Summer 2013

Integrating Graduate Coursework to Prepare Alternatively Certified Teachers

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Integrating Graduate Coursework to Prepare Alternatively Certified Teachers

AMY J. HEINEKE AND DEBORAH PREACH

ABSTRACT: In this article, we describe our innovative work as teacher educators to integrate coursework for alternatively certified teachers. Rather than maintain boundaries among individual courses for new elementary teachers, explicit connections support first-year teachers’ professional learning and aid in the immediate application to classroom practice. Course integration included backward planning with shared goals, the combination of key topics and content, and the incorporation of common assignments and related classroom tasks. The innovation reflects the function of collaboration in higher education, where teacher educators work together to improve the professional learning and performance of classroom teachers.

Aspiring teachers have two general paths to join the profession and enter the classroom. Traditional paths of teacher preparation take place at the university and require an individual to be enrolled for 2 to 4 years in an undergraduate or graduate degree program. Alternative paths to teacher certification occur in various contexts (e.g., online, universities) typically after an individual has completed a non-education-related bachelor’s degree. Juxtaposed with the traditional path and the prototypical undergraduate teacher candidate, alternative certification programs aim to attract individuals from various ages, careers, and areas of expertise. In the United States, alternative certification programs developed to address teacher shortages in urban areas (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001) but have expanded to create a large pipeline of teachers in regions across the nation. Whereas only 6,000 alternatively certified (AC) teachers were employed in U.S. classrooms in 1998, 60,000 were employed in 2005, increasing at a rate of 20% each year (Feistritzer, 2007). The debate on the best approach to teacher preparation is currently on center stage in educational policy.

Many stakeholders in education espouse strong positions regarding alternative certification. Proponents argue that alternative paths provide a supply of high-caliber teachers from diverse ranges of experience to meet the demand and raise student academic achievement in low-income schools (Decker, Mayer, & Glazerman, 2004; Raymond, Fletcher, & Luque, 2001). Opponents assert that AC teachers have less impact on student achievement than do traditionally
certified teachers (Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). Before becoming a teacher, some alternate programs, such as Teach for America (TFA), provide only a brief preparation period (e.g., 5-week training) with limited clinical experiences and opportunities to learn content and pedagogy (Berry, Montgomery, & Snyder, 2008). Because teachers simultaneously learn to teach while teaching children (Humphrey, Wechsler, & Hough, 2008), opponents purport decreased teacher effectiveness. In the strategic position to bridge the two sides, teacher education programs can partner with alternate path organizations to address the teacher preparation gap (Gaiber, 2009) that exists between traditionally certified and AC teachers.

This article outlines one innovative approach to preparing AC teachers, through integrated university coursework undertaken with first-year elementary teachers. We served as both instructors and classroom supervisors in a university teacher education program geared toward AC teachers. Recognizing that AC teacher development is affected by the interaction of the program and the school context (Humphrey et al., 2008), we aimed to make explicit connections between teachers' university coursework and classroom practice. As we taught coursework for the same cohorts of teachers, the purposeful integration of coursework on literacy and English language learners (ELLs) maximized the learning of first-year teachers. We define course integration as the purposeful connections among content, assignments, and classroom practice, with the goal of allowing teachers to immediately improve their practice with diverse students. We begin by describing the graduate program at Arizona State University (ASU) and related literature on AC teacher preparation. We then share our action research methods and findings related to our ongoing work to integrate coursework and classroom practice.

