

ning on the first day of school in September, the placement of teacher candidates with associate schools rather than with associate teachers, the field-based courses to be completed by teacher candidates during their extended practicum, and the replacement of the honorarium for associate teachers with faculty support for school improvement projects. The summary of responses to the questions posed in the focus groups gives voice to the three themes of partnership, pragmatics, and problematics that emerged from the field. The analysis of focus group data is followed by a review of the importance to the restructured program of seeking the views of professionals in the field.

The New Program

The most distinctive feature of the restructured program is the extended practicum of 14 weeks, beginning in the Fall Term. During this period, teacher candidates are assigned to associate schools, in which they also complete two experienced-based courses: one is called Research, Theory and Practice and the other is called Critical Issues and Policies. The teacher candidates within each school work as a study group discussing their experiences learning to teach, the action research they are conducting, and the case studies they are developing about exceptional learners.

The innovations in the restructured program clearly imply a different role for teachers than the traditional one of providing three-week or four-week placements for teacher candidates to teach. Although those at the Faculty of Education were both optimistic and excited as they developed the structure of the program, they were aware that it depended for its success significantly upon the views of those in the field who would be working with the teacher candidates. As the program was being developed, it became increasingly important to determine the perspectives and views of the experienced teachers and administrators who were to be involved in the program. Accordingly, the decision was taken to design a study that would provide this information.

The study, reported here, is the first of a series of studies evaluating the restructured program. As an evaluation study, it is somewhat unusual: it provided evaluative information before the restructured program was approved by the Queen's University Senate. This evaluation of the plans took place in the fall of 1995, at an early stage of their development. The current study provides views of three focus groups of experienced educators and administrators on a model for teacher education that places the learning of theory between practica that emphasize learning from experience.

Consulting through Focus Groups

The focus group interview involved interviewing a purposefully sampled group of people rather than each person individually. By creating a social environ-

ment in which group members are stimulated by the ideas of one another, a researcher can increase the quality and richness of data (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). Focus groups are an effective means of soliciting teachers' and administrators' understandings, experiences, and perspectives on a topic of interest—like a new teacher education program (Morgan, 1988).

In the recent literature on professional development schools, focus groups have usually been conducted after a new program has been implemented to gauge field approval (e.g., Shen, 1993). Because "focus groups are useful when it comes to investigating *what* participants think, but they excel at uncovering *why* participants think as they do" (Morgan, 1988, p. 25), we chose to conduct focus groups during consultation prior to restructuring. Such data would enable the designers of the new program to understand the reasons for views on extended practica, on practice preceding theory, on field-based coursework, on the associate school model, and on the removal of the honorarium. Awareness of such reasoning would also be helpful in making the program feasible for all concerned and in communicating with the field.

Method

A neutral facilitator from another unit in the university moderated the focus groups. With the committee of four faculty members who were designing the program, he created an introductory question and four substantive questions, each concentrating on one aspect of the restructured program that would have great impact on schools. The introductory question was in two parts: "What are the benefits of the current practica?" and "What are the frustrations of the current practica?"

Two researchers participating in this study arranged three focus groups with the assistance of local districts of education. The directors of four nearby districts of education were contacted and asked to nominate participants for three focus groups: elementary teachers, secondary teachers, elementary and secondary administrators. They were asked to nominate individuals who were experienced with the supervision of teacher candidates during practica and who could provide feedback on aspects of the proposed restructured program. The directors were familiar with the draft proposal for restructuring.

The two researchers attended the three focus groups and each made about 30 pages of field notes, while the neutral facilitator conducted the groups. These 60 pages of notes were transcribed from hand-written to word-processed and analyzed with three passes through the transcription using the method of constant comparison. On the first pass, the transcribed notes were analyzed for consistency. The notes for each focus group were then, on the second pass, analyzed for emerging themes on each question about extended field-based practica. On the third pass, the field notes and analyses of the three focus groups were compared and consistencies and inconsistencies among the three perspectives were analyzed. We sought themes that

emerged from all three focus groups that demonstrated perspectives about the innovative program as a whole and data that were inconsistent with these themes.

