

Modeling Conspicuous Collaboration for Preservice Teacher Candidates Enrolled in Higher Education Courses

Karen S. Voytecki, *East Carolina University*
Patricia J. Anderson, *East Carolina University*

Preservice and inservice teachers in higher education should have the opportunity to observe conspicuous collaboration in action. When collaborative efforts are overt and used as teachable moments, the possibilities are clearer and the results more impactful for all participants. In this program description, we share benefits, challenges, structures, and implementation techniques for modeling conspicuous collaboration in higher education teacher preparation. To provide models of conspicuous collaboration, we collaborated in a project to co-teach general and special education teacher preparation courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels. We examined our own courses to design class activities and assignments that could be successfully co-taught. Each of us delivered our individual course, adding special collaborative learning activities and assignments that allowed students to experience interactive, collaborative learning while observing the purposeful collaboration of their instructors. Both of us—together with our preservice and inservice teachers—realized that optimal collaboration included clarifying roles and responsibilities, displaying respect toward the collaborative partner, holding one another accountable, setting aside time for planning and debriefing, and considering ways to combine classroom assignments and learning activities that met the requirements of both courses.

Keywords: collaboration, higher education, co-teaching, special education, general education

“Collaboration” “Inclusion” “Individual Needs” Whether considered individually or in combination, these contemporary expectations bombard administrators and teachers in rural schools with benefits, challenges, and expectations. With the chronic shortage of special education teachers nationwide (Robinson et al., 2019), especially in rural areas (Schulte & Justeson, 2019), administrators in rural schools must maximize the skills and talents of all teachers. Faced with limited resources and spaces, administrators in rural schools must work to provide the best possible education for all students while accommodating students’ diverse backgrounds and varied

developmental needs. When collaborating to meet the needs of all students, special education and general education teachers together face the challenges of inadequate resources and instructional options in their schools.

A key principle of inclusive schooling is collaboration (Hedegaard-Soerensen et al., 2017), conducted both formally and informally on a daily basis (i.e., co-teaching; consultation; transdisciplinary teams; and models involving families, students, and school staff). As with all teachers, rural education teachers are responsible for educating students with diverse abilities and

needs. They often have limited contact with outside service professionals for support and program planning, thus increasing their sense of professional isolation and heightening the need for collaboration (Pugach et al., 2012).

Although collaboration is identified as a best practice in education, preservice teachers typically do not experience these approaches in their higher education training (Lock et al., 2017).

Teachers at all levels of education are increasingly asked to draw on their collaborative skills to meet the needs of today's P-12 learners. It is not unusual for public school teachers to work together with grade or content level colleagues, special educators, and paraprofessionals to implement curriculum and to meet individual student needs. While implicit in most teacher preparation programs, many teacher education leaders do not explicitly teach the skills necessary for successful collaboration (Bacharach et al., 2008, p. 9).

Brinkmann and Twiford (2012) urged teacher education leaders to demonstrate collaboration between general special education teachers and adaptive special education teachers so those they teach can better understand diagnostic testing, lesson planning, differentiating, and collecting data. Weiss et al. (2017) insisted that collaborative processes and strategies should be a fundamental component of teacher preparation.

Literature Review

Definitions of Collaboration

Collaboration is defined as “the act of working collectively with other individuals for an agreed upon mission. The collaborative individual seeks to not only work toward individual goals, but toward mutual goals” (Kemp, 2013, p. 4). Collaboration in K-12 education is clarified as “a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice” (Riveros, 2012, p. 604). Collaborative teaching in higher education is further delineated as “any academic experience in which two professors work together in designing and teaching a course that itself uses group learning techniques” (Robinson & Schaible, 1995, p. 57). Faculty collaboration is further defined as “a cooperative endeavor that involves common goals,

coordinated effort, and outcomes or products for which the collaborators share responsibility and credit” (Austin & Baldwin, 1991, p. 2).

Working collaboratively has long been the goal for educators at all levels; however, the reality of educational practices often prohibits it. Challenges that educators face with collaboration include time constraints, individual responsibilities, limited access to colleagues, and dissimilar goals/objectives. The fact that collaborative planning, teaching, and evaluation all require additional work, focus, and determination adds a major challenge when attempting to incorporate collaboration. Collaborative delivery helps ensure those learning to teach are provided with genuine opportunities to apply special education knowledge, principles, and practices in classroom settings. Such a cohesive experience for those learning to teach can yield opportunities for meaningful discussions and increased learning and effectively enhance the learning experience of both the instructors their students (Harper & Sadler, 2002).

