

COMMENTARY

**PRACTICUM: INTEGRAL TO THE
NEWLY REVISED INITIAL TEACHER
TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR QUEBEC**

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ABSTRACT. Once relegated to a somewhat peripheral place in the education of beginning professionals, the practicum has recently been elevated to its proper central role in a coordinated, collaborative initial teacher training program. The practicum is the one professional feature that establishes the culture of the profession and must be the "glue" that binds the education of educators.

RÉSUMÉ. Auparavant relégué à un rôle assez secondaire dans la formation des nouveaux enseignants, le stage pratique a récemment été réintégré à la place de premier plan qu'il doit occuper dans tout programme de formation des maîtres coordonné et concerté. Le stage pratique est l'élément professionnel qui fonde la culture de la profession; il doit jouer dans la formation des éducateurs le rôle d'un "liant".

Notwithstanding Professor Kelebay's negative view of the practicum, as expressed in his article "Is the Practicum Practical?" (MJE, Fall 1993), the newly revised initial teacher training programs from the *Ministère de l'Education du Québec* (MEQ) (1) clearly demonstrate that the practicum is not only alive and well but has been elevated to a central pivotal position within the newly constituted four-year education degree program.

The practicum is an essential element. . . since it offers student teachers a first contact with the reality of the classroom. It gives them an opportunity to reflect on the different teaching practices and to become familiar with all of the educational duties carried out by a school staff, it ensures that their training will be comprehensive, well-rounded and rewarding. (MEQ, 1994a, p. 1)

Effective September 1995, all candidates wishing to become elementary and/or secondary school teachers in the Province of Quebec must successfully complete a four-year (120 credit) university-level degree

program following CEGEP (2). Within this four-year program, and occupying a central place within the overall program structure, is a revitalized and lengthened field experience component. While each university will be able to offer a program with its own peculiarities, all initial teacher training programs must be approved by the MEQ for certification purposes and must follow the central tenets as laid down by the various ministerial regulations. Some of the main features of this new collaborative relationship may be summarized as follows:

Since teacher training is professional training, the practicum must comprise a minimum of 700 hours distributed over the entire university program but mainly concentrated in the last year. (p. 4)

In addition, the practicum must give future teachers an opportunity to work with as wide a variety of students as those they will later meet in their teacher careers. (p. 4)

By entering into a clearly defined partnership with the school system, the university and those responsible for teacher training therein can offer student teachers a stimulating and enriching practice teaching experience. (p. 5)

Cooperating teachers are directly involved in the training of student teachers and for this reason play a special role in practicum supervision. They possess the knowledge and expertise necessary to guide student teachers in the gradual acquisition of teaching skills and in the development of a professional code of ethics. They are therefore key collaborators with the university in the teacher training process. (p. 9)

One of the results of various research projects aimed at improving the practical training of teachers has been the development of a special type of cooperating school where the coordination and supervision of practicums provides a basis for other joint ventures in the areas of experimentation, research, and professional development. (p. 13)

In a recent devastating critique of the "Teach for America" program and, by implication all such "quick-fix" short initial teacher training programs, Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond (1994) clearly documented the many and serious professional shortcomings of this kind of "emergency" program. One of the major weaknesses, as noted by Darling-Hammond, concerned both the lack of any kind of meaningful practicum as well as the dearth of appropriate supervision for the small amount of student teaching that was evident in some minor measure. Professor Kelebay is quite correct to note that more of the same is not necessarily an improvement and, further, that a simple extension of the time spent in schools is in and of itself not a significant indicator of meaningful

growth on the part of the student teacher. However, this new program, as detailed by the MEQ, makes the practicum experience central to the training process and does not relegate this vital on-site component to some peripheral sphere where its core coordinating role can be minimized.

A decade ago, in its famous clarion wake-up call for a new direction for American education, the authors of *A Nation at Risk* (1984) noted that "persons preparing to teach should be required to meet high educational standards, to demonstrate an aptitude for teaching, and to demonstrate competence in an academic discipline" (p. 30). A few years later, the Holmes Group, in *Tomorrow's Teachers* (1986), reiterated many of the same concerns as noted in *A Nation at Risk* but did provide a touch more detail as to how some of these proposed massive interventions might occur.

