Innovation, Policy, and Capacity in Special Education Teacher Education: Competing Demands in Challenging Times

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In a special new millennial issue of the Journal of Teacher Education, Sindelar and Rosenberg (2000) speculated that teacher educators entering the 21st century will continue to navigate a complex professional landscape replete with numerous and often contradictory demands. The authors noted that these demands will continue relentlessly from outside and inside of our university homes and include, to name a few, labor-intensive legislative mandates for curriculum and assessment reform, budget-driven university retrenchment, and a growing market orientation to higher education access and delivery. In terms of predictions, this one was correct: Almost 15 years later, in a time of severe budgetary restrictions, teacher preparation programs are still facing multiple and relentless demands that require significant amounts of fiscal and human resources that must conform to highly variable state program approval/certification requirements and meet standards of professional organizations such as the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). Programs are also being assessed by professional (and in the view of some, politically motivated) accreditation bodies such as the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). Completers of programs are not spared the demands and are required by most states to demonstrate, through controversial and costly assessments like the edTPA, their professional readiness to meet the academic needs of all students the first day they become teachers of record. A major impetus for this enhanced scrutiny is the requirement that any formula or combination of accountability metrics includes measures of impact on P-12 student outcomes (Bishop, Sindelar, Brownell, Rosenberg, & Connolly, 2005; CAEP, 2013; Gansle, Noell, & Burns, 2012).

With these thoughts in mind, it was with great interest that we read the manuscripts in this special issue of Teacher Education and Special Education (TESE) titled “Special Education Teacher Education in the 21st Century: Evolving Approaches.” In our current roles as deans of large comprehensive Schools of Education (and as former chairs of large and productive Departments of Special Education), we seek to “stay ahead of the curve” and ensure environmental conditions in our respective schools lead to the development of high-quality teachers, promote evidence-based practices, and facilitate collaborative and innovative thinking. We are particularly interested in defining how as instructional leaders we can promote, nurture, and ultimately sustain the environmental conditions for high-quality teacher development in the face of changing and politically charged policy contexts, competing reform agendas, reduced operational capacity, increased requirements for accountability, and the myriad technological applications for learning.

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that were unimaginable a few years ago. Clearly, we are indebted to the editors and authors of the articles in this special issue. These articles provide us with provocative and thoughtful views of how to best prepare special educators in a period of dramatic and unpredictable policy and practice. Most importantly, each contribution helps clarify what we know about the swirl of change surrounding special education teacher development, facilitating greater integration of theory, policy, research, and practice.

For example, in a most creative fashion, Dukes, Darling, and Doan (2014) set the stage for this special issue using evolutionary biology as a metaphor for changes in education. Considering special education as an organism within an evolving educational environment, elements of special education teacher preparation (e.g., course delivery, field experiences, and performance assessment) are viewed as being affected by a broad array of social, political, educational, technological, and economic evolutionary selection pressures. Changes induced by this complex environment are ongoing, dynamic, and, in many cases, almost imperceptible, and it is often difficult to discern the direction of influence one mechanism has on another. The authors highlight variant (e.g., alternative routes for preparation, preparation goals) and invariant (e.g., diversity, technology) selection pressures and use the selection pressure framework as a means for their fellow contributors to review and ponder three key dimensions of special education teacher preparation: course delivery and professional development, innovative approaches to teacher development, and performance-based assessment.

In terms of course delivery, Vernon-Dodson, Floyd, Dukes, and Darling (2014) reviewed the literature related to special education course delivery and identified common themes related to established preparation needs, methods, logistics, efficacy, and other critical factors (e.g., prerequisite candidate knowledge, emerging course delivery research). Given the proliferation of online preparation programs, they reviewed a number of studies published over the past decade evaluating the efficacy of instructional approaches. A discouraging finding was the limited work deemed suitable for review. From more than a potential 1,300 articles, only 17 met the selection criteria established by the co-authors. While the review sample size was small, no significant differences were reported between the traditional face-to-face programs and models offered online with respect to student performance and teacher satisfaction. Logistical concerns related to online learning such as computer speeds, bandwidth, system outages, uploading or downloading errors, learning platforms, and other technical issues were reported as ongoing challenges in a number of studies.

