Meeting the Demand for Accountability: Case Study of a Teacher Education Program in China

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Abstract

To meet the demand for accountability, a teacher education program in a university located in South China has established processes at the college, the program, and the faculty levels to assure its program quality. Highlights of the processes are: involvement of stakeholders and the examination of program effectiveness. Although much has been done to help program candidates succeed, more effort is needed in the areas of program assessment and continuous improvement to assure program quality. An accountability implementation plan, a beginning teacher mentoring program, and a comparative study of beginning teacher performance were recommended to further enforce its strategies toward program accountability.

Keywords: *Teacher education, accountability, program quality*

When the public demands teacher education programs to move toward accountability, teacher education program developers need to assure their program quality as a first step to work towards accountability (Flanigan, Marion, & Richardson, 2000; Kaufman, Herman, & Watters, 1996; Lyons & Gooden, 2001). Demand for educational accountability is more pressing when funding for educational programs becomes more stringent (Chan, Richardson, & Jording, 2001). Responding to the accountability movement, a teacher education program in a university located in South China has taken the initiative in planning to assure the quality of its program. The program developers aim at helping school teachers with no pedagogical background to gain competency and confidence in teaching. The program is a two-year part-time certification program in response to the demand for certified and qualified teachers of this time.

Accountability Movement in Higher Education

Literature of accountability in higher education is rich. In acting towards program accountability, many higher education institutes in the world have devised program quality control measures to demonstrate its responsibility to the public interest. Higher education institutes in Australia, Behrain, Canada, Chile, China, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Namibia, New Zealand, Philippines, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Uruguay, United Kingdom, the United States and Vietnam have taken the lead in response to the accountability movement (HKCAA Tenth Annual International Conference, 2001; Bureau for Higher Education, Ministry of University Affairs, Thailand, 1998; Fuentelsaz & Jimenez,

2000). How to improve program quality to achieve accountability was examined by Beza (1984) to include 5 basic elements: entry screening, increased program competencies, mentoring student teachers, exit evaluation, and probation for beginning teachers. Crawford (1998), Meek and O'Neill (1997), and Sutherland (1997) also shared similar viewpoints in program quality assurance. Models of program accountability were developed by Hallett (1997) and Ball (2000). Hallett favors a loose-tight model that involves the topic-down and bottom-up processes. Ball introduced his accountability model to include three components: academics, candidates, and social evaluation. In addition, Randall (2000) emphasized that the achievement of accountability resulted in increased demands on the learners in terms of the acquisition of knowledge and skills, the capacity for conceptualization, and increasing autonomy in learning. In discussing the effectiveness of accountability, Leong (2000) presented indicators of effective measures to maintain quality as follows: institutional mechanisms for course approval and monitoring, course design and delivery methods, staff qualifications and appointment procedures, student support services, assessment procedures and criteria, and course management. These indicators should be identified and developed as quality measuring criteria in alignment with the institute's mission and value system (Daniel, 2000). In support of accountability, Richardson, Chan and Jording (2001) emphasized that plans need to be developed to supervise educational activities, sets checkpoints for educational progress and provides directions for accountability movement. In attempting to achieve accountability, concerns were expressed by Beza (1984) about potential decreases in enrollment and incompletion of the academic competency areas. Sutherland (1997) also highlighted that the cumbersome accountability process of acquiring evidence could possibly overburden institutes of their prime responsibility of providing teacher education.

The Case of a Teacher Education Program

The case described in this paper is a two year part-time teacher certification program for teachers in China who started teaching in earlier years when teaching certificate was not required for classroom teaching. Teachers without any pedagogic preparation were permitted to teach in their areas of specialization. Since regulations in recent years have made it clear that a teaching certificate issued by a provincial education department is required for a teaching position, universities nationwide have started to initiate teacher certification programs to help non-certified teachers to obtain a teaching certificate. Because most non-certified teachers cannot leave their full time employment to participate in the certification program, many universities have made it more convenient to them by offering part-time two-year programs. The program in this study is located in the college of education of a city university in South China. The city covers a large modern metropolitan area of 400 square miles with a K-12 student population of 800,000. Of its 18,000 classroom teachers, approximately 40% of them are non-certified. The college of education in this university of study is one of the largest providers of teacher education program of the city. To improve the quality of teaching in public schools, the city government has approved huge amount of financial support to the teacher certification program of the university. At the same time, public demand for demonstration of program accountability is pressing. Thus, the President of

the university has asked the designers of the teacher education program to re-examine its program effectiveness and to develop a program accountability plan in response.

