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Failure to Fail in a Final Pre-service Teaching Practicum

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Failure to Fail in a Final Pre-service Teaching Practicum

Abstract

This article presents a Canadian perspective on the issue of failure to fail in Bachelor of Education programs. The issue of failure to fail in Bachelor of Education programs is one that had not been explored in any great detail. What literature does exist focuses on the strain that a teacher experiences when s/he mentors a student teacher (Siebert, Clark, Kilbridge, & Peterson, 2006) and the wide variety of situations that can result in failure (Sudzina & Knowles, 1992). This study examines whether the issue of failure to fail in final pre-service practica exist and, if so, why? Twelve interviews were conducted at a mid-sized Canadian university in Ontario with university supervisors and associate teachers on the topic of teacher candidate failure during the final teaching practicum. All participants had experience with teacher candidates struggling during practicum. Faculty commented on their supervision of student teachers in Ontario, other provinces in Canada, and the United States. Results indicate that both university supervisors and associate teachers find the decision to fail a student teacher difficult, taking an emotional toll on both the supervisor and the student. University faculty report the decision to fail results in additional work for the faculty responsible; however, failure to fail an underperforming student teacher could diminish the reputation of professional programs. Associate teachers feel a sense of betrayal when their recommendations to fail an under-performing student are not followed by the university. These findings have implications for improving the quality of field experiences and support for students, associate teachers, and faculty in Bachelor of Education programs.

Cet article présente une perspective canadienne sur le fait qu'il n'y a pas d'échecs dans les programmes de baccalauréat en éducation. Cette absence d'échecs dans les programmes de baccalauréat en éducation n'a jamais été explorée en détails. La documentation qui existe se concentre sur la pression ressentie par les enseignants quand ils dirigent les étudiants à l'enseignement (Siebert, Clark, Kilbridge & Peterson, 2006) et sur la grande variété de situations qui peuvent mener à l'échec (Sudzina & Knowles, 1992). Cette étude examine la question de savoir si l'absence d'échecs lors des derniers stages pratiques d'initiation existe et si oui, pourquoi. Douze entrevues ont été menées dans une université canadienne de taille moyenne en Ontario avec des superviseurs universitaires et des enseignants associés sur la question de l'échec des étudiants à l'enseignement lors du dernier stage pratique d'enseignement. Tous les participants ont eu l'occasion de constater des difficultés éprouvées par les candidats à l'enseignement durant le stage pratique. Les professeurs ont fait des commentaires sur leur supervision d'étudiants à l'enseignement en Ontario, dans d'autres provinces du Canada et aux États-Unis. Les résultats indiquent qu'à la fois les superviseurs universitaires et les enseignants associés trouvent que la décision de faire échouer un étudiant à l'enseignement est difficile et qu'elle peut entraîner des conséquences émotionnelles à la fois pour le superviseur et pour l'étudiant. Les professeurs d'université rapportent que la décision de faire échouer un candidat crée du travail supplémentaire pour le professeur responsable; toutefois, le fait de ne pas faire échouer un étudiant dont le travail ne donne pas satisfaction pourrait faire baisser la réputation des programmes professionnels. Les enseignants associés se sentent trahis quand leurs recommandations de faire échouer un étudiant dont le travail n'est pas satisfaisant ne sont pas prises en compte par l'université. Ces résultats ont des implications qui pourraient améliorer la qualité du travail sur le terrain et le soutien apporté aux étudiants, aux enseignants associés et aux professeurs qui enseignent dans des programmes de baccalauréat en éducation.

Keywords

failure, practicum, teaching

Cover Page Footnote

Dr. Florence Luhanga, University of Regina was the principal investigator for this study.

Context

The study reported in this paper was conducted at a mid-sized Canadian university, and the Bachelor of Education degree program at this university is concurrent in nature. Student teachers in the program complete two degrees over a four or five-year period. The program is structured in a way that enables students to focus primarily on their first undergraduate degree during the first four years while taking only two Education courses and completing three undergraduate field practicums before the Education Professional Year. The entire Professional Year is focused on Education courses and includes three teaching field practicums consisting of 16 weeks in total. Successful completion of the Professional Year leads to a Bachelor of Education degree and a teaching certificate. Although the program normally enrolls more than 200 students in the first year, less than 100 student teachers make it to the Professional or final year practicum. Students that leave the program do so for a variety of reasons; they either find the undergraduate field practicums too demanding, they may decide that teaching is not for them, or they are unable to meet the 75% G.P.A. requirement to enter into the Professional Year.

