

A Comparative Examination of Teacher Candidates' Professional Practicum Experiences in Two Program Models

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Abstract. This paper reports on one aspect of a larger study, examining the relationship between teacher candidates' self-reports of knowledge and confidence related to many key areas of professional practice. Survey information was provided by concurrent and consecutive bachelor of education students. Perceptions of professional gains through the practicum were examined. Students who are studying education through a concurrent program feel that they have acquired significantly more professional background about teaching through practicum experiences than students acquiring a comparable degree through a consecutive route. As the practical applied knowledge that students acquire through practicum experiences is essential for teacher development, this finding is relevant, especially as each of these programs is undergoing structural changes as a reflection of new provincial directions about teacher education. The results of this study demonstrate that the amount and placement over time of practicum provided in a teacher's pre-service program matters to the level of professional expertise they feel that they have acquired overall.

Keywords: practicum, consecutive education programs, concurrent education programs.

Introduction

This paper reports on a study regarding whether or not pre-service teacher candidates feel knowledgeable and confident in the acquisition of skills they need to teach in their own classrooms at the completion of their respective teacher preparation programs. The study contrasted responses from teacher candidates who completed their teacher preparation programs in different models. One group graduated through an eight month program, involving 13 weeks of classroom practicum time; the second group graduated with a 5 year concurrent education degree, including 19 weeks of classroom practicum. The focus of this study is on teacher candidates' perceptions of what is gained through practicum experiences in the classroom. We investigated how effective

in some tasks new teachers perceive themselves to be as a direct result of what they have learned through practicum experiences.

Background

Theories may provide the knowledge that teacher candidates require to work effectively with students in the classroom. However, without opportunities to apply these theories to practice during practicum time, candidates may lack the necessary confidence to address new contexts with equal effectiveness, and they may lack the pedagogical content knowledge to determine strategy efficacy as they encounter new situations early in their career. Practicum time in a teacher education program is typically designed as a professional internship of short duration, strategically placed in the teacher candidates' professional program. The practicum allows the teacher candidate to try out ideas that they have learned in courses in the context of a classroom where a certified teacher can act as a mentor for them.

However, not all teacher preparation programs provide the same amount of classroom practicum experience for teacher candidates. In the jurisdiction where this study took place, teacher candidates are required by their accreditation body to acquire a minimum of 12 weeks of successful practicum experience. Success in the practicum is assessed by the professional judgment of the mentor teacher, who is referred to as an associate teacher (AT) in this jurisdiction. In this study, however, two paths to acquiring the professional teacher accreditation are examined in relation to the perceived impact of the practicum on knowledge and confidence of the new teacher. Students acquiring their accreditation through a consecutive program route in this jurisdiction engage in 13 weeks of practicum (i.e., one week more than required by the local accreditation body), while those who acquire their accreditation through the concurrent program route acquire 19 weeks of practicum (i.e., 7 weeks more than required by the local accreditation body). Additionally, the 19 practicum weeks in the concurrent program are distributed across the 5 years of the program, while the 13 weeks of the consecutive degree route are spread across 8 months.

While we acknowledge that the quality of the practicum experience each teacher candidate may experience can be vastly different due to many circumstances, our study focuses solely on examining perceptions related to how the length and placement of the experience may have an instructional impact. As teacher candidates, prospective teachers enter the professional arena through practicum experiences; however, they are often unequally exposed to many learning opportunities (Beck, Kosnik & Rowsell, 2007). It is logical to assume that more time in a practicum context would allow more exposure to a greater variety of learning opportunities. Many of the learning opportunities that a pre-service teacher candidate may have during any practicum may be wholly dependent on the skills and resources of the teachers to whom they are assigned for their practicum. Additional practicum time may allow new teachers to have otherwise unavailable exposure to strategies utilized by experienced teachers, and they may lack contextualized opportunities to apply their course-based knowledge in contexts that would allow the teacher candidate to develop

confidence in their ability to use these strategies if they have little or no time to see them in operation and to adapt theoretical ideas to pragmatic contexts. Therefore, the current study provides us with a benchmark of current reports of knowledge and confidence acquired through practicum experiences on which to base program design decisions for this aspect of teacher preparation.