Graduate Teacher Preparation for AC Teachers

Historically providing traditional paths to certification, ASU responded to teacher shortages by developing the Induction, Masters, and Certification (InMac) program to prepare and support AC teachers. TFA Phoenix and the Arizona Teaching Fellows sought out a partnership with ASU to provide teachers with necessary coursework to maintain credentialing with the Arizona Department of Education. TFA is a national organization that recruits college graduates to fill teaching positions in low-socioeconomic areas (TFA, 2011). The Teaching Fellows program recruits high-performing individuals from other career paths to teach in low-income schools. Unlike TFA, which requires only a 2-year teaching commitment, teachers in this program typically wish to change careers to work in education for the long term (New Teacher Project, 2011). Through the partnership with TFA Phoenix and Arizona Teaching Fellows, traditional and alternative paths merged to share the responsibility to prepare new classroom teachers.
AC teachers face numerous challenges. Because most enter the classroom with an undergraduate degree in a field outside education, they typically have no formal teacher preparation or classroom experience. With minimal preparation during the summer preceding their first year of teaching, these teachers enter the classroom less prepared than their peers who went through a 2- or 4-year teacher preparation program (Heilig & Jez, 2010). With less prior knowledge related to teaching, they tend to struggle in the application of knowledge learned in trainings and coursework, which ultimately affects their effectiveness in the classroom (Joyce & Showers, 1982). Similar to other first-year teachers, AC teachers often feel unprepared to fulfill their many teaching responsibilities (e.g., lesson planning, grading papers) and become overwhelmed with stress, burnout, and isolation (Schlechte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005). In addition to these challenges of being a new teacher, AC teachers need to complete coursework for certification while fulfilling requirements from schools, districts, and programs.

To meet the unique professional learning needs of AC teachers, ASU leaders charged faculty members to design innovative coursework and supervision. Alternative programs have been criticized for not considering the unique situations and demanding schedules of first-year teachers when planning coursework (Rochkind, Ott, Immerwahr, Doble, & Johnson, 2007). Research in graduate and alternative teacher preparation at the university level has demonstrated the need for courses that are interconnected (Shosh & Zales, 2007) and applicable to classroom practice (Humphrey et al., 2008). The program at ASU aimed to utilize the latest educational research to create a rigorous program that was embedded in classrooms and responsive to teachers. Paramount to the InMac program model, full-time faculty clinical instructors with practical experience and theoretical expertise in high-need classroom settings provide teachers with individualized support in university coursework and in classrooms. Weaving theory and practice, the program model attempts to support teachers in connecting their professional coursework to their classroom instruction (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Levine, 2006).

**Method: Action Research to Enhance Integration**

As reflective practitioners committed to conducting action research (Elliott, 1991), we consistently collected and analyzed data to evaluate and inform our practice to maximize teacher learning. In our second and third years of course integration, we invited teachers’ voluntary participation in our action research related to course integration. Approximately 150 graduate students and AC teachers gave informed consent for data collection and analysis in six ASU course sections in Phoenix, Arizona. We maintained documentation and anecdotal data of teachers’ oral and written discourse in class discussions
and assignments and teachers’ actions with their students in the elementary classroom. Teachers provided formative and summative feedback through reflections, exit tickets, and surveys specific to course integration and the formal course evaluations given by the university. In this section, we outline each data source and describe how we utilized the data in our ongoing action research cycle.

We collected qualitative data during class sessions to conceptualize the degree and depth of understanding of course objectives and topics. Following each class session, we independently reviewed our anecdotal notes, examined assignments and artifacts (e.g., student-designed posters from small group discussions, reflective guides following literature discussions), and reflected through written memos. When we met to plan subsequent courses, we analyzed our notes to gauge the progress of teacher learning in accordance with the larger shared goal of preparing teachers to support students’ language and literacy development. We highlighted gains and gaps in teacher learning to recognize where we needed to focus our future instruction and supervision.

To collect additional formative and summative data to further our practice, we gave targeted surveys that focused on course integration at the close of each weekly session and at the end of the semester. Aiming for transparency with the young educators, we shared the goals and purposes of course integration and asked the teachers to complete these short surveys in electronic format on a Google form. Referred to as an exit ticket to check for understanding at the close of each evening, the survey asked the following questions: “What are your key takeaways about teaching literacy?” “What are your key takeaways about teaching ELLs?” “How can you connect the course content with your classroom practice?” “What do you understand as the connection between the content of both courses (i.e., literacy and ELLs)?” In addition to the anecdotal and documentation data collected each class, we analyzed the survey data following class each week to determine the efficacy of our course integration in allowing teachers to make explicit connections between course content and classroom practice. Integral to our action research on course integration, formative data allowed for immediate evaluation and modification for our future practice (Elliott, 1991).

