



# **Enhancing the Practical Experience of Teachers: Constructing the Clinical Experiences of Teacher Candidates in Ontario**

Position Paper of the

**Ontario Teachers' Federation**

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*Perhaps the most pervasive pedagogy in teacher education is that of supervised student teaching, which has long been acknowledged as having a profound impact on student teachers. Many teachers have claimed that the most important elements in their professional education were the school experiences found in student teaching (Guyton and McIntyre, 1990). Yet, at the same time, current conceptions of the purposes of student teaching, what it should encompass and how it should be constructed, differ markedly from institution to institution.*

Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust and Shulman, *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World: What Teachers Should Learn and Be Able to Do*, 2005

As the Government of Ontario moves to enhance the preparation program of the province's teachers, it will be essential for it to consider carefully the purpose, focus and structure of the practical experiences that so profoundly and indelibly shape the eventual teaching practices of its teacher candidates.

This position paper begins by defining the practicum experience - what it is and what it is not. It then addresses the pivotal role of the associate teacher in the practicum, and the essential processes that are needed to ensure the deployment of the very finest teachers to serve as role models for future generations of educators in our schools. Finally, included in the paper is a brief consideration of the roles and responsibilities of the various players who are partners in the endeavour of teacher preparation.

## Part 1: What is the Practicum?

In Ontario, as in other jurisdictions, teacher candidates consistently identify the practicum as the most valuable part of their teacher preparation experience. The practicum constitutes essential, experiential learning; it is, in fact,

praxis, as it is where theory and practice come together. It is through the practicum that teacher candidates hone their teaching knowledge, skills and abilities, and it is through the practicum that they come to understand the complexity of the life of the teacher, including critical issues such as the diversity of Ontario classrooms and schools, the importance of professional judgement and the cyclical nature of the school year.

### Purpose

In so far as the practicum is defined as the experience of learning "how" to teach, its central and most obvious purpose is to expose teacher candidates to teaching practice. The practicum provides candidates with an opportunity to practice the theoretical knowledge, attitudes and skill sets that they have acquired in their B.Ed./Dip.Ed. courses, and to apply these in real-life, classroom situations. The practicum advances the understanding by teacher candidates of the nature of the Ontario classroom, and in particular the diversity of the student population therein. It is a test site for building the teaching and assessment skills of teacher candidates and provides practical knowledge of the students they will teach. The practicum also provides essential exposure to the school and board. It is the clinical setting for the profession.

The journey towards learning how to teach includes, of necessity, a mix of observation and practice teaching, with a gradual and appropriate release of responsibility from the associate teacher to the teacher candidate.

### Focus

To the extent that the primary purpose of the practicum is to learn how to teach, the focus must be on the classroom teaching experience. During the practicum, candidates must have sufficient opportunity to acquire the practical, on-the-ground skills that principals will expect them to have once they are qualified professionals. Teachers need to know how to practically manage their classrooms. To learn this, teacher candidates need to live the everyday experience of the teacher. This experience includes understanding school policies, student learning, assessment, classroom management, diversity issues, collaboration and other essential components that make up the realities of teaching in the Ontario context.

It is essential for teacher candidates to have sufficient exposure to the different panels and the subject area(s) they will be teaching. Ontario teacher candidates must have adequate opportunity for observation and practice in each of the two divisions and specific subject area(s) which they will be qualified to teach.

To be useful and effective, it is crucial for the practicum experience to be interwoven into faculty courses. The practicum should not be disconnected from the theoretical underpinnings of learning, taught to teacher candidates during their university classes. Built into every pre-service program, at the faculty and during the practicum, should be ample opportunities for teacher candidates to reflect on their practicum experiences.

### **Length**

In order to meet the expectations of an effective practicum, sufficient time in the practicum setting is essential.

The Government of Ontario has determined that the minimum number of days of practicum within the expanded Initial Teacher Education (ITE) program will be 80. The Federation believes that this is an insufficient proportion of time to be allocated to practice teaching experience within a four-semester program. At the conclusion of the Government's own consultation on the expanded ITE program in the spring of 2012, there was general consensus among stakeholders that a three-semester program would include 90 - 100 days of practicum. The Ontario Association of Deans of Education (OADE) proposed 120 days within a four-semester program, and although not all of this was necessarily to be spent in an Ontario classroom, one can assume that at least 75 - 80% of it would be. The position of the Federation remains that within a four-semester program, teacher candidates should spend at least 100 days observing and practice teaching in an Ontario classroom.

### **Timing**

Ideally, the practicum experience should be connected to the cycle of the school year, so that there is a clear understanding of the ebb and flow of events in the school calendar, as well as key occurrences in the year (e.g. beginning of school, assessment periods, parent teacher interviews, reporting, etc). That said, care should be taken so that practicum timing is respectful of the particular school environment in which teacher candidates are placed.

