

Teacher Education Curriculum Reform in Cambodia: Perspectives, Practices, and Challenges

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Abstract: Over the past four decades, the Global Education Reform Movement has emphasized the evaluation and improvement of teacher education programs. Worldwide, concerns about unqualified teachers have prompted Cambodia to initiate teacher reforms. This qualitative case study examines educators' perspectives, practices, and challenges in teacher education curriculum reform, distinguishing between "teacher training" and "teacher education" within Cambodian teacher education colleges. The findings indicate that the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport decided to provide the teacher education system more flexibility and autonomy as a higher education institution in governance and management, curriculum structure, teacher educators' qualifications, professional status and responsibility, and functional allowance. Additionally, in the context of institutional change, educators conceptualized a clear distinction: "education" refers to learning activities that contribute to human development, whereas "training" focuses on practical teaching skills in the classroom. The study revealed that implementing reforms brought about opportunities and challenges, as demonstrated by varying evidence of autonomous leadership and management, curriculum development, interpretation, implementation, assessment, and improvement of curricula and syllabi. However, teacher educators' mindsets, knowledge, and skills in the pedagogy of the field and fear new practices remain challenges, and the top-down approach still has influence. This study provides insight into the observations that middle leaders are linchpins of curriculum reform and teacher educators, as curriculum implementers, require a mindset change.

Key words: Cambodia, curriculum reform, institutional change, teacher education, teacher training

1. Introduction

1) Background of the study

Over the past four decades, the Global Education Reform Movement has increasingly embraced globalization and neoliberal ideologies of higher education, redefining education, training, and teacher education quality (Sahlberg, 2012; Teng et al., 2020; Zajda, 2020). Teacher education is a crucial policy issue. The goal is to identify the specific factors that policymakers may prioritize to improve teacher quality and, consequently, achieve favorable results in schools (Cochran-Smith, 2023). Lynch (2014) argued that curriculum reform necessitates the active involvement of individual teachers, schools, and policy makers, educators in teacher education, and professional development organizations.

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For instance, Singapore's education transitioned from teacher training to teacher education as the "universitization of teacher education," signifying a change from focusing solely on classroom management and content delivery to incorporating content mastery with high academic credibility and professionalism. Thus, the National Institute of Education was upgraded as part of the Nanyang Technological University in 1991 (Nazeer-Ikeda & Gopinathan, 2022, p.24).

In Cambodia particularly, teacher reform was launched in response to global recognition and concern over the significant effects of having unqualified teachers (No & Heng, 2017). This initiated a move from various teacher training systems that had changed ad hoc over Cambodia's post-conflict rebuilding period from 1979 to lead to the establishment of teacher education in 2017, which formalized professional qualifications for teachers as bachelor's degree ('12+4': 12 years of high school education plus four years of higher education) for primary and secondary school teachers by upgrading 12+2 training programs (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport [MoEYS], 2017; Royal Government of Cambodia [RGC], 2022a, 2022b). MoEYS implemented teacher-education policy reforms in two phases. In the first phase, MoEYS began forming a teacher policy in 2013, an education strategic plan (2014–18), and professional standards for teachers (second revision: January 2016) (MoEYS, 2013a, 2013b, 2016b). In the second phase, MoEYS set teacher education provider standards (December 2016), established teacher education colleges (TECs) (May 2017) and a curriculum framework (December 2017), and started programs (primary and lower secondary education) in 2018. Additionally, the reasons for the shift from teacher training to teacher education were: (1) lack of vision, mission, and goals; (2) non-autonomous governance and management; (3) shortage of educational staff; (4) overload of the training curriculum; (5) insufficient student services; (6) inadequate learning resources; (7) insufficient infrastructure; (8) insufficient financial resources; and (9) lack of internal quality assurance (Chhinh et al., 2016). Among the nine main challenges of teacher training centers, MoEYS set the reform teacher education curriculum and teaching methodologies as priorities in teacher education reform and national education strategic plans. Cambodian teacher education curriculum reforms aim to build and enhance highly skilled and ethical human resources and foster a knowledge-based society by moving from teacher training to teacher education (Hang-Chuon, 2018; MoEYS, 2017). However, implementing the Cambodian teacher education curriculum reform in the context of institutional change requires more attention and discussion.

