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More than Hoop Jumping: Making Accreditation Matter

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Abstract

This study provides a discussion of faculty perspectives on the impact of national accreditation on a teacher education program. Research questions from a three-year investigation examined the influence of accreditation on how teacher educators approach their work and whether meeting accreditation requirements contributes to ongoing, systemic self-reflection. Self-study survey data identified faculty perspectives on the influence of accreditation on planning, instruction, curriculum development, assessment, and collaboration. Accreditation as a form of self-study reveals both strengths and the inherent challenges of meeting the sometimes competing goals of accreditation requirements and meaningful examinations through self-reflection. Study implications underscore the need for conscious efforts to maintain self-reflection as central to program improvements and considerations for teacher educators' work.

In today's education climate, rarely a week passes when the status of education or its constituent parts are not critiqued, including curriculum choices, student performance, teacher preparation, and performance reporting. Subsequent conversations among stakeholders cast blame on any number of reasons for why the profession is seen as needing a fundamental overhaul due to its perceived inadequacy, subpar international standing, and presumed broken status (Duncan 2009; Felch, Song, & Smith, 2010; National Council on Teacher Quality, 2013).

As conduits to K-12 student learning, teacher education programs are also reminded of their role, often through indictments on the quality of K-12 teacher preparation (Finn, 2001; Labaree, 2004; Maier, 2012; National Council on Teacher Quality, 2013). New takes on accreditation, "blueprints" for success in program development, and think tanks are among the remedies proposed (US Department of Education, 2013). Regardless of the stakeholder, calls to define quality insist on data to fortify excellence while simultaneously engendering what some propose as healthy competition in teacher preparation (Hess, 2001; National Council on Teacher Quality 2011, 2013; Zeichner, 2007). Defining the characteristics of "quality" and agreeing on what constitutes "data" are areas of program evaluation open to varied perspectives.

This study provides a discussion of a teacher education faculty's perspectives on the impact of national accreditation on their reflective practices about quality teacher education. Research questions examined the influence of accreditation on how teacher educators approach their work and whether meeting accreditation requirements contributes to ongoing, systemic self-reflection. Study findings identified the influence of accreditation on planning, instruction, curriculum development, assessment, and collaboration. Accreditation as a potential form of self-study reveals both strengths and the inherent challenges of meeting the sometimes competing goals of accreditation requirements and meaningful examinations through self-reflection. The

implications underscore the need for conscious efforts to maintain self-reflection as central to program improvements and considerations for teacher educators' work.

Introduction

Defining Quality

Like the public education system, higher education faces the opportunity and the challenge of responding to newly defined evaluation structures that delineate broad-based goals for teacher preparation (Dillon & Silva, 2011; Raths & Lyman, 2003; Teaching Commission, 2006). Drawing from edicts that were sparked originally by NCLB (2001) and more recently through national evaluations of quality (e.g., National Council on Teacher Quality, 2013), prescriptions for producing "highly qualified" teachers are relying on teacher training programs to include increased rigor in course work, improved professional development for inservice teachers, and higher standards through competency testing (Hardy, 2002). Central to these efforts is the presumed merit of accreditation as the vehicle for evaluating the quality of teacher preparation and a direct connection to K-12 student performance.

Theoretically, accreditation provides tools for data gathering and report development that chronicle teacher and student performance (Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, Haertel, & Rothstein, 2012). What is less clear is whether the accreditation process impacts systemic and sustained individual and collective reflections among teacher educators. Without an examination of the reflective potential of accreditation as a form of self-study, accreditation remains an exercise in hoop jumping that is reluctantly engaged by some, vigorously avoided by some, and despised by others.

Accreditation and Self-Reflection

History of Self-Study

The concept of self-study in teacher education is not new (e.g., Hamilton, 1992; Loughran, 1996; Russell & Munby, 1992). Educational researchers and practitioners have long engaged in the process of self-study as a vehicle for examinations and reflection on practice (Cochran-Smith 2005; Gore & Zeichner, 1991; Loughran, 2002, 1996). A central dimension of self-study is a process of reflection and inquiry that is shared collectively, is public, and allows for reframing (Samaras & Freese, 2009). Without a dedicated focus that allows for a critique and subsequent response, self-studies may be adopted in the same manner as any other "skill" for technique-based examinations of practice.