Students in the Concurrent Bachelor of Education program are required to complete three 40-hour undergraduate field practicums and three professional year field practicums throughout the program. The three undergraduate field practicums consist of observing and assisting the associate teacher in the classroom. The associate teacher is charged with assessing the student teacher in these field practicums. During the three professional year field placements both the associate teacher and an Education university faculty member supervisor complete a Summative Evaluation based on the student teacher's professional and teaching performance. The associate teacher also completes a formative assessment conducted midway through the field practicum. This alerts Education faculty and the practicum office of any concerns. Education faculty observe student teachers at least once during the practicum and more often if concerns exist. Student teachers are required to successfully complete three Professional Year field practicums in order to be recommended to the College of Teachers for certification. The practicum committee, which consists of faculty members and the Practicum Supervisor, is responsible for deciding whether students who fail one or more practica should be given another chance to practice. The practicum committee meets to discuss circumstances of all practicum failures including those where the student decides to end the placement or is asked to leave by the school or university supervisor. In all but the most serious cases, students are permitted to repeat one field practicum during which they are provided mentoring by a university supervisor, the Practicum Supervisor, and the associate teacher. During this mentoring, a written agreement specifying the remediation required is agreed to. A student who fails to perform successfully for the second time will be withdrawn from the program. The decision to withdraw a student is made by the practicum committee after all circumstances have been considered. It is important to note that students in this concurrent program who fail the field practicum are still eligible to graduate with an undergraduate degree.

Bachelor of Education programs in Ontario rely on associate teachers to provide the practical part of a teacher's preparation. In Ontario, student teachers must complete eight weeks of successful practice in an associate teacher's classroom in order to graduate with a Bachelor of Education degree. The selection of associate teachers is strictly governed by the Ontario College of Teachers. Under Regulation 347/02, associate teachers must have at least two years of teaching experience, be a "good role model" to student teachers, and be a member in good standing with the Ontario College of Teachers (Ontario College of Teachers Act, 1996). A

member in good standing is one who has paid his or her annual dues and whose membership has not been revoked for violating the standards of practice for teachers in Ontario (Ontario College of Teachers Act, 1996). Associate teachers are recommended by the principal as good teachers who will be able to mentor student teachers.

In this paper, “university supervisor” is used to refer to university faculty members who teach and who are also responsible for supervising student teachers during field practicums as well as university supervisors hired by the university to supervise student teachers in the field. University supervisors consist of faculty who are both experienced teachers and hold a Ph.D. as well as former principals and experienced teachers who may not hold a Ph.D. “Associate teacher” is used to refer to practicing classroom teachers who host and supervise student teachers during their final year teaching practicum. “Student teacher” will be used to refer to Concurrent Bachelor of Education students who are in their final or Professional Year. The term “practicum” is used in this paper to refer to teaching field practicums that student teachers have to complete during their final year under the supervision of an experienced teacher.

Literature on Failure in Education Practicums

There is very little relevant literature on the subject of failure in a professional year Education practicum. Academic Search Complete and ERIC are the research databases commonly used in Education. A search using the terms “failure,” “practicum,” and “Education” was conducted revealed only two dated articles.

The practicum provides student teachers with the opportunity to make meaning of the theory they have been studied in class. The university prepares student teachers for their practicum by conveying classroom management models, pedagogical theories and teaching strategies. These courses provide student teachers with the foundational knowledge on which to build their teaching practice. Faculties of Education have been entrusted with the task of preparing competent teachers (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Hill, Friedland, & Phelps, 2012; Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2008) so that graduates of teacher education programs are ready or competent to take up positions as beginning teachers. Similar to other professional programs such as nursing and social work, the field component of undergraduate programs in Education is critical in preparing prospective practitioners (Bogo, Regehr, Power, & Regehr, 2007; Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Knowles & Sudzina, 1991; Parker, 2010; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). It is within the field experiences that a student acquires knowledge, skills and values necessary for professional practice and becomes socialized into the profession.

