

A Deep Dive into Accreditation: Using Action Research to Assess and Evaluate a Teacher Education Program

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ABSTRACT

Continuous assessment in the fields of teaching and education is a must for faculty in higher education as well as the teaching candidates they instruct. Such assessment requires a deep dive into practice and policy along with a willingness to evaluate program delivery models objectively. Although accomplishing this degree of evaluation is not an easy task, it does provide a rich opportunity for determining program strengths and areas in need of improvement. Spearheaded by accreditation guidelines and a collaborative action research project, the authors highlight the lessons they learned and explore application possibilities within a literacy education program. From the importance of accountability from all stakeholders, (i.e., university administration, faculty, and students), to the role technology integration plays, to the significance of diversity and the implementation of field experiences throughout, they share their discoveries and insights in a forthright and reflective manner. As university faculty working with those seeking teaching certification at an advanced level (Masters and/or Educational Specialist), the authors examine the influence CAEP, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, has not only on their program but, ultimately, on their individual pedagogy and methodology. Reconciling the need of maintaining accreditation with their own desire for autonomy in teaching, they look critically at ways to merge the two.

Keywords: program-assessment, action-research, accreditation, Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP)

Cite this article as: Comer, M., & Kolodziej, N. (2022). A Deep Dive into Accreditation: Using Action Research to Assess and Evaluate a Teacher Education Program. *International Journal of Higher Education Pedagogies*, 3(2), 14-23. <https://doi.org/10.33422/ijhep.v3i2.163>

1. Accreditation and Its Significance to Our Program

Although the US Department of Education does not grant accreditation, it and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) provide recognition for accrediting organizations, such as CAEP. Established in 2013, CAEP's foundation is rooted in two organizations, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC), that date back to 1954 and 1997 respectively. CAEP was formed as a result of a merger of these two organizations and became the sole accreditation organization for teacher preparation programs in 2013 (CAEP, 2020c). In 2014, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the national organization that oversees higher education accreditation and quality assurance, recognized CAEP as an official accreditation agency.

To attain and/or maintain CAEP accreditation, Educator Preparation Providers (EPPs) must provide evidence that their programs meet the appropriate CAEP Standards. To that end,

there are two sets of standards, one for programs that convey an initial teaching license and one for those that convey an add-on endorsement to existing teaching licenses. In order for Candidates to be admitted into our graduate literacy program, they must hold an initial teaching license; thus, our program uses CAEP's *Standards for the Accreditation at the Advanced-Level*. These standards are as follows:

- Standard 1. Content and Pedagogical Knowledge
- Standard 2. Clinical Partnerships and Practice
- Standard 3: Candidate Quality, Recruitment, and Selectivity
- Standard 4: Program Impact
- Standard 5: Provider Quality and Continuous Improvement (CAEP, 2021)

To initiate the process of becoming accredited, an EPP must generate a self-study report, a narrative with accompanying evidence to substantiate that the program meets the CAEP standards. Subsequently, CAEP assigns a visitor team to conduct a formative offsite review of the program, using the self-study report as the basis. After completing the initial assessment, the team visits the program to conduct an on-site review that includes interviews with various stakeholders such as faculty members, program students and graduates, and P-12 administrators. Finally, the team crafts a report of the program's alignment with the CAEP standards, and the Accreditation Council makes a determination regarding the program's accreditation status. Per the CAEP guidelines, "Accreditation for seven (7) years is granted if the EPP meets all CAEP Standards and components, even if areas of improvement (AFIs) are identified in the final report of the Accreditation Council" (CAEP, 2020b, Accreditation section). If AFIs are noted, a program must improve those areas prior to its next accreditation visit; failure to do so results in the AFIs becoming stipulations, "serious deficiencies in meeting CAEP Standards [and]...failure to correct the condition leading to the stipulation results in probation or revocation of accreditation" (CAEP, 2020b, Stipulations subsection). Subsequently, accredited programs must submit an annual report to CAEP indicating their status on eight criteria, including aspects such as graduates' employment and their effectiveness with their P-12 students. At the end of the seven- to ten-year accreditation cycle, the process starts again, beginning with the self-study report (CAEP, 2020a).