2) Purpose and research questions

This study examines educators' perspectives, practices, and challenges in implementing teacher education curriculum reform, distinguishing between "teacher training" and "teacher education" in the context of the establishment of teacher education colleges for the Bachelor of Education (12 + 4). To address this purpose, the following questions were asked:

1. How do educators conceptualize the teacher education curriculum from "training" to "education" ?
2. How do educators practice teacher education curricula in the context of institutional change?
3. What challenges do educators face in the teacher education curricula?

2. Literature review

1) Teacher education curriculum reform

According to Moreno (2006, p. 195), the curriculum is "a socio-historical construct that translates knowledge hierarchy and classification into regulations, academic standards, textbooks, teaching aids, and practices in classrooms and schools". There are four approaches to teacher education curriculum reform. (1) Discipline-based curriculum design typically follows a top-down approach, establishing knowledge within a specific subject area while heavily relying on textbooks and established bodies of knowledge (Young, 1998). (2) Practice-based theory emphasizes the connection between theoretical knowledge and real-world applications, and learning experiences often involve school-based settings in

which students can test and refine their understanding (Flores, 2016). (3) A competency-based approach focuses on developing skills necessary for successful teaching practice. Predefined teaching standards are used to design the curriculum to ensure that graduates possess the competencies needed in the classroom (Cochran-Smith & Demers, 2008). (4) Research-based teacher education encourages critical reflection and engagement in educational research. The goal is to develop teachers who can analyze and choose effective instructional practices based on research findings (Cochran-Smith & Demers, 2008; Krokfors et al., 2011). For instance, Bouckaert and Kools's (2017) study in the Netherlands on teacher education curriculum development and implementation examined the relationship between theory and practice (using a questionnaire survey with 75 participants); teacher educators work as curriculum developers, and teaching advisors join national networks and write coursebooks. Another study in Ireland by Walsh et al. (2022) explored standard-based practices in the teacher education curriculum (14 teacher educators, semi-structured interviews), and teacher educators needed to talk and share their experiences and document use. However, Taguma and Barrera (2019) revealed that the alignment between pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment is rarely coherent or even connected. Moreover, they suggested that the new policy implementation of teacher education curriculum reform poses challenges for implementers (Taguma & Barrera, 2019).

2) Perspectives of teacher educators on “training” and “education”

Owing to variations in language and context, there is a distinction between “teacher training” and “teacher education” (Asif, 2013). The term “training,” whether pre-service or in-service training, often emphasizes practical classroom skills, such as using new technology. By contrast, “education” encompasses a broader range of knowledge, child development, curriculum design, and effective teaching methods (Asif, 2013).

As stated above, training implies a limited focus on skills and neglects ongoing learning, which is crucial for effective educators. While practical skills are essential, teacher education programs should go beyond “training.” By encompassing both theory and practice, these programs equip future teachers with knowledge and adaptability to thrive in diverse classrooms. “Teacher education” carries a more comprehensive meaning than “training.” This suggests a continuous process of development that fosters skills, critical thinking, and pedagogical understanding (Asif, 2013; Mulenga, 2020; Stephens et al., 2004). “Teacher education” in many countries accurately reflects the multifaceted nature of preparing effective educators and their knowledge of theoretical perspectives on education (Mulenga, 2020; Nazeer-Ikeda & Gopinathan, 2022; Stephens et al., 2004). Thus, it does not seem logical to use these two phrases interchangeably, because of their various methods of conceptualization and contextualization.

Given that this study focuses on exploring teacher educators' perceptions of teacher education curriculum reform as they implement curriculum change, a particular interest is in examining the change from “teacher training” to “teacher education.”

3. Context of teacher education institutional change

1) Governance and management

Battambang and Phnom Penh's teacher education colleges were upgraded from the two teacher training centers. The RGC has recognized teacher education colleges as higher education institutions (RGC, 2022a, 2022b), with the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia recognizing them for a five-year period. These institutes are divided into three faculties: the Faculty of Science Education, the Faculty of Social Sciences, and the Faculty of Pedagogy and Research. These include governing boards, academic councils, and deputy directors. Teacher training centers are still directly under the Teacher Training Department (TTD) of MoEYS, with each institution having a director, deputy directors, academic office, administrative office, and application school.

