

Some Effects of the Practicum on the Professional Self-Concept of Student Teachers

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Les études relatives aux effets des cours pratiques sur les élèves-professeurs ont généralement dégagé un déclin notable dans l'image de soi relative à la profession et certains auteurs ont argué que de tels déclins étaient inévitables. Cette étude examine les effets de trois différentes organisations de cours pratiques sur cette image de soi des élèves-professeurs au cours d'un programme de développement pédagogique à l'Université Simon Fraser. Beaucoup d'élèves soutiennent ce programme pendant les cours pratiques dont la durée variait de 6 à 13 semaines. On a dégagé que l'image de soi (réelle) tendait à se développer tandis que l'image de soi (idéale) restait identique à elle-même pour deux des trois groupes d'élèves-professeurs. On note cependant une tendance au déclin pour ce qui est de l'image de soi (réelle) dans les premiers stades du cours pratique et à son regain dans les derniers stades. La conclusion montrait que dans des conditions qui faisaient naître un fort soutien de la part des élèves-professeurs, la longueur de la pratique d'enseignement continu est un facteur important qui influence l'effet du cours pratique sur l'image de soi.

The practicum is widely held to be among the most useful components of teacher education programs and there have been a number of suggestions that it be increased in length (Tittle, 1974). Resistance from university faculties comes primarily because of opposition to reducing the time allocated to on-campus courses and reluctance to rely too heavily on classroom teachers whose knowledge of curriculum design and instructional psychology are sometimes considered inadequate.

Several studies have examined the effects of the practicum on student teachers and have found decreases in professional self-concept (Burgy, 1972; Coulter, 1974; Dumas, 1969; Walberg, 1966, 1968; Walberg et al., 1968; and Wright & Tuska, 1966). Exceptions to this pattern were a study by Smith and Adams (1972) who found, at Louisiana State University, that a majority of students reported a positive change in self-concept after student teaching, and Coulter (1976), who attributed a reversal of his earlier findings to more supportive school environments. These findings suggest that program planners should exercise caution when considering increasing their reliance on the practicum as a component of teacher education programs.

It would be inappropriate, however, to decry the practicum without attempting to identify the factors which cause a negative impact on professional self-concept. If those factors can be reliably identified and dealt with in planning, the value of the practicum may be improved substantially.

Factors identified in previous research as contributing to a decline in professional self-concept have been quality of interaction between experienced and prospective teachers (Krasno, 1971); quality of supervision (Ahnell & Templeton, 1973; Burgy, 1972; Goodlad, 1965; Soares & Soares, 1974); tempering of idealism with reality (Wright & Tuska, 1966); conflict between personality needs and role demands (Walberg, 1968); and speed of induction into teaching and school context factors (Coulter, 1974; Coulter & Elsworth, Note 1).

The authors' analysis of this research led to the conclusion that a primary cause of the usual decrease in professional self-concept was a conflict between students' unrealistic and idealized perceptions of themselves as teachers, and the realities of schools, the patterns of behavior they were forced to conform to, and their lack of skill in teaching. Some conflict of this kind is probably inevitable, but the effects could be modified by factors such as speed of transition into teaching, level of support from supervisors, and length and continuity of the experience.

In an attempt to throw light on this interpretation an examination was made of the professional self-concept of student teachers during the practicum in a program whose structure seemed likely to minimize its negative effects by providing for gradual transition, a high level of support from supervisors, and an extended continuous period of teaching.

Several writers have linked anxiety to aspects of self-concept (Coates & Thoresen, 1976; Coopersmith, 1967; Felker, 1972) and argued for the notion of an optimal level of anxiety in teachers. Too little anxiety might lead to tolerance of unsatisfactory situations in schools and inadequate preparation for teaching, while too much might cause undue stress and tension and interfere with performance. Greenstein and Greenstein (1973) have linked anxiety to discrepancies between initial idealistic views of teaching and the realities of classroom situations, and Lortie (1975) has associated high levels of anxiety with the usual abrupt transition into teaching. Because of these links between self-concept and anxiety, it was considered that an examination of anxiety might be useful in interpreting findings on changes in student teachers' professional self-concept.

The Professional Development Program at Simon Fraser University is a three-semester program of professional teacher education during which students spend six months in school classrooms and six months on the university campus. Those intending to teach in elementary schools may begin the program after a minimum of four semesters (two academic years) of academic preparation, and those planning to teach at secondary level must complete a degree by the time they finish the program.