For an educational program that is associated with a public university or college, accreditation is essential to its existence. Not only does accreditation indicate to students and their future employers that the program is of high quality, but it is also a requirement if the university (or college) or its students receive public funding (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, n.d.). Our literacy program is housed within a large public university in the southeast; without public funds to support various university facets and student loans and grants, our program would not endure. Thus, when faced with writing our self-study report, we knew the stakes were high and that our best efforts were required in order to compile it and its accompanying evidence. Additionally, we recognized that the process would allow us to delve into collaborative action research which, according to Mills (2017), has the potential to be a powerful agent of educational change. Because the nature of the self-study report lends itself to that of a case study, we were able to, as Crowe and her colleagues (2011) describe, conduct an in-depth, multi-faceted exploration of our program which resulted in numerous lessons learned.

1.1. Purpose/Objectives

The purpose of our study was multi. First, it was a means to ensure continued accreditation. Next, the study enabled us to look at our literacy program in an in-depth manner, exploring

instructional practices as well as program delivery models. Specifically, we wanted to evaluate our program as a whole and, individually, what we do as educators.

The following objectives guided our research:

1. Assess our program's ability to meet CAEP accreditation standards
2. Explore stakeholders' accountability in the accreditation process
3. Investigate the implementation of field experiences across the breadth of the program
4. Examine the role technology integration plays
5. Define diversity and its inclusion in our program

These objectives are in direct correlation with the goals of conducting our CAEP self-study report. As aforementioned, earning CAEP accreditation is necessary for our program's existence; thus, the first objective is an overarching one that encompasses the others. Objectives 2 and 3 are inter-related and are associated with CAEP Standards and guidelines. Standard 3 requires that the "provider ensures that effective partnerships and high-quality clinical practice are central to preparation" (CAEP, 2015, p. 6). Finally, objectives 4 and 5 are particularly important because these are CAEP's cross-cutting themes that impact all aspects of educator preparation programs (CAEP, 2015). Consequently, CAEP requires that programs address these themes throughout the entire self-study report.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

The timing of our research study was ideal; approximately two years prior, our entire literacy program underwent numerous changes when we transitioned from being an in-person program to being one that is delivered 100% online. Simultaneously, the professional standards on which our program's course objectives are based were revised (International Literacy Association, 2018). Considering the enormity of the changes our program experienced, we decided to situate this research study on the outcome stage of Fullan's (2007) change theory. For context, the change theory includes four main stages: initiation, implementation, continuation, and outcome. Additionally, the theory, according to Ellsworth (2001), allows the researchers to take part in the change process, something that appealed to us. To summarize, the initiation stage, or phase, is impacted by five factors. The first is the quality of the innovations that currently exist, followed by access to the innovations, support from administration, teacher advocacy, and outside change agents. The implementation stage, per Fullan and Stigelbauer (1991) is affected by three major factors: characteristics of change, local characteristics, and external factors, i.e., government and other agencies. The third stage of the change theory, continuation, centers on the reaction to the change and depends on three things:

- how the change is embedded into the structure, or in our situation, the program;
- the degree to which the people impacted by the change are committed, and;
- the establishment of specific procedures for continuing assistance

The last stage in Fullan's change theory is outcome, the one in which we were primarily invested. In essence, the outcome phase requires a significant commitment to change. Fullan (1993) shares the following four perspectives concerning the outcome: (1) active initiation and participation; (2) pressure, support, and negotiation; (3) changes in skills, thinking, and committed actions; and (4) overriding problems of ownership. Fullan reminds us that change does not end in simply recognizing that it is needed or in the initial implementation of change. Rather, he stresses that change requires continuous interaction with the initial change and other changes brought about by it.

In regard to the self-study report guidelines set forth by CAEP, we appreciated Fullan's (1993) stance that "effective change agents neither embrace nor ignore mandates. They use them as catalysts to reexamine what they are doing" (p. 24). Considering the four main stages in the change theory, we *initiated* the changes of our literacy program by conducting an internal program evaluation, comparing the program's current course objectives to the recently revised professional standards. After determining the changes that were necessary to better align our program with the standards, we planned and *implemented* them. *Continuation* of our changes proceeded until we evaluated the *outcome* of (and commitment to continuous interaction with) our changes via our CAEP self-study report, the catalyst for the research project and changes we undertook.

2. Methodology

Building on change theory, we selected the participatory action research framework because it "is a framework for conducting research and generating knowledge centered on the belief that those who are most impacted by research should be the ones taking the lead in framing the questions, design, methods, and the modes of analysis of such research project" (Participatory Action Research, n.d.). Specifically, we chose collaborative action research as our method of study because of its interactive nature (Mills, 2017). With a vested interest in the outcomes, action research allowed us to examine the data from our program through a critical and constructive lens. Addressing it through collaboration encouraged objectivity because we each held the other accountable. The collaborative approach also permitted us to engage in reflective dialogue throughout the process, bouncing questions, concerns, and ultimately, ideas off one another. Positioned as a fundamental component of teaching (Mills, 2017), action research permitted us ample opportunity to explore the following research questions:

- What practical applications can be learned from the CAEP self-study report?
- How can critical reflection be used to improve program design?