We have coined the term “conspicuous collaboration” as the intentional modeling of overt collaboration since obtaining the requisite knowledge and skills of effective collaboration is not an intuitive process. Arthaud et al. (2007) overtly modeled collaboration for preservice teachers in their teaching practices in higher education. Fuhrman & Streim (2008) stated that in order for collaboration to occur, individual responsibilities should be clearly articulated with an open discussion of possible solutions by all team members. Elements of conspicuous collaboration include open communication, common planning time, and mutual respect.

Rationale and Benefits of Collaboration in Higher Education

The shift to more inclusive educational practices in American schools has created a climate where collaboration is viewed as an essential practice for the education of students with special needs. In fact, researchers have asserted that effective collaboration between special education and general education professionals has moved to the forefront of crucial skills for special educators (Carter et al., 2009). The language of the *21st*

Century Goals for Education further accentuated the importance of collaboration and extended to include society as a whole (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2019). According to Nevin et al. (2009), K-12 reform efforts of inclusion of students with disabilities in schools encouraged teacher educators to collaborate across disciplines. In order to prepare future teachers to meet the needs of a diverse student population, such collaboration is considered imperative. Unfortunately, many teacher preparation programs do not include explicit training on collaboration; resulting in minimal opportunities for joint, collective practice (Friend & Cook, 2013). Modeling conspicuous collaboration enables both general education and special education preservice teachers to recognize the symbiotic relationship that exists throughout the education enterprise. As educators connect with other professionals outside their respective disciplines, the core concepts and values of true collaboration and diversity can be realized.

Given the nature of higher education, college faculty experience professional isolation (Kariuki & Jarvis, 2017). Teacher educators must provide an emphasis on preparing general and special education personnel in collaborative ways, especially in places where their training has previously occurred separately (Nevin et al., 2009). While this collaboration may be present in some settings, Fogg (2006) insisted there was a need for collaboration over autonomy, noting that in particular, junior faculty preferred opportunities to collaborate with senior faculty.

Teacher educators can make collaborative efforts conspicuous to those they teach so they can internalize the importance of collaboration and embrace collaboration in their own settings. Modeling collaboration is an important component of the process (Nevin et al., 2009) and is a key element in conspicuous collaboration. The benefits of organizational collaboration include improved efficiency, effectiveness, increased instructor confidence, acquisition of new teaching methods, and enhanced student learning (Burns & Mintzberg, 2019). Articulating learning objectives for their courses enables collaborators to plan more effectively (Shibley, 2009). Additional reasons to

collaborate include increasing productivity, maximizing resources, improving teaching and research, maintaining motivation, and encouraging creativity and risk taking (Creamer, 2003). Furthermore, when higher education faculty members model methods of collaboration in higher education, they allow preservice teachers to benefit from their experiences and expertise and afford a real life example of what the preservice teachers may have only read about in textbooks. Using joint planning, co-taught lectures, group activities and discussions, and shared responses to student questions, faculty members can present different theoretical perspectives to students (Artesani et al., 1998). Instructors also benefit from collaboration as they share a sense of responsibility for each other, plan high-quality course content in advance, and maximize resources with two instructors being better than one (Minett-Smith & Davis, 2019). When a teacher educator connects with a colleague outside their discipline, there is an opportunity for them to complement each other's strengths and overcome limitations in their individual knowledge or experience.

Barriers to Collaboration in Higher Education

According to Bennett and Fisch (2013), the lack of preservice teacher training in collaboration is partially due to the segregation of general education preservice teacher candidates and special education teacher candidates in the higher education setting. Jorgenson et al. (2011) cited challenges for collaborative teaching in higher education including transportation, technology access, financial compensation, support personnel roles, and university policies. All of these obstacles must be addressed before beginning collaboration so as to not disrupt the collaborative process. Lester and Evans (2009) reported that lack of team teaching in higher education may be due to traditions, insufficient time, a dearth of creativity, and the often-held perception that teaching should be an isolated activity.

Modeling Conspicuous Collaboration in Higher Education

Effective collaboration with a variety of partners is essential for all teachers, especially in rural areas. One powerful way to instill this understanding is for

teacher educators to model effective collaboration at all levels of the teaching profession. Given the need for conspicuous collaboration in higher education, we collaborated in courses at both the graduate and undergraduate levels to prepare qualified rural education teachers. Each of us incorporated collaborative concepts and practices and selected activities and assignments that highlighted collaborative practices. Our collaboration occurred on various projects and during mutual class periods but did not occur during all class sessions or lessons.

