Improving Teacher Candidate Readiness Through Enhanced Articulation and Targeted Assistance

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ABSTRACT: A crucial part of the teacher educator's job within the context of a Professional Development School (PDS) network is to prepare teacher candidates with the necessary skills to become highly effective teachers. In order to accomplish this, they must have a common understanding of a set of standards for teacher candidates to meet, and there must be communication about the measurement of these standards. This paper describes a PDS initiative that a team of instructors piloted to facilitate internal communication about the progress of their teacher candidates and areas where they needed assistance. The tool was designed to measure progress, or lack thereof, of teacher candidates, knowledge, skills, and application of those knowledge/skills as they progressed through key courses prior to beginning their full-time internship. Results of the piloted initiative helped inform the instructors and university supervisors where they should provide additional support to ensure that the candidates are of the highest quality possible, or, if necessary, counsel ineffective candidates into a different career path.

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED: 1. A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community; 2. Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need; 3. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants.

Teacher educators continually focus on new and innovative ways to improve the clinical practice of teacher candidates. Their job is to prepare candidates with the necessary skills to become highly effective teachers. Educational researchers (AACTE, 2010; CAEP, 2015; NAPDS, 2008; NCATE, 2010; Zeichner, 2012) demonstrate that classroom-based experiences for teacher candidates should be intentionally linked to content and pedagogy coursework and that these experiences must be closely monitored by the university instructor and field supervisors. As a result, the National Association of Professional Development Schools (NAPDS) calls for earlier and more frequent clinical work and supervision guided by the Nine Required Essentials of NAPDS.

A critical component of successful programs is open lines of communication between the many stakeholders—instructors and supervisors—about the teacher candidates prior to and during their internships. With this intentional communication, we believe that the teacher candidates will be more successful in their internship and as novice teachers. This paper describes an initiative that a team of instructors piloted to facilitate internal communication about the progress of their teacher candidates and areas where they needed assistance. The tool was designed to measure progress, or lack thereof, of teacher candidates, knowledge, skills, and application of those knowledge/skills as they progressed through key courses prior to beginning their full-time internship.

Context of the Initiative

Towson University's (TU) College of Education (COE) has a long and rich history of preparing highly qualified teachers. Originally a Normal School founded in 1866, TU is the largest producer of teachers in the state with 25 nationally recognized graduate and undergraduate teacher preparation programs. The Department of Secondary and Middle School Education (SMED) is a department with 15 full-time faculty members, one major (middle school education) and one certification program (secondary education). The department graduates approximately 85 undergraduate students per year. The work we do in preparing and assessing teacher readiness is firmly grounded in the research on professional development schools (CAEP, 2015; NAPDS, 2008; Holmes Group, 1990; Danielson, 2013). Our college has a tradition of forming and maintaining successful Professional Development School networks dating back to January of 1994 and grounded in the seminal work of Abdal-Haqq (1993) and the Holmes Group. We affirm the importance of reciprocal PDS relationships to the success of teacher candidates and achievement of the students with whom they work during internships. Furthermore, we believe in the fluid nature of the PDS work that we do and strive to not just participate in PDS work but to transform it where we can.

As one of the departments in the College of Education, SMED has a strong commitment to maintaining strong Professional Development School (PDS) networks with surrounding school districts. Although these partnerships have

worked very well, we wanted to develop a better way of facilitating internal communication about the progress of our teacher candidates and targeting needed assistance. It was an ongoing challenge for the instructors to communicate effectively with each other about the degree of progress being made by teacher candidates, since they come from a variety of disciplines and a cross-section of instructors throughout the university. Consequently, supervisors and instructors within SMED often ended up with interns in their professional year (final two semesters) with a wide range of support needs. Unfortunately, those needs were often not sufficiently transparent until it was too late, particularly since supervisors in the final semester frequently did not have prior knowledge about the candidates they supervise or their respective mentor teachers.

