

Quest for Educational Equality: The Case of a Rural Pre-service Teacher Education Program

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In this article, I describe a rural pre-service teacher education program and consider its potential to enhance the delivery of equal school services and equal educational opportunity in small rural communities. I employed a case study design to gather data from 51 students enrolled in two cadres within the East Kootenay Elementary Teacher Education Program, and from several of their instructors. The findings indicate that the model being used in the program is supported in the relevant literature and carries the potential to enhance efforts to achieve educational equality through the preparation and ongoing support of teachers who intend to work in rural areas. A model developed from this analysis is proposed as a framework for the development and study of other collaborative university-school programs of pre-service teacher education.

Introduction

I present here the results of a case study of a collaborative university-school program of pre-service teacher education. The relevance and value of such programs and the need for related research have been documented in the literature by Goodlad (1987), who has noted that "the joining of schools (and school districts) in commonly purposive and mutually beneficial linkages is a virtually untried and unstudied phenomenon" (p. 11). Others have noted that until recently, such collaborative projects have been rare (Brookhart & Loadman, 1990).

Rural Canadian school districts face a challenge that confronts many jurisdictions across North America: ensuring educational equality for students. Recently, the British Columbia Royal Commission on Education (1988) identified "the problem of delivering equal school services and ensuring equal educational opportunity to areas with thinly scattered population" (p. 194). Its report noted the difficulty of attracting and retaining competent teachers:

Certain isolated and rural school districts face particular difficulties in competing with urban areas to attract teachers. . . . fewer

opportunities exist for established teachers to remain current in their study or specialization areas, or to develop new teaching skills or strategies. In-service programs in such areas prove more costly to provide due to problems of distance and economy of scale, common to isolated regions. (pp. 194-195)

In 1990, the provincial government established policy to address this problem. In response, the University of Victoria, East Kootenay Community College and six school districts formed a consortium to deliver a pre-service teacher education program on-site in the rural southeast corner of the province, some 800 miles from Victoria and the university. The Ministry of Advanced Education funded the program, which was designed to meet the staffing needs of the six districts by developing a pool of qualified teachers likely to remain in the area upon program completion.

My focus here is on the East Kootenay Elementary Teacher Education Program (EKETEP) during its first two years of operation. The Royal Commission's comments on educational equality and on the recruitment and retention of teachers led to the question on which the present research was based: Might a locally based pre-service teacher education program aid the effort to provide equal school services and

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equal educational opportunity for students in rural communities? The primary purpose of this study was to respond to that question, to assess the validity and applicability of EKETEP's theoretical base, and to develop a conceptual framework which could be applied to the development and analysis of similar programs.

Teacher Education: Collaboration Along the Continuum

With the above question in mind and this multi-year project underway, I examined the concept of teacher education as a continuum which begins with program entry and extends through pre-service education, induction, and in-service during the practitioner's career as a teacher, involving both teachers and teacher educators in the process. In that conception, the phases are integrated and viewed as a process of continuing education (Joyce & Clift, 1985; Clifford, 1991). At each stage, there are important roles for the teacher as learner, for schools, and for teacher education institutions.

A view of teacher education as a continuum leads logically to the idea of collaboration among those involved. Bowman (1991) argues for initiatives that will overcome "the twin solitudes of university and school" (pp. 38-39) and that will move teacher education into an arena where university personnel and practising teachers together will be able to contribute to teacher education along this collaborative continuum.

The ultimate purpose and focus of teacher education activities, and therefore of school-university collaboration, is the educational well-being of pupils in schools. Discussion of this focus leads naturally to consideration of its logical precursor of that aim - strengthening the capabilities of teachers. The literature is clear that this is not a solitary task of universities, but one which requires "coalitions and alliances with people in the schools" (Lanier & Featherstone, 1988, p. 20).

Introducing the concept of collaboration into teacher education processes raises the question of relative roles. The literature is clear about the concepts of mutual goal-setting and equal partnership, in which the interests of both parties are satisfied (Goodlad, 1987). Clearly, collaboration means more than simply cooperation in and assistance with activities already planned by universities and schools. It suggests that to benefit from collaborative projects, both parties must value and share ownership of them (Brookhart & Loadman, 1990).