Beyond skill development, the reflective component of self-study is also a process, in its own right, that allows for in-depth examinations of practice over time (Dinkelman, 2003). He contends that as a true form of self-reflection, self-studies must also contribute to how we consider questions about teachers' work (teacher educators included), serve as a model for students, and prompt programmatic change through analyses of the kinds of knowledge produced that reflect in-depth reviews over time. Critically reflective practices are essential in this process.

Reflection

Critically reflective thinking and critical reflection have been long been defined in a variety of ways in teacher education research (Brookfield, 1995; 2009; Larrivee, 2000; Rodgers, 2002). The process often includes dilemma identification or problem framing from multiple perspectives that include critical examinations of practice both individually and system-wide. Regardless of the focal areas (i.e., individual or institutional practice), the process occurs by questioning and analyzing taken-for-granted assumptions, routines, rationalizations, and unexamined explanations (Carrington & Selva, 2010; Loughran, 2002; Rodgers, 2002; Shandomo, 2010).

Historically, examinations of reflective thinking offer perspectives on the individual and how s/he thinks as well as the process of problem solving (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983). Dewey's (1933) and Schön's (1983) conceptions of reflective thinking focus on multiple perspective problem framing where all available data are used to seek and evaluate solutions. Although Schön's conception moves toward reflection that includes a change component, these conceptions are not necessarily *critical* in the political sense of the word. Others have emphasized that to be critical, results must transform curricula and practice, focus on criteria of equity and justice, or alter the status quo (cf. Van Manen, 1977; Brookfield, 1995; Fook, 2006). Brookfield (2009) contends that the addition of "critical" represents a shift from working within an existing system toward questioning the system, assessing it, and considering alternatives. Without a commitment to examinations that push beyond the norm, "reflections" remain narrow and insulated.

More than Bean Counting

A challenge for teacher educators who are committed to systemic program reform involves movement away from data collection and data mining for the *sole* purpose of responding to accreditation mandates. Alternatively, deliberate question posing and problem identification must be a part of the *process* of self-study. Critically reflective problem-solving, for example, is conceptualized as framing and reframing problems from multiple perspectives, generating and evaluating a range of possible solutions, and considering the personal, academic, political, and ethical consequences of solutions for students and society (Gore & Zeichner, 1991; Leland, Harste, Jackson, & Youssef, 1997; Rodgers, 2002; Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

Critically reflective problem-solving is thought to benefit both teachers and students by widening teachers' "understanding of teaching beyond narrow technical concerns to the broader socio-political influences" that affect students' learning (Roskos, Risko, & Vukelich, 1999, p.

113). The challenge for those engaged in self-studies linked to accreditation is a dedicated commitment to exceeding the technical requirements of program improvement. Instead, a more critical lens is necessary both in problem and question identification as well as in how data are reviewed and used, thereby affording opportunities for critically reflective thinking.

The more traditional approach to program evaluation, at times, dictates and justifies why program studies take place; often lacking the more lasting and introspective dimension of true self-studies. The dilemma for teacher educators is steeped in tensions where self-studies are driven by outcomes-based goals that include a checklist mentality for program evaluations requirements. This stems from a focus on the means to accomplishing a particular goal efficiently and effectively, without examining the goal itself and its underlying values and assumptions (Valli, 1993). Even when efforts are made to look beyond standardized performance assessment, teacher educators must be cautious in their intentions for data collection and data use. On a larger scale, data generated as part of self-studies have the potential to contribute to professional literature in ways that enhance teacher education (Zeichner, 2006).

