ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to detail how online courses and programs influence teacher education for both preservice and inservice inclusive educators. Specifically, this chapter will examine how online courses and programs that are focused on inclusive special education and dual certification in general and special education have the potential to address teacher shortages in special education, expand teacher competence, and provide pathways for career development. Teacher education programs have the opportunity and the civic responsibility to create courses and programs in inclusive education that are accessible, relevant to the career development needs of both preservice and inservice teachers, and promote meaningful and just education for all students in inclusive schools and classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

There is an opportunity for the field teacher education and teacher preparation programs (TPPs) at institutions of higher education (IHEs) to simultaneously address issues of access to initial and continuing teacher education, preparation for inclusive practice, and the persistent demand for teachers in high-needs certification areas such as special education. To do this, TPPs need to rethink traditional approaches and take action so that the work of teacher education becomes more inclusive and remains forward-looking. This will require that TPPs examine both the content of courses and programs and also consider how courses and programs are made available to both preservice and inservice teachers. The result should be courses and programs that are widely accessible, grounded in interdisciplinary research, and aligned with the needs of teachers, children, and schools.

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The purpose of this chapter is to detail how online courses and programs influence teacher education and TPPs for both preservice and in-service inclusive educators. Specifically, this chapter will examine how online courses and programs that are focused on inclusive special education and dual certification in general and special education have the potential to address teacher shortages in special education, expand teacher competence, and provide pathways for career development.

In this chapter, the multidisciplinary definition of innovation put forth by Baregheh, Rowley, and Sambrook (2009) will be used to guide discussion and analysis. Through their study of the definitions of innovation across the disciplines of technology, science and engineering, economics, business and management, and innovation and entrepreneurship, Baregheh et al. (2009) define innovation as: “Innovation is the multi-stage process whereby organizations transform ideas into new/improved products, services or processes, in order to advance, compete and differentiate themselves successfully in their marketplace” (p. 1334).

The field of teacher education faces two pressing problems that require innovative approaches to professional preparation. These are a) training an adequate number of qualified special education teachers to keep pace with teacher labor market demand, and b) adequately preparing general education teachers to educate students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms and schools. In alignment with Baregheh and colleagues (2009) definition of innovation, this chapter recognizes that although the use of online courses and programs are not new in teacher education generally and special education teacher preparation specifically, the use of online courses and programs as a means to address the above stated problems constitutes innovation because their use improves the processes (e.g., lowers barriers to access) and outcomes (e.g., increases the numbers of teachers who are well prepared to work with students with disabilities) of teacher education and thereby advances the work of inclusive teacher education.

Although not codified in educational law, inclusion both as a philosophical stance and as a practice has significant implications for how, where, and by whom students are educated in K–12 public schools. Though definitions of inclusion vary, the spirit of the idea in the context of public schools remains consistent; this has been well articulated: “As social philosophy inclusion means fostering acceptance, belonging, and community in schools and other social institutions for a diversity of students, families, educators, and community members” (Salend, 2008, as cited in Brownell, Smith, Crockett, & Griffin, 2012, p. 4). Brownell et al. (2012) specified what inclusion means in practice in K–12 schools:

*As an educational practice [inclusion] this means, that to the greatest extent possible students with disabilities attend their neighborhood school and participate in the same curriculum and the same school activities as their same age peers who do not have disabilities.* (p. 5)

The enactment of inclusive educational practice requires that there is an adequate supply of highly skilled and knowledgeable teachers and school leaders. The realization of inclusive schooling, to a certain extent, will hinge on the willingness of TPPs to make high-quality inclusive teacher education available to a more socioeconomically, culturally, and linguistically diverse population of preservice and in-service teachers through online learning arrangements.

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