Chapter 13

A U.S. UNIVERSITY'S DEVELOPMENT OF AN INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PREPARATION PROGRAM: THE JOURNEY

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on a U.S. university's development of an Inclusive Early Childhood Education program. This innovative program is designed to prepare teachers to work successfully with all learners, including students with disabilities. Graduates of this interdisciplinary program earn three teaching licenses, one for general education classrooms, one for special education classrooms, and one for working with children ages birth to three years. The authors ground the program's development in the U.S. federal legislation that laid the foundation for increased access for and service to children with disabilities. In addition, the authors describe the philosophical underpinnings and curriculum for the new program, and identify the specific outcomes from this newly developed program. Preliminary lessons about this process that might assist other programs considering similar strategies are presented.

Keywords: inclusive early childhood education, cohort model, benchmarking, inclusion, learning communities.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1975, the Congress of the United States enacted the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA (1990). IDEA, also known as Public Law 94:142, was designed to ensure that children with disabilities have access to a free, public and appropriate education: "Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities" (IDEA, Part A, and Section C.1). Since its initial passage, IDEA has been amended and now includes special provisions for school-age children (found in Part B of the legislation) and infant and toddlers (located in Part C). At the national level, approximately 6.4 million students were served under IDEA, or about 13% of the total public school enrollment (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). For the state of Ohio in 2011-2012, about 9% of the children and youth were served under IDEA (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). These data demonstrate a clear and pressing need for teachers who are well-prepared to serve this segment of the population. However, U.S. teacher preparation programs have been slow to respond, leaving the majority of new teachers feeling ill-prepared to meet the challenges and realities of the classroom (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

In 2011, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) and the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) addressed this need in a report

entitled, Preparing *General Education Teachers to Improve Outcomes for Students with Disabilities*. The report emphasized that *all* teachers must be able to create classrooms where *all* children learn and classrooms that are supportive of children with disabilities (Blanton, Pugach & Florian, 2011). However, "these same teachers report that they do not feel adequately prepared for the job and for being held accountable for the achievement of learners who have disabilities, who are English language learners, or who are from the nation's lower socioeconomic levels" (Blanton et al, 2011, p. 5). Graduates from Bowling Green State University's (BGSU) teacher education programs were no exception to this larger trend. BGSU is one of the largest teacher education programs in the state of Ohio. While graduates from BGSU's Early Childhood Education program were well-prepared in many areas, there were concerns about their knowledge and skills in meeting the needs of all learners. In response, BGSU's College of Education and Human Development (EDHD) created an Inclusive Early Childhood program that prepares graduates for teacher licensure in general and special education for Prekindergarten through Grade 3, as well as Birth to Age 3 Early Intervention Specialist.

The remainder of this paper focuses on the historical and political context for this Inclusive Early Childhood Education program, the philosophical underpinnings and curriculum of inclusive education, specific outcomes from this newly developed program, and some preliminary lessons about this process that might assist other programs considering similar strategies. This chapter focuses on a U.S. university's development of an Inclusive Early Childhood Education program. The authors ground the program's development in the U.S. federal legislation that laid the foundation for increased access for and service to children with disabilities. In addition, the authors describe the philosophical underpinnings and curriculum for the new program, and identify the specific outcomes from this newly developed program. Preliminary lessons about this process that might assist other programs considering similar strategies are presented.

2. BACKGROUND

In 1954, the United States' Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* ruled that students could not be separated in schools because of race. This ruling had a wide-ranging impact on public education and resulted in other civil rights related movements, including one to provide an education to individuals with disabilities in public schools. Prior to 1954, 4.5 million students with disabilities in the United States did not receive an education. With the passage of IDEA, just twenty-one years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, for the first time in U.S. history, all students with disabilities were entitled to a "Free Appropriate Public School Education" (FAPE). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was later reauthorized in 2004. The American with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 further protected school-aged children with disabilities, emphasizing the goal of educating children with disabilities in the "least restrictive environment" (LRE). Subsequent court rulings supported interpretations of the ADA that, wherever possible, students with disabilities be educated in general education classrooms. The term "inclusion" became part of a national lexicon. Inclusion is defined as placing students with disabilities in general education classrooms and providing appropriate support services (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005). Although full inclusion for students with disabilities has not yet been fully realized, IDEA and ADA have changed the learning environment for students with disabilities; to the greatest extent possible, all students are educated in the same classrooms, with modifications and accommodations provided to students with disabilities as appropriate.