### **Site**

To fulfill the regulatory requirements of teacher preparation, the practicum must happen in a school setting in Ontario for at least the minimum number of days specified in any new regulation. Alternative field experiences are encouraged and acknowledged as useful, but should be outside of the regulatory specification of minimum days.

### **Funding**

There should be a designated envelope for funding the practicum so that this essential component of teacher preparation is adequately funded. This has not been the practice in the past and the net result of this has been that an inadequate proportion of the funds allocated for Initial Teacher Education programs has typically been earmarked to build a healthy practicum experience for teacher candidates. In fact, with the announced reduction to the Basic Income Unit (BIU) funding from 2.0 to 1.5 BIUs, we anticipate an even further erosion of funding to support the practicum experiences of teacher candidates. This will mean less in-person interaction between Faculty members and associate teachers, fewer Faculty visits to schools, and declining support and recognition of associate teachers.

We urge the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to consider a solution to this long-time deficiency in ITE funding, which will undoubtedly reach a critical level under the new funding parameters if left unattended.

### **The Role of Alternative/Additional Field Experiences**

A great deal of research attests to the benefits to teacher candidates of additional field experiences, outside of practicum placements. While we recognize that these experiences are useful and may help expand a teacher candidate's understanding of his or her role in the community or as an integral part of the moral imperative to provide education to all children globally, alternative placements do not directly prepare teacher candidates to teach in Ontario schools. As such, they should be outside of the regulatory specification of minimum days.

## Part 2: Supporting Associate Teaching

There are four main components necessary to an effective associate teaching experience. These are recruitment, selection, support and recognition.

### Recruitment

Being an associate teacher in Ontario is a voluntary undertaking. There should be clearly specified criteria for the role of the associate teacher, and these should be broadly communicated to the field. There should be an opportunity provided to all teachers to put forward their names for consideration as an associate teacher, provided they meet these criteria.

### Selection

We strongly recommend modelling the selection process for associate teachers on that used for selecting mentor teachers in the New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP). Selection in the NTIP is done in a transparent manner, and with the collaboration of union and board personnel.

### Supports

Adequate preparation of teacher candidates to ensure their readiness is an essential component of a successful practicum outcome. Faculties and their partners should develop an explicit protocol and criteria for approving a teacher candidate's practicum placement, pending the candidate's readiness to be in a classroom. The "readiness" factor could depend on his or her conduct in courses, work completion, attendance, attitude, etc. This approval would be both a support mechanism for the associate teacher and a measure of protection for the teacher candidates. Ongoing communication between the associate teacher and the faculty through face to face encounters and via the practicum handbook are essential, as is respect for the associate teacher's judgement and feedback regarding the teacher candidate's performance. There should be support provided to the associate teacher in the evaluation process, and this should be viewed as a shared responsibility between the practicum advisor and the associate teacher.

There should be a formal process for debriefing by the associate teacher and faculty at the end of the academic year and suggestions for improvement/changes made by

associate teachers should be considered for incorporation into subsequent years.

While opportunities for a group of teacher candidates to observe a single associate teacher may be useful and therefore encouraged, the formal assignment should never be of more than one teacher candidate at a time to a single associate teacher.

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### Recognition

Proper recognition of the important role of associate teachers is necessary to elevate the status and leadership role of associate teachers in the practicum. Again, the NTIP provides an excellent road map of how to do this. A better recruitment and selection process, as well as improved acknowledgement of the importance of this role, will also enhance recognition of the work accomplished by associate teachers.

## Part 3: Roles and Responsibilities of Partners

All education partners have a role to play in assuring the success of the initial teacher education program and the practicum. Faculties, school boards, teacher Federations and principals need to work cohesively and collaboratively for this to occur. It would be indispensable to establish a framework to encourage on-going dialogue among faculties of education, the Federation, schools and school boards so as to improve collaboration among the parties. This would help ensure a better alignment between faculty programs

and the practicum experience. The Federations also have a clear and essential role in terms of working to enhance the status of associate teaching, the attractiveness to teachers of taking on this voluntary role, and good communication with the faculties about issues related to the performance of the associate teaching role.

The OTF/Affiliate Teacher Education Liaison Committee (TELC) and the Teacher Education Advisory Committee (TEAC) must be integral and vibrant parts of this collaboration. These must be regularly scheduled, with ample faculty presence, in order to be useful. Federation Days and Boundaries Workshops provided by the Affiliates should be mandatory components of the new ITE program.

With clear communication protocols, good supports, and a collective commitment to the success of the program, and particularly the practicum, among all partners, the initial teacher education experience will be greatly strengthened.

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The Ontario Teachers' Federation is the advocate for the teaching profession in Ontario and for its 160,000 teachers. OTF members are full-time, part-time and occasional teachers in all the publicly funded schools in the province—elementary, secondary, public, Catholic and francophone.





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