Findings

First Stage of Data Analysis: Consistency and Complementarity

The first stage of data analysis demonstrated no contradictions between the field notes of the two notetakers. There were differences of omission. When the two notetakers met to discuss the differences, they described how they used nonverbal communication during the group interviews to ensure that all conversation was recorded by one or the other, but not all comments were written by both. The notetakers recommended to the research team that in future all focus groups be audiotaped.

Second Stage of Data Analysis:

Supportive Answers Emerged to the Four Questions

Similar themes emerged in the focus groups with elementary teachers, secondary teachers, and principals, although the last group provided more detail about the intersection of the proposed model for teacher education with the operation of under-funded schools in the 1990s. Consistent with the nature of their responsibilities, principals also made recommendations about evaluating teacher candidates.

Associate School Model

Stated strengths of this model included: opportunities for teachers to be involved in teacher education as a long-term commitment and benefits to teacher candidates from working over an extended period with associate teachers who know them well. Concerns expressed included: the possibility of excluding schools in which only a few teachers are committed and the need for a school leader who has time and interest to coordinate students and associate teachers. Secondary teachers discussed associate departments and their concern that it would be difficult for heads to prevent teachers who were not good role models from becoming associate teachers within an associate department or school because the role of department head does not include evaluating teachers.

Extended Practicum

The orientation of teacher candidates in August for the extended practicum starting at the beginning of School in September would be critical. Pairing of teacher candidates and associate teachers would have to be done carefully. Teachers would be in charge at the beginning and would gradually hand over responsibilities to the apprentices. The expectations would have to be expressed very clearly because associate teachers and teacher candidates would behave differently than during a three-week practicum. Some teachers suggested more than one week of intensive

orientation, and some suggested candidates arrive at the school when the teacher first returned to the school which might be prior to the last week of August. One member of each focus group suggested an alternate pattern that combined early participation in schools with an early return to the Faculty of Education.

Coursework Completed During the Practicum

Suggestions were made about content (e.g., classroom management, curriculum planning, assessment) more than about organization. Many teachers expressed interest in working with faculty members; some expressed interest in learning from such courses and receiving professional development credit. Action research was suggested a number of times as a framework within which the courses could be tailored to the needs of teacher candidates and associate teachers. Secondary teachers suggested that a return to the Faculty of Education for intensive coursework during the practicum would be beneficial for the teacher candidates.

Appropriate Rewards for Teachers

All three focus groups recommended education about changed expectations for associate teachers, workshops in schools or at the Faculty of Education, and more collegial relationships between faculty members and associate teachers. Remaining current and receiving credits for professional development were seen as more important prerequisites than the small stipends that had been paid to teachers by the Faculty of Education in the past.

Summary of Second Stage

In summary, all groups expressed support for the thrust of the changes: the longer practicum, more emphasis early in the program on the realities of schools and teaching, and closer integration of coursework and practicum. A general lack of time and the large amount of time required to negotiate individual agreements with each associate school were seen as the biggest problems, although no participant saw these time problems as insurmountable.

Third Stage of Data Analysis:

Three Themes about Making Partnership Work

Three themes emerged as criteria for making the partnership between the associate schools and the Faculty of Education workable: partnership, pragmatics, and problematics. Partnership focused on the benefits of reciprocal interactions between and among teachers, teacher candidates, students in classrooms, administrators, and members of the Faculty of Education. Pragmatics highlighted specific, practical aspects of implementing a field-based program with emphasis on the extended practicum. These were pragmatic issues that required immediate attention to ensure effective implementation of the restructured program. Problematics

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centered on potential problems that could arise without true partnerships and careful attention to the pragmatics. Preventing problems would entail (a) extensive planning prior to implementation, (b) field partners with ready access to faculty members once problems were perceived, and (c) assurances of support and intervention from the Faculty of Education when there were problems.

Partnership

The predominant message from the three focus groups was a desire for a partnership between schools and the Faculty of Education. Increased interactions of schools with teacher candidates and faculty members were perceived as positive and mutually beneficial.