That does not suggest that programs planned by the school district or by the university alone are not

valid, simply that they are not designed to serve mutually identified objectives. In fact, there are probably more cooperative arrangements in existence than true collaborative initiatives. Goodlad (1987) asserts that "the history of school-university collaboration is not so much replete with failure as it is short on examples of carefully crafted agreements and programs accompanied by . . . individual and institutional commitments on both sides" (p. 11).

The development of productive linkages around programs of teacher education involves three primary agencies: teacher education institutions, schools, and the districts within which those schools are located. The teacher education institutions have as their fundamental purposes the task of preparing individuals to teach and the study of teaching and learning. The central focus of the schools is learning and, as a primary means to that end, teaching.

Studying, preparing for, and practicing the profession of teaching are separate yet complementary endeavors. It is clear that truly collaborative initiatives will require a clear understanding, by each group involved, of its own and other groups' interests and objectives. Both practising teachers and teacher educators/researchers have valuable contributions to make, in collaborative settings, toward school improvement. Both can contribute to a joint effort to understand teaching and learning and to strengthen the capabilities of teachers (The Holmes Group, 1986). That effort will call on the universities to bring to the schools the best of their knowledge about teaching and will provide opportunities to introduce new ideas and to conduct relevant research in schools (Brookhart & Loadman, 1990). Collaboration also ensures that the schools will be more than just convenient settings in which to conduct research that, although it may be of value to the university researcher, does not address the needs and interests of the practising teacher. In many cases, involvement in the collaborative enterprise will also provide for university faculty a fresh awareness of the realities of classroom life.

Opportunities for collaboration can be found first within the pre-service phase of the teacher education continuum. At this juncture, teachers, teacher educators/researchers, and student teachers come together around a common purpose. Obviously, there are opportunities for them to interact around the practicum. The literature also suggests the direct involvement of practising teachers as instructors in pre-service programs. Boyes (1990) refers to them as master teachers, suggesting that both they and university faculty members "have ideas that could

improve program delivery, increase communication, create innovative solutions and foster partnerships" (p. 8).

In summary, healthy collaborative relationships between schools and universities will be characterized by commonality of purpose, mutual goal-setting, and shared ownership. Those relationships will grow as part of a teacher-centered initiative in which school and university personnel can reflect together on the teaching process and can work together to make scholarly and research expertise relevant to the school setting (Clifford, 1991).

The idea that universities and schools can develop productive relationships along the teacher education continuum provides a backdrop against which to examine the structural elements of the East Kootenay Elementary Teacher Education Program. Review of the professional literature suggests that EKETEP was operating from a sound theoretical base. The aim of program personnel was to move beyond simply providing pre-service teacher education to contribute to the larger aim of developing a new relationship between the university and the teaching profession, not "a relationship founded on the twin solitudes of university and school" (Bowman, 1991, p. 34) but one that might collaboratively serve the end of educational equality for pupils. The study reported below was carried out to establish the groundwork for designing and evaluating other programs that prepare teachers for rural schools.

Method

This research project used case study methodology to study the structures, processes, and participants of EKETEP. Yin (1989) has described four applications of the case study in evaluation research: explanation, description, illustration, and exploration. The present study addresses two of those applications: "to describe the real-life context in which an intervention has occurred. . . . [and] to explore those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes" (p. 25). The primary rationale for choosing the design was that it carried the potential to reveal new information about an approach to pre-service teacher education that was advocated but not widely documented in the literature. A criticism of case studies is that they are not generalizable beyond the case itself. A valid response to that criticism is that the focus of generalization is not to a larger population, but to theoretical propositions. The case study provides an opportunity to test and apply these propositions.

Questionnaire and interview data were gathered as part of two formative evaluation activities. In 1991, a questionnaire was administered to the 21 students enrolled in the first year of EKETEP's operation and to program faculty, in a formative evaluation of the program (Ibuki, 1991). In the spring of 1992, the 30 students who had begun in the second year, and their instructors, participated in a second evaluation (Storey & Nixon, 1992). The latter group consisted of approximately fifteen faculty and local instructors during each year. For the second evaluation, interviews with ten students were added, five from each year of the program.