2) System and teacher education curriculum framework

Teacher training centers are divided into regional and provincial centers that offer lower secondary and primary education programs, respectively. Both types of centers follow a 12+2 system, with student teachers selecting two specialized subjects (e.g., mathematics and physics) for lower secondary education. This compares with TECs, where, after four years of education, student teachers earn a bachelor's degree in education specializing in teaching a specific subject. The primary education system has the same duration as lower secondary education but culminates in a bachelor's degree in primary education and follows teacher professional standards and student-teacher education competencies (MoEYS, 2016b, 2017).

3) Curriculum structure

The length and curriculum structure of teacher training and education differ within the teacher training structure. The curriculum structure of provincial teacher training centers (PTTCs) had a total of 2726 hours of training in five domains: professional skills, basic education training, major-related knowledge, and teaching methodology (1209 hours), practicum (552 hours), and pedagogical research (16 hours). According to quantitative data, the estimated number of credits is more than 153 (Chhinh et al., 2016). The curriculum structure of a teacher education college has 140 credits, including education studies (16 credits), academic subjects (55 credits), curriculum studies (12 or 24 credits), academic discourse skills (14 or 2 credits), essential courses (15 credits), research courses (6 credits), and practicums (22 credits) (MoEYS, 2017).

According to quantitative data, the curriculum structure of Regional Teacher Training Centers (RTTCs) had a total of 2830 hours of teaching over two years, split between academic subjects and teaching methodology (801 hours), practicum (552 hours), and pedagogical research (16 hours). The estimated number of credits is more than 155 (Chhinh et al., 2016). Based on the curriculum structure of the TEC, there are 140 credits: education studies (16 credits), academic subjects (55 credits), curriculum studies (12 or 24 credits), academic discourse skills (14 or 2 credits), essential courses (15 credits), research courses (6 credits), and practicums (22 credits) (MoEYS, 2017).

The qualitative data revealed that TECs equip themselves with action research, academic discourse skills, and a four-year practicum encompassing various definitions, such as school experience, assistantship, teaching practice 1, and teaching practice 2. Additionally, the lower secondary programs of TECs include multicultural studies and career counseling (MoEYS, 2017).

4) Teacher educators' qualifications, professional status, and responsibilities

Teacher educators who teach student teachers in 12+4 programs must hold at least a master's degree in a specialized subject or a PhD. They are assistant lecturers, associate lecturers, lecturers, assistant professors, associate professors, and professors. The expected teaching load is 12 h/week. Additionally, according to teacher educators' professional standards, they play the role of program developers (MoEYS, 2022).

Teacher educators in 12+2 programs at RTTCs and PTTCs can hold bachelor's degrees, with a weekly teaching load of 14 and 16 hours, respectively; they are higher education teachers and play the role of program implementers (MoEYS, 2023, RGC, 2023).

5) Functional allowance

According to RGC and MoEYS legislation (RGC, 2023), teacher educators from TTCs and TECs have different functional allowances because of their roles. For instance, teacher educators at TTCs fulfill the role of higher education teachers and receive an additional functional allowance of 837 500 riels (\$204.37) to their basic salary. Depending on their status, teacher educators at TECs receive functional allowances. For example, assistant lecturer: 837 500 riels (\$204.37); associate lecturer: 857 500 riels (\$209.25); lecturer: 900 000 riels (\$219.75); assistant professor: 940 000 riels (\$229.52); and associate professor: 980 000 riels (\$239.29) (RGC 2023).

As described above, it can be concluded that teacher education colleges changed from teacher training centers in terms of status, system, teacher education curriculum framework and structure, institutional structure, teacher educators' qualifications, and functional allowance. Moreover, teacher education colleges are undergoing institutional change based on political, historical, and sociocultural perspectives.

4. Research methodology

This study employed qualitative research, namely, the case study method (Yin, 2014). This method is appropriate for examining current occurrences beyond the limits of traditional historical research. The study utilized several types of data, including the curriculum framework for the Bachelor of Arts (education), reports from TECs, and in-depth interviews, to answer the research questions.