Through their review, the authors identified several implications for effective 21st-century teacher education research and practice. As online teacher preparation programs continue to grow, teacher educators need a much clearer understanding of the technology and its potential for effective pre-service and in-service teacher development. Given the paucity of empirical research comparing traditional and online teacher preparation models, more empirical research is needed to determine the value of various preparation models, that is, what works, for whom, and under what conditions.

Dieker, Rodriguez, Lignugaris/Kraft, Hynes, and Hughes (2014) reported on the use of simulation technology to facilitate effective teacher development, specifically instructional skills, classroom management, and reflection. While simulation technology has been used widely in other fields such as aviation, medicine, and military science to develop discrete and targeted practices, its application in teacher development is limited. The co-authors assert this technology can help novice teachers to hone their skills through practice, feedback, guided reflection, and opportunities make immediate instructional adjustments and practice the task again in a controlled environment. To that end, Dieker et al. described their own simulated classroom learning research and development efforts in collaboration with other universities. A key feature of this work is a structured process for
reflection drawn from extensive military simulation research designed to provide personalized learning to facilitate effective skill mastery, knowledge transfer, and acquisition-to-application learning. Anecdotal evidence suggests the simulated practice paired with a structured instructional review process helps novice teachers become more adept at “in action” reflection enabling them to modify their instruction to meet dynamic student needs. Still, while simulated classroom learning holds great promise for the future of teacher education, the research base is limited. Unlike other fields in which this technology has proven successful, many questions remain unanswered about its potential and widespread use in teacher education given significant start-up and maintenance costs, technology requirements, and personnel investments.

Finally, McCall, McHatton, and Shealey (2014) reviewed three broad teacher candidate assessment areas: core knowledge and instructional skills required for effective special education teaching (i.e., academics, behavior, collaboration); dispositional factors such as reflective practice, attitudes about disability, and cultural response; and summative assessment models (e.g., work samples, portfolios, field assessments). Given emerging state and federal accountability policies linking higher education teacher preparation programs on the standardized K-12 test scores of program graduates, this review is timely for TESE readers. While teacher quality is a significant factor in student performance, other challenges to effective student learning (e.g., poverty, disability, language, school context, leadership, class size, culture, and race) received considerably less attention in public debate and policy development.

More than ever before, colleges and universities preparing teachers for work in complex learning environments (e.g., special education, low-income schools, urban and rural communities) must be able to demonstrate the value of the preparation their graduates receive. Not surprisingly, McCall et al. found few well-documented and research-based teacher assessment models. Unfortu-
such as computer speeds, bandwidth, system outages, uploading or downloading errors, and learning platforms are, for many campuses, stumbling blocks for effective and efficient online learning. Many programs simply lack the necessary infrastructure to use technology effectively. Keeping up with innovative applications of e-learning that go beyond the mere downloading of PowerPoint displays is difficult because capital expenditure requests for synchronous technology upgrades compete with other, sometimes more immediate demands such as facilities maintenance, faculty positions, and faculty salaries. Even when there are adequate budgets, the selection pressures associated with faculty buy-in to novel technological methods loom large. Many teacher educators fail to understand technology’s potential in comprehensive teacher development; in many schools of education smart boards and high technology classrooms remain underused and online applications of assessing student performance are approached with anxiety and suspicion.

A related challenge is converting existing face-to-face courses into effective instructionally sound online courses or hybrid learning experiences. As deans seeking to implement a futures orientation to teacher preparation, we recognize that institutional support for guiding the conversion and roll-out of course content is needed, as is budgetary support to fund instructional technology support and time for course preparation. Nonetheless, we are constrained by the variable technological competence of our colleagues and the range and intensity of needs across our programs and campuses. Consider the specific selection pressures: Does one hire an instructional designer or a faculty specialist in the burgeoning area of autism spectrum disabilities? How does one promote faculty buy-in for conversion to electronic coursework and maintain reasonable and equitable faculty load? Is there the capacity to provide the necessary support for the wide range of technological tool skills necessary for navigating simulated learning environments?¹

Second, there are selection pressures that emerge from the two often competing cultures of research and politics. Generally, the research minded culture views educational issues as overly complex, multi-causal, and in need of considerable study; the political culture expects streamlined explanations to complex issues that can be easily communicated and are amenable to specific actions (Henig, 2008). These competing cultures are on full display in the often tense discussions of the common core, the delivery of clinically rich preparation programs, and the use of performance-based assessments of the policy area and on our campuses.

