Development of Skills, Habits, and Mindsets of an Equitable Educator

What the Science Says

Because learning and development are relational and highly context sensitive, it is important that all students experience environments of trust and belonging. Warm, caring, supportive teacher–student relationships are linked to better school performance and engagement, greater emotional regulation, social competence, and willingness to take on challenges.[25] Strong relationships have biological as well as affective significance. Brain architecture is developed by the presence of warm, consistent, attuned relationships; positive experiences; and positive perceptions of these experiences.[26] Such relationships help develop the emotional, social, behavioral, and cognitive competencies that are foundational to learning.

Children's ability to learn and take risks is enhanced when they feel emotionally and psychologically safe; it is undermined when they feel threatened. A meta-analysis of 99 studies found that the affective quality of teacher–student relationships was significantly related to student engagement and achievement. Students often placed at risk in school and society—children of color, those from low-income families, and those with learning differences—were harmed most by negative teacher affect and benefited most from positive relationships with teachers.[27]

Students learn best when they can connect what happens in school to their cultural contexts and experiences, when their teachers see their families and communities as assets and are responsive to their strengths and needs, and when their environment is identity safe, reinforcing their sense of value and belonging. This is especially important given the societal and school-based challenges many children, especially those living in adverse conditions, experience. For all these reasons, and because children develop through individual trajectories shaped by their unique traits and experiences, teachers need to know students well to create productive learning opportunities. Building highly favorable conditions into the environments in which children grow and learn—including trust, connections to children and families, and supports—improves equity of experience and opportunity. All of these understandings are key to the development of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of equitable educators.

Overview

Teachers have the ability to powerfully shape students' experiences and learning in their classrooms. Preparation programs have the responsibility to ensure that new teachers are equipped with the mindsets, skills, and knowledge to do so as equitable educators. This responsibility includes providing opportunities for teacher candidates to learn to:

- develop self-awareness and inquiry skills to guide continuous learning, including learning about children and their experiences, strengths, and needs and how to build on those strengths and meet those needs;

- develop mindsets and key dispositions, including empathy; social, emotional, and cognitive skills that support learning; cultural competence; and the ability to support children's healthy identity development;

- develop the skills to create classroom communities that honor all learners, where students learn and construct meaning together, with responsive and supportive connections fostering students' trust, sense of belonging, and positive identities;

- develop the pedagogical knowledge and skills to create and scaffold rich, meaningful tasks that are accessible to students and implemented in ways that support the development of a growth mindset, perseverance, resilience, and problem-solving abilities;

- understand the national, local, historical, economic, and political contexts of schooling; their impact on students' experiences and learning; and how they are manifested in schools and classrooms; and

- build strong partnerships with families, communities, and other educators in order to teach from an asset-based, culturally responsive stance.

These kinds of knowledge, skills, and dispositions build the foundation on which teachers learn to translate knowledge of students' lives, experiences, and prior learning into curricula that support high-leverage learning.

What Teachers and Teacher Educators Can Do

Because learning is relational, it is paramount that teachers develop the mindsets to support all students well and equitably. These mindsets start with an authentic curiosity about oneself and others, as well as a positive disposition about learning and equity that supports compassion; care; an acknowledgment that everyone holds evolving beliefs and biases that influence decision-making; and an acceptance and honoring of students' backgrounds, experiences, and social identities. They also include dispositions and skills for engaging in trauma-informed and healing-oriented practices for students who face adversity.

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Equitable educators cultivate dispositions within themselves and their students that include empathy; social, emotional, and cognitive skills that support learning; cultural competence; and healthy identity development, as well as personal and professional identities rooted in these capacities. Among the cognitive skills they support are those productive for learning, such as executive function and growth mindset, as well as the problem-solving, perseverance, and resilience that enable children and adults to function in the face of daily challenges.

Developing Social and Emotional Learning

Educators informed about the potential that culturally responsive forms of social and emotional learning can provide are at an advantage when trying to develop meaningful relationships with their students. The fundamentals of social and emotional learning begin with the importance of helping students:

- become aware of their emotions,
- learn how to manage their emotions,

- interact well with others,
- understand how their behavior affects and is affected by others,
- set goals both personally and academically, and
- make appropriate decisions that help them succeed.