During field experiences, students are paired with a practicing professional in the classroom setting and a university supervisor for the duration of field experience (Griffin, 1989; Ontario College of Teachers Act, 1996; Veal & Rikard, 1998). While the associate teacher in the classroom provides the day-to-day teaching and supervision of the student, the university supervisor acts as the link between the educational institution and the practice setting and directs the teaching and learning process (Brown, Neudorf, Poitras, & Rodger, 2007; Myrick & Yonge, 2005). Within this context, therefore, both the associate teacher and university supervisor have the responsibility to teach, supervise, and evaluate students’ performances to ensure that the graduates of their programs are ready to teach. The relationship between the student teacher, associate teacher, and university supervisor is sometimes referred to as the teaching triad (Griffin, 1989; Veal & Rikard, 1998). Richardson-Koehler (1988) suggests that the role of university supervisors in field practicums is extremely awkward and clinical in nature. Associate

teachers reported that university supervisors visited their classrooms too infrequently and never developed a real understanding of the students' abilities (Borko & Mayfield, 1995). Borko & Mayfield (1995) also argued that the role of the university supervisor needs to be reconceptualized as one of helping associate teachers become teacher educators. University supervisors, however, do not have the time to develop a relationship with the associate or the student teacher in the classroom and, as a result, are often seen as outsiders (Richardson-Koehler, 1988).

When compared to assessment of more traditional university courses, assessment of field practicums is problematic in the sense that students on field practicum are faced with different challenges. Some writers have argued that the grading of field practica is impossible due to its subjective nature and the fact that consistency of grading is made impossible due to field practica in different schools, grade levels and with different associate teachers (Kynch, 2005; Sharp, 2006). Hawe (2003) suggests that it is very rare that students fail practica in the final year of their professional program and further conveyed that some associate teachers and university supervisors experience difficulty in identifying and making decisions to fail students who display incompetent or unsatisfactory practice.

There are several internal and external contextual factors that can impact a student's practicum performance. Sudzina, Giebelhaus, & Coolican (1997) explained that there are a variety of reasons that student teachers fail a practicum. Poor communication, unrealistic expectations, and a conflict in teaching styles between the associate and the student are some of the more common reasons for failure. Sudzina, & Knowles (1992) found that conditions that promoted failure revolved around mismatched field practicums, subject problems, poor interpersonal relationships with supervising teachers, and difficulties associated with understanding particular student or community populations.

The difficulty of evaluating a failing student has led Education supervisors to leave the awarding of a failing grade to the second assessor, an option considered to be easier on the assessor and the student (Ford & Jones, 1987). At times, Education university supervisors may rely too heavily on their background knowledge of a student to evaluate the student's teaching performance rather than focusing on the lesson in their evaluation (Ciuffetelli-Parker & Volante, 2009). Education university supervisors often feel conflicted about their role in the practicum as Ciuffetelli-Parker & Volante (2009) state, "The crux of the matter: Do we evaluate or do we counsel?" Many associate teachers believe supervising faculty are too easy on student teachers; however, excessive stress during the practicum can inhibit learning and keep student teachers from experimenting and developing a progressive philosophy of learning (Beck & Kosnik, 2002).

In an ideal world, student teachers would be matched with associate teachers who are strong in the areas/s in which pre-service teachers need to grow. The reality is that in Ontario, associate teachers are a scarce resource for which universities compete (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). In Ontario there is a shortage of associate teachers according to the Ministry of Education Report on Associate Teachers in Ontario (2009). This means some associates may be pressured to take a student teacher by their principal or by the university. Such pressure may result in a negative classroom atmosphere even before the student teacher has arrived in the associate's classroom. This may result in a different dynamic than that of an associate who willingly accepts and looks forward to the arrival of the student teacher (Cole & Sorrill, 1992). Nonetheless, the desire of associate teachers and university supervisors to maximize comfort and minimize risks may limit student teacher growth during the practicum (Borko & Mayfield,

1995). As the practicum is such high stakes, associate teachers and university supervisors may be reluctant to push student teachers into taking risks with their teaching and instead stick with traditional teaching strategies which may be more likely to result in a pass.

