


Chapter 7

Embodied Equity: Integrating Movement in a Teacher Education Practicum for Diverse Learners

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ABSTRACT

The state of education in the US is currently undergoing a transition. The prevailing inclination towards standardized approaches in education continues to produce inequities in learner outcomes that are challenging teacher preparation programs to rethink their practices. Education’s “wicked equity problem” results from inequities in school funding, access to quality education opportunities, and equitable resources for diverse and marginalized learners. This chapter describes a teacher education practicum integrating findings from neuroscience that evidence movement as an accessible, inclusive neurodevelopmental lever and pathway for diverse learners to thrive. The authors assert embedding embodied practices in teacher preparation programs have the potential to dismantle systemic barriers to equitable learning opportunities while developing strong equity stances in teacher candidates.

INTRODUCTION

“Becoming an effective teacher requires more than developing socio-political awareness and teaching skills, and understanding how children learn and develop. Moving from theory to practice also requires the courage to create schools that look very different from those we have now” (Kugelmass, 2000, p.193).

The state of education in the United States is currently undergoing a significant transition. The prevailing inclination towards standardized, uniform methodologies in education that has persisted for a century is being supplanted by a mindset characterized by entrepreneurialism, school choice expansion

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and personalized approaches. There is a growing recognition among the public that a singular, universally optimal method for educating diverse learners is non-existent. As a result, both families and educators are increasingly embracing alternative methods to education encompassing a wide spectrum of approaches. Teachers are one group of educators leading the way in this dynamic shift, as an increasing number of them are departing from traditional roles to establish innovative and distinct schools. These include microschoools, hybrid schools, cooperatives, and various other alternative approaches.

These pioneering educators are a relatively small and emboldened constituency who often face an uphill battle. Much larger numbers of teachers are choosing to leave the profession entirely. Traditional teacher education preparation programs report a decline in people enrolling with many would be PK12 educators citing low salaries and poor working conditions as reasons for not entering the profession despite having a love or passion for teaching (Irwin et al., 2023). Local school districts nationwide face high vacancy rates with special education teacher positions being the most difficult to fill, along with positions at Title 1 schools (Irwin et al., 2023; Knox, 2022). Over an eight year period from 2012 to 2020, people completing traditional teacher preparation programs across the United States (US) declined by at least 28%, introducing some 50,000 less teachers into schools (Irwin et al., 2023). Bryant et al. (2023) surveyed American PK12 teachers across the country toward the end of the 2021-2022 school year revealing a third planned to leave teaching before the start of the 2022-2023 school year, equating to roughly 900,000 experienced, certificated, and labeled as highly qualified educators. A 2022 survey and report by the National Education Association (NEA) cited systemic issues stemming from legacy practices, curricular constraints, the burden of excess testing, burnout, and the loss of autonomy as reasons given by some 55% of respondents who reported plans to leave the profession (Walker, 2021). Strikingly, the NEA poll found a disproportionate percent of teachers of color namely Black (62%) and Hispanic or Latinx (59%) desiring an exit (Walker, 2021).

Clearly, teachers are becoming increasingly frustrated with the current situation, as many lack a clear direction towards opportunities that would allow them to exercise their autonomy. Teachers are expressing a desire to implement educational methods that align not only with their passion for teaching, but also with new conceptualizations of learning emanating from the frontiers of neuroscience, human development, and holistic wellness. While under publicized and struggling to reach nationwide scale and impact, deep learning (project based) school models (see High Tech High K12 schools in San Diego, CA), neuroscience informed curriculum (see Talitha Koum in Waco, TX), expeditionary models (see Polaris Charter Academy in Chicago, IL), self-paced models (see Battle Born in Las Vegas, NV), deep liberatory and place based models (see Homies Empowerment in Oakland, CA and Eco-Verdi in Melbourne, FL) and models touting greatly increased teacher pay and elevated professional learning arcs (see The Education Project (TEP) schools in New York, NY) are flourishing. The example schools above are either public charter schools or tuition free private schools, all with one or more locations serving diverse learners from lower income communities of color.

In 2023 however, realization of such important work remains largely outside of the everyday school experience for the majority of marginalized learners. For millions of learners subject to the persistent and significant opportunity gaps in America's compulsory PK12 education system, new approaches to teaching and learning may offer a lifeline. One such group of learners are children labeled with a disability, of color, and living in urban, low-income communities (also often attending under-resourced schools) (Pak and Parsons, 2020). To qualify for school based special education services, these learners must be labeled with one of 13 qualifying disabilities under the Individuals with Education Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 2004: autism spectrum disorder, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing

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