

**Teacher Education Reform:
Listening to Voices from the Inside**

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Abstract

For decades, teacher educators and others have looked critically at the way teachers are initially prepared and during the last ten years the calls for reform in teacher education have become even more frequent. Some programs have responded to those demands and made substantial and long lasting changes. This qualitative study reports on data gathered during interviews with deans and other senior teacher education program heads who have been leaders of major long term programmatic changes in their institutions. Interviewees described the major reforms that occurred under their leadership and described the origins of each initiative and the positive and negative influences on these reform efforts. Conclusions focus on the importance of faculty development and a coherent program foundation, the centrality of context, and the re-visioning of relationships between states and teacher education programs.

***Keywords:* preservice teacher education, program development, interviews, deans, reform, barriers**

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Over the last few decades, teacher educators, and many outside of teacher education, have looked critically at the way teachers are initially prepared (e.g. National Commission on Excellence in Teacher Education, 1985; Holmes Group, 1986; Goodlad, 1990; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996; Tom, 1997; Larabee, 2004; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Zeichner, 2014).

In response to that criticism, state and national groups began introducing specific reform requirements for program approval. Both large and small institutions have been affected by reform ideas and accreditation demands. Many have worked hard to go beyond changing their programs to meet accreditation requirements; they have built on the suggestions of the critics to re-invent their programs. A few program changes have been documented (e.g. Mezeske & Mezeske, 2004; Carroll, Featherstone, Featherstone, Feiman-Nemser & Roosevelt, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2006). But more documentation and analysis is needed about how change is made (Wang, Odell, Klecka, Spalding, & Lin, 2010) and what types of internal and external forces and decisions support and hinder reform in teacher education programs.

Literature about teacher education administrators and deans of education in the United States is sparse and focuses mostly on schools of education in large institutions (Anderson & King, 1987; Denmark, 1983; Bush, 1987; Clifford & Guthrie, 1988; Judge, 1982; Goodlad, 1990; Valli 1992; Bowen, 1995; Gardner, 1992; Gmelch, 2002; Wepner, D'Onofrio, & Wilhite 2008; Clift, Loughran, Mills, & Craig, 2015) and there is a lack of research on what teacher education administrators know about their profession. Even less research has been conducted examining specifically what they have learned about what supports or hinders teacher education reform. This study addresses that need for understanding the nature of reform efforts. The question guiding the research was "what can experienced leaders in teacher education reform tell us about the composition of reform and what are key influences and supports needed for that reform to happen successfully?"

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Design

To fill the gap in the literature on the anatomy of teacher education reform, I examined reform efforts in nine liberal arts teacher education programs from different parts of the United States through intensive interviews with their senior teacher education administrator—the dean, department chairperson or director of teacher education. This qualitative study is not an analysis of policy or a description of programs, rather an initial exploration of the composition of reform from an insider’s perspective and what we learn when we pay attention to those initiating and leading the efforts.

Description of the Participants and Institutions

Because of their size and their flexibility and nimbleness when responding to challenges and changes (Roose, 2013), the focus of this study about teacher education reform is on liberal arts teacher education programs. I used “purposeful sampling” (Patton, 1990) to locate interviewees who had been senior teacher education administrators at different types of liberal arts institutions for at least ten years, had experience with reform in teacher preparation and worked in different parts of the country—two each from the west, mid-west and south and three from the east. Also, “snowball sampling” (Goodman, 1961) was utilized as initial interviewees suggested others.

Three of the nine institutions are classified as regional schools and six as national. One is an HBCU (Historically Black College or University), five are religiously affiliated, five are more selective in their admissions and three combine liberal arts with an emphasis on research. Either the interviewee or the institution’s website described their institutions as focused on liberal arts. Institution size ranged widely, while the range in size of the preparation programs was much narrower, with 25-225 teachers licensed per year. All the administrators considered their programs small.