The first semester of the program includes two major elements, Introduction to Classroom Teaching (Education 401), during which teams of two, three, or four students are placed in classrooms for an initial six-week practicum, and Studies in Educational Theory and Practice (Education 402), which is a seven-week series of seminars, workshops, and presentations. This first semester is offered in two alternative patterns. In the regular program Education 402 follows Education 401. In the external or off-campus programs the two components are integrated in a pattern of alternating weeks. In both cases students begin the program with classroom observations and under the supervision of classroom teachers gradually take increasing responsibility for teaching, at a rate that is considered appropriate for each individual.

The two subsequent semesters consist of a full semester practicum (Education 405) and a semester of course work on campus (Education 404).

Thus there are three different patterns of practicum experiences: Education 401 (regular program) — a six-week introduction to teaching as a member of a team of students.

Education 401 (external programs) — six weeks of introduction to teaching distributed through a 13-week semester as a member of a team of students. Education 405 — a 13-week teaching practicum in an individual placement.

This program has a number of features which differ from what is generally considered traditional (Channon, 1971) and which might be expected to reduce the usual negative impact of the practicum on professional self-concept if the authors' interpretation of factors leading to a decrease in professional self-concept is correct. On the other hand if the effects of the practicum are inevitable, as has been suggested by some researchers, the extended time in schools should increase the negative effect. The non-traditional features are:

- a) Induction into teaching is gradual and at a rate that is considered appropriate for the individual concerned.
- b) Orientation meetings at the beginning of each semester are held for the classroom teachers and university supervisors who work with the students in the schools. For supervisors of students in the Education 405 portion of the program and the Education 401 external program group a series of workshops which dealt with techniques of supervision outlined by Cogan (1973) and Goldhamer (1969) are conducted in the schools and in regional centres throughout the province. Both the orientation meetings and the supervision workshops are well attended and favorably received, a response providing reasonable grounds for believing that supervisors are generally familiar with and sympathetic towards the program and their intended role in it.
- c) The extended periods of time in classrooms allow for gradual introduction to teaching, the development (as distinct from testing) of teaching skills, and accommodation to the realities of classroom situations.

- d) While there is considerable emphasis on discussion of teaching and formative evaluation, assessment is de-emphasized and grading is done on the basis of pass or withdraw.
- e) The teaming of students in the initial practicum provides additional peer support and possibilities of observing and sharing difficulties with other inexperienced colleagues.
- f) Most of the university supervision is done by teachers on leave from local school districts. This tends to reduce the philosophical differences which are sometimes found between teachers and permanent university staff. It has an additional advantage in that supervision is the sole responsibility of these individuals and does not have to compete for time and emotional commitment with research or other activities.

In summary, the Professional Development Program provides a gradual introduction to teaching, good support from supervisors and other students, and longer periods of time in schools than most other programs. Because of this it was predicted that the normal decrease in professional self-concept would not be found.

METHOD

Students were randomly selected to participate in the study from each of the three practicum experiences. The selected students completed a semantic differential instrument developed by Coulter and Elsworth (Note 1) to measure the effect of the practicum on student teachers' professional self-concept. This instrument produces scores on seven factors (warmth-supportiveness, creativity, non-conformity, orderliness, satisfaction, clarity and energy-enthusiasm) for each of four concepts related to self-concept — Myself, and Myself as I would like to be (personal concept); Myself as a teacher, and The teacher I would like to be (professional concepts). A measure of teaching anxiety, the Teaching Anxiety Scale (Parsons, 1973) was also completed. Because the study was integrated with others in a major program evaluation project not all students completed all instruments. However, the following numbers of students completed pre- and post-tests on the measures indicated.

In the Education 401 regular program, 90 students completed the semantic differential on professional concepts and 52 on personal concepts. Eighty-three completed the Teaching Anxiety Scale. The instruments were completed the day before the students went into the schools for the practicum and again at the end.

In the Education 401 external programs, 204 students completed the semantic differential on professional concepts and 205 completed the Teaching Anxiety Scale. These students also completed the instruments the day before they commenced the practicum and again at the end.