In an effort to open lines of communication among the instructors, with the ultimate goal of ensuring student success, the SMED faculty constructed a tool, referred to as an Articulation Guide, to help instructors determine if teacher candidates are successfully progressing through their core courses taken prior to the full-time internship. They sought to determine if the teacher candidates are gaining the necessary knowledge, skills, and application of those knowledge/skills for readiness to begin their full-time internship. The cumulative results of the Articulation Guide will inform instructors and university supervisors where they should provide additional support to ensure that the teacher education candidates are of the highest quality possible, or, if necessary, to help counsel ineffective candidates into a different career path. In a review of the literature, we could not find any tool that gauged teacher candidate readiness by surveying multiple stakeholders (e.g., instructors, supervisors). A significant body of literature on collaboration and communication between Institute of Higher Education (IHE) and the PDS sites is available but there is very little about communication internal to the IHE.

Link to the Nine Essentials

This Articulation Guide addresses three of the nine essentials that the National Association of Professional Development Schools, (NAPDS, 2013) state are fundamental qualities of a Professional Development School (PDS). The Articulation Guide helps advance equity in the classroom through a concentrated effort to determine the needs of individual students and groups of teacher candidates prior to their full-time internship and then provide appropriate assistance for those students (Essential # 1). As the candidates enter their professional year, they receive additional support through university classwork and seminars taught by the university instructors based on those identified needs as well as ongoing professional development opportunities, jointly developed with school partners (Essential # 3). The Articulation Guide is also an innovative approach to improvement as partners reflect on best practices and how to deliver those practices and likewise provide similar growth opportunities for school staff (Essential # 4).

Towson University SMED and our partner schools embrace all Nine Essentials for Professional Development Schools. In doing so, we continue to strengthen our multiple partnerships. In addition to the three Essentials we specifically mention in this Articulation Guide initiative, other essentials are in place through a variety of efforts that have long been in place with our Professional Development School network and the effective collaboration we have with partner schools and school systems. This initiative merely represents a next step in strengthening those various partnerships. The targeted assistance we are able to collaboratively provide to our teacher candidates will be especially powerful. As can be seen by the design of this effort (next section), it begins with the university instructors identifying strengths and weaknesses in their candidates at an early stage of the program. Subsequent instructors then have information on specific knowledge and skills that need improvement. This identification continues through the professional year so that it is continually updated as candidates take higher-level courses and gain more classroom experience. We believe this ongoing work will deliver better prepared graduates since they will have received assistance in areas of need. We also believe that it will allow us to plan reciprocal professional development opportunities for school staff since the entire effort is based on research-based, best instructional practices.

Rationale for the Articulation Guide

The mere assignment of a final grade does not always adequately inform future instructors of the strengths and weaknesses of individual students. A major focus of this Articulation Guide is for instructors to be able to share important information about students without having to deal with the endless shuffling of paper or exchange of emails. Thus, the initiative allows for the creation of an individual file on the shared computer drive within the department for all students in our secondary or middle school programs.

At the end of each course, the instructor completes the respective section of the Articulation Guide for all Middle School majors and for the Secondary Education English, Social Studies, History, and World Language students. The secondary Mathematics and Science teacher candidates are enrolled in a separate program and are therefore, not included in this data set. The end result is that each subsequent instructor is able to see the ratings and comments from previous instructors. In this way, they can provide more appropriate supports as individual and groups of students progress through the program. It also allows us to have a running record of each student's journey through our key courses in the event we need to focus in on a Professional Growth Plan or Assistance Plan during the part-time or prior to the full-time internship.

Development of the Articulation Guide

The Articulation Guide was derived from a variety of sources. It began with a review of the course syllabi from the identified key

courses. The courses selected for inclusion in the Guide are those that immediately precede and are most closely related to the full-time internship (See Appendix A). In no way are they intended to minimize other courses. The Guide could easily be expanded to include additional courses in the future if desired.