Additionally, in the jurisdiction where this study is taking place, the government has recently made significant changes to accreditation criteria, which will come into effect in fall of 2015. In response to the demands for new program designs in the accreditation program for teacher certification in this jurisdiction, many accrediting institutions are considering the elimination of the concurrent program route and retaining the single option of a 2-year consecutive program. This study may shed some light on the efficacy of this decision as it relates to decreased opportunities for longer program embedded practica.

Teacher preparation programs include a combination of course work in a university setting, and internship style practicum placements in classroom settings. In the jurisdiction where this study was completed, practicum placements are arranged in any of 52 school boards in the province. Teacher candidates are able to identify any three of these school boards as areas where they might ultimately apply for a teaching position. Then, program placement officers approach school boards to arrange the number of placements required in their area. Usually, school boards have employees who are then responsible for placing the teacher candidate in a specific classroom for a specific placement block.

As this university offers two routes to the completion of the same bachelor of education (B.Ed.) degree, with two approaches to the placement and differences in the total amount of time provided for the practicum, we identified the need to compare teacher candidates' perceptions of the relative value of these differences in providing them with the skills and strategies needed to support their developing professional skills to prepare to be successful with the role of teacher. The skills that were identified for this aspect of the larger study were selected because, while some theory for each skill can be provided in the context of their courses, each skill could reasonably be expected to develop more fully if teacher candidates had contextualized opportunities in schools to use these skills and to consider the impact of their practices in relation to the outcomes they achieved.

Six skills were identified by researchers in this category of professional practice. They include: the ability to manage a classroom; the knowledge and confidence to interact with parents; the knowledge and confidence to interact with school and board administrators; the ability to manage difficult student behaviours; the ability to deal with difficult situations; and the knowledge and confidence to address the learning needs of all children.

Literature Review

During the past 15 years there has been a considerable amount of intensive investigation into the value and learning afforded to teacher candidates whose professional preparation program provides opportunities for them to hone their theoretical course knowledge by participating in classroom placements, usually referred to as practicum experiences, or collectively as practica. While we were able to find many studies related to the perceived value of teacher practicum experiences, there seems to be an absence in the professional literature regarding investigations of the relative perceived value of different approaches to providing the practicum experience and the perceived value of different amounts of practicum experience. It seems reasonable to assume that more time in a classroom practicum placement is likely to provide more opportunities for the teacher candidate to gain a wider variety of professional skills, but there is a dearth of literature about existing programs to support this contention.

Much of the existing research literature about teacher practicum placements addresses perceptions of how effective this experience is as a contributor to the overall professional preparation of a new teacher. A study by Brouwer & Korthagen (2005) confirmed the role of the practicum in the overall development of competent teachers. While both classroom theory and practicum experiences were found to be contributors to a new teacher's development, the practicum in a school context was more influential than the course components of the teacher education program on the development of teaching competence. However, the nature of the practicum has also been found to matter when teacher competency are the desired outcome. In a study by Beck, Kosnik, and Rowsell (2007), researchers identified the need for more focus in the practicum on practical issues related to the daily tasks of functioning in a classroom. In this study, teacher candidates identified six characteristics or skills needed to be provided and developed in their preparation programs to prepare them to teach, including: theoretical understanding, practical knowledge and skills, comprehensive program planning ability, knowledge of what must be done in the first few weeks of school, understanding and skill in assessment and evaluation, and knowledge of how to implement effective group work. It is interesting to note that five of these six characteristics relate to implementation practices that might be expected to develop in teacher candidates during their practicum placements, even though the participants in the study also identified the need to have theoretical understanding.

It seems clear from this study that prospective teachers recognize and value the theoretical aspects of the preparation program to help them understand what they should do, but they value the practical experiences of the practicum to show them how and when to do these things. The Brouwer and Korthagen (2005) study also demonstrated that by gradually increasing student teaching activity complexity, by increasing cooperation among students (triads of student teachers), cooperating teachers, and university supervisors, and by alternating between student teaching and college (in-class) sessions, teacher education programs allowed student teachers to relate theory and practice. This need for balance between the course theory and the practicum experiences is supported

by the research of Ng, Nicholas, and Williams (2010). This research revealed that pre-service teacher beliefs may also be influenced by placement experiences, suggesting that placements may be an important factor in shaping beliefs about teaching and teaching efficacy. Also, this study argued that teacher education programs should strive to improve pre-service teachers' teaching efficacy, since efficacy leads to improvements in teaching ability.