We made overt efforts to implement and assess the use of conspicuous collaboration to help students to value, identify, and understand the collaborative process. To ensure that conspicuous collaboration was implemented with fidelity, we co-planned the collaborative projects, co-taught some aspects of them, co-evaluated the resulting student products, and co-reflected on the instructional process to determine if our collaborative and course goals were met. In addition, all collaborative projects included student assessment and a range of ways of soliciting student feedback on the collaborative process (e.g., exit tickets, open-ended assessment questions, class discussions). The following sections describe the conspicuous collaboration strategies we utilized in the teacher preparation program located in a rural region of the southeastern United States.

Collaborative Assignments and Class Sessions

Shadowing/Assessment Project

One conspicuous collaboration project with which we engaged was designed to make our collaborative efforts conspicuous to those we were teaching so they could internalize the importance of collaboration and embrace collaboration in their future classroom settings. One facet of this project was oriented to general elementary education majors and another to special education majors. We modeled collaboration during general education and special education graduate classes to a cohort of students in a conspicuous, overt, and intentional way. We designed the project to support the requirements of two graduate courses and we made explicit connections between coursework and assignments in the two courses with members of

both courses completing the same assignments and assuming comparable responsibilities. This effort modeled conspicuous collaboration while concomitantly providing quality instruction in each class. The authentic learning of conspicuous collaboration processes was accentuated our commitment to help students make connections between the two graduate courses.

Our conspicuous collaborative project met the objectives for both graduate courses (TCHR 6030: Literacy Development in the Content Area Classroom and SPED 6000: Exceptional Children in the Regular Classroom). The focus in TCHR 6030 was determining the learner's approximate general reading level and motivation to learn as well as their ability to use specialized skills/abilities to process materials in a particular content area. The SPED 6000 course emphasized observing a student with a disability and comparing that student's actions, activities, and expectations against those of their peers. Students enrolled in SPED 6000 took part in a shadowing experience in a rural K-12 school and conducted an assessment component for TCHR 6030 to address areas of interest for reading and learning, define general reading levels in comprehension and recognition, identify motivation to use reading for content learning, and conduct a writing inventory. Students were required to work in partner groups and write an overall report, including an overall description of shadowing in the rural K-12 school, how technology was used to collect information, the use of assessment instruments and the resulting data, and a reflection about the collaborative experience. Each partner group made a class presentation to a combined class session to share their experiences and the knowledge they gained. We required groups to incorporate the use of technology, such as VoiceThread, Prezi, and/or the Smartboard. We evaluated the partner groups using the same rubric.

Based on assessment feedback received from students, we noted that the general education preservice teachers commented more often on learning more differentiated instructional strategies for individual learners. Conversely, the special education preservice teachers remarked that they gained knowledge about instructional approaches

for large class sizes involving diverse student populations.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Lesson Plan

Masters of Arts in Teaching graduate students, who were not special education majors, were simultaneously enrolled in two graduate courses. We are higher education faculty members, one of us an elementary education instructor and the other a special education instructor. We modeled conspicuous collaboration and critical aspects of teaching beneficial to K-12 rural school settings. We tasked our graduate students with creating a lesson plan for the content area and grade level they planned to teach incorporating Universal Design for Learning (UDL) accommodations in TCHR 6030. We required our students to then extend that lesson plan to provide modified instructional activities for specific students identified previously through a case study assignment. Working within the SPED 6000 course, the preservice graduate students wrote justifications for accommodations and modifications along with reflections on the redesigned plan. Project deliverables included an original lesson plan, a completed UDL checklist, a redesigned lesson plan (with changes noted in red type), and a reflection paper.

We concluded that the redesigned lesson plans were better suited to meet the individual needs of a class of students diverse in strengths, challenges, and exceptionalities. In addition, those we were teaching benefited from this conspicuous collaboration project by being able to make explicit connections between what they were learning in their special education and their general education courses.

Shared class meetings

We held three combined class sessions of TCHR 6030 and SPED 6000 students during regularly scheduled class times. The first combined session featured introductions of ourselves and the students and an overview of the collaborative projects. During the second combined session, our students presented their work on the *Shadowing/Assessment Project* and submitted the accompanying documents. The third and final

combined class session focused on using a variety of strategies to develop literacy in inclusive classrooms.