1) Participants

The participants were selected based on purposeful sampling, as outlined by Patton (2015). The total number of participants was thirteen - 2 vice deans, 2 heads, 1 vice head of the department, 6 teacher educators, and 2 directors working at both TECs, namely Battambang Teacher Education College (BTEC) and Phnom Penh Teacher Education College (PTEC). There were nine PTEC participants (female=3, male =6). The participants were two directors and seven teacher educators from different backgrounds, including a teacher educator at the National Institution of Education (NIE), three schoolteachers, a university teacher, a local organization staff member, and an educational inspector from the Provincial Office of Education, Youth, and Sport. Four participants were from BTEC (female=2, male=2). One was a former schoolteachers, two were PTTC trainers, and one was an RTTC trainer. All participants in this study were between 33 and 55 years of age, with 7-25 years of work experience. Eleven teacher educators have been lecturing on various subjects in primary and lower secondary education programs, including biology, chemistry, earth science, the Khmer language, physics, ICT, and mathematics. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, the pseudonym "P," denoting participants and directors, was assigned to each responder, along with a corresponding number.

2) Data collection

The interviews were conducted between January and March 2023 at two teacher education colleges: Battambang Teacher Education College and Phnom Penh Teacher Education College. Data were collected through a combination of in-depth interviews and document analysis. The semi-structured one-on-one interviews lasted for approximately one hour each. Before the primary interviews, pilot research was undertaken with former deputy directors who had previously worked at the RTTC. Their feedback resulted in the addition of new questions and adaptations to existing ones and contributed significant insights. As the focus of the study evolved, the interview questions were modified according to the principles outlined by Cohen et al. (2018).

Our research employed a thorough document analysis along with interviews to provide a deeper understanding of the research setting and situations. The method proposed by Yin (2014) entailed scrutinizing relevant resources released by MoEYS, such as the teacher education curriculum framework (MoEYS, 2017), TECs (BTEC, 2023; PTEC, 2024), and other relevant documents. Through analyzing these materials, we acquired a comprehensive overview of the area of interest.

3) Data analysis

This study used theme analysis, with a primary focus on the six phases of analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). As mentioned above, the researcher analyzed previous literature, TECs' reports, and other relevant documents as mentioned above based on the purpose and research questions. This investigation aimed to identify patterns in the differences between TTCs and TECs, as well as educators' perspectives, practices, and practical challenges. Initially, data gathered from

interviews and research articles were organized and classified, resulting in the development of 17 distinct codes that reflected various experiences. Following the process of re-coding from open coding, a comprehensive analysis revealed five subthemes related to educators' practices and three subthemes concerning problems. The three primary themes that emerged were "teacher educators' perspectives," "teacher educators' practice," and "challenges faced by teacher educators in practice." The analytical findings were further substantiated by a discussion with a colleague with specialized knowledge in the same subject field. The next section presents a thorough examination of the data and compares them with prior research.

This study was approved by the Graduate School Ethics Committee (no. 000980; May 22, 2023) for participant consent, data collection, and protection measures. It also informed administrators at teacher education colleges and participants about the study's purpose, sampling process, and data usage permissions, as well as securely stored transcripts with password-protected access.

5. Findings

1) Teacher educators' perspectives on the "training" to "education"

Based on the findings from the interview data, the researcher identified six groups of participants: teacher educators of former teacher training centers (lower secondary and primary education), NIE, schoolteachers, university teacher educators, and educational inspectors who conceptualized "teacher training" and "teacher education." Teacher educators have reported different views. One participant, a former teacher educator at the RTTC, said:

"[...] Teacher training and education are synonymous but depend on their level. In terms of training, I do not need to conduct any research if I understand the content of the textbooks [grades 7, 8, and 9]. My approach differs when it comes to teacher education colleges. I have continuously researched new teaching methods. For instance, I had to conduct one experiment in the first year, another in the second year, and continue until the third year. Therefore, I will continue to develop my professional abilities." (P5)

A former teacher educator at the PTTC said:

"When teaching at the Provincial Teacher Training Center, I often relied on traditional teaching methods and habits and neglected new methods. Now, through the TEC program, we provide various methods to student teachers but let them analyze which method is suitable for teaching according to the content." (P9)

One former high school teacher reported the following:

"Teacher Training develops the specific practical skills necessary for classroom expertise. Teacher education has broad meanings related to theory and practice. It provides learning activities such as learning, teaching, research, and approaches that contribute to human development." (P7)