Perceived benefits of becoming an Associate School. Based on previous experience, teachers and administrators praised the roles that teacher candidates played in their schools. The benefits to schools had two dimensions: interpersonal relations and craft knowledge. The first benefit involved the infusion of energy teacher candidates brought to schools and the attention they could provide for students and groups of students with individual needs. The second benefit focused on the teacher candidates' sharing ideas and promoting teachers' reflection on practice. Field personnel also discussed potential advantages in the proposed change from selecting individuals to be associate teachers to selecting associate schools and allowing them to connect candidates with associate teachers over the course of the practicum.

On the topic of interpersonal relations, elementary teachers emphasized the "Vitality [teacher candidates] bring to school, to the classroom," and "more individual attention for children." Secondary teachers noted their presence "Helps students who need one-on-one" and brings "enthusiasm." These comments were echoed by administrators who commented on "fresh enthusiasm, they energize our school;" and "Enthusiasm, willingness to receive ideas from staff, and share ideas."

Administrators also addressed the support provided to the school: "Assistance, support working one-on-one with small groups in the school." However, they emphasized the opportunities for mentoring and teamwork that attend being an associate school: "The mentoring relationship that develops between practice teacher and associate is fantastic. Discussion and questioning really brings things into focus for the associate." Another administrator focused on the professional development of associate teachers, "It is an ideal relationship, through the teamwork, for the associate teacher." One principal looking to the future suggested that having teacher candidates in his school gives him "a head start on recruiting."

The second dimension of partnership centered on the craft of teaching, the ideas and resources that teacher candidates bring to the classroom, and the ensuing reflection on practice. Four elementary teachers described sharing and reflection specifically. One said, "I like to share; for [candidates] I have to break it down into bits from the whole process. It clarifies why I am doing what I am doing." Another

emphasized, "Growth, sharing. It also makes me more creative. We use themes and tie our teaching all together." Two others emphasized, "Sharing of ideas; they come with expertise I don't have," and "We work as a team; there is real learning for them at the school."

Secondary teachers also highlighted the stimulation they received by being an associate school and mentoring teacher candidates. "They bring new ideas; it keeps me in touch with new stuff." "Professional development for me, by learning methods from student teachers." "We are rural, so we car-pool with practice teachers. Car-pool discussions help us avoid being jaded." An administrator echoed the teachers, emphasizing the benefit to teachers of teacher candidates' "willingness to learn from staff and to share ideas."

Enhancing partnership: Extended practica and Associate Schools. Given the focus on the quality of interpersonal relationships and the positive effects of teacher candidates on craft knowledge, it was not surprising that the extended practicum was viewed as a way to strengthen the partnerships between schools and the Faculty of Education. In each focus group, the brevity of the present three-week practicum was cited as a frustration. Elementary teachers commented, "Three weeks is too short, you don't have time to create a cooperative relationship," and "There is miscommunication with the lack of time. Something disrupts like a fire alarm, and there is no time to re-plan. Simply not enough planning time." A secondary teacher noted, "In a short time you have to tiptoe around student teachers. There is too little time to trust and really speak your mind." Another said, "Teaching is about personal relationships; it's impossible in a short time." There was strong support among the teachers for time to build rapport, work together, and develop a relationship with the teacher candidates. The focus was on improving the practicum for both candidates and associate teachers.

While administrators expressed this theme of candidates' building rapport with associate teachers and students, they also viewed the extended practicum as a vehicle for producing better teachers for the profession. One administrator used the analogy that "teaching is a marathon" and that being "a sprint runner for a couple of weeks" does not prepare teacher candidates for the marathon. The message was that teaching experience for candidates must resemble teaching as it is experienced in the profession. Because the extended practicum accomplishes this, it will improve teacher education.

Both teachers and administrators saw the Associate School model contributing to better partnerships between the Faculty of Education and schools. Teachers emphasized the desire for "a collegial relationship with a couple of faculty members assigned to a school" and for faculty members to serve as part of "a consultative team" within schools. Some saw this as "sorely missing" in the old model of assigning teacher candidates to schools with no continuing relationship between individual faculty members and individual schools. Administrators acknowledged the benefits of "ongoing association of faculty members and schools." One

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described it this way, "Schools need a partnership with a faculty person—then it [the new program] would work. A faculty person needs to be on site a good deal of the time." There were suggestions that the faculty take part in discussions with the candidates "like those planned for the field-based courses" about teaching, classroom management, etc.