Achieving Accountability through Program Quality

Educational program accountability is initiated from the development of a quality program that reflects the current critical needs of the community. What follows is the quality implementation of the procedures leading to the outcomes of the program. Effectiveness of the program is a demonstration of program accountability.

The relationship of accountability and program quality can be shown in the Diagram 1 where the cycle starts with the establishment of accountability goals and ends in program effectiveness as feedback to goal revision of accountability. In this process, it is clear that programs of better quality yield more effective outcomes to satisfy the accountability goals. When accountability goals are not achieved, it is quite possible that the program or its implementation procedures was not developed well enough to generate the desired outcomes. On the other hand, reality of the goals has to be re-examined to ensure a reasonable extent of attainability.
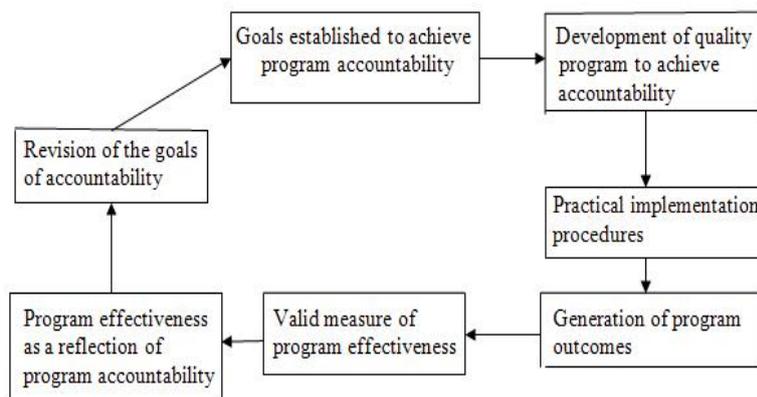

Diagram 1. Relationship of Program Quality and Accountability

Believing in the relationship between program quality and accountability, the program designers of the teacher education program launch a quality assurance procedure across the program. The major governance of quality assurance to achieve accountability includes:

The Dean's Cabinet

At the college level, the Dean's Cabinet consists of program coordinators, department heads, elected faculty members and student representatives to ensure systemic implementation of quality assurance procedures across all programs. The Dean's Cabinet oversees the entire program implementation process and makes recommendations to the academic departments for improvements needed to enhance the achievement of accountability.

The Program Advisory Board

Members of the Program Advisory Board include program coordinators, department heads, school teacher representatives, principal representatives, professional organization representatives, and representatives from the provincial department of education. The major function of the Board is to bring the community needs and teacher shortage to the attention of the College of Education. Though the Board is advisory in nature, its recommendations have been closely followed by program designers of the college.

School Teacher, Faculty and Student Collaboration

A professional collaboration is established between school teachers, college faculty and students when students go for student teaching practices. Student performance expectations and standards compliances are well communicated to ensure an understanding among all the stakeholders. Matters of quality concerns are discussed at the collaborative meetings of the stakeholders to be held at regular intervals. Recommendations for program improvement are made to the department heads that will bring them to the attention of the Dean's Cabinet.

Program Development for Accountability

For the teacher education program to establish accountability, the university has asked program developers to adhere to the fundamental guidelines of program development initiated by Henson (2006). Four basic components are required of the development of a program: goals, design, implementation and evaluation. When goals are identified with levels of objectives to be achieved, details of the program can be developed to respond to goal achievement. Then, implementation procedures can be established to systematically carry out the planned activities as program functions. Finally, methods of evaluation need to be in place to determine whether the program goals have been achieved. Results of the evaluation will be employed to revise program goals and their realities of attainment.

