

One Teacher Candidate's Experience in a Restructured Teacher Education Program

By Andrew Cotton

Andrew Cotton was a teacher education student and is now a graduate student studying with the Faculty of Education, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada. Rena Upitis, dean of the Faculty of Education, provided the encouragement for this paper and the opportunity to present an earlier version to the annual conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education, St. John's, Newfoundland, June 1997.

As I peered at the children through the window of Room 4 at Lakeside Public School in early September, I became immediately conscious of how the window symbolized the uniqueness of my position as a teacher candidate at Queen's University. Although a window separates people, it does not close us off from one another, but rather invites us to witness and share in diverse experiences. Standing on the other side of the classroom window, I was separate from the students, but the clear panes allowed me to identify myself with them. As a teacher candidate, I too was a student—a student of teaching. Yet, here on the first day, from all external appearances, I would be introduced and perceived as a fellow teacher by the students and staff. As 9:00 a.m. inched closer, questions that had always been with me now seemed louder, more colourful, more urgent. "Will I be able to respond to the needs of these children?" "Have my own life lessons and experiences been of enough value to facilitate my teaching skills?" "Are my strengths great enough to

One Teacher Candidate's Experience

overshadow my insecurities?" Most importantly, "Will I be able to transform my experiences in the restructured Bachelor of Education program into tools for great teaching?"

As a student in the concurrent teacher education program at Queen's University, I realized early in my undergraduate years that I gained more knowledge about successful classroom teaching by practicing teaching in a classroom than I did sitting in one as a student. This personal longing and enthusiasm for change within teacher education seemed to be answered for me with the call for participants for the pilot of the restructured B.Ed. program. Many aspects of the new program appealed to me. The concept of belonging to an associate school, rather than being assigned to individual associate teachers, responded to issues I had developed after two- or three-week experiences of student teaching spread over my four years in the concurrent program. Being embraced by an entire school staff, and benefiting from their cumulative years of knowledge and experience, presented greater opportunities for me to learn by example and to grow as a teacher.

Such experience included the chance to witness the process by which an entire staff prepares for the beginning of the new school year. To share in the procedures that bring a school together, academically and socially, I regarded as a tremendous advantage to teacher candidates who have rarely seen this aspect of teaching before. As well, the opportunity to observe a seasoned teacher welcome students to his or her class, to explain classroom routines, and to establish the community agreements which foster positive student behavior, I decided was an experience that I could not afford to miss.

The August orientation was an intensive week of sessions created to prepare us not only for this first day in the school but for the entire fall practicum. Throughout that week, the field-based courses were explained in both their design and purpose. The Critical Issues course (CRIT 100) and the Research, Theory and Professional Practice course (PROF 190) became essential tools in aiding me to evaluate my teaching practice. Designed to complement the practicum experience, these courses became a framework which not only provided a structure for my learning at the school, but encouraged me and my fellow teacher candidates to focus on key issues. Instead of being in a University classroom, dreaming up hypothetical situations, I was living and breathing the assignments during the fall practicum.

Being in the school on the first day of the academic year and studying its equity and inclusion policies and practices was not simply an assignment, but was a pertinent exercise to me. I had to become versed in the IPRC (Ontario's procedures for identifying learners with special needs) and IEP processes, as I needed to know the best methods to accommodate the exceptional learners in my classroom. The field-based assignments, therefore, possessed a validity and an honesty that assignments in the previous B.Ed. program did not have. Guided by these assignments, I began to examine my own teaching practice.

Issues of inclusion, which had once seemed very clear in my mind, were no

longer as defined. In my Grade 2 classroom, which encompassed a variety of learners with different abilities, I soon realized that striving to maintain an inclusive classroom led to issues of balance within the class. Increasingly, the daily job of sufficiently attending to each individual need was becoming an elusive goal for me. During such moments, I realized the disjunction between my theory and my practice. While I have always advocated inclusive practices, it was not until my extended practicum that I recognized some of my beliefs lacked validity since they had never been put into practice. Here, in this Grade 2 classroom, my confrontation with this discrepancy was both strangely dislocating and rewarding. Though I gained a greater sense of awareness about myself as a developing teacher, I soon realized that this process was not without the struggle of critical introspection.