Schultz (2005) provides support for the concept of day-to-day problem solving capacity development through practicum learning. The study highlighted the need for teacher preparation to support new teacher inquiry to help teacher candidates use problem solving approaches when they face the day-to-day challenges in a classroom.

However, other research shows that the type of school where a practicum takes place influences the learning that a teacher candidate acquires from the practicum. Results of a study by Ronfeldt (2012) demonstrated that teachers who had field placements at easier-to-staff schools were more capable of improving students' test scores and also more likely to remain teaching in challenging city schools during their first five teaching years. Thus, according to the results of this study, teacher education programs should consider assigning pre-service teachers to field placements at easier-to-staff schools. This study also emphasized the importance of identifying what and how pre-service teachers learn at easier-to-staff schools. The authors argued that it may be that these schools have many characteristics of overall effective schools where good teaching and learning flourish, such as high quality administration and support, professional staff relations and collegiality, and more experienced teachers (Ronfeldt, 2012). It seems logical that exposure to such contexts would influence a teacher candidate's learning about how to teach well.

The research literature about practicum experiences is also very clear about two other key findings. First, the structure of a practicum matters to what can be learned from it. Second, but far from less important, is the nature of the relationship between the teacher candidate and the classroom teacher who hosts their practicum placement is critically important to how successful that placement will ultimately be, as measured by the teacher candidate's perceptions of their learning in a classroom context.

In the context of this study, practicum placements have some provincially mandated expectations about the amount of placement required for certification. However, there is no requirement outside of that minimum time that identifies how or where a placement is structured. Therefore, teacher candidates may be in a position to take advantage of opportunities that have been shown to have considerable professional learning value. For example, in a study by Bryan and Sprague (1997), teacher candidates reported their perceptions of the value of having practicum opportunities to teach in a foreign country. First, the placement was helpful with respect to initial hiring by helping teacher candidates to obtain a teaching job and to improve the experience of initial teaching interviews. Second, retention was positively affected by the foreign

country placement, as demonstrated by the 80% retention rate compared to the 50% retention rate characteristic of typical populations of new teachers. Third, attitudes toward pupils were improved by the placements in foreign countries, in that students reported developing more respect for individual differences among students. Fourth, practicum experiences in foreign countries improved attitudes regarding second languages. Teacher candidates' appreciation for and patience with speakers of second languages increased. Fifth, overseas experiences increased curriculum choices, as teacher candidates were able to use curriculum units they had previously used overseas. Sixth, overseas experiences increased teaching flexibility, since teacher candidates often had to create interesting lessons with limited materials. Seventh, overseas experiences increased the variety of teaching strategies used by teacher candidates, since they had to learn to understand different learning styles and adapt their teaching to them (Bryan & Sprague, 1997).

The perceptions that these foreign experiences helped teacher candidates manage learning for a diverse group of learners is related to the present study's investigation of perceptions of the ability to manage classrooms, manage difficult behaviours, deal with difficult situations, and address the learning needs of all children. Similar perceived advantages of foreign practicum placements are also evident in several other studies (Grierson & Denton, 2013; Maynes et al., 2012; 2013). The Grierson study documents how participating in an international practicum in rural Kenya supported the development of global perspectives in Canadian teacher candidates. Through analysis of data gathered through a post-practicum focus group, individual interviews, and written reflections, the participants demonstrated how they came to recognize the significant assets of those who live in this developing country, in lieu of perceiving their differences as deficits. Relating their insights to the literature reveals how their experiences have prepared these teacher candidates to provide global education and to differentiate instruction in response to the needs, interests, and background experiences of diverse student populations. The findings of this study provide support for international field experiences that include cultural immersion and collaborative reflection, and document how the provision of this practicum in association with the Canadian NGO Free the Children provided these opportunities and had the potential to increase participants' teaching confidence and competence. Since both sets of participants in the present study had opportunities to participate in international practica, their skill sets and personal perceptions of knowledge and confidence may have been influenced by these professional experiences, as well as by the timing and focus of other practica.

