

Reports from the Field

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Collaborating with Teachers in the Selection of Teacher Education Candidates: One experience

Abstract

In recent years faculties of education in the province of Ontario have been inundated with applications for admission. One faculty has responded by giving more careful attention to its criteria for admission and its selection procedures. In this paper is described the collaborative work of the University of Ottawa and the Ontario Teachers Federation in the development of the criteria and selection procedures of applicants to a B.Ed. program.

Résumé

Depuis quelques années, les facultés des sciences de l'éducation de l'Ontario sont littéralement submergées de demandes d'admission. L'une d'entre elles a réagi en réexaminant attentivement ses critères d'admission et ses modalités de sélection. L'auteur de cet article décrit la collaboration qui s'est instaurée entre l'Université d'Ottawa et la Fédération des enseignants et enseignantes de l'Ontario pour fixer les critères et les modalités de sélection des candidats à un programme de B.Ed.

Until recently Ontario admissions requirements for teacher education received scant attention. Over the last few years faculties of education in the province have been inundated with applications for relatively few places. A

career in education is attractive to many people in Canada. It offers relatively high social status, attractive benefits, and salaries up to \$65,000. In recent years the media have focused attention on the critical shortage of qualified teachers. Therefore a need has developed to examine admissions criteria and processes for selection of candidates. It is the purpose of this paper to describe how the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa and the Ontario Teachers Federation (OTF) collaborated in this area.

Admissions criteria and concomitant selection processes are employed to select candidates who demonstrate the potential to be successful at a task (Applegate, 1987; Watts, 1982). The need for effective criteria and procedures in the selection of teacher education candidates is obvious (Benner, George, & Cagle, 1987). Moreover, faculties of education need to apply admissions criteria and procedures which provide reasonable confidence that those who are selected will be able to perform the multidimensional role of a teacher (Applegate, 1987; Benner *et al.*, 1987; Freeman, Martin, Brousseau, & West, 1989; Lamén & Reeves, 1983; Schalock, 1979; and Watts, 1982).

Much of the literature on admission into teacher education programs is from the United States and focuses on selection criteria. The most common admission categories are grade point average (GPA), a basic skills test (reading, writing, and math), letters of recommendation, a personal interview, and work experience with children/adolescents (Ishler, 1984; Lamén & Reeves, 1983; Watts, 1982). It seems that in some American institutions teacher education candidates' academic standing is not high. However, a lower GPA is compensated for by extensive experience with children/adolescents. Teacher Education applicants usually gain experience with children/adolescents through camp counselling, teaching assistantships, Sunday school, and other activities involving individuals and groups of people, and it is regarded as important (Book, Byers, & Freeman, 1983; Book & Freeman, 1986).

The process employed by faculties of education to assess the suitability of applicants has received far less attention than the criteria. It would appear that some programs in the United States follow the general admissions requirements of the particular university, thereby applying a single criterion: GPA. Other institutions use a combination of the aforementioned criteria. Benner *et al.* (1987) describe a process at the University of Tennessee whereby the GPA score, a written statement, and an interview are considered.

Selection Criteria for Teacher Education Admissions

In the province of Ontario, faculties of education at seven universities (Brock University, Lakehead University, Queen's University, Nipissing University, University of Toronto, University of Western Ontario, and York University) were surveyed by telephone. Four of the seven faculties use procedures involving academic standing and experience. Nipissing and Lakehead have admission on academic standing alone. York is the only faculty that uses a procedure that includes academic standing, experience, and an interview.

The academic standing of an applicant is usually assessed by calculating the GPA. Registrar/admissions office staff in all universities perform this function. However, there is some variation on how transcripts are assessed, e.g., best 15 courses, best 20 courses, type of courses, up-grading courses, and extra points for honours courses and graduate degrees. Each faculty in Ontario has a different method of assessing the GPA of an applicant.

Only five of the seven faculties surveyed include experience in the admission criteria. Of these five faculties three have definite, stated criteria (Brock, Toronto, York). One university has no stated criteria (Western) and the other has flexible criteria (Queen's). Of the three universities with definite, stated criteria, two show preference for actual teaching experiences in schools and the other places equal value in life experiences and school-based experiences. In most cases the criteria were developed by university personnel (registrar officers and professors). In three universities the experience of applicants is assessed by a dyad (a professor and an educator) who each give a score. The forms are usually read on a single Saturday or over the course of an entire weekend. At York University experience is assessed by the registrar's office, and at Brock University a committee (registrar office and professors) assess the experience of applicants.

