Graduate Focus Group Interview Summary- October 9, 2024

Dr. Carrie Kondor, Director of Education, interviewed four graduates of Linfield's Teacher Education Program on October 9, 2024. The questions posed were the same questions used in the 2019 & 2023 Graduate Student Focus Group Interview with one additional question.

The purpose of the graduate focus group was to have 1-year, 2-year, and 3-year graduates answer the following questions:

> ● *What are your "go-to" teaching strategies that you use on a regular basis? (with follow up about their use of technology)*
>
> ● *Did you feel prepared when you stepped into the classroom? How did we do in helping you get ready for that? (with additional question for Single-Subjects and Art/Music/PE graduates about their content area preparation vs. their Education Department preparation)*
>
> ● *Where was your steepest learning curve, biggest struggles in your first year(s) of teaching? What do you wish you had known going into the profession that you didn't know?*
>
> ● *How do you know your students are learning, thinking about both formative and summative assessments? (with follow up about differentiated student needs)*

Four graduates attended a focus group zoom interview. After redacting the zoom transcription, Dr. Kondor entered the responses into ChatGPT (chat.openai.com), requesting a summary of themes in the responses.   The summary of themes was then checked by Dr. Kondor for accurate reflection of the qualitative data, and the summary was sent to participants for member-checking. Findings generated from the 2024 interview questions are included below.

Question: What are your go-to teaching strategies that you use on a regular basis?

Common themes across the graduate responses include:

- **Gradual Release of Responsibility**: Several participants, particularly Participants 1 and 3, emphasized using the "I do, We do, You do" model, where the teacher gradually shifts responsibility for learning to the students.
- **Collaboration and Interaction**: Participant 1 highlighted partner work for young students, while Participant 3 mentioned "Think-Pair-Share" and incorporating movement to keep students engaged.
- **Classroom Environment and Flexibility**: Participant 3 discussed rearranging the classroom to create a flexible learning space that allows for more dynamic activities.
- **Routine and Structure**: Participant 4 emphasized the importance of consistent routines, especially for new students, and used chunking to break lessons into manageable parts.
- **Behavior Management**: Participant 1 mentioned using multiple behavior management strategies, including individual, group, and whole-class systems.
- **Checking for Understanding**: Participant 2 focused on regularly checking for student comprehension, particularly through questioning to assess who is following the material.

These strategies reflect a focus on engagement, gradual learning transitions, and maintaining structured yet adaptable classroom environments.

Question: Could you expand on your use of technology?

Common themes across the graduate responses include:

- **Classroom Monitoring and Management**: Participants mentioned tools for monitoring student screens. Participant 4 highlighted using a tool to view what students are doing on their devices, helping manage off-task behavior and focus. Similarly, Participant 1 uses screen mirroring and restrictions to ensure students only access district-approved materials.
- **Interactive Presentations**: Both Participants 2 and 3 emphasized the use of interactive presentation tools. Participant 3 uses presentations where students actively engage with content (e.g., matching vocabulary). Participant 2 mentioned Pear Deck, which allows students to interact with slides on their own devices and answer questions.
- **Engagement Through Gamification**: Several participants discussed tools that engage students through game-like experiences. Participant 2 highlighted "Blooket," a competitive game-based learning tool, as a more engaging alternative to Kahoot. Participant 3 uses "Classcraft," a gamified classroom management tool where students create characters and gain experience points, especially for a group of video game-obsessed students.
- **Subject-Specific Programs**: Participant 1 shared the use of "Reading Eggs," a literacy program tied to phonics skills that students can work on independently. This was described as a highly engaging program with features like spelling "driving tests."
- **District-Specific Tools**: Participant 1 also mentioned that their district replaced projectors with TV display screens, which are integrated into daily teaching, as well as district-approved platforms like iReady for skill-building.

These responses reflect a focus on using technology for classroom management, interactive learning, and engaging students through gamification and subject-specific digital tools.