Reflecting daily upon my teaching practice through journal-keeping proved to be extremely helpful in aiding me to isolate the nature and origins of my concerns. Although finding quiet moments in a hectic day is difficult, the physical act of writing out my thoughts enabled me to diagnose the areas of my concern. My journal also proved useful in aiding me to chart my own professional development. By using my journal as a medium not only for documenting thoughts and experiences, but also for determining areas that need to be improved upon, I was able to formulate questions about my practice for action research.

Looking back upon my journal, I realized I was repeatedly concerned about my inability to respond to the needs one of particular Grade 2 student. I questioned whether or not my method of classroom management was too dogmatic. Was my insistence upon adhering to ultimately unimportant class rules perpetuating his disobedient behavior? Action research became a way for me not only to question my existing teaching practices, but also to question my motivations so as to improve the learning of my students.

However, such reflection did not occur in isolation; discussions with my fellow teacher candidates, with faculty liaison, and with associate teachers were powerful mediums for exploring issues and concerns. While the nature of the field-based courses and assignments promoted group discussion with my fellow teacher candidates, the very design of the restructured B.Ed. program facilitated communication with peers. Having first met during the August orientation, all teacher candidates at Lakeside Public School (a fictitious name) bonded through mutual experience. Together we experienced the anxiety of the first day of school, the anticipation of meeting our associates and our students, as well as the growing pains associated with developing as an educator.

With each individual teacher candidate bringing a wealth of experience and the excitement of a new perspective, it is not surprising that we turned to one another for support, feedback, and sharing. I remember vividly one particular incident where I was forced to physically separate two battling students. Although I managed to separate the two students, I later asked my fellow teacher candidates for suggestions of alternative actions I could have taken. Further reflection occurred in

One Teacher Candidate's Experience

conjunction with my faculty liaison.

As the link between the Faculty of Education and the associate school, the faculty liaison played an integral role in facilitating a positive learning experience for me. Her willingness to provide both written and verbal feedback on my lessons was essential in giving me the confidence to hone my teaching skills. Ensuring constant contact with the faculty liaison, through phone calls or electronic mail, was also central to promoting a positive practicum experience. Since I was at the school for four months, it was important for me to realize that I was not simply left to my own devices, but rather could depend upon my faculty liaison to assist me if ever any conflict should arise.

This reaching out and sharing of ideas occurred to the greatest extent with my associate teachers. My first associate, a Grade 2 teacher, was an incredibly giving educator. Her willingness to share both her classroom and insights with me was central to fostering a positive relationship with me. On the first day of school, she introduced me to the class as a fellow teacher, not simply a student teacher. What music to my ears! After years of feeling like a guest in another's classroom, the expectation had already been established that I was to be treated with the same respect as a full teacher, and that I too had to fulfill these responsibilities.

For the first few days, I observed my associate introduce routines, procedures, and expectations within the classroom. I remained a silent observer, studying the students and their interactions with each other and the teacher. As I eavesdropped on their conversations, I made note of subjects that were of interest to them and anticipated using this information at a future date. I similarly noted my associate's actions, writing down her classroom management techniques which have withstood years of teaching. The following week I began to take on increased responsibility, and by the third week I was responsible for teaching the whole class for the entire morning, Monday through Friday. This schedule would rotate, with my teaching times alternating each week between mornings and afternoons.

After years of guiding preservice teachers, my first associate expressed her belief that teacher candidates can learn about teaching only by teaching, not through simply observing it. In many ways, her philosophies toward teacher education coincide with those of the restructured B.Ed. program. From the beginning, I was gaining knowledge through practical firsthand experience. Whereas the early months of the previous B.Ed. program would have focused on planning, preparing, and gathering resources, the extended fall practicum built upon these discrete elements, exposing teacher candidates to more comprehensive, holistic experiences. Practice, and more practice, became an integral factor in giving me confidence in my abilities.

With each new day presenting a different set of experiences, I learned how students will magically take a lesson in a direction you had not intended. I was improving in my ability to "read" a class, becoming increasingly aware that a class has its own rhythms, and that each child contributes his or her own special dynamic,

influencing the tone of that day by his or her presence or absence. As well, I was continually learning how to adapt my lessons to suit the varied needs within the classroom. Ensuring that all students experience success in the classroom has been both the greatest challenge and greatest reward of the fall practicum. Designing lessons, assignments, and group work in such a way as to foster and build student success has been a profound learning experience for me.