In the Education 405 program, the students completed the semantic differential on professional and personal concepts and the Teaching

Anxiety Scale during the first week of the practicum and again at the end. An additional 65 Education 405 students completed the semantic differential on professional concepts and the Teaching Anxiety Scale in the following semester. Selection of this group of students made it possible to examine changes in self-concept and anxiety through two practicums over an eight-month period because the students had previously been included in the sample of Education 401 external program students.

The following predictions were made for each of the three sample groups: that neither professional self-concept (responses to the concept "Myself as a teacher") or self-concept (responses to the concept "Myself") would decline after student teaching; that ideal self-concept (responses to the concept "Myself as I would like to be") would not change after student teaching; that ideal professional self-concept (responses to the concept "The teacher I would like to be") would decline; and that anxiety would decline after student teaching. (See table 1.)

Table 1 / Predicted Changes in Self-Concept Measures and Anxiety after the Practicum

Variable	Prediction	Sample Groups
1. Professional self-concept – Actual (Myself as a teacher)	No decline	401 Regular (N = 90) 401 External (N = 204) 405 (N = 121)
2. Professional self-concept – Ideal (The teacher I would like to be)	Decline	401 Regular (N = 90) 401 External (N = 204) 405 (N = 121)
3. Self-concept – Actual (Myself)	No decline	401 Regular (N = 53) 405 (N = 65)
4. Self-concept – Ideal (Myself as I would like to be)	No change	401 Regular (N = 53) 405 (N = 65)
5. Anxiety	Decline	401 Regular (N = 83) 401 External (N = 205) 405 (N = 121)

Each of these predictions was tested for each group by analysis of variance with differences accepted as significant at the .05 confidence level.

RESULTS

Mean scores for Professional Self-Concept (Actual) for each sample group on each of the seven factors of the semantic differential instrument are shown in table 2. The results clearly support the prediction that was made. There were no significant declines on any of the factors. On the other hand there were a number of increases that were large enough to be considered significant. The tendency to increase self-concept was strongest for the

Table 2 / Mean Scores on Professional Self-Concept for Students in Three Sample Groups before and after the Practicum

Factor	Sample Group					
	N = 90 Education 401-Reg.		N = 204 Education 401-Ext.		N = 121 Education 405	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
<i>Professional Self-Concept Actual</i>						
Creativity	15.1	17.6*	15.7	17.0*	16.0	17.3*
Orderliness	32.8	33.6	32.0	32.7	32.9	34.7*
Warmth	35.9	37.0*	34.9	34.8	35.1	35.9*
Satisfaction	16.7	16.7	16.4	16.2	15.5	16.4*
Clarity	21.8	22.5	21.0	21.8*	21.4	22.8*
Energy-Enthusiasm	29.9	29.7	29.1	28.8	28.7	29.5*
Non-conformity	21.6	22.5*	22.5	22.6	21.0	21.8
<i>Professional Self-Concept Ideal</i>						
Creativity	19.9	19.7	20.1	19.7*	20.0	20.2
Orderliness	38.5	37.5	38.1	37.3*	38.8	38.8
Warmth	39.2	39.1	38.8	38.1*	38.7	39.1
Satisfaction	19.4	19.2	19.6	19.2*	19.9	20.0
Clarity	26.0	26.0	26.2	25.6*	26.5	26.4
Energy-Enthusiasm	33.3	33.1	33.5	32.6*	33.5	33.6
Non-conformity	25.7	26.4	26.5	25.9	25.7	26.4

* $p < .05$.

Education 405 group which spent a full semester in the schools and weakest for the Education 401 external group whose six-week practicum was interrupted by periods of workshops and seminars.

Mean scores for Professional Self-Concept (Ideal) for each sample group on each of the factors are shown in table 2. It will be seen that for the Education 401 regular program students and the Education 405 students the expected decline in professional self-concept (Ideal) did not occur. While there were very slight shifts in both directions, none of these were significant. In the case of the Education 401 external program students there was a significant decline on six of the seven factors. The differences were not large, but their consistency suggests that they should not be ignored. The major difference between this practicum and the other two was that it was associated with a concurrent series of workshops and seminars, while the others were in solid blocks of teaching practice of six or thirteen weeks duration. These workshops and seminars seem to have led to slight modifications of professional self-concept (Ideal) in the direction of their professional self-concept (Actual). However, this interpreta-

tion cannot be made with a great deal of confidence. An alternative explanation may be that the frequent interruptions in teaching practice provided the opportunity for students to reflect more often and more fully on what they did in the schools.

