



## Identifying Excellence: A New Model for the Teacher Education Practicum

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### Abstract

*The paper proposed here will examine the efforts of one Canadian school district to redesign the current model used by schools and universities in placing pre-service teachers into practicum learning contexts. Historically, pre-service teachers from teacher education faculties in Canada have been placed with cooperating teachers through a partnership between teachers and principals and the university faculty. University faculty have requested the assistance of potential cooperating teachers and those that are interested in hosting a university student then respond to this request. While efficient and often beneficial to all parties, there is little attention given to the readiness of the practicing teacher, outside of recommendations around years of practice, to guide a pre-service teacher.*

*This research will examine the on-going development of a new model for cooperating teacher identification and selection. Through a working group established in one Canadian school board, a protocol was developed for examining the readiness and passion of practicing teachers expressing interest in hosting pre-service practicum teachers. This protocol focuses on various areas of teacher readiness including knowledge of curriculum, diversity of pedagogical techniques, attention to differentiated instruction and diversity of assessment practices. Notably, however, is the added ability of this protocol to highlight areas of passion for the practicing teacher, allowing university personnel to match pre-service teachers and practicing teachers on areas other than teaching specialization. Finally, this protocol involved school-based leadership in the identification process, allowing the practicum to become a meaningful part of the professional development of all involved.*

*While the existing literature base on pre-service teacher education practicum placements is broad, there is little that questions the process by which that placement is made originally. This research will examine the theoretical assumptions around teacher readiness and present a new model for pre-service teacher education practicums that addresses the role of the school in identifying excellence.*

### 1. Introduction

“An invaluable component in the preparation of pre-service teachers is the field experience” (Butler & Cuenca [2], 2012, p. 296) and, as such, the field experience has become a hallmark of teacher education programs in Canada. What is often overlooked, however, is the method in which classroom teachers are selected as mentor teachers. In the province in which this research takes place, the primary method of selecting mentor teachers lies with the classroom teachers themselves, through an act of volunteerism that is then fulfilled by the university. This causes one to ask, is it enough that a teacher volunteers to become a cooperating teacher or ought there to be some mechanism for determining excellence in those that will mentor future generations of teachers?

### 2. Issues of importance in the field experience

Issues of significance to cooperating or mentor teachers pervade research as scholars attempt to improve the field experience (e.g., Ambrosetti [1], 2014; Franklin Torrez & Krebs [3], 2012). Nielsen et al.[4] (2010) described the various issues of significance for volunteer sponsor teacher candidates. Most notably, however, was a concern that cooperating teachers may not possess the skills necessary to examine and share their own pedagogical understandings and yet, by virtue of their role as teacher, they were seen as potential cooperating teachers. Implicit in this concern is one inherent flaw in the volunteer nature of cooperating teachers in the field experience; the taken-for-granted notion that “anyone who has taught can effectively teach teachers” (Butler & Cuenca [2], 2012). This circuitous logic is, ultimately, fallacious as described Butler and Cuenca [2] (2012) when they state that:

*any individual who holds the power to sanction another into a community is legitimized as being at the apex of that community. In placing pre-service teachers with mentor teachers,*



*teacher education as an institution signals the status of mentor teachers as experts of practice. (p. 297)*

If one accepts that educational institutions, by virtue of their willingness to accept cooperating teachers who volunteer to mentor pre-service teachers, legitimizes a cooperating teacher as an expert, then one ought to also acknowledge the need to place pre-service teachers with cooperating teachers based on criteria other than subject area specialization, grade level specialization and a willingness to participate.

### **3. Identifying excellence: The work of one school division**

To address the fallacy of experience and to base field experiences on more than a desire to volunteer, one suburban school division took up, not only the question of desirable characteristics in a cooperating teacher, but of ways in which these characteristics could be identified in potential volunteers. To do so, a working group was formed whereby members of a committed group of professionals made up of school-based administration, central office administration and university representatives came together to discuss over four sessions those characteristics of cooperating teachers that would denote excellence and ways in which those characteristics could be identified before the teacher was permitted to mentor a pre-service teacher.

#### **3.1 Characteristics standing for excellence**

Throughout discussion over the four sessions many characteristics were seen to be desirable among excellent cooperating teachers. In distilling these down into themes, however, five critical ideas became apparent. The first, knowledge of curriculum, was seen to be vitally important as pre-service teachers would, it was assumed, come with knowledge of the relevant curriculum documents but not necessarily with a clear idea of how to translate those curriculum documents into practice. The ability to bring curriculum documents alive for students was seen to require deep understanding of instructional design and of the curriculum itself and this knowledge would be necessary if cooperating teachers were to be able to pass on requisite knowledge around instructional design.

The second, diversity of pedagogical techniques, was seen to incorporate not only an array of teaching methods, but an understanding of pedagogical variety as part of teacher scholarship and critical reflection. Cooperating teachers would be expected to be able to draw from an extensive array of pedagogical techniques while also being able to articulate their choices in regards to pedagogical methodology. This would require the cooperating teacher to understand their pedagogical choices from an evidence-based or research-based perspective, requiring that cooperating teacher to practice teaching as scholarship. In conjunction with teaching as scholarship, however, the cooperating teacher would also require the ability to be able to critically reflect on choices made in an objective and instructive manner thereby allowing the pre-service teacher to benefit.