The present study identified how the *process* of self-reflection, prompted by and affiliated with accreditation, is perceived by educators within a nationally accredited teacher education program. Research questions centered on the impact of accreditation on how teacher educators approach their work and whether meeting accreditation requirements contributes to ongoing, systemic self-reflection. This study captures faculty reflections on: program goals and mission claims, reliability and validity in program assessment, and determining how "quality" is formalized. Findings reveal both genuine value in the process of accreditation as a prompt for self-study, as well as challenges of participation in ongoing self-studies that are rooted in accreditation frameworks.

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Methods

Research Objectives

Influenced by the role of self-study as a method for critical reflection on practice, this research examined self-study survey data from 22 faculty members in "Western University's" teacher education program. Research questions included: What are the perspectives of faculty in a teacher education program on the process of accreditation? How does the process of accreditation impact the daily work of program faculty? What do faculty members perceive to be the strengths and limitations of engaging in accreditation?

Data Sources and Collection

Participants

Following 2012 accreditation approval by Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC), a survey was distributed to teacher licensure faculty at Western University. Data were collected at three yearly intervals between 2012 and 2014. The respondent pool for all waves of data collection included tenure track and clinical licensure program faculty who had participated in the accreditation process. The same faculty were asked to complete the surveys at multiple time intervals to determine changes in the group's attitudes and behaviors over time (Neuman, 2003).

Across all data collection periods, the majority of respondents were faculty from the Elementary, Secondary, and Special Education program options. In 2012 and 2013, approximately half of the respondents were tenure-track faculty members. In 2014, approximately two-thirds of the respondents were clinical faculty members. Between 2012 and 2014 response rates were reported at 77%, 86%, and 75% respectively.

Data Collection

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Survey method for waves 1 and 2. The 2012 and 2013 surveys consisted of 17

questions where the majority asked faculty to complete online surveys where they rated

questions using a 5-point Likert scale of "strongly disagree," "somewhat disagree," "neither

agree nor disagree," "somewhat agree," and "strongly agree." Faculty rated statements asking

whether the national accreditation process affected the overall quality of students' preparation,

faculty members' approaches to course work, teaching, curriculum, collaboration, reflection on

their work, assessment, confidence in measures of program assessment, and awareness of local

and national conversations on accreditation. The surveys also asked respondents to indicate their

department and rank (i.e., tenure or clinical faculty).

In addition to closed-ended questions, the surveys included five open-ended questions

prompted faculty to discuss whether the national accreditation process affected the quality of

student preparation, their work, their students' classroom experiences, their approach to learning

assessment, and their level of discussions with others about assessment. Due to a limited

response rate during wave one the question was not asked in the second wave. Specifically, "In

what ways, if at all, have you participated in conversations about teacher education program

assessment as a result of your involvement with national accreditation?"

Survey method for wave 3. The 2014 survey, more narrow in scope than the previous

two, addressed respondents' most recent experiences with specific accreditation-related efforts

including: aligning rubrics across specialization areas, improving inter-observer reliability of

student teaching episodes, and identifying student teaching portfolio artifacts and rubrics that

were common across specialization areas (e.g., Elementary and Secondary education).

Accreditation feedback prompted attention to these tasks. By years two and three, post visit,

faculty began to formalize the process of collaborating within and between specialization areas

on various program improvement areas (e.g., supervisory support, e-portfolio development). Twelve faculty members completed the survey, garnering a 75% response rate. Approximately two-thirds of respondents (67%) were clinical faculty members.

Survey three included 16 questions where faculty considered a statement and rated it using the 5-point Likert scale of "strongly disagree," "somewhat disagree," "neither agree nor disagree," "somewhat agree," and "strongly agree." Statements addressed whether accreditation efforts affected the overall quality of students' preparation, teaching practices, and their approach to supervision. As with previous survey waves, respondents indicated their department and faculty status.

Several open-ended questions prompted greater specificity on whether the accreditation process affected the quality of student preparation; to what extent, if at all, the self-study component of accreditation was useful; in what ways, if any, accreditation efforts impacted views regarding teacher preparation; what, if anything, a faculty member learned about how other faculty members approach student teaching observations; and, in what ways, if any, the process of aligning rubrics and identifying work samples had been informative.