Following practical procedures in designing the teacher education program has generated ample amount of good evidence to establish program accountability. It demonstrates to the public that development of the teacher education program is

academically sound, practically oriented and sensibly structured. The evaluation component of program development is particularly convincing as a professionally responsible act.

Accountability: Assessment of Program Effectiveness

Program assessment as a tool to reflect on program accountability is achieved through a summary of student performance assessments in the college. This is done by starting an initial survey of students' knowledge, skills and disposition of the teaching profession at the beginning of the program. Similar surveys are conducted at the mid-point and at the end of the program. Survey data are compared to determine if significant gains have been made to students' level of knowledge, skills and disposition. Improvement of student performance provides powerful evidence to document program accountability.

Program assessment is also performed by providing opportunities for student feedback. Recommendations for quality improvement is sought through channels such as student forums, course evaluation and end of program evaluation by students. In recent years, program assessment was also performed by interviewing program graduates who have assumed their beginning teaching jobs. At the same time, arrangements have been made to interview the supervisors of the beginning teachers to solicit information about how well the program has prepared their students for the teaching positions in the market.

Information as a result of the interviews provides valuable information for better program modification. In addition, program assessment is also performed by the Board of Examiners at the college level. The Board of Examiners consists of faculty representatives from each of the academic departments and external examiners from other universities. The Board of Examiners moderates assessment results against program aims, objectives, policies, assessment methods and standards to assure program quality.

Accountability: Assessment of Student Achievement

To document for program accountability, the program has to provide evidence of achievement through students' academic progress. A procedure is established by the university to monitor the academic progress of students through four major steps: (1) selecting highly qualified students during admission, (2) monitoring students' semester progress, (3) reviewing students' academic standing at mid-point of the program, and (4) examining students' overall performance at the end of the program. The rationale for this assessment procedure is that if admission standards are set high in the fore front, the program is able to attract highly qualified students who stand a greater chance of program completion. By continuously monitoring students' academic progress, program advisors could detect at an early stage possible problems that could deter students from program completion. If students are found not being able to catch up with the planned schedule, remedial work can be offered to assist the students. Evaluation of students'

performance at the end of the program is usually comprehensive in nature. Students will need to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and disposition of a professional teacher before graduation from the program. University faculty and field supervising teachers help evaluate student performance. These four procedures of monitoring student academic progress can well be served as checkpoints of a responsible program that relates well to the requirements of program accountability.

Special Features of the Accountability Measures

What this university has done to meet the challenge of accountability is unique. The special features of the accountability measures are highlighted as planning, involvement, structure and outcome. They are concisely described in the following paragraphs.

Planning

The program developers have demonstrated again and again their careful planning effort in documenting the process toward accountability. Outcomes of their effort have become sources of powerful evidence to meet the accountability requirements. Credits are also given to the approach designed and undertaken by stakeholders in achieving accountability.

Involvement

A unique feature of the quality assurance process to achieve accountability is the extent of involvement by educators. Involving educators in this accountability process is an effective way to establish professional recognition. The program improves by considering practical ideas recommended by internal and external examiners. Internal examiners are faculty colleagues from other programs. External examiners are faculty invited to judge the quality of the program from other universities. In addition, faculty in the program and other public school educators also contribute to the quality of the program to ensure accountability.

Structure

The structure of examining program quality is established to allow opportunities for stakeholders at every level to participate in providing feedback. The college of education clearly defines the functions and responsibilities of different units of this structure to achieve accountability. The Dean's Cabinet, the Program Advisory Board, the School Teacher, Faculty and Student Collaboration, Student Forum and the Board of Examiners are organized to provide adequate channels for sharing and discussion of critical program issues.

Outcome

The program employs three channels to demonstrate its levels of accountability. First, program leaders have invited program graduates to reflect upon their experiences with different aspects of the programs. It is believed that graduates who have undergone every stage of the program would be most eligible to provide feedback for program advancement. Second, evaluation of program graduates by their school employers generates solid evidence of program quality to uphold program accountability. Third, the percentage of program graduates who passed the provincial teacher certification examination is another strong indication of program success.