The desire for a closer partnership with the Faculty of Education included the perception that individually and collectively faculty members must share responsibility for the new program with schools and have a greater presence during the implementation of the extended practicum. Partnership was viewed as part of compensation to schools for their role in teacher education. Additionally, schools saw the Faculty of Education, through this partnership, providing opportunities for in-service to schools and supporting schools in concrete ways with workshops, consulting, and knowledge resources.

Pragmatics

The role of the Faculty of Education is pivotal in the views field personnel hold of teacher education programs. This role underlies all of partnership, pragmatics, and problematics. Where partnership emphasized reciprocal interactions among teacher candidates, associate teachers, schools, students, and faculty members, pragmatics focused on particular and practical aspects of implementing the field-based program. The extended practicum would require clarification and discussion before and during its implementation. Suggestions for carrying out the field-based courses focused on content to the exclusion of means of organizing and delivering these innovative courses.

Organizing the extended practicum and the Associate School model. All focus groups recommended that teacher candidates spend time in the Associate Schools prior to the beginning of school in September, although all realized that such time was voluntary, and not required, for teachers. They cautioned that sensitivity to teacher needs at this critical time of the school year was essential. A secondary teacher stated, "Bring practice teachers in ahead of time so teachers can find out from them what they feel they need and would like to do before first day of school." And an elementary teacher suggested "for classroom set-up, two or three days ahead of the beginning of school." An administrator suggested that taking part in school life during the "last week of August would help because they have to feel like staff members [during the extended practicum]." The emphasis in these discussions was on "time for faculty and schools, teachers, to sit down together and understand what is expected of everyone."

While all agreed that teacher candidates must "be immersed in what makes a school" and all recommended negotiation of roles and organization within Associate Schools, each focus group raised the issue of the authority of the associate teacher in the classroom. This was expressed as "The associate teacher is in charge and would provide direction and guidance to the teacher candidates," and "For the

first three or four weeks I would be in charge. As long as that is understood, they would be observing and learning." The secondary teachers described "an apprenticeship model whereby [teacher candidates] would gradually take over."

Administrators described a gradual assumption of teaching responsibilities by the candidates. As they talked, they laid out a series of steps including joint planning prior to the beginning of school, candidate observation during school start-up and teacher handling of management issues, observation of teaching and joint teaching by the candidate, followed by an extended teaching opportunity. One administrator summarized this long discussion: "We mean...good to see how a class gets put together, some classroom management things, a clearly defined observation phase, integration into staff, minimum of six weeks, and preferably longer, to teach." These discussions permitted the evolution of a different set of expectations than those held in the past for candidates who experienced no practicum of longer than three weeks.

The Associate School model was viewed as both enhancing relations and partnerships, and as demanding more negotiation and joint planning by the partners. Negotiation would have to extend to "the number of candidates assigned to a school," as well as the means of "pairing associates and student teachers." Teachers warned, "Don't force [teacher candidates] into classrooms where they are not welcome." It was recognized that "coordination of [candidates] with departments" in secondary schools takes time. Administrators made recommendations for pragmatics that would assign candidates to "schools' areas of need," including schools' providing profiles of themselves and their identified needs and candidates' providing information about their strengths and passions. This would enable schools to choose candidates "with skills the school knows how to put to use."

Organization of the field-based courses. Teachers and administrators made suggestions for content of the field-based courses like classroom management and planning. They mentioned the need for attention to inclusion and exceptional students. They had, however, few recommendations about the organization of these courses. They expected faculty members to talk with candidates about the issues in these courses and about issues arising in the classroom and school. There were suggestions that the courses not involve theoretical projects unrelated to day-to-day teaching, and remove candidates from the classroom as little as possible. The Faculty of Education was viewed as the appropriate group to suggest how to run field-based courses. Field personnel were prepared to provide feedback on the appropriateness of content and organization once these innovative courses were underway. Their familiarity with classroom life and with practica in the past made them much more comfortable to recommend the pragmatics, which needed negotiation, for the practicum than for the field-based courses.

