

## Graduate Focus Group Interview Summary- October 27, 2023

Dr. Carrie Kondor, Director of Education, interviewed five graduates of Linfield's Teacher Education Program on October 26, 2023. The questions posed were the same questions used in the 2019 Graduate Student Focus Group Interview.

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)*
- *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 and one graduate sent responses via email. After redacting the zoom transcription and email responses, 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 2023 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:

**Active Learning:** Several graduates emphasized the importance of students actively engaging with the material through methods like cooperative learning, investigations, and independent practice. These strategies encourage students to take an active role in their learning.

**Differentiation:** The use of different strategies to address the needs of students at various levels is a recurring theme. This includes strategies for students who may need additional support as well as those who require more challenging enrichment activities.

**Behavior Management:** Some graduates highlighted strategies for managing student behavior and classroom transitions, such as CHAMPS and self-assessment. Effective behavior management is essential for creating a conducive learning environment.

**Feedback and Assessment:** Strategies for assessing and providing feedback on student performance were discussed. These include exit tickets, real-time feedback in online practice, and debriefing sessions to address comprehension issues.

**Fluency and Mastery:** Graduates discussed techniques to build fluency and mastery of skills, especially in subjects like math and language. These techniques are geared toward helping students become more proficient in core concepts.

**Student-Centered Learning:** Many strategies mentioned encourage students to take ownership of their learning. This student-centered approach promotes independence and critical thinking.

**Visual Aids and Graphic Organizers:** The use of visual aids, such as Thinking Maps, to help students better understand and organize information was a common theme. Visual tools can aid in comprehension and communication.

**Adaptability and Flexibility:** Several graduates mentioned the ability for students to move between different groups or levels based on their needs. This adaptive approach allows for personalized learning experiences.

**Positive Reinforcement:** Encouraging positive behavior and hard work through praise and positive reinforcement is a common theme. This helps create a positive classroom atmosphere and motivates students.

These common themes reflect a holistic approach to teaching, with a focus on active engagement, individualized instruction, behavior management, and effective assessment. It highlights the importance of adapting teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of students and creating a positive and productive learning environment.

**Question: Could you expand on your use of technology? How does technology support your strategies or the other way around? How does technology serve as a teaching strategy.**

Common themes across the graduate responses regarding the use of technology in education include:

**Interactive Displays and Screen Sharing:** Graduates mentioned the use of interactive displays, such as smartboards and smart TVs, to engage students and facilitate screen sharing for collaborative learning. Screen sharing allows students to present their work to the class and empowers peer teaching.

**One-to-One Device Programs:** Many of the graduates highlighted the advantage of having one-to-one device programs (e.g., iPads or Chromebooks) in their districts, which provide students with individual devices for learning.

**Digital Whiteboards and Teaching Apps:** The use of digital whiteboard apps, such as "Explain Everything," was mentioned as a tool for students to teach each other and record their explanations, fostering academic vocabulary and comprehension.

**Educational Platforms:** Graduates noted the use of educational platforms like Schoology and Google Classroom to manage assignments, discussions, and sharing of resources. These platforms promote collaboration and communication among students.

**Remote Learning and Feedback:** Technology has enabled remote learning and the ability for students to record themselves, complete assignments, and receive feedback, even beyond the classroom.

**Management and Monitoring:** Technology supports classroom management, allowing teachers to monitor students' activities on their devices and ensure they are on task.

**Adaptive and Differentiated Learning:** Technology can support differentiated instruction by providing students with resources and activities tailored to their specific needs and abilities.

**Engagement and Empowerment:** The use of technology in teaching aims to engage students and empower them to take an active role in their learning by allowing them to share and present their work.

**Efficiency and Organization:** Graduates mentioned that technology tools like Google Slides and Go Guardian can streamline administrative tasks, enhance organization, and simplify grading.

Overall, technology is seen as a valuable tool for enhancing teaching strategies, supporting differentiated learning, and fostering engagement and collaboration in the classroom. It is also leveraged for management and efficiency, allowing teachers to better monitor and guide their students' learning experiences.