Data Summary

Survey data from this study were analyzed within each year, to evaluate year-to-year differences, and to determine any subgroup differences within and between years. For the first two years of data, descriptive statistics identified faculty responses to each question in the dataset. Correlations revealed relationships among key questions regarding overall program improvement including planning, instruction, curriculum development, assessment, and collaboration.

Data were then examined for statistically significant differences between years of data

collection and to identify longer-term trends using paired sample t-tests. Survey responses were also compared across tenure track or clinical faculty using cross-tabulations. Statistically significant differences between these groups were identified using Chi-square tests.

Survey data were also analyzed for each year using frequency distribution and descriptive statistics. Where questions were the same from year to year, these data were examined for statistically significant differences between years using paired sample t-tests. Data were also analyzed on the subgroup level (i.e. tenure-track versus career-line faculty) using cross-tabulations and Chi-square tests. Correlations were used to determine relationships among key variables (Bohrnstedt & Knoke, 1994).

Although there were no statistically significant year-to-year differences for any question, findings demonstrate how the accreditation process framed a systematic and balanced approach to assessment and program study. Findings also showed that faculty are generally quite open to learning improvement and individualized reflection on practice. Many cited the advantages of using a common language for evaluating student progress, the merits of consistency in emphases across courses, and the utility of a formalized process for data-based decision making. For those who expressed more definitive opinions, national accreditation positively influenced approaches to course work, collaboration with peers, self-reflection, new approaches to assessment, increased confidence when assessing program quality, and involvement in local and national accreditation discussions.

Faculty perceptions regarding accreditation varied in depth and intensity. For some, the primary goal of accreditation was to meet general administrative requirements governing program quality, while simultaneously gaining approval from an accreditation oversight body.

For others, data collection prompted self-reflection on program improvement using a systematic template for building an organizational narrative.

Faculty Reflection on Program Quality

Within the survey, faculty members rated their level of agreement or disagreement on whether involvement in national accreditation impacted the overall quality of student preparation. Consistent across multiple indicators, the further away in time from the accreditation visit, faculty members became less ambivalent and more negative about the connection between the university's involvement in national accreditation and its overall quality of students' preparation.

When faculty were asked to rate the impact of accreditation on program quality, one 2012 respondent said, "I think the accreditation is […] hoops to jump through that make no sense/don't improve the program." One respondent who agreed that the overall quality of students' preparation has improved wrote, "The self- reflection and coordination required for the national accreditation is helpful in spurring additional thinking about processes, programs, and classes."

For individuals who responded positively to a potential relationship between national accreditation and student quality, benefits included greater awareness of state standards, inter-departmental collaboration, and increased support for students. During both 2012 and 2013, some reported the overall quality of students' preparation had improved as a result of the university's involvement in national accreditation and "accountability" requirements.

Faculty Reflection on Planning, Teaching, and Assessment

When asked to evaluate the impact of accreditation on planning and teaching, nearly half of faculty respondents agreed that their approaches had changed as a result of accreditation

requirements. Though it was not until two years after the accreditation process that faculty offered more definitive opinions about whether accreditation affected their specific approaches to course work planning.

When asked to consider the impact of accreditation on teaching, a statistically significant distinction is noted by a subset of faculty. Specifically, one year after accreditation, clinical faculty were more likely than tenure-track faculty to report that their teaching practices had changed as a result of national accreditation.

Following a similar timeline for change, while views on changes to curriculum were reported as minimal, a statistically significant difference emerges between tenure-track and clinical faculty. One year after the accreditation visit, clinical faculty were more likely than tenure-track faculty to say that their approaches to curriculum had changed as a result of their involvement in national accreditation.