The modeling of conspicuous collaboration was a primary outcome of the three shared class meetings. This occurred through co-planning, co-teaching, preservice teacher involvement, co-evaluating, and co-reflecting. Anecdotal comments by students included positive reactions to having two professors engaged in purposeful learning in the same classroom and benefiting from our unique expertise.

21st Century Classroom Design

Working a semester in advance, we completed collaborative planning about 21st century classroom design for inclusion in two undergraduate courses. The syllabi for both classes (ELEM 4300: Classroom Organization and Management in Elementary School and SPED 3004: Managing the Learning Environment) reflected the general education–special education collaborative project, which focused on demonstrating implementation and knowledge of 21st century skills on classroom design using free classroom design software. (See <http://classroom.4teachers.org>).

Throughout the semester, we modeled conspicuous collaboration. During the first class session, we attended both classes, introduced ourselves to the students, and discussed the collaboration that would occur between us and the general education and special education preservice teachers. Two class sessions later in the semester, we co-created and co-presented the same PowerPoint presentation on 21st century classroom design (which highlighted 21st century skills), critiqued sample classrooms and taught the preservice teachers how to use the free classroom design software.

All students in both courses incorporated their 21st century classroom design into their classroom management plans. All were required to attend one of three meetings scheduled during the last class session and the final examination sections. Once they arrived at the combined class session, we randomly assigned a special education student to work with a pair of general education students. Each

group of three students reviewed each other's 21st century classroom designs and discussed similarities and differences in the proposed designs. After that review, we presented each group of three with three case studies about students with exceptionalities who would be included in a hypothetical elementary classroom. The group of three was charged with redesigning their classrooms to accommodate all three case study students with exceptionalities, using predetermined grade levels and physical constraints (e.g., room shape, room furniture, etc.). Using the software we discussed above, one person in the team then created a 21st century classroom design based on the components of the case study. Each team summarized the key assignment elements, reflected on the collaborative process, and discussed their experience during the culminating portion of the class.

We noted the resulting classroom layouts and furniture were well designed to meet the needs of a large class of students and the needs of students with exceptionalities, including those with physical, academic, and emotional disabilities. Both general education and special education preservice teachers benefited from working in teams as they strived to design one classroom that met both the expectations of all the team members and the academic and social needs of all students in the class. This necessitated the sharing of team members' differing expertise, cumulative course knowledge, and divergent internship and practicum experiences.

Successes and Challenges of Demonstrating Collaboration

We observed numerous successes that resulted from both the undergraduate and graduate conspicuous collaboration experiences. We observed preservice teachers gaining skills and appreciation for one another and their respective areas of the teaching profession. Based on the two collaborative projects (Shadowing/ Assessment and Universal Design for Learning lesson plan), the graduate students in both classes were able to demonstrate their collective skills in selecting and adjusting techniques based on individual learners.

The undergraduate juniors in the special education course listened to the elementary education undergraduate seniors who had more realistic visions and ideas due to their previous internship experiences. In contrast, the undergraduate seniors benefited from the undergraduate juniors' knowledge about special education differentiation techniques, disabilities expertise, and relationship to their surroundings. Special education and general education preservice teacher pairs collaborated to develop classroom management plans. We observed certain elements of the classroom management plans that were improved as a result of the collaboration (e.g., classroom layouts that worked well for large class sizes, group work, and students with wheelchairs; classroom management techniques that took into consideration the individual needs of students as well as the class as a whole). The subsequent class discussions were reflective and rich, and the preservice teachers were able to experience what co-planning and collaboration in the classroom would be like. Weiss et al. (2017) emphasized that preservice teachers benefit from opportunities to learn with other education professionals to plan and deliver instruction.

While the benefits of conspicuous collaboration overshadowed the challenges, we had to overcome some obstacles. As reported by other higher education collaborators and teachers, we were challenged to ensure the content was truly relevant to both courses (Artesani et al., 1998). In our case, students in both courses learned about classroom management; however, the elementary candidates were seniors who had begun their internship experience. They had an additional year of coursework and classroom experience but less coursework in special education. The special education candidates were juniors with fewer content instruction courses who were also working in a practicum setting with fewer rural K-12 contact hours and less consistency in their schedules. We capitalized on the varied background knowledge of the two groups. The elementary education students focused on content area instruction and classroom practices while the special education students focused on differentiating instruction for learners with exceptionalities. Therefore, we had to present

course content in a developmentally appropriate sequence for both groups of students.

