Searching for integrity in our research and practice

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Introduction

We are three teacher educators practicing self-study and reflecting on its value to our students while also exchanging our reflections with each other. As with artists who come together in schools of study in both individual and joint exploration, we hope that our collaborative inquiry will shed new light on our thinking and research in teacher education program reform efforts. Our intimacy and collaborative exchanges allowed us each to think more deeply about the personal as part of a community of self-study scholars.

We are at a critical point in our careers where we strive for ethical and moral integrity in our research to practice efforts as we reflect and study our own teaching to better serve as a role model to our students. For a decade we have redesigned our teacher education programs. Although we do not work in the same university, each of us has tried to develop our research agenda based on a certain set of beliefs. To what degree has our research made a difference in our students' learning? What challenges and changes are similar and dissimilar across our programs? Each of us is involved in teaching, administration, self-study, and the development of innovative programs. How have we changed our teaching to be congruent with the program goals?

Objectives

Given the nature of our programs, cohort based, we have a set of ideals as the framework for our program. To inquire into our beliefs and practices we focused on the following questions:

· What impact has our self-study research had on our practice?
· How have our beliefs shaped the goals and objectives of our programs?

Data sources

We engaged in email conversations. Although the range of topics was vast — our program, our daily events, how we refined our work over time — we each chose a specific area of our research agenda to examine. Our electronic forums were saved and analyzed.

1. Each of us responded to the questions in the Objectives section of this proposal.
2. Although this is group proposal each of us studied our programs independently. Kosnik studied the practicum, Freese studied the practicum and program effectiveness, and Samaras examined the connection between field courses and the practicum.

Clare's self-study
Context

I teach in a very large program, which is organized around cohorts of approximately 65 students. The cohorts have their own faculty team (two full-time and five part-time instructors) and distinctive program characteristics. Our program is called "Mid-Town" because of the location of our practicum schools just north of downtown in Toronto's multiracial, multiethnic urban core. The Mid-Town program has an explicit philosophy: an inquiry approach to teaching and learning; teachers as researchers; a close teacher-student relationship; an interactive, dialogical pedagogy; integration of academic learning with life learning; and a strong class community.

Research:

For the past five years I have done extensive research on our program. There is general agreement that the practicum is a key aspect of a teacher education program (Glickman & Bey, 1990; McIntyre, Bryrd, & Fox, 1996). Student teachers, associate teachers (also called cooperating or mentor teachers), and university faculty all recognize its crucial role. Given the high priority of the practicum we have systematically examined multiple aspects: the role of the associate teacher; the benefits/challenges of professors doing practicum supervision; the value of student developed action research projects; student learning during the practicum; and an examination of the internship We used a variety of research methods: interviewing 20+ associate

teachers and 50+ student teachers; involving student teachers as co-researchers; conducting surveys; making frequent school visits; and maintaining extensive field notes.

Findings:
This systematic research agenda led to a deeper understanding of the complexity of the practicum for all involved. Given my role as director of the program and faculty member in a specific cohort I have been able to influence practices at both the local and institutional levels.

Linking Theory and Practice
Consistent with the literature our students saw the practicum component of the program as the more important part of the program. Through innovative practices we have made progress in linking the two components: use of action research; gradually easing students into the placement; having students return to the university one day/week during the practicum for debriefing; involving associate teachers in our campus program (guest lectures, sitting on admissions' committees, having Liaison Committees, one rep from each practice teaching school). Clustering student teachers in a few schools allowed us to work with our associate teachers on ways to connect the two components of the program.

Workload guidelines
From our research it became apparent there was inconsistency in the amount of work assigned to each student. Some students were spending over five hours an evening preparing lessons and marking. With heavy teaching responsibilities they had little time to observe in the classroom. Working with our students and teachers we developed workload guidelines. This gave associate teachers a firm outline of appropriate teaching loads while providing students with a standard. When supervisors visited they could gauge the amount of work assigned to a student.

Student – Teacher Dialogue
The process for providing feedback and appropriate areas for comment were problematic. There is a fine line between too much feedback and not enough with each student having a different tolerance level and set of expectations. Working with students and associate teachers we developed an interim evaluation form (checklist in seven main categories) to be completed at the mid-point during the practicum.

The categories and points indicated the main areas for assessment; further the form could be used as a guide for the final evaluation. The student received formal feedback, helping some realize they were progressing while others were alerted to areas needing improvement. The scale for the checklist was focused on "developing as a student teacher" rather than being compared to a seasoned veteran.

Supervision of the Practicum
From my own experience and research I knew there was significant variance in the amount and quality of supervision. Our numerous studies revealed that students fully appreciated our support, saw us as a friendly face, and used us as a sounding board. However, we also learned that some supervisors were unsure how to supervise. In addition, many supervisors noted that it was not included in PTR/Merit Pay hence they saw little value for them personally or professionally. Associate teachers welcomed us into their classes and gladly engaged in discussion. In cases of a failing students, they too required support and assistance. These studies have resulted in numerous changes in supervision practice in our program and strengthened our school-university partnership. All faculty involved in the elementary preservice program (tenured, tenure stream, seconded, and contract) are required to supervise. A formula has been developed to assign supervision duties thus making loads equitable and manageable. Inservices for new practicum supervisors have been offered; a practice teaching supervision handbook is in development; and guidelines for supervision are in place.