Investigations into how faculty described their involvement in accreditation affected their students' classroom experiences included "being more transparent in my classes," "thoughtful application to the students' setting" and "some more time required on [the students'] part in relation to products for assessment." In year two, faculty members noted positive changes in the classroom as "students receive better quality," "more opportunities for hands-on experiences," and "more explicit and specific instruction on the standards of practice." Conversely, faculty also reported that amendments to various evaluation tools, portfolio assignments, and an increase in documentation were negative outcomes from the national accreditation process as they resulted in more busy work for faculty to manage.

In addition to considering the impact of accreditation on curriculum and instruction, collaboration with colleagues was reported to have increased initially, but declined over time.

Specifically, self-study data indicated that initial collaboration was linked to collective discussions on overall program quality. In 2013, overall quality rating was significantly correlated with all other variables including whether national accreditation affected faculty teaching practices, approaches to curriculum, collaboration, reflection on their work, approaches to assessment, confidence in measures, as well as participation in local and national conversations concerning accreditation. This movement implies changes in faculty perspectives on how quality is manifest across their program as well as more fine-tuned examinations of program components.

As with many dimensions of their program examinations, the impact of accreditation on reflective practices varied over time. Although there is not a statistically significant difference between years of data collection, respondents were more likely to report that reflection on their work changed two years after an accreditation visit, in comparison to the first year. This finding suggests that, if there is an effect, national accreditation has a long-term effect on faculty's reflection on their work. This same pattern was noted in reflections on assessment practices with attention to relationships between assessment and teaching standards, coursework, and field experiences over time.

Faculty indicated that longer term effects of the accreditation process were evident in coursework planning, teaching practices, and overall reflective practices. As a short-term effect, clinical faculty were more likely to report that their teaching practices and approaches to curriculum had changed. The effects of accreditation efforts on overall quality of student preparation were mixed, although faculty did indicate a level of positive change in their work.

Conclusion

Findings from this investigation demonstrate how standardization in teacher preparation does not have to be an end goal. Self-study data, originally driven by accreditation, revealed a series of findings highlighting both strengths and limitations of the process of meeting accreditation demands.

Initial findings identified how the accreditation process reinforced the importance of a systematic and balanced approach to assessment and program evaluation. Findings also demonstrated that faculty members are generally quite open to learning from the accreditation process. Many individuals cited the advantages of using a common language for evaluating student progress, the merits of consistency in emphases across courses, and the utility of a formalized process for data-based decision making. For those who expressed more definitive opinions, national accreditation was viewed positively in: course work planning, collaboration, self-reflection, developing new approaches to assessment, increased confidence assessing program quality, and involvement in local and national accreditation discussions.

Data also indicated ambivalence for some regarding the effects of national accreditation on faculty workloads, assessment, and accreditation discussions that examined whether the national accreditation has improved the overall quality of students' preparation. Additional critiques included increased paperwork, busy work related to data collection, and beliefs that instructors' personal standards for teaching and assessment exceed those affiliated with accreditation requirements.

Data comparisons over time revealed a noticeable decrease in participants' reported involvement in local conversations concerning the mechanics of accreditation (e.g., site visits, document preparation). These findings indicate a potential shift in comfort and familiarity with the process of thinking about their work in greater depth versus compliance with evaluation

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criteria. Data trends noted the need for fewer conversations regarding the process of the technical

components of responding to accreditation mandates. What is less clear at this time is whether

efforts associated with accreditation have substantively impacted faculty planning, teaching, and

assessment; whether there will be *lasting* changes to teaching; and whether accreditation efforts

ultimately impact student learning in K-12 classrooms.

The perceptions of faculty regarding accreditation vary in depth and intensity. For some,

the primary goal of accreditation is to meet general administrative requirements governing

program quality, while simultaneously gaining approval from an accreditation oversight body.

For others, data gathering and reviews for accreditation have lent themselves to wider

conversations that would not have happened without the accreditation mandates. While these

prompts are not universally accepted, discussions that exceed accreditation criteria are beginning

to take place. Finally, the impact of discussions and reflections are both collective and

collaborative; they highlight the process of reviewing one's work, build a sense of community,

and make explicit the benefits gained and the potential pitfalls of the specific areas of study

(Samaras & Freese, 2009).

