



## Innovation in Pre-Service Teacher Education: an Examination of the Canadian Field Experience

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### Abstract

*The findings below describe one Canadian school division that took up issues around the current practices employed in pre-service teacher field education and developed a reflective tool designed to measure the readiness of cooperating teachers to guide and lead pre-service teachers. The reflective tool focused on a number of critical areas of teacher readiness including knowledge of curriculum, diversity of pedagogical techniques, attention to differentiated instruction, diversity of assessment practices and areas of passion for the practicing teacher. This has allowed university personnel to match pre-service teachers and practicing teachers on areas other than teaching specialization. Through a full implementation cycle, several key findings emerged including the increased role of the school administrator in pre-service teacher education, the importance of strong relationships between school administrators and teachers in the placing of pre-service teachers and the importance of secondary teacher attributes such as expertise outside of curriculum content and pedagogical strategies.*

*The literature base on pre-service teacher practicums is extensive yet deals primarily with concerns within the experiential placement such as the relationship between cooperating teachers and pre-service teachers (e.g., Franklin Torrez & Krebs [5], 2012). The research described here differs in that it has examined the model itself and will address a new role for key stakeholders in ensuring excellence in pre-service teacher education.*

### 1. Introduction

Historically, pre-service teachers have been placed with cooperating teachers in schools through a combination of requests made by the local post-secondary institution and acts of volunteerism on the part of teachers and schools. While this process has, at its best, been efficient, it has often disregarded the readiness of cooperating teachers to lead pre-service teachers and has, at its worst, perpetuated the status quo in a profession that is currently undergoing rapid change. Within this volunteer structure one finds small institutional variances but the common supervisory triad (Nolan & Hooper [8], 2008) often remains the norm. “Faculty supervisors, cooperating teachers, and student teachers work together to share decision making about student teachers’ field experiences” (Range, Duncan & Hvidston [9], 2013, p. 46). Through the findings presented here, one can see that there is, in fact, a missing critical component to this supervisory relationship, that being the role of the school-based leadership in the identification of in-service teacher excellence and readiness to mentor the next generation of colleagues. While the triad is a powerful supervision model, pre-service teacher education requires a four-pronged approach.

### 2. The role of school administration in pre-service teacher education

While there is an extensive literature base on the role of school-based leaders in the mentorship of novice in-service teachers (e.g., Cherian & Daniel [3], 2008; Clark [4], 2012; Holland [6], 2009; Kealy [7], 2010) little research exists that extends this responsibility to pre-service teachers in the field. It is widely recognized, however, that novice teacher induction processes provide neophyte teachers with the opportunity to “develop teaching skills under the mentorship of veteran teachers and school principals” (Cherian & Daniel [3], 2008, p. 1). As a result novice teachers are able to “deepen their understanding of praxis (the reflective integration of theory, technique, and craft) and, more importantly, to develop a deeper sense of who they are as educators as they shape and are shaped by the mastery of the craft” (Cherian & Daniel [3], 2008, p. 1). If it is widely recognized that novice teachers benefit from focused principal mentorship, why should this not be the case for a pre-service teacher? Holland [6] (2009) noted in her study that “not only did principals believe that the most effective teacher preparation involves extensive experience in actual classrooms, they also believed that such experiences were the best way for beginning teachers to continue to develop their knowledge and skill” (p. 20). Given the potential of principals to support the development of novice teachers and the recognition of the importance of

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experience in pre-service teacher education, does it not follow that support from master teachers, university mentors and principals would lead to the greatest development before a teacher enters the classroom as a licensed professional?

### **3. Key findings through a full implementation cycle of the reflective tool**

To address the issues surrounding the voluntary nature of field experience, one suburban school division took up the question of excellence in cooperating teachers through the development of a reflective tool designed to identify master teachers ready for the position of mentor. Through one full implementation cycle of the reflective tool, three critical elements were uncovered as a result of thematic analysis of interviews with the participating school administrator. These were the increased role of school administration in the development of pre-service teacher and cooperating teacher professional growth, the importance of trust between cooperating teachers and school administration and, finally, the critical role of secondary characteristics, called areas of passion, among cooperating teachers.