EKETEP: Findings of a Case Study

The initial response to the announcement of EKETEP was strong and positive. Clearly, there was a large contingent of people in the East Kootenay area for whom the idea of a locally based program held considerable appeal. Half of the candidates who entered in the initial year of the program lived in Cranbrook, where classes would be offered. The others lived in communities within reasonable daily commuting distance.

The program began operation in September, 1990 at East Kootenay Community College. It was housed in a new modular facility which would accommodate College activities once it was no longer needed for teacher education purposes. Figure 1 displays the governance and administrative structure of EKETEP, which involved personnel from the University of Victoria, East Kootenay Community College and the six school districts as members of a consortium. Some of those individuals also served with a teacher representative and two students on an advisory committee to the consortium.

Within the policy mandate established by government, a primary purpose of EKETEP was to help ensure the supply of teachers for rural districts. Writing of teachers' experiences in these areas, Alexander and Bandy (1990) had concluded that for teacher retention efforts to be successful, school districts would have to seek out individuals with rural backgrounds and some commitment to teaching in a rural setting. The EKETEP candidates were enrolled in a teacher education program near their home area. That was a location in which many of them wanted to remain. Although not all had been raised in the East Kootenays, most had lived there for several years.

The location of EKETEP and the fact that it was a collaborative venture resulted in a unique school-university partnership. The local presence of the

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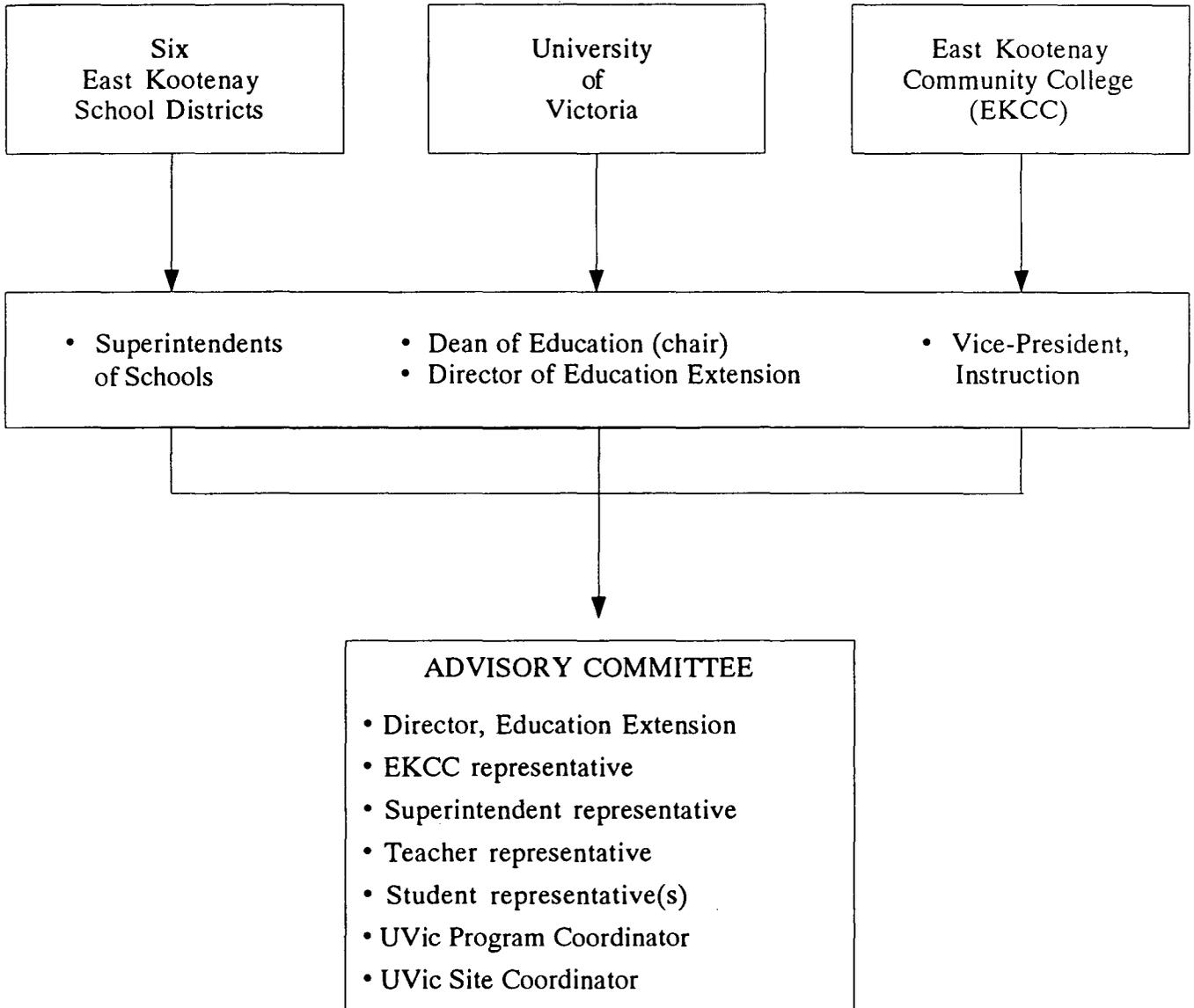