According to Kornick (1989), cooperating teachers take on student teachers for a variety of reasons. Many feel a sense of professional obligation and see the opportunity as a chance to revitalize their teaching. Others look forward to company in the classroom. Sometimes associate teachers agree to take a student teacher into their classroom but have reservations (Sudzina, Giebelhaus, & Coolican, 1997). Cole & Sorrill (1992) stress associates must volunteer for their role willingly and not be coerced into it. In order to be effective, associate teachers need to be good role models to student teachers and well-grounded in their own teaching. Cameron-Jones (1997) suggested that associate teachers must strike a fine balance between providing support for the student teacher but also challenging him or her.

Inviting a student teacher into their classroom can be difficult for associate teachers who have no knowledge of the strengths or weaknesses that a student may possess. Koerner (1992) found that having a student teacher in the classroom resulted in an interruption of instruction, displacement of the teacher from the central position in the classroom, disruption of the classroom routine, and a shifting of the teacher's time and energy away from students and towards the student teacher. Graham (1997) referred to her experiences as an associate teacher as both the most rewarding and most difficult professional relationships of her career. If the student teacher is unable to communicate key concepts to students during her teaching, the associate teacher will need to re-teach the material before moving on to more complex concepts. This can be precarious as the student teacher takes on an increasing amount of teaching responsibility. When failure does occur the associate often feel personally responsible (Siebert et al., 2006).

Method

Research Design

This study examines whether the issue of failure to fail in final pre-service practica exists and, if so, why? There is little in the extant literature that discusses the issue of failure to fail in Bachelor of Education programs. What little research does exist describes the strain a struggling student teacher places on the associate (Siebert et al., 2006), and the wide variety of conditions that can result in failure (Sudzina & Knowles, 1992). Only two related articles were found. In a search of ERIC and Academic Search Complete databases, and both of these articles were more than seven years old. Neither of these two articles focused on the Canadian context. As a result, we decided to examine the experiences of university supervisors and associate teachers in order to develop a more thorough understanding of the complexities of failing to fail a student in a final Education practicum.

Qualitative research focuses on the meanings people bring to the phenomena as a result of their experiences (Lincoln & Denzin, 2005). As qualitative methods are inherently inductive, a qualitative descriptive design was employed in this study to discover the meanings and intentions that shape the process of identifying an underperforming student and making a decision on how to proceed (Cooper, Chenail, & Fleming, 2012). We were interested in choosing a research method that focused on participants' experiences of their daily work lives, and how they understand the value and importance of failing to fail an underperforming student in a faculty or school of Education. This study utilizes a phenomenological methodology. Phenomenology seeks to produce an accurate description of aspects of human experience

(Ehrich, 2005). From a phenomenological viewpoint, there is no universal truth; each individual has different and unique experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and values. The meaning of human experience is taken exactly as it is given by the person experiencing it (Ehrich, 2005).

Participants were asked the following questions:

1. Imagine having to communicate to a student that he or she has not met the professional standards of practice in their final field practicum. What would it be like being the one dealing with such a student?
2. In your experience as a faculty member or associate teacher, have you ever failed or considered failing a student in their final field practicum?
3. How was this situation managed, and what was the outcome?
4. Did you ask for any assistance? If so, explain, what kind of assistance did you receive or ask for?
5. In your experience as a faculty member or associate teacher, do you think some students pass field practicum even when their performance is questionable? If so, explain?
6. What are some of the factors that prevented you from failing a student in the past?
7. What do you think are the challenges and consequences of failing a student on field practicum?