Another structural variation in a teacher candidate's professional practicum experience that has been found to have a strong impact on professional preparation is participation in practicum experiences with a peer. In a 2003 study that compared teacher candidates' perceptions of practicum experiences when they were alone in the classroom practicum, with a second group who were partnered with a peer in the same classroom, they found that teacher candidates preferred the pairing situation for its perceived advantages to their

learning (Bullough et al., 2003). In the paired context, teacher candidates reported more opportunities and experience with creating lessons that were more innovative; improved classroom management; and the paired participants felt that the students in their classrooms learned more material and learned it more quickly. When the pairing is done between a more advanced teacher candidate (i.e., in a later year of a multi-year preparation program) and a teacher candidate newer to the professional preparation context (Grierson et al., 2011) the newer teacher candidates report positive learning through the pairing and mentoring which they received from more experienced teacher candidates when they participated in a paired practicum peer mentorship program. The majority of these participants perceived the mentorship program enhanced their confidence and professional growth, although some challenges were also acknowledged. Clearly pairing teacher candidates in their practicum, for different purposes, has perceived learning advantages for the participants.

The nature of the relationship between the teacher candidate and the classroom teacher who hosts their practicum placement has been found to be critically important to the perception of the teacher candidate about how valuable their placement has been to their professional preparation to teach. A study by Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell (2006) attempted to identify central principles that can be used to create teacher education programs and practices that address teacher candidates' and teacher educators' expectations, needs, and practices accruing from a teacher preparation program. By analyzing three pre-service teacher education programs (one from each of The Netherlands, Canada, and Australia), the researchers identified seven principles of practice for teacher candidate learning and for guiding change and improvement in teacher education programs. The seven principles identify requirements for enhancing the process of learning about teaching. These seven principles include the perceptions that: learning about teaching involves continuous conflict and competition among various demands; knowledge about how to teach should be perceived as a subject that is yet to be created, rather than as an already created subject; learning about teaching means that the teacher's focus must be on the learner, not the curriculum; teacher candidate research enhances learning about teaching and teacher candidates can guide their own professional development by conducting research on their own teaching practice; learning about teaching requires that those learning to teach work closely with peers, in horizontal, not vertical relationships; meaningful relationships must exist among the schools, universities, and teacher candidates to promote learning about teaching; and, to enhance learning about teaching, teacher educators should model the teaching and learning approaches used in the teacher education program in their own practice. All of the principles are based on learning from experience.

It is interesting to note that at least five of these seven principles of an effective teacher education program can only be developed fully within the context of a successful practicum component of the program. Furthermore, the researchers note that the principles are interconnected, and improvements to all of them consecutively will be the most effective approach to create programs that address the expectations, needs and practices most suitable for both the new

teachers and their students. The principles reflect three major program (change) components: perceptions of knowledge and learning that guide teacher educator practices, program structure and specific practices, and staff and organization quality (Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006). Each of these principles also connects to the nature of the practicum and to its role in extending the theoretical learning of a course into the situated learning of practice in the classroom.

Other studies that highlight the critical nature of the relationship between the hosting teacher in the classroom and the teacher candidate help to identify the specific behaviours that support successful practicum experiences. Beck and Kosnik (2002) identify seven components of the relationship between the classroom teacher (often referred to as the associate teacher or AT) and the teacher candidate including: the provision of emotional support by the AT; having a peer relationship characterized by mutual respect (as opposed to a supervisory one) with the AT; opportunities for ongoing collaboration with the AT in planning but independence in teaching a lesson; room to be flexible with the content and the methods they use to teach; feedback from the AT; opportunities to observe good teaching by the AT; and a demanding but not excessive workload while the teacher candidate is on a practicum placement. This study highlights the complexities and the necessity of providing opportunities for teacher candidates to develop their skills to interact productively with other professionals and to deal with difficult situations in a school context. It does not, however, address how such skills are developed in teacher candidates.