Included in the syllabi review was the identification of key outcomes, particularly those that appeared to be common among most of the identified courses. Additionally, the approved department classroom observation form based on the Danielson Framework (The Danielson Group, 2013) and key High Leverage Practices (Teaching Works, 2013) that are priorities identified by the College of Education helped inform this initiative.

It is important to note that this template was developed with an eye on brevity. If this initiative became too burdensome, we may not have gotten cooperation or the needed buy-in to make the effort worthwhile. Rather, this initiative was based on the notion that it is better to focus on the vital few rather than the trivial many. We viewed this Guide as similar to creating a tapestry woven through a series of courses for each student prior to the full-time internship.

Three-Dimensional Model

In thinking through how best to deal with the complexities of arriving at a workable document while still capturing necessary information and facilitating internal communication, it appeared that we were dealing with three dimensions – knowledge, application, and performance. To illustrate how teacher candidates experience different skills and characteristics, if they are enrolled in the part-time internship (SCED/MSED 499) they have the opportunity to practice the identified skill/characteristic much more than the students in Principles of Secondary Education (SCED 341 and MSED 342) because the SCED/MSED 499 students are in school classrooms twice a week for three hours each day. SCED 341or MSED 342 teacher candidates may gain knowledge about certain skills/characteristics, but they have less time to apply (practice) those learned skills/characteristics due to the breadth of the content in SCED 341 and MSED 342 and the nature of the course. Likewise, students in content area methods courses are more likely to have the opportunity to lead discussions than students in SCED 341 or MSED 342. Thus, we had to recognize inherent differences among courses (See Appendix A), and not have the exact same expectations for each course. Those course instructors are the ones best positioned to tell us the depth to which they took students in the identified skill/characteristic areas.

In addition to knowing if students have gained the knowledge about a specific skill/characteristic to begin their full-time internship and whether they have had the opportunity to apply that skill/characteristic, we needed some kind of indication of the student's performance level in that skill/characteristic. These data points would also assist SCED/MSED 499 instructors in making decisions about topics to emphasize in seminars and/or assistance plans for students who consistently

have shown little progress according to scores on the Guide. With that background, these are the three dimensions that we believe will allow us to arrive at a better overall picture of an individual intern's strengths and weaknesses in vital areas.

Dimension 1: Knowledge (K) – By putting the letter "K" on the Guide, the instructor is saying that the teacher candidate has knowledge (learned) about the specified skill/characteristic in that class but did not have the opportunity to apply (practice) it.

Dimension 2: Application (A) – By putting the letter "A" on the template, the instructor is saying that the teacher candidate has knowledge (learned) about the specified skill/or characteristic in that class and also had the opportunity to apply (practice) it.

Dimension 3: Performance (4, 3, 2, 1, or 0) – In addition to knowing if the teacher candidate has knowledge (learned) a particular skill/characteristic and whether that teacher candidate has had the opportunity to apply (practice) it, we needed to be able to identify how well the teacher candidate is able to demonstrate that skill/characteristic. Hence the five categories: Exemplary (4), Proficient (3), Basic (2), Unacceptable (1), or Not Taught/Not Observable (0).

To further clarify each of these performance measures in Dimension 3, we defined Exemplary as the teacher candidate being very impressive in the identified skill/characteristic at the level of cognitive demand (Knowledge or Application) reached in the course. We defined Proficient as the teacher candidate being generally competent in the identified skill/characteristic at the level of cognitive demand (Knowledge or Application) reached in the course. We defined Basic as the teacher candidate being at a fundamental level in the identified skill/characteristic at the level of cognitive demand (Knowledge or Application) reached in the course. We defined Unacceptable as the teacher candidate being generally unsatisfactory in the identified skill/characteristic at the level of cognitive demand (Knowledge or Application) reached in the course. Finally, we decided to add a measure that allows the instructor to state that the identified skill/characteristic was either not taught in that class or, for whatever reason, the instructor was unable to observe it in that particular teacher candidate.