#### **3.1 A new role for the school administration**

In implementing the reflective tool, the administration of the participant school took a more focused role in the placement and support of pre-service teachers. The administrator involved, in this particular case, was an assistant principal assigned with the task of overseeing the development of pre-service teachers. Of note was the fact that he was new to this school, having moved from the school where the reflective tool was originally developed. The assistant principal was involved in the development of the original reflective tool and implemented its use in his new administrative role. In doing so, the importance of administrative participation was highlighted as the assistant principal noted that his use of the reflective tool was both a way for him to show explicitly his commitment to the success of the pre-service teacher placements but also a way for him to know better how to support the in-service teachers taking on the mentorship role. It provided him with the information necessary to know how to support in a way that would encourage positive professional growth for all involved. Examples of this growth included setting up supports for teachers who wished to increase their own mentorship skills and also providing support for teachers who desired the opportunity share specific knowledge with their pre-service teacher through focused professional development opportunities.

#### **3.2 Trust between cooperating teachers and administration**

Of particular import to the assistant principal involved in the implementation of the reflective tool was the development of a climate of trust between himself and the teachers involved. Being new to the school, the non-evaluative nature of the reflective tool was seen to be of critical importance. The implementation of the reflective tool, which required the teacher to discuss with the assistant principal a number of topics including pedagogical strategies, assessment techniques, familiarity with the curriculum to be taught and professional obligations, was approached more from a professional discussion around practice than from a decision-making stance around readiness to mentor. This, it was felt, allowed this assistant principal to form a more trusting relationship with the teachers, leading to an open and comfortable dialogue around what is needed to effectively support pre-service teachers. Because of this, the assistant principal felt comfortable stepping in to support the teachers when necessary and the teachers felt comfortable asking for that support if needed. This trust, it was assumed, would spill over into other areas of professional development for the teachers involved. It also permitted the assistant principal to become more involved in the support and mentorship of the pre-service teachers, a role that has been extolled as a critical result of this study.

#### **3.3 Areas of passion among cooperating teachers**

A final area of critical import, and one that was identified in earlier preliminary findings, was the need for matching pre-service teachers and cooperating teachers on more than teaching specialization and grade level taught. While this was not a new finding, its importance to the success of field experiences was highlighted once again. By finding areas of passion in common between pre-service and cooperating teachers, the role of cooperating teacher became more collegial and, while still supervisory and evaluative, the relationship was able to develop along other lines. This allowed cooperating teachers and pre-service teachers to collaborate and to take risks in areas in which both felt comfortable.

## **4. Implications and Conclusion**



The implementation of this reflective tool resulted in both successes and challenges for all involved. The opportunity for a greater role for school administration was seen as one of the key strengths of the reflective tool. This was seen to benefit not only the cooperating teachers but was also seen to have a potentially transformative effect on the initial years of a novice teacher's career. Alberta Education [1] (2010) reported an attrition rate in Alberta, Canada of 25% for new teachers in their first five years. This statistic was exacerbated by teacher shortages in rural and remote areas, a decline in the number of men entering the profession and young people choosing not to enter the profession at all, following their teacher education programs. Having school-based administration take a greater role in the development of new teachers before they enter the profession, such as this reflective tool allowed, was seen by the study participants as a positive way to address the disturbing attrition statistics by allowing pre-service teachers to feel more comfortable asking for and receiving support from those in administration. A second success was the development of a climate of trust and reciprocal respect between school administration and cooperating teachers, a climate that was also seen to add to the potential learning and growth of both the pre-service teacher and the cooperating teacher. By developing a climate of trust based on mutual interests and goals, both the pre-service and cooperating teachers would be more apt to take risks and collaborate in more innovative ways with the full support of an engaged administration.

A decided challenge associated with implementation of the reflective tool, and one that had direct implications for school-based administrators, was the time it was seen to take. In discussing his implementation of the reflective tool, the assistant principal in this study noted that he often felt pressured to expedite the discussion associated with the reflective tool due to busy schedules. He found it difficult to take the time he felt he needed. It can be assumed that this would often be the case, not only in identifying cooperating teachers, but also in taking a greater role in the support and development of pre-service teachers.

Field experience has been characterized as a defining element in pre-service teacher education (Butler & Cuenca [2], 2012) and, as such, has been examined from a variety of perspectives. This study, however, has provided a differing lens from which to examine the education of pre-service teachers, from that of student to that of pre-licensed teacher. Given the opportunities for development and support, perhaps the field experience ought to be addressed more from the perspective of novice teacher induction. Perhaps, with an increased role to play by school-based administration and a four-pronged approach to supervision, pre-service teachers will come more to be seen as teachers, requiring similar resources and benefiting from the same level of support as novice teachers, shifting the view of pre-service teachers from pre-professional to members of the profession.

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