

Mapping the Journey of Reform and Assessment for an Elementary Education Teacher Preparation Program

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Abstract

This article describes the non-linear journey of an elementary education teacher preparation program in a large southeastern university during an eight-year process of program improvement. In that time period, the program developed and implemented innovative programs; collected data from various sources; and adopted a robust, valid, and reliable performance assessment instrument in order to enact program improvement. The authors provide details and lessons learned that highlight the relationship of practices for improving teacher candidate programs and performance assessment data. They conclude by sharing suggestions for continual improvement by utilizing actionable data.

Teacher education is in the midst of a transformation as high stakes accountability heightens the demand for valid and reliable teacher candidate performance assessments (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2012). The Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), the new accrediting body for educator preparation, is influencing this shift by implementing a new assessment process for colleges of education. The CAEP accreditation processes advocate drawing on quality data to monitor progress and demonstrate that teacher candidates have positively impacted P-12 student learning (CAEP, 2013).

In 2010, the Data Quality Campaign (2010), an initiative involving American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE), CCSSO, and National Council

for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), called for the development of quality teacher evaluation that could be paired with K-12 student learning for a more comprehensive evaluation process. The report emphasized that systems of statewide longitudinal data collection would lead to increased transparency and communication with stakeholders while having the potential to provide the field of teacher preparation with actionable data that, when shared among colleges of teacher education nationwide, would inform teacher education and support on-going program improvement (Data Quality Campaign, AACTE, CCSSO, & NCATE, 2010).

Set within this landscape of assessment in teacher education, this article maps the eight-year journey of reform in an undergraduate elementary education program within a large, state-supported teacher education program. The journey began with a series of questions: *Where are we? Where do we want to go? How will we get there?* Grappling with these questions, faculty designed several simultaneous initiatives as mandates emerged and coalesced, eventually generating a comprehensive reform effort. While faculty began and persisted in their journey of reform, they encountered roadblocks, but also scenic routes. *Roadblocks* were seen as initial obstacles to improvement. Over time these seeming roadblocks turned into *scenic routes*, or opportunities, to explore innovative practices while traveling to reach the destination of continual improvement utilizing actionable data.

Beginning the Journey: Where Are We?

As the largest producer of initial licensure teachers in a southeastern state (Institutional Planning, Assessment and Research [IPAR], 2013), over the last eight years, the College of Education averaged 1,689 undergraduate teacher candidates, of whom 54% were from elementary education (IPAR, 2013). In total, elementary education teacher candidates required over 1,800 practicum placements (from early experience through internship) each semester. Formal partnerships with 36 school systems in the eastern third of the state made the successful placement of teacher candidates possible. While the majority of the teacher candidates completed practica and internships within these 36 counties, others were placed across the state. Prior to their student teaching-internship experience, elementary teacher candidates each completed 111 hours of field experience (Dobson, 2013).

In 2006, a group of elementary education faculty conducted a program needs assessment with the intent of re-conceptualizing the undergraduate curriculum. They reviewed the elementary education teacher candidate exit survey data and principal survey data and found that both teacher candidates and principals reported weaknesses in the areas of classroom management and assessment. Capstone performance measures in place at the time, however, did not yield any discernible data to support the self-reported and principal-reported weaknesses in classroom management and assessment. According to progress reports and teaching portfolios

developed by teacher candidates, the candidates did relatively well across all areas of teaching, including assessment and classroom management. Based on these initial data, the group constructed what they considered to be a premiere model for an elementary education program. Suggested changes to the existing model included a new assessment course, practicum blocks in which teacher candidates were engaged in teaching and managing diverse classrooms under close supervision of faculty early and often in the program, and increased time and supervision in the year-long internship.