During the graduate collaboration project, the same students enrolled in both classes at the same time. Coupled with other class responsibilities, graduate students needed to combine skills and expertise from two separate courses with different goals and learning activities. The expectations of integrating skills in such a quick manner may have been ambitious considering the fast timeline of a five-week summer session.

Tips for Collaboration in Higher Education

When presenting conspicuous collaboration to preservice and in-service teachers in higher education, we suggest it may be helpful to be mindful of the following tips. Graziano and Navarrete (2012) stated that co-instructors in institutions of higher education should be flexible in their teaching approaches, accountable and respectful of their collaborative partner, and responsive to needs for time to co-plan and debrief. In this case, we co-planned all aspects of process as well as the evaluation of the conspicuous collaboration approach. We developed an initial overview of the conspicuous collaboration courses and projects, accompanied with a timeline, and agreed upon meeting dates. Our co-planning occurred prior to the start of the course (e.g., syllabi development), throughout the course (e.g., co-planning co-taught class sessions, co-evaluating projects), and after the course ended (e.g., co-reflecting on student outcomes and the process of conspicuous collaboration). We had similar philosophies on classroom management and gained additional instructional strategies by implementing approaches used by each other (e.g., learning stations, cooperative learning techniques). We routinely analyzed our collaborative experiences throughout the process during scheduled meetings. We debriefed and reflected upon each step using a Plus/Delta method to determine what was working well (e.g., assignments were organized and collaborative structures were implemented with fidelity) and what could be changed or improved (e.g., more time could be allowed for class-wide sharing of collaborative partner projects).

In general, co-instructors need to recognize each person's unique expertise and deliver instruction and use assessment methods that will benefit students. Describing strategies for successful collaborative teaching in higher education, Jorgensen et al. (2011) indicated the need to involve people with a disability who have expertise in the topic being taught, co-plan and co-teach to build joint ownership, and model and provide natural supports to each collaborative partner. Essential elements of collaboration at the postsecondary level, according to Lester and Evans (2009), include the need for extra planning and reflection, strong communication skills, and the ability to embrace diversity and differences of opinion. For this project, we saw the value in co-planning and co-teaching, and we felt ownership in the courses and with all groups of students. We were committed to maintaining open and on-going communication regarding both our collaboration and the student-to-student collaboration. We facilitated communication via scheduled meetings, emails, and phone calls. We learned from each other's varied expertise and experiences, which stemmed from our having differing teaching specialties (i.e., elementary education and special education), teaching experiences (i.e., teaching in different states and at different K-12 levels), and different approaches to teaching in higher education (i.e., cooperative learning arrangements, varied components of assignments). In addition, we served as rich resources for each other and often collaborated to problem solve student dilemmas (e.g., answer student questions, help students think through their projects). While our collaborative process at the higher education level took more time for planning, evaluating, and debriefing, the resulting student growth and high quality student products proved to be well worth the time commitment.

Strategies to facilitate effective collaboration highlight the need to clarify roles and responsibilities, discuss expectations, and schedule activities. Strategies should provide ongoing communication, joint planning time, co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing (Murawski & Ricci, 2019). At the conclusion of our higher education faculty collaboration project, we each wrote a

reflection on the process and debriefed together. After considering suggestions for other higher educators who may want to attempt some collaboration, we concur with the list of guidelines from Devlin-Schere and Sardone (2013): collaborate with a person whom you respect but who is slightly different from yourself; remain confident in your abilities; assess your strengths and challenges; remain open to suggestions and do not be defensive; and be cautious about changing the dynamics of the collaborative relationship by adding or deleting others from the mix. For this project, we respected each other's expertise and philosophies but also appreciated our differences in teaching approaches and varied experiences. This respect was important especially during the regularly scheduled debriefing meetings in which we discussed the strengths and challenges of the collaboration. Our modeling of conspicuous collaboration for preservice teachers occurred at both the undergraduate level and graduate level in elementary and special education courses in multiple semesters. It was helpful that we were able to maintain our collaborative endeavor for all projects and we improved our approaches to communication, workflow, and ideology throughout the duration.

Tips for Translating Conspicuous Collaboration in Higher Education to Collaborating in Rural K-12 Schools

Co-teaching is a research-based collaborative strategy, which is effective for educating students with exceptionalities in the inclusive classroom (Friend & Bursuck, 2019). Collaboration among general education teachers and special education teachers is best begun in the teacher education setting in order to better understand and implement essential skills for teachers. Managing classrooms effectively, analyzing data, and completing diagnostic testing are all parts of the teaching cycle and should be modeled by instructors (Brinkmann & Twiford, 2012). The most effective elements of collaboration are sharing leadership in the classroom, planning together for co-taught instruction, developing a respectful and trusting relationship, and communicating honestly with each other (Bacharach et al., 2011). Bacharach et al.