**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 regarding their preparation for entering the classroom include:

**The Impact of the Pandemic:** Several graduates mentioned that their student teaching experiences were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected their classroom management and behavior management training. The pandemic brought unique challenges that were not fully addressed in their education.

**Influence of Mentor Teachers:** The mentor teachers played a crucial role in their preparation. Graduates emphasized the value of learning from experienced educators and gaining insights into real classroom practices.

**Need for Practical Classroom Experience:** The graduates highlighted the importance of in-person classroom experience, which helped them determine if teaching was the right career for them. They found it invaluable to work with actual students during their teacher preparation programs.

**Curriculum and Lesson Planning:** Graduates expressed the need for more comprehensive training in curriculum development and lesson planning. They found it challenging to create and implement curricula, especially when faced with the reality of different resources, student needs, and classroom settings.

**Behavior Management:** Classroom management and behavior management were identified as areas where they felt less prepared. Graduates desired more training on handling extreme behaviors, building relationships with students, and addressing behavior issues effectively.

**Differentiation and Accessibility:** Graduates felt they would have benefited from more guidance on differentiating instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners, including those with disabilities or special requirements.

**Adjusting to Real Classroom Realities:** The graduates noted that the classroom environment often differed significantly from what they had learned in their teacher preparation programs. They acknowledged the complexity of real-world teaching and the need for better alignment between training and classroom reality.

**Continuity and Building on Knowledge:** Graduates expressed the desire for ongoing training and building on knowledge and skills over multiple years. They believed that having the opportunity to plan and implement units of instruction multiple times during their preparation could have been beneficial.

**Adaptability and Flexibility:** The responses indicated that teacher preparation should equip future educators with adaptability and flexibility to handle unexpected challenges and changes in the educational landscape, such as the pandemic.

In summary, the graduates recognized the value of mentor teachers, practical classroom experience, and a strong foundation in teaching principles. However, they also highlighted the need for more comprehensive training in areas like curriculum development, classroom and behavior management, and differentiation to better prepare them for the complexities of the teaching profession. The adaptability and resilience of teachers in the face of unforeseen challenges were also emphasized.

**Question: For those of you who double majored and had a content area plus your education classes. Is there anything that you could say about differences between preparation of your content versus your education classes?**

Common themes across the graduate responses regarding the differences between their content area preparation and their education classes include:

**Content-Specific Training:** Graduates highlighted that their content area preparation (such as history, science, social studies) focused on the subject matter itself, including state standards and subject-specific curriculum. This preparation was often standards-driven and aimed at equipping them with a deep understanding of the content.

**Lack of Classroom Management and Behavior Training:** Several graduates mentioned that their content-specific classes did not adequately address classroom management, student behavior, or behavior intervention strategies. They felt that this was more emphasized in their education classes, particularly for elementary education, where behavior management is a significant aspect.

**Curriculum Development:** Some graduates felt that they lacked training in curriculum development and lesson planning specific to their content area. They desired more guidance on how to align their content knowledge with teaching strategies and standards, especially in subjects with complex or detailed standards like social studies.

**Exposure to Diverse Teaching Environments:** Graduates highlighted the importance of exposure to various teaching settings and levels. They wished for more opportunities to explore both elementary and secondary education to better understand the differences in behavior management, curriculum development, and instructional strategies.

**Special Education and Accessibility:** Some graduates expressed a need for training on making content accessible to students with diverse needs, including English language learners and students with disabilities. They suggested that understanding how to modify content and make it more inclusive would be beneficial.

**Social and Emotional Learning:** The importance of addressing social and emotional learning (SEL) was emphasized, especially in light of the challenges brought about by the pandemic. Graduates felt that

training on how to communicate with students about their emotions and support their social and emotional development would be valuable.

**Deep History and Complex Topics:** In content areas like social studies, graduates mentioned the challenge of taking broad and complex historical topics and making them appropriate for middle school students. They desired more guidance on how to break down and teach such complex subjects effectively.

In summary, the graduates recognized the value of their content area knowledge and standards-based training. However, they also identified gaps in their preparation related to classroom management, behavior management, curriculum development, accessibility, social and emotional learning, and the practical application of their content knowledge to the classroom. They believed that a more holistic approach to teacher preparation, which integrates subject matter expertise with pedagogical skills, would better prepare them for the complexities of teaching.