As input on the new program model was gathered from the entire elementary education faculty and recommendations were being finalized, the state Department of Public Instruction (DPI) required all institutions of higher education (IHE) with initial teacher preparation programs to revise their programs. In 2008, DPI mandated that the revisions include three key goals. First, IHEs were charged to make program changes based on the five standards set forth by the state's Professional Teaching Standards Commission and principles of the 21st century skills movement (DPI, 2014). Second, a new state accreditation process for initial licensure programs shifted the focus to outcomes rather than inputs (e.g., capstone projects, not syllabi, were to be the foci). Finally, all IHEs were required to develop a minimum of six rubric-evaluated evidences to measure teacher candidates' competencies in the newly revised standards and 21st century skills. These new evidences were to be collected and scored in a new electronic portfolio.

Within the same timeframe of the program needs assessment, development of a new program model, and state mandated reform (2006 – 2009), a research analysis was undertaken at the state level regarding teacher education. Researchers (Henry et al., 2011) examined the initial data set (Henry, Thompson, Fortner, Zulli, & Kershaw, 2010) for the impact of teacher education graduates, categorized by route of preparation, on student achievement. They used a three-level hierarchical linear model with students nested in classrooms within schools accounting for the following student characteristics: prior test scores in reading and math, peer test scores, mobility, days absent, gender, race/ethnicity, poverty, gifted, disabled, limited English proficiency, over age for the grade, under age for the grade, and covariates at the classroom and school levels. Student achievement was measured using scores on state achievement tests. Data on preliminary performances of former teacher candidates teaching in the state were shared with the 15 participating state IHEs. When compared to other former elementary education teacher candidates across the state, our program completers ranked slightly above the mean in language arts achievement and comparable to the mean in math achievement. Furthermore, data indicated that our first-year elementary teachers did not impact student achievement as much as our third year elementary teachers (Henry et al., 2011).

As statewide findings were shared and revisioning was underway, the College of Education (COE) leadership sought more actionable data from the recently distributed findings. The COE engaged the same evaluation researchers to design and enact a drill-down study focusing on our evaluation instruments and their ability to discern differences on our program completers' performance (Henry et al., 2013). As a result, analyses conducted at the state university system level on pathways in teacher preparation (Henry et al., 2014) were replicated at the program level using campus-developed assessments of teacher candidate readiness (Henry et al., 2013). In this context, the drill-down study was a more focused analysis that sought to link K-12 student achievement to specific teacher candidate performance measures at the programmatic level. A powerful result of the drill-down study was the analysis of the elementary education's program's *home-grown* assessment of teacher candidate performance, including a teacher candidate-developed portfolio, observational assessments from the internship, and dispositional assessments. None was found to be a valid or reliable measure of teacher candidate performance.

Figure 1 depicts the ways in which these various reforms, mandates, reports, and studies overlapped throughout an eight-year period.