Increased collaboration between special education teachers and general education teachers has provided individuals with special needs with access to the general education curriculum (National Council on Disability, 2004). The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2013) reported that more than 50% of students with disabilities spend at least 80% of their time at school in a general education classroom. Thus, general education teachers need to know characteristics of children with disabilities, be effective in using differentiated teaching strategies, develop strong collaborative skills, and have extensive knowledge of IDEA mandates. This trend, however, is not distributed equally across grade levels. Turnbull, Turnbull and Wehmeyer (2010) found that elementary students with disabilities are more likely to be served by general education teachers than older children. Consequently, it is especially important that elementary teachers understand inclusion and how this approach changes what they do in the classroom and how they respond to all children.

Preparing future teachers for these inclusive classrooms requires that preparation programs modify their curriculum. According to Gable, Tonelson, Sheth, Wilson, and Park, (2012) general education teachers often lack the knowledge and the skills needed to differentiate instruction and provide modifications and accommodations to students with disabilities. General education teachers in the United States are not alone in their reticence about working with special needs students. A recent analysis of empirical studies from 16 different countries that examined general education teachers' attitudes about inclusive education indicates that the majority of teachers feel neutral or negatively about inclusion (de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011). While general education teachers may feel ill-prepared or disinclined to work with students with special needs, special education teachers frequently do not have the content knowledge necessary to meet the needs of both general and special education students

Several studies have shown that there is the lack of preparation for teachers in working with children with exceptionalities. The National Center for Education Statistics (2009) indicates that 68% of public school teachers feel underprepared to work with students with disabilities. Lambe and Bones (2006) conducted a study identifying characteristics that pre-service teachers desired in order to become effective teachers in the inclusive setting. They found that one of the challenges was the difficulty of balancing the needs of all children; new teachers have a tendency to focus on those who required the most help instead of finding ways to effectively differentiate instruction in order to meet the needs of all learners. Additionally, Orr (2009) found that teachers' knowledge of effective inclusion strategies was correlated to their successful implementation of inclusion. Inclusive classrooms can have a positive impact on student academic achievement for both the general education and special education population being served when the teachers and other professionals working with the students have proper training in the content areas and an understanding of the individual needs of each student in the classroom. When general education and special education teachers work together as a team all students are more stimulated and respond better to their educational environments (Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012). While teachers, especially those new to the profession, may not currently feel well-prepared for inclusive classroom, evidence suggests that providing them with the knowledge and skills related to inclusion will likely yield better classroom practices.

3. THE INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM PERSPECTIVE

In response to federal mandates, research on most effective strategies for meeting the needs of all learners, and survey results from recent graduates of our programs, BGSU's College of Education and Human Development developed the Inclusive Early Childhood program. This four-year undergraduate program is designed to prepare teachers to work effectively in inclusive classrooms, with emphases on differentiated instruction and developmentally appropriate pedagogies. The governance and oversight of the program is shared equally between two units within the college: the School of Intervention Services that provides licensure options in special education and the School of Teaching and Learning that has licensure programs in general education. Additional support is provided from programs in human development, educational psychology, and education measurement and assessment. These interdisciplinary faculty teams embedded five essential components in the curriculum design: 1) research-supported practices; 2) justice, fairness and equity for inclusive learning experiences; 3) respect for cultural and linguistic diversity, 4) family-centered practices; and 5) interdisciplinary collaboration.

During the initial stages of program development, an advisory board was established which consisted of stakeholders such as superintendents, principals, parents, teachers university and faculty. This advisory board was essential in the development and implementation of the Inclusive Early Childhood program (Wooldridge, Murray & Shinew, 2014). The vision that emerged from the work of the advisory board and faculty interdisciplinary teams was to create an inclusive undergraduate program that blended the best practices from early childhood education with special education. This collaborative work created a curriculum which develops teachers with the skills to effectively meet the needs of every young child in our diverse society, birth through grade three. Other teams involved with development and implementation included a Steering Committee (charged with moving the various parts of the new program forward), Course Design Teams (interdisciplinary groups of faculty that developed initial course syllabi and sample assignments), Course Review Teams (groups responsible for reviewing all of the course components to ensure these various pieces fit together to make a strong program collectively), Assessment Committee (a group responsible for designing program assessment and evaluation tools) and the Field Placement Committee (a group comprised of both university faculty and practitioners who identified the desirable characteristics and criteria for field experiences and practicum). The work of these various groups was supported by a grant from the Ohio Department of Education.

