Should it stay or should it go? Re-considering the Pre-service Teacher Education Admissions Interview

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Abstract: *Ontario teacher education is transitioning from a two-semester to a four-semester program. As two members of one Ontario faculty of education, we are preparing for this shift by considering the past, examining the present, and imagining the future of teacher education. One component of imagining the future of our program includes the admission selection criteria. As such, this paper re-examines a now defunct admissions interview practice, and frames the practice within the body of existing and related research within, and outside of the teacher education discipline. A cursory analysis of our former admissions interview revealed that some components of the process were in alignment with best practices documented in the literature. The analysis also revealed that substantial work is required (e.g., research, faculty discussion, vision of our graduates) prior to developing new policies and procedures regarding admissions interviews. We present some of key questions we are considering that may help guide future research and program decisions.*

Keywords: teacher education, admission criteria, interview\

Introduction

> If teacher education is considered as not just a major students choose while making their way through college (a private choice and a private good) but as a profession that serves social goals and purposes, the question of selection into teacher education takes on new meaning (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 305).

Ontario's faculties of education are currently undergoing substantive changes to their program content, structure and duration. We are on the cusp of change, as each faculty of education must consider the role they will play as agents of change within this process. As two members of a faculty in the throes of examining this issue, we believe that the admission process, more specifically the admission interview, may be one factor that warrants further examination. Consequently, the broad intent of this paper is to: *consider the past; examine the present; and imagine the future* of teacher education. To do so, we will: (1) provide a historical overview of the admission practices at one Ontario faculty of education; (2) review current research on admission criteria into pre-service teacher education programs, as well as admission interviews across other disciplines; (3) reconsider the admission interview process in light of the existing and related research; and (4) present questions for future consideration that have emerged as a result of this work.

Historical overview: One Faculty of Education

In this section, we provide a historical overview of one Ontario faculty of education's admission practices, specifically the inclusion of an interview as a key component of the selection process.

In 2003, as a new pre-service teacher education program and university, faculty members were extensively involved in all aspects of program development and implementation. For example, as small team of faculty, we undertook the substantial task of establishing program policies and procedures; as well as developing and implementing all courses, coursework, and assessments. At the same time, we assumed the task of creating a practicum program including its structure, policies, handbook, and assessment tools; and establishing school board partnerships. However, prior to the arrival of all faculty members, the university's registrar's office developed the admission criteria and coordinated procedures for the inaugural cohort of students entering the new university. Consequently, during the first year of the program, we sought to actively contribute to the admission criteria and processes for subsequent cohorts of students.

As we began to review the admission policies and procedures, we discussed enhancing the admission process by including an alternative component to address the non-academic attributes one might desire in a teacher. We agreed to include an admission interview as a component of the selection criteria for the second cohort of students (2004-2005). Interestingly, in 2008, Crocker and Dibbon's review of 40 Canadian teacher education programs reported 68% of our colleagues at other faculties of education considered the admission interview a desirable selection criterion; however, very few faculties include it as in the selection process.

Upon agreeing to include an interview in the admission process, we began reviewing relevant research literature and consulting with our community partners. Through this process, we agreed to adopt a structured interview protocol (Baker & Spier, 1990). As a small, recently established university (student population ~ 1000), we were able to collaborate with the university administration (e.g., the registrar's office) to expedite the implementation of the organizational and procedural elements of the admission interview process. This labour-intensive process was only possible, however, with the support and assistance of our community partners (i.e., school boards, school administrators, and teachers). Consequently, our community partners became key participants in the admissions selection process.

Initial Protocol

The initial admission interview was implemented for the second cohort of students (2004-2005). The interview protocol required the addition of components to supplement the initial application documentation requirements (e.g., university transcripts, reference letters, experience profile, statement of intent, and evidence of oral and written proficiency in English). Specifically, the admission interview protocol required the addition of a timed written case study analysis (described briefly in the subsequent section), followed by a structured interview conducted by pairs of trained interviewers.

A structured interview is described in this paper as an interview with a structured and standard protocol, that incorporates a standard set of pre-determined interview questions (with clear assessment criteria) that must be addressed within a specified amount of time. Interviewers consisted of volunteer school administrators, teachers, faculty, and registrar's office staff. All

interviewers attended training sessions to enhance consistency in processes and assessment. Teacher candidates enrolled in the program (2004-2005) assisted in the process by welcoming applicants, and performing organizational and administrative tasks. The interviews occurred in the evenings, over the course of two weeks.