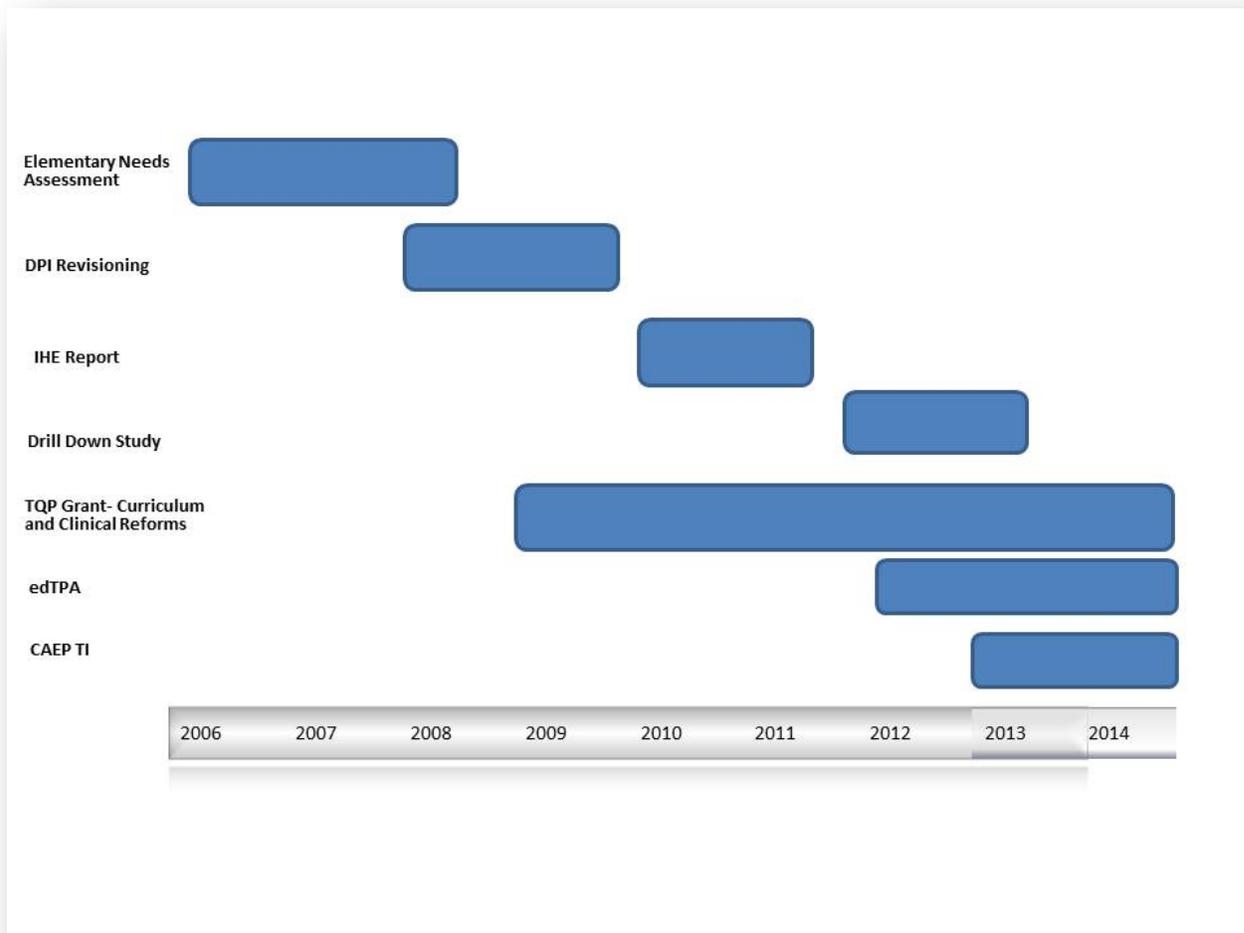


Figure 1. Program improvement timeline. Spanning an eight-year period, various pressures influenced program improvement. These included internal program needs assessment, Department of Public Instruction mandates, statewide Institution of Higher Education reports in teacher education, graduate impact drill down studies, grant funded reforms, the Teacher Performance Assessment pilot, and CAEP accreditation pathways. Often these pressures overlapped.

Where Do We Want to Go and How Do We Get There?

Spurred by these overlapping and sometimes competing pressures of program needs assessment, DPI state mandates (2006 – 2009) and the IHE reports (2010-2011), faculty within the elementary education program continued to engage in program improvement. The remaining two questions – *where do we want to go* and *how will we*

get there? – offered faculty a framework for considering how to systematically and purposefully examine performance assessment data in relation to curriculum redesign and implementation.