4. OUTCOMES

The outcome for the work done by the collaborative, interdisciplinary teams was the creation of the Inclusive Early Childhood Education program. The Inclusive Early Childhood Education (IEC) Program is the first program in the state of Ohio, and one of the few in the United States, designed to prepare undergraduate teacher education candidates for employment in inclusive early childhood learning environments. This program leads to a Bachelor of Science in Education degree and, as noted earlier, graduates earn three teaching licenses in four years: Early Childhood Education license for pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade, the Early Childhood Intervention Specialist license for pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade and the Birth to Age 3 Early Intervention Specialist certificate. Graduates are prepared to provide differentiated, evidence-based instruction to young children from

birth through grade 3 and will be able to teach young children with and without disabilities in integrated settings.

The program consists of 134-136 credit hours comprised of general education courses, content courses, teaching methodology courses, practicum experiences and student teaching as shown in Figure 1: Inclusive Early Childhood Education 4-year Curriculum Plan. This curriculum uses a cohort model and student progress with the same cohort of 35 students through each of the designated blocks of courses. BGSU is built on the concept of learning communities where students and faculty share knowledge; collaboration among learners is considered a "value added" to the curriculum. The integration of student cohorts is on the rise at the undergraduate level in higher education (Saltiel & Russo, 2001; Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006). This model emphasizes the importance of students creating shared knowledge as learning community and participating as collaborators in learning (Korthagen, 2010). Students in the Inclusive Early Childhood program begin as a group, proceed together through a series of blocked courses, and end the program at the same time. The Inclusive Early Childhood students are enrolled in the block program in cohort groups and progress through the program in those groups as a learning community as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Inclusive early childhood education 4-year curriculum plan.

Freshman 1	Freshman 2
GSW 1100 or 1110: Writing (3–5) **EDTL 2010:** Intro to Education (2) BGP: Social & Behavioural Sciences (3) BGP: Arts & Humanities (3) Math 1150: Intro to Statistics (3) BGP: Arts & Humanities (3)	GSW 1120: Writing: (3) **EDTL 2300:** Intro to Educational Technology (2) **EIEC 1110:** Continuum of Early Childhood Development (3) BGP: Social & Behavioural Sciences (3) Math 2130: Math for Early Childhood Teachers (3) BGP: Natural Sciences (3)
Sophomore Block 1	Sophomore Block 2
EIEC 2100: Inclusive Perspectives on Early Childhood Classrooms (1) **EIEC 2110:** Intro to Young Children with Exceptional Needs (3) **EIEC 2120:** Foundations of Inclusive Early Childhood Education (2) **EDFI 3010:** Educational Psychology Applied to Early Childhood (3) **EIEC 2140:** Communication Development in Young Children (3) **EIEC 2150:** Creative & Expressive Arts Movement for Inclusive Early Child (3) Additional Course: **ENG 3420:** Children's Literature (3)	**EIEC 2210:** Cultural & Linguistic Diversity in Early Childhood Education (3) **EIEC 2220:** Working with Families of Young Children (3) **EIEC 2230:** Infant & Toddlers in Natural Environments (3) **EIEC 2240:** Curricula for Infant and Toddler Early Care and Education (3) Additional Courses: BGP: Natural Sciences (3) BGP: Additional BG Perspective Course (3)

Figure 1. Inclusive early childhood education 4-year curriculum plan (cont.).

Junior Methods Block (fall only)	Junior Student Teaching Block (spring only)
EIEC 3100: Inclusive Prekindergarten Field Experience (2) **EIEC 3110**: Intentional Teaching for Young Children (3) **EIEC 3120**: Phonics in Inclusive Early Childhood Classrooms (3) **EIEC 3130**: Emergent & Beginning Reading(3) **EIEC 3140**: Introduction to Assessment in Inclusive Early Childhood Settings (3) **EIEC 3150**: Instructional Assistive Technology(3)	**EIEC 4110**: Positive Behaviour Supports for Young Children (3) **EIEC 4120**: Advanced Assessment for Program Planning (3) **EIEC 4800**: Inclusive Early Childhood Student Teaching: Pre-Kindergarten (8) **EIEC 4810**: Pre-Kindergarten Student Teaching Seminar (1)
Senior Methods Block (fall only)	Senior Student Teaching Block (spring only)
EIEC 3300: Kindergarten – Grade 3 Practicum in Inclusive Classrooms (2) **EIEC 3310**: Reading & Writing Methods for Inclusive Early Childhood Classrooms (3) **EIEC 3320**: Math Methods for Inclusive Early Childhood Classrooms (3) **EIEC 3330**: Social Studies for Inclusive Early Childhood Classrooms (3) **EIEC 3340**: Science Methods for Inclusive Early Childhood Classrooms (3) **EIEC 3350**: Adapting and Accommodating Instruction in Inclusive Early Childhood Classrooms (3)	**EIEC 4210:** Literacy Assessment for Instruction (3) **EIEC 4220:** Consultation, Collaboration, & Transitions (3) **EIEC 4900:** Inclusive Early Childhood Student Teaching: Kindergarten – Grade 3 (8) **EIEC 4910:** Kindergarten – Grade 3 Student Teaching Seminar, (1)

