Survival Kit or Lessons for Life? Future Directions for Preservice Teacher Education from the Perceptions of Newer Teachers

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Abstract

Recent literature, supported by a survey of secondary school teachers in southwestern Ontario, Canada, indicates that preservice teacher education does not adequately prepare graduating teacher candidates to thrive in a profession that is ironically, driven by change. Attempts at reform have focused on the basic aspects of the typical preservice program: foundations, curriculum methods and field experience. The results have been decidedly discouraging. Positive improvement will hinge both on a recognition by teacher-education institutions, of the inevitable compromise between short-term necessity and long-term vision, and on their willingness to implement, carefully and constructively, promising innovations such as action research and centers of pedagogy.

Background

In 1993 the prominent educational change theorist, Michael Fullan, was asked by an interviewer from Education Forum, a magazine published by the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation, “how will graduates from faculties of education help us with change?” At the time, such graduates were having great difficulty in finding employment in their field, let alone changing it, but the question was interesting for the angle it took on the often-discussed issue of educational reform. “We have a pool of persons with great potential, but I don’t think we are doing enough about getting their careers started well,” Fullan replied; “teachers individually and in combination should be the change agents of the future” (see Wright, 1993:17). These, the final words of the interview, presented an intriguing question. How well does preservice teacher education prepare graduating teacher candidates for a field (and a world) dominated by change?

Judging from recent literature on the subject, the answer is ‘not very well’ (Kagan, 1992). Birch and Elliott (1993: 366) even argue on the basis of their survey of relevant research studies, that “existing teacher education programs have worked to maintain the status quo”. Far from producing highly-trained, self-
confident change agents, the preservice experience actually serves an apprentice-
ship function that socializes new teachers into the existing cultural norms and
practices of an essentially conservative profession. Although bridging the gap
between theory and practice has long been a goal of faculties and colleges of
education, Mandzuk (1995: 389) recently pointed out that “it is as elusive today
as it has been in the past”. The need to provide student teachers with a survival
kit for the short term, invariably clashes with the need to equip them with the
attitudes, skills and conceptual knowledge that might produce critical-thinking,
action-researching innovators in the long run.

This dilemma is not peculiar to North America. Basing their conclusions on
the findings of research into the attitudes of Australian teachers towards change,
Churchill and Williamson (1997) have noted a similar degree of frustration with
teacher education in that part of the world. In their view, preservice teacher
training programs should reflect a much broader conception of teachers’ work.
They conclude that “many teachers feel unprepared, unwilling or unskilled in and
for the roles they occupy in their responses to change initiatives and directives”
(1997:13). A recent Green Paper on teacher training in New Zealand targeted the
same dichotomy, noting that ideally “pre-service teacher education should equip
beginning teachers with the skills and knowledge to begin teaching as well as to
lay the foundations for life-long learning” (Government of New Zealand, 1997:
4). It seems that a theoretical consensus has begun to emerge with regards to the
inadequacy of teacher-education programs in preparing teachers for change.

The Study
This paper draws on selected findings from a larger study that sought information
from teachers of nine secondary schools in southwestern Ontario, regarding the
impact of significant change on their work lives. The participating schools
represented a mix of urban, suburban and small-town settings, drawn from both
Public and Catholic School Boards. The Ontario study was itself a part of a major
international investigation developed by the Consortium for Cross Cultural
Research in Education, a group centred at the University of Michigan, with
collaborating scholars in several other countries, including Canada, the United
Kingdom, Australia and Israel (Poppelton and Williamson, in press). In Ontario,
the research team supplemented the semi-structured interviews common to all
countries participating in the investigation, with a survey questionnaire. In all,
130 two-page questionnaires were completed, as well as 45 one-hour teacher
interviews, during a two-year period from 1994 to 1996. The overall results of
the survey questionnaire concerning the impact of change on the teaching
profession are reported elsewhere (see Glassford, 1997).