Table 3 shows mean scores for Education 401 regular program students and Education 405 students in the Fall semester on factors of Self-Concept (Actual). It had been predicted that these scores would not decline after the practicum and this prediction was supported. The increases in Self-Concept (Actual) were surprising since it was anticipated that personal concepts would be more resistant to change than professional concepts. The table indicates that there were significant increases on two of the seven factors for Education 401 students and on five of the seven for Education 405 students and that on all other comparisons there was a tendency for an increase, although differences were not significant.

The prediction that there would be no change in self-concept (Ideal) was supported by the results shown in table 3. For students in both the Education 401 program and the Education 405 program in the Fall

Table 3 / Mean Scores on Self-Concept for Students in Two Sample Groups before and after the Practicum

Factor	Sample Group			
	N = 53 Education 401-Reg.		N = 65 Education 405	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
<i>Self-Concept (Actual)</i>				
Creativity	16.7	16.9	17.1	17.9*
Orderliness	31.9	33.3	32.9	34.2*
Warmth	34.3	35.9*	34.9	36.1*
Satisfaction	15.2	16.5*	16.1	16.8
Clarity	21.0	21.3	21.6	23.1*
Energy-Enthusiasm	28.5	28.7	28.9	29.9*
Non-conformity	21.6	22.7	22.3	22.7
<i>Self-Concept (Ideal)</i>				
Creativity	20.1	19.7	19.9	19.8
Orderliness	37.6	37.2	38.2	38.6
Warmth	38.8	39.2	38.6	38.6
Satisfaction	19.5	19.6	19.9	20.0
Clarity	25.3	25.6	26.1	26.1
Energy-Enthusiasm	32.9	33.3	33.2	33.3
Non-conformity	26.7	26.8	25.9	26.0

*p < .05.

semester, there were only very slight variations in both directions and none of these differences was significant.

The fact that the increase in both professional and personal Self-Concept (Actual) was more pronounced for students in the longer Education 405 program tends to support the idea that, given adequate supportive mechanisms and a gradual introduction to teaching, the length of time in schools may be one of the most important elements in changes in students' self-concept. To examine this more closely, some of the Education 401 regular program students had been asked to complete the Professional Self-Concept (Actual) scale at the mid-point of their six-week practicum as well as at the beginning and the end. The results are shown in table 4. On most factors there was a tendency for scores to be lower at the mid-point of the practicum than at the beginning, and for scores to increase again at the end. The differences were significant only on the factors of satisfaction and energy-enthusiasm, and the sample of students for this extra set of tests was small. However the results must be considered as lending support to the idea that the length of the practicum is one of the major variables influencing self-concept. If this pattern of results was confirmed in other studies, there would be a strong indication that the normal practicum of three or four weeks duration would have the negative impact on self-concept that has been found in other studies, even when there is high-quality supervision and a gradual transition to teaching.

Table 4 / Mean Scores on Factors of the Professional Self-Concept (Actual) for Education 401 (Regular Program) Students (N = 40) before, during, and after the practicum

Factor	Before	During	After
Creativity	15.70	16.65	16.92
Orderliness	33.28	32.93	33.30
Warmth	35.90	36.00	36.50
Satisfaction	16.53	14.93*	16.37*
Clarity	22.77	21.77	22.03
Energy-Enthusiasm	30.20	28.83*	29.17
Non-conformity	21.95	21.35	22.03

* $p < .05$.

Scores on the Teaching Anxiety Scale for each group of students are shown in table 5. There was a consistent pattern of reduced anxiety after the practicum which was statistically significant for each group. It should be noted that the score for students at the beginning of Education 405 is approximately the same as at the end of Education 401 which precedes it, indicating a continuing decline in anxiety with experience in the class-

room. This decline was seen even more clearly in the scores of a group of external program students who were tested at four stages during their

Table 5 / Mean Scores on the Teaching Anxiety Scale for Students in Three Sample Groups before and after the Practicum

	Education 401 Reg. N = 83	Education 401 Ext. N = 205	Education 405 N = 134
Before practicum	72.06	73.68	65.61
After practicum	66.32	66.12	62.21
Difference	5.74*	7.56*	3.40*

**p* < .05.

program. Mean scores for the 45 students who were involved were: Fall 1975 (Pre ED.401), 71.86; Fall 1975 (Post ED.401), 64.28; Spring 1976 (Pre ED.405), 63.21; Spring 1976 (Post ED.405), 59.11. The difference in scores before and at the end of the practicum was significant at the .01 level for both practicums, and the difference between the end of ED.401 and the beginning of ED.405 was not significant at the .05 level.