Whereas the formative surveys informed our week-to-week instructional planning and practice, the summative narrative survey given at the end of each semester asked the following questions: “How did integrating the two courses affect (or not affect) your time?” “How did integrating the two courses affect (or not affect) your learning?” “How were applied assignments and classroom practice affected by the content you received in both classes?” “Did you find the content of the courses to be integrated and related?” “Would more course integration in your program be beneficial to you as a teacher and learner?” We utilized these data at the end of each semester to evaluate and inform our future plights at course integration but also to demonstrate the efficacy of our collaborative practice to our superiors and administrators at the university.
Additional summative data—specifically, the formal course evaluations at the university—also informed the evaluation phase of our action research.

In the next section, we share findings from data collected during the most extensive integration in our 3 years working together. The collaborative and purposeful course planning grew gradually as we became better acquainted with each other, the content, and the needs of the AC teachers. When teachers’ needs changed (e.g., new state mandates for ELL instruction, shift to placing TFA and Arizona Teaching Fellows teachers in charter schools), our integration was flexible to incorporate and account for those unique needs.

**Findings: Course Integration and Teacher Learning**

In this section, we share the results of our action research on integrating graduate coursework to prepare AC teachers. We organize the findings based on the steps in our action research cycle: plan, implement, evaluate, and modify (Elliott, 1991). In the first section, we share course details and preliminary plans to frame the course integration, using primarily anecdotal and documentation data. In the second section, we describe the actual design and implementation of course integration, using anecdotal and formative data. Finally, in the third section, we evaluate the efficacy of the course integration through analyses of graduate students’ formative and summative surveys and evaluations.

**Framing the Course Integration**

As teacher educators with the desire to improve our practice, we collaborated to provide teachers with relevant content for the classroom, specifically in the pertinent areas of literacy and ELLs. In the fall and spring semesters, our courses were offered back-to-back on the same evening with the same cohorts of TFA and Arizona Teaching Fellows teachers. Meeting periodically to discuss our evolving practice as clinical instructors, we realized the benefits of working together to meet the needs of the AC teachers in the elementary program. We believed that by integrating the courses and providing content that was applicable to their classrooms, teachers would develop a deeper understanding of how to encourage the language and literacy development of diverse students. The first step to course integration was outlining the interconnected nature of the courses.

*Language and literacy courses.* Due to the importance of reading and writing to student achievement, two courses focused on language and literacy instruction in the first year of the program. In the Language and Literacy 1 and 2 methods courses, the second author provided teachers with a comprehensive set of knowledge, skills, and mind-sets to effectively teach students how to read and write. As new teachers in elementary classrooms with limited
preparation in the area of literacy development, instruction, and assessment, the Language and Literacy coursework provided teachers with the pertinent knowledge to support students’ language and literacy development.

Taught in the fall semester, Language and Literacy 1 aimed to provide teachers with a comprehensive understanding of literacy development and effective instructional strategies to teach reading and writing in the elementary classroom. Teachers learned effective, research-based methods to teach the various components of literacy: phonics and decoding, vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing, and oral language (Allington, 2006). During this course, teachers examined, evaluated, and applied literacy approaches for effective instruction and analyzed the role that language plays in literacy development.

Taught in the spring semester, Language and Literacy 2 required teachers to utilize their knowledge from the prior course to plan data-driven instruction. New content included research-based approaches for designing assessment and targeted instruction. The content emphasized the application of literacy methods through diagnostic assessment and instruction and differentiated lessons for diverse learners (Serafini, 2010). Throughout the course, AC teachers applied their learning through cycles of (1) purposive selection of formal and informal assessment tools; (2) data collection, analysis, and interpretation; and (3) design of instructional interventions based on the individualized needs of students.

ELL courses. In addition to foundational knowledge of language and literacy for all students, the growing population of families whose primary language is not English necessitates teachers with specific knowledge on teaching ELLs (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008). The ELL 1 and 2 methods courses aimed to give teachers a theoretical understanding of second-language acquisition and a comprehensive set of strategies for assessing and instructing students during content, language, and literacy instruction.