A former teacher educator from the NIE said:

"In teacher training centers, most educators impart content knowledge and teaching methods to their student teachers, adhering to the official syllabus of MoEYS. In teacher education, teacher educators must continuously develop their capacity, such as through research and up-to-date teaching methodologies for student teachers and pupils, to have professional ethics and to be future competent teachers." (P3)

A former university teacher said,

"When I was at the university, the subjects I taught were only the foundations of mathematics. I did not share the knowledge I had acquired until my PhD. TEC differs from universities and other teacher-training centers that focus solely on pedagogical skills. In TEC, student teachers need to know many mathematical theories and practice them so that they can analyze and apply them in their teaching." (P13)

Another former educational inspector stated:

“During my tenure as an inspector, I frequently inspected schools and questioned why I lacked proficiency in teaching methods and basic knowledge. [...] The teaching of Teacher educators is not full-time because of the hours-based system. Teacher trainers primarily provide students with documents for reading. However, in teacher education colleges, student teachers receive regular and enhanced instructions. Teacher educators do not rely on traditional methods to teach students. They use theory-based practices more often, which is beneficial for becoming teachers.” (P8)

2) The practice of teacher educators on teacher education curriculum

Autonomous leadership and management in TECs. Interview and document data revealed that TEC leaders assumed responsibility for chairing decision-making in their respective TECs. Both TEC leaders handled all work per the official MoEYS nomination.

“TECs serve as internal organizers and handle all the work, followed by MoEYS-developed committee and consultative workshop. For example, institutes have to design, implement, evaluate, and improve syllabi beforehand.” (P1)

In addition to the interview data, the nomination letter of the TEC curriculum committee and subcommittee (MoEYS 2018) states that the directors of both TECs play roles as curriculum leaders within the main leading subcommittee for syllabus development. However, it remains top-down in nature and is not fully autonomous because it is supervised by MoEYS.

Syllabus development. The participants who were management team members reported that the teacher education college is a university-based teacher preparation program, and teacher educators bear significantly more responsibilities than both teachers and university teachers. They are autonomous and flexible in preparing, developing, and implementing the teaching profession. Moreover, the TEC management team delegates authority to middle leaders such as deans, department heads, and vice heads. One participant stated the following:

“We [the directors] empower the deputy directors in charge, dean department heads, and vice heads in directing the work of the faculty department and managing the faculty, especially in teaching, learning, and leading syllabus development.” (P1)

Curriculum interpretation and implementation. All participants recognized themselves as curriculum implementers, considering the development of syllabi a top priority in their day-to-day activities. They were responsible for developing the course syllabus and preparing lesson plans, worksheets, assessments, and tests. For example:

“Focusing on curriculum and teaching, teacher educators’ roles and responsibilities include preparing the syllabus, implementing the curriculum collaboratively, and preparing the subjects for student teachers’ evaluation, encompassing both the courses they have taught and the exams they will take.” (P1)

Assessment and improvement of TEC curriculum and syllabus. All the participants discussed the final summative course assessment and developed the main checkpoints for evaluation. At annual meetings, they updated and revised the curriculum and syllabus to meet student-teacher needs and improve teacher-education programs.

“According to the action plan of the teacher education college, all teacher educators are required to attend our annual meeting to review the curriculum syllabus and discuss ways to improve it this year. They are required to review the curriculum syllabi annually. We [the director] can conduct a review workshop to gather fundamental ideas for MoEYS policy. We must determine which subjects to include, how much credit they should receive, and how to expand our scope to include other subjects.” (P1)

Supporting novice teacher educators. According to the interview data, participants reported that they had a leadership role within their faculty and department, and they always shared curriculum knowledge and teaching methods with novice teacher educators with whom they did not have experience teaching adults, especially learning how to teach, teaching how to teach, and teaching

experiments. One middle leader reported the following:

“I worked at NIE for 18 years, and have been teaching at TEC for four years. I not only teach but also develop syllabi, teaching materials, student-teacher worksheets, and materials for conducting experiments. I assist new teacher educators in learning how to teach by providing hands-on experiences through co-teaching and lesson study.” (P3)

3) Challenges in the practice of educators on teacher education curriculum

Mindset that cannot be autonomous. Although the teacher educators interviewed were pleased with the additional autonomy, they were not ready to do so because they hesitated to engage in new curriculum development and syllabus content responsibilities. They questioned the absence of a prescribed teacher education curriculum framework and course books. In addition, the participants expressed concerns that assuming responsibility for content creation would not be acknowledged by higher authorities, potentially resulting in them being held accountable if they failed to satisfy the established criteria.