We conducted the research for this study over the course of two years, with a comprehensive evaluation of data occurring in the second year. It should be noted that prior to this time period, however, we collected student/candidate work, or exemplars; reflected on practice; and discussed, periodically, the status of our program's alignment with CAEP standards. Delving into research involved in-depth examinations of program summative assessments (e.g., Reading Specialist Praxis tests and comprehensive exams) as well as course measurements, i.e., specific course and instructor evaluative pieces. Throughout the process, we documented lessons learned which would guide us in writing the self-study report for accreditation as well as inform program design and practical applications for us as practitioners. Additionally, these lessons ultimately provided a starting point for the action part of the research study.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, technology such as Zoom, Teams, and the Google Suite of tools (e.g., Google Docs, Sheets, and Slides) was used for collecting, disseminating, and discussing data.

Briefly, action research is a four-step process that, according to Mills (2003) is a dialectic research spiral consisting of identifying an area of focus, collecting data, analyzing/interpreting data, and concluding with developing an action plan. Building on this, we considered the four criteria outlined by Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2012) for identifying an appropriate area of focus: (1) it should involve teaching and learning, centering on the

researcher's own practice; (2) it should be within one's ability to control; (3) it should be something that the researcher is excited about; and (4) it is something the researcher would like to change or improve (p. 513). While the self-study report did serve as a catalyst for our project, the focus and methodology stemmed directly from the spiral and area of focus of action research referenced previously.

2.1. Data Collection

Though the research project was a two-year process, data collection, per CAEP guidelines, covered a three-year period prior to this study and consisted primarily of examining documents related directly to our program of study and their connection to CAEP accreditation requirements. Rather than relying on just one or two documents for information, we reviewed multiple sources of data, i.e., work samples, Praxis exam scores, and evaluative pieces/rubrics. Doing so allowed us to look at our program through a more critical lens than a single document might allow. This triangulation of data (Gay et al., 2012) focused on at least three sources of data, which helped to encourage reliability and decrease bias. It should be noted that, as Gay et al. (2012) point out, "data collection during action research is often idiosyncratic, fueled by the desire to understand one's practice and to collect data that are appropriate and accessible" (p. 514). In regard to our research project, documents data collection permitted the insight we desired and satisfied dictates of the accreditation process.

3. Results/Discussion

Outlined as lessons, our results have proved to be valuable as reflective tools in guiding program and course redesign. The action research study brought to light strengths as well as growth areas. Implementation of the lessons should improve practice and result in rich data, providing details concerning the accuracy of our research results as well as streamlining future CAEP accreditation self-study reports.

3.1. Lesson One: Standards Inclusion

Beginning with President George H.W. Bush's first National Education Summit (NES) in September, 1989, standards have been at the forefront of educational reform (U.S. Department of Education, 1995; Vinovskis, 1999). Building on the NES, President Clinton mandated with the *Improving America's Schools Act* of 1994 that all states develop standards for every subject and grade level. Attention to standards continued to rise and became even more pronounced with President George W. Bush's *No Child Left Behind* (U.S. Department of Education, 2005) reform and President Obama's *Race to the Top* platform (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Educationally speaking, standards drive instruction at all levels, from elementary to middle school, high school, college, and graduate school. As a literacy-based graduate program, we use the International Literacy Association's (ILA) standards as a guide for developing courses and content. Additionally, CAEP, as a governing accreditation body, has a set of standards to which licensing programs adhere. Well versed in these, we know that we address them in the courses we teach and with the assessments we have in place. We soon realized, however, that knowing this and proving it are two entirely different things, resulting in yet another valuable lesson learned.

Concerning standards, we list them on our syllabi, link to them on our program's standards' crosswalk webpage, include them on course websites and discuss them in content. Though designed with the standards in mind, we failed to list them directly on the assignment guidelines or rubrics used to assess them. The omission of the standards from these pieces

proved to be an issue. We had to revisit the various key assessments and identify the standards that each addressed before we could discuss them adequately within the CAEP report. Needless to say, this took a great deal of time. We learned that just because we know the connection of the standards to each assessment piece, our candidates may not. As such, it is critical that we make that connection transparent. To that end, we are in the process of revising all assessments and rubrics to include standards. This practice will ensure that there is no question concerning standards and their connection to our assessments. Another major advantage of taking the time to do this on the front-end is that it will save us time when we go through our next accreditation visit. We will be able to speak to the association of the assessments with the CAEP standards without having to conduct an intensive search to match them.

