

A Community-Based Native Teacher Education Program: Tensions in Being Both Firm and Flexible

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Abstract

The community-based Native Teacher Education Program (NTEP) is designed for students of Aboriginal descent and is delivered in partnership with two client groups in northern Ontario. While based on the same coursework as the traditional Teacher Education Program, the NTEP differs in terms of length, delivery, the inclusion of mentor teachers, and the admission requirements. The tensions in delivering the program with the Aboriginal client groups relate to admission requirements, the selection of mentor teachers, and accommodations for students in their coursework, the selection of instructors, the location of practice teaching placements, and the need for the client groups to build capacity.

While Aboriginal people value the traditional ways, they also realize that education is essential for a better life and success in today's world (Kirkness, 1999; Swanson, 2003). The small isolated communities in Ontario's North now have their own schools and need Native teachers to educate their children. In the past, non-Native teachers have gone to these communities, but the residents want to hire their own people who are familiar with the culture and the lives of the students. Moreover, education is seen as an important means of preserving Native culture, and Native teachers act as brokers between cultural maintenance and the economic advancement of individuals and of the entire community (Stairs, 1991). In the mid-1990s there was a shortage of qualified Native teachers in northern Ontario. At that time, few Native people had a high school diploma (Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000), and potential candidates for postsecondary education were unable to leave their communities due to their family responsibilities, and the difficulties of adjusting to a non-Native urban culture (Friesen & Orr, 1998). Hence, in 1997 the University of Ottawa was asked to develop a community-based Native Teacher Training Program (NTEP) to meet the teacher training needs of the Sioux Lookout District. Later a similar program was delivered to the Matawa First Nations in the Thunder Bay area. Essentially, this two-year program is one in which students take courses, engage in three practice teaching sessions, and work in the primary and junior classrooms of their local schools. The University and northern coordinators for each client group administer this self-funded program. The graduates receive a certificate from the University of Ottawa and are eligible to apply to the Ontario College of Teachers for certification. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the tensions inherent in delivering such a program, but first the NTEP will be further described and results of research will be discussed.

The Community-Based Native Teacher Education Program (NTEP)

The University of Ottawa offers a campus-based one-year Teacher Education Program to students who have an undergraduate degree. The NTEP course work is based on that program and modified in terms of length and course delivery. Two other differences are the inclusion of mentor teachers and the admission requirements. The NTEP consists of the same foundational and methods courses that comprise the Teacher Education Program. Other similarities include the use of the same textbooks and assignments. In addition, many of the professors who teach in the Teacher Education Program also give courses in the NTEP, which helps to ensure consistency between the two programs. The extent of the commonalities between the two programs related to coursework is important because we want to ensure that those enrolled in the NTEP receive an education that is at the same standard as that offered in the traditional program.

Although the courses offered in the NTEP are the same as those given in the traditional program, there are differences in delivery. The campus-based Teacher Education Program is given in a single academic year beginning after Labour Day and ending in the April. On the other hand, the NTEP begins a two-year cycle in July with four to five weeks of courses. Each course in the program is 30 h in length and runs for one week. For the first summer session, the students are flown out of their communities to Sioux

Lookout or Thunder Bay to take their courses. The instructors for the summer session are flown from Ottawa to the location in northern Ontario to give their courses. All textbooks and materials are shipped to the northern centres for use by the professors and students. Courses offered during the fall and winter are given through distance education, specifically by telephone. Although e-courses and those with a video component are desirable, the technology in some of the communities is insufficient to deliver courses in any other format than telephone. Professors teaching these courses use as much print material and class discussion as possible to break up the monotony of lecturing. Courses are offered again in person during the second summer and through distance education the following fall and winter. The sequencing of the courses is determined by the needs of the students, the needs of the client groups, the availability of the professors, and the type of course (i.e., whether it requires face-to-face teaching such as the methods of teaching the arts course).