For the purposes of this article, we shall focus on the in-depth interviews, and
in particular, on those teachers within the larger study who had up to ten years
experience in the field. While five years’ experience is frequently used to
demarcate neophyte teachers from experienced ones, we were anxious to broaden
the sample to include a full decade’s range of recollections, if any, of the impact
of preservice education. Furthermore, in Ontario, most board contracts cut off the
salary bonus for ‘progress through the ranks’ at ten years, and so this seemed like
a reasonable cut off point for defining ‘newer’ teachers. The responses of this sub-group (12 interviewees) have been carefully sifted for indications of particular successes or failures, in dealing with change that might be traced to their initial preservice education programs. Ultimately, we were interested to know if anything in their preservice experience had prepared them for coping with, adapting to, implementing and/or managing significant educational change, whether that change was a new policy intentionally implemented across an entire school system, or a social change with dramatic collateral impact upon education, or something in between.

An examination of the personal interviews conducted with newer members of the profession does offer some interesting insights. These interviews were 45-60 minutes in duration, and consisted of 12 in-depth questions. Responses were recorded by the interviewer on a standard question and response sheet. Answers were read back to each interviewee, to ensure accuracy. The particular educational change identified by the participating teacher as the most significant in the past five years, became the focal point for subsequent questions in the interview.

Findings

Among the questions in the in-depth interview was one which asked, “what were the things that impeded you in your efforts to implement the change?” The dozen respondents with 10 or fewer years experience, listed fairly standard hindrances to change such as organizational inertia, lack of direction, inadequate resources, insufficient time and, resistance from parents, students and colleagues - generally the same factors cited by the more experienced teachers in the survey. Half of the twelve interviewees felt negative toward the specific change they cited as an example upon which to base the interview, while the other half felt positive.

Another question asked the respondents to mention “the things that helped you implement the change”. Most commonly cited was help from fellow teachers, followed by specific professional development or inservice initiatives, such as training workshops and background resource materials. Notably, not a single respondent mentioned the beneficial impact of their preservice teacher education, although one participating teacher did cite an inservice course from the local Faculty of Education as “very helpful.” The twelve interviewees being looked at here had been in the field from three to ten years, so it is not surprising that references to the B.Ed. program are not overwhelming. Still, the total absence of such comments should be cause for concern. Their preservice training was apparently irrelevant to these newer teachers in their struggles to implement or cope with a significant educational change affecting their students and their own work lives.

Several questions elicited information from the interviewees concerning the nature of their encounter with change. Many of the problems mentioned were not surprising: heightened levels of stress, increased demands on already scarce time, frustration at the lack of consultation from higher-ups, and divisions within the teaching staff between those who embraced a change, and those who resisted it. However, several of these same teachers mentioned ancillary benefits of the
change process. “It has made me a better teacher,” said one, in discussing the implementation of new evaluation guidelines. Another referred to a “positive anxiety” associated with the change experience. A third teacher cited staff unification “from meeting similar challenges,” while acknowledging that there was still “lots of complaining.” A fourth interviewee pointed out that the scarcity of time was an encouragement to “work smarter, not harder” by for example, being “more pro-active with parents.” A fifth respondent cited “more consultation with colleagues” and “improved political sensitivity in dealing with senior administration” as beneficial side-effects of implementing a controversial government-mandated change called Transition Years. “It encouraged me to be a better decision-maker and risk-taker,” said this seventh-year teacher. In a similar vein, another respondent credited the generally negative encounter with change for helping to discern “how assertive I should be.”

Near the end of the interview, each participating teacher was encouraged to reflect on the lessons learned from their recent experience with the change process. Many of the comments point to a continuing failure by policy-makers and senior administrators to take seriously the collected advice about change implementation assembled by experts in the field such as Michael Fullan, whose widely-cited book, *The Meaning of Educational Change* (1982), was based upon a comprehensive review of research studies over several decades, and has been available for many years. For example, a teacher with 9 years’ experience stated, “as a professional, I feel that I should be part of the process of change, [but] few teachers are consulted.” “If a change is to take place,” said a 10-year veteran, “you need to ‘pilot’ it.” “We need to speak up,” said a third teacher, also with 10 years’ experience. “Lots of work has gone in,” explained a third-year teacher, who confessed to feeling “somewhat negative” about the implementation of change, “but we’ve seen no feedback or direction from input.” This latter comment may offer some perspective on the next observation, from a teacher in a different school. “It is surprising that so many people feel negative about the process of change,” said this survivor of seven years in teaching, “and about means of learning how to implement new ideas.” Another teacher, a ten-year veteran whose overall experience of change was “positive,” acknowledged the necessity of finding people “willing to be open to the changes,” but went on to confess that “at times you are overwhelmed by change.”