The third, attention to differentiated instruction, was seen as a critical identifier of excellence due in large part to the move toward inclusive education and the incredible diversity in Canadian classrooms that is present today. Evident in this theme was a belief that differentiated instruction was necessary in classrooms today and would become a cornerstone of education in the future. Therefore, in educating and preparing pre-service teachers to educate future students, cooperating teachers were expected to be both capable of and attentive to the various needs of learners in the classroom. Much like knowledge of the curriculum, this theme was addressed as teaching as scholarship. Excellence around attention to differentiated instruction was seen to require cooperating teachers to examine their own knowledge and practice on the topic and to be able to articulate both strategies employed and the rationale for their inclusion.

An additional theme around indicators of excellence was that of diversity of assessment practices. Evidence of varied and appropriate assessment practices was seen to correlate with expertise as a teacher and involved knowledge of assessment from varied perspectives including division wide policy perspectives, student perspectives and parent perspectives through grading and reporting. It was expected that excellence in this theme would result in a cooperating teacher who was able to examine and comment upon growth and progress from those multiple perspectives. Finally, an attention to the triangulation of multiple data points as evidence of understanding assessment practices beyond the ability to discuss assessment was seen as pivotal to the successful mentoring of future teachers.

The final theme, and the theme to which much import was attached, was that of passion among cooperating teachers. In the context of this thematic analysis the emphasis was not placed on cooperating teachers being passionate about mentoring a pre-service teacher, although this was seen as important. It was on identifying an area of passion held by the potential cooperating teacher that



could be shared with the pre-service teacher. For example, a cooperating teacher could be passionate about interdisciplinary work in the teaching of their subject specialization such as teaching through the arts. The recognition of this passion would then allow for two particularly beneficial situations. First, cooperating teachers and pre-service teachers could potentially be matched using this passion as a base. Secondly, having articulated this passion, cooperating teachers would now be better equipped to articulate this teaching passion for the benefit of the pre-service teacher, presenting them with the opportunity to experiment in an area in which the cooperating teacher is comfortable and which excites all involved.

### 3.2 The reflective tool

The discussion around characteristics of excellence was followed by the development of a protocol designed to identify excellence in potential cooperating teachers. The reflective tool was designed as a rubric to be used by the administrative team in face-to-face meetings with potential cooperating teachers. While it made use of a number of differing headings and exemplars of excellence, it was in the changes that were made from working group session to working group session that themes became apparent. First, document analysis of changes to the reflective tool from one session to the next resulted in a desire to ensure the tool itself was non-evaluative. This was considered important for two reasons. First, the creation of the tool was undertaken in the hopes that it would act as a basis for on-going discussion between teacher and administrator on excellence in practice. It was felt that if it was seen as evaluative, potential cooperating teachers would be concerned about failure and this would quell all discussion in future. Also, as the school division in question, as part of a provincial mandate, has a teacher evaluation strategy, it would have been inappropriate for the school division to adopt a second evaluative tool. For this reason, a ranking system that was in evidence in the earliest drafts of the reflective tool was abandoned by the final meeting of the group.

Further to this, it was felt that the reflective tool ought to provide teachers with an opportunity for professional growth and development in conjunction with the discussion between teacher and administrator. This was one area in which the area of teaching passion identified by the potential cooperating teacher became particularly relevant. While the tool would allow teachers to identify their strengths and weaknesses in the characteristics noted above, they would also be encouraged to discuss that area of passion that pervaded their practice. This aspect of the reflective tool was seen to encourage professional inquiry and was designed to allow potential cooperating teachers the opportunity to articulate how their area of passion improved their practice and how this would then be of benefit to pre-service teachers.

Finally, the reflective tool was redesigned over a number of iterations to ensure that the process would not be too onerous for potential cooperating teachers. The working group made a number of changes in this regard, initially including a project to be undertaken by the teachers in evidence of their suitability, which was then revised and became a discussion around suitability with an appropriate school-based administrator in a non-evaluative context. This desire to ensure that the reflective process would not be seen as too time consuming or punitive in its requirements was two-fold. First, as evidenced by changes made to the requirements of the reflective tool, the working group hoped to encourage and not discourage teachers from becoming a mentor. The concern became that if the tool was too onerous, teachers would choose to contribute in ways other than pre-service teacher mentorship and that this professional obligation would be ignored. Second, the working group hoped to create a culture by which mentoring a pre-service teacher was seen as an act of school leadership and would, therefore, create a culture of teacher leadership in the school as a whole. To accomplish this it was felt that the teacher must be in control of the discussion surrounding the reflective tool and it would need to be viewed as developmental in nature.

### 4. Conclusion

In the creation of the reflective tool, the school division reported in this study undertook the challenge of addressing the fallacy of experience through development of a protocol to identify excellence in a non-evaluative and pro-active manner. While the reflective tool, at the time of this paper, has not yet been tested, it is anticipated that there will be both triumphs and challenges in its implementation. It is likely that the time involved on the part of school-based administrators will be seen as a challenge, highlighting the efficiency of the volunteer model currently in use. It is also likely, however, that the professional development and leadership opportunities presented by the use of the reflective tool will lead to increased feelings of preparedness for the role of cooperating teacher. This, along with the effectiveness of the reflective tool, will provide the basis for further research and be of interest to higher education institutions and school divisions looking to identify excellence.



## References

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