During the induction year, students are required to successfully complete a half-time teaching internship. . . . As a necessary part of successful master's study in teaching, the intern teachers must be judged by the academic and clinical faculty as exemplifying both the qualities and ethical character befitting a career teacher, and the teaching performance appropriate for a novice teacher. (p. 93)

It is interesting to note that both of these important studies speak volumes in regard to increasing academic subject matter standards. Perhaps echoing the almost half-century call from an eminent British educator, both of these studies decry what to them is the sorry state of elementary and secondary teachers' course matter knowledge. Gilbert Highet (1950) did indeed note a truism in that all teachers "must know the subject" (p. 19) but as was also noted in both of the American tomes but, unfortunately, not emphasized enough, is that subject matter knowledge without the appropriate supporting pedagogy is a proven recipe for failure. An overall reading of these two stellar reports indicates that a teacher must possess both a solid knowledge of the subjects that s/he teaches as well as have a proven school-based clinical experience that shows that s/he can deal effectively with the reality of the modern and ever changing elementary and secondary school classroom.

More recently, John Goodlad, in *Teachers for Our Nation's Schools* (1990), has chronicled a series of investigations related to the way that beginning teachers are taught and inducted into the profession. Goodlad has shown that there are a myriad of programs available and an equal number of ways in which student teaching or field experience is placed within the overall training program.

Visiting interviewers did not talk long with a faculty group about student teaching without stimulating discussion of the old issues: How much student teaching is desirable? Should it be broken into two or more short sessions or span an entire quarter or semester? Should it be offered with or without an accompanying integrative seminar? How are future . . . teachers to get a concentrated block of time without the disruption of returning to campus for the remaining required courses in a major? How do we include all of the requirements, including those for the baccalaureate, in just four years. . . .(p. 204)

Even more recently, Goodlad, in *Educational Renewal* (1994), has suggested that

. . . programs for the education of educators must assure for each candidate the availability of a wide array of laboratory settings for simulation, observation, hands-on experiences and exemplary schools for intercepts and residencies; they must admit no more students to their programs than can be assured these quality experiences. (p. 89)

In more detail later on in the same volume (pages 157-194), Goodlad indicates that this "internship" is of some import, as he notes:

The sixth curricular component embracing a two-semester or three-quarter post-baccalaureate year, immerses each candidate for extended periods in two rather different partner schools in quite different settings. (p. 170)

Goodlad is not only suggesting that the practicum become an integral component of the initial training of teachers, but he further suggests that universities should only admit the number of education candidates that correspond to the realistic number of "exemplary" student teaching placements that are available. In other words, the practicum experience will determine how many students are initially accepted into the program as well as becoming the central vehicle for modeling the various behaviors necessary for the beginning teachers to experience.

Over the last thirty years or so, the teacher training programs at McGill University, as representative of similar change in all of the other Quebec institutions, have undergone steady change. In the early 1960s, for example, one could become an elementary teacher in Quebec via a six-month (two term) program following secondary school. In the early 1970s, one could still become an elementary teacher via a six-month program following CEGEP. It was only in the mid-1970s that the provincial regulations were enforced whereby new teachers had to have a minimum of first degree status, including thirty credits in an approved education program. More recently (the early 1980s), the elementary

and secondary post-baccalaureate diploma programs were increased from thirty credits over two terms to forty-five credits over three terms in recognition of the changing complexity of the public school classroom. Over these three decades of teacher-training change, the practicum has also changed from a relatively minor in-school experience under the total control of the education instructors from the university to a much more collaborative on-site endeavour that bridges the gap between the universities' classes and the hard reality of the classroom. Likewise, in university credit value the practicum has blossomed from a non-credit, non-graded notation on a student's transcript to a fully recognized and credited "course" that carries the same weight and responsibility as the other components of the education initial teacher training program. Finally, after about four years of various public and professional consultations, the MEQ has introduced this expanded and extended regime in order to prepare public elementary and secondary school teachers for the beginning of the twenty-first century. At the heart of this new professional scheme is an expanded vital and necessary field experience component that provides absolutely essential practical experience for the beginning educational professional.

NOTES

1. The MEQ has issued three separate publications that, taken together, describe the new initial teacher training regime. All three publications are listed in the bibliography and may be ordered free of charge directly from the MEQ.
2. CEGEPS are publicly funded "junior colleges" that offer two-year pre-university programs and three-year career programs [e.g., nursing] following secondary school.

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