Part of the NTEP coursework includes 12 weeks of supervised practice teaching, which is similar length to that of the campus-based program. However, the sequencing of the practicum is different in the NTEP because it is a two-year program. The students do their first practicum in the winter of the first academic year, which is followed by a second one that spring. The third practice teaching session is held in the winter of the second year. Client groups have some flexibility as to how the practicum is structured. The Sioux Lookout District students have three four-week practice teaching sessions with the last two in non-Native schools. Those with the Matawa First Nations have two three-week sessions in the first year, and a six-week practicum in the second.

In between taking courses and doing practice teaching sessions, the students work in their local schools as classroom assistants under the supervision of a mentor teacher. Essentially, the NTEP students spend most of their two-year teacher education program, not taking courses, but rather working alongside a mentor teacher putting theory into practice. The mentor teachers for the NTEP are selected because they are considered by the principal of the school to be an excellent teacher and are able to model professional behaviour, provide support, and share the job of being a teacher with another adult. The students observe their mentor teachers in terms of the routines and classroom management they establish with the pupils. They watch them teach lessons, assess progress, discipline pupils, and work with other teachers, the administration, and parents. Although these topics are covered in the courses, students find their learning solidified when observing their mentor teachers (Duquette, 2003). The classrooms of the mentor teachers are also the location of the first practicum, as knowledge of the pupils and routines gives the NTEP students a sense of the familiar and a boost to their confidence. Therefore, the placement with mentor teachers over a two-year period is a unique feature of the NTEP, and one that serves as a means of learning about students, teaching, and the profession.

Another difference between the traditional teacher education program and the NTEP are the requirements for admission. To be admitted into the traditional Teacher Education Program, a candidate must have an undergraduate degree and have graduated with at least a "B" average. The Ontario College of Teachers permits NTEP candidates to enter with Grade 12 or the equivalent. Although this lower academic requirement has been implemented, it is still difficult to find candidates who have completed high school. With each intake, we seem to be increasing the numbers, but we are not yet at our goal of admitting only those who have successfully completed Grade 12. Because the NTEP students do not have an undergraduate degree, we cannot grant them a Baccalaureate in Education upon completion of the program. Instead, they receive a certificate. Later, upon providing proof of having completed an undergraduate degree, NTEP graduates are granted the Baccalaureate in Education Degree. This is possible because the courses in the NTEP are the same as those in the Teacher Education Program.

In summary, while the NTEP and the Teacher Education Program share the same courses, there are differences in the way the programs are organized, in the delivery of the courses, and the admission requirements. Despite the differences, students in both programs are eligible for the same degree and certification to teach in provincial schools from the Ontario College of Teachers.

What We Have Learned

The research on the NTEP has shown that the students enrol in the program because they want to help their communities, are ready to be a role model, and like working with children (Duquette, 2000). Those who persist do so because they are driven to achieve their goal of being a teacher and have strong personal support networks in their communities. It was also found that the structure of the program facilitates persistence. Specifically, the mentor teachers provide them with moral and active support in order to continue in the NTEP, especially when they feel overwhelmed by the coursework,

family responsibilities, and their jobs in the schools. With this information, the University has stressed the importance of admitting those candidates who appear to have a strong desire to teach because they are likely committed to the goal of being a teacher. Early in the program we also discuss with the NTEP students the importance of having a support system for themselves.

The results of research have also provided some understanding of what NTEP students learn in their program and how they gain knowledge. The research shows that NTEP students learn the most in the areas of curriculum planning and evaluation, discipline and classroom management, and pupil and pupil-teacher interactions (Duquette, 2003). It was also found that the students seemed to learn through observing their mentor teachers, and those with five years of experience or more learn more about working with pupils than their less experienced peers. The findings also showed that according to Fuller's (1969) model of stages of concern among student teachers, the NTEP students address self-survival and impact concerns. Moreover, the findings also suggested that NTEP students must master a certain set of "survival" classroom skills before they begin to consider the effectiveness of their teaching and address the two areas simultaneously. From this research we learned the importance of admitting those teacher candidates with experience working in schools because it is related to increased breadth and depth in learning about teaching and being a teacher, and ultimately graduates who are further along in the stages of learning to teach.