Anne's self-study
Context
I teach in a two-year graduate program, which is cohorted, inquiry based, and includes extensive field based experiences within a professional development school context. Cohorts consist of 26 elementary and 26 secondary preservice teachers placed in four partnership schools. The goal of the Master's of Education in Teaching Program (MET) is to help students construct knowledge as they inquire, reflect and collaborate with peers, MET faculty, and mentor teachers in the field. The program is grounded in the belief that teacher development and learning require continuous reflection and professional inquiry into one's practices, and that learning is constructed by each individual based on one's experiences

and background (Dewey, 1933, Sergiovanni, 1994, 1996, Schon, 1989.) The MET Program goals and objectives are consistent with the recommendations of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) study which recommended that universities develop extended graduate level teacher preparation in the context of professional development schools (Darling-Hammond & Hunt, 1996).

Research

As a self-study teacher educator and program director I have initiated and directed systematic evaluation efforts and self study of the program. External and internal evaluations have been conducted on a regular basis. The most recent external review was conducted by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in 2001.

Summative evaluation of the MET graduates and mentor teachers has been systematically conducted via surveys, interviews and focus group discussions. In addition to the data from MET graduates and mentor teachers, principals who hired MET graduates were asked to evaluate the graduates' teaching performance via surveys and structured interviews. These ongoing external reviews have focused faculty efforts on continuous inquiry into our teaching and program effectiveness.

Findings:

Based on the extensive internal and external evaluations conducted on the program the following findings have emerged.

Theory to Practice Connections

Findings revealed that restructuring a traditional undergraduate teacher preparation program into a master's level program has required a major shift in thinking and teaching for professors, school partners and our students (Freese, McEwan, Bayer, Awaya & Marble, 1998.) The program consistently receives very high marks from the MET graduates and principals in terms of successfully linking theory with practice and preparing outstanding teachers. The MET principles of reflection, inquiry and collaboration are reflected in the graduates' beliefs about teaching, their teaching performance as beginning teachers, their innovative curriculum, their collaboration and leadership in the schools.

In contrast to the MET graduates' and principals' evaluation of the program, first year MET students often express dissatisfaction with the program's emphasis on inquiry, reflection and action research as opposed to learning "how to teach". In spite of efforts over the years to modify the curriculum, provide more structure and make the theory to practice links more explicit, the MET students often report that they do not see the connections until the second year (Freese, 2000). Since our findings have been consistent from cohort to cohort, it is believed that it generally takes two semesters in the program for students to make a shift from a traditional teaching approach to a constructivist one.

Faculty workload issues

External reviews revealed the time and labor-intensive nature of the program for faculty. MET faculty have a higher number of contact hours due to the intensive field-based and professional development responsibilities. Recruitment of faculty to teach in the program has been difficult because of the workload demands on faculty. Although there are guidelines requiring that all faculty in the teacher education department participate in field based programs, these guidelines have not been enforced. Consequently, the teaching loads and responsibilities are uneven. This past year, MET faculty have worked with the Dean to develop teaching guidelines for the program which are consistent across all programs in the College.

Governance structure

MET has a unique governance structure which is composed of university faculty, mentor teachers, principals and student representatives who meet monthly, and collaboratively make decisions (Freese et al., 1998). The Executive Council has played a crucial role in maintaining the integrity of the program. I have worked closely with the Executive Council to obtain their input and participation in identifying program needs and issues, such as expectations of mentor teachers and MET students, program modifications and selection of partnership schools. Burnout of participating schools due to hosting a large number of students (13) in each school for a number of years in a row has necessitated policies for school rotation in and out of the program. The Executive Council is a great example of one way the MET Program continually engages in self-study and formative evaluation. In addition, the Council helps to maintain and

strengthen the school university partnerships and active involvement of all university and school participants.

Anastasia's self-study
Context
My work context and role as Director of Teacher Education have provided me with an excellent platform for exploring the integrity of my research and teacher education program development. I work with early childhood and elementary preservice teachers in a deliberative and reflective teacher education program (Valli 1990). The CUA reflective teacher model structures the development of preservice teachers' personal decision-making and action in dynamic teaching situations. I reflected how that model could also be used by teacher educators and thus added the notion of self-study of teacher education practices for students and professors alike (Samaras, 2002).

Research
Program evaluations revealed that preservice teachers perceived the field experience as unconnected to their methods courses. This tension motivated me to think about how I could improve my teaching about planning. I went back to Vygotskian (1978) principles I learned during my doctoral work and discussed using a sociocultural stance with colleagues. First and foremost, I saw a need for more support from cooperating teachers and peers and formative assessment before the student teaching experience. It would be a critical point in my teaching and research and one where I would have a chance to act on my notions of a Vygotskian approach in preparing teachers and as it aligned with the CUA Reflective Teacher Model.