Participants

A total of six education university supervisors and six associate teachers were recruited ($n = 12$). As the program is relatively small in comparison to other Ontario programs, this represents over half of the faculty. The participating faculty had an average of 26 years of teaching experience and had supervised an average of 153 student teachers. Five of the six faculty had taught at other universities in Canada or the United States and were able to draw from their previous experiences in responding to the questions. The associate teachers had an average of 21 years of experience as a teacher and had supervised an average of 11 student teachers. Although associate teachers can begin taking student teachers after two years, the teachers who chose to participate in this study all had more experience. All participants had experience with a student teacher who failed or was in danger of failing.

Research Procedures

Data collection. Approval was received from the university's ethics board and school boards. Education university supervisors and associate teachers who had supervised pre-service teachers were invited to participate in the study. Participants were recruited through the electronic distribution of a study information flyer that was sent to all education university supervisors and university supervisors as well as to associate teachers. In addition to the flyer, participants were recruited using "snow ball" techniques or referrals from initial volunteers. Interested participants were asked to email or call one of the researchers. Researchers then provided interested participants with a copy of the information letter, consent form, and interview guide via e-mail or regular mail. Participants were asked to mail or e-mail their signed consent forms back to the researchers. Researchers and/or research assistants followed up with the volunteers to set up the time, date, and place for the individual face-to-face or telephone interviews.

Twelve individual in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide were conducted between June 2010 and August 2012. Prior to each interview, demographic data were obtained including highest level of education, current position, number of years in current position, number of years of teaching experience, and total number of students supervised. The interviews were conducted by the researchers and their research assistants and evolved based on the participant's responses. Although participants were not required to have experienced failing a student, all participants in this study had experienced working with students in danger of failing. In other words, there was a chance the student may not pass the practicum because of poor performance. Interviewees were asked to reflect not only on their experiences observing student teachers in Ontario, but at other locations where they had worked during their career as educators.

Data analysis. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by research assistants; the transcripts were read and individually analyzed by each of the researchers separately. Afterwards, the researchers met, discussed patterns in the data, and then reached consensus on emerging themes. Field notes were used to expand on and understand the context of interviews. The researchers continued to meet throughout the writing process to discuss the data and where it belonged according to the themes identified. This type of member checking according to Guba & Lincoln (1989) is the single most important provision that can be made to bolster a study's credibility.

Results

Data analysis revealed the following four themes: (a) making the decision to fail a student is a difficult process for associate teachers and university faculty supervisors; (b) the impact of failing a student influenced making the decision; (c) failure created additional work for faculty members, associate teachers, and for the university practicum office; and (d) there were consequences of failing to fail students who does not fully meet the professional standards of practice according to the Ontario College of Teachers. Each of these themes is described below.

Failing a Student is a Difficult Process

“I think it is difficult to fail a student because it is crushing their dreams and aspirations really, and kind of jolting them into reality.” (Associate Teacher)

Student teachers do not teach in a vacuum; they are impacted by their associate teacher, the children in the classroom, and the complexity of their own lives. Findings from the study show that although most students pass their final professional practica, the decision to fail a student is a difficult process for university supervisors and associate teachers, and it is not taken lightly. Participants revealed that the decision to fail a student who does not meet the professional standards of practice is only reached after considerable reflection, consultation with others, and after other avenues have been explored. In addition, failing a student is a reflective process for both faculty and associate teachers. Before university supervisors and associate teachers considered failing a student teacher, they wrestled with the question of whether a student teacher is incapable of becoming a good teacher or if they are in the process of becoming a good teacher. University supervisors reported that they often felt torn between doing what is

right for the teaching profession versus giving the student the benefit of the doubt, as demonstrated in the following comment from a university supervisor.

This is my personal opinion. It is unfair of me to assume that an hour of watching that lesson is the best effort of a student, who just maybe had a parent die, or a divorce announced or they were just in a car accident... those are some of the factors that make it difficult, I think to try and walk in their shoes... yet I also uphold totally that I want the best in the classrooms.

Education university supervisors also pointed to the complexity of working with a student at risk of failing in the professional year who may have serious issues that cannot be easily remedied through the help of the associate teachers or university supervisors. As one university supervisor expressed,

We cannot control all the variables in a student's life so if a student gets pregnant, has a falling out with a family member, or if a partner loses a job...those factors are going to affect the performance in a classroom and how do we help them through it, that's the task.