The three practicum arrangements differed somewhat in length and form, but had common mechanisms of student support. To consider effects of differing length and form, comparisons were made between the sample groups in the Fall semester on professional self-concepts using analysis of covariance. The results are shown in table 6 and figure 1.

For Professional Self-Concept (Actual) significant differences were found between the groups on factors of Creativity, Orderliness, Warmth, and Clarity. The Education 405 and 401 regular program students had a significantly greater increase in score than the Education 401 external program students on Creativity; Education 405 students had a greater increase in score than both Education 401 groups on Orderliness and Clarity; and Education 401 regular program students had an increased score on Warmth which differed significantly from the slightly reduced score on the same factor for Education 401 external program students.

For Professional Self-Concept (Ideal) significant differences were found between the groups on factors of Creativity, Warmth, Satisfaction, Clarity, and Energy-Enthusiasm. The differences in every case were due to discrepancies between scores of Education 405 students and those of students in the Education 401 external program group. On the factor Nonconformity the scores of the two Education 401 groups differed significantly, but in other comparisons the Education 401 regular program students did not differ from the others.

Table 6 / Analysis of Covariance for Mean Scores — 401 Regular, 401 External, and 405 Students — on Professional Self-Concept (Actual and Ideal, Fall 1975)

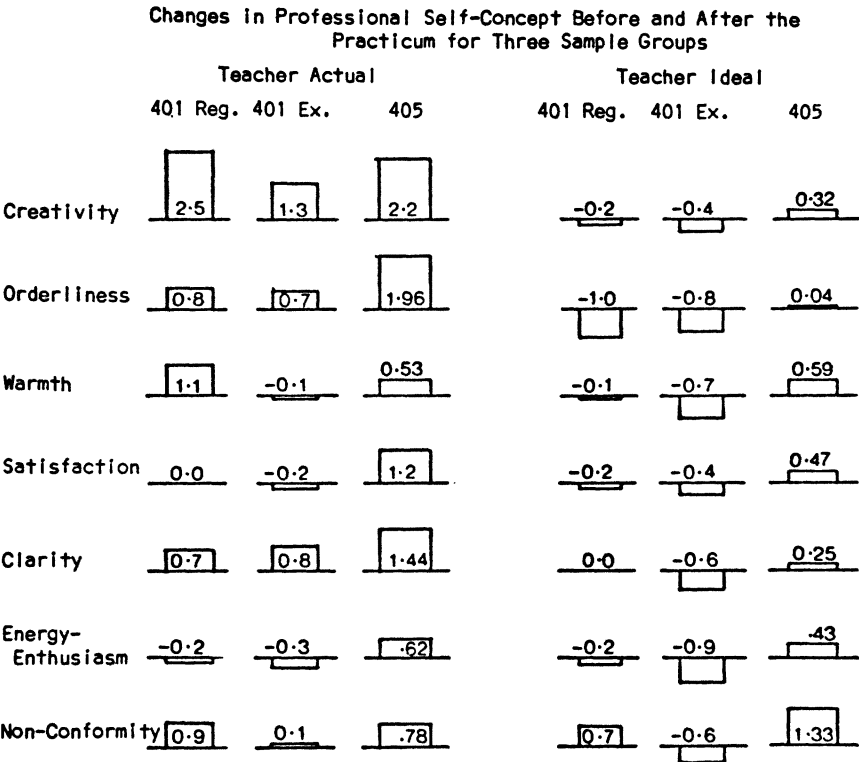
		Actual			Ideal		
		401 Reg. N = 90 Mean	402 Ext. N = 200 Mean	405 N = 66 Mean	401 Reg. N = 90 Mean	401 Ext. N = 200 Mean	405 N = 66 Mean
Creativity	<i>Pre</i>	15.1	15.7	15.59*	19.9	20.1	20.11*
	<i>Post</i>	17.6	17.0	17.79	19.7	19.7	20.43
Orderliness	<i>Pre</i>	32.8	32.0	32.98*	38.5	38.1	39.30
	<i>Post</i>	33.6	32.7	34.94	37.5	37.3	39.34
Warmth	<i>Pre</i>	35.9	34.9	35.56*	39.2	38.8	38.92*
	<i>Post</i>	37.0	34.8	36.09	39.1	38.1	39.51
Satisfaction	<i>Pre</i>	16.7	16.4	15.54	19.4	19.6	19.83*
	<i>Post</i>	16.7	16.2	16.74	19.2	19.2	20.30
Clarity	<i>Pre</i>	21.8	21.0	21.83*	26.0	26.2	26.82*
	<i>Post</i>	22.5	21.8	23.27	26.0	25.6	27.07
Energy-Enthusiasm	<i>Pre</i>	29.9	29.1	29.30	33.3	33.5	33.45*
	<i>Post</i>	29.7	28.8	29.92	33.1	32.6	33.88
Non-conformity	<i>Pre</i>	21.6	22.5	20.91	25.7	26.5	25.39
	<i>Post</i>	22.5	22.6	21.69	26.4	25.9	26.72

