

Chapter 2

Can We Practice What We Teach? Problematizing Systemic Barriers to Equity–Oriented Teacher Preparation

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ABSTRACT

Increasing scholarship and PK-12 practice has included universal design for learning (UDL) as a framework for both the mindset and implementation of inclusive and equitable practice. Preparing new teachers in this way requires teacher educators to ‘practice what they teach’ in their own practice of UDL. Building on the authors’ prior self-study work, which analyzed applications of UDL in conjunction with DisCrit (disability studies and critical race theory), this chapter describes how these frameworks inform both how and what we teach, and the systemic barriers to equity that our pedagogy has exposed within these contexts. The authors unpack each of these barriers in detail, and offer solutions for combating these barriers, which we believe can empower teacher educators to begin to chip away at deeply oppressive institutional structures, attitudes, and practices, and transform the work of preparing new teachers.

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INTRODUCTION

Teacher education has long been a field concerned with centering equity (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 2016; Cochran-Smith & Keefe, 2022). Many educator preparation programs are anchored by missions that embrace equity and justice and aim to disrupt the status quo through the development of teachers as “change agents” (e.g., Gunn & Bennett, 2022; Picower, 2011). Yet the contested interpretations of such terms, as well as ambiguity in some of their theoretical and practical foundations can complicate these aims and interfere with how teacher educators pursue them. For the purposes of our work as teacher educators, and our related scholarship, we view equity-oriented teacher preparation as focusing, “not only on methods for effective teaching, but also on supporting teacher candidates to identify, interrogate, and resist problematic practices and beliefs that are often embedded into the structures of schooling itself.” (Fornauf & Mascio, 2022, p. 43); meaning that our aim is to prepare teachers with inclusive pedagogy who will also teach in ways that are anti-racist, anti-ableist, anti-cis-heterosexist, and otherwise anti-oppressive.

In this chapter, we apply foundational concepts of two interdependent frameworks, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Disability/Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) to identify and problematize barriers to equity-oriented teacher preparation that are deeply rooted within institutions of higher education and offer solutions to begin to dismantle them. We begin with brief explanations of UDL and DisCrit, as well as an overview of how we have previously incorporated a combination of these frameworks into our efforts preparing equity-oriented teachers. The crux of the chapter then outlines three major systemic barriers to this work within teacher preparation programs (see Table 1): 1) the systemic ableism embedded in academia, 2) the use of grades and test scores as gatekeepers in teacher preparation programs, and 3) the rising prevalence of institutions adopting a neoliberal ‘customer satisfaction model’ guiding faculty evaluations. We end the chapter with a section on concerns and hopes - intending to both preemptively avoid misunderstandings and misuse of our writing, and highlight work currently being done in the field that addresses barriers and contributes to equity-oriented teaching and teacher preparation.

Why UDL and DisCrit to Support Equity-Oriented Teacher Preparation

Our exploration of UDL and DisCrit as foundational partner frameworks for equity-oriented teacher preparation is grounded in our research and experiences as teacher educators ourselves, and more specifically our encounters with barriers we have been forced to contend with across different institutions. While we have found each of these frameworks to offer important ways of interrogating curricular

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