The pragmatics theme emerged from analyses of all three focus groups. Teachers and administrators recognized that negotiations would be needed about specific ways of proceeding in individual schools.

Problematics

The role of the Faculty of Education is central in addressing problematic issues. Imperative are open channels of communication between the Faculty of Education and the Associate Schools. Preventing problems would require careful planning before implementation took place. When problems arose and were identified, teachers and administrators wanted assurance that the Faculty would be supportive and responsive. Implementation, workload, coordination, and evaluation emerged as potential problem areas.

Implementation. To implement the field-based program, commitment was integral on the part of the staff and the principal: "Teachers *have* to be committed," and "Persons transferring in [to an Associate School] need to be interested." One elementary teacher suggested that when a school received an Associate School designation that it not be a "forever" arrangement: "Staff committed this year, but not next year; get a break. Not forever and ever."

Considerations about commitment raised questions about the selection process for associate teachers and the importance of some form of training. A secondary teacher asked: "What guidelines, policies, procedures do you need to tighten up, so [there are] fewer poor role models?" Another cautioned that a "Diplomatic department head will be needed...when you have a department member who is not a good role model." All of the teachers were in agreement that there should be some form of screening to ensure that the teachers involved were committed. Training was perceived as necessary to effective implementation and as a rewarding consequence of participation. An elementary teacher queried: "No one had provided training; how does anyone know I'm doing okay? Training would be a reward.... Wouldn't that be worthwhile?"

The administrators expressed concern that more clarity was needed for their teachers regarding appropriate expectations for teacher candidates: "There must be specific expectations communicated to the associates," and "[there is a] lack of guidelines about what should be expected...at various stages of the practicum."

Workload. All focus groups were concerned that the Faculty of Education acknowledge the workloads of the teachers and the significant amount of time required to work with teacher candidates. An elementary teacher wondered: "I don't know how much time I would have for a student. So much going on with inclusion and everything else....Children have to come first. Not an objection to having them there; issues need to be addressed." Two secondary teachers expressed concerns about the overly dependent teacher candidate: "You assume a certain level of competence and, when it isn't there, you sometimes have to explain it over and over." "It's a lot of work—workload can be more than the compensation." The administrators echoed the teachers, acknowledging that "Time is hard to come by," and expressed "reservations about amount of time it takes associates...in early weeks" of the practicum.

Coordination. Building on the Associate School model, coordination within the school of associates and teacher candidates was necessary, as was coordination between the school and the Faculty of Education. This dual focus, internal within the school and external between the school and Faculty of Education, was identified as critical by all focus groups and potentially problematic were it not to occur.

An elementary teacher proposed that one teacher take on the role of “school controller.” An administrator saw the need for the associate school having “a formal *coordinator* [italics added], with release time, not a liaison, but a coordinator.” A secondary teacher was concerned about the possibility “that reports will be fragmented...Who will take responsibility?” With sufficient coordination, there would be greater opportunities for teamwork with “real learning for [teacher candidates]” and a “collegial model” operating where the teacher candidates, associate teachers and faculty members would be “part of the team.”

A conduit between the schools and the Faculty of Education was an imperative. Were this in place, collegial relationships could be fostered, a “totally different view of the faculty members role.” Then, troubleshooting would be possible in the event of problematic performances by teacher candidates. As one elementary teacher noted, “a poorly prepared teacher candidate can create chaos, though this has been rare.” Similarly, a secondary teacher asked, “What happens when they need a lot of work?” Implied, but unstated by the teachers, was the question: ‘Where is the Faculty of Education when this occurs?’

The administrators also wanted clarity on the interface between their schools and the Faculty of Education. They requested more groundwork to enable teacher candidates to understand the operation of a school including “information about the Ministry, guidelines, role of government,” and a protocol to assist the candidates’ integration into their respective schools. The most pointed question addressed a candidate’s unsuitability for teaching as a career: “What happens if we find out this person doesn’t seem to be suited? Is the Faculty willing to act?” Overall, the administrators wanted a “feedback loop” that would both support and expedite partnership.