Working on students' ability to cooperate with peers and the people who surround them also enhances their ability to empathize with others and advocate for themselves and enhances their readiness to learn in school and beyond. One example of this may be seen in the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) wheel (see Figure 4), which suggests how to develop SEL in the following contexts: classroom, school, family, and community.

Figure 4. Interactive CASEL Wheel

Source: CASEL. (2020). *What is the CASEL Framework?*

Cognitive skills such as problem-solving, perspective taking, and executive function interact with *emotional skills* such as emotion recognition, empathy, and emotion regulation, and with *social skills*, including cooperation, helping, and communication.[28]

These skills are developed not only through specific lessons or programs but also through a set of reinforcing practices infused throughout the school day and in all parts of the environment. For example, teachers who can construct authentic tasks that feature strong scaffolding and well-supported collaboration develop social and emotional skills that can also support motivation and achievement. If they incorporate well-designed self- and peer assessment practices focused on meaningful feedback and opportunities for revision, they can also help students develop a sense of efficacy and confidence, leading to increased competence and a growth mindset. These in turn support problem-solving and resilience.[29] This is equally true within teacher education itself, where instructors and mentors need to model and enable social and emotional learning for prospective teachers through all aspects of the program. Teachers should also learn how to support the varying needs of students who have had different kinds of home and schooling experiences, including some who have experienced traumatic events that impact their learning, creating an even greater need for particular social, emotional, and cognitive supports. The vignette in Social and Emotional Learning for Teachers of Multilingual Learners provides a glimpse of how these skills can be taught in an educator preparation classroom with these kinds of considerations in mind.

Social and Emotional Learning for Teachers of Multilingual Learners

At Towson University in Maryland, preservice teachers gather in class to practice and develop their own social and emotional skills. Their instructor starts class by having them focus on their breathing, concentrating on the positivity that each of them brings to the class. She then reminds them that this simple practice can help multilingual learners start class in a more focused manner. She gives insight into how some multilingual learners might be estranged from family, have other issues related to being in a new environment, or find themselves frustrated while learning a new language in addition to adjusting to a new culture.

She shares how students might get teased for mispronouncing words or how they might be missing their friends. She says, "There are so many factors that go into what a child brings to class. One of your main goals should be to try and connect with them so that you can promote learning by building on students' strengths using social and emotional learning and asset-based instruction to help them be successful."

She next has the teachers search on their phones for a country they would like to move to where English is not the primary language so they can reflect on the obstacles they might face in a new environment. She asks, "What kinds of emotions are generated by thinking about all that is involved with moving?" This sparks a rich discussion in the class, where the future educators talk about how they are fearful of having to find a job in a new location where people do not speak English, find a home, and make new friends, all while being homesick.

The instructor then says, "Imagine you are going through all of that and, at the same time, the pandemic hits. All of those factors together would be stressful for anyone, no matter how prepared they might be. As a result, students and families in general can benefit from building their social and emotional skills, yet multilingual learners might have a greater need to access these skills. To be equitable educators, we should reflect on our individual students' needs and strengths to ensure that we are supporting them to succeed."

Source: Provided by Gilda Martinez-Alba, Towson University. (2023).

Preparation programs can also help candidates think of their own well-being and can introduce activities that help them focus on their own social and emotional learning, such as pausing to stretch to refocus in class, doing guided meditation, reading materials that focus on emotions to open the door to conversations related to how to work through different feelings, and making time with themselves as well as their students for goal setting and self-care.