Building on the cohort model, benchmarks are utilized to insure student success and provide feedback for program improvement. Benchmarking student progress is a management tool used to assess student learning. Benchmarking provides students, faculty members and administrators with information that can be used for program improvement and measures student learning. Benchmark assessments measure student mastery of standards so that the student can progress to the next level (Bergan, Bergan, & Burnham, 2005; Cizek, 2001).

Benchmarks are embedded in the coursework and program; the Inclusive Early Childhood students must meet these goals in order to proceed to the next phase of the program. Benchmarks include achieving a "C" or better on identified courses, passing standardized assessments required for licensure, and demonstrating proficiency in their practicum and field experiences. These benchmarks assist with quality improvement and continuous program improvement. The final benchmark is graduation.

Benchmarking began in fall 2013 with the first cohorts of first year students or second year transfer students. There are 639 students enrolled fall 2014 which would include first year students, second year students and third year transfer students. The breakdown of students is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusive Early Childhood Program 2014 enrolment data.

Cohort by Year	Enrollment Number
Freshmen	201
Continuing Freshman	42
Sophomore (30-39 hours)	119
Sophomores (40-59 hours)	84
Transfer students	193
Total	639

The students in the program are assessed using professional and content standards from Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The Council for Exceptional Children standards (2009) include concepts such as the foundations in special education, developmental knowledge of learners, individual learning difficulties, instructional strategies in general and special education curriculum, creating learning environments, instructional planning, assessment, social interactions in the classroom, language development, professional and ethical practice and collaboration with families, service providers and educators. The National Association for the Education of Young Children standards (2011) include promoting child development and learning, building family and community relationships, observing, documenting and assessing young children, using developmentally effective approaches, using content knowledge to build curriculum and professional practice. A crosswalk of standards and coursework was developed as a tool to ensure all standards were embedded in the course content and were assessed to ensure quality and drive improvement and change. These standards, used in program and curriculum development as well as for student assessment and benchmarking, are essential for continuous program improvement. An example of the crosswalk is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Inclusive Early Childhood (IEC) course linked to NAEYC/CEC/EC/DEC standards.

Freshmen Semester No. 1 *(16-18 semester hours)*	
Course & Course Description	**NAEYC/CEC/EC/DEC Standards**
EDTL 2010: *Intro to Education*	
EDTL 2300: *Intro to Educational Technology*	

Figure 2. Inclusive Early Childhood (IEC) course linked to NAEYC/CEC/EC/DEC standards (cont.).

Freshmen Semester No. 2 *(18 semester hours)*	
EIEC 1110: *Continuum of Early Childhood Development* **(3)** **Catalog Description:** Focuses on the broad continuum of cognitive, social, emotional and physical development of children emphasizing conception through grade 3. Examines children growing up in diverse families, communities, and cultural contexts through various observational techniques, application of developmental theory, and instruction in research methodology.	1. The candidate is able to discuss the typical and atypical progression of child development from conception through 3rd grade. (NAEYC,1a, 1c) (CEC/DEC EC2K7, EC3K2, EC3K1,EC6K 1 &2) 2. The candidate is able to objectively describe a child's behaviour and be able to infer the developmental level based on a variety of observational techniques. (NAEYC 3 c & 3 d) (CEC/DEC EC8S5, EC8S6, EC2S1, EC3K1, EC8S3) 3. The candidate knows how to apply child development knowledge, including norms, individual differences and red flags, to real life situations. (NAEYC 1c, 4b) (CEC/DEC EC9S1,EC2K7,EC2S1) 4. The candidate knows master key terms and concepts related to maturationist, behaviourist, constructivist, and ecological theories. (NAEYC # 1) (CEC/DEC EC2K1) 5. The candidate knows how to explain how environmental factors influence a typical and atypical development. (NAEYC 1b, 2a, 5a) (CEC/DEC EC2K6) 6. The candidate knows how to explain ways in which developmental context consists of one's biological makeup, personal experiences, previous development, and the social-cultural environment, which all interact in complex ways. (NAEYC 1b, 1c, 2c, 6d) (CEC/DEC EC8S5, EC8S6, EC2K2,EC2K6

5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This new program is still in its infancy, the first cohort started the program in fall, 2013; there are, however, numerous conclusions about both the process and the curriculum that can be drawn after three years of intensive planning and collaboration. Other institutions considering developing a similar program might find these conclusions helpful.