Another university supervisor describing the intersection of field practicum and personal issues, said, "It was clear to me that I was dealing with a student who was preoccupied with some issues in her life...and she blamed her hesitancy in the classroom and her distance from the kids totally on that." Participants revealed that before they failed a student they consulted extensively with colleagues. They held discussions with associate teachers for "comparative views," brought their issues with students of concern to faculty meetings for discussion and guidance, and relied on "advice from peers" on how to move forward.

In this process of reflection and consultation, many avenues were considered regarding next steps. Options included the drafting of a practicum improvement plan that specified the areas the student needed to work on and assigning a second supervisor to provide a second opinion. These measures would ensure the decision to fail a student was only reached when the university was convinced the student was incapable of meeting the professional standards of practice. University supervisors who found themselves being responsible for making the final decision to fail a student expressed the difficulty involved. One supervisor noted,

It is very difficult to take that responsibility of failing a student in a field practicum situation because they have put four or five years into their education and you would hope that the weeding out of students who are not going to succeed happens at earlier levels. But sometimes, it doesn't, so it is very, very difficult.

Another factor that was cited by university supervisors was the limited amount of time they have to spend with each student. Several mentioned having to make a decision based on a single visit. The quotation below from a faculty member shows how the limited observation time influences a decision not to fail a student:

For a university supervisor, you're going there for one hour. Making a judgment on an hour of teaching, you can make mistakes. Maybe it was just a bad lesson. The only case

where I failed [to fail] a student was when the student was clearly a really good teacher and I was seeing a bad snapshot.

In this instance the university supervisor acknowledges the lesson she or he observed warranted a failure but they knew the lesson was not reflective of the student's teaching.

The Impact of Failing a Student Influences the Decision

University supervisors mentioned how failing a student in a field practicum caused painful feelings ranging from heartbreak to feelings of guilt, regret, and blame on their part. One university supervisor explained that, "I think it's the sense of responsibility when someone has spent so long working on something and you feel terribly guilty telling them well, no, you're just not going to be able to do that." They clearly grasped the significance a failure had for the student teacher.

According to the faculty participants, if a student fails to graduate at the end of their five-year concurrent program, the reality sets in that they cannot become a teacher at the end of a five-year program. In addition to time loss, the student would also have invested a lot of money paying for their education. Another university supervisor reiterated how failing a field practicum in the final year would "crush the student's hopes and dreams of becoming a teacher." Yet another university supervisor showed how their understanding of the impact of a failure sometimes has led to them giving the student benefit of the doubt: In defending a decision to pass a weak student, an university supervisor said the following:

When a student has paid for five years of tuition, if we hadn't given them an opportunity to realize that teaching was not for them prior to professional years, we almost owe it to them to make sure they succeed because they have invested so much into that career.

Although it may be clear to the university supervisor that a failure is required, university supervisors were cautious about how they conveyed the decision to the student. One university supervisor said,

I don't like it when a student is crushed when they really fail. I made it clear to her that her teaching is a lifelong thing and that she's got a lifetime to become the professional that she feels she can become.

While another university supervisor explained to a student who had failed that although she might not be well suited to classroom teaching they could explore alternative teaching situations such as "tutoring but not in a traditional classroom setting."

Failure Creates Additional Work

When it becomes evident that a student may be in danger of failing, the individual making the decision must arrange additional meetings with the student to mentor them, consult with the associate teacher, and ensure that all such efforts are documented. One university supervisor explained her experience, "You have to talk to the practicum people, write a report, show up to an appeal..... the number of visits is sometimes an issue. It can start to get

hectic...by the eighth one, it was starting to get confusing.” Another university supervisor explained how such efforts result in less time for other students:

It’s frustrating because it takes up an incredible amount of your time. You are meeting with them constantly, but then you are not finding any change necessarily. Like, there is a lot of agreement, yes, yes, of course. It is also very awkward because you don’t really like to be the person who has to tell somebody after all of this schooling that, you’re not really good.