For example, in their review of special education teacher candidate assessment, McCall et al. (2014) highlight the question the viability of a common core for developing teachers and note the lack of research on teacher performance assessments, especially for special education. Nonetheless, many of our students seeking certification and licensure will need to pass the edTPA, a multiple measure assessment system aligned to state and national standards that ensures that all new teachers are able to teach and improve student achievement (edTPA, 2013). Students are required to submit video clips of instruction, lesson plans, student work samples, analysis of student learning, and reflective commentaries. With 33 states participating in the system, and organizations such as American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) strongly supporting it as a means of increasing “learning opportunities for our nation’s students by setting high and manageable standards for the teachers who will serve them” (Robinson, 2013, p. 1), the edTPA also has no shortage of critics among teacher education faculty and advocates. In addition to losing influence in recommending students for certification and licensure—the edTPA has been likened to a “bar exam for teaching”—some faculty are concerned that corporate scorers do not know the teacher candidates nor are aware of the context of the teaching sample. As noted by Gorlewski (2013), this anonymity dismisses the importance of relationships in teaching, “preferring the pretense of objectivity over trust, authenticity, and cultural responsiveness” (p. 1).
The conflicting research and political selection pressures are also central to discussions on the hot button issues of teacher candidate quantity and quality. Currently, in concert with new CAEP accreditation standards, a number of state and university systems are increasing standards for entry into teacher preparation programs. In Standard 3, CAEP requires that providers ensure that the average grade point average of its accepted cohort of candidates meets or exceeds 3.0, and that the group average performance on nationally normed assessments such as ACT, SAT, or GRE be in the top 50% from 2016-2017 and grow into the top 33% of the distribution by 2020. Going beyond a mere aggregate average, the State University of New York system has mandated that every candidate in its teacher preparation programs must have at least a 3.0 GPA. These candidate selection pressures will arguably improve teacher candidate quality but can have great impact on the size of already shrinking preparation program enrollments and have the possible unintended consequence of reducing opportunities for disenfranchised and nontraditional students who wish to become teachers.

A discussion of the merits of the edTPA and increasing admission requirements for teacher preparation programs is clearly beyond the scope of this commentary. We raise these issues as exemplars of the conflicts deans face when negotiating the selection pressures that involve scholarly and political views of academic policies and procedures. Specifically, the new assessment demands of the edTPA are not without cost: Funding must be allocated to ensure that teacher preparation candidates are prepared to meet the edTPA requirements and faculty personnel must be made aware as to how these new certification requirements and learning activities. In addition, opportunities for knowledgeable faculty must be provided for productive critiques of the new assessment policies and structures. Similarly, we know little regarding the impact of increased GPA and standardized test scores on college enrollments, the percentage of students from underrepresented groups in our programs, and most important, the effects of such changes on the performance of our graduates. Still, we are required to integrate such policies due to variant selection pressures of legislative statute.

The articles in this special issue explore innovative approaches but also highlight contradictory internal and external selection pressures institutions must address in making well-conceived practices happen. Writing about the effects of policy incoherence on school improvement practices, Honig and Hatch (2004) urged that education decision makers reconceptualize their views of competing policy demands, noting there will never be objective alignment among demands or selection pressures. Rather, they advocate that the goal of policy coherence be viewed as a dynamic process in which multiple stakeholders work together to negotiate a best fit between internal demands, external demands, and the mission of their respective institutions. Unfortunately, far too many of our colleagues have only a superficial knowledge of policy and selection pressures and, as observed by Bartolome (2008), view policy decisions as “almost god-given, and permanent, and not subject to examination and challenge” (p. 376). We agree that selection pressures must be viewed within this dynamic prism and that innovation in teacher preparation—as on full display in this special issue—is necessary but not sufficient for changes in practice. Those developing innovative practices in special education teacher preparation must complement their efforts with an awareness of selection pressures and a commitment to the ongoing process of policy coherence.

Note

1. In Dieker et al.’s (2014) creative simulated environments technology, several of these difficult selection pressures are minimized. As part of their development of TeachLive,™ iterative improvements to make their system have resulted in greater user friendliness and affordability. This increases the probability of innovation scalability in our budget-sensitive schools and colleges.
References