Question: Did you feel prepared when you stepped into the classroom? And then how did we do in helping you get ready for that?

Common themes across the graduate responses include:

- **Preparation through Hands-on Experience and Lesson Planning:** Participants emphasized the importance of hands-on experiences, like creating their own projects in science class, which they applied in their teaching roles. Lesson planning, though initially overwhelming due to its length, was crucial for understanding content, student needs, and classroom execution. Writing detailed plans helped participants internalize the material and target specific learning strategies, especially for ELD integration.
- **Frameworks and Evaluation Tools:** The evaluation frameworks used by mentors and supervisors played a key role in their development. These frameworks allowed student teachers to lead discussions about their progress and understand expectations. They also provided clarity during evaluations and helped resolve conflicts with mentor teachers by aligning goals.

- **Reflection and Continuous Learning:** Keeping a notebook for daily reflections and debriefs was highlighted as a valuable tool. This practice helped participants assess what worked and what didn't, allowing them to make improvements in real-time, both during student teaching and in their current teaching roles.
- **Research and Standards Alignment:** Participants noted the importance of learning how to research content and align it with educational standards, especially in broad subjects like the arts and social studies. Understanding standards and how to tailor lessons to meet them was seen as a crucial part of their preparation.
- **Long-Term Value of Tools and Strategies:** Several participants mentioned returning to the tools and strategies from their program, such as lesson plan templates and methods for unpacking standards, in their current roles and even in further education. These resources continued to support their professional growth and curriculum development.

Question:

Where was your steepest learning curve, biggest struggles in your first year(s) of teaching? What do you wish you had known going into the profession that you didn't know?

The participants highlighted several key themes in their experiences with teacher education programs. These included the importance of hands-on experience, curriculum preparation, classroom setup, and self-care, as well as some gaps in the preparation for the complexities of specific subject areas.

- **Hands-on Experience and Peer Learning:** Participant 1 emphasized that, while learning theoretical concepts is essential, real understanding comes from practical, firsthand experiences during student teaching. They also valued opportunities to hear peers' stories, as it provided a broader perspective on different classroom challenges.
- **Curriculum Preparedness:** Many participants felt unprepared to manage the curriculum they would be teaching. For example, Participant 1 mentioned how overwhelming it was to learn new reading and math curricula on the job with little prior exposure, advocating for more curriculum-focused practice during their training. Similarly, Participant 3, as a drama teacher, felt confident in lesson planning but struggled with teaching technical theater aspects due to the broad scope of the subject. They suggested splitting the curriculum into distinct sections for better preparation.
- **Classroom Setup for Accessibility:** Another area of focus was classroom design. Participant 1 highlighted the need for better guidance on how to set up a classroom that is both accessible to all students and enjoyable for the teacher. They felt that there should be more specific discussions on creating a balanced, inclusive learning environment.
- **Self-care and Managing Stress:** Participant 4 pointed out that the importance of self-care was often mentioned but not thoroughly integrated into teacher preparation programs. They noted how student teachers were unprepared for the mental health challenges exacerbated by the pandemic, suggesting that teacher training should address the potential for crises like school lockdowns and shootings. They also stressed the need for teachers to learn how to maintain their mental well-being during stressful situations.

- **Lesson Planning and Flexibility:** Both Participants 2 and 3 praised the lesson planning aspects of their training, citing multiple opportunities to practice and receive feedback as crucial to their confidence. However, they also noted that certain broad subject areas, like social studies and drama, left them feeling unprepared due to the vast amount of material and the variety of topics they would need to teach. Participant 2, in particular, wished for more specific guidance on how to teach certain subjects, like American history, which would better equip them for real-world classrooms.
- **Gaps in Methods Class Effectiveness:** Several participants expressed dissatisfaction with their methods courses. Participant 4 found their methods class lacking in practical strategies, while others felt that their class did not provide the depth of subject-specific techniques they needed. This was compounded by differences in how the course was taught by individual professors, leading to inconsistency in teacher preparation.