The third area in which we have gained information through research is on becoming a role model (Duquette, 2004). We knew that students apply to the NTEP to become role models for their families and communities, but the reasons for this choice and process of becoming one were unexplored. It was found that some of the graduates embraced the idea that they were role models and became one because there are few positive role models in their communities. This finding supported similar results found by Smith-Mohamed (1998). The NTEP candidates wanted to model that students needed to complete their education in order to obtain a well-paying job, develop self-confidence, and to make the community socially and economically stronger. These graduates wanted to show by their own example that it was possible to be a mother, go to school and hold a full-time job all at the same time. A similar result was reported by Friesen and Orr (1998), however, their study furthered our understanding of the social change occurring in the small Native communities: two of the younger women demonstrated that a possible life path is completing one's education first then having children, a message their older peers were imparting to the young people in the communities. From the findings of this research we have learned the importance of discussing with the NTEP students the topic of role models and the students' experiences as role models in their communities.

In summary, the three studies done on the NTEP have assisted us in knowing which elements of the program need to be emphasized in order to support students in their goal of graduating. We also know the types of knowledge and skills students learn during the program and that those with more experience seem to be further along in their development as a teacher upon graduation. In addition, we have learned that the graduates become role models in their communities. For these students, graduating from a university program is an important milestone in their personal and professional lives. For many, it is the first time they have set a goal and persisted when barriers threatened to blunt their determination. Graduation from the NTEP is also a source of personal and community pride.

Tensions in Being Both Firm and Flexible

There are six areas of tension that have developed in working with the client groups related to the following: admission requirements, the selection of mentor teachers, accommodations for students in their coursework, the selection of instructors, the location of practice teaching placements, and the need for the client groups to build capacity to administer their own NTEP one day. Each of these areas is characterized by a sense of firmness and flexibility on the part of the University and client groups and will be discussed below.

Admission Requirements

The goal of the client groups is to have well-trained teachers instructing the pupils in their community schools. When the NTEP first began, the Sioux Lookout District client group was particularly focussed on admitting as many students as possible because the need for teachers was very great in their schools. This approach caused some tension as the Sioux Lookout District was willing to overlook the academic requirements in favour of the ability to speak the Native language. However, in order for the University to be accredited by the Ontario College of Teachers, the academic requirements had to be upheld. As well, the University felt that having Grade 12 would ensure that NTEP students had sufficient knowledge of topics in the curriculum to be able to teach them effectively. Over the years, the Sioux Lookout District

has made gains in satisfying their need for qualified Native teachers in their schools, and is now moving to seek candidates who have completed high school rather than relying on the “equivalent” admission requirements. It is expected that this change will make an improvement in the quality of teaching in the schools because the teachers will have the background knowledge of the subject disciplines and the skills and motivation to research an unknown topic. Hence, in this regard, the University initially showed some flexibility in admitting more students with the equivalent of Grade 12. Now, the Sioux Lookout District has gradually acknowledged the advantages of higher academic requirements and has become more rigid in demanding Grade 12. The effect in the communities is that some people who previously dropped out of school are now realizing that in order to get ahead, a high school diploma is required and are returning to school. As well, more parents are encouraging their adolescents to complete their secondary education.