The extended practicum provides teacher candidates with great opportunities to explore these issues in detail. My experience when I moved to a Grade 4/5 class during the latter part of the fall term provided an example of this. In this class of 34 students, Paul (not his real name) repeatedly challenged my authority through acts of disobedience toward myself and others. Before this experience, I believed that educators should and could treat all students equally. My experience with Paul, however, forced me to reconsider and re-evaluate this very perception. From the moment I arrived at the class, he was disrespectful; if I asked for quiet, he would be the first to continue talking. If I requested that the class line up at the door, Paul would be sure to strike the piano keys in the process.

The class rules, as established by the teacher, explicitly stated that any rudeness to teachers or other students resulted in a two day in-school suspension to another classroom. Although Paul's repeatedly rude behavior justified such repercussions, I felt that this method of behavior modification would be less than successful. How could he work on his social skills, and improve upon his behavior with me, if he was in another room for two days?

This hesitancy to send Paul away initiated a crisis of conscience and conduct within me. Clearly, I was making exceptions for Paul, and this did not seem to me to be equal treatment. Even though no students in the class indicated they were aware of Paul's seemingly special treatment, I nevertheless felt I was not fulfilling my duty to treat all students equally. Although I spoke with him many times about his actions and their hurtful impact upon others, I now recognize that had I sent Paul to the in-school suspension room immediately after his first "offence," perhaps his undesirable conduct would have ceased.

Though my issues with Paul remained unresolved at the end of my placement, I nevertheless felt confident knowing that I acted in ways which I believed were in his best interest. From this experience, I have confirmed my belief that a class is a group of individuals, not just a class of students. Although Paul may never realize the motivations for my behavior, such an experience has enabled me to arrive at the philosophy of "fairness, not sameness of process" among students. Having the time to arrive at such realizations is the defining characteristic of the extended practicum. In cultivating any skill, teacher candidates benefit from the increased time to improve classroom management techniques and refine lesson and unit preparation, as well as cultivate listening skills and patience. However, I am nevertheless conscious of the double-edged nature of the extended practicum. While the fall practicum provides a wonderful opportunity for the teacher candidate to learn from

One Teacher Candidate's Experience

an associate teacher's years of experience, there similarly exists the opportunity to embrace inappropriate teaching techniques and attitudes.

From the outset of the pilot program, one particular question remained with me: "How do I avoid being co-opted into the existing teaching system?" Without formal teacher education preceding my practicum, I wondered if the absence of theory would be an invitation to adopt poor teaching habits. Like many teacher candidates, I had fears of losing control in the classroom. In struggling to contain this fear, it might have been easy to embrace techniques modeled before me. By seeking to avoid costly mistakes that could impede a child's learning, I welcomed the feedback and advice offered by my associate teachers. Even though I was aware of the co-opting issue from the beginning of the school year, I think these thoughts were tempered by the realization that I had a lot of learning to do.

It became apparent to me midway through the fall practicum that I had to balance my need to learn from my associate teachers with my expectations of myself as a teacher. Looking back, I am unaware of cultivating any specific strategies to avoid adopting poor teaching practices. Rather, like many other teacher candidates, I developed a critical perspective from my earlier and short-term experiences of student teaching and from volunteering and brought diverse experiences to my teaching placements. I used this critical perspective during my teaching in the fall. This stepping back from the situation, combined with the field-based course readings and assignments and the creation of a safe learning environment for me by my associate teachers enabled me to avoid, I believe, being co-opted to the status quo.

In many ways, my fears about co-option, combined with my entire fall practicum experiences, were about finding my own voice as a teacher. Though I made efforts to ensure that I did not lose my own voice in the classroom, I was equally concerned that the voices of all students were heard. While the field-based courses and assignments encouraged critical examination of my own teaching practice so as to ensure all students were receiving equitable treatment, my Program Focus course, "Teaching Exceptional Children," provided me with further opportunities to learn about inclusive classroom practices.

Based on a workshop format, the Program Focus course became a vehicle for teacher candidates not only to explore issues of exceptionality they found important and interesting, but for them to present this information to the entire class. Strategies for teaching exceptional children, as well as collaborative and global education practices, became even more pertinent through the February alternative teaching placement. My experience in a classroom specifically for students with severe multiple disabilities at an inner-city school was both troublesome and oddly rewarding.