This discussion revealed a need for more targeted support in curriculum preparation, classroom management, and mental health strategies, along with a desire for more in-depth, subject-specific teaching methodologies.

Question: **How do you know your students are learning... thinking about both formative and summative assessments?**

Creative and Tailored Assessments

- **Customized Tools:** Participant 1 discussed how their district-provided literacy assessments are often too complex for first graders. They create their own, more accessible assessments (e.g., matching pictures, cut-and-glue activities).
- **Adaptation for Digital Tools:** Use of digital platforms like the STAR reading program helps assess reading skills through various tasks (letter sounds, passage reading), though tailored assessments remain necessary for classroom compatibility.

Formative Check-ins

- **Quick Gauges of Understanding:** Participant 1 also employs quick formative techniques, such as "thumbs up/down" or "show me on your fingers," and uses exit tickets (like solving one or two math problems on sticky notes) to assess learning progress daily.
- **Verbal and Non-traditional Assessments:** Some students who struggle with written tasks are assessed verbally or through more practical engagement.

Peer and Self-assessment in Collaborative Settings

- **Peer Coaching and Quizzing:** Participant 3 shared how acting students in their monologue workshops engaged in peer coaching. They asked each other prepared questions about their characters and scenes, which helped them understand the material and test their knowledge through interaction.

Chunking and Focused Feedback

- **Incremental Learning:** Participant 3 described breaking down monologue performances into manageable parts, giving targeted feedback on specific aspects to help students gradually improve and internalize their learning.

Worksheets and Conceptual Understanding

- **Worksheets as a Formative Tool:** According to Participant 1, worksheets can also be used to evaluate students' understanding of specific topics. Worksheets help identify areas where students need more practice, such as recognizing text features.
- **Tailored Expectations:** Some students are unable to complete traditional tests, so alternate assessment methods (such as verbal responses) are employed.
- 6. Summative Examples and Applications
- **Providing Examples to Demonstrate Understanding:** Participant 2 highlighted how asking students to give additional examples of a concept discussed in class is an effective way to measure their understanding of historical events, causes, or other topics.
- **Explaining Concepts to Others:** Another sign of learning is students' ability to explain the concepts to peers, demonstrating their mastery of the material.

These methods emphasize flexibility, creativity, and the importance of formative assessments in gauging students' understanding, alongside the more formalized summative assessments.

Question: Is there anything else that you would like to share?

highlights several important themes related to communication, support, and professional development in the educational environment. Here are the key themes identified:

- **Communication with Staff and Non-Educators**: Participants emphasize the need for effective communication among educators and with non-educational staff, such as counselors. They discuss challenges in providing necessary information about students' behavioral issues and ensuring timely support for students who are struggling.
- **Student Support and Inclusion**: There's a focus on the need for structured support for students facing challenges, particularly those with behavioral or health issues. Participants express concern about students not receiving the help they need, which can disrupt the learning environment for others.
- **Diversity and Representation in Education**: Participants discuss the challenges of integrating equity and diversity into non-core subjects, such as the arts. They express a desire for more examples and resources to effectively incorporate diverse perspectives into their teaching.
- **Professional Communication with Parents**: The transcript highlights the complexities of communicating with parents during conferences, especially when discussing student behavior. Participants express a need for strategies and practice in handling various scenarios during these discussions.
- **Mentorship and Guidance**: There is a strong emphasis on the importance of mentorship during student teaching. Participants encourage seeking support from mentor teachers and maintaining communication to enhance their teaching practice.
- **Engaging with Students**: Participants reflect on the challenges of interacting with students, particularly younger ones. They express a desire for better preparation in understanding developmental differences and effectively communicating with students of varying ages.
- **Practical Experience and Preparation**: Overall, the discussion points to a need for more practical training and scenarios to prepare future educators for real-life situations they will encounter in the classroom.

These themes collectively underscore the challenges faced by educators in fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment while emphasizing the importance of effective communication, mentorship, and practical experience in their professional development.