Figure 1. East Kootenay Elementary Teacher Education Program (EKETEP): governance and administration

program meant that university faculty members and sessional instructors would be in the region regularly over its life, which was assured for at least three years. School districts were able to draw on these people as resources for professional development activities at less cost and with fewer logistical difficulties than was normally the case. These attributes, and several structural dimensions of EKETEP, form the basis for the analysis below.

The following sections review the foundational elements of EKETEP: student characteristics, program design and delivery, early induction activities, collaborative teaching opportunities, and ongoing university presence. Following that, a conceptual framework developed from the study is presented to describe and analyze the program in a manner that will be relevant to the design and delivery of similar programs.

Student Characteristics

There was a strong early expression of interest from East Kootenay residents in enrolling in EKETEP. For some, it was in the category of “a dream come true.” One said, “This has been a long term plan for me. I would not have moved to the UVic campus until my children had graduated.” Others indicated that if the program had not become available, they either would have remained in their previous occupations or would have searched for other ways to obtain certification.

Accompanying this strong interest was, for most, a stated desire to teach in the East Kootenay region after completing the program. Most of the students were settled in and committed to the area. This commonality further strengthened relationships within the group in ways which probably would not have occurred in the traditional university context.

A pre-service teacher education program offered in a local community far from the university is likely to enroll some students who, for family or economic reasons, are place-bound, affected by family circumstances, or otherwise committed to remaining in the area:

“I entered the program because it came up at a time when I was wondering what to do now that my children were no longer babies. The easy access of the program was very important to me.”

“[It was] extremely important for practica to be in my home town or [I] would not have been able to do the program.”

“I decided to become a teacher when my marriage broke up. The program here is great but if this program wasn’t here I would go to the coast. This program allows my family to live in a place they are familiar with, great!! At the coast my educational and living expenses would really put stress on me.”

A member of the program faculty commented that the needs and preferences of such students were important factors for universities to consider:

“On the first day of classes, I asked the question, “If the Elementary Teacher Education program was not being offered in Cranbrook, how many of you would be pursuing a career in teaching at this moment?” The vast majority of the class said they would not be enrolled in a teacher education program. This points to the importance of bringing the universities to the people, and educating in the communities where they plan to hire and teach.”

Many of these people were older than the typical post-secondary student. The average respondent in EKETEP’s first intake group was in the age range 31-35; seven were over age 35, and only three were 25 or younger. Many had families and considerable work experience. Recently held positions included, among others: biological technician, retail manager, bank teller, financial consultant, and child care worker. One commented, “It has been wonderful to be a part of this group of people who have so much experience.” A faculty member noted, “I enjoy these more mature students. Many have families, have travelled, have other degrees, etc. - they are interested in learning, and finding out what a teaching career would be like.” One might suggest that some of these individuals would rapidly become leaders in their profession. At least, they would be likely to bring to their classrooms a breadth of experience that would enrich their teaching. The two-year relationship developed within the group could enhance the building of networks for future professional contact.