The need for the development of such positive relationships is supported by the work of Evelein, Korthagen, and Brekelmans (2008) in another study which found that new teachers have much lower measures of need fulfillment in the early stages of their careers than more experienced teachers. This difference might be attributed to more skill, and therefore more success, in dealing with day-to-day interactions that form the basis of classroom implementation. This study is supported by the work of Ferrier-Kerr (2009) who found that the professional relationships between the AT and the teacher candidates are based on several factors, including: personal connections; interpretation or understanding of respective roles (of the AT and the teacher candidate), the AT's style of supervision; and, engagement in reflective practice.

Grundoff (2011) studied first year teachers' perceptions of how their practicum experiences helped them prepare for early career teaching. Findings supported the importance of the practicum in developing contextualized skills of the profession but found that some practicum features supported skill development while other features hindered development. Participants in this qualitative study found that the practicum had many differences from the reality of actually teaching in their own classrooms. Differences that facilitated the transition of a teacher candidate into the role of teacher included feeling like they were part of the school community once they were teachers; they felt respected by other

teachers and by students. They also valued having time to develop relationships with the children. They enjoyed the increased sense of autonomy.

However, they also found some differences between the practicum and their professional teaching roles that they felt had hindered their transition into their professional teaching roles. Differences that hindered the transition included a feeling of shock and anxiety upon beginning to teach due to a discrepancy between expectations and reality, which mostly had an impact on teachers for their first few weeks of teaching. Participants' transition was disrupted in two areas due to the mismatch. First, new teachers did not have a clear understanding of what they had to do at the beginning of the year. Second, new teachers did not recognize the size and scope of teaching. Practicum placements were limited to practicing and developing skills within the context of the classroom. As new teachers, they were overwhelmed by their responsibilities outside of the classroom. As a result, student teachers underestimated the range and amount of work, and were frequently tired as new teachers.

Findings suggested that teacher preparation programs should include a practicum at the beginning of the year so that student teachers can experience what needs to be done firsthand. Also, the authors argued that practicum roles, relationships, and sites should be re-evaluated. Specifically three key recommendations resulted from this study, including: practicum should be viewed as an opportunity for collaboration so classroom teachers should have a larger role in teacher education programs, and schools rather than classrooms should be recognized as placement sites. By providing teacher candidates with a school-situated practicum, the candidates can gain exposure to a variety of teaching styles and also have embedded opportunities to experience the out-of-classroom aspects of this professional role during practicum times. Furthermore, the authors of the study reported that, with this structure governing practice teaching, teacher candidates could experience more interaction with administrators by being required to attend meetings and perhaps participate in more interaction with parents.

Each of these prior research studies informed the selection of questions we used to structure the current study. While the current body of literature about the importance, nature, location, relationships, and structure of the practicum as a component of a teacher preparation program has been examined, the comparative perceptions of these characteristics across programs routes toward a B.Ed. degree in the local jurisdiction does not appear to have been studied.

Method

Participants. Participants in this study were from both the consecutive and the concurrent programs at three campuses from one Northern Ontario University, during the 2011-2012 academic year. A total of 212 respondents (25 males, 186 females, 1 gender not reported) completed the survey and were included in the study. Respondents' ages ranged between 18 and 58 years old ($M = 23.18$, $SD = 4.91$). Respondents were completing or had completed a consecutive teacher

preparation program ($n = 81$) or were completing or had completed a concurrent teacher preparation program ($n = 131$).

Demographic data were collected to identify the details of each respondent's program route and the stage of completion of their teacher preparation. Of the 131 concurrent education respondents, 31 were in the final year or recently graduated from their teacher education program. Twenty-one respondents had previously graduated. Only data from those students completing the final year of their B.Ed. degree or recently having completed this degree were included in this aspect of the study.

Research Questions. Therefore, the 2 key questions for this aspect of the larger study are: 1. Do the additional 6 weeks of practicum experience make a perceived difference in the level of knowledge and confidence of the teacher candidate?; and 2) Do student teachers perceive that the distribution across time, of the practicum experiences, influences their knowledge and confidence as teachers?

Measures. *Demographics.* Several types of demographic data were collected in this survey to support comparisons across groups. Data about age, gender (0 = male, 1 = female), the participants' current status in the education program (i.e., concurrent or consecutive program; their year of graduation from consecutive or concurrent), were collected for descriptive information and to allow investigation of relationships between demographics and dependent variables.

