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An Alternative Pathway to Elementary Teaching

Lotta Larson and Tom Vontz

The quality of the classroom teacher is the single most predictive school-related variable of student academic achievement. Teacher quality is a function of the unique blend of knowledge, skills, and values that individuals bring to the profession. These assertions are supported by decades of education research, and by the policies and expenditures of local, state, and national governments. In short, the ways in which teachers are educated, developed, and mentored matter (Rice, 2003).

While high-quality educators are essential at every level, they are particularly important in elementary schools. Here, children build foundational ideas and skills that persist into future schooling and adult life. The United States Department of Labor (2016) projects that jobs for “kindergarten and elementary school teachers” will increase by 116,300 (7%) by 2026 as student enrollment is expected to increase, coupled with a “substantial number of older teachers” who will retire over the coming decade (n.p.). Many school districts are experiencing teacher shortages. However, many Americans are inspired by the idea of shaping young minds and turning to teaching as a second, or even third, durable career (Rich, 2014). Most states require that teachers demonstrate strong content knowledge in their subjects, particularly at the secondary level. However, those seeking to teach elementary school may have more flexibility in terms of credentials.

Yet, traditional pathways to elementary teaching present a host of practical obstacles. In response, there has been a rapid growth in alternative pathways to licensure (Grossman & Loeb, 2010). While the prevalence and expectations vary by state, and even district, these programs seek to meet the increasing demand for classroom teachers. Recognizing this need, faculty members at Kansas State University’s College of Education launched the Masters in the Arts of Teaching (MAT) program in May of 2016. Of course, while creating and implementing a new program, we’ve gained insights and wisdom. The goal of this article is to share the vision of our program, along with lessons learned, in hopes of inviting further dialogue about innovative pathways to teaching and support others who wish to embark on a similar journey.

From Traditional to Innovative

Building on our expertise and experience in a successful, yet traditional, teacher preparation program, we identified the labor market’s demand for additional elementary teachers in the State of Kansas and the rest of the country. With several military bases close by, we also recognized the need to offer veterans and/or military-connected family members options for earning teaching credentials despite frequent geographic moves and deployments. We consulted school administrators, teachers, alumni, potential candidates, and community leaders to learn what they saw as immediate and long-term needs in education. Simply put, our goal was to create an innovative program that produced quality teachers by catering to the underserved teacher education market of candidates holding a bachelor’s degree seeking initial licensure in elementary education. Now in its second year, the program has almost doubled in size. We expect continued growth in both enrollment and quality. Tom Vontz, program director, explains, “To be successful, we knew we had to overcome common barriers to education. The program had to be fast-paced, meaningful, and accessible, without compromising quality.”

Fast-paced. Candidates admitted to the MAT program commit to a year of intense online coursework and related field experiences. The program spans from early May of year 1 to graduation at the end of May of year 2. Coursework is completed during fall and spring semesters and in intersessions. Andrea Graham, MAT graduate and current second-grade teacher, shares that the program “was appealing... because 12 months was something that was obtainable for my family.” At the expense of sleep and leisure time, many candidates continue to work while completing the program. For example, Blake Freeland, MAT graduate who now teaches fourth grade, found that “the timeline was tailored for me; a one year master’s program and at the end you’d be eligible to teach.” To him, it was financially feasible to complete a one-year program which, in the end, offered him a path to a new career as an elementary teacher.

Meaningful. Due to the fast-paced nature of the program, faculty members and candidates feel an urgent need to make every assignment or experience “count.” The course sequence is closely aligned with relevant field experiences. Guided by our vision statement of “Preparing educators to be knowledgeable, ethical, caring decision makers for a diverse and changing world,” faculty carefully conceptualize assignments that infuse content knowledge, pedagogy, and dispositions. While most of our faculty members have vast experience teaching online, the development and implementation of the MAT program presented us with new pedagogical challenges. Simply put, we recognize that teaching educational theory is not the same thing as preparing teachers that will face every-day problems in regular classrooms. It is our responsibility to produce quality teachers, no matter their chosen pathway. Candidates also recognize that our college has a long-standing tradition of excellence and expect to get a quality education. Freeland points out, “K-State comes with its own reputation; I knew I wasn’t going to be given some half approach to a program.” To meet these expectations, we’ve challenged ourselves to adapt our traditional on-campus pedagogy to an online format that is both meaningful and accessible.

Accessible. Studies suggest that universities are commonly turning to distance education to reach learners in remote areas, promote equity, and serve those whose needs are not met in traditional on-campus classrooms (see Madden, Jones, & Childers, 2017; Wishart & Guy, 2009). With all courses administered online, mostly in an asynchronous format to accommodate time zones and busy schedules, the MAT program attracts candidates from diverse geographic regions ranging from Texas to Alaska. Despite the asynchronous format, most assignments involve close collaborations among candidates via message boards, blogs, or shared online applications. In addition, synchronous interactions via video conferencing such as Skype or Zoom, engage faculty members and candidates in live discussions. Vontz explains, “Rather than viewing distance education as something ‘distant’ and impersonal, we think of online learning as opportunities for global interactions from your living room; education should be accessible to anyone, from anywhere.”

Distance Supervision

While it is commonly recognized that online learning can be more effective than traditional instruction for postsecondary students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), the efficacy of distance supervision of field experiences is still rather unexplored. In our traditional teacher preparation program, candidates gain valuable, hands-on experience in designated professional development schools. While being cognizant of the MAT program delivered online, we want our candidates to have practical learning experiences, including a 12-week student teaching

placement in an elementary classroom. To provide candidates with quality field-based experiences despite their geographic location, we have developed an innovative supervision model involving contemporary technology and extensive feedback.