3.2. Lesson Two: Stakeholders' Accountability

According to McMahon (2011) the term educational stakeholders is a way to characterize everyone affected by the education system. For the purpose of this research study, the stakeholders are us, the professors who teach the literacy courses; the students/candidates who populate (or populated) our classes; and the administrative personnel at our university. Each entity plays an important role in the accreditation process. One valuable lesson we learned through our research concerns our own accountability. As professors we must be transparent with students/candidates concerning expectations, evaluative measures, and the role of standards in our program. However, candidates, due in part to CAEP's expectation of exemplar student work inclusions, also have a high degree of accountability. They must be active participants in the learning cycle, willing to assume responsibility in acquiring course content. They must also be receptive to the changes we made based on our research findings (e.g., completion of field experience survey, exemplar work permission form).

Communication between all stakeholders, we discovered, is tantamount to success. There must be an open dialogue between all entities; without it, true reflection and understanding of our program's status concerning accreditation would be impossible. One thing that worked for us was to meet with our graduate school director often via Zoom or Teams. We engaged in open dialogue, expressing concerns (or frustrations) and asking for clarification when needed. Additionally, the director, our department chair, associate dean, and dean acted as proofreaders. They read our self-study report closely, requesting clarifications when met with something we failed to make crystal clear. Beyond this, they offered insights from the viewpoints of individuals outside our particular discipline, thus ensuring that we paid attention to detailed explanations.

3.3. Lesson Three: The Role of Technology Integration

Technology in the 21st century touches most everything we do, including teaching and learning. As an accreditation body, CAEP stresses its rapidly increasing role in education by including it as an overarching theme in the self-study report. Housed at a university with technology in its name, we have long been advocates of integrating it into educational platforms. Our literacy program is 100% online; we use digital tools to share content and evaluate student work as well as to communicate with candidates who may never, physically, step foot on our campus. With our backgrounds, coupled with the stand-alone technology and literacy course offered in our program, we were (and are) confident of our ability to speak to this component in the CAEP self-study report. Even so, we discovered through the action research process that we were lacking in at least one key area. We failed to move beyond the surface study of technology theoretical models and/or frameworks.

To prepare our teacher candidates to think meaningfully about technology integration within their own classrooms, we recognized that we need to be more intentional with opportunities to study technology theoretical concepts. Exploring Kimmons, Graham, & West's (2020) Passive-Interactive-Creative-Replaces-Amplifies-Transforms (PICRAT) model in an in-depth manner gives our candidates a platform for thinking critically about the effect of technology use on practice while exploring what their own students' relationship is with the technology (Kimmons, et.al., 2020). As a model, PICRAT encourages teachers to think about the effective uses of technology to strengthen student engagement and achievement. In addition to PICRAT, we want our candidates to internalize Puentedura's (2003) the Substitution-Augmentation-Modification-Redefinition (SAMR) technology framework. The SAMR framework allows our candidates to look closely at their technology-infused lesson designs and evaluate the role it, technology, plays in those lessons. In essence, they must move beyond checking the box that says they integrate technology with teaching and into actual analysis of how, what, and why they are using it. Each model, or framework, provides educators with opportunities to scrutinize their technology usage through a research-based lens.

3.4. Lesson Four: Delving into Diversity

Through the process of our collaborative action research and writing the CAEP self-study report, we became even more acutely aware of how critical attention to diversity is. It, per CAEP guidelines, is (along with technology) an overarching theme that should touch everything we do. Based on the International Literacy Association (ILA) standards, we created a course that focuses solely on diversity and equity in literacy. With CAEP's all-encompassing diversity theme, however, we had to think critically, to go beyond the one course to evaluate how well we integrate it across the entire program. The first lesson we learned concerning diversity is that we needed to ensure we had a solid understanding of how we, as a faculty and program, view it. Stemming from Howard's (2007) stance that educators in rapidly transitioning schools need to reexamine everything we're doing; we engaged in open dialogue with faculty members and our director of graduate programs, centering on the following questions: Do our candidates recognize that although race and ethnicity are critical components of diversity, it moves beyond these two aspects? For example, do we stress that diversity, though not an exhaustive list, also includes cultural circumstances, socioeconomic backgrounds, academic abilities, gender identifications, communication styles, linguistic patterns, and religious views?