In only a few universities in the province of Ontario are practising teachers (not administrators or consultants) involved in the assessment of applicants' files. The role of teachers (and not always practising classroom teachers) is confined to the assessment of the experience portion of the application. However, if a stronger link between characteristics of candidates and successful teaching is to be forged, practising teachers need to be involved more fully in all phases of the process (Schwartz, 1986; Watts,

1982; Wilson & Mitchell, 1986). Therefore, it is the purpose of this paper to explain the procedures for assessing applicant files and to describe the active involvement of members of the Ontario Teachers Federation (OTF) in all phases of the selection process at the University of Ottawa.

The Advisory Committee on Admissions

Candidates are admitted into the Teacher Education program at the University of Ottawa on the basis of their academic standing and experience. Both components are weighed equally. The academic score is calculated by officers in the admissions office. Over the years, the "Statement of Experience" (SE) forms have been assessed by professors, active and/or retired. However, given the dramatic increase in the number of applicants for the B.Ed. program, it was felt by faculty that professors would not be able to cope with the daunting task of assessing thousands of files. It was decided, therefore, to strike an advisory committee on admissions to review the format of the SE form and to develop a strategy for the assessment of the experience component of approximately 4300 applications.

The Advisory Committee on Admissions first met in the spring of 1990. Membership included superintendents from four local boards of education, the Ontario Teachers Federation representative, an admissions officer, a B.Ed. student, and four faculty members. This committee functioned in an advisory capacity, reporting to the Teacher Education section of the Faculty of Education. All policy decisions, however, were ultimately made by the Executive Committee of the Faculty of Education, and approved by Faculty Council.

Review of the "Statement of Experience" form

The first task of the Committee was to review the SE form. It was decided by members of the Committee that the previous form was rather narrowly focused, with too much emphasis on scholarly activities and remunerated teaching experiences. It was agreed that a new form should be developed to assess the following: (1) motives for becoming a teacher, (2) life and work experiences relevant to teaching, (3) presence of personal qualities related to effective teaching, and (4) competency in the English language.

Essentially, applicants were asked to state why they wanted to become a teacher, to describe their important life and school-based experiences, and to explain how their previous experience related to teaching. Applicants were also required to ensure that a referee signed the SE form to attest to the authenticity of the experiences described.

A subcommittee consisting of two faculty members and the OTF representative was struck to develop criteria to be applied to the assessment of the SE forms. Faculty members reviewed the literature on characteristics of successful teachers. The OTF representative discussed this issue with practising teachers. Subcommittee members later met to discuss their respective lists of characteristics. Interestingly, the lists of characteristics developed independently by each of the three members showed remarkable consistency. By combining the lists, a set of criteria which embodied theory and practice was developed for use in the assessment of experience. The final list of characteristics was categorized as follows: organizational skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills, flexibility, and creativity/initiative/leadership.

The Saturday sessions

The second task was to develop a method for the assessment of the SE forms. The Advisory Committee on Admissions made a decision to involve practising teachers. It was felt that 300 teachers would be required to accomplish the exercise (about 100 per session). Teachers were recruited by OTF to work on three Saturdays in February and March 1991. Each session lasted about seven hours including breaks for coffee and lunch. A superintendent booked the cafeteria of a local high school. OTF members organized the triads which were pre-arranged to ensure elementary, secondary, and gender representation. The Faculty was responsible for typing and photocopying the assessment criteria sheet and forms to record scores. The admissions officer transported files, recording forms, and supplies. The OTF representative and faculty members jointly selected the catering firm. Media coverage, which occurred on the second Saturday, was directed by the OTF representative.

At the beginning of each Saturday session the OTF representative welcomed the teachers and provided a brief in-service orientation on holistic marking and the criteria for assessment. Other members of the Committee were present to ensure that each triad had adequate supplies (pens, criteria sheets, and score-recording sheets). Faculty also monitored the process and provided assistance to teachers. Triads were given packets of about 35 forms. These forms were stapled so that the applicant's name was not visible. Forms were identified only by a student number. Each member of the triad read each form in the packet. Teachers then assessed the submissions according to the given criteria and gave them a score of one through 10. Up to two marks were deducted for a poor quality submission (i.e., in terms of grammar, spelling, sentence structure, clarity, and organization). For scores less than nine, teachers wrote brief comments indicating in which categories of the criteria the applicant was weak. These comments were later used by the admissions officer when debriefing unsuccessful

applicants. Scores and comments were written on the back of the form. When members of the triad had read all the forms in the packet, the chairperson recorded on the score-recording sheet the three scores and any comments for each applicant. Most teachers completed the task of assessing their packet of forms by mid-afternoon.