Interviews and Analysis

All the initial interviews were conducted in person and were

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digitally recorded. Three questions formed the basis of the standardized open-ended and guided interview: (a) What reform efforts had they been a part of during their years involved with teacher education? (b) What supported those efforts? and, (c) What were hindrances in the efforts? The open-ended interviews allowed for exploration of the initial questions as well as any emergent topics.

Consistent with general qualitative methodology and grounded theory (Patton, 1990; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I utilized a reflective and comparative process of analysis throughout the data collection. Doing so allowed for the honing of follow-up questions and exploration of emerging concepts with the interviewees. I also collected data about the institutions and teacher education preparation programs from their websites, curriculum vita and additional documents that interviewees or their faculty had written about their programs.

Starting with a generative open analysis then moving to more focused classifications (Patton, 1990), I read the interviews multiple times, allowing patterns, themes and categories of analysis to come from the data. Because the questions were open-ended, a variety of responses were possible. When a similar response was repeated, I regarded it as significant and employed constant comparison analysis (Strauss, 1987) to identify divergent responses for each question.

Discussion

The interviewees were asked to talk about reform initiatives or mandates coming from within or outside the institution and most chose to talk about both. For each example, interviewees talked about origins of the reform and influences, both positive and negative, on reform efforts.

Following the common language usage of teacher educators and of those outside education, the word “reform” was used in the interviews to ask about changes the administrators had overseen in their programs over the years – changes that would help their preparation of stronger, more competent beginning teachers. The reform initiatives the interviewees discuss might be placed in a

political light (Imig, D., Wiseman, & Imig, J., 2011) but most often the administrators did not bring that orientation to the study.

The Reforms

Altogether, the interviewees talked about nine different reforms. Four reforms were introduced and discussed in-depth by at least four of the interviewees: (a) learning about and focusing on multiculturalism/diversity, (b) the redesigning or re-conceptualizing of the program, (c) changing expectations and/or deepening content, and (d) changing assessment. Other reforms chosen by fewer than four of the interviewees included: developing K–12 partnerships, incorporating special education issues and learning into the program, changing programs to support students' needs in passing state tests, and developing support structures for alumni.

For the majority of the programs the key reforms were conceptual, rather than structural in nature (Tom, 1997, p.97). This study focuses on what supported and hindered these reform efforts rather than exploring the reforms themselves. The idea or need for reform came from a variety of sources, from inside and outside the institution and sometimes from a combination of both. State mandates impacted five efforts, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)¹ requirements sparked change and ideas for reform within institutions came from the faculty. Often reforms originating within an institution dovetailed with changing expectations of an outside force such as NCATE.

Key Elements that Impact Reform

The interviewees referenced reform efforts they led decades ago and some that were more recent. I identified four major elements that impacted the success of their reform efforts. Two of these elements focus on what programs can do for themselves, and two of the elements focus on contexts and relationships that are central to reform, and which also need to be cultivated. These selected elements cut across time and programs and, as a teacher education

¹As of 2013, NCATE has been subsumed under the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). The interviewees often spoke of efforts begun before 2013.

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administrator myself, I can attest that they are germane, applicable and significant when considering reform efforts of today.

The role of faculty and professional development. The first key element emerging from this study is the centrality of faculty in reform efforts. Knowing the faculty is crucial to reform efforts might seem like it goes without saying, but it is essential to recognize the ways teacher educators can and do contribute to reform efforts and the significance in supporting them.

In most cases, the vision and energy of faculty members was an essential component of the reforms—they were their own experts. They, and the administrators, brought new ideas from their graduate and K–12 work experiences to the reform discussions. In addition, they found ideas about reform and support for their initiatives through scouring the literature to find research, theory and best practices and then shared information with colleagues. During the 1980s and 90s many reform ideas were introduced nationally and one leader said that even her rural southern college was influenced. “Those things were in our air and in our minds and we would say we aren’t doing as well as we should be doing. So we [were] always looking to do better by our students.”