The Selection of Mentor Teachers

We know from the research on the NTEP that mentor teachers play an important role in the program. Hence, selecting teachers who are excellent professional models is crucial. Unfortunately, the schools are usually quite small, and it is not unusual for one teacher to teach two grades. Therefore, a principal does not have the luxury of choice, particularly when there is more than one NTEP student who requires a mentor teacher. As well, some of the school’s teachers have less than two years experience, which is a requirement of NTEP mentor teachers. In this area the University had to show some flexibility because the situation in the communities was unchangeable. Hence, the principal does his or her utmost to ensure that the mentor teachers are a good match for the student. Moreover, the minimal experience of some of the mentor teachers has not been a problem as the principal co-signs all of the practicum reports written by those teachers. Hence, in the area of mentor teachers, the University had to show some flexibility in order to ensure the availability of these invaluable role models for the NTEP students.

Accommodations for Students in their Coursework

Most of the NTEP students balance family responsibilities, coursework, and their jobs at the schools. As in many northern communities, the residents go through crises involving sick children, substance abuse, suicides, and violence in their own families and in the communities (Goulet & McLeod, 2002; Hill, 1999). Not surprisingly, there are times when the NTEP students are under much personal stress and feel overwhelmed by their assignments. While the University requires that assignments be submitted on time or a late penalty is administered, in the NTEP, we have had to show some flexibility in the submission of assignments. For some of our students, the need to gain control over their lives is more important than completing assignments. Hence, the professors teaching in the NTEP are very flexible regarding accepting late assignments.

While accommodations are made for the NTEP students, for some the pressures of their personal life are such that they do withdraw from the program. Later when they have re-gained control, some wish to return to the NTEP. The University has been quite flexible in this area and will re-instate the students so that they can go on to complete the requirements of the program. From the research, we have learned that graduating from the program is very important for the students; hence the professors accept late assignments and the administration re-instates former students. It is through the flexibility of the professors and the encouragement they give to the students, that many students have been able to persist to graduation. Whereas, in another program they may have been withdrawn because they had failed a course due to incomplete assignments.

The Selection of Instructors

The University requires that instructors have a graduate degree to teach in the Teacher Education Program. For the NTEP, we also seek those professors who are either of Native ancestry or have experience working with Aboriginals. There have been situations with both client groups where an instructor with a Master’s Degree could not be found. However, on both occasions potential candidates had experience in the field, extensive knowledge of the subject area, and were of Native descent. Again, the University had to demonstrate some flexibility because there were no other instructors who had knowledge and experience to teach these courses. Moreover, these professors were positive role models for our NTEP students and provided courses in which the content was extremely relevant to their community experiences.

Location of Practice Teaching Placements

The Sioux Lookout District has adopted the practice of flying their students out from their remote communities and into the towns of northern Ontario to do two of their practice teaching placements. This opportunity to observe the teachers in provincially-funded schools has proven to be enriching for the students who have commented that observing these teachers reinforced for them how to teach and manage a classroom. The Matawa First Nations does not seem to have the same depth of financial resources

that would permit their students the opportunity to teach in provincially-funded schools. Therefore, these NTEP students do all of the practice teaching sessions in their home schools. Unfortunately, as many of them are very small, the quality of the placement cannot always be guaranteed. On this issue, the University has had to show some flexibility, as there are no options, given the budgetary constraints.

Building Capacity

One of the goals of Aboriginals in Canada is self-control, which extends into the education sector, and more specifically, teacher education. Although the University developed the NTEP and has been actively involved in all phases of its implementation, we realize that there will come a time when the client groups will want to exercise more control over it. At this point, the Matawa First Nations and the University share in the administration of the NTEP, and we tend to take the lead in more areas than they. However, the Sioux Lookout District is eager to assume a larger degree of control than the other client group. With the 2003-05 intake, the Sioux Lookout District coordinator is now sole practicum supervisor of the NTEP students. Previously, the University coordinator assisted in this role. As well, they have taken on the job of supervising the mentor teachers through the use of faxed monthly reports on the NTEP students. The Sioux Lookout District also decided that they will pay the honorarium to the mentor teachers at the end of each academic year. In addition, they developed handbooks for those involved in the NTEP instead of using the one prepared by the University. This client group also organized their own graduation ceremonies in 2003, flying their graduates to Sioux Lookout instead of Ottawa. Hence, they want to be more involved in the delivery of the NTEP at the local level and assume more control over the expenditure of funds. As the northern coordinator commented, "We want to put more of a Native face on this program." They also want to take on more of the administrative responsibilities in order to reduce their budget for this program. The University again had to be flexible in these areas, as we support the principle of building capacity among Aboriginals and wish to continue working with the client groups to achieve that goal. Moreover, the University coordinator has worked with the northern coordinator in supervising the NTEP students, and believed that the University's standards and procedures would be upheld. She also reviewed the drafts of the handbooks and suggested revisions to improve the accuracy and clarity of information provided in them. Moreover, the job of managing the paperwork involved in the supervision and payment of the mentor teachers was easily transferred. Hence, the University has had to be flexible in meeting the client groups' changing needs, but has also had to show some firmness in maintaining standards and ensuring that accurate information is distributed to the communities.