Taught in the fall semester, ELL 1 emphasized second-language acquisition theory and research, in addition to the language policies that guide instruction. After building foundational background knowledge, we explored the various tenets of sheltered instruction (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008) to support teachers in planning and executing lessons to teach content while supporting students’ language development. By the end of the course, teachers utilized theories, principles, and strategies of sheltered instruction to plan and implement a unit in their classroom that targeted students’ language growth.

Taught in the spring semester, ELL 2 focused on the literacy component of ELLs’ second-language development. Teachers examined, discussed, and utilized various research-based approaches to the instruction and assessment of ELLs’ reading and writing (Perez & Torres-Guzman, 2002). Content emphasized data-driven instruction through the use of qualitative language and literacy assessments. Throughout the course, teachers immediately applied learning in the classroom by conducting, analyzing, and using assessments to plan targeted instruction to build on students’ background knowledge and experiences.
With the large and growing population of ELLs, particularly in schools where TFA and Arizona Teaching Fellows teachers are placed, teachers require targeted preparation in how to simultaneously support second-language acquisition and provide access to academic content. Across organizations and programs, AC teachers report a lack of preparation and capability to meet the needs of ELLs (Humphrey et al., 2008). In the InMac program, the ELL courses provide teachers with linguistically responsive practice (Lucas et al., 2008) to support student achievement.

**Designing the Course Integration**

With the shared emphasis on effective instruction and assessment to support language and literacy development, we easily found alignment among course objectives, themes, and assignments. In this section, we describe how we designed the course integration, including the interconnected macrolevel design of the four courses, the microlevel lesson planning for each course session, and the purposeful connection between university coursework and classroom practice. Following the tenets of backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), which requires starting with the end goal in mind, we planned purposefully to yield high-quality teachers who utilized effective instruction and assessment to meet the needs of the diverse learners.

**Macrolevel planning.** We launched the macrolevel design by setting shared goals and visions for teacher learning. As teacher educators dedicated to improving the education of low-income students, our big goal was simple—to prepare teachers to effectively support students’ language and literacy development. Recognizing that these first-year AC teachers were learning while doing through on-the-job training (Humphrey et al., 2008), we wanted to intensify our efforts to ensure that the students in their classrooms were developing language abilities and learning to read, write, listen, and speak in meaningful ways.

Beginning with our end goal for teacher learning in mind, we began by setting out the initial, macrolevel plans for course integration across the courses. Our first challenge was to purposively integrate the courses to highlight the shared themes and outcomes while maintaining the course requirements and foci required by the university. Rather than tweak the university-mandated course outcomes, we emphasized the common trends where teachers could make immediate connections to classroom practice (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Levine, 2006). By highlighting the shared themes between the individual courses in fall and spring semesters, we had a starting point for the integration of content and assignments.

Trends in content led us to develop a shared trajectory for teaching course topics. We put together a sequence that (1) accentuated background knowledge of key theoretical and practical principles (e.g., second-language acquisition theory), (2) maximized connections between literacy and ELL course content (e.g., focusing on vocabulary on the same evening to highlight the
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literacy and ELL lenses of vocabulary instruction), and (3) emphasized immediate and appropriate application to classroom practice to support student learning (e.g., teaching students how to read and write). We utilized the course syllabi to highlight the deliberate intersection of course content for teachers. Although we provided separate syllabi for our courses, we implicitly demonstrated our alignment by using the same format and organization of the syllabus, a small gesture that teachers recognized and appreciated, typically accustomed to having to maneuver the syllabus styles of various professors.