Some of the works they mentioned that impacted their work included major reports by national groups, such as the Holmes Group’s and John Goodlad’s Renewal Network, and leaders in the field such as Linda Darling-Hammond, Marilyn Cochran-Smith, and Gloria Ladson-Billings. “We were always reading and we met and talked.” One administrator and her faculty members all read the same texts and then explored how to bring new ideas to the education curricula.

[W]e integrated all of our courses and so in our conversations and our faculty meetings... We educated ourselves.

We’d say, ok, this year, we are going to think about race as an issue and for the whole year we would read and think and talk about it.

As they read they accepted some ideas and rejected others. Along with continual reading of professional literature,

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attendance at national conferences and meetings introduced and supported ideas teacher education faculty members brought to their programs. It was during those national meetings they learned about latest research and best practices—about new masters’ programs, about social justice topics, the latest about teaching subject matter, assessment tools and orientations, professional development school initiatives and building communities of teachers. For the faculty from schools that drew their students from a more regional population and were more limited in their national view, going to conferences and hearing from others who were doing teacher education differently or were conducting research in an area of interest, were central ways these faculty members gained support for their reform work.

Besides bringing expertise and vision to the reforms, faculty at all the institutions put much time and energy into the reform efforts. Most leaders talked about the number of hours their faculty members met each week and month to work on reform efforts, in addition to time and energy personnel spent on other demands from the program and the rest of the institution.

Although the leaders did not dwell on the financial supports needed for the reforms, several interviewees said outside funding plus internal funds for professional development and travel were key supports for innovation. And one leader noted, their reform efforts benefited doubly when she found outside funding to send multiple faculty members to a national conference together and they collaboratively brought back research and best practice ideas to their local context.

The encouragement, promotion, and financial underwriting of individual expertise and further professional development opportunities of the people responsible for enacting the changes in a program seems to be fundamental and essential to the success of any reform effort. We have most often seen in the reform efforts directed at K–12 education that honoring teacher knowledge and their professional development has not been front and center (e.g. Rose, 2010; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011). This study is a vital reminder of where the power and energy of reform efforts

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lie and why faculty expertise and professional development need to be cultivated.

Coherent foundation. A second factor that emerged as a significant support of reform efforts was the development of defining principles or a philosophical framework. The majority of interviewees spoke to the importance of a clear institutional philosophy program faculty used to support their reform efforts. Alternatively, the teacher educators themselves developed a solid conceptual framework of their own, sometimes building on stated institutional goals.

The administrators showed a range of thinking about and articulation of the conceptual basis of their programs. Some had specific language that referred to principles, pillars, or abilities underlying and informing the reforms. Others spoke less about an explicit framework, but spoke of the centrality of a framework or philosophy to their efforts. Several did not talk about philosophical or conceptual guidelines but cited program goals and needing to work towards those outcomes. A few programs built on the conceptual thinking of the college as a whole (e.g. a developmental perspective), while others tied reform efforts to fundamental strengths of the institution (e.g. a progressive philosophy, the centrality of the liberal arts, being of service).

The administrators of the five NCATE accredited programs more often used the specific language of “conceptual framework” because such a framework was required for accreditation. But of the four non-NCATE programs, three interviewees talked about some type of conceptual grounding or guiding principles that supported program reform. Administrators from NCATE schools who used NCATE language still talked about the need for such a foundation beyond a requirement for accreditation. One interviewee said, “[Our guiding principles] came from how we were working together because we were essentially democratic in our thinking, respected each other’s thinking. So when NCATE required a conceptual framework, ‘community of inquiry’ seemed one just right for us.”

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The leaders spoke about how having a conceptual grounding helped support all reform efforts through strengthening the programs, helping them articulate more coherently to their students, colleagues and administrators about the changes, giving them a stronger base from which to seek inside and outside funding, and helping them stay focused when bombarded with numerous new demands and suggestions about how to change teacher education.

One dean talked about their framework guiding all that they do and helping them get better at what they do.

We are true to our framework; it gives us our moral purpose. And it really came out of our own work... Here is our educational philosophy, you are always on a journey... and hopefully moving to better and better. But it doesn't mean you scrap everything. You build on where you have come from.