Finally, what can be learned from the following offhand comment made by one of the participants? Upon reflection, this 9-year teacher stated that it was “more difficult to implement new changes.” At first glance, the expression ‘new changes’ seems like a simple example of word redundancy. Surely change is, by definition, new. But perhaps it was not a redundancy. Some change ideas have been around for a long time. Never fully implemented, frequently recycled as familiar elixir in shiny new containers, sometimes removed from one shelf only to be placed on another, such ‘innovations’ at least have the virtue of familiarity. The benefits and drawbacks of implementation are reasonably predictable. ‘New’change, however, is more frightening. Teachers are thrust into unfamiliar territory with little preparation or support, and yet held accountable for the success of the change as well as the continuing welfare and progress of their
students. Little wonder then, that many of them echo the cautious sentiment of ‘Garth,’ a Generation X character in the popular movie, *Wayne’s World,* who admitted that, “we fear change.”

What does it all mean? Newer teachers in the profession may be somewhat more open to change than their seniors, whether due to naivete, training or the exuberance of youth. At the same time, they are unable to point to any specific aspect of their Bachelor of Education program that helped prepare them for a rapidly changing profession and world. They have already learned through the school of hard knocks what researchers have known for some time, but what policy-makers and senior administrators all too often seem not to know, namely, that the successful implementation of change requires the informed consent, trained support and dedicated participation of the front-line implementers - in this case, the classroom teachers. Any meaningful changes to student outcomes must begin here. Yet these same teachers too seldom receive encouragement in the field to become the reflective change agents who are able to lead educational systems to meaningful reform. As Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991:353) forcefully state, “reform is badly needed, yet people’s experience with change is overwhelmingly negative - imposition is the norm, costs outweigh benefits, (and) the few successes are short-lived”.

**Implications for Preservice Programs**

Change and its sibling, continuity, have always been the siamese twins of human experience. This is not news. Without continuity, one could not recognize change; without change, continuity would be a superfluous word. Our species has always lived in a world of change, made bearable by the comforting rhythm of continuity. Each new day is connected to both the past and the future. The seasons come and go in a more or less predictable pattern. Each life is unique, but the flow of that life still follows the ‘many parts’ articulated by the Shakespearean character, Jacques, in the famous soliloquy, “All the world’s a stage,” from *As You Like I.* What is new about change in the overall picture as we enter the next millennium, is its rapid pace. Three decades ago, Alvin Toffler coined a phrase, “future shock,” to describe the syndrome that would face human beings as they moved into an era of accelerating change (1970). Now, we are living in that age. What preservice teacher education must do then, is, to prepare the next generation of teachers not just to survive, but to thrive in a world of rapid change.

Thriving in such a world implies much more than simply embracing each change as it comes along. Change and progress are not synonymous. Some change ideas may be bad - wasteful, flawed, perhaps even dangerous. Yet, frequently, they are marketed with all the vigour and skill one would wish, is reserved for genuinely good innovations - the ones that will improve the teaching-learning dynamic, lessen wasteful effort, and maximize positive outcomes for students. The well-prepared beginning teacher then, must be able to think clearly, critically and contextually, placing new or apparently new ideas about education in a broader historical and sociological perspective. Recognizing ‘improvement’ necessitates a familiarity both with what was and is, and also with
what might or should be. Furthermore, it implies the ability to move between the theoretical world of exciting ideas and noble ideals, on the one hand, and the practical world of crowded classrooms, antiquated learning materials, late-night marking sessions, rewarding but fatiguing extra-curricular supervision, confusing curriculum guidelines and contradictory community expectations, on the other.