Still another faculty concurred with the following, “The consequence is a workload as well. Failing a person will take up most of your time.” It is clear from these quotations that failing a student creates more work compared to the work the university supervisor would have done if they passed the student.

Consequences of Failure to Fail for the Program

“I’ve seen other teachers stop being associate teachers because of stuff like that.”
(Associate Teacher)

The participants in this study noted that there are consequences for the Bachelor of Education program as a result of failing to fail an under-performing student. First of all, the program’s reputation may be diminished as associate teachers realize that an underperforming student passed the internship component, as one university supervisor explained, “the professional field is at risk.”

Associate teachers described feeling insulted and even betrayed when their recommendations were not adhered to, as demonstrated by the following quote from an associate teacher, “It was very frustrating and ultimately I felt almost betrayed because I did fail that student, and they did go on to become a teacher.” This sense of betrayal can result in a loss of field practicums, as one associate commented, “there was nobody contacting me later, nobody did any follow up.” One associate teacher said, “A consequence for me would be that I am less inclined to take on another student teacher.” Associate teachers mentioned that they wanted to be partners in the process of creating new teachers but they sometimes felt as if their recommendations were not given as much weight as the university supervisors, as shown in the following quotation from an associate teacher, “There was no outcome that involved me.” One associate teacher noted how the university faculty’s multiple roles as teacher, mentor and evaluator could influence their judgment of a poorly-performing student teacher during field practicum.

It was very uncomfortable. The student was well liked and the university thought he was a strong candidate so it was very uncomfortable all around. But in the classroom he had very little regard for the students. Behaviour management consisted of put-downs; lesson plans were often not completed. A couple of times he felt uncomfortable with the lesson so he just walked out of the classroom. But he was a very pleasant person so if you met this fellow you would think, Oh, geeze, nice guy and probably a good teacher, but when you actually saw what he did, no, it was very inappropriate.

Although a student may be well regarded at the university, that may not translate into acceptable classroom practice. Failure to fail underperforming student teachers can lead to other students knowing about underperforming student and devaluing a program in which there are no consequences. One faculty member explained “You know it’s interesting how students talk as well; they will talk among themselves about each other. ...Like I can’t believe she passed through that blah blah blah...” Both university supervisors and associate teachers said they were concerned about the “reputation of our program.” They are trying to uphold what “we feel is a quality graduate,” and want to continue to be “proud of our program and program graduates.”

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that (a) making the decision to fail a student is a difficult process for associate teachers and university faculty supervisors; (b) the impact of failing a student influenced the decision; (c) failure created additional work for both faculty, associate teachers, and for the university practicum office; and (d) there are consequences of failing to fail students who does not fully meet the professional standards of practice according to the Ontario College of Teachers.

When a decision to fail a student occurs late in the program, faculty may experience painful emotions and even blame themselves. Such a decision is difficult for all involved, university supervisors, field instructors, and students. For faculty, the decision to fail a student is a time-consuming process causing extra workload and in the end it may result in an appeal. In this study, university supervisors and associate teachers reported they wrestled with the question of whether a student teacher is incapable of becoming a good teacher or if they are in the process of becoming a good teacher. As a result, they often felt torn between doing what is right for the teaching profession versus giving the student the benefit of the doubt. Similarly, Siebert et al., 2006 associated failing a student with feelings of anxiety, distress, self-doubt, guilt and relief for the associate teacher.

Although failing a student in a field experience can become necessary in order to avoid unprofessional practices, faculty also realized that, for the student, failing a field practicum might result in loss of career and self-worth. University supervisors conveyed their fears that the failure would “crush the student’s hopes and dreams of becoming a teacher.” The limited time a university supervisor spends observing the student’s overall performance makes it difficult to fail a student who may otherwise perform better when teaching a different lesson or teaching a different class or in a different school (Borko & Mayfield, 1995). Student teachers are therefore normally given the benefit of the doubt with the hope that with support and practice they will improve and become good at their job.