Supervision Technology. Using SWIVL™ (www.swivl.com), a robotic video and audio device, to record teacher and student interactions, candidates and supervisors can gain deep insights into a candidate’s progress and performance in the classroom. Using SWIVL™ technology, candidates video record themselves while teaching. Guided by a series of prompts or tasks, the candidates review their videos and carefully reflects on each performance. Through digital note taking, candidates document strengths and weaknesses, ask questions, or develop goals for future lessons. Using cloud-based sharing, university supervisors gain access to uploaded videos, along with the candidates’ commentary. At this point, candidates and supervisors engage in dialogue centered around feedback and self reflection.

Teacher Feedback. To provide candidates with timely and personal feedback, the MAT program relies on teaching assistants (TAs) as university supervisors. Most TAs are experienced classroom teachers with master’s degrees. Candidates and TAs frequently dialogue about learning episode or activities that take place in the classroom. Since these conversations are based on video recordings, they tend to focus on the reality of a particular lesson, not someone’s memory or interpretation of what took place. David Allen, director of field experiences, asserts, “In many ways, this is better than our traditional field experiences which relies on the interpretations of a sole observer... through video, we are able to freeze a moment in time, reflect, provide feedback, dialogue, and document growth.”

MAT Fast Facts	
Degree	Masters in the Arts of Teaching
Provider	College of Education, Kansas State University
Graduate Credits	31
Course Delivery	100% Online
License	Recommendation for Kansas Initial K-6 License
Reciprcity	Kansas maintains reciprocity with all U.S. States
Tuition & Fees	\$17,462.30
Duration	Cohort Model (May – May)
Transfer Credits	Not Accepted
Admissions Requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bachelor’s degree with 3.0 GPA 3.0 GPA in the final two years or approximately the last 60 credit hours • Admission interview • Letters of recommendation • Graduate Record Examination (GRE) score of 301 or higher on Verbal and Quantitative OR Praxis Core Academic Skills for Educators (CORE) subtest scores of 150 on Mathematics, 156 on Reading and 162 on Writing

Lessons Learned

We believe the MAT program is meeting the needs of schools seeking teachers and candidates looking for an alternative pathway to licensure. However, teaching adults, many of whom have been out of school for several years, in a fast-paced, online environment represents several challenges. Here, we present a few lessons learned:

Admissions Requirements. The MAT requires (1) an undergraduate degree from an accredited institution, (2) a 3.0 GPA (overall or in the last 60 hours), (3) positive letters of recommendation, (4) satisfactory answers during an admissions interview and, (5) minimum scores on either the GRE or the Combined Core Academic Skills for Educators test. In theory, the undergraduate degree, GPA, and test scores help to ensure that candidates possess basic knowledge and intellectual skills to be an effective elementary teacher. In practice, however, undergraduate GPA and test scores do not necessarily correlate with effective elementary teaching. Perhaps, more important, are the attitudes and dispositions that prospective teachers bring to the program; yet, these are difficult to accurately measure, especially as an entry requirement.

New Partnerships. Like many universities with professional development school partnerships, our field placements have traditionally occurred in a few local school districts, resulting in long-term, close-knit relationships with administrators, clinical instructors, and teachers. We now understand the necessity of extending operations beyond our immediate geographic footprint (Allen, Goodson, Rothwell, & Sprouse, 2017). By doing so, we are facing administrative difficulties of placing students in districts that are unfamiliar or geographically distant from the university. However, we also recognize the benefits of forming new partnerships across Kansas and across the United States. In the first 18 months of the program, we placed 128 candidates into 65 different school districts. While administratively challenging, this level of diversity (of ideas, systems, curricula, resources, families, and students) has created a dynamic learning environment and sparked new ideas among students and faculty alike. Many of our new partner schools are located far away from a teacher education institution; they appreciate the newfound opportunity to “grow their own teacher” within their community.

Clear and Timely Communication. As educators, we value the importance of constructive feedback. However, we didn’t fully appreciate the urgency of clear, specific, consistent, communication among students, faculty, TAs, administrators, and K-12 stakeholders in an online program populated with somewhat apprehensive adult learners. Candidates demand clear, timely, and specific feedback on assignments. Faculty want to know what is happening in other classes, field experiences, and other parts of the program. School districts need to know expectations of a university with whom they have not worked. We continually share trials and tribulations with each other; we are constantly learning and adapting to new circumstances.

Rigor and Confidence. A challenge of all teacher education programs is to model high expectations for success while helping candidates gain confidence. This is particularly true in the context of teaching adults learners who are not accustomed to critical feedback. The fine balance between rigor and confidence building can potentially damage the learning environment and/or a teacher’s development. We want our candidates to be challenged, without being overwhelmed; and confident, yet realistic, about their teaching abilities. This common problem is exacerbated in the MAT that is populated with students on a seemingly larger continuum than

our typical undergraduate, face-to-face classes. To address these issues, our team of experienced TAs who assist teaching faculty provide students with personalized feedback and individualized guidance throughout the program.

Closing Thoughts

Trends in teacher education indicate a teacher shortage for the foreseeable future. Furthermore, the number of traditional, face-to-face students choosing teaching as a career will likely continue to decline, while alternative routes to teacher preparation will likely continue to increase (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2016). While there is no magic formula to address a multifaceted problem, forging new pathways that help overcome common obstacles is a way to address a large, nationwide problem. No matter what an alternative route looks like, we believe that above all, quality must remain a priority. After all, teachers have a direct impact on students and, as eloquently explained by Steven, a MAT graduate, “[Teaching] is more than a job, it’s a career that has meaning; it’s a way to give back and it’s a way to make the world a better place.” By sharing our vision and lessons learned, we hope to support other innovative programs and invite meaningful dialogue about multiple pathways to teacher licensure.

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