Discussion and Conclusions

Since 1997, we have trained close to 100 Native teachers, many of whom are employed in their community schools. In some schools we can see that a critical mass of well-trained teachers is developing a more professional culture among the staff. We have also heard from principals that our graduates have become fine teachers and are able to infuse the curriculum with the culture. Moreover, there are more positive role models for the communities than ever before. Graduates of the NTEP are modelling high personal standards, persistence, and the importance of completing of one's education. The goal of having well-trained Native teachers in the northern schools is being achieved.

During the years of delivering the NTEP, there have been some tensions between the University and the client groups that relate to control over the program. The tensions have been felt more so between the University and the Sioux Lookout District because they appear to further along in the process of capacity building than the Matawa First Nations. As well, they are eager to exercise sole control over certain segments of the program and to demonstrate fiscal responsibility by avoiding budget over-runs. Because of this "push" by the Sioux Lookout District, the University has had to respond by determining which elements of the NTEP are unalterable, such as minimal academic requirements for admission, the similarity of the courses between the NTEP and the traditional teacher education program, and the required standards for student teaching to pass a practicum.

The University has also had the occasion to introduce some flexibility into the delivery of the program, such as long extensions for assignments, re-instatement of students, the transfer of the supervision of practice teaching to the northern coordinators, the supervision and payment the mentor teachers, and the preparation of handbooks. Essentially, the University has had to be in tune with the needs of both client groups, know when the standards and procedures absolutely must be upheld, and exercise judgement on when and how to be more flexible in the delivery and administration of the NTEP. Working through these tensions associated with changing roles and responsibilities in the partnerships has not always been easy. The University has learned to listen carefully to the client groups, acknowledge

their needs, and be as accommodating as possible. We realize that the nature of the partnerships between each client group are unique to that group and the University, will change over time, and that we must be prepared to make revisions. However, this is not necessarily an acrimonious process. It is one that will ultimately result in the ability of Aboriginals to exercise self-control over the training of teachers and the education of their people.

The experiences of the University of Ottawa in delivering a community-based NTEP may have implications for others in a similar situation. Specifically, it is important for providers to realize that the Native clients will eventually want to administer the program or a similar one themselves. Hence, the agreement with the current provider is merely temporary and will change as the Native client group approaches their goal of self-control over education. Therefore, universities should be aware of the client group's goals and on-going needs that will assist them in achieving those objectives. In addition, a certain amount of trust must be developed between the partners in order to facilitate the negotiation of evolving roles and responsibilities. Trust for the university will likely relate to confidence that the client group is able to do the task they say they can do and to an appropriate standard. Trust for the Native groups means faith that the university will actually listen and legitimately do what it can to help them meet their needs and in doing so, increase Native control over the program. In delivering a teacher training program to an Aboriginal client group, universities must be willing to uphold standards and yet be flexible about delivery. Essentially, through the NTEP the university is facilitating the building of capacity by the client groups to administer their own educational service, which is a step towards the goal of self-government.

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