On the heels of the DPI revisioning and statewide IHE preliminary analysis of the impact of graduates, the elementary education program received a 2009 U.S. Department of Education Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) grant award. The grant provided approximately \$9 million over five years to focus on curriculum and clinical reform in collaboration with two local school districts. The goal of this federal grant program was to change the trajectory of a first year teacher's ability to impact student achievement. The innovative reforms focused on breaking down traditional vertical, silo-like course sequencing that allowed little chance for teacher candidates to make connections or build on knowledge. The reform efforts created a horizontal trail, woven throughout courses, providing connections and developmental opportunities for teacher candidates to plan, teach, and assess throughout the program. Utilizing the resources of the grant, core innovations implemented in the elementary education program included Instructional Strategy Lessons for Educators Series (ISLES) modules (Carson, Cuthrell, Smith, & Stapleton, 2010), Instructional Coaching (Smith, Covington, Cuthrell, & Stapleton, 2010), Video Grand Rounds (Cuthrell, Vitale, & Bullock, 2014), and Co-teaching (Smith, Tschida et al., 2014).

Instructional Strategy Lessons for Educators Series (ISLES)

The establishment of a common language of high leverage practices (i.e., research-based instructional practices yielding increases in K-6 student achievement) was critical in implementing curriculum reform and developing expertise in novice teacher candidates. University faculty and school district personnel developed the online instructional module series, ISLES, as one of the strategies to address this goal (Carson et al., 2010). These modules, based on three levels of knowledge (declarative, procedural, conditional), provided a set of instructional strategies that included advanced organizers, graphic organizers, examples/non-examples, compare/contrast, higher-level questioning, review games, jigsaw, think-pair-share, formative assessment, and summative assessment. The modules were embedded into junior and early senior level courses within the program as teacher candidates built their knowledge in introductory, methods, and advanced courses. The culminating module, at the conditional level, required teacher candidates to plan, instruct, and assess a lesson that included use of ISLES strategies (Cuthrell, Stapleton, & Smith, 2013). At the conclusion of the final ISLES module, teacher candidates met individually for 20-40 minutes with their senior methods instructor to engage in a critical reflection of their ability to utilize the strategies.

Instructional Coaches

In order to improve clinical experiences in the internship, Instructional Coaches were hired by local school sites to mentor teacher candidates in best practices, conduct in-class observations, and provide targeted professional development (Smith et al., 2014). Instructional Coaches were introduced in the first senior semester to maximize teacher candidates' growth in the year-long internship experience. During the first semester of their senior year, teacher candidates reported to their local school classrooms one day a week to observe their clinical teachers and meet the students. Teacher candidates were encouraged to be actively engaged in their internship classrooms by assisting their clinical teachers in various classroom tasks and by teaching at least three lessons to classroom students. Instructional Coaches observed interns teaching and then provided feedback as an additional resource for improving lesson planning and implementation in an authentic school setting. During teacher candidates' final internship semester, they reported to their schools every day to perform teaching duties in their individual classrooms. Instructional Coaches continued to observe them and offered specific suggestions to improve their performances. Additionally, Instructional Coaches used data from their observations to plan professional development tailored to meet the needs of individual candidates. These two all-day professional development sessions, offered to all elementary education interns, focused on curriculum, assessment, and approaches to learning

Video Grand Rounds

As ISLES and Instructional Coaching continued to impact upper level courses and the internship experience, Video Grand Rounds (VGR) was developed in the summer of 2012 for the early experiences course (Cuthrell et al., 2014). VGR was based on the medical model of *rounding* in which a small group of medical students accompanies a licensed medical doctor to observe his or her treatment of patients and then engage in discussions regarding those patients' symptoms, needs, immediate medical treatment, and follow-up care (Hebert & Wright, 2003). Recognizing that novice education students were conducting 16 hours of independent classroom observations in the field but were unable at the end of those 16 hours to discern effective from ineffective teaching practices, elementary faculty sought to redesign its observation model and, in response, embedded aspects of the medical model. The configuration included observation and analysis of one common video of classroom interactions per week over the course of four weeks. All viewings were followed by whole class discussions of the videos. Subsequent to the in-class video experience, novice education students independently observed four hours elementary classroom interactions and produced written reflections of their observation experiences.