Solidifying our own understandings of diversity aided us in the construction of the CAEP report. But, more importantly, our doing so resulted in critical reflection, earnest discussions, and important realizations. Through reflection, we discovered that even though our university possesses minimal racial and ethnic variances, we are a diverse people group, with different views, backgrounds, and capabilities. Engaging in serious discussions about the topic, spurred by CAEP's focus on it, reinforced important insights. One, diversity is not just something we need to check off to satisfy CAEP's requirements. Rather, it is, like Segal (2019) points out, a way to discover new ideas, to engage in fresh experiences, and to learn from different people. By doing so, according to Segal, we open ourselves and our teaching to perspectives that promote better problem-solving, open dialogue, and greater creativity. Two, we need to ensure that candidates enrolled in our courses are clear on the topic of diversity, what it entails, its impact on education, and its role within our program. Three, we must be intentional in the part diversity plays throughout the program. Yes, there is and will be a heavy emphasis on the topic in the *Diversity and Equity Literacy* stand-alone course, but there is and should be significant attention given to the subject in other courses too.

3.5. Lesson Five: Implementation of Field Experiences

Guided by the International Literacy Association's recently updated *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals, 2017* our literacy program underwent extensive revision in 2018 with specific changes implemented in the fall 2019 semester. Among other changes, this latest version of the standards included a new strand, *Practicum/Clinical Experiences*. Consequently, our program revision was carefully crafted to attend to this standard, particularly the concept that "practicum experiences should not be standalone, but should instead be integrated throughout coursework, assessments, and other program components" (International Literacy Association, 2018, p. 20). To the extent possible, we embedded additional field experiences in our courses, while maintaining our stand-alone field experience course. Doing so allowed us to be confident that our candidates were accruing field experiences across the program. However, while crafting our self-study report, we discovered that we failed to recognize the need to collect various data regarding those field experiences which led to yet another valuable lesson.

As mentioned previously, diversity is a theme that must be interwoven in all parts of the self-study report. Not only did we need to demonstrate that our candidates were immersed in multiple field experiences, but we also needed to show that they were gaining experiences with a wide range of diverse P-12 students. While fumbling through our records of field experiences to create our self-study report, we realized the need to explicitly document each field experience for each course, tracking the level of diversity of the P-12 students with whom our candidates were working. This led to our creation of a survey tool that we could use for each future field experience. Using Qualtrics software for the survey, our candidates are now required to complete it after every field experience. In addition to gathering demographic information and data related to the field experience, candidates respond to the items displayed in Figure 1 below. The resulting data will allow us to not only track individual candidates' experiences working with diverse P-12 students, but it will also provide us with that information at the program level. We plan to use that data to analyze our field experience placements and make future adjustments to them if we discover omissions in the range of candidates' work with diverse P-12 students.

Student groups (choose all that apply)	Racial and ethnic groups (choose all that apply)
Economically disadvantaged ☐	American Indian/Alaska Native ☐
English language learner ☐	Asian ☐
Students with disabilities ☐	Black/African American ☐
Homeless ☐	Caucasian ☐
Foster ☐	Hispanic ☐
Migrant ☐	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander ☐
Military family ☐	Other ☐
Other ☐	

Figure 1: Diversity Items on Field Experience Survey

4. Conclusion

4.1. Jump Through the Hoops

Regardless of career paths or where one finds themselves, life itself requires a certain degree of engaging in complex or annoying series of things in order to get or achieve something, i.e.,

jumping through hoops (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). For us, accreditation guidelines form one of those hoops. The standards put in place by CAEP are accessible, achievable, and applicable. The overarching themes of diversity and technology are important in today's educational climate. Examining closely and evaluating an educational program are needed facets of the educational spectrum. In doing so, colleges and universities are able to reflect on not only what they do but also on why they do it. Through reflection, they can provide justifications for decisions made, celebrate strengths, acknowledge weaknesses, and develop plans for addressing the growth areas. For these reasons, the CAEP accreditation process is not a bad thing. Yet, despite the positive outcomes associated with the CAEP process, there is also a key lesson learned that (at least on the surface) sounds glib: Jump through the hoops outlined, but don't let the accreditation dog wag the teaching tail until it falls off! There is no denying that CAEP is an important component of an education program. But (one of the most valuable lessons we learned), it is also critical to trust yourself and your decisions. You know your content, your pedagogy and methodology, and your students or candidates. Be honest in admitting what works and what does not. Acknowledge that learning is a lifelong process that involves victories and mistakes as well as trial and error. Do the best you can, grow from the blunders, and make needed changes. Ultimately, these are the underlying lessons CAEP accreditation teaches.

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