One participant stated the following:

“I want MoEYS to develop syllabi and produce coursebooks for teacher educators and student teachers; I believe I could follow these effectively.” (P4)

Another participant said the following:

“Now, teacher education institutions have transformed from “teacher training” to “teacher education. “Teacher educators must ensure that instruction is based on the curriculum. They improved the syllabus content and contributed to its revision. Teacher educators are also responsible for supervising student teachers in conducting action research, and they conduct research as a team.” (P2)

Insufficient knowledge and skills in the pedagogy of teacher education. Based on the novice participants’ statements, the lack of a prescribed coursebook, textual materials, and teaching methods in syllabi presents challenges for teacher educators in adult teaching. Hierarchical pressures, particularly in Cambodia’s TEC institutions, make it difficult to produce materials and assessments that align with the expectations of senior leaders.

“My knowledge and skills with effective teaching methods were insufficient. I recognized that teaching high school students was easier than teaching student teachers.” (P11)

Fear a new practice. Participants who were schoolteachers, former RTTC and PTTC, and a former educational inspector revealed that a common challenge in practice was fear new practices. They reported that teaching methods, assessments, and objectives did not adequately meet the needs of student teachers in the 4-year education. They felt they did not have experience developing the syllabus and content because they were familiar with the prescriptions developed by MoEYS.

“I cannot guarantee that the quality of my knowledge will fully educate student teachers. For example, teaching methods, assessments, and objectives do not adequately meet the needs of student teachers during their practicum or when they begin their teaching careers.” (P8)

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aims to examine educators’ perspectives, practices, and challenges in teacher education curriculum reform, which transformed from “teacher training” into “teacher education” in the context of the establishment of teacher education colleges for Bachelor of Education (12+4) to respond to higher education reform, globalization, and neoliberal ideologies (No & Heng, 2017; Sahlberg, 2012; Teng et al., 2020; Zajda, 2020). The results revealed that teacher educators’ perspectives distinguish between “teacher training” and “teacher education,” as concluded in previous reports by Asif (2013), Mulenga (2020), and Stephens et al. (2004). In the Cambodian context, teacher training focuses on comprehending and proficiently instructing textbooks (grades 1–9) and typically follows a top-down approach. It establishes knowledge within a specific subject and prescribed curriculum framework (MoEYS, 2016a), and how to teach it well to become a skilled practitioner. In this scenario, teacher

educators may choose not to participate actively in research initiatives and instead focus on teaching-specific practical skills based on their expertise. Conversely, teacher education encompasses syllabus development linked to current teaching methods and the cultivation of expertise and skills through autonomous teaching and continuous research. In addition, TEC educators frequently employ theory-based practices instead of traditional strategies to cultivate future teachers' professional competence. Educators' practices in the teacher education curriculum are autonomous in curriculum and syllabus development, practice, assessment, and improvement. It can be concluded that directors act as curriculum leaders in institutional change, and middle leaders such as faculty and department heads take the lead in developing and implementing syllabi. Teacher educators were considered the backbone of the education system; they developed and put syllabi into practice. MoEYS plays a critical role by delegating responsibilities and granting autonomy for curriculum matters. However, educators still face challenges, such as a mindset that they are not ready to be autonomous, insufficient knowledge and skills, and fear that a new practice could be solved.

This study contributes to teacher educators who are practitioners of curriculum reform and need high qualifications, pedagogy of teacher education, curriculum knowledge, and research. Moreover, they require a mindset change to clearly understand the teacher education process by coaching and supporting middle leaders. The middle leaders (deans and department heads) were identified as the "linchpin" for teacher education curriculum reform. MoEYS should provide TECs more flexibility and autonomy in their academic processes and management, thus strengthening their role as higher education institutions. However, the top-down approach still influenced the teacher education curriculum reform (separate but controlled). Although teacher educators have implemented curriculum reform in detail, further research should explore the professional development of teacher educators to address the challenges in their work.

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