To summarize, in planning a site-based teacher education program which will enroll mature students, it is important to recognize that these are adult learners.

The extensive literature on adult learning should be a key reference point for decisions about the structure, content, and delivery of these programs.

Program Design and Delivery

The age and occupational profiles presented in the previous section indicate that the EKETEP candidates were not typical undergraduate education students. They resembled more closely the adult learner as described in the literature. Schuller (1988) states that "adults bring with them a set of expectations and attitudes that make rather different demands on teaching approaches from those who come into higher education directly from school" (p. 347). Yet a common complaint among adult students is that their maturity, experience, and expectations are not acknowledged by their instructors, who may not realize that these students "differ in their expectations of higher education: what it is; who it is for; how they hope to be taught, to learn, and to be treated; what they hope to get out of it" (p.342).

The initial cohesiveness of the EKETEP student group was strengthened by the organization of the program, which reflected some of the major principles of adult learning. The student body comprised cohorts grouped together for classes, moving together through the program with a shared group of faculty members. Individuals were able to meet together and work collaboratively over time rather than only at points when they might coincidentally cross paths as a result of having a single instructor in common. As noted above, the cohorts were relatively small: 21 in the first intake and 30 in the second.

These program attributes provided an opportunity to acknowledge a basic principle of adult education, that "adults learn best in environments which provide trusting relationships, opportunities for personal interaction with both the teacher and other learners, and support and safety for testing new behaviors" (Brundage, 1980). In his recent review of teacher education in British Columbia, Bowman (1991) suggests that the dynamics of small programs seemed to make a positive difference, noting that students in such programs worked and reflected together collegially and spoke positively of their experiences. During the formative evaluations of EKETEP, students indicated a similarly positive response:

"Small, personal class with good relations between fellow future teachers."

"The support and camaraderie that has developed has been a great incentive."

"The class! With a group this size, a lot of support is available and makes for a great learning environment."

"Excellent family-type atmosphere - I felt very welcome here. This was a very supportive group. Teacher-student ratio was excellent."

One student observed, "The fact that we are all together for every class and often have to work collaboratively has offered me a unique insight into working as a team in the school setting." A faculty member commented that the structure and composition of the student group had a positive effect on teaching, saying: "These students are an enthusiastic and close knit group, which means they are a pleasure to teach, and since they are comfortable with one another, they are willing to enter into class discussions." Another, though, mentioned having "some concerns about the inevitable lack of outside interaction for students - it must at times be very tedious to do everything with the same 29 people for two years!"

The relationships and sense of common purpose developed during the pre-service program created important interpersonal links among these teacher candidates. They hoped to begin their careers within a cluster of school districts that formed a coherent unit for various purposes, including in-service programs and activities. If that became the case, the relationships fostered through the program's delivery format would be likely to add further strength to this collaborative effort to achieve educational equality.

Early Induction Activities

The third set of factors that characterized the program might be termed early induction activities. EKETEP was mandated to provide pre-service teacher education. However, its structure and organization, and particularly its relationship with area school districts, offered an opportunity for students to take preliminary steps toward the next stage of the teacher education continuum - induction into the profession. Cole and Watson (1991) have noted the importance of this phase, stating that: "The idea that the pre-service year can produce fully functioning, "finished" teachers has been pretty much abandoned . . . we have come to

realize that [it] provides merely the foundation for continuing professional growth" (p. 1).

Throughout the program, the EKETEP students had opportunities for school contact beyond practica by attending sessions presented by resource personnel from local districts. Besides obtaining general information about locally relevant topics such as teaching in the small community and the education of native students in band-operated schools, students were able to interact with representatives of familiar local organizations. They were sometimes invited to participate in school and district professional development activities. This opportunity had two primary benefits. The first was the opportunity to develop knowledge and skills. The second, important in terms of students' post-program entry into the profession, was that they were able to begin developing relationships with their eventual colleagues. These opportunities can be viewed as an early part of the induction process, which, when it occurs at all, typically begins only when one has begun work as a qualified teacher.