Evaluating the Process to Program Accountability

Evaluation of the process to program accountability can be described by three basic components: development of quality program, implementation of quality program, and evaluation of quality program. A quality program cannot demonstrate its accountability without displaying the essentials of these components. They form a cycle by starting with program development to be followed by program implementation and ending with program evaluation. The outcome of program evaluation is fed back to the revision of the program.

Program Development

The process of development of a quality program needs to be fully described with strong support of human and academic resources. Collaboration with school teachers in the development of teacher education programs has been credited with encouragement to face with classroom realities. Review and endorsement by education specialists will certainly add credit to program accountability.

Program Implementation

An implementation procedure has to be developed to ensure program efficiency and effectiveness. An internal cross-checking system will surely help uphold program quality and integrity. A periodic formal self-study will assure the program activities in alignment with the participants' needs.

Program Evaluation

The program needs to be designed with formal program and candidate assessment devices. Formal assessment rubrics need to be developed to collect data as documentation of program and candidate success. Analysis of assessment data is a powerful means of demonstrating program accountability.

Recommendations for Improvement of Program Accountability

Program accountability can be demonstrated by strengthening support of program graduates. The positive effects of a mentoring program on the success of first year teachers are documented in recent literature (Hudson, & Williamson, 2001; Singleton, 1999; Wheeler-Clouse, 1999; Wilk, 1999; Wilson, 1998). This recommendation calls for mentoring beginning teachers by veteran teachers and the teacher education faculty to assure the quality of program graduates by monitoring their teaching activities in their first year of teaching. The teacher education faculty and the veteran teachers will work as a team to provide support and needed services to assure quality teaching of the beginning teachers (Ackley, 1991; Breeding, 1998; Edick, 2001; Montesano, 1998; Robertson, 1997). Continuous support of program graduates is a powerful strategy in managing quality assurance of a program and thus demonstrating accountability.

Another way to demonstrate program accountability is to develop a plan of continuous program improvement. The plan can be developed and implemented to call upon all faculty and staff to continue to seek for alternative ways for program improvement (Deming, 1982). It should focus on student needs by reviewing current trends of school development.

An important but frequently overlooked factor contributing to program quality is the pride faculty and staff take in cherishing the success of the program. Pride in the program can be developed in faculty and staff by motivating them through professional participation, recognition, and program ownership. Highly motivated faculty and staff contribute to assurance of program quality. Their contributions would serve as a model that graduates should strive to equal when they assume their teaching positions. The value of modeling pride and motivation is an essential component of program accountability.

Finally, conducting studies to compare the performance of program graduates with that of other teacher education program graduates is a clear indication of program outcome. Such comparative studies provide ample opportunities for a teacher education program to learn from the successful experiences of others. Program improvement is always initiated as a means to demonstrate program accountability.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Accountability for teacher education always comes at a time when huge investments are approved for program development or when student achievement is comparatively low. The finger always points at poor quality teachers prepared by college teacher education programs. This is true not only in China but also in many countries worldwide. When teacher education programs are pressured to produce solid evidence to demonstrate accountability, program developers strive hard to create a data collection system to satisfy the accountability criteria. While much effort is exerted on program assessment, enthusiasm for the pursuit of teacher education goals is often overlooked.

In many countries where teacher salaries are not economically competitive, school systems are experiencing a difficult time to retain teachers. Schlecty and Vance (1983) estimated that of all beginning teachers entering the education profession in the United States, fifty percent will leave during the first seven years of teaching. The education accountability process adds not only to teachers' workload but also to their professional pressure. To protect the graduates' interest in teaching career, teacher education programs need to initiate a vigorous support program to prepare them to manage additional responsibilities as a result of program assessment for accountability. It is a plausible approach to reducing the number of beginning teachers leaving the profession.

On the other hand, the teacher education program in China as illustrated in this manuscript has taken the lead of showing other teacher education programs as well as public school systems how demand for accountability can be met. In fact, the call for education accountability does not come overnight. Developers of teacher education program need to embed the assessment system as an essential component of program development. After achieving program effectiveness, teacher education programs will face program efficiency issues emerged as the second wave of educational accountability (Chan & Richardson, 2002).

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