As has been shown, members of the Committee shared the tasks related to organizing the Saturday sessions. Considerable time was spent working jointly on the more tedious organizational aspects, such as the system of recording scores. It was felt that these elements needed to be planned thoroughly to provide for an efficient implementation of procedures on each of the three Saturdays, and to ensure that the scores and comments recorded by teachers were easily accessed and understood by admissions office staff. Time devoted to discussing these details was well spent in terms of developing a cooperative work spirit and trouble-free implementation of this initiative.

The follow-up

After each Saturday session admissions officers completed the files. For each applicant the three experience scores were averaged and combined with the academic score to calculate a total score. The applicants were then ranked according to their total scores. In early April acceptance letters were sent to successful candidates. Most successful candidates had an experience score of approximately 9.5/10 and an academic score of about 8.0/10.

In mid-April a reception was held for participating teachers. The atrium of the board office, which served as the site for the Saturday sessions, was the chosen location. Again the OTF representative and faculty members jointly organized the reception, and invitations were sent to teachers through OTF affiliates.

The funds made available for this initiative were \$4500, and this project was completed slightly under budget. Catering and reprography constituted the two major expenses.

Evaluation of This Initiative

At the end of each Saturday session teachers were invited to complete an evaluation form in which they rated, on a scale of one to five, the physical arrangements, selection process, and organization of the day. For each category respondents were able to write comments and suggestions.

Respondents rated the physical arrangements as satisfactory ($X = 3.67$), but commented on the temperature and seating in a negative way.

Teachers also rated the selection process as satisfactory ($X = 3.67$). The comments suggest that teachers initially felt uneasy about holistic marking. However, as teachers implemented it, they felt more confident in their abilities to assess the forms holistically. Finally, teachers showed a high level of satisfaction with the organization of the sessions ($X = 4.30$).

The results also reflected an overwhelming satisfaction in participating in the sessions. The following comments of four participants serve as typical statements in support of this initiative:

It's great to see the university accepting input from teachers. Thanks.

This is a great idea—I appreciate being asked to participate in the process of selection!

It was sobering to read the applications of people interested in teaching. It was a privilege to be involved, and I strongly support the involvement of practitioners in the selection of preservice candidates.

Great learning experience.

In sum, teachers through their participation and comments showed an appreciation of being involved in the selection of candidates for the B.Ed. program. Some educators participated on all three Saturdays. The results suggest that teachers are eager to work with the Faculty of Education in this area and welcome further involvement.

Conclusions

The success of this initiative, relating to procedures for the admission of candidates into the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa, was due largely to the cooperative efforts of the various stakeholders. Although members of the Advisory Committee on Admissions represented different constituents, they were committed to working harmoniously to improve the process for selection of candidates. It should be added that the Faculty welcomed the opportunity to plan cooperatively and valued the suggestions made by other members of the Committee, particularly the OTF. At no time did the Faculty feel that the OTF or boards of education were exercising too much influence in an area that could be described as Faculty of Education "turf". In fact, their active involvement was appreciated, especially in operationalizing the Saturday sessions.

There were some obvious benefits to this initiative. The first was improved two-way communication between the Faculty and the other mem-

bers of the group, in particular OTF. A high level of trust has been established among all members, who are eager to work together again.

A second benefit was the excellent public relations for the Faculty of Education. Teachers now have a better understanding of the admission procedures and support them. It should be added that the OTF representative, who had received training in media relations, issued press releases. She also orchestrated the coverage by a local television station, highlighting the involvement of teachers in the selection of B.Ed. candidates. The result was a very positive media presentation, which benefited the Faculty of Education, as well as teachers in general.

Finally, it is anticipated that the 300 candidates at the University of Ottawa will be among the most carefully selected in any B.Ed. program. The majority of 300 accepted-candidates have very strong academic backgrounds and extensive experience with children/adolescents and adults that is deemed relevant to teaching by practitioners. These characteristics will undoubtedly serve as an excellent base for their year of teacher education and their careers as teachers. It is felt that by working together, faculty and practising teachers have made significant progress in identifying and applying criteria and procedures for the selection of teacher education candidates that are linked to desired teaching performance.

The work of this committee fully exemplifies that genuine collaboration amongst divergent stakeholders is possible. Moreover, this type of committee structure shows promise as a model for the development and implementation of initiatives involving other faculties of education and teachers.

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