One of the purposes of induction is to help integrate beginning teachers into the school, the district, and the community (Gill, 1990). EKETEP students had opportunities to begin this process in small ways through informal, independently arranged contacts. However, because of the intensity of the two-year academic and practicum experience, these activities were limited in number and usually self-initiated. Four of the ten students interviewed stated that they had maintained informal connections with schools. Two had done substitute teaching prior to enrolling in EKETEP, although for both, contact since starting the program had been minimal. Two students had maintained program-related connections. One had completed a practicum at the elementary school where she had once attended, and had been invited back for a post-practicum class outing. The other had maintained contact with a principal after receiving help from the principal with a class assignment.

Induction is an important bridge from pre-service to practice. It is reasonable to suggest that the process should begin toward the end of the pre-service phase. The evidence from EKETEP, however, suggests that for this to occur, early induction activities would need to be built into the structure of the pre-service program as the first phase of an induction sequence which would continue in the first year of actual practice.

Collaborative Instruction

EKETEP presented a unique opportunity to involve practising teachers in the pre-service program by using a collaborative instruction model. That model enabled teachers and university faculty members to develop partnerships at the single course level, and provided professional growth opportunities for both. It recognized the benefits of having both an experienced, currently practising teacher and a professor with knowledge of theory and research involved in development and delivery of the same course. It also began "a new relationship between those who work in schools and those who work in teacher education" (Bowman, 1991, p. 43).

EKETEP offered two alternatives within this collaborative approach. Both involved two individuals: one from the university and one from the field. In one case, the professor as course instructor was supported by the involvement of a practising teacher for specific topics and activities. The faculty member assisted in identifying the local teacher partner; carried responsibility for overall course planning and sequencing; offered instruction, both direct and arranged; identified ways in which the partner teacher could be involved, and arranged for that involvement. In several cases, there was close collaboration on all aspects of course delivery, including class presentations by the partner teacher. The professor assumed primary responsibility for marking and grading.

In the second option, a local teacher was the course instructor, supported by a faculty member who assisted with planning, presented specific topics, and acted as a resource person. The teacher was engaged by the university as course instructor, responsible for all aspects of course planning, delivery, and evaluation. The faculty member advised and assisted with course planning and led some class sessions.

The benefits to the teacher engaged as a sessional instructor under these arrangements included: contact with the EKETEP students, professional liaison with and support from a faculty member, and the opportunity to engage in a unique collaborative venture. Other, more tangible benefits included classroom release time and a stipend or professional development funding. For the professor, the arrangement provided an opportunity for close association with a practising teacher on a sustained basis throughout the course, the opportunity to practise and study the collaborative

venture, and financial support for research or professional development.

These collaborative arrangements were important components of the effort to build solid, ongoing university-school relationships and to provide educational equality for pupils. Both students and faculty were supportive of this model, although several pointed out areas where care needed to be taken in planning and staffing:

"In the evaluation and assessment course the instructors had very similar philosophies and a great deal of contact with each other. However, that was not true of social studies where the instructors had different backgrounds and came from different provinces."

"It depends on the two instructors' personalities and philosophies. They must believe in the same goals."

A faculty member agreed that this type of instructional partnership "needs careful pairing to ensure complementary and compatible styles, approaches, expectations, etc." Two faculty members noted the strengths of the collaborative approach:

"The matching of the practical experience of fulltime teachers with the knowledge of university teachers enables students and the instructor to have a growing experience. The local person provides continuity for the students."

"The university/classroom practitioner [combination] makes for a valuable team approach. I thought the students received both theory and practical ideas. Not having done this before, I was glad to share with someone with experience."

Collaborative instruction emerged during the first year of EKETEP as a possibility, partly as a way of reducing the demands on regular faculty. During the second year of the program, it became clear that this was a viable innovation that should be continued. The fact that the scholarly and research expertise of faculty and the applied curriculum and instruction skill of classroom teachers could be applied simultaneously enriched the program in ways that may be important to the quest for improved instruction and educational

equality. The satisfaction of students and instructors with this approach to teaching also suggested the need for systematic study. While that dimension was beyond the scope of the present study, it is recommended for examination during future years of EKETEP and in similar programs.