We then looked at appropriate performance assessments to demonstrate teacher learning (Chung, 2008). To reflect the collective effort and encourage teachers to make explicit connections between courses, we provided them with the opportunity to apply learning from both courses in a common assignment. Reflecting the content similarities of the courses, the original assignments called for the appropriate use of research-based strategies of assessment and instruction for diverse learners, specifically in the area of language and literacy development. Rather than have teachers complete separate and similar assignments for each course, we recognized that teachers could take more time, energy, and effort to absorb and internalize the concepts and purposes of the assignments through meaningful integration. Although we did not allow one assignment to suffice for both courses, we enhanced the existing assignments by bringing together the objectives from both lenses to find the integral strands and components to support teachers' deep understanding from multiple perspectives (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Assignment integration centered on course-culminating projects and aimed to support teachers’ literacy instruction and assessment with ELLs. These final projects, known as signature assignments, had to remain consistent with other course sections of the same class due to accreditation requirements; nevertheless, the required assignments were similar in both fall and spring semesters, which made the integration possible. In the fall semester, the required literacy lessons and sheltered English lessons came together to form the integrated culminating assignment of sheltered literacy lessons. In the spring semester, the integrated student case study (Heineke & Davin, 2013) combined the required case study of a struggling reader and case study of an ELL. By integrating the final projects, the teachers were able to demonstrate not only their understanding of the individual course objectives but also how those objectives related to one another and came together to support meaningful classroom practice. As the unit plan and case study served as summative assessments for the literacy and ELL courses, we were able to truly backward-plan our course sessions together to yield deep understanding on the instruction and assessment of culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

One key similarity across our approach to teaching the graduate-level coursework was the incorporation of scholarly work in the fields of literacy and ELL education. Particularly due to the high caliber of teachers enrolled, we knew that adding theoretical and research-based articles was important to
ensure engagement and rigor, as well as build teachers’ research knowledge base. Rather than read separate articles for each class, we chose articles related to both course topics for teachers to read more deeply and connect to both sets of course content. For example, the use of Shirley Brice Heath’s (1982) ethnographic study on home and family literacy events provided teachers the opportunity to move beyond the textbook to use influential research to explore concepts related to language, literacy, and diversity. Through the article facilitation assignment, we asked teachers to connect theory and practice on topics related to literacy and ELLs. Typically held during the overlap of our two course sessions each evening, pairs of teachers shared key points and information for the article and facilitated an engaging activity to guide the comprehension and application of the article to the classroom setting.

In addition to the full integration of the culminating projects and research article facilitation, we had smaller assignments from individual courses with integrated content. For example, the fall literacy course utilized a read-aloud assignment to encourage teachers to use interactive reading with meaningful children’s literature (Tompkins, 2010). To provide a specific lens on linguistically diverse students, we asked teachers to utilize a culturally relevant text (Bishop, 1990). In addition, parents’ involvement in language and literacy development is critical to students’ achievement (Tompkins, 2010); thus, the spring literacy course included a project to support family partnerships and provide information for parents to utilize in supporting their children’s literacy development at home. To integrate with content from the ELL coursework, we incorporated culturally and linguistically responsive practice (Lucas et al., 2008) to ensure that teachers recognized the backgrounds and utilized the resources of parents and families. We integrated the assignments for teachers to utilize and apply literacy and ELL lenses.

The macrolevel integration between the courses outlined and assessed the goals for teacher learning at the end of their first year of classroom teaching. Our main challenge was to effectively backward-plan our course instruction to reach those goals and foster successful teaching of literacy and ELLs for teachers with scant educational background and training before their first year of teaching. Based on the aligned trajectories completed in the macrolevel planning, the microlevel integration occurred when we planned individual course sessions and learning experiences to support teacher learning related to the course goals.

Microlevel planning. Dependent on the literacy and ELL course topics and objectives in a given evening, the microlevel course integration manifested itself in lesson planning in one of two ways—a fully integrated session and a partially integrated session. When the course topics and objectives were identical, we fully integrated our practice—holding the full evening of class time together with both teacher educators present and facilitating through a coteaching approach (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2008). When the course topics were related, we partially integrated our practice—holding our own classes separate with an overlap of time in between. Figure 1 contains the
different schedules of the integrated course sessions. Regardless of the decision to fully or partially integrate the evening of class, we collaborated in the process of lesson planning to ensure the explicit connections between course content and classroom practice (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Levine, 2006).

Because each course had a substantial amount of literacy- or ELL-specific content to teach independent of the other course, approximately 75% of the evenings were partially integrated. In these connected class sessions, we maintained our individual class time with an overlap in the middle of the evening. The integrated 1-hour period accomplished three things: (1) a shared dialogue to build the latter course session on the content of the prior, (2) two small group facilitations on content-related research articles, and (3) time for housekeeping on joint classes and assignments. An electronic exit ticket at the end of the evening tied the two course sessions together and checked for understanding by asking teachers to make linkages and share their takeaways. Despite the maintenance of course time with separate learning objectives, we collaborated to ensure connections between course content to maximize teacher learning.