While it was rewarding to work with students with severe disabilities, my personal philosophies toward teaching exceptional learners came into conflict with my associate teacher's own teaching practice. As a teaching assistant for this three-

week practicum, my role was to provide support for one student who worked most days within a mainstream classroom. Yet by the end of the first week, it became apparent that our interpretations of support differed. It became increasingly difficult to follow through with her expectation for me to follow the child's every move. While this student required assistance for academic success, he was more than capable of accomplishing other tasks on his own. The purpose of education is to equip students with skills to make them as independent and self-reliant as possible, and I viewed this constant hovering over the student as impeding this outcome. While the information I learned from the Program Focus course enabled me to arrive at this perspective, the February placement, ironically, solidified this outlook. Though our differences were never resolved, I nevertheless learned much from this placement. Not only did I gain more experience in working with someone who shares a different attitude, but more importantly, I continued to find my own voice—and use it!

This process of cultivating a greater sense of self was nevertheless accompanied by uncertainty about the nature of the education system in Ontario and my place within it. While I felt I had made great strides toward improving myself, I increasingly developed more questions about the pedagogical underpinnings of curriculum taught in schools. Though we had tackled the practical issues during the fall, the larger philosophical questions of teaching had not yet been resolved.

Questions such as “Why are we teaching one subject over another?” “What should be the motivations for evaluation?” and “How can I know that my students are learning?” became pressing concerns with me. While I anticipated that these issues were to be addressed on our return to the Faculty of Education in the Winter Term, it became apparent that faculty members had not fully anticipated the extent to which the fall practicum experiences would necessitate considerable renovation of the curriculum courses. Together, faculty members and teacher candidates soon realized that they could not simply re-position the curriculum and instruction (methods) courses from the previous B.Ed. program into the restructured one.

Unlike the previous program, where all teacher candidates were working principally from the same hypothetical outlook, the rich and diverse experiences of the fall practicum had irrevocably impinged upon the curriculum and instruction courses in their perspective and design. Many of us left our fall practicum experiences with diverse questions in mind. In my particular case, I had specific scenarios and students in mind as I studied the materials presented in the curriculum and instruction courses. While the content of these courses was still significant, it became increasingly important for the courses to respond to these questions which had been formulated during the practicum experiences.

The restructured program is based on the premise of learning from experience, and it became important for teacher candidates in the pilot program to ensure that the curriculum courses were modified to both complement and respect the significance of these experiences. The Faculty of Education's willingness to invite

One Teacher Candidate's Experience

feedback and respond to our concerns facilitated the immediate restructuring of the Winter Term schedule. As teacher candidates in the pilot program, we had been introduced to this emphasis on dialogue and discussion since the on-campus weeks in October. The many debriefing sessions, open meetings, and discussions with professors and administration have been a rare privilege for me. The opportunity to shape and define the Bachelor of Education program at Queen's has been an empowering process for many teacher candidates in the pilot program. To witness our commitment to education mirrored at the Faculty of Education has been an experience I rejoice in.

I completed my May practicum in Lakeside School too. It was extraordinary to share experiences again with the students I met that first week in September. Not only had they grown physically, but they had made great strides scholastically. To see how much they had achieved in a year, and to witness the processes by which a teacher begins to draw the academic year to a close, is an experience that further enriched me. In many ways, I regard this Grade 2 class as my first class. I feel a kinship with them, knowing that I, too, join them in the learning process. In this regard, the practicum experiences have been enormously successful. Not only did I have opportunities to learn from different associate teachers, but the teaching experiences have enabled me to grow as a developing teacher. Many of the philosophies I had upon entering the restructured program have been refined or altered due to the teaching experiences. The curriculum and field-based courses, similarly, introduced me to exciting new techniques, materials, and perspectives that will give greater depth and breadth to my learning and my teaching.

While my participation in the restructured B.Ed. program facilitated the development of my own teaching philosophy, the year marked a significant transition in my life. In many ways, it was not simply my last year as a student, but rather my first year as a developing professional.

Note

1. Adapted from "Room to Grow" (Cotton, 1997, p. 63).

Reference

- Cotton, A. (1997). Room to grow. In D. Featherstone, H. Munby, & T. Russell, (Eds.) *Finding a voice while learning to teach* (pp. 63-65). London, UK: Falmer Press.