicate.

The article “Exit Evaluation of the Pilot Project for a Restructured Teacher Education Program” describes part of the final phase of the pilot’s evaluation and illustrates the research team’s approach to high-risk evaluation and the need to be prepared for unwelcome news. Questionnaire data from the exit survey showed that candidates delivered their harshest criticism earliest—during the focus groups interviews—and that they were the most thoughtful about the power of the restructured program when they had had the time to reflect on the value of the extended practicum almost a semester later.

The closing article in this issue brings the stories of the implementation and evaluation of the new program up to the present time. Changes, it is shown, are far from simple and the program is clearly going to reflect modifications as the faculty learn how it makes different demands on our own teaching.

Learning from the Experience of Evaluation

There is clearly a subtext to this collection of articles. Although they represent

various attempts to assess the impact and appropriateness of a restructured teacher education program, they also represent the efforts of a research team to learn from the ongoing experience of evaluation and, in doing so, to mirror the fundamental professional principles that the restructured program is intended to foster. Our collective experience has taught us:

1. That we can anticipate and should welcome bad news when an evaluation is aimed at uncovering problems and complaints.
2. That immediate responses to problems revealed in focus group interviews contribute to the sense that evaluation involves taking the candidates and their criticisms seriously. (It also enhances later response rates.)
3. That the harshest criticisms are replaced by positive comments once candidates have had the opportunity to step back from the extended practicum and view the program as a whole.
4. That candidates who have been introduced to action research skills can themselves study the process they have been involved in, and can bring a significant timbre to concept of teacher candidate's voice.
5. That some problems cannot be immediately remedied if they involve changes to calendar dates and text which require approval by the University Senate 18 months in advance.

Our experience with the pilot of the restructured teacher education program is teaching us something about being professional. In her welcome to the pilot candidates, the dean remarked that being a professional involved learning something new each year. As we continue to evaluate the restructured program with its 620 candidates, we are learning to treat each year as a pilot year.

Note

1. Queen's University has a concurrent program in addition to the consecutive program. The final year of the concurrent program occurs after the requirements for the B.A. or B.Sc. are fulfilled, and is virtually the same as the consecutive program. Both programs lead to the Bachelor of Education degree. For teacher candidates registered in the Aboriginal Teacher Education or Technology Education who do not possess a degree, the one-year consecutive program results in a Diploma in Education.

References

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