The partial integration at the microlevel can be illustrated by the connected class session that focused on assessment. In the third week of the spring semester, the literacy course was closing a two-class discussion on classroom assessment of reading and writing, and the ELL course was embarking on a discussion of assessment specific to linguistically diverse students. We recognized the importance of maintaining separate time to dive into the complex and pertinent issues involved in each aspect of assessment; however, we wanted to build on teachers’ prior learning to deepen their understanding of language and literacy assessment. Knowing that the literacy course had covered specific concepts, such as miscue analysis (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 2005) and writing development (Calkins, 1994), the ELL course built on the prior learning to highlight the role of second-language transfer (Cummins, 2000) in the aforementioned approaches, as well as going beyond to additional topics, such as cultural and linguistic bias issues in assessment. In addition to the shared dialogue to connect courses, small groups facilitated research articles on assessing bilingual readers’ comprehension (Jimenez, Garcia, & Pearson, 1996) and issues of validity and reliability in the assessment of ELLs (Solano-Flores, 2008). Our collaborative planning allowed us to maximize learning and time.
When the topics and objectives aligned, we utilized approximately 25% of course sessions to fully integrate our practice as teacher educators. In these joint class sessions, we cofacilitated the entire evening of class. Reflecting the collaborative demands of coteaching (Jackson, 2010), we met extensively before the session to lesson plan together. We shared the same learning objectives and backward-planned the almost-5-hour session to maximize teacher learning. Although we shared the stage throughout the joint course sessions, we intentionally utilized each of our areas of expertise and strengths as teacher educators to take the lead dependent on the lens of the conversation and facilitation. Following the course sessions, we met to reflect on the coteaching experience and on teacher learning related to the common objectives.

The joint class session on culturally relevant literature extensions exemplifies the full integration at the microlevel of course planning. Due to the strategically designed and aligned trajectory of each course, the seventh week of the spring semester called for similar foci between courses—children's literature extensions and culturally relevant literature and extensions in the literacy and ELL courses, respectively. Because extensions such as drama, writing, and art can be utilized with all children's literature, we acknowledged that pooling our knowledge and passion for the pedagogical topic would be beneficial for teacher learning. After the two research article facilitations on culturally relevant children's literature extensions through art and drama, we combined our efforts to facilitate a hands-on, experiential session to identify quality, culturally authentic literature, share texts in engaging ways with children, and design extensions to further students' comprehension and enjoyment.

Whether approaching the content through partial or full course integration, the explicit connections and purposeful planning enhanced teacher learning and understanding on integral concepts related to language and literacy, as well as more broad issues of classroom culture, instruction, and assessment. After analyzing the anecdotal and reflective data with a broad lens at the close of each semester, we noticed a marked improvement in the quality of discussions and assignments. The integration yielded meaningful discussions that were grounded in student learning, as well as assignments that demonstrated deep understanding of unique language and literacy needs of diverse learners. In addition to the integration at the university, we furthered the innovation by extending the coursework into teachers' classrooms (see Table 1).

Extending to the classroom. When we embarked on our mission to integrate coursework, our main purpose was to better prepare teachers to effectively support students' language and literacy development. Recognizing that AC teachers received “streamlined preparation” to allow for quick entrance to the classroom (Humphrey et al., 2008, p. 2), we wanted to provide teachers with content that was applicable and valuable to their practice. We conceptualized the classroom as an additional setting and extension of course time to work toward the learning goals of our courses (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). To facilitate transfer and fluidity between the university and classroom contexts,
we asked teachers to apply learning through the instruction and assessment planned and implemented with students in the classroom. Some of these applications included the classroom-based performance assessments, such as the case study research of an ELL student conducted in the spring semester. We asked teachers to employ their learning in their classrooms as well as bring classroom experiences into our dialogues at the university.