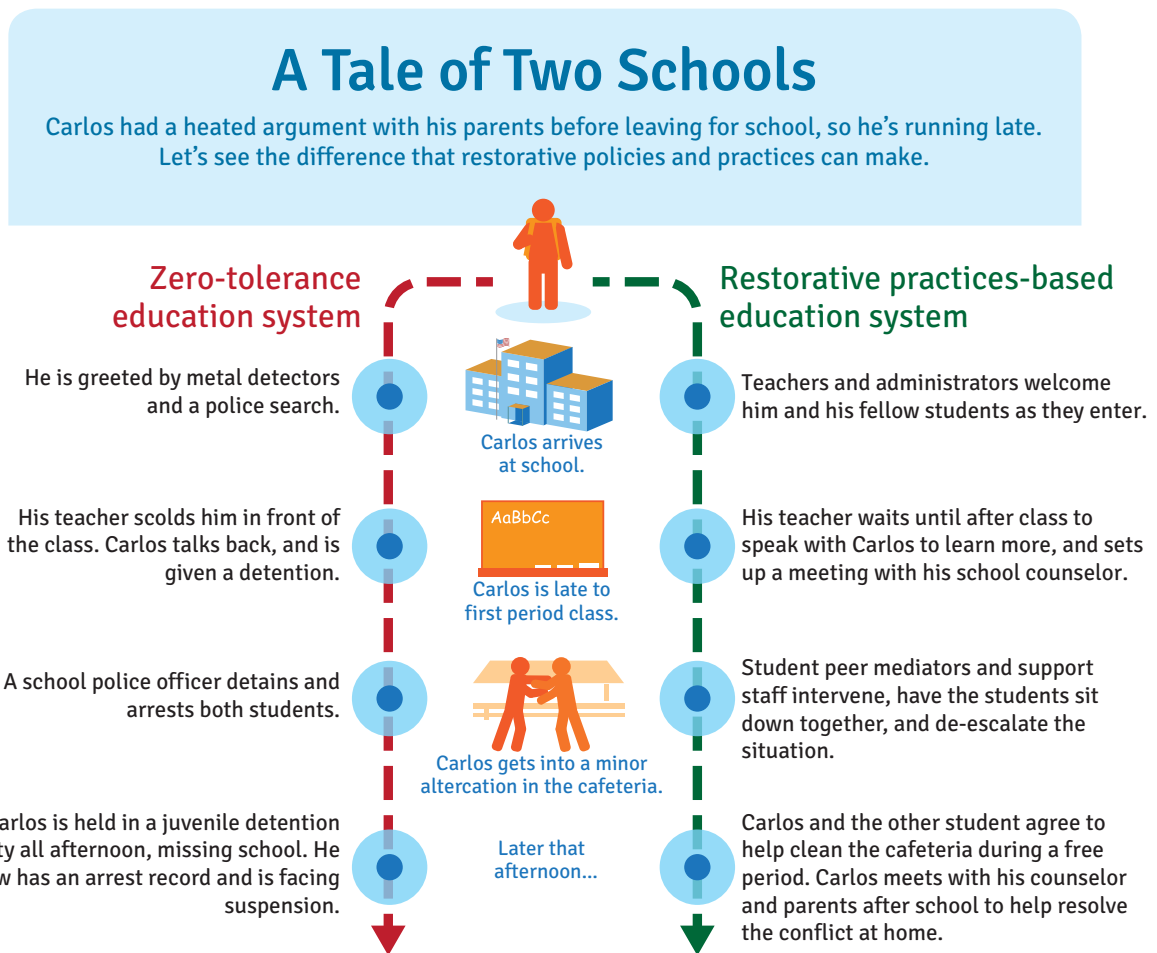## Constructing Community That Enables Positive Relationships

Preparation programs also need to support teacher candidates to develop the skills to create classroom communities that honor all learners, helping children negotiate relationships with peers and adults with care and respect. This includes learning to use restorative practices to support inclusion and community building; support classroom learning environments; and replace punitive, coercive, and exclusionary disciplinary approaches with proactive development of community caring, coping mechanisms, and conflict resolution skills that help students develop empathy for one another and an understanding of their own behavior. Such practices result in fewer and less racially disparate suspensions and expulsions, fewer disciplinary referrals, improved school climate, higher-quality teacher–student relationships, and improved academic achievement across elementary and secondary classrooms.[30] Restorative approaches are also grounded in ameliorating long-standing inequities in schools and society by building safe, inclusive learning environments where consistent, caring relationships can thrive and every young person is valued and affirmed.[31]

The illustration in Figure 5 provides two very different scenarios that show how restorative policies can make a difference in outcomes for students.[32] Teaching how to implement and advocate for this approach by modeling it for and with future teachers, which enables them to experience it for themselves, is important.