Knowledge and Confidence. A total of 6 questions developed by the researchers was used to assess teaching knowledge and confidence which participants attributed to having related practicum experiences. Each of the 6 questions focused on pre-service teachers' perceptions of how the practicum may have helped them develop abilities to address common classroom tasks.

Questions were responded to on a 5 point scale from 0 = *definitely not* to 4 = *definitely*. The 6 questions were summed to obtain an overall total score that could range between 0 and 30; higher scores indicated the perception that more knowledge and confidence was gained from the practicum experience. Internal consistency was calculated for the following six items related to the question "How well do you think your practicum placements have prepared you to": manage a classroom, interact with parents, interact with administrators, manage difficult behaviours, deal with difficult situations, and address the learning needs of all children? Cronbach's alpha demonstrated the measure (6 questions) to be highly consistent ($\alpha = .89$).

Procedure. An invitation to participate in a comprehensive study of pre-service teachers' confidence and knowledge was posted on an existing Facebook group designed to promote professional support amongst teacher candidates. A brief description of the purpose of the study was provided. This site included a link to the participant information letter. Those who were interested in the study as

potential participants followed the link to the information sheet which provided all information necessary for informed consent.

Potential participants could agree to continue or could exit the program, after reading the introductory letter and examining the informed consent form. Completion of the questionnaire indicated each respondent's agreement to participate in the study. One reminder of the opportunity to participate in the survey research was posted on the Facebook site approximately one month after the study was first advertised. Data collection was completed over a two month period. Completion of the entire questionnaire required approximately 15 minutes. Only those questions related to perceptions of the value of learning as a direct result of the practicum experiences were analysed for this subcomponent of the larger knowledge and confidence study.

Results

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare participants from the consecutive and concurrent education programs on their average responses to each of the six survey questions.

For the question, "How well do you think your practicum placements have prepared you to manage a classroom?" results demonstrated significant differences between consecutive and concurrent program participants, $t(207) = -2.018$, $p = 0.045$, with concurrent program participants ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.89$) scoring, on average, higher than consecutive program participants ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.82$).

For the question, "How well do you think your practicum placements have prepared you to interact with parents?" results did not demonstrate significant differences between consecutive and concurrent program participants, $t(206) = -0.568$, $p = 0.571$, with concurrent program participants ($M = 1.45$, $SD = 1.30$) scoring comparably to the consecutive program participants ($M = 1.35$, $SD = 1.24$).

For the question, "How well do you think your practicum placements have prepared you to interact with administrators?" results did not demonstrate significant differences between consecutive and concurrent program participants, $t(207) = -1.429$, $p = 0.154$, with concurrent program participants ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.24$) scoring comparably to the consecutive program participants ($M = 1.95$, $SD = 1.25$).

For the question, "How well do you think your practicum placements have prepared you to manage difficult behaviours?" results demonstrated significant differences between consecutive and concurrent program participants, $t(207) = -2.205$, $p = 0.029$, with concurrent program participants ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.06$) scoring, on average, higher than consecutive program participants ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 0.98$).

For the question, "How well do you think your practicum placements have prepared you to deal with difficult situations?" results demonstrated significant differences between consecutive and concurrent program participants, $t(207) = -2.265$, $p = 0.025$, with concurrent program participants ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.08$) scoring, on average, higher than consecutive program participants ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.08$).

For the question, "How well do you think your practicum placements have prepared you to address the learning needs of all children?" results demonstrated significant differences between consecutive and concurrent program participants, $t(207) = -2.489$, $p = 0.014$, with concurrent program participants ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.81$) scoring, on average, higher than consecutive program participants ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 0.93$).