The key question becomes how to improve preservice teacher education programs to better serve teacher candidates and their future students not just in the short term, but more importantly, over a full teaching career.

The discussion might begin with a re-consideration of who gets accepted into teacher education. Most programs in the Western world place primary emphasis on academic achievement with other factors such as experience profile, personal interview and designated-minority inclusion receiving some consideration in the overall picture. Regardless of the relative emphasis of the latter factors at particular institutions, the major common element is an insistence upon acceptable grades. Given that preservice curricula loads already seem crowded, and given that adding another year to them may not be financially feasible for either students or governments, such programs may have to consider establishing more course prerequisites prior to admission. Certainly, there is support for the notion that “a sound liberal education” (Birch and Elliott, 1993) is a necessary foundation for the kind of adaptable, morally secure, critical-thinking instructor we seek for our schools. For example, a recent Quebec governmental document on teacher training had this to say on the subject: “the autonomy and responsibility that characterize teachers’ work require that their training allow them to acquire a broad, general education, to develop a critical mind and to contribute to the advancement of research” (Gouvernement du Quebec, 1992:15). This implies a thorough exposure to history, as well as a broad cross-section of social sciences and humanities (Lucas, 1997). An in-depth understanding of the human condition and an orientation to inquiry are just as vital as literacy, numeracy or computer skills for would-be teachers.

Once in a preservice program, aspiring teachers have a continuing need for such liberal arts instruction, now more focused on the professional field they hope to enter. Frequently referred to as the foundation courses, these subjects should continue to encompass the history, philosophy, politics, economics, sociology and psychology of education. In recent years, many Canadian institutions have succumbed to a well-meaning trend towards emphasizing the short-term and practical over the long-term and conceptual (Taylor and Miller, 1985). This may be unavoidable in programs that deliberately emphasize hands-on classroom experience virtually to the exclusion of other perspectives, but it also guarantees that most graduates will not have a developed base for ongoing reflection that could link practice to its conceptual roots. Based on his extensive research into teacher education programs in the United States, Goodlad (1994) has observed that:

many of the students we interviewed, whether undergraduate or postbaccalaureate, were ill-prepared to discuss issues pertaining to the larger political, economic, and social context of schooling. They had limited vocabulary and intellectual tools for addressing education as a
moral endeavor - and yet most educational decisions are ultimately moral in nature (p. 185).

While few would wish to send unprepared teacher candidates into the ‘real world’ of today’s classrooms simply because of an undue bias toward ivory-tower theory, neither is it advisable to focus the entire teacher education program on teacher tips and practitioner proverbs, leavened by a superficial exposure to the latest trendy models and panaceas. The key is to find the appropriate balance between the ‘warm’ and the ‘demanding’ conditions set out by Roberts and Clifton (1995) as indicators of effective instruction. Novice teachers require both a ‘survival kit’ of classroom techniques, and a solid foundation of enduring big-picture ideas, theories and models which will permit them to connect the challenges and frustrations of their own teaching experiences, to the main currents of educational thought. The ‘survival kit’ supports novice teachers in the short run; the enduring ideas should ensure that they continue to think hard about what they are doing, and why they are doing it, all the way to retirement.

The same principles apply in both the curriculum methods courses and the teaching practicum, the two other mainstays of conventional teacher education programs. Student teachers mindful of what faces them in their immediate future, want the practical teaching techniques that will enable them to survive practice teaching, get a job offer, and then earn a permanent contract. As Goodlad (1994:165) noted of the teacher candidates he observed, “the closer they were to taking over their own classrooms, the more they wanted what could be used next week”. In the medium to long-term however, they will need the broader base which exposure to the history and theory of curriculum and instruction will afford them, if they are to maximize their potential as positive change agents. Yet, as Geddis and Onslow (1997:19) reiterate, “neither academics nor practitioners focus much attention on how theory might inform practice”. Perhaps it is a step in the right direction simply to acknowledge the inherent tension between theory and practice, between ‘now’ and ‘later,’ and to resolve that student teachers will continue to be exposed to both short-term and long-term perspectives in curriculum and methods courses in something like an equal balance. There can be little doubt that later in-service training in various aspects of the teaching craft, will be more successful if there is a strong preservice base from which to work.