(2011) acknowledged that effective collaboration required the need for support and training in the university, handling interruptions without stopping the class, and planning specifically rather than generally. They emphasized the essential nature of communication for successful collaboration between co-teachers, the relationship of the co-teachers, classroom applications, and the teachers' knowledge base. Conspicuous collaboration at the postsecondary level can lead to successful, intentional collaboration at the K-12 level.

Benefits of collaboration and co-teaching in rural schools include increased teacher confidence, shared responsibility for student learning, decreased pupil-teacher ratios, students with disabilities having more direct instructional time, and increased support for students without disabilities as well, all of which leads to academic success (Strogilos & King-Sears, 2018). While the special education teacher has expertise in how to deliver instruction to meet the academic and social/emotional needs of the learner with exceptionalities, the general education teacher identifies priorities and generates solutions (Pugach et al., 2012). When general and special education teachers use collaborative problem solving, they are able to access more resources and facilitate greater professional collegiality, resulting in strategies that benefit learners and meet the unique challenges of rural educational systems (Pugach et. al, 2012). In addition to general and special educators co-teaching in rural areas, collaborating with paraprofessionals in educational programs leads to improved outcomes for students and increased job satisfaction for teachers (Webster & DeBoer, 2019).

Skills important for collaboration and co-teaching, according to Brinkmann and Twiford (2012), include classroom management, collaborative lesson planning, communication, data collection, interpersonal skills, differentiation of instruction, and self-advocacy. Skills identified for successful collaboration and co-teaching in a general education field setting are interpersonal communication, physical arrangement of the classroom, familiarity with the instructional content, instructional presentation, classroom management, instructional planning, curriculum goals,

modifications and accommodations, and assessment (Bennett & Fisch, 2013). Skills that an educational collaborator must master, according to Graziano and Navarrete (2012), include understanding the teaching approach of one's collaborative partner; clarifying teacher roles, responsibilities, and expectations; scheduling shared planning time; utilizing effective communication; and using a professional learning community to provide flexibility for collaborative thematic and interdisciplinary units. Implementing conspicuous collaboration in the teacher preparation program may help to prepare individuals to collaborate and co-teach in rural school settings. Our conspicuous collaboration activities included a focus on collaborative class management and instructional planning, differentiated instruction and assessment, and communication and interpersonal skills.

Conclusion

Faculty members working in teacher education should embrace the concept and practice of conspicuous collaboration. Experiencing the collaboration modeled by instructors can enable both general education and special education preservice educators to recognize the symbiotic relationship that can exist throughout the education enterprise. "Teacher preparation programs need to build these understandings through authentic practice opportunities so that preservice teachers then have a conceptual foundation upon which to develop their skills in schools" (Weiss et al., 2017, p. 75). If their instructors utilize collaborative practices, preservice teacher candidates may embrace collaborative practices as they move to assuming the role of inservice teachers, effectively helping the increasingly diverse population of students in rural schools to achieve academic and social success.

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About the Authors

Karen S. Voytecki, PhD, is an associate professor of special education at East Carolina University. Her research interests include utilizing technology for teacher preparation, co-teaching in higher education, inclusive education, and classroom management. Dr. Voytecki received the Clarissa Hug International Teacher of the Year award from the Council for Exceptional Children. voyteckik@ecu.edu

Patricia (Tricia) Anderson, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Elementary and Middle Grades Education. She began her career at East Carolina University in 1982, after earning her degrees from Delta State University and University of Georgia. Dr. Anderson promotes shared governance efforts in a variety of ways, serving previously as both Chair and Vice-Chair of the Faculty for the university, Parliamentarian for the Faculty Senate for 11 years, and most recently leading the successful approval of the proposed College of Education Code of Operations. Dr. Anderson served for three years as Chair of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction; she has received teaching and Scholar-Teacher awards. Her leadership roles on campus have included planning Centennial Celebrations over a ten-year period, leading revisions to the *ECU Faculty Manual*, and serving on a wide variety of university-level task forces and committees. Tricia's academic expertise is in classroom management for elementary education, the use of flexible seating, and listening skills used in elementary classrooms. andersonp@ecu.edu