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Case Studies of Reform in Canadian Preservice Teacher Education

Purpose

The broad purpose of this research-in-progress is to examine closely some of the reform-minded efforts to improve preservice teacher education at a selection of teacher education institutions across Canada. This will provide insights into the processes of program reconceptualization and implementation and, more specifically and significantly, the individuals, their work, and the institutional structures initiating and facilitating such efforts in current fiscally and ideologically conservative political milieus. The specific goals of the research are:

- to develop case studies of progressive, persuasive, and effective teacher education reforms, the institutional contexts and educational settings (broadly conceived) in which the reformed programs operate, and the people who operate them;
- to understand the orientations prevalent in institutional contexts and of personnel who are involved in reform efforts; and
- to understand the particular personal, curricular, institutional, structural issues and problems that were overcome in the design and implementation of these programs.

Background and Context

The research builds on the findings of an earlier three-year SSHRC-funded study focused on the professional lives and experiences of pre-tenured teacher education faculty working toward reform in teacher education at a number of Canadian teacher education institutions (Cole, 1999b; Cole, Knowles, Brown, & Buttignol, 1999). In brief, that research made evident the considerable dissonance underlying and determining the direction and articulation of the teacher education reform agenda in faculties of education; most apparent was the competing nature of the agenda of progressive, "reform-minded" teacher educators and conservative, "response-minded" teacher education institutions. Institutional forces that maintain the status quo overpower individual efforts to challenge and change convention, particularly when those individual efforts are made by the least powerful members of the academic community: untenured professors of teacher education. This revelation begged the question, How can substantial teacher education reform ever happen?

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Calling for teacher education reform is not a new phenomenon, and proposals continue to abound; yet when one looks broadly at teacher education over the past several decades, the overwhelming observation is that not much has changed. There is no shortage of information about reform implementation in the United States and Canada. Numerous analyses exist of proposals and strategies for educational reform (Blackwell, 1996; Bush, 1987; Clark, 1993; Cornbleth, 1986; Cuban, 1990; Fullan with Stiegelbauer, 1991; Holmes Group, 1995; Kettlewell, 1996; Portman, 1993; Sarason, 1990). For the most part, however, it seems that only lip service is paid to the idea of improving schools for students and teachers and improving how teachers are prepared (Cole, 1999a).

There are, however, small pockets of reform activity throughout North America as deans of education, or faculties as a whole or in clusters, endeavor to reform their preparation programs. Such efforts stand out as anomalies in an otherwise static and conservative system of teacher education. These efforts typically are not well publicized, and the complexities of the reform process are usually made known only in informal conversation; yet it is these kinds of reform-minded efforts that merit exploration, description, and analysis. This, then, is the focus of the research-in-progress.

Progress Report

In the first phase of the research I gathered and analyzed information about teacher education reforms underway in faculties and departments of education in Anglophone universities across Canada (Cole, 1999a). From this analysis I identified five sites where substantial programmatic reform is underway. I am now in the process of studying and analyzing these initiatives using a case study framework (Merriam, 1988) situated in a life history perspective (Cole & Knowles, in press; Goodson, 1995). These case studies of teacher education reform will emerge as compelling, in-depth analyses of individual, institutional, and programmatic change.

I chose research sites that on examination will reveal a range of reform efforts in Anglophone Canadian teacher education institutions. The research is guided by several clusters of questions:

- What kinds of reform efforts are taking place in Canadian teacher education institutions? How are the innovative, progressive, and conceptually strong programs intellectually and practically shaped? What are the intellectual and practical bases for the design and implementation of these reform-minded programs? What is the general climate in the institutional contexts in which substantial programmatic reforms take place? What are the internal and external pressures that have motivated program reconceptualization?
- What are the central underpinning philosophies, orientations, and practices that give impetus to the reforms? What are the structural, administrative, programmatic, curricular, and institutional constraints that were overcome in the implementation of these reformed programs? How have these reforms fitted into the work, agenda, and vision of the greater university context? What is the role of "external" agencies at various levels? What is the sociopolitical milieu of these programmatic reforms?

- Who are the prime movers in these reform efforts? What is the nature of and basis for their commitment and motivations? Who is responsible for general program and curricular development and for the day-to-day implementation? What is the relationship between faculty members and administrators in both the development process and implementation of new programs?

The first cluster of questions is designed to reveal the nature and scope of teacher education reform efforts; the second cluster will uncover information about the rationales for, and intellectual and institutional commitments to, reform; and the third will provide insights into the perspectives, roles, responsibilities, and relationships of those involved in reform efforts.

The case studies will provide both a description and critical analysis of each reform effort in an attempt to lay bare the complexities, idiosyncrasies, and multiple realities that define and determine the directions of institutional and/or programmatic change attempts. I intend to make visible the personal, complex, and "messy" nature of reform that reflects the multiple realities of individuals and institutions operating in particular political and provincial milieus rather than merely describing successful exemplars that defy replication. As such, the case studies will serve both as examples (not models or standardized frameworks) of teacher education reform initiatives and the bases for theoretical insights into the values, goals, processes, and facilitative structures associated with substantive reforms. These are invaluable for propelling reform initiatives elsewhere. Such exploration has the potential substantially to inform the direction of teacher education reform in Canada. I anticipate that although the report will represent the complexities associated with political, institutional, and individual agendas, much will be revealed of the fruitful ways that innovative programs are conceptualized, developed, and implemented.

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