



Benefits and Challenges of Implementing a Merged Elementary and Special Education Program in Hawaii

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Abstract

The purpose of this five-year study was to evaluate the results of re-designing a dual undergraduate teacher preparation program into a fully merged elementary and special education program. The program was designed to produce teachers more capable of working with a diverse population of students, including children who are culturally diverse, dual language learners, those at-risk for school failure and those identified with high-incidence disabilities. Faculty from both departments engaged in co-teaching the merged courses in the new program. The foundational practices of the redesigned program included Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Response to Intervention (RtI), culturally responsive pedagogy, evidence-based practices, and instructional/assistive technology. The presentation will (a) provide an overview of the process, (b) share the final merged curriculum and clinical practice component, and (c) report upon our successes and lessons learned. (Program redesign funded by the US Department of Education, 2011).

1. Introduction

In this study we redesigned an existing dual elementary and special education teacher preparation program by merging standards-based coursework and clinical practice; and integrating evidence-based instructional approaches to address the needs of all children, including the challenges of children with high incidence disabilities.

2. Rationale

Inclusion of students with disabilities in the elementary classroom requires institutions of higher education to prepare educators to teach all students. Teachers need to be prepared to work effectively with students with disabilities and to collaborate with their general/special education colleagues. Dual elementary and special education teacher preparation programs have focused on preparing educators with these skills. However, many of these dual programs do not actually engage in program or curricular coordination between general and special education resulting in an absence of, or minimal, collaboration and coordination of programs [1]. In these dual programs, preservice teachers learn the importance of collaboration but they rarely see this demonstrated in their university courses. It is important for teacher candidates to be prepared in programs that model collaboration and make explicit the connections between elementary and special education content knowledge and skills. Blanton and Pugach [1] describe a merged program as one in which "faculty in general and special education come together to offer a single undergraduate curriculum for their general and special education students. Students entering merged programs are all prepared to teach in both fields" (p. 14). The nation has a clear and compelling need for reforming teacher preparation in order to produce highly skilled, inclusive special education teachers. These teachers will be better equipped to teach all children and improve the outcomes of students with high incidence disabilities.

2.1 Merged special and general education programs

It is increasingly common for students with high incidence disabilities to receive their education in inclusive settings [2]. Regardless of placement, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act emphasizes that all students be provided with access to the general curriculum. "Because of this, every teacher needs to be prepared to work effectively with students who have disabilities and to collaborate effectively with their special or general education teacher counterparts" [1. p. 4]. Accordingly, merging special and general education teacher preparation programs has been promoted as a promising means to reforming teacher preparation [3]. However, general and special education university faculty seldom co-teach classes, general and special education teacher candidates seldom take classes together, and the preparation of future general education teachers typically involves insufficient coursework and clinical experiences with children with disabilities [4].

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3. The redesign process

The existing program at the time of the study was a two-year B.Ed. Dual Elementary and Special Education program with discrete courses and field experiences, with candidates placed into two cohorts of 18-20 each. Each cohort was assigned two co-coordinators, one elementary and one special education. The candidates completed ten elementary and six special education courses. They completed 200 hours of field for the first three semesters, and a fourth semester of fulltime student teaching; either 8 weeks in an elementary and 8 weeks in a special education classroom, or 16 weeks in an inclusive classroom. The candidates were evaluated through two separate evaluation/assessment systems.

The chairs of the Elementary and Special Education departments gained buy-in from program faculty to redesign the existing Dual preparation program. The chairs submitted a proposal for a federal program improvement grant that was funded for \$1.5 million over five years. Faculty then engaged in a five-year process of program redesign, implementation, evaluation and scaling-up, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Five steps in the implementation process.

Plan	Conducted a collaborative planning and program development process resulting in a redesigned, merged elementary and special education program
Prepare	Completes feasibility study, design and deliver professional development activities for faculty
Pilot	Deliver redesigned program to a cohort of 37 candidates
Evaluate	Collect data to assess and determine effectiveness of new program. Data were collected from pre- and post-surveys and focus group interviews on faculty and candidate knowledge and skills, and their perceptions of their experiences during the redesign of the program.
Scale-Up	Implement redesigned, merged program with two cohorts of 20-25 candidates. Continue to collect data to assess and determine effectiveness of new program

4. The redesigned program

The goal of the redesign of the existing dual program was to create a single undergraduate curriculum comprised of merged elementary and special education coursework and clinical experiences. During the development stage, program faculty evaluated all dual program syllabi in an effort to retain all high priority content and identify unnecessary duplication or repetition of content. After priority content was identified, further efforts were made to fully integrate the elementary and special education content into common instructional blocks. A similar process was completed with the clinical experience requirements from both elementary and special education. The redesigned clinical experience blocks resulted in common observation and evaluation instruments, with supervision conducted by both elementary and special education faculty. Instructional practices that address children with high-incidence disabilities were incorporated into all instructional blocks; the new integrated courses were all revised in line with current research on data-based decision making, instructional/assistive technology, response to intervention (RtI), evidence-based practices, universal design for learning (UDL), culturally relevant pedagogy, and co-teaching. The resulting merged program consisted of 13 integrated courses, six integrated field courses and an integrated assessment system. All courses were designed to be co-taught by elementary and special education faculty. However, after piloting the first cohort, it was determined that a few courses, depending upon content, were better taught by pairs of elementary faculty and some by pairs of special education faculty. Table 2 depicts the four semester instructional blocks.