Some of the leaders also noted that sound grounding helped them use or incorporate outside mandates and resources in ways that supported what they were doing.

Some reform efforts presented in the study did not last as long as others and often those were spearheaded by a single faculty member and not rooted in a clear set of overall program principles. The institutions that seemed to have made the most profound, long-term and systematic reforms were those that had a clear institutional and/or program philosophy the teacher preparation programs used to support their reform efforts.

The Importance of Context. It is often easy to think about reform using broad strokes, with one size fitting all programs. There may be fundamental pieces in teacher education that need to be the same in all programs, but this research points up the importance of each program's context, both in the nature of the institutions offering teacher preparation and their individual local contexts. As one interviewee said, "[T]eacher education is always contextual, both in terms of who the students are, what the program is and what the schools that we are preparing them for." All the reform efforts were impacted by their context.

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Liberal arts context. The size and type of the institution was found to be a critical element in support for reform. Because most liberal arts institutions are small, teacher administrators usually have working relationships with their provost, academic deans and/or presidents (Roose, 2013). The interviewees spoke of working with or at least communicating with key administrators. Therefore, when reform efforts were initiated they had already been included in the thinking and planning and understood and/or had ownership of the changes. Size also allowed programs to be flexible and nimble as they explored and experimented with reform.

Being liberal arts institutions and often interdisciplinary in outlook, the nature of the institutions made their acceptance of reforms, which often entailed integrated courses and new ways of thinking about learning and teaching, easier. Interviewees remarked they found acceptance of the reforms from their liberal arts colleagues and sometimes those colleagues were part of the teams developing and implementing the changes.

In some cases, the mission of the institution supported the reform vision or the faculty doing the reform work. One institution, located in an urban center, had, as part of its mission, to work collaboratively with the city, so the president's vision dovetailed with and supported the urban-focused reform of the preparation program. One leader talked about her institution's way of functioning in the world as a model for the beginning teachers coming from the institution: "I don't think you can prepare teachers who will be able to function in a democratic setting or help create a democratic setting if they don't come from one."

There were differences in how interviewees talked about the liberal arts context impacting their reform efforts. For some, small size and communication between arts and science faculty, institution administrators and teacher education personnel was important in supporting changes, while others also focused on how including liberal arts perspectives and ways of thinking, exploring, reflecting, creating and problem-solving impacted their thinking and actions (Roose, 2013) as they worked on programmatic changes.

Local PreK–12 Context. Most administrators talked about how

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their programs and reform were entwined with the local schools. One leader said it “was certainly their knowledge, K–12 working with higher ed., that really helped us [with assessment reform].” Another said how one reform effort, changing the program’s culture to include higher expectations, benefited from knowledge and experience gained as a science faculty member worked with K–12 science supervisors—“the synergy of combining university and school perspectives and expertise.”

Local context also impacted reform efforts as teacher educators saw changes in the population demographics of their region or watched and listened more closely to what community people, parents, school personnel and students in their urban area said they needed and wanted, which was better learning and teaching to happen. As one leader noted:

[Our part of the state] was seeing a huge influx of Hispanics...and those changes were happening quickly around us and teachers were struggling... I guess you could say—how are we responding to the local context? We looked at what California was doing and because they were further ahead in preparing teachers to work with second language learners...we sent people to conferences specifically with that research in mind.

Although local school connections provided many advantages for the reform efforts, the administrators also pointed out how those relationships could hinder program reform. Several talked about the limitations, especially in urban areas, of using local classrooms for field experiences. They spoke of students not seeing good teaching models in their placements. Another major issue was the use, in some districts, of scripted curricula. One leader remarked, “We have so few placements where students can actually teach... where they aren’t teaching to the test or given scripted curriculum...[T]hey know coverage isn’t learning, but feel pressure from the school, teacher and kids. They have to pass the [state exams].” Many reforms called for consistency between what programs taught and what students experienced in schools and when there

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was not congruence reform was harder to accomplish.