Completing the Guide

With the above definitions in mind, this Guide is relatively easy to complete. There are only nine possible entries in any given cell on the Guide. Each of the nine possible entries indicates the following: a) whether the teacher candidate has knowledge of the skill/characteristic, b) whether the teacher candidate has applied that skill or characteristic, and c) the extent to which the teacher candidate had mastered the skill or characteristic. It is the combination of these three dimensions which we believe gives us the additional information we need to help our teacher candidates. Hence, the nine possible entries include:

- K4: The skill/characteristic was learned but not applied/ practiced; the teacher candidate is at an exemplary level

Student Name:	Program:				
Student ID:	Major(s):				

K = Knowledge of the Skill/Characteristic A = Applied/Practiced the Skill/Characteristic Performance Level: 0 = Not taught or not observable; 1 = Unacceptable; 2 = Basic; 3 = Proficient; 4 = Exemplary	SCED 341 MSED 342	SCED 355 MSED 365	SCED 357 MSED 367	SCED 499 MSED 499	SCED 401 MSED 401
Professionalism – Appearance, Attitude, Maturity, Judgment, Respect for Others, Timely Completion of Assignments					
Attendance/Participation					
Presence – Voice, Demeanor, Interpersonal Communication					
Written Communication					
Content Knowledge					
Designs Lessons and Sequences of Lessons					
Maintains Healthy Relationships with Students					
Sets and /Enforces Behavior Expectations					
Awareness of Management Issues					
Delivers Engaging Lessons Using Multiple Strategies					
Differentiates Instruction					
Manages Pacing					
Manages Transitions					
Leads Group Discussions					
Elicits Student Thinking through Questioning					
Explains and Models Content, Practices, and Strategies					
Checks for Understanding (Formative Assessments)					
Provides Appropriate Feedback to Students					
What is the overall performance level of this student (4, 3, 2, or 1)?					
Instructor Initials (including middle initial)					

of knowledge compared to other teacher candidates in the course.

- K3: The skill/characteristic was learned but not applied/practiced; the teacher candidate is at a proficient level of knowledge compared to other teacher candidates in the course.
- K2: The skill/characteristic was learned but not applied/practiced; the teacher candidate is at a basic level of knowledge compared to other teacher candidates in the course.
- K1: The skill/characteristic was learned but not applied/practiced; the teacher candidate is at an unacceptable level of knowledge compared to other teacher candidates in the course.
- A4: The skill/characteristic was learned and applied / practiced; the teacher candidate is exemplary at this skill/characteristic compared to other teacher candidates in the course.
- A3: The skill/characteristic was learned and applied / practiced; the teacher candidate is proficient at this skill/characteristic compared to other teacher candidates in the course.
- A2: The skill/characteristic was learned and applied/practiced; the teacher candidate is at a basic level in this skill/characteristic compared to other teacher candidates in the course.
- A1: The skill/characteristic was learned and applied/practiced; the teacher candidate is unacceptable in this skill/characteristic compared to other teacher candidates in the course.
- 0: The skill was not taught, or it was not observable in this course.

Sample Completed Guide

On the following page, there is an example of what a completed Guide might look like for a sample teacher candidate who has completed SCED 341 (Principles of Secondary Education), SCED 355 (Methods of Teaching Social Studies), and SCED 499 (Part-time Internship). It is mostly fictional to serve a purpose, but it could easily represent one of our teacher candidates. It takes about 8-10 minutes to complete this one form once the instructor gets familiar with the procedure. There are many preliminary conclusions that could be drawn from this sample template, but here are a few that are readily apparent.