Table 2. Four semester instructional blocks

Curriculum Block Semester I	Curriculum Block Semester II
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning & Instruction - Introduction to Inclusive Teaching • Assessment I: Foundations of Assessment • Planning & Instruction- Literacy I: Teaching Children to Read in Inclusive Settings K-3 • Learner in the Environment I: Social 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Assessment II: Formal Assessment * Planning & Instruction Literacy II: Teaching Children to Read in Inclusive Settings 4-6 * Planning & Instruction - Math in Inclusive Settings * Planning & Instruction - Science in Inclusive Settings



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> and Cultural Contexts for Learning All courses co-taught GEN/SPED 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learner in the Environment II: Classroom and Behavior Management All courses co-taught GEN/SPED except Assessment SPED/SPED
<p>Curriculum Block Semester III</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planning & Instruction-Literacy III: Writing and Visual Arts in Inclusive Settings (GEN/SPED) Planning & Instruction- Integrating Social Studies and Performing Arts (GEN/GEN) Planning & Instruction – STEM (GEN/GEN) Learner in the Environment III: Behavior Project Implementation (SPED/SPED) 	<p>Curriculum Block Semester IV</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student Teaching Seminar (GEN/SPED)

Clinical experiences were revised and resulted in the addition of tutoring and rounds not found in the prior dual preparation program. The tutoring and rounds in Semester I replaced the traditional 2 days per week in a host classroom. The tutoring experience was paired with the *Planning & Instruction- Literacy I: Teaching Children to Read in Inclusive Settings K-3* instructional block. Candidates spend three mornings per week, three hours per day, tutoring children in grade 1 who have been identified as struggling readers. Candidates also spend time shadowing their tutees for the remainder of the school day. Also, in Semester I candidates participate in a series of rounds, observing at four different sites. The rationale for introducing rounds into the program was to follow the model of other professional schools who are demonstrating exemplary practices

Table 3. Four semester clinical practice blocks

<p>Clinical Practice Block Semester I</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tutoring: RTI Reading Intervention - 1:1 tutoring 1st graders at risk for reading failure; Shadowing Tutee for school day Rounds: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistive Technology Center Model Autism Spectrum Disorder classroom Hawaiian Immersion School International Baccalaureate School 	<p>Clinical Practice Block Semester II</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 mornings a week co-teaching with mentor teacher GEN and SPED supervision Over 200 hrs. during semester UHM courses in afternoons Mon.-Thurs.; one course on Friday mornings
<p>Clinical Practice Block Semester III</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 week in field 7 weeks UHM courses, Mon-Thurs. 8 weeks in field - co-teaching with mentor teacher GEN and SPED supervision Over 200 hrs. during semester 	<p>Student Teaching Semester IV</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student teaching 15-16 weeks in inclusive setting or 8 weeks in special education setting and 8 weeks in elementary setting 5 days a week, 7:30-3:00 p.m. 4 weeks total solo teaching Supervision by GEN &/or SPED

As we engaged in the program redesign we gathered data from faculty and candidates. From this data we identified the benefits and challenges experienced during the piloting and implementation of the program. The data were used to make program revisions and improvements prior to scaling-up. A representative sample of feedback from faculty and candidates are represented in Table 4.



Table 4. Benefits and Challenges

Benefits – Faculty Feedback	Benefits – Candidate Feedback
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Great to try something new and different to benefit students! * Change to revise program to reflect needs in today’s classrooms. * Integrating/streaming makes load lighter for candidates. * Working together has added joint perspectives, integrated ideas, and faculty feeding off ideas from each other. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The special Ed content and the elementary content have been integrated into my mind smoothly. • I feel that the tutoring is teaching me so much and benefiting my tutee. • I really enjoy the rounds! • I love the idea of co-teaching. You get two different perspectives all while they are in the same classroom.
Challenges – Faculty Feedback	Challenges – Candidate Feedback
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time, even with my amazing partners, it takes time! • Terminology! But we’re arriving at some shared understandings. • Will the content areas get the time/attention they need? • Co-teaching is a balance, building trust takes time. Personalities matter. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel that we are getting an overload of information, but it is manageable and I am enjoying myself. • It is difficult when faculty are not on the same page with grading. • There are issues with making university assignments fit with my mentor’s classroom needs. • I am super overwhelmed and stressed but I feel everything we learned is valuable.

5. Sustainability

At conclusion of the five-year process, we identified areas to address for sustainability. The faculty workload assignment for this program was the equivalent faculty workload to the prior Dual Program (two courses, one elementary and one special education = one co-taught merged course). However, planning time for the co-teaching teams should be build into faculty workload. Further, personalities do matter for faculty co-teaching with one another; this requires thoughtful assignment of faculty to the merged program. We provided co-teaching training for faculty, candidates, and mentor teachers; for sustainability that training should be continued.

6. Conclusion

This paper provides a successful experience in redesigning and implementing a merged teacher preparation program. Results indicate improved practice in the delivery of elementary and special education course content and in the preparation of teacher candidates. Data indicate candidate proficiency in incorporating the practices of UDL, Rtl, culturally responsive pedagogy, evidence-based interventions, co-teaching and instructional/assistive technology into their teaching repertoire to ultimately improve student performance. We share an innovative model useful to other teacher educators who are engaged in merging general and special education curricula.

References

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