In the recent past, much of the emphasis on integrating theory with practice has focused on practice teaching, however this hands-on experience is structured in particular institutions. The results have been decidedly discouraging, in part because of the typically hectic atmosphere in the host schools. As Birch and Elliott (1993:372) point out, “time for reflection, opportunities for peer observations, and encouragement of experimentation do not normally characterize the school”. One might even argue that placement in a school characterized by calm and placid teachers, pioneering novel approaches in a reflective yet experimental atmosphere, nurtured by a supportive administration with input from selflessly dedicated parent volunteers, would fail the reality test. What graduate could ever hope to teach in such a shangri-la? Why prepare for utopia, when the jobs are elsewhere?
The dilemma goes beyond the model-school debate, however. Many have argued that the real purpose of the entire preservice program is, quite frankly, to socialize prospective teachers to the existing norms and values of an established profession. Indeed, as Taylor and Miller (1985:118) assert, the student teaching experience “serves to introduce and initiate the prospective teacher into the conventional wisdom”. This is not all bad; consider the alternative. They might simply be turned loose in conventional ignorance. Nevertheless, if positive change is the goal, then a rigid adherence to the status quo is a barrier to be overcome. One should however, not underestimate the difficulties inherent in such an endeavour. As Hargreaves (1984) notes:

this culture of teaching, with its privileging of classroom experience, presents such an historically entrenched obstacle to educational innovation that any policy of simple exhortation to teachers to draw on and accept wider experience and perspectives is unlikely to prove effective (p.252).

Again, within conventional preservice programs, it may be that the best one can hope for is to establish a framework of reflective practice that might endure the hurly burly of the first few years of new teachers’ careers. Once initial survival in the profession is more or less assured, there might be a base for ongoing constructive teacher development of the sort advocated by Fullan and Hargreaves (1992). Beginning teachers must at least see and, occasionally experience a vision of the ideal or else why would they expend scarce time and energy later in their careers in pursuit of fundamental changes to the ways that they serve their students? Entrenched sub-cultures the world over, have proven remarkably persistent over the past century, impressively resistant to rationally based top-down reform efforts. The established sub-culture of professional teaching in Canada and elsewhere, is no less conservative, no less entrenched in school staffrooms and professional associations. Yet, that is where real change must take place if it is to endure. The seeds of positive reform must be planted during the preservice experience otherwise later watering and fertilization will do no good.

Guidelines for Policy and Practice
The external climate for ‘big’ changes in teacher education is not propitious. For example, a movement in the early 1990s to add a second year to the consecutive Bachelor of Education programs in Ontario fell victim to the cost-cutting priorities of a new provincial government. Lengthening either the consecutive or concurrent programs across Canada by a year would not, of itself, represent radical change in any event. It could provide time to deliver a fuller exposure to the foundations and curriculum methods of education. It could provide more time for in-school apprenticeship training, sometimes referred to as mentoring. While lengthening the program could well be a positive development, and in keeping with the tone of this paper’s recommendations, it is just as likely to be simply more of the same. Where then, is the genuinely new that is also going to be genuinely better than what we have? For example, throwing student teachers into the schools for an extended period before they take their foundation and theory
courses simply sets them adrift in a sea of conventional wisdom without a compass. Not much prospect for progressive change there, but a lot of reinvented wheels perhaps. Yet, keeping them from being tainted by the imperfect reality of actual schools until they have been pumped chock full of theories, models and paradigm shifts, simply ensures that relatively few will find real jobs, fewer will keep them, and those few will mostly resent and belittle their ‘useless teacher ed.’ training. Inevitably, one seems driven back to the imperfect compromises built into most current preservice programs.