It is interesting to note that faculty in this study often referred to having only one hour of observation time on which to make a decision about whether to fail a student. In reality a student who is identified as being a risk of failure receives an additional observation by a different faculty member before such a decision is made. By getting a “second set of eyes” on the issue, the student is given a second chance. In addition, such a decision is never one person’s responsibility. A failure is discussed with the associate teacher, the practicum supervisor, and the practicum committee before a failure is determined. Students in this concurrent program who did eventually fail the field practicum still graduated with an undergraduate degree.

Our findings also show that faculty members devote a considerable amount of time working with a student whose practice is weak or is in danger of failing. This results in increased

workload on the faculty member dealing with a failing student. When it becomes evident that a student is in danger of failing, the individual making the decision must undertake additional meetings with the student to mentor them, consult with the field practicum supervisor, the associate teacher and others involved with the student, and ensure that all such efforts to help the student are documented. Such efforts result in less time for other students as well as other duties. The time required can lead to a supervisor's frustration. For associate teachers, failure of the university to heed the recommendation to fail a student may feel like a betrayal of the relationship. Such feelings may damage the university's reputation and ability to secure associate teachers or field practicums. There is concern that, if this were to happen, the reputation of the program of the program would be damaged. Associate teachers described feeling insulted and even betrayed when their recommendations were not adhered to.

The results of this study demonstrate that, consistent with Sudzina & Knowles (1992), failing a student during practicum is a complex and difficult decision. Such a decision is taken only after much effort at remediation has failed (Siebert et al., 2006). A decision to award a teacher candidate a failure is a significant loss for the student and can lead to painful feelings on the university supervisor's part. A failure in the practicum means additional work for the university supervisor, yet failure to fail may result in associate teachers feeling betrayed and less willing to take student teachers into their classroom. Associate teachers can feel betrayed when their recommendation to fail a student is not heeded. This sense of betrayal may result in the associate and perhaps even the entire school from being willing to accept student teachers in the future.

A student teacher that struggles or fails a practicum is a strain on her or his associate teacher. When failure does occur the associate often feels personally responsible (Siebert, et al., 2006). These findings support earlier studies that show how some associate teachers and faculty experience difficulty in identifying and making decisions to fail students who display incompetent or unsatisfactory practice (Hawe, 2003).

Conclusions

This study contributes to our knowledge of the challenges faced by university supervisors and associate teachers working with students who are at risk of failing their final field practicums in concurrent Education programs. It also highlights the challenges faced by not only the university supervisors and associate teachers working with failing students but also the university that is responsible for their education. In order to improve associate teacher experiences and to increase the quality of programs and graduates, this study recommends the following: (a) there should be a recognition that the university faculty, associate teachers and student teachers have differing responsibilities and the unique nature of each field practicum adds to the complexity; (b) strategies that strengthen the relationship between the university and the associate teacher should be implemented. This should begin with an understanding of students and their personal issues, if any; choosing an appropriate field experience; tracking students and identifying any problems early in the field practicum; providing clear documentation of any issues and their remediation; and the provision of continuous student feedback; (c) team meetings at the university should include discussions of each failing or underperforming students regularly in order to provide a transparent process that effectively facilitates a student's learning and professional development. This would also be an opportunity for collegial suggestions as well as the development of a plan for providing emotional and

academic support to all involved. Additionally, faculties or schools of Education should implement, and upgrade, training for new and existing faculty and associate teachers; (d) if a program truly intends to uphold the standards of its profession, university administrators must provide solid affirmation of, and commitment to, the teaching practica in Education; one example of this discussed by participants in this study would be to recognize the time commitment involved by the faculty and associate teachers in making the decision to fail a student. While such recognition may not result in financial compensation or verbal recognition of the extra time and effort involved, it would go a long way toward recognizing the difficulty of failing a student during field practicum.

This study has explored failure to fail underperforming students in Education field practicums. It demonstrates that failure can be a difficult and time-consuming process for all concerned. The decision to fail an underperforming student, however, can be supported, upheld, and is necessary to the reputation of the program. With supports in place including emotional support, rigorous assessment, intervention with students, and the recognition of the time commitment involved, the reputation of Bachelor of Education programs and the Education profession can be upheld. The issue of failure to fail in Education practica requires more study. The authors plan to continue the research and gather data from a student perspective.

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