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

The graduate responses provide insights into how they assess student learning and thinking through both formative and summative assessments. Common themes include:

**Summative Assessments:** Graduates mentioned the use of summative assessments, such as pre and post-tests or CFAs (common formative assessments) at the end of units. These assessments are used to measure students' growth and determine whether they have achieved the learning objectives of the unit.

**Formative Assessments:** Formative assessments are seen as valuable tools to gauge student learning and adjust instruction accordingly. Graduates frequently mentioned using strategies like exit tickets and thinking maps to assess student understanding and engagement during daily lessons.

**Active Engagement:** Engagement is considered a strong indicator of student learning. Graduates emphasized the importance of active participation, including students reading, writing, sharing, and interacting with their peers. Engaged students are more likely to grasp and apply the content.

**Observation and Non-Verbal Communication:** Several graduates pointed out that they assess student learning through non-verbal cues and observations. They pay attention to students' body language, participation, and non-verbal signals to determine their comprehension and engagement.

**Options for Assessment:** Graduates mentioned the importance of offering a variety of assessment options to cater to different learning styles. This includes giving students choices in how they demonstrate their understanding, such as through essays, projects, or other creative means.

**Transference of Knowledge:** Assessing students' ability to apply their knowledge in different contexts, such as transferring skills from one language to another, is seen as an important indicator of deeper learning.

**Feedback and Celebration:** Graduates use feedback and celebrations to acknowledge students' progress and accomplishments. This approach helps boost students' confidence and encourages them to take ownership of their learning.

Response to Pressure: Students' ability to perform under a little pressure, such as timed assessments or official assessments, is another indicator of their learning.

Engaging Talk Moves: Graduates use "talk moves" in their classrooms to encourage respectful agreement, disagreement, and additional contributions. These non-verbal and verbal cues help in assessing how students interact and discuss concepts.

In summary, the graduates utilize a combination of both summative and formative assessments, including non-verbal cues, active engagement, and student choices to gauge student learning and thinking. They also emphasize the importance of recognizing and celebrating student achievements, creating a positive learning environment, and using a variety of assessment methods to cater to diverse learning styles and preferences.

### **Question: How do you differentiate to assess your students learning?**

The graduate responses highlight various strategies for differentiating to assess students' learning. These strategies aim to accommodate diverse learning needs and levels among students. Here are the key points mentioned:

Academic Differentiation Tools: Graduates utilize various academic tools to support differentiation, including sentence frames, visuals, frequent check-ins, checklists, extended time, collaborative learning with planned partners, varied outcomes, modeling, and visual schedules.

Differentiating for All: Several graduates emphasize the importance of differentiating not only for students who need additional support but also for students who excel or are at the average level. This approach aims to challenge all students based on their readiness and abilities.

Grouping and Leveling: In some classrooms, students are grouped and leveled based on their abilities in specific subjects, such as math and reading. Higher-performing groups engage in more complex tasks, while lower-performing groups receive additional support, such as sentence starters and modifications.

Thinking Maps and Graphic Organizers: Thinking maps and graphic organizers are mentioned as useful tools for differentiation. These tools allow students to express their understanding and ideas without being limited to a fixed number of responses. They cater to both higher and lower-performing students.

Choice and Student Involvement: Allowing students to choose the level of challenge or the way they approach an assignment is seen as a key element of differentiation. It empowers students to communicate their comfort and capabilities, fostering a sense of ownership over their learning.

IEP and Visual Supports: For students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), graduates provide additional supports and visuals to help them access their assignments and navigate their schedules effectively. Visual cues and routines assist students with various needs, including English learners.

Constant Adaptation: Graduates highlight the need for ongoing adaptation in their teaching practices, as different students may require different levels of support and engagement throughout the school year. This involves regular assessments to gauge student progress and make necessary adjustments.

In summary, the differentiation strategies shared by the graduates involve a combination of academic tools, group dynamics, visual aids, and student choice. These strategies aim to address the unique

learning needs of each student, from those who need additional support to those who require more challenging opportunities.