Evaluation. Evaluation of teacher candidates was of particular concern to the administrators, less so to the teachers. The teachers’ focus was on consistency in evaluation formats given the placement of teacher candidates with different associates. The administrators took a systemic perspective, highlighting the lack of information from the Faculty of Education about evaluation procedures, the tension created between the associate and teacher candidate because of evaluation, and possible evaluation models that could be used. They also raised the question of who should be doing the evaluation—the associates, the principals, or both. The emphasis given to the candidate’s evaluation by potential employers was also seen as problematic. One administrator said, “The evaluation thing creates quite a tension; prevents full teamwork; [the candidate feels] the associate has ultimate say—about whether I get a job, etc.” Evaluation was viewed as a problematic that

could either be resolved through negotiation or could cause difficulties in the restructured program.

Discussion

Focus groups as the method of choice for data collection has not been a usual avenue for educational inquiry. Initially used for market research, other fields such as international health and family planning (e.g., Debus, 1987; Folch-Lyon & Trost, 1981; Kumar, 1987) have adopted focus groups to gather qualitative data on problematic topics where attitudes, beliefs, practices, and values are important to understand an issue (Bertrand, Brown, & Ward, 1992). More recently, educational settings are increasingly using focus group methodology to consider issues such as curriculum review (Hendershott & Wright, 1993), the effectiveness of education (Lederman, 1990), and the assessment of student affairs programs and services (Kaase & Harshbarger, 1993). Singular to this method of data collection is the level of intimate conveyance of data (Byers & Wilcox, 1991).

Critics of focus groups argue that the small sample participating cannot be generalized and caution about the sample being representative and the responses of the participants biased by hearing the opinions of others in the group. Proponents counter that the intent of focus groups is not to quantify reality, but to obtain program-relevant data on attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions (Franklin & Knight, 1995; Ward, Bertrand, & Brown, 1991). The candor and clarity of the responses of the teachers and administrators reported in this study reflect Richard Krueger's (1988) statement that "the intent of focus groups is not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine the range, and not to make statements about the population but to provide insights about how people perceive a situation" (p. 96).

Two issues arise from the data collected and reported: predictive validity and relative consistency among the respondents/participants. Because the restructured program relies so heavily on the participation and support of teachers and administrators in the field, the issues they identified and the concerns they raised should be considered as a template for evaluation of the new program. The teachers and administrators identified that, for partnership to be successful, particular pragmatic issues must be attended to by the Faculty of Education. Should these not be adequately addressed, the problematic concerns highlighted could become preeminent. Their predictions about anticipated problems can be validated by subsequent focus groups that evaluate the extended practicum as experienced by school personnel.

In the data reported here, all of the focus groups, elementary and secondary teachers and administrators, expressed support for the thrust of the changes. There was consistency in the framing and substance of their responses. Where there was divergence, it was between the teachers and administrators. The administrators took a more systemic perspective considering implications for their staff and the teacher

candidates in light of under-funded schools in the 1990s. Future evaluation should attend closely to points of divergence among the groups that could contextualize concerns and shape appropriate responses by the Faculty of Education.

Conclusions

The themes of partnership, pragmatics, and problematics emerged in each of the focus groups and were closely intertwined. The theme of partnership was very important to the field. Pragmatics provided the Faculty of Education with a work list, while problematics gave the Faculty outcomes to anticipate if partnership and pragmatics were not dealt with thoroughly.

The findings of the current study were used to guide preparation of documentation for teachers and administrators about their roles in the restructured program, and to guide implementation of the restructured program. They were also used in designing the methods of delivery and content of the two field-based courses and other specific components, such as the role of the faculty liaison, of the new teacher education program.

Subsequent studies will pursue the inquiry described using consultative focus groups with teachers and administrators involved in the extended practicum during the pilot year of the program. The suggestions made and predictions raised require further attention as implementation of the restructured program proceeds.

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