**p* < .05.

CONCLUSION

The first and most obvious point to emerge from this study is that the generally found decline in self-concept after student teaching is not inevitable.

The second point to consider is whether changes that did occur could be particularly associated with any specific aspects of programs. In this study, the greatest increase in professional self-concept (Actual) was found for students in Education 405, and this effect was sufficiently powerful to increase students' personal self-concept (Actual) as well. The elements which distinguished Education 405 from the other practicum experiences were an individual placement, the length of continuous practice, and the fact that it was preceded by a previous practicum — Education 401. Other supportive mechanisms and a gradual transition were common to all groups. Which or what combination of these variables were most influential could not be conclusively determined from the data in this study. However, it should be noted that individual placements and previous practicums are common to many of the short-term practicums studied in other research, in which declines in self-concept have been almost universally found. This, coupled with the tendency towards a decline in professional self-concept after three weeks of Education 401 with a subsequent recovery, suggests that the most influential variable was the length of continuous teaching



(Note: Increases in self-concept are shown by boxes above the lines, decreases by boxes below the lines.)

Figure 1

practice under conditions which provided a high level of support. This interpretation is admittedly speculative, but if it is correct, and student teachers' professional self-concept is considered important, there must be some doubt about the wisdom of the widespread practice of three- or four-week teaching practicums. Additional studies in which comparisons could be made between practicums of different lengths at several institutions might provide more conclusive data on this point.

The scores for the groups on professional and personal self-concepts (Ideal) suggest that personal self-concept (Ideal) is highly resistant to change and that professional self-concept (Ideal) need not decline after teaching practice. In this study, declines on this measure were found under conditions which provided for integration of in-school and "campus-style" experience. Whether this was due to the "campus-style" experiences, to the interruptions in the practicum, or to other factors could not be determined from the data.

Scores on anxiety suggest that anxiety may decline with increased time in school, provided adequate supportive mechanisms are available. This interpretation was made because of the consistency of the decline in anxiety across all groups. The rate of decline did not vary, for example, when the Education 401 external program students' professional self-concept (Ideal) declined on six of the seven factors, or when the Education 405 students' professional and personal self-concepts (Actual) increased. The existence of support mechanisms for students in all groups represents an unknown factor in this result, and it would be interesting to examine the relationship of anxiety to length of practicum in programs where less support was possible.

The tendencies that were found were for the sample groups as a whole. However, a minority of students changed in ways that differed from the general trend, suggesting a need for further investigation. Variations in the nature of the practicum might have varying effects for students of differing personality characteristics and with different kinds of prior experience. Analysis of these factors in further research would probably be worth while and may suggest matching of students having alternative patterns of school experience.

The differences in program which led to results which were different from those found in previous research obviously make it difficult to generalize these conclusions to other institutions. Furthermore, in any study of this type it is extremely difficult to isolate the operative factors with precision. It is possible, for example, that a 13-week practicum without the other supportive mechanisms that are present at Simon Fraser University might have very different and possibly quite negative consequences. However, this reservation does not alter the major conclusions of this study that the generally found decrease in professional self-concept is not inevitable, but can be reversed by modifications in the nature of the practicum, and that the length of the practicum can be a major factor in change in self-concept under conditions which provide a high level of support.

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