The following reflection from a teacher's observation of restorative justice practices for the first time illustrates the power of the approach:

> I was invited to an elementary school that had implemented restorative justice practices starting with their kindergarten class, and each year they added in more grades until they finally had all grades using it. As a result, the principal of the school welcomed educators to come and observe it in action. When I observed students in 3rd grade, they were clearly very familiar with the process. I was immediately fascinated by how well the students were able to sit in a circle and express their feelings. It reminded me of group therapy, except that this was taking place in the classroom. In one classroom I observed, students sat in a restorative circle and tossed around a ball to share how they were feeling that morning. They added why they were feeling that way as well. When one student shared how they were sad because they didn't get along with their sibling that morning, the other students chimed in to give advice on how to work through it once they got home. The teacher also added to the conversation. In another classroom, I noticed students sitting in a circle were discussing a conflict a few students had encountered at recess. They talked through the issue with their teacher's guidance. I had never seen such deep conversations in a classroom to work through issues that were not related to content objectives, yet had they not worked through these issues, the students would have likely not been able to focus on the lesson. I was later informed that the middle school across the street from them was now starting the same process grade by grade. This is amazing! I can't wait to try it with my students in the future.[33]

Figure 5. A Tale of Two Schools Infographic

A Tale of Two Schools

Carlos had a heated argument with his parents before leaving for school, so he's running late. Let's see the difference that restorative policies and practices can make.

Zero-tolerance education system

Restorative practices-based education system

Carlos arrives at school.

He is greeted by metal detectors and a police search.

Teachers and administrators welcome him and his fellow students as they enter.

Carlos is late to first period class.

His teacher scolds him in front of the class. Carlos talks back, and is given a detention.

His teacher waits until after class to speak with Carlos to learn more, and sets up a meeting with his school counselor.

Carlos gets into a minor altercation in the cafeteria.

A school police officer detains and arrests both students.

Student peer mediators and support staff intervene, have the students sit down together, and de-escalate the situation.

Later that afternoon...

Carlos is held in a juvenile detention facility all afternoon, missing school. He now has an arrest record and is facing suspension.

Carlos and the other student agree to help clean the cafeteria during a free period. Carlos meets with his counselor and parents after school to help resolve the conflict at home.

Source: Schott Foundation for Public Education. (2014). *Restorative practices: Fostering healthy relationships and promoting positive discipline in schools.*

Checking Bias and Developing Empathy

Strongly related to teachers' development of capacities like social-emotional competencies and empathy are the beliefs they carry and how those beliefs influence their views of students and student learning. Teachers' perceptions of students shape expectations that often predict student achievement apart from prior ability. While most teachers enter the profession with a passion for fostering children's learning, growth, and development, implicit and unconscious biases can play a role in how they interact with their students. Thus, educators need to learn how to proactively cultivate positive and affirming attitudes and understand the dynamics of implicit and attributional biases in order to create culturally sensitive and identity-safe environments.[34] The dispositions to do this, as well as the knowledge and skills, can be taught.

Helping Teachers Develop Empathy

Empathy reduces bias, and it can be learned. In one study, for example, middle school math teachers who were provided an empathy-enhancing experience improved their relationships with students and dramatically reduced their use of exclusionary discipline. These teachers read articles that explained how students' feelings and experiences can cause them to behave; the articles encouraged teachers to maintain good relationships with students, even in the face of conflict. The teachers were asked to reflect on and write about how they could understand students' experiences and sustain positive relationships even when challenges arise and how they show respect to their students. Compared with teachers who were asked to simply read and write about technology use in the classroom, the first group of teachers significantly reduced their use of exclusionary discipline in the classroom and strengthened their relationships with students. Another study found that when teachers and students completed a survey that identified their commonalities, knowledge of those connections improved their relationships. Students earned higher grades when teachers learned about their similarities to those students, with the effects most pronounced for Black and Latino/a students, closing the achievement gap in grades between these student groups and White students by over 60%.

Sources: Okonofua, J. A., & Eberhardt, J. L. (2015). Two strikes: Race and the disciplining of young students. *Psychological Science*, *26*(5), 617–624; Gehlbach, H., Brinkworth, M. E., King, A. M., Hsu, L. M., McIntyre, J., & Rogers, T. (2016). Creating birds of similar feathers: Leveraging similarity to improve teacher–student relationships and academic achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *108*(3), 342–352.