Although work with local districts could be difficult, on balance all the administrators welcomed collaboration with their local schools on reform efforts. While the national dialogue often calls for programs to be more similar than different, this study indicates different programs shared similar reform goals but the ways they proceeded with their reforms were greatly influenced by their local communities' needs and expertise.

Teacher ed[ucation] programs seem like they are always changing depending on what the local, what the current, context is. Or they always should be. I assume most of them are. So that is always the [basis] for reflection and change.

Relationship with the State. In addition to relationships with local K–12 districts, interviewees talked about the critical nature of the relationship of states to their teacher education programs. Whether the state was top-down or collaborative in its relationship with the programs mattered greatly with regards to reform efforts and the interviewees were concerned about the direction most of the states were headed.

Most of the programs seemed to be impacted frequently and strongly by state actions. In states where they thought programs had a good, two-way relationship with the state education department, the leaders spoke of positive effects of such collaborative efforts.

Most other interviewees did not see their states' initiatives as strongly supporting reform efforts. And often they saw new state requirements, additions to an already crowded set of demands, as hurdles to developing competent teachers and reforming programs. One leader complained, "We are being told now...students have to take three state exams and they have to do something on child abuse and violence prevention and teaching drugs and alcohol... [T]he state never takes anything away, they keep adding and adding and adding."

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State mandates often constricted reform initiatives because they worked in opposition to what the programs were trying to do. One such example is imposing mandates for more high stakes testing of preservice teachers when programs were wanting to spend more time on development and implementation of alternative, authentic performance assessments.

Some interviewees spoke of the state education agencies often having the best interests of teacher education in mind. But because of fluctuating directives from their state legislators who, without knowledge of research or historical trends, jumped in with their ideas, demands and timelines, the agencies could not give open, consistent support. More positive and constructive change seemed to occur in those states allowing programs choice of how to implement a mandate rather than the state being prescriptive, not integrating input and involvement from programs or having unrealistic time frames for implementation.

The interviewees spoke of being wary of trusting state support. Agencies might be helpful one year and then, often with a new administration, that support would be changed or withdrawn. Some administrators said state agencies were making some demands that were in line with what research and education experts were saying, but other demands seemed more politically driven, less knowledgeable and highly variable, even capricious in nature.

During this time of political maneuvering and public debates about teacher education (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Earley, 2005), it is important to understand the reforms examined here occurred more often when states worked with programs rather than being more prescriptive and top-down with their requirements. Therefore, it behooves teacher educators to work continually on communicating with state departments of education—to be proactive in developing relationships with state officials and giving them input about what the faculty knows about reform—so the states can be more consistently supportive of institutional reform efforts. At the same time, those interested in reform may need to work around the state and its more “one size fits all” reform thinking, tweaking state requirements to correspond more closely with program goals and local needs.

Conclusions

By dissecting examples of teacher education reform in the United States and examining their influences, several important elements needed for successful reform emerged. Building on a congruent program philosophy and supporting the professional growth of faculty were central and foundational for the reform efforts. In addition, the study points up the importance of both listening and responding to the needs of local K–12 schools and communities as stimuli for reform and factors to work with and around in the implementation of reforms. Also, because of size, purpose and constitution, liberal arts institutions are often conducive contexts for reform to be initiated and to succeed.

Conclusions from this study also suggest need for a wider critical discussion about ways states support and limit reform efforts. These results suggest that for programs to change, states need either to work collaboratively with them or need to define desired outcomes and then support programs getting to those results in their own ways.

Leaders who have been immersed in teacher education transformation during the last few decades have unique perspectives and much wisdom to contribute to the conversation about reforming teacher education. This study has begun the process of dissecting reform efforts and finding patterns of knowledge. More researchers and policy-makers need to examine and tap into the insight of those who have, and are now, living and leading, teacher education program and practice reform. At the end of her interview, one administrator reflected on the knowledge she and others had gained over the years about teacher education reform, “We have learned a lot...if only someone would listen.” An important next step is for others to pay attention.

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