These results are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparison of Concurrent and Consecutive Education Program Participants' Responses to the Individual Items Related to the Question: How well do you think your practicum placements have prepared you to:

	Education Program				t
	Concurrent		Consecutive		
	M	SD	M	SD	
How well do you think your practicum placements have prepared you to:					
manage a classroom? 2.018*	3.30	0.89	3.05	0.82	-
interact with parents? 0.568	1.45	1.30	1.35	1.24	-
interact with administrators? 1.429	2.20	1.24	1.95	1.25	-
manage difficult behaviours? 2.205*	2.98	1.06	2.65	0.98	-
deal with difficult situations? 2.265*	2.80	1.08	2.46	1.08	-
address the learning needs of all children? 2.489*	3.27	0.81	2.96	0.93	-

* $p < 0.05$

When the six questions were combined to create a total score, results demonstrated a significant difference between the participants from the concurrent and consecutive education programs on average responses to the overall question: How well do you think your practicum placements have prepared you to...?, ($t(207) = -2.186$, $p = 0.030$). Specifically, participants from the concurrent education program ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 0.86$) scored higher, on average,

compared to participants from the consecutive education program ($M=2.40$, $SD=0.84$).

The significant group differences related to 4 of the 6 indicators studied in this survey; while there were differences in the average overall scores on the remaining 2 indicators, those differences were not found to be significant. In other words, responses from concurrent program participants indicated that, generally, they thought they were better prepared by their practicum placements, at least compared to consecutive program participants, whose responses generally indicated that they thought they were less well prepared by their practicum placements.

Next, we considered if the number of different classroom placements that teacher candidates experienced on average could account for any differences in their perceptions of the learning value of their practicum placements. The combined participant group (consecutive and concurrent students together) completed practicum placements in a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 4 different classrooms. The average number of classrooms experienced by this group of survey participants was 3.39.

An ANOVA was used to compare the average responses on the 6 survey questions in relation to the number of different classroom practicum placements each person had experienced. There were no significant differences on any of the 6 areas of this set of questions that are attributable to the different numbers of classrooms teacher candidates had experienced during their practicum placements. In other words, the number of practicum placement classrooms had no effect on how well the teacher candidates thought the practicum placements prepared them to: manage a classroom, interact with parents, interact with administrators, manage difficult behaviours, deal with difficult situations, or address the learning needs of all children.

Discussion

This cross-sectional study was an attempt to understand the knowledge and confidence of current and recently graduated faculty of education students regarding their perceptions of how well prepared they felt to handle complex interactions that are required in a classroom. Results indicate that teacher candidates in this program are feeling well prepared to handle some of the interaction tasks that will be required of them as teachers but feel severely underprepared in other areas. Both groups of teacher candidates feel fairly knowledgeable and confident in their ability to manage the day-to-day operation of a classroom and to address the learning needs of all children. Both groups in this study reported feeling they had achieved considerable knowledge and confidence in both of these areas through their practicum experiences, reporting 3.30 (concurrent) and 3.05 (consecutive) on measures related to managing a classroom and 3.27 (concurrent) and 2.96 (consecutive) on their ability to address the learning needs of all children. Since each of these abilities is a crucial aspect of a teacher's role in the classroom, these results are encouraging, although significantly more so among concurrent students.

However, the remaining four measures of this aspect of the larger study are a cause for concern about the efficacy of practicum experiences as they are currently structured. While survey participants felt that they had developed some knowledge and confidence to manage difficult behaviours in the classrooms (2.98 concurrent; 2.65 consecutive), participants felt less knowledgeable and confident in their ability to deal with difficult situations, interact with administrators, and interact with parents (Table 1). In fact, our results suggest that as teacher candidates move further and further away from interaction with students and face the need to address situations with greater complexity or which involve other adults in the school environment, they feel less prepared to do so confidently.

Preparation to interact with parents is an area that is very weak for both concurrent and consecutive teacher candidates, indicating that the practicum experiences as they are currently structured, provide them with insufficient exposure to these situations to allow them to develop knowledge and confidence in this area.

In this jurisdiction, the practicum placement for both concurrent and consecutive teacher candidates is evaluated by associate teachers and by faculty advisors. The evaluations are structured by criteria for assessment, which include foci that reflect the standards of the profession in the province. Among these standards is a category of professional behaviours titled “Leadership in Learning Communities”. The Ontario College of Teachers, the accreditation body for the teacher preparation institutions in the province, explains this aspect of the standard as follows (<http://www.oct.ca/public/professional-standards/standards-of-practice>; Accessed January 28, 2014):

Leadership in Learning Communities Members promote and participate in the creation of collaborative, safe and supportive learning communities. They recognize their shared responsibilities and their leadership roles in order to facilitate student success. Members maintain and uphold the principles of the ethical standards in these learning communities.

