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Middle Level Faculty and Change

Robin Dever
Kent State University - Geauga Campus and Twinsburg Academic Center, rdever2@kent.edu

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Robin Dever
Kent State University-Geauga

Abstract

There is no argument that the world of middle level education is constantly changing. Teacher education programs are always in flux adopting their programs to meet these needs. Faculty who teach within a middle level education teacher preparation program are at the front lines of preparing the next generation of middle school leaders. They are responsible for not only molding the next generation of middle level educators but also shaping the next generation of middle level education researchers and advocates. This requires constant changes to curriculum and organizational structures while finding new methods to meet state requirements. However, not all faculty members are open to change; some resist moving forward. Some are over-burdened by this charge and often resist changes that are being implemented to best prepare this next generation. Exploring the root cause of faculty resistance can help programs work with all faculty. This article will begin a conversation on how to lead faculty members through these journeys and empower them to continue to advocate for the field.

Change is inevitable. The difference is how you react to it. You can either jump onboard and accept it, or resist. Some change is for the better and others can be a step backwards. No matter what the consequence, the one variable that doesn't change is the fact that the world will never stop evolving. One place where this can always be seen is in the arena of education. As new theories evolve and practices change, new teaching methods are put in place. Some are fads and stay only a short time while others are here for the long haul.

When practices in K-12 schools change, teacher preparation programs must adapt to these new methods as well. While this is true of all fields of education, one area that has seen drastic changes is the area of middle level education. Since its transition from a junior high to a middle school model, researchers and practitioners are continually refining how to best meet the needs of young adolescents.

This situation is true of one middle level teacher preparation program as they worked through a process to add a major component into the existing teacher preparation curriculum. This addition was integrating the International Baccalaureate framework into the existing course of study for middle childhood education majors. This journey has taken nine years in the making as faculty had to prepare not only logistically to the changes but also philosophically. This article will explore the process and discuss how programs can better make curriculum changes including considerations to respond to resistant faculty.

Background Information

As one institution was looking at ways to provide a better teacher education preparation and to stand out in the crowded sea of teacher preparation programs in their state, the early childhood education program sought to incorporate the International Baccalaureate (IB) program into the curriculum. They became authorized to include the Primary Years Programme (PYP) into the curriculum. With this new authorization, each graduate from the Early Childhood Education program will automatically be eligible for the IB Teaching and Learning Certificate. Shortly after, in 2011, the Middle Childhood Education program began exploring including the Middle Years Programme (MYP) into their program of study and ultimately decided to pursue the same path as early childhood education.

Steps of Change

The first step in this process was to find someone to steer the process. Once this individual was identified, they became the IB Coordinator for the university. Every IB school, whether it be K-12 or a university, is required to have an IB Coordinator to serve as the liaison between IB and the school. In this case, a middle childhood education faculty member became the IB Coordinator for the university. The next logical step to this process was to have faculty explore what it means to be an IB program. This needed to occur on three fronts. They first had to learn what the components of IB, then what an MYP middle school looked like, and lastly what it would look like within a teacher preparation program. Contacts with local IB middle schools were made and faculty visited these schools to observe IB in action. This process took place over two years.

Once this happened, over the next several years, all full-time faculty members in the department were sent to official training workshops so that they can learn the details of IB and how to implement the program. Meanwhile, the department was working on how to revise course objectives to meet the state requirements, standards set by the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) (AMLE, 2012) and those required by IB (IB, 2014). In examining each of these, faculty came to realize that there was a smooth alignment between the AMLE and IB standards (Dever & Raven, 2017).

During the next academic year, the faculty worked to officially change all of the course descriptions to include IB language, designed assessments to include IB components, and assigned all aspects of IB into each of the courses in the program of study. Once these were agreed upon, the changes were channeled through the university required process to become officially adopted. The largest of these changes was to the unit plan that all teacher candidates are required to complete. While they are still required to complete a unit plan, the format is now in alignment with the IB unit planner and includes components specific to IB such as key and related concepts.

Also during this year, the IB coordinator worked with area IB schools to establish field experience opportunities for the teacher candidates. Since it is critical that teacher candidates see IB in action, the department agreed to shift field experiences to IB schools as much as possible. One obstacle to this was geography. The middle childhood education major is offered on three separate campuses. Every campus did not have an IB school in close proximity to reasonably expect teacher candidates to visit. To overcome this, these campuses set up “field trips” to these middle schools where they can still observe IB in action, yet not complete an official field placement there.

Finally, the IB coordinator officially submitted the application to offer the MYP Teaching and Learning Certificate. This was followed by a site visit by representatives of IB. With this visit complete and authorization granted, the first cohort of teacher candidates eligible for the IB certificate began in 2016 with the junior level cohort who graduated in 2018. The university has since graduated two additional cohorts of teacher candidates who are eligible for the IB certificate.