1. Mary is a Social Studies major since she has taken SCED 355.
2. It appears that she has strong content knowledge and written communications skills.
3. Her attendance and participation are also exemplary.
4. Several of her "Knowledge" scores are fine. It appears to be the application where there is a problem.
5. She has classroom presence issues that must be addressed in some manner. They may be insurmount-

able since she was assigned an unacceptable score by all three instructors. That's no way to start a full-time internship. She needs to be put on an Assistance Plan.
6. She appears to know how to design lessons but has a much more difficult time implementing them.
7. Her classroom management skills are also an issue. She received a basic score in her first two courses, but she was unacceptable in her part-time internship.
8. She has regressed in several areas during her part-time internship. The intensity of that experience may well be beyond her ability to cope. We must keep a close watch.
9. Her overall evaluations by her methods and her part-time internship instructors were a "2" meaning that she is at a basic level. Her SCED 341 instructor rated her overall a "3," but that course is much more at a knowledge level in some areas than the other courses. For a student entering a full-time internship, these scores are asking for trouble. Red flags should be going up.
10. She decided to exit the program. If she had not done so, she should have been put on an assistance plan immediately.

Conclusion and Recommendations

We have completed two rounds of using the Articulation Guide. The primary beneficiaries of this effort so far have been the instructors for the part-time and full-time internship seminars since it allows them much better information upon which to plan appropriate supports for individuals and groups of students. It is extremely helpful for these instructors to review the results of each teacher candidate's Guide in order to target assistance. It is also helpful to aggregate the results of an entire class of teacher candidates to better focus seminar topics to assist many of the teacher candidates at the same time. As a result, our teacher candidates are better served in that they are less likely to fall through the cracks because of more limited communication among staff.

Going forward, we believe that our partner schools and the multiple partnerships as a whole are also beneficiaries of this initiative since improvement in our teacher candidates should result in better outcomes for the students they teach. Additionally, aligned with NAPDS Essential #2, the results of this initiative allow us to work collaboratively with those partner schools in developing appropriate, ongoing professional development opportunities for the teacher candidates as well as for school staff. This template reflects best practices in classroom instruction as identified in the research (Teaching Works, 2013; The Danielson Group, 2013); therefore, new or refresher professional development for school staff can easily be a byproduct of this effort.

Another significant benefit of this initiative has been the opportunity for multiple faculty members to review common courses they teach. For example, in one specific case, three

Student Name: Mary Doe	Program: Secondary
Student ID: 123456	Major(s): Social Studies

K = Knowledge of the Skill/Characteristic A = Applied/Practiced the Skill/Characteristic Performance Level: 0 = Not taught or not observable; 1 = Unacceptable; 2 = Basic; 3 = Proficient; 4 = Exemplary	SCED 341 MSED 342	SCED 355 MSED 365	SCED 357 MSED 367	SCED 499 MSED 499	SCED 401 MSED 401
Professionalism – Appearance, Attitude, Maturity, Judgment, Respect for Others, Timely Completion of Assignments	A3	A3		A3	
Attendance/Participation	A4	A4		A4	
Presence – Voice, Demeanor, Interpersonal Communication	A1	A1		A1	
Written Communication	A4	A4		A4	
Content Knowledge	A4	A4		A4	
Designs Lessons and Sequences of Lessons	A3	A3		A3	
Maintains Healthy Relationships with Students	A2	0		A1	
Sets and /Enforces Behavior Expectations	A2	0		A1	
Awareness of Management Issues	A2	0		A1	
Delivers Engaging Lessons Using Multiple Strategies	A2	A2		A2	
Differentiates Instruction	K3	A2		A2	
Manages Pacing	K3	A3		A2	
Manages Transitions	A2	A2		A2	
Leads Group Discussions	K3	A2		A2	
Elicits Student Thinking through Questioning	K3	A2		A1	
Explains and Models Content, Practices, and Strategies	A2	A2		A1	
Checks for Understanding (Formative Assessments)	A2	A2		A1	
Provides Appropriate Feedback to Students	A2	A2		A1	
What is the overall performance level of this student (4, 3, 2, or 1)?	3	2		2	
Instructor Initials (including middle initial)	ABC	XYZ		MNO	