Co-teaching

The co-teaching innovation, based on the work of Cook and Friend (1995), began with a small pilot in fall 2012 and continued through subsequent semesters (Smith, Tschida et al., 2014). Co-teaching differs from the traditional teaching model in that co-teachers work together over a semester or school year to plan lessons and deliver instruction. When applied to the internship setting, clinical teachers and interns rotate between assuming lead teacher and assistant teacher roles throughout the entire internship experience. This approach diverges from the traditional student teaching model in which the clinical teacher gradually releases all teaching responsibilities to the intern and reassumes them near the end of the semester. The decision to implement a co-teaching model was based on cumulative student achievement data gathered over four years at St. Cloud State University that found statistically significant gains in reading and math proficiency in co-teaching settings when 35,000 P-12 students were compared in co-taught and non-co-taught clinical internship classrooms (Bacharach & Heck, 2012; Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2008, 2010).

During the elementary education pilot, clinical teachers, teacher candidates, and university supervisors were trained on seven co-teaching practices for use in the internship: One Teach, One Observe; One Teach, One Assist; Station Teaching; Parallel Teaching; Supplemental Teaching; Alternative/Differentiated Teaching; and Team Teaching (Cook & Friend, 1995). Two configurations of co-teaching were adopted; configuration A assigned one teacher candidate to one clinical teacher, and configuration B assigned two teacher candidates to one clinical teacher. Elementary candidates were then randomly assigned to one of the two co-teaching configurations or to the traditional version of the internship. Elementary co-teaching interns and their clinical teachers were trained in the co-teaching model during the fall prior to spring implementation of the model. Co-teachers were expected to utilize the seven strategies in their lessons with at least three co-teaching instances each week and all seven strategies across a period of five weeks. At the end of the pilot, faculty, interns, and clinical teachers agreed that the co-teaching partnerships enabled clinical teachers to provide consistent mentoring and afforded interns a comprehensive rigorous experience with the support necessary to gain the skills and the confidence required to teach successfully, while providing K-6 students greater access to instruction.

Teacher Performance Assessment

In spring 2012, during the innovation process, the elementary education program participated in Stanford University's Teacher Performance Assessment Consortium (TPAC). Built on California's long-term performance assessment for teacher candidates and beginning teachers (PAC), the Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA) requires each teacher candidate to show evidence of planning, teaching, and assessing around a central focus in each content area (Dobson, 2013). Each candidate completes four

tasks: planning a series of lessons, implementing and video recording the implementation of the lessons, assessing student learning outcomes, and using those outcomes to plan next steps. For each task, the teacher candidates answer guided questions in reflective written commentaries (Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning and Equity [SCALE], 2013).

This rigorous assessment, using nationally validated and reliable instruments and work sample methods (SCALE, 2013), provided a research base to launch a significant change in the elementary education program. Because each course in the elementary education program had multiple sections and multiple faculty instructors, increasing the consistency and coherence across the program was seen as an essential change. As the elementary faculty worked through the question – *Where do we want to go?* – expertise in elementary planning, teaching, and assessing at the novice level emerged as a clear destination and became the essential component of the program revision process.

Heeding the call of AACTE, CCSSO, and NCATE in the Data Quality Campaign (2010), actionable data became increasingly important in our journey. Set within a broader context of ongoing curriculum conversations, multiple semesters of edTPA data provided a valid and reliable lens through which to analyze the competencies of elementary teacher candidates while assessing the impact of the various innovations. Data summits delving into edTPA data were held beginning in 2013 at the program, college, and state teacher education levels. As part of these sessions, elementary education faculty discussed programmatic results of edTPA portfolio assessments and determined next steps in program improvements and innovations. Because of a robust coding feature in the College of Education's Teacher Education Management System (TEMS) integrated database, teacher candidates participating in reform innovations were tagged with innovation-linked codes. For example, data associated with an elementary teacher candidate participating in Instructional Coaching carried a coaching tag. Data from an elementary teacher candidate participating in ISLES instruction were assigned an ISLES tag. As a result, each teacher candidate codes reflected the instructional affordances offered that candidate. This coding provided the opportunity for faculty to collect and analyze edTPA data at multiple levels: individual teacher candidate, individual innovation, and combined innovations.

