

Research Note

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Are They Ready to Teach Reading and Writing? The Preparation of Preservice Elementary Language Arts Teachers in Canadian Universities

Introduction

For the past 24 years I have been teaching in an undergraduate preservice education program. My main teaching assignments have been courses in language arts, children's literature, and corrective reading. My professional responsibilities have also included the supervision of student teachers (primarily in K-6 classrooms) in public, separate, and independent schools in the greater Edmonton, Alberta area. During that time I have had many conversations with classroom teachers and principals about their perceptions of the preparedness of newly graduated elementary schoolteachers to teach reading and writing to their students. A frequent assertion from them is that beginning teachers have not been well prepared by universities to teach the critically important literacy components of the elementary curriculum. They point out that many Canadian school boards employ large contingents of reading consultants and specialists to provide not only specialist diagnostics and remedial services, but also basic literacy education for beginning teachers.

A literature search turned up only one recent Canadian study of required preservice literacy courses. MacFaddin and Godinovich (2001) reported on a study done in British Columbia by the BC Literacy Council of the International Reading Association (IRA) that focused primarily on secondary reading programs and indicated that no BC teacher education program required any reading/literacy courses for preservice secondary teachers. It also mentioned that elementary preservice teachers in the province were required to take a minimum of two courses in literacy for certification.

The IRA recommends that preparation for teaching elementary school (grades 1-5) should include at least 15 credit hours in basic reading and language arts courses, children's literature, and developmentally appropriate practices (Berger, 1998).

To ascertain the level of preparation in reading/literacy pedagogy required of preservice elementary teachers in Canadian universities, I conducted a survey in 2004 of all 36 teacher education institutions with AUCC membership and accredited by provincial ministries of education and/or colleges of teachers (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2004).

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Methodology

In June 2004 a one-page questionnaire (see Appendix) was sent to the dean or education department chair of the 36 education programs. A stamped, self-addressed return envelope accompanied the questionnaire. A brief follow-up letter and another copy of the questionnaire was mailed out to nonresponders in November 2004.

Responses were recorded in terms of the number of one-semester courses in literacy (3 hours of instruction per week for 12-14 weeks) required for graduation from an undergraduate preservice education program. Literacy courses were defined as any courses related to the pedagogy of the elementary (K-6) language arts. These included courses described in calendars as language arts, reading (developmental, corrective, remedial, content area), children's literature (taught in the education faculty), linguistics for teachers, and writing (developmental, remedial, across the curriculum). Space was also provided for listing elective literacy courses and for making additional comments.

Results

By October 2004, 16 (44.4%) responses had been received. The follow-up letter to nonresponders resulted in eight additional responses, bringing the total response rate to 23 of a possible 36 (63.8%). Table 1 reports the number and percentage distribution of reading/literacy-related courses required of preservice education undergraduates for the 23 respondents.

As shown in Table 1, most (52.2%) teacher education programs require two one-semester courses in reading/literacy. Nineteen (82.6%) of the programs surveyed require either one or two one-semester courses. One program (4.3%) had no requirement, and three programs (13.0%) required three such one-semester courses.

Most programs provided a number of reading/language arts-related optional courses as well, but this research did not determine what percentage of undergraduate teacher trainees completed such optional courses. Three responses included the comment that the requirements were "inadequate" or even "woefully inadequate."

Discussion

To my knowledge there are no specific national Canadian standards for the preparation of elementary teachers to teach literacy. The IRA, which also has a significant Canadian membership, has prepared a number of documents that

Table 1
Required One-Semester Literacy Courses for Elementary Education Students
in English-Language Canadian Universities

	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
0 Courses	1	4.3%
1 Course	7	30.4%
2 Courses	12	52.2%
3 Courses	3	13.0%
Total	23	99.9%

deal with standards for the preparation of regular elementary classroom teachers who teach literacy. One such recent document is a brochure entitled *Investment in Teacher Preparation in the United States* (IRA, 2003), which laments the great variability in the competence of beginning teachers to teach literacy as they emerge from their teacher preparation programs (from 3-24 semester hours). The document argues for much better and consistent standards for such teacher education and features five key standards that the Association adopted in 1998 and revised in 2003. The 2003 standards are published on the IRA's Web site (IRA, 2004) and have also been adopted by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the largest teacher education accrediting body in the US. Three or four specific pedagogic skills or repertoires that a teacher demonstrates as a result of meeting the standard follow each of the five standards. The five standards include:

1. Foundational knowledge of reading and writing processes and instruction.
2. Knowledge of instructional strategies and curriculum materials to support reading and writing.
3. Assessment, diagnosis, and evaluation of reading instruction.
4. Creating a literate environment based on an understanding and implementation of Standards 1-3.
5. A commitment to professional development as a career-long responsibility.

When one examines the detailed skills and dispositions tied to these standards, and when one adds to that the responsibility of preparing preservice teachers to teach the listening, speaking, and viewing components that are normally part of the language arts curriculum, it is difficult to imagine that all this can be adequately covered in the one- or even two-semester courses that are typically required of Canadian preservice elementary teachers.

Conclusion

This research report is intended to stimulate discussion in Canadian teacher education faculties about the adequacy of preservice literacy curricula to prepare Canada's elementary teachers for their crucial role as teachers of literacy. Further research is needed on the content of the basic course(s) required of elementary preservice teachers in order to provide an understanding of just what it is that beginning teachers are taught to know and do regarding literacy instruction and whether such content meets the standards set out by professional organizations such as the IRA.

References

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Appendix
Preservice Elementary Education Literacy Preparation Survey

Introduction

This brief survey has been sent to the Education Departments/Faculties of the 36 universities and colleges identified in the 2004 edition of Directory of Canadian Universities published by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (p. 444) as offering programs in Elementary Education and Teaching. The intent of this survey is gather baseline data about the number and type of language arts, reading, and other literacy-related courses required for graduation of students enrolled in pre-service elementary education programs (K-6). The information received will not be used to identify any of the institutions providing the data.

Instructions

Please complete the questionnaire as accurately as possible and mail it back to the investigator in the business return envelope provided. Alternately, you may fax it c/o Dr. Robert Bruinsma at 780-465-3524. I can also be contacted at robert.bruinsma@kingsu.ca Thank you for your assistance.

DATE: _____

NAME OF INSTITUTION: _____

TITLE AND NAME OF PERSON COMPLETING THIS FORM (Optional):

E-MAIL CONTACT (Optional): _____

APPROXIMATE UNDERGRADUATE ELEMENTARY EDUCATION ENROLLMENT: _____

LITERACY-RELATED COURSES **REQUIRED** TO GRADUATE (Please list by calendar number, title and credit value). Examples of such courses include any related to the pedagogy of the elementary language arts, reading (developmental, corrective, remedial, content area), children's literature (taught in the Education faculty), linguistics for teachers, writing (developmental, across the curriculum).

COURSE NO.	COURSE TITLE	NO. OF CREDITS
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS: (Please add any comments that you feel may be useful. For example, I am also interested in knowing whether there are optional literacy courses available to your students in addition to those required for graduation.)