There are a couple of promising leads. Goodlad (1994) has urged the establishment of “centers of pedagogy,” purposely new and close partnerships of education colleges and faculties with selected elementary and secondary schools, loosely based on the medical-school model of close ties between the university and so-called teaching hospitals. Educational renewal, in his view, requires the creation of a radically new setting for teacher education, deliberately distanced from the university proper, and built upon an innovative culture of inquiry into, instruction about, and service to teaching. Just as faculties of education can lose touch with the real world of classroom instruction, so too can elementary and secondary schools become immersed in the mundane details of institutional existence, thus losing sight of long-term goals for improvement. An intentional school-university partnership built around the education and field-training of new teachers could benefit both institutional partners, while providing a greatly improved practicum experience for the apprenticing teacher candidates. Instead of simply being sent “out there” (Goodlad, 1994) to gain some experience in the trenches, student-teachers would be carefully placed in partner schools - exemplary sites where novices could learn their craft under the guidance of expert practitioners with close links to the faculty instructors. With one foot still in the academic environment of the university, and one firmly placed in progressive but still realistic school surroundings, the center of pedagogy might be able to bridge the seeming chasm of practice and theory, of survival now versus growth later. It will require great fortitude however, on the part of deans of education to successfully re-direct some of the attention of their faculties, schools and colleges, away from the research-and-funding morass of the typical university, and into fruitful partnerships with forward-thinking area schools and school boards.

Drawing upon the work of Lieberman (1995), Sheppard and Brown have urged the formation of action research teams within schools, aided by ‘critical friends’ from an associated faculty of education, as the key to school improvement (1998). There is no doubt that student teachers enrolled in a lengthened preservice program might well be attached to such an ‘action research team’ as part of an enriched field placement. Action research could prove to be the key to deepening the value of the standard practicum as well since it is precisely designed to combine the practicality of real-world improvement in the hands of the actual practitioners, with due attention to rigorous research methods. We are not referring here to the sub-category of action research associated with the work of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), in which the over-riding goal appears to be a peaceful, nevertheless radical revolution that would begin in the
schools and transform society into an egalitarian social and economic order. Rather, we are referring to the “rational-interactive dynamic” model of action research proposed by McKernan (1996) in which each school becomes a potential laboratory for empirical testing of teacher-generated, classroom-driven hypotheses about improvement. Seeing the teacher as also the primary researcher has profound implications for many aspects of pedagogy, but for none more than the process of teacher education itself. Action research has by now progressed far beyond the soft, self-absorbed, reflective-journal exercises that turned off many a novice teacher in the past. The methodology is still simple, direct and pragmatic, but at the same time constructed within parameters that lend themselves to tangible evaluation of results. Building on the work of John Dewey, the team of Taba and Noel (1962) outlined a six-stage process that still retains its validity: identifying problems, analyzing problems, formulating hypotheses for improvement, gathering and interpreting data, implementing ideas through action, and evaluating the results of the action. In the words of McKernan (1996: 5) “first, action research is rigorous, systematic inquiry through scientific procedures; and second, participants have critical-reflective ownership of the process and the results”. The inclusion of an action-research experience within the preservice program, whether as part of a collaborative school-based team or as an individual initiative arising out of the student-teaching component, would provide for every beginning educator a concrete encounter with educational innovation. Investigators who have observed and taken part in this type of practitioner-based inquiry agree that “action research is primarily concerned with change, being grounded in the idea that development and innovation are an essential part of professional practice” (Altrichter, Posch and Somekh, 1993: 201).

These two ideas - redesigned centers of pedagogy, and action research experiences - are not revolutionary but, they are promising. They are also not mutually exclusive. Taken together, they might add crucial elements to teacher education that would better prepare graduates for the world of change they are sure to meet in their professional careers. Perhaps then, some future survey of teachers’ perceptions of change in their work lives, will turn up at least a few individuals able to connect their successful adaptation to innovation with specific and helpful aspects of their preservice experience.

**References**