In an effort to further program improvement, elementary education program leadership held a curriculum summit for elementary faculty in spring 2013. Conceptually central in these discussions was the teacher candidate performance data. At this summit, program templates, rubrics, goals, and processes were discussed in depth and at length. At the conclusion of the summit, key templates and rubrics that reflected the progression of anticipated candidate development from sophomore to senior years were finalized for implementation.

By framing the discussion within the edTPA data, program improvement centered on creating a developmental progression of skills for elementary education teacher candidates set within the broader context of the entire scope of program innovations. In order to measure student learning, faculty acknowledged the importance of reliable and valid capstone assessments, but also recognized the need to develop formative benchmark assessments to use throughout the program. When considering the question, *How will we get there?*, the purposeful collection, analysis, and action related to the performance assessment data significantly moved the program forward on its journey.

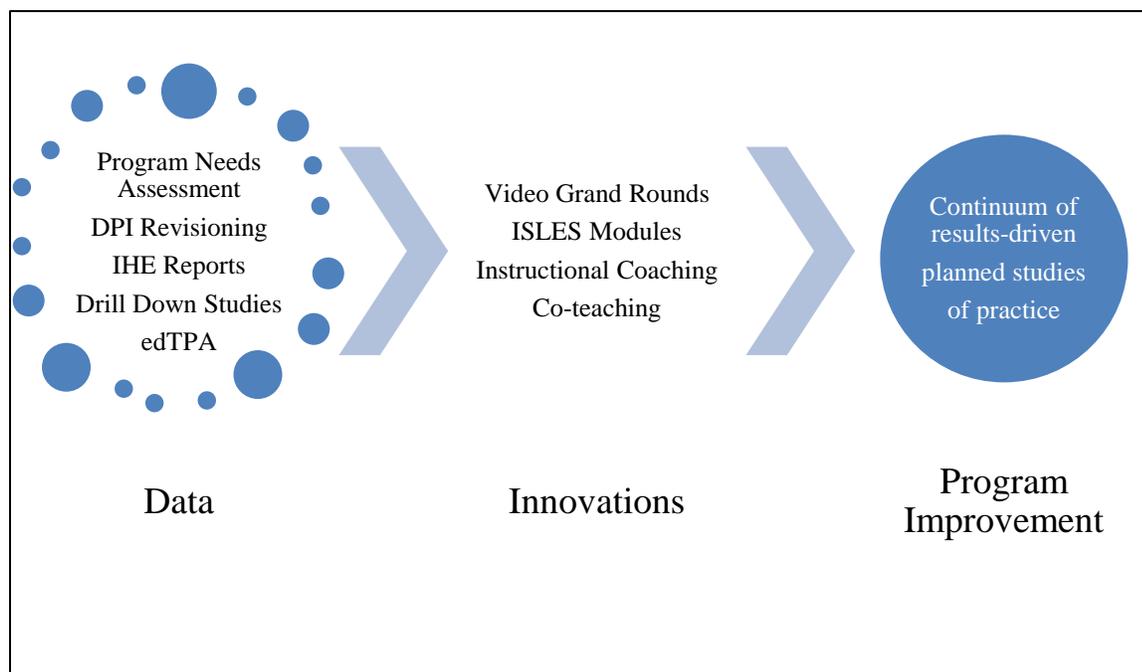


Figure 2. Process of program improvement. Through the careful consideration of various data points, including statewide and college level initiatives, promising innovations emerged, all of which ultimately converged to form a continuum for developing expertise in novice teachers. This continuum, comprised of a set of planned studies of practice examining the innovations, supported result-driven program improvements.