Evolved Protocol

This section describes the admission protocols from the second year (2005 – 2006) until the final year of implementation (2012 – 2013). The protocols are detailed on the UOIT Faculty of Education website (UOIT, 2013) and the Teacher Education Application Service (Ontario Universities' Application Centre, 2012). During this time period, the admission process included three components: 1) initial documentation requirements; 2) supplementary requirements; and 3) the interview. Although, the focus of this paper is the latter, to provide context, the first two components are summarized briefly.

Initial documentation requirements

The initial documentation requirements included an undergraduate degree (with a preference to applicants with four-year honours) from a recognized university meeting a minimum overall academic average, and if applicable, the degree required teachable subject requirements. In addition to the academic requirements, if the candidate's first language was not English, then English language proficiency documentation was required.

Supplementary requirements

Supplementary materials included:

- a personal statement / essay detailing the applicant's rationale for becoming a teacher;
- an experience profile summarizing teaching-related experiences; and
- verification contact information of two references that could confirm the validity of the information in the experience profile.

The interview process

Applicants, who successfully met the criteria of the first two components of the process, were invited to visit campus to attend the admission-interview weekend. At this time, applicants completed the written case study analysis and the face-to-face interview. Upon arrival to the campus, current teacher candidates greeted the applicants, and directed them into an open area where the applicants could interact with both current students and faculty. In small group settings, candidates individually completed a timed and individual case study analysis, which consisted of a broad classroom vignette. Accommodations, such as a scribe or additional time, were provided if the applicant informed the university in advance, and provided appropriate documentation. In addition, candidates who needed to travel long distances were eligible for a phone interview.

Upon completing the written case study analysis, the candidates participated in a face-to-face structured interview. The interviews were conducted by school administrators and associate / field placement teachers from partner school boards. During the timed interview, pairs of interviewers asked a standard set of questions, some of which were based on the case study, as well as additional questions to ascertain the interviewee's potential for teaching. Interviewers then independently scored the interviewee using a rubric.

The Dilemma

For nine years (2004 - 2013), our faculty expended tremendous efforts and resources to implement the above described pre-service teacher education admission interview. The overarching purpose of the admission interview was to recruit candidates most suitable for a pre-service teacher education program by attempting to assess non-cognitive attributes one might desire in a teacher.

Our dilemma is this: as faculty members who teach in the pre-service teacher education program, we occasionally encounter students who struggle with the coursework, field experience / practicum, and the program in general. Although the numbers of such struggling individuals are few, we contemplate how an admission interview process, with the intention of selecting "appropriate" candidates, failed to serve both the unsuccessful individuals as well as the program. Consequently, if the admission interview process admitted individuals who were not successful in the program, then **o**stensibly the admission interview process may have rejected individuals who could have flourished in the program, and as teachers.

As two members of an Ontario faculty of education in the midst of examining significant changes in our program, we believe that the admission process, more specifically the admission interview, may be one factor that warrants further examination. As such, we consider the dilemma of how to select candidates with the greatest potential and commitment to teaching, and reconsider our abandoned admission interview as a means for serving this purpose. As we contemplate this dilemma, we consult the literature specific to admission criteria into faculties of education as well as admissions interviews for academic and non-academic purposes.

Review of the Literature

Admission Criteria: A Canadian Teacher Education Context

In their review of 40 pre-service Canadian teacher education programs, Crocker and Dibbon (2008) identified the most common admission requirements included a combination of academic and non-academic criteria. Examples of academic criteria included undergraduate grade point averages (GPA), and depending upon the program, specific course prerequisites. Non-academic admission criteria included work experience, profile statements/essays, references, and much less common, a personal interview. Crocker and Dibbon (2008) attributed the rare occurrence of the admission interviews to their "labour intensity" and current research is "mixed … on their reliability for admission criteria" (p. 29).

Given its paucity in Canadian faculties of education, literature focusing specifically on the admission interview process within pre-service teacher education programs is scarce. As such, we consider a small body of research regarding admission criteria for pre-service teacher education in general. After comparing selection criteria to student success in the pre-service teacher education program, Kosnik, Brown, and Beck (2005) concluded that the selection criteria used in their teacher education program was an inadequate measure, because a "considerable number of candidates apparently not suited to teaching were still admitted" (p. 101). The authors recommended that faculties of education re-evaluate their admission criteria to ensure that it

focuses on seeking evidence that the applicants possess the qualities desired "for strong teaching" (Kosnik, Brown & Beck, 2005, p.101).

This recommendation, echoed by Casey and Childs (2007, 2011), proposed that admission criteria reflect some of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required by beginning teachers, with the understanding that some of these areas would be developed during the pre-service teacher education program. Casey and Childs (2007, 2011) further recommended that pre-service teacher education programs critically examine the underlying foundations for their admission criteria.