First and most importantly, is that this program responds to a need, both from teachers' perspectives and from the schools and families they serve. The program merges three teacher licenses resulting in a significantly increased course load. While some faculty and administrators were concerned that prospective students might be unwilling to enroll in

such a challenging program, the number of applicants, including students who opted to transfer from the previous Early Childhood program into the new Inclusive Early Childhood program, indicate that the program will be in high demand. As the only undergraduate program of its type in the region, it is likely that this level of demand will continue. Additionally, feedback from in-service teachers, administrators, and community members has been consistently positive. Numerous school and agency administrators have indicated they await the opportunity to hire graduates of the Inclusive Early Childhood Program. The program has also been acknowledged by state organizations as an innovative initiative. Virtually all of the feedback has focused on both the importance of teachers being able to respond to the increasingly diverse needs of their students and the importance of providing graduates with additional qualifications that will make them more employable. Recent emphasis in the United States on early childhood education at the federal level seems likely to increase the profile of the program even further.

While the program has generated considerable interest from external stakeholders, the internal response has been complex. Faculty from all units involved in this collaborative program have been committed to the concept of an inclusive early childhood model and recognize the advantages both for their teacher candidates, as well as for the young learners program graduates would eventually serve. However, the institutional and cultural barriers that can impede interdisciplinary programs have been challenging. At an institutional level, many questions emerged:

• Which unit would be responsible for scheduling?
• How would faculty be assigned to teach classes?
• How would student credit hours be counted?
• Which faculty member should be responsible for coordinating the program?
• Who will be responsible for identifying and monitoring field experiences?

While on one level these are technical and bureaucratic issues, these questions also illuminate a larger complication regarding how collaboration across units develops. This institution is not alone in struggling to build new relationships for the purpose of developing inclusive teacher preparation programs (Harvey, Yssel, Bauserman, & Merbler, 2010).

A few key elements have emerged that will be essential in continuing to develop and strengthen these collaborations. One important factor is a committed and flexible leadership team that is able to focus on the best outcomes for the students and the program. Such a team sets the tone for all of the communication and decision-making. In addition, there needs to be a commitment to providing adequate resources to support the program, especially in the early years. Collaboration is more challenging in times when resources are perceived as limited and faculty members are concerned about their positions. Finally, creating a culture of collaboration is difficult. One of the first steps has been to establish structures for ongoing conversations during regular program meetings. Opportunities to share ideas and concerns related to the new program has not only identified issues that need to be addressed, but also helped faculty realize commonalities and develop a shared vision for the program.

In developing this program, faculty and administrators involved in the process have mirrored some of the same challenges faced in PK-12 schools. Even when individuals share a common goal, in this case a program that would prepare teachers to meet the needs of all learners, creating a culture and structure that challenges existing barriers to collaboration is not easy. As is the case for colleagues in PK 12-schools, however, the challenges are too great and the stakes are too high for remaining static in how and what we teach.

Plans are in place for extensive and ongoing program evaluation of the Inclusive Early Childhood Program grounded in a continuous improvement model. Initial data are very preliminary but the end goal is clear – to become what Darling-Hammond (2012) describes as a "powerful" teacher preparation programs within the U.S. context. The exemplary programs highlighted in Darling-Hammond's work are different in many ways; they do, however, have important commonalities that are helpful in creating new or making significant revisions to teacher preparation programs: a clearly defined knowledge base, organizational structures that support skill development, performance-assessments that connect theory and practice, and a focus on meeting the needs of *all* learners.

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KEY TERMS & DEFINITIONS

Inclusive Early Childhood Education: An education program that blends the best practices from early childhood education with early childhood special education.

Learning communities: These communities are groups of students and faculty who share knowledge and collaborate in the learning process.

Inclusion: A practice in public schools of iintegrating children with disabilities in our schools and communities.

Cohort models: This model emphasizes the importance of students creating shared knowledge as a learning community.

Benchmarking: A management tool used to assess student learning.

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