We served as the intermediaries between the university and classroom contexts. As clinical instructors with dual roles, we supported the AC teachers in schools in addition to teaching the coursework. As our integration deepened, the line between clinical supervisor and course instructor became less defined. Rather than using only the standard university supervision form, we looked for implementation and application of course learning in classroom practice (Acheson & Gall, 2011). In this way, we supported teachers in generating and utilizing knowledge of practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), where formal and practical knowledge came together to inform practice in the unique context of each teacher's classroom. In addition, our observations in classrooms directly affected our subsequent teaching, as we utilized the teachers' practice and students' responses to exemplify the theories and ideas discussed in class. By utilizing data from classrooms, we recognized the gaps in knowledge and understanding to determine where to revisit important concepts that teachers needed to effectively support student achievement.

Nevertheless, we did not want to serve as the primary links between the courses and the classrooms. Rather than serve as the gatekeepers of the language and literacy practices in classrooms, we wanted teachers to share their unique and innovative applications of course learning, as well as their struggles, questions, and reflections. We utilized Web 2.0 technologies (Albion, 2008) to bring each teacher's classroom practice into an interactive dialogue conducted on media, such as Google sites and wikis. In this way, teachers could electronically share and learn from one another's pedagogical plans, implementations, and reflections.
Evaluating the Efficacy of Course Integration

Central to action research, not only did we plan and implement the course integration for AC teachers, but we also collected data to evaluate teacher learning to modify and improve our practice for future cycles (Elliott, 1991). Through the collection of data at the university and school sites, we investigated teachers’ responses to our joint practice to further our targeted support of these new AC teachers. In this section, we share the formal data from summative surveys and course evaluations that we utilized to reflect on the course integration to then modify our future collaborative practice.

Findings from the summative survey data demonstrated that teachers perceived the course integration to have a profound effect on their teaching and learning. Qualitative analysis of the data told us that teachers found the integration to be a “wonderful synergy of ideas” that was “cohesive, enjoyable, and worthwhile” that led to an “exponential increase in learning.” Thematic analysis of survey responses led to quantitative trends (see Table 2) that illustrated teachers’ positive perceptions of the integration in terms of time and effort, learning, connections between literacy and ELLs, and applications to classroom practice. Overall, the data overwhelmingly demonstrated that the AC teachers thrived from the course integration.

We were curious if course learning did indeed transfer to classroom practice. Since we held the dual role of instructors and supervisors, we had the unique opportunity to collect data to evaluate if this integral transfer to practice occurred (Acheson & Gall, 2011). In addition to the programmatic criteria on the classroom supervision form, we incorporated specific feedback related to the integrated course goals, topics, and objectives. In the majority of the teachers in our integrated courses, we observed inspiring changes in classroom practice, specifically in the areas of language and literacy. Whereas teachers began the school year using only direct instruction through the five-step lesson plan emphasized by TFA and The New Teacher Project, we observed constructivist language and literacy practice in the classroom, such as readers’ and writers’ workshop, literature circles, and classroom libraries with culturally relevant literature. Teachers utilized various language and lit-

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eracy classroom assessments to plan differentiated, targeted instruction based on the needs of the whole child.

We also saw the impact of the integration through a distinct change in our university course evaluations. Despite previous findings that TFA teachers negatively rated their InMac courses and instructors (Carter, Amrein-Beardsley, & Hansen, 2011), our evaluations significantly improved as the course integration deepened. Furthermore, even though our courses were evaluated individually, teachers' evaluations of the courses and instructors remained integrated. Some teachers specifically referenced the course integration: “Integrating this course with [the first author's course] was very helpful, but I still found the courses challenging.” Other teachers connected the coursework with classroom practice: “I extended effort and saw results of that effort in my own classroom, especially during the case study assignment.” Another teacher implicitly connected the course integration content with classroom practice: “This course was extremely applicable and helped me further ELL literacy instruction in my classroom, such as setting up literature circles and small group intervention.” Demonstrating the depth and extent of our integration, teachers were unable to separate the courses to give individual feedback on formal evaluations. Evaluation responses also went beyond the scope of the university course, as teachers could not divide their experiences in coursework from their classroom practice.