Although admission interviews into Canadian faculties of education are a rarity, there is some American research supporting the use of personal or group interviews as a component of the admission process. For example, Shechtman and Godfried (1993) concluded, that group interviews were an effective means for assessing decision-making skills and self-efficacy; while personal interviews (with faculty) were effective for measuring verbal and cognitive reasoning abilities. More recently, Ackley, Fallon and Brouwer (2007) recommended using admission interviews to gain insight into candidates' past experiences as a means for uncovering candidates' "desire to serve others and society" (p. 661).

In her review of exemplary pre-service teacher education programs in the United States, Darling-Hammond (2006) concluded that such "exemplary" programs invested "substantial effort in selecting candidates whom they feel have the capacity to become strong teachers" (p.305). Moreover, although each program's admission processes varied, several commonalities existed. Specifically, the programs typically required high GPAs (and test scores in some instances); essays regarding teaching, learning, and children; indicators for teaching ability and commitment; and interviews or face-to-face meetings with candidates.

Although there are some American studies exploring admission interviews into faculties of education, there is limited Canadian research regarding the specific processes and structure of the interview. As such, we turned to other fields and disciplines, as we believe that much can be learned from research conducted outside of pre-service teacher education.

Admission Interviews in Other Fields and Disciplines

To better understand the processes and structure of interviews conducted for the purposes of selecting the best candidates for a position (e.g., job interview or academic admissions interview), we focused our review of the literature on two formats: the structured interview and the multiple mini interview (MMI). In the following section, we present both formats and discuss the challenges and benefits highlighted in the literature.

The Structured Interview

A structured interview uses a standardized structure (i.e., pre-determined questions, scoring, time limitation), and as such its reliability and validity is enhanced when compared to an unstructured interview, however, issues of reliability and validity still exist (Baker & Spier, 1990; Public Service Commission of Canada, 2009). For example, even in highly structured interviews, Blouin (2010) found that the inter-rater reliability of a structured interview for an Emergency Medicine residency program was suboptimal, suggesting that "despite the highly structured format of the interview, subjective elements still get incorporated in the rating" (p.

248). This is consistent with the previous findings of Kreiter, Yin, Solow, and Brennan (2004) and Salvatori (2001) who also found weak inter-rater reliability in other medical school admission interviews.

In their meta-analysis investigating the validity of employment interviews, McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, and Maurer (1994) found that the validity of an interview was influenced by the content (job-related/employment, situational, psychological) and by the manner in which it was implemented (structured, unstructured, multiple raters/interviewers, single rater / interviewer). They concluded that situational interviews (interviews that address how an individual would respond to a particular situation) had higher validity than job-related or employment interviews (focus on past behaviours and information related to the job). McDaniel et al (1994) also found that structured interviews had higher validity than unstructured interviews.

Baker and Spier (1990) developed a comprehensive list of "guideposts" (p. 87) differentiating a structured interview from its unstructured counterpart. The guideposts include suggestions to enhance the reliability and validity of the interview process. Examples of their suggestions included increasing the structure of the interview to enhance the reliability, train interviewers to reduce rating errors, and focus the interview on dimensions of the job.

The Multiple Mini Interview (MMI)

The structured interview is a common admission criteria for medical schools worldwide for assessing candidates' non-cognitive qualities, however, research indicates that traditional structured admission interviews "weakly predict academic performance" and have only a "modest capacity in predicting clinical performance" (Goho & Blackman, 2006, p. 399). In spite of similar findings from other studies (Eva, Rosenfeld, Reiter, & Norman, 2004a, 2004b; Lemay, Lockyer, Collin, & Brownell, 2007, Stansfield & Kreiter, 2007), traditional structured interviews are common-place and continue to be highly valued by medical school admission committees.

In 2002, faculty at the Michael G. DeGroote School of Medicine at McMaster University (Hamilton, Ontario, Canada) pioneered a new vision for the admission interview: the Multiple Mini Interview (MMI). The MMI protocols were developed in response to the research citing flaws and inequities inherent in the structured interview process, and complaints from patients regarding physicians' poor interpersonal skills, professionalism and ethical/moral judgment. Similar to the structured admissions interview, the MMI protocol was designed to assess non-cognitive qualities, including candidates' ability "to think on their feet, critically appraise information, communicate their ideas, and demonstrate that they have thought about some of the issues that are important to the medical profession" (Trinh & Edge, 2012, p.5). Unlike the structured interview, the MMI consists of a series of short (approximately 6 - 8 minutes) interview stations (approximately 6 - 9 stations); each located in a separate room and supervised by two interviewers. At each station, the candidates are presented with a real-life scenario, and they are asked to discuss the specific issues with the interviewers. The interviewers rate the candidate's overall performance at each station, which results in approximately 12 - 16 independent interviewer ratings for each candidate.

