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From "Big Ideas" to deliberate action: Curriculum revision and alignment in an American special education teacher preparation program

Jennifer Bautel Williams*, Sarah C. Williams, Debbie Metcalf, Lora Lee Smith Canter, Alana Zambone, Tara Jeffs, Kim Floyd

East Carolina University, Curriculum and Instruction, Greenville, NC 27858, USA

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ABSTRACT

Curriculum design is a complicated and time consuming process, especially when considering multiple standards from national, state, and local levels. This is further complicated for teacher preparation programs that offer a variety of specializations and use multiple delivery formats. Although, many models of curriculum development exist, this paper presents an overview of how one American special education program used the model described by Kame'enui, E. J., Carnine, D. W., Dixon, R. C., Simmons, D. C., & Coyne, M. D. (2002) to articulate and organize key dimensions of the program. Although the model has been often emphasized for K-12 environments, this manuscript describes how it is also useful for the university setting.

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Teacher education in the university setting is moving rapidly away from the "business as usual" model for serving college students (Education Commission of the States, 2000). Training institutions are responding to teacher shortages across the nation by exploring creative approaches to program design and by integrating emerging technologies that enable them to reach out at a distance to larger and more diverse student populations. For example, while some students still complete traditional teacher education programs, other programs (or parts of programs) are now delivered online or in an intense condensed format. Furthermore, increasing numbers of adjunct faculty are being hired to support distance education programs that reach out to a widening geographic area. Consequently, it is now more important than ever to focus on curriculum design in teacher education to ensure that candidates have the opportunity to progress through a developmentally sequenced, focused, and consistent program no matter the delivery method.

Higher education institutions approach the curriculum design process in a variety of ways. Moreover, many revision efforts are tied to specific skill/knowledge standards (e.g. CEC Competencies, INTASC Standards). Delandshere and Arens (2001) noted that developing standards for teacher education programs parallels developing curriculum standards for students in the public school setting. Their work also revealed that although teacher education programs involved in standards-based reform often responded with an alignment between course sequence and field experiences, existing course content could be "mapped" to standards with uncertainty as to the teaching conception from which they were working. It may become difficult for teacher educators to think about their work outside of the framework that is provided by the standards resulting in the potential danger of a uniform view of teaching that inhibits other perspectives (Delandshere & Arens, 2001). Therefore, teacher education programs can structure the curriculum revision process in such a way that standards are meaningfully integrated with other site-specific goals.

Successful curriculum design involves a lengthy process that includes strong collaboration. Lunenberg (2002) identified nine steps for structuring the process of curriculum design for teacher education programs: (1) define the problem, (2) analyze the context, (3) organize the design process and define the role of stakeholders and experts in it, (4) formulate goals, (5) specify methods, (6) construct a prototype, (7) try-out, (8) analyze results, and (9) revise. Ryan and Krajewski (2002) integrated INTASC and the Rhode Island Beginning Teacher Standards (RIBTS) to create a shared vision for an elementary/special education program. They applied the following five steps in an effort to shift from an emphasis on courses taken and grades received to a focus on candidate performance in coursework and the classroom setting: (1) critical skill/competency identification and alignment with sequential course offerings, (2) organization of competencies into

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 252 328 5590; fax: +1 252 328 2585.
E-mail address: williamsj@ecu.edu (J.B. Williams).

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three strands (instruction, assessment, and professional development), (3) course analysis and determination of evidence to be produced in each, (4) assessment of student performance through student portfolios, and (5) professional development for field based teachers and involved arts and sciences faculty.

Long-term program revision has the potential to result in a clear link and vision between coursework/instruction and the performance of teacher candidates. Faculty buy-in is also an important benefit of this approach. As Ryan and Krajewski (2002) noted, "Through our reflections and collaborations we have developed a culture that fosters conversations and awareness of standards of quality. The focus in our journey has been on our teaching and its impact on student learning. However, the challenges remain significant" (p. 66).

Once a curriculum structure is in place, it becomes critical to emphasize and establish a process for ongoing evaluation and renewal. Both internal and external factors may influence change in a teacher education program. Internal factors may be addressed by developing "active collegial networks" and "new connections" within the university as well as collecting long-term feedback from graduates to identify areas in need of revision (Akmal & Miller, 2002, p. 411). External factors may include federal or state education reform and pressure from school systems.