Implications

For others exploring whether the value of self-studies affiliated with accreditation helps

faculty to view the process as more than hoop jumping, they are encouraged to define

accreditation more broadly. Questions for consideration should encourage conscious efforts to

reflect on the purposes of self-studies as well as the data gained. Obviously, many of the criteria

affiliated with self-studies meet the mandates for program documentation and evaluation. But for

many institutions, perhaps an overlooked benefit of accreditation stems from more broad-based

goals for quality and in-depth reflection on practice. However, without a systematic plan for

moving beyond the "hoops" of accreditation, the mechanics of accreditation never move beyond

data gathering and form completion. The following recommendation will guide others in their efforts to engage in systematic reflection that moves accreditation towards a meaningful process:

1. *Framing problems:* As with other forms of reflection, teacher educators must determine how they will frame self-studies in ways that meet their needs; must consider how problems were conceptualized and framed (or located); and must determine if multiple perspectives are considered as areas of study are formulated.

2. *Seeking solutions:* What solutions were proposed, and how will they related to how the problems or suggested areas of evaluation?

3. *Evaluating solutions:* How are the data identified used to inform next steps for institutional and individual practices?

The answers to these questions are multi-layered and complex. Further, they also challenge the conventions of university, college, and departmental conversations that identify the purposes of teacher education and the value of various types of data collection on program quality. While self-studies lend themselves to data collection for problem solving and decision-making, these outcomes are not the sole purposes for self-study. Nor, though, is self-study an end in and of itself. These lessons are particularly critical in the current climate with its emphasis on data collection for the purpose of defining and measuring performance.

At a time when teacher education is under intense scrutiny, teacher preparation programs must balance the realities of responding to accreditation requirements and reporting with the implementation of data-based decision making and broad based self-reflection and program improvement. At times these seemingly competing goals consume and drown the energy and resources spent showcasing data and its related impact on teacher preparation. Our findings revealed that the accreditation process heightened awareness by faculty of the need for

systematic reviews of assessment tools, suggested more formalized plans for data collection and analysis, and challenged the need for an evidence-based program attuned to current practices in teacher education.

Without careful attention to moving beyond a process of filling in the proverbial blanks, an inherent feature of accreditation, efforts toward self-study as a continuous and reflective process remain unlikely. Yes, "feedback loops" are encouraged and validated, however without a deliberate commitment to efforts to move beyond the pendulum swings of a process-product view of engaging in self-study (Dinkleman, 2003), opportunities are lost for the benefits of self-reflection. The benefits of self-study as a continuous opportunity for review must be planned deliberately (Loughgran and Northfield, 2009).

When accreditation compliance broadly informs self-study efforts, participants are provided the freedom to learn from data through question posing and examinations of findings that not only future data collection but foster program improvements and reflection on practice. For colleges and universities who prepare for accreditation, adopting a reflective approach to program improvement requires acceptance and participation in the *process* of critical examinations. At Western University, accreditation has positively affected the specific ways many faculty approach assessment and their general satisfaction with program quality.

To be truly educative, self-studies affiliated with accreditation must require movement beyond a hyper-emphasis on the mechanics of evaluation in ways that detract from the fundamental mission of a teacher preparation program in unintended ways. As such, colleges of education must identify an approach that permits the faculty to balance program assessment with discussions of broader programmatic goals in ways that align with their missions, student needs, and research goals.

Without dedicated vigilance, accreditation remains an exercise in "hoop jumping." Conscious commitments to self-studies are catalysts for substantive conversations on teacher education. Data from this self-study indicate the *process* of accreditation offers both opportunities and potential barriers for program development and improvement. As teacher educators, we are reminded that in the midst of the clamors for reform and an obsession with "drilling down" in data collection, self-reflection must underscore the complexity of teachers' work and the contexts in which they reside (e.g., Hargreaves, 2004; Sparks, 2004; Lasley, Siedentop, & Yinger, 2006; Zeichner 2006). These goals must remain foundational to quality teacher preparation.

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