The MMI served as a valid and reliable tool for assessing non-cognitive skills (Eva, Rosenfeld, Reiter, & Norman, 2004a, 2004b; Eva, Reiter, Rosenfeld, Trinh, Wood, & Norman,

2012; Lemay, Lockyer, Collin, & Brownell, 2007), as well as a "fairer and more defensible assessment of applicants to medical school than the traditional interview" (Lemay, Lockyer, Collin & Brownell, 2007, p.573). Specifically, the MMI was the best predictor of clinical / ethical / interpersonal skill-oriented outcomes while GPA was the most consistent predictor of performance on knowledge oriented outcome such as content-based examinations (Eva, Reiter, Rosenfeld, Trinh, Wood & Norman, 2012; Eva, Rosenfeld, Reiter & Norman, 2004b). These findings highlight the importance of obtaining a balanced view of each candidate's knowledge, skills and experiences during the admissions process.

Since its inception in 2004, the MMI has been used for candidate selection at medical schools across Canada, Australia, the United States, England, the Middle East, the Far East, and Israel. The MMI has also been adopted for admissions by other disciplines, including: schools of pharmacy, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, midwifery, dentistry, dental hygiene, and veterinary medicine (ProFitHR Candidate Assessment System, 2012).

Reconsidering the Admission Interview Process

In light of the existing and related research, we now re-examine our faculty's admission interview process. After considering the related literature, our previous admission interview protocol seems to align with the structured interview protocol (Public Service Commission of Canada, 2009) as we attempted to standardize the process and structure of the interview (i.e., standard questions, scoring, multiple raters, training of interviewers). Although research indicates that structured interviews are more reliable than unstructured interviews (McDaniel et al, 1994), without additional research, we are unable to ascertain the reliability and validity of our admission interview process.

For example, as previously described, our timed admission interview consisted of a face-to-face structured interview conducted by school administrators and associate / field placement teachers from our partner school boards. We presume the structured aspect of the interview (i.e., standard length, questions, scoring rubric) enhanced the reliability of the interview process (Baker & Spier, 1990; Public Service Commission of Canada, 2009); however, we have not determined the extent to which the interviewers adhered to the questions and the process. Moreover, the faculty also provided training for the interviewers specific to issues related to the administration of the interview, which are characteristic of structured interviews (i.e., protocols for consistency in questioning, scoring, and note-taking processes). These administrative guidelines enhance the reliability of the interview process (Public Service Commission of Canada, 2009). In spite of this training, the extent to which these protocols were implemented is unknown.

Beyond the interview structure and training, the admission interview questions also require additional research. For example, although the content of the interview questions were based on both the case study scenario and the candidate's past behaviours and experiences, or situational content and job-related/employment content (McDaniel et al, 1994), the interview presumably focused chiefly on the latter, which as noted (ibid) is typically less reliable than the former. Based on the literature, it would be prudent for the admission interview content to be more situational in nature as described by the MMI literature (Lemay, Lockyer, Collin &

Brownell, 2007) and based on the faculty's underlying vision for its graduates (Casey & Childs, 2007, 2011).

Conclusions and suggested next steps

The purpose of this paper was to examine the past admission interview practices of one faculty of education by considering its historical context for implementation, examining the research specific to admission interviews, and reconsidering the admission interview processes using related literature as a critical lens. Based on our cursory analysis, we conclude that our faculty of education's previous admission interview process appears to have included practices that somewhat enhanced its reliability and validity. However, we are yet unable to determine the degree and consistency to which the intended admission interview process was actually implemented.

What we can conclude with confidence, however, is that much work needs to be done in researching potential pre-service teacher education admission interview processes. Much like the dedicated faculty at DeGroote School of Medicine at McMaster University who sought to improve the reliability and validity of its admission interview processes to select future doctors; we must also direct such energy in selecting individuals charged with the great responsibility of working with our children and youth. We need the brightest and best people to enter the teaching profession (Vareky, 2013) during a time, as noted by Crocker and Dibbon (2008), that requires an "unprecedented range of knowledge, skills, and experiences" (p. 109).

In concluding this paper, we focus on our broad intentions, which were to: *consider the past; examine the present; and imagine the future* of teacher education. In light of the work presented, we imagine the future of teacher education by presenting the following questions for consideration: How might we re-envision the admission interview? How do we enhance the reliability of the admission interview? What other evidence-based interview processes (e.g., MMI) might we consider? Regardless of the interview protocols developed, how will we address issues of reliability and validity? How do we address issues of feasibility (i.e., time, financial, human resources)? From a broader perspective, if the ultimate goal of the admission process is to attract and admit candidates who demonstrate potential for becoming effective teachers, how do we know that our admission process achieves this goal?

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