Ongoing University Presence

The fifth set of factors relates to the ongoing presence of the university in the local area throughout the pre-service program. The Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria had for many years offered a wide range of teacher professional development activities which were a blend of response and initiative. Faculty members had travelled throughout the province to work in this capacity with groups of teachers.

With the coming into being of EKETEP, this response capability was strengthened by three new sets of circumstances. First, for at least a three-year period, professors would be on-site regularly and available to assist with in-service programs. Second, both the University's profile in the East Kootenay area and its capacity to respond were enhanced by the development of the collaborative teaching partnerships. Third, Education Extension had prepared and made available to districts a professional development needs assessment package to assist teacher groups to work collaboratively with the university in the planning stages. Each of these factors supported the development of a collaborative approach to activities along the teacher education continuum.

A Conceptual Framework for the Program

Through EKETEP, the University of Victoria became an active partner in preparing teachers for rural school districts in British Columbia. The EKETEP initiative also provided a substantive base on which collaborative programs of induction and professional development could be built. Figure 2 presents a framework for describing the program in the context of the collaborative teacher education continuum.

EKETEP rested on five foundational elements which have served as an organizer for the data from this study: student characteristics, program design and delivery, early induction activities, collaborative instruction, and ongoing university presence. Each of these elements was important to the overall structure and flow of the program. In addition, each was related to the later