In most jurisdictions, this standard forms the basis of assessment of the teacher candidates’ professional interactions in the school context. The standards are broken down into observable behaviours that are assessed by both the associate teacher and the faculty advisor at set times during the teacher preparation programs, which differ across the concurrent and consecutive program routes. Each Faculty of Education has internal control over how they define details within each of the standards of practice. In the jurisdiction where this study took place, these standards are associated with two professional behaviours: 1) collaborating with others to create a learning community; and 2) assuming professional responsibility (the planning binder, duties, meetings, punctuality, and initiative). It may be that these behavior descriptions are too vague to draw the attention of the teacher candidate, the associate teacher, or the faculty advisor to the specific types of knowledge and skills addressed in this survey. It is often said that what is assessed gets attention and that adage may apply in

this instance. If we were specific about the types of interactions that need development through a practicum experience, we might expect that teacher candidates could more fully develop knowledge and skills with classroom management, interaction with parents, interaction with administrators, managing difficult behaviours, dealing with difficult situations, and addressing the learning needs of all children.

There might be value to consider a more targeted approach to teaching practica than may exist in some jurisdictions at present. If newly revised teacher education programs in this jurisdiction will allow for 18 weeks of practicum experience before a teacher is accredited, those weeks could be focused on the acquisition of specific skills that can only be learned in context, rather than on the general application of theoretical skills and knowledge that have been taught in course work. For example, later in the program, practicum opportunities might include several chances for the teacher candidate to interact with parents (e.g., through school committees, parent-teacher interviews, special events which they may arrange to involve parents, etc.). Following these experiences, associate teachers and faculty advisors would have a wealth of assessment information about the teacher candidate's skills in working with parents, which can be used to provide guidance for further professional growth.

The findings in this study are timely as Ontario's provincial jurisdiction is currently undergoing significant program review to extend the program of teacher preparation to align with requirements in most other Canadian provinces. While the jurisdiction has a reputation of providing strong teacher education programs, an additional year of preparation will allow for additional course and practicum time. This combination should provide additional opportunities for teacher candidates to acquire both theoretical knowledge through further course work and pedagogical content knowledge through practicum work.

However, to ensure that the combination of theoretical and practical knowledge is acquired and that, therefore teacher candidates have an opportunity to develop stronger pedagogical content knowledge, we believe that targeted practicum experiences hold potential. During a targeted practicum experience, teacher candidates would focus on developing strength and confidence in one set of professional competencies during each teaching block, rather than being diversified across the usual focus on five different sets of competencies. Potentially, this could allow teacher candidates the freedom to explore, and use, a variety of interaction strategies, thereby having greater opportunities to develop knowledge and confidence in this area. Since schools are increasingly focusing on a professional team approach and making efforts to partner with parents in ensuring the success of the child, this approach to a targeted practicum would provide a focus on learning supported by parents and other professionals. Such an endeavor would seem to be invaluable as program review efforts progress.

Conclusions

This study was part of a larger study, which investigated the knowledge and confidence, which is perceived by teacher candidates as a result of many aspects of their teacher preparation programs, including the practicum components. Due to the length of the larger study, investigation into the practicum aspects of the study focused on only 6 measures. It may be of value to examine the practicum experiences in either or both of these participant populations more thoroughly through more detailed questions and to triangulate survey responses through other forms of data.

While we cannot over extend the interpretation of our data since it reflected responses from only 212 teacher candidates. While this is a solid basis for some conclusions, this number of participants represents only about 20 percent of the total teacher candidate population from this university in the study year. It may be that a larger participant group would reveal different trends.

As this jurisdiction undertakes significant structural changes in its teacher preparation program and the practicum time involved in the consecutive program increases from 13 to 18 weeks, over two years, it is expected that we may see a close in the gap in perceptions of knowledge and confidence resulting from practicum experiences in the two groups of teacher candidates (i.e., consecutive and concurrent). Additionally, work is presently underway to develop more targeted skill development during practica than has previously been used at this university. It will be important to monitor these experiences closely as this new program delivery model is implemented.

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