Where Are We Now?

Over the last five years, several innovations were piloted and studied with the intent of strengthening elementary education teacher candidates' experiences; these innovations have already led to a more coordinated approach to teacher candidate education and internship performance measures and it is hoped, will ultimately lead to gains in K-6 student achievement. What began as program area curriculum and clinical reforms evolved into a coordinated set of innovations and associated planned studies of practice: Video Grand Rounds, ISLES, Instructional Coaching, Co-teaching, and edTPA.

Certainly, transforming a large elementary education program is a complex, multifaceted task. Systematically investing in planned studies of practice that result in data-driven program improvements is critical. Such studies can illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of teacher candidate performance allowing faculty to determine what changes or innovations result in more effective teacher education. The overall work of the last eight years has resulted in a more cohesive, structured, and data-driven elementary education program. The planned studies of practice are part of a continuum of developing expertise within the program. Currently we are engaged in a Transformation Initiative (TI) for CAEP accreditation, and as such, will contribute to the development of a research base that documents and substantiates promising and effective practices and innovations to inform and transform educator preparation (CAEP, 2013).

Turning Road Blocks into Scenic Routes

Within large programs, the journey of utilizing performance assessment data in program improvement can be riddled with roadblocks, such as resistance and dissent from faculty and fidelity of evaluation methods. Key considerations such as utilizing integrated technology systems, defining effective communication structures, providing technology support, deploying resources appropriately, and determining a transition timeline are highlighted below as recommendations that may help turn roadblocks into scenic routes.

Find an appropriate platform to support a complex, integrated technology system. While technology may make things easier over the long run, transitioning to an integrated technology system, a new portfolio platform, and creating a process for doing so was difficult. Roadblocks encountered during this transition included resistance to change, a need for technical support, and a need for a well-defined communication structure. Positive scenic routes included the ability to tag students in the newly integrated technology system facilitating further drill-down studies and the submission of program benchmark and capstone assignments in a central repository. Prior to large-scale use of the electronic platforms, instructors documented teacher candidates'

learning outcomes in multiple locations. Utilization of Taskstream™ as an electronic portfolio with the integrated technology system provided access and oversight to program administration, increasing the likelihood that teacher candidate data could be and would be reviewed by faculty.

Create a well-defined communication system. With all of the stakeholders (faculty, teacher candidates, clinical teachers, university supervisors, instructional coaches, and adjunct instructors) trying to understand the major reforms occurring in the program, it became apparent that a well-defined communication structure was needed to alleviate the confusion and increase efficiency. Multiple people were contacted with questions, leading to a duplication of efforts, and at times, misinformation. After many scenic routes exploring alternate communication structures, elementary leadership developed a streamlined process for disseminating information that included weekly email updates tailored to each set of stakeholders.

Further necessitating the need for a well-developed communication structure was faculty buy-in. When faculty did not understand what the new requirements were and why they were important, roadblocks quickly developed. Individual faculty members may not have believed in the process, failed to complete the required assignments, or no longer wished to be a part of the process. One-on-one conversations were very effective in creating buy-in with faculty members, but with more than 25 elementary faculty members involved in the process, they were not efficient. Even though faculty received information about the impending changes and why the changes were coming long before implementation, the change, when it came, was still seen as another top down mandated requirement and was not supported initially.

Create a system for technology support. Technology support was instrumental. There was one faculty member in charge of all of the technology training as Taskstream™ and the edTPA were introduced. This proved to be a roadblock, as it was a huge amount of work for this individual to train 500 stakeholders in the software, problem solve when there were issues, and answer the constant stream of questions regarding technology. Over time, lead faculty refined the training to better inform the teacher candidates, clinical teachers, university supervisors, and faculty members on Taskstream™. An archive of technical support documents were developed, used, disseminated and refined as needed.