When examining curriculum reform, it is important to bridge the existing gaps between theory and practice, preparation and practice, and research and practice. Lunenberg (2002) stressed that an initial step in this process is for teacher educators to serve as role models for effective teaching. Breakdowns in student connections can occur when faculty members do not have a clear understanding of how learning occurs (ineffective process) and what is actually learned (ineffective product) in teacher preparation experiences (Russell, McPherson, & Martin, 2001). These breakdowns may lead to the often discussed gaps between *preparation and practice* and *theory and practice* (Lunenberg, 2002). Furthermore, without consistent communication among faculty members within one program there may also be internal curriculum gaps (Russell et al., 2001). Communication and the establishment of a shared vision for producing quality teachers is a key to alleviating this dilemma (Bullock, Park, Snow, & Rodriguez, 2002; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Ryan & Krajewski, 2002).

Russell et al. (2001) point out that fragmented programs without much evidence of collaboration or agreement between colleagues in a university may cause candidates to enter the teaching profession unable to collaborate effectively with colleagues in teaming relationships themselves. Moreover, if communication and collaboration are lacking in the large university setting, the result may be *stand alone courses* that (although mapped to standards or criteria) lead to potential uneven or inadequate teacher preparation (Williams, Connell, White, & Kemper, 2003). One program avoided this risk by establishing syllabi on a 70/30 percent formula where 70% of the course contained common assignments, reading, and activities and 30% allowed for "creative endeavor" of the instructor. This arrangement allowed faculty members to meet specific course competencies and address key content with a common understanding and a definition of academic freedom (Williams et al., 2003).

Several additional challenges impact the curriculum development process during the creation or revision of teacher preparation programs. Wilson and Ball (1996) emphasized the need to prepare teachers in a context of change. Teacher candidates are being prepared for teaching roles that may be quite different from their previous experiences as students or even their current perceptions. Programs can respond by identifying and beginning with those teaching practices that *do* remain constant. Additionally, teacher reform programs should "practice what we preach" and provide teacher candidates with "new images" of teaching practices by modeling effective instructional knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Wilson & Ball, 1996, p. 132).

Considering the multiple demands placed on teacher educators, limited attention may be given to the development of program curriculum and policies (Cochran-Smith, 2003). However, simply tinkering with programs or initiating new changes before previous ones are implemented thoroughly does little to improve them (Russell et al., 2001). Alternatively, the use of innovative program design that "proceed[s] from the premise that thinking like a teacher is a process that must be taught explicitly and developed over time, not a process that switches on automatically when students enter a preservice program" (Russell et al., 2001, p. 47) has the potential to yield more positive results.

As we tackle curriculum development in higher education, it is necessary to remember that our students are entering a period of adult learning. Lunenburg (2002) maintained the focus that prospective teachers are adult learners, and it is important for teacher educators to understand their beliefs, concerns, and preconceptions. However, becoming adult learners does not supersede the need to receive instruction and training that is clearly and developmentally organized (Kelly, 2006). Furthermore, the curriculum design should be articulated clearly enough to be shared among a wide variety of faculty members and delivered in a range of formats.

1. East Carolina University teacher preparation program

The Program of Special Education at East Carolina University (ECU) offers both undergraduate and graduate degrees in a variety of on-campus and distance education formats. Candidates in the undergraduate program earn degrees primarily through two options. One group of students completes an on-campus face-to-face 4-year program. Alternatively, other cohorts of students complete a $2+2$ program where, after completing 2 years of coursework at their local community colleges, they finish the program either completely or partially online through ECU's distance education program based out of one of four community college hub sites. Faculty members and administrators felt strongly that the program should be the same and should hold high teacher preparation standards regardless of method of delivery.

Additionally, during the 2004/2005 school year the program embarked on a curriculum revision project that involved transitioning from a model leading to a categorical licensure to one that prepares teachers to work in noncategorical settings. Students in the program can now choose from two preparation strands. One strand prepares teachers to work with students in the general education curriculum (on track to earn a high school diploma). The second strand prepares prospective teachers to serve students who work with an adapted curriculum (with significant cognitive disabilities who are not pursuing a regular high school diploma). Faculty members in the program sought to update program competencies and coursework in response to emerging student needs, accreditation expectations, and current educational issues. This process was also streamlined with the task of providing similar learning situations for the different cohorts of students described above. A task force, consisting of eight of the program's full time faculty members worked initially to develop a program model that ensured consistency and accountability across established competencies and followed a series of steps similar to those articulated by Ryan and Krajewski (2002).

Several members of the task force had used the curriculum design structure presented by Kame'enui, Carnine, Dixon, Simmons, and Coyne (2002) to prepare prospective teachers for organizing and integrating curriculum at the K-12 (Kindergarten-12th) grade level. This model was a good match for this project and provided a strong structure for referencing and documenting