

The Weakest Link

Ontario teacher training is worse than a waste of time.

Last year, on my first day at an Ontario faculty of education, the dean of the faculty addressed us. He gave an inspirational speech right up until he said, “Everyone who is here today will graduate in April.”

Everyone will pass, I thought? Why not just give us our diplomas now, instead of going through the motions? What university program automatically issues a degree to anyone who enrolls? I prayed that I was over-reacting to the dean’s promise.

Unfortunately, as the year went on, I learned that I had not been over-reacting.

Almost all of my classmates agreed that our teaching training was a joke, but their reactions varied. Only a few were, like me, offended by and worried about our lack of preparation for the classroom. Most of my classmates were grateful that they did not have to work very hard, and they had a very enjoyable year.

Despite their own singular lack of accountability, the professors at my faculty of education spoke constantly of its importance. They frequently reminded us that we were accountable to our students, our parents, and our administrations. But no one ever actually said what this meant.

For example, we were told that clarity in assessment and evaluation was the key to accountability, and that there were important differences between the two. But no instructor ever clearly explained the difference between assessment and evaluation. My fellow classmates gave several oral presentations on this topic, but most freely admitted they had no idea what they were talking about. The difference was never clarified for us.

We were also told that we were accountable to parents to explain our teaching strategies, but no one ever defined strategies, much less talked about which were best for which students and for which subjects.

I received my degree as an intermediate/senior English teacher

without ever learning a single strategy for teaching a struggling reader. I knew I would be accountable to Johnny’s parents when I failed to remediate his reading problems; however, I had no idea what I would say to them. The best I could tell them that they should not hold me accountable, but rather my faculty of education for not teaching me how to teach.

Teachers commonly say that their practicums (practice teaching positions) were the only valuable parts of their training. However, there were very serious problems with this aspect of my teacher training as well.

Because experienced teachers know that universities are teaching little or nothing, it has become very difficult to find master teachers who will accept apprentice teachers. Good teachers are less and less willing to put up with teacher trainees who make messes of their classes. As a result, many faculties of education are forced to place some of their students with truly dreadful teachers. Many of my practicum placements were worse than a waste of time.

Another problem is that many of the professors at the education faculties have not been classroom teachers for decades, if ever. Some confessed that they were unfamiliar with developments in research, technology, and curriculum. Even when they were aware of the revised curricula or mandated teaching methods, they did not show us how to apply them in our own classes, presumably because they did not really understand the new requirements.

Instead of devoting time to important topics such as test modification, research-based teaching methods, curriculum planning, and innovative strategies, we wasted time on activities like bean-bag tossing as an example of kinesthetic learning, and how to use computers to make fancy handouts.

The constant infantilization of teacher candidates breeds contempt

and apathy in even the most positive and enthusiastic student teachers. Undoubtedly, one of the lessons I learned was a deep cynicism for the education system, a cynicism I could no doubt live without and be a better teacher.

And, as promised by the dean on the first day of my teacher training year, everyone did indeed graduate — including all the people who did assignments the night before yet received A+ grades, the young man in my English section who could not write a complete sentence, despite English being his first language, and the woman who when questioned about the veracity of her sources replied, “It’s on the Internet, so it’s out there.”

The most valuable lesson I learned last year may turn out to be which teachers never to let near my own children.

Even though parents do not realize the worthlessness of teacher training, most educators and administrators are well aware of the problem. When the Ontario College of Teachers surveyed its members about the most valuable aspect of their professional development, teachers rated their certification programs ninth out of nine possibilities, well behind such things as common sense and lessons learned from their parents.

The public, unfortunately, has no idea how useless teacher training actually is. The man on the street believes that certified teachers will do a better job than uncertified teachers, even though research has shown this to be untrue. This myth makes it difficult for policy-makers to do something about the problem.

As long as every public school teacher is required to waste a year, rather than to learn something, at a faculty of education, little is likely to change in Ontario schools.

(The author has requested anonymity as he or she is currently employed in Ontario as a teacher).