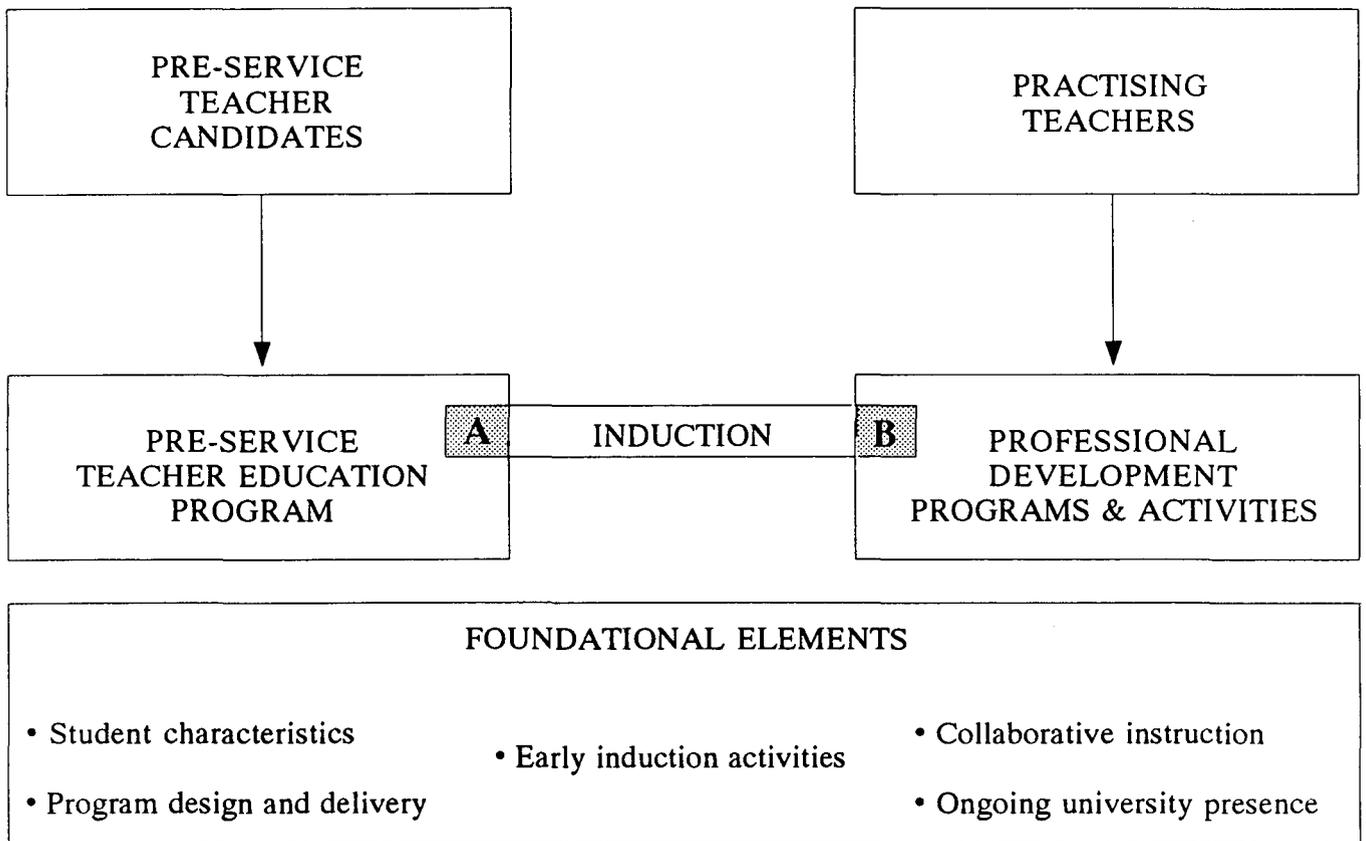


Figure 2. The Teacher Education Continuum

phases of the teacher education continuum: induction and in-service or professional development.

The importance to the pre-service program of each of the foundational elements has been documented above. Their relationship to the professional development of practising teachers is plausible in all cases, and stronger in some. It could be argued, for example, that the maturity and experience of the EKETEP candidates facilitated the development of professional relationships when opportunities arose to interact around in-service activities. The design and delivery of EKETEP allowed practising teachers to benefit from opportunities to make presentations to the candidates during their courses. Early induction activities permitted both groups to participate in activities which focused on the beginning experience. Collaborative instruction opportunities allowed some teachers to study, prepare, present, and discuss important instruction-related topics in the context of delivering a course. Finally, the ongoing presence of university faculty encouraged collaborative planning of professional development activities and increased their availability to teachers.

Figure 2 shows the teacher education continuum in three phases: pre-service, induction, and professional development, with induction linking the other two phases. Section A represents induction activities which occur during the pre-service program, such as candidates' individual liaison activities. Throughout the program, and particularly during their practica, EKETEP candidates had opportunities to meet and to develop working relationships with their practising colleagues in districts where they were themselves likely to teach. As noted above, these students were sometimes invited to participate in professional development activities with practising teachers, in ways which also addressed in preliminary way the process of teacher induction (section B). The model also identifies the primary participants in each of the major phases: pre-service candidates in the case of the pre-service program (EKETEP), and practising teachers where professional development programs and activities are concerned.

Conclusion

Earlier in this paper I raised the question: Might a locally based pre-service teacher education program aid the effort to provide equal school services and equal educational opportunity for students in rural communities? In my view, on the basis of the evidence from the literature and the findings reported above,

and at this exploratory stage of developing a conceptual foundation for that effort, the question can be answered affirmatively. The consortium approach carries the potential to move teacher education into an arena where university personnel and practising teachers working in collaboration will be able to contribute jointly to the teacher education process.

Pre-service teacher education serves those who will soon become practising teachers and therefore full participants in professional development programs and activities. This analysis of EKETEP suggests that the unique nature of this pre-service initiative holds considerable promise for the pursuit of educational equality. That promise will be realized through the equipping of teachers to teach effectively, by addressing their needs at key points along the teacher education continuum.

Where school districts take seriously the pursuit of educational equality for students, an early step will be to identify areas where action is needed and to determine what actions will have the greatest impact. Rural districts will have little difficulty in accomplishing this initial objective. To move beyond that, however, presents a major resource challenge: the availability of time, personnel and funds.

For the rural school district, the teacher education program presented in this article presents an opportunity to address creatively the challenge of attaining educational equality. Though externally funded and managed, EKETEP remained sensitive to the local context because it was governed collaboratively. Through the consortium model, other rural districts may be able to achieve, in the areas of recruitment, retention and continuing teacher education, objectives which alone they would find more difficult. Programs such as EKETEP may hold for rural school districts the promise of being able to enhance their efforts to achieve, through their schools and their teachers, equality of educational opportunity for students.

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