I worked with teacher education colleagues in designing creative pedagogical strategies towards knowing preservice teachers, situating their learning, structuring social mediation, and working within their multiple and overlapping learning zones. I conducted case studies of preservice teachers working as a pair with a cooperating teacher in the shared task of planning, implementing, and evaluating an interdisciplinary unit of study. I was concerned that students acquire content and pedagogical knowledge but researched if situating the coursework would provide a more purposeful and personal teaching experience. Research was also conducted to

investigate preservice teachers' understanding of the professional tool of planning in the restructured practicum connected to education course work.

Findings
Situated learning
Preservice teachers slowly entered a teaching community by working closely with a peer partner and alongside a cooperating teacher. The Vygotskian-designed program enabled preservice teachers to witness and experience theory into practice and talk about it with their peers, cooperating teachers, and professors. They expressed a sense of pride and ownership in their work while they learned the value of collegiality and the politics and realities of schooling (Samaras, 2000). In terms of planning, students shared their excitement in their ability to individualize planning and instruction for their students. They had opportunities to make curriculum decisions and see its impact on students' learning. Although they recognized that pedagogical and content knowledge are essential to teaching, they also experienced how peer collaboration and research enhanced it.

Partnership and ownership
Preservice teachers had opportunities to experience collective cognition as they constructed knowledge in partnership with others in coursework and fieldwork. With cognitive and emotional support from peers, they were able to witness and experience the ways that theory becomes practice. They solved problems with others and made public their reflections in their self-study of their teaching practices in journals, papers, exit conferences, and interviews. They expressed and sorted out their disappointments as they critically questioned practice. Intermittingly, I also conducted research on incorporating Vygotskian principles in my own interdisciplinary teaching effort (Samaras with Reed, 2000).

Feedback and free rein
Cooperating teachers played different roles while preservice teachers tried the practices advocated in coursework. The varying support systems that preservice teachers received from cooperating teachers indicated that preservice teachers cannot always rely on the support of cooperating teachers. Preservice teachers were most successful in implementing an interdisciplinary unit of instruction when the cooperating teacher provided structure while allowing them freedom

and the opportunity to claim ownership of their learning and teaching.

A professor's self-study

Interestingly enough, in my efforts towards bridging the disconnect between teacher education programs and the teacher's real work, I also conducted an autobiographical self-study of my use of Vygotskian principles for program development. At first I set out to merely describe how I used Vygotskian principles in program development and evaluation. I questioned why Vygotskian researchers had been remiss in including his work in teacher preparation and not only for children's learning. During the writing process and in parallel of my discussion of Vygotsky, I began to question my attraction to and incorporation of Vygotskian principles in the CUA teacher education program. What began as action research project evolved into a postmodern narrative inquiry where I became the knower and curriculum innovator with Vygotsky as my revolutionary companion. I continuously shared my work with my students and modeled that teaching is a lifelong process that is enhanced through collaboration and self-study. Finding this synergy was made possible through the methodology of self-study and the S-STEP SIG, which supported and surrounded me in this against-the-grain research direction.

Conclusions

Two key questions remain. Have we improved our teacher education programs? And what impact has our self-study research had on our practice? In response to the first question the answer is a qualified yes and no. Our understanding of the sheer complexity of the teacher education has deepened yet we still struggle with weak students, difficult associate teachers, reluctant colleagues, and an institution that does not value the time- intensive nature of our program. We now have greater frustration and limited patience with others who are following practices that we know are harmful or inappropriate. With new students, new associate teachers, and new principals we are in a continuous state of (re)educating those involved. Yet we know that many of our processes in fact support student teacher's learning. Our research has given us confidence to participate in discussions on policy issues, with data to support our position we have a strong voice at the "table." In response to the second question, what impact has our self-study research had on our practice,

we now see our work as ongoing: from our research we improve our understanding; implement new processes; study the effect of these innovations; learn from each others' teacher reform efforts.

Although we were each working in separate institutions our collaborative efforts were important. We realized that each of us faces similar challenges as teacher educators, researchers, and program directors. There are certain tensions within teacher education such as the theory-practice divide which is a constant. Our collaboration provided support, offered each of us a safe space to reveal our challenges, afforded us other perspectives, and allowed us to float new ideas/suggestions.

In keeping with true action research our work is a continuous spiral of self-study. We see now that many of our problems are not unique to our contexts or geographical boundaries. There is, for whatever reason, much tension for our students as they grapple in making theory to practice connections. Each of us discovered that the field component is invaluable to their learning, albeit wrought with problems of quality supervision, adequate feedback, workload, and school politics. Perhaps our greatest finding in this collaborative self-study is that we have found each other. We have had rich intellectual dialogue through email over much time and great distances. Our discussions helped us sort out the dilemmas that confronted us and will no doubt brace us for the challenges yet ahead. Our students watch us and recognize that we are self-study teacher educators still trying to improve our practice and teacher education.

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