Challenges to Bring Change

Implementing change is difficult. This was evident in the process to bring IB to the middle childhood education program. In looking back at this journey, there were many factors that influence the journey to make change happen. Civian, Arnold, Gamson, Kanter, & London (1992) categorize these factors into arenas of political atmospheres, economic constraints, and structural barriers. In our department, challenges we faced in adopting IB included all three of these aspects. The first of these, the political atmosphere includes any hidden agendas driving the change. This can include an administrator's wish to make a change and faculty feeling pressured to accept them, even if they disagree with them. It can also include a faculty's acceptance of reform for the sake of doing what is politically correct even if they might philosophically disagree with it. In this specific case of adding IB, this may have been the case with some faculty. Since the early childhood program already adopted IB, pressures from administration may have surfaced to follow suit. The administration was fully supportive of the adoption of IB while the faculty may not have been equally supportive. This may have led to certain faculty feeling pressed to go through with also adopting it in middle childhood even though they might not have agreed whole-heartedly with it. Van de Ven & Poole, (1995) state that faculty members' core values and philosophical beliefs must align with the change or else there is an increased chance of faculty resistance and program failure.

While larger, philosophical barriers might exist that contradict faculty members' acceptance of a reform, structural and economic constraints are less abstract and are often out of the control of faculty. These include issues such as teaching load, financial support needed for professional development, and the support of a point person to lead the changes. While these were out of the hands of the faculty, the amount of work required to revise course objectives, learn the components of IB, and rework course assignments such as the unit planner, required quite a bit of faculty attention and time.

These constraints lead to the bigger, general issues related to change. This can include a faculty member feeling as if the change is outside of their expertise and are unwilling to learn something new. Some may feel that their time is better spent completing research on their existing agenda and prefer not to take away from that plan to learn and support a curriculum change. Lastly, faculty may not be willing to make changes to the courses they perceive as already being established and refined with the mindset of "If it's not broken, why fix it?" It is with this attitude that faculty resist change because they believe that the existing courses/program is already effective and there is no need to change (McCrickerd, 2012).

Steps to Decrease Resistance

When implementing a curricular change, such as integrating IB, there will always be resistance. However, those driving the change can put some steps in place to help faculty accept the changes. The notion of having a leader to the change can be helpful, such as the IB Coordinator. However, it is important to note that the change must be viewed as a collective, not

individual, change. There exists a belief that this leader will serve as inspiration to others and that their enthusiasm for the change will automatically "enlighten" other members and bring about a more widespread change. In reality, the opposite occurs. The leader brings their enthusiasm to the group but quickly gets bogged down with the realities of the day-to-day operations and reverts to previous practices. Other faculty members see this and then question the need to make the proposed changes (Jones, 1991). Alschuler (1987), outlines a strategy to implement large scale change within the context of higher education. The first of these is ensuring that the group is ready for change and identifying a leader within that group. This step is the key to the entire process. While the faculty at this institution seemed to agree that the adoption of IB was a good idea, its readiness for change may have been overlooked. This can be seen in the fact that only one member of the faculty was willing to step up and be IB Coordinator.

The next step in this process is recognizing the need for change. Some faculty members may see the status-quo as being effective and not needing to be changed. Some may see the change as being worthwhile, but the costs of change don't justify the means. Asking the question if the faculty genuinely see the need for change is critical. Some faculty may publicly acknowledge the need for change but may only be doing so for political reasons such as not being the one to go against the group or for fear of not aligning with the wishes of administration.

If the first two steps are met, the last one is creating an appropriate faculty development plan. This plan must be made in collaboration with the faculty as they are the only ones who can determine the gaps in their knowledge that need to be filled in order to implement change.

Conclusion

As long as the Earth continues to rotate, change is inevitable. People, places and things will forever be evolving and developing. The processes will look different, but some key components will always exist. These range from identifying competing philosophies to balancing time commitments. These were true in the transition made to add IB to a middle childhood program. If clocks could be turned back, knowing what we know now, it is not sure if these challenges could have been prevented but they could have, at minimum, been identified. We struggled politically, economically, structurally, and philosophically. For those interested in adding IB to the middle grades program, the process appeared to be smooth and worthwhile. What we failed to foresee is the gaps that existed with some faculty's philosophical beliefs and perceptions of IB. Had we collectively analyzed the implementation of IB through the lens of faculty change and identified these gaps, we could have laid out a solid rationale and process, we believe it could have offered opportunities for buy-in and more successful implementation of IB.

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