The broad findings from the summative data presented here are not meant to be exhaustive. We share an overview of the evaluation phase to show how we utilized action research to modify and enhance the course integration. Our innovation did not just encompass an integrated design; rather, the innovation was ongoing, as we engaged in a systematic and cyclical process of inquiry through planning, implementing, evaluating, and modifying our practice (Elliott, 1991). Over our 3 years collaborating as teacher educators, each action research cycle deepened our integration and improved teachers’ learning and practice related to literacy and ELLs.

**Discussion: Innovation in Alternative Teacher Preparation**

In this article, we aimed to describe innovative coursework specifically integrated to meet the needs of AC teachers in a university teacher education program. Dedicated to improving our practice to maximize teacher learning, we planned our macro- and microlevel course instruction to cultivate teachers who could provide effective language and literacy support for diverse students. By making explicit connections between the content of typically separate courses, we fostered the professional learning and practice of first-year teachers.

Through the processes of integrating our courses, we greatly improved as teacher educators. First, our collaboration served a professional learning community, where we networked about issues related to our teaching
and learned from each other in the process of linking courses to provide a coherent shared learning experience (Lieberman, 2000). As we engaged in conversations around macro- and microlevel course planning, we recognized the benefit and challenge of having to articulate our reasoning behind certain practices and decisions. Second, our integration pushed us to provide teachers with models of sound educational practices, such as the use of backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), classroom-based performance assessments (Chung, 2008), and coteaching (Bacharach et al., 2008). These effective pedagogical approaches are required of classroom teachers but are not consistently modeled in higher education (Tinto, 2003). Third, through our endeavor to target in-service teacher learning and make explicit connections between theory and practice, we became more resourceful and constructive in our uses of interactive technology and classroom visits. Through the various facets of the course integration, we transformed our practice as teacher educators.

Although the purpose of this article was to highlight our innovation in teaching education, our practice as teacher educators means nothing if not connected to both teacher and student learning. We contend that the extra efforts necessary to integrate coursework and classroom experiences are worth the reward to close the teacher preparation gap (Gaiber, 2009). The classroom teacher is an important factor in student achievement; every classroom necessitates a teacher who is well versed in theory and pedagogy and well prepared to provide targeted instruction to meet the needs of all learners, specifically in urban schools where student needs often go unmet by unprepared teachers (Gaiber, 2009). For AC teachers who lack the appropriate knowledge base (Darling-Hammond, 1994) and clinical preparation (Berry et al., 2008), course integration can accelerate teacher learning through intensive instruction, explicit connections, and applied content. Through integrating our courses, new teachers learned more about language, literacy, and ELLs and transferred that learning into effective classroom instruction to support student development and achievement.

Our successes in the collaborative coursework stretch beyond the alternative approach to teacher certification. The innovation can be extended to different contexts of teacher education to support and foster teachers' understanding of key concepts and the corresponding application to effective classroom practice with students. When teachers are grouped into cohorts—a learning community in teacher education (Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006)—the effort to integrate coursework is significantly easier. As in this article, cohorts involve a group of teachers who complete their program together; instructors who teach different courses in the same semester can collaborate in the plight to integrate on a number of levels. Nevertheless, even outside the cohort model, most traditional education programs have individuals who take more than one course at a time. If instructors within general teacher specialization tracks (e.g., elementary, secondary, special education) collaborate in profes-
sional learning communities to maintain an open dialogue about course content and assignments, purposeful connections can be made between courses.

We recognize that there are challenges to course integration, especially inherent in the instructional structures in higher education (Jackson, 2010). Faculty members in teacher education programs tend to operate autonomously, as opportunities to socialize and collaborate can be limited to monthly meetings or required university events. Recognizing education as a shared endeavor, teacher educators must seek out venues to discuss factors that directly relate to the development of effective teachers (Tinto, 2003). Even if extensive course integration such as the approach described here is not possible, faculty members can advance the learning of teacher candidates by reaching outside one particular course curriculum to demonstrate connections with other content, courses, and classroom experiences. The plight begins with faculty and administration—seeing the purpose and finding the time to do this important work.

References


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