Comments (Put your initials after your comment):

1. Mary tries hard in my class, and she is very intelligent. She is challenged in interpersonal communications, and it showed in her classroom management during the microteach session. She really needs to develop her stage presence. ABC

2. Mary is a hard worker. She knows what to do, but struggles doing it in real time. XYZ

3. Mary has had an up and down part-time internship. She is able to complete the academic work with no problem but applying it to the classroom is often a significant challenge. After counseling her on several occasions, she has decided to exit the program at the end of the semester. If she had not done so, I would have had to put her on an assistance plan for her full-time internship. MNO

different instructors of the same course reached different levels (knowledge vs. application) within the same indicators. That we believe will help us even more as department members discuss internally how to better align curriculum so that teacher candidates experience a more common level of instruction in the identified indicators. We believe this is the area where we have the opportunity for increased professional growth at the university level, and it is where we intend to recommend to faculty that we spend time attempting to assure comparable outcomes for the same courses taught by different instructors.

We are excited about the possibilities this initiative presents. For interested parties, we have included a 10-step process for creating your own Articulation Guide (See Appendix B). We realize that there will be additional improvements to the process over time, and we welcome input moving forward. At this time, however, we feel we have taken an important first step. Our teacher candidates and the students they teach deserve our very best, and we will continue to focus on how to make that happen. SUP

Appendix A SMED Courses Included on the Articulation Guide

SCED 341	Philosophy and purposes of secondary education; nature of secondary education programs; principles of teaching and learning; basic techniques in instruction. A field experience to schools is required and will necessitate travel time before and after class. Individualized grade level experiences for specific content areas will be provided.
MSED 342	Introduction to the field of middle level education; professional decision making and field experience in the middle school setting.
SCED 355	Objectives, curriculum, materials, and instructional procedures in the teaching of social studies.
MSED 365	Knowledge, skills, and dispositions to make decisions about curriculum, instruction, and assessment in a middle school social studies classroom.
SCED 357	Language arts as taught in secondary schools.
MSED 367	English language arts as taught in middle schools.
SCED 499	Clinical experience in a professional development school the term immediately prior to the full-time internship; focus on classroom management and discipline, technology utilization, student diversity and reflective practices.
MSED 499	Clinical experience in a professional development school the term immediately prior to the full-time internship; focus on classroom management and discipline, technology utilization, student diversity and reflective practices.
SCED 401	Analysis of and development of solutions for problems in pupil behavior, curriculum, evaluation and instructional procedures. Secondary teaching philosophies and strategies based upon identified needs determined as a result of the internship experience will be explored in depth.
MSED 401	Analysis of and development of solutions for problems in pupil behavior, curriculum, evaluation and instructional procedures. Secondary teaching philosophies and strategies based upon identified needs determined as a result of the internship experience will be explored in depth.

Appendix B

Ten Step Process for Developing an Effective Articulation Guide

The following steps represent one way an institution could move forward in establishing an effective Articulation Guide unique to its own program.

1. Agree on the need as a department
2. Determine the research base for the identified skills and characteristics to be measured
3. Select the skills/characteristics you deem most important
4. Select the courses you wish to include in the initial phase
5. Review the course syllabi for those courses to identify key and/or common outcomes
6. Create your model
   a. Reach agreement on the dimensions of the model
   b. Decide how you will have faculty enter the data (on a shared drive or on paper)
   c. Put the data collection system in place so that you are ready to implement
7. Pilot your Articulation Guide
8. Gather data and review results from the pilot
   a. Are there any surprises? How do you address them?
   b. Are the data valuable to end-users? What would make the data more valuable?
9. Implement the pilot again to continue to work out "bugs" in the system,
   a. Decide how you will use cumulative data over time as your teacher candidates complete the program
   b. Review data for possible curricular implications
10. Continuously make necessary revisions (including the addition of other courses if desired)

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