Create a structure in which edTPA faculty liaisons collaborate to ensure continuous program improvement. Identifying Teacher Performance Assessment Liaisons (TPALs) proved beneficial (L'Esperance, Dobson, Bullock, & Lys, 2013; Lys, L'Esperance, Dobson, & Bullock, 2014). Lead faculty from all university teacher education programs completing the edTPA were invited to be part of the TPAL structure. The TPALs met monthly and became versed in the assessment processes in the college as the performance assessment was implemented on a larger scale. Data-

driven program improvements were continually part of the conversation at the monthly meetings. Providing a forum that established the authentic use of performance assessment data to truly improve programs cemented the purpose of this group and increased faculty engagement. The data were collected and analyzed regularly, allowing the elementary education program the opportunity to highlight its work and learn from others. Data-driven actions were real and went beyond the academic exercise of checking off a box on an annual assessment report.

Consider the transition timeline. In the elementary program, because multiple reforms were occurring at the same time, there was a notion that the time was right for program-wide changes. It was hoped that changing everything at once would add consistency of message by having faculty and students within the program complete identical benchmark and capstone assignments embedded into specific courses. The roadblock was in the timing of these changes. Decisions made over the summer, when there was a lack of opportunity for buy-in, resulted in resistance and lack of buy-in and knowledge by some faculty members. After the first semester of changes, faculty members were able to discuss revisions and faculty buy-in increased dramatically. When implementing transitions, programs must pay attention to timing so that faculty can be involved in the process.

Final Destination: Suggestions for Continual Improvement

The following suggestions are offered to teacher education programs conceptualizing the integration of program revision and performance assessment data.

1. Nurture a culture of evidence. Provide multiple opportunities for faculty to meet, discuss, and explore performance data. Highlight data trends in briefs at the university, college, and program levels. Establish a schedule of data reviews.
2. Invest in technology. Utilize electronic portfolio platforms to collect benchmark and capstone assignments. Build or adopt a data management system to support large- and small-scale analysis.
3. Tag teacher candidates. Create specific codes within your information management system to facilitate further analysis of data, like performance assessment and the impact of various program improvement initiatives for teacher candidates. It is easier to tag teacher candidates during the process as opposed to after.

4. Designate leaders. Streamline the process for disseminating information and alleviate confusion. Provide clear timetables for data analysis and program improvements. The review needs to be led, not just required.
5. Engage faculty. Everyone brings strengths to the table. Take time to find out those strengths, acknowledge them, and support them. Do not ignore faculty resistance and faculty dissent; instead, find ways to engage.
6. Invest in faculty. Immerse faculty and staff in the process. Faculty need to live it in order to improve it. Strategically assign lead faculty to course development and subsequent program improvements. Value the investment by providing faculty opportunities to present their research efforts to faculty colleagues at all levels.
7. Stick with it. See the improvement through. Strategically plan your scale up. Collect the data on the improvement's impact. Then make decisions to continue or discontinue. Allow the data to guide your decision-making.
8. Include stakeholders. Teacher education is a partnership enterprise. Stakeholders, such as school district partners and state legislators, have the potential to be powerful advocates for teacher education when they are part of a change in progress.
9. Stay patient. Improvement and change are difficult. Both take time.
10. Celebrate! Routinely recognize the work of teacher candidates and faculty in improving programs. Take pride in using results to drive instruction. Rejoice in the final destination.

Comprehensive changes in curricular and clinical experiences take time, commitment, and vision in order to systematically create a programmatic continuum of developing expertise in novice teacher candidates. Performance assessment data provide the structure and information needed for large programs to make these purposeful changes. The increasingly explicit culture of assessment in teacher education, in conjunction with the promise of valid and reliable performance assessments, invites teacher education programs to embark on a journey of renewed focus. At the heart of that journey stand program improvement, actionable data, and a clear sense of the impact of those improvements. With this multi-pronged focus, continual improvement and assessment become more meaningful and truly transformative.

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