Reflective educators can seek information and help students solve problems when challenges emerge—which contributes not only to motivation but also to an asset-based orientation toward families, communities, and students. Educators can also focus on their own role in creating conditions conducive to learning in both their classrooms and the school as a whole. Schools can trigger rather than ameliorate social identity threats that undermine students' confidence and performance when they group or track students in ways that convey messages about perceived ability, deliver stereotypical messages associated with group status, or emphasize ability rather than effort (e.g., "innate intelligence" vs. "hard work") in their judgments about students and their attributions of causes of success.[35]

Understanding and Addressing Inequality

Being able to develop the skills and dispositions of an equitable educator requires that teachers understand the historical, social, economic, and political contexts of the United States as well as the more localized communities in which they teach. Further, it is important that they understand how these contextual realities interact and directly impact the experiences of students, their understanding of themselves, their perceptions of their social identities, and their learning. Some of this learning may come from reading scholars whose social and historical research raises consciousness and awareness.[36] More of it may come from direct, guided inquiry into both school settings and community settings in which candidates are placed.[37]

Preparation programs need to help teacher candidates develop an understanding of equity issues and dilemmas that arise in classrooms and schools. An important part of teacher preparation is helping candidates build a commitment to engage—and a skill set to tackle—hard questions and situations that involve issues such as race, class, and power. Both teacher educators and candidates should seek to understand how these issues impact their understanding of themselves, their positionality, their understanding of privilege and how that has affected their experiences, and how these understandings influence their views of students' ability and learning. This understanding and skill set—often developed through autobiographical inquiry into experiences of privilege, discrimination, and inequality[38]—can help facilitate the acknowledgment and reduction of bias and create more equitable teaching practices and learning environments. A result of such preparation is using this lens to critically analyze curriculum choices. Table 1 provides an example of a practical scaffolding tool to learn these skills.

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Table 1. Looking Critically at a Unit to Create a More Inclusive Curriculum Tool

Unit title:			
Questions to consider:	Current state of the unit:	Changes needed:	Resources to support changes:
Whose voices, perspectives, or experiences are heard in this unit? (This might be through texts, quotes, stories, examples, primary sources, video, social media, articles, etc.)			
Whose voices, perspectives, or experiences are centered in this unit?			
Whose voices, perspectives, or experiences are marginalized in this unit?			
Whose voices, perspectives, or experiences are missing from this unit?			
What identities are included in this unit? Consider all facets of identity: race, religion, gender, gender identity, ability, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, sexual orientation, family structure, language, citizenship, age, etc.			

Unit title:			
Questions to consider:	Current state of the unit:	Changes needed:	Resources to support changes:
What systems of power are shown through this unit?			
Who is shown to benefit from these systems of power? What benefits are shown/explained?			
Who is shown to be harmed by these systems of power? What consequences or forms of oppression are shown/explained?			
What examples are provided of people taking action or pushing back on systems of oppression or abuses of power? Who is centered in examples of resistance? Are the people taking action coming from WITHIN the oppressed groups or from OUTSIDE of the oppressed groups?			
How are groups of people shown in a variety of ways throughout this unit?			
What groups of people are shown making positive contributions to the world in this unit?			
How does this unit connect to the lives of students? What makes this unit relevant to students and to today's world?			
How does this unit invite students to take action against bias and injustice?			
How does this unit draw on experiences and knowledge of students?			
How does this unit provide opportunity for student-led inquiry?			
How does this unit honor multiple ways of knowing, multiple ways to access knowledge, and multiple ways to demonstrate knowledge?			

Source: Created by Jessica Lifshitz, Meadowbrook Elementary School in Northbrook, IL.. (2023).

When educators develop an understanding of how to critically examine curriculum and teaching practices and the ways these may inadvertently promote bias and marginalization, they move further toward eliminating inequity. This understanding is required of teacher education faculty as well as candidates if it is to be infused in the preparation program.

These dispositions are supported and strengthened when teachers organize and build partnerships with families, community members, and other educators around children's learning strengths and needs. This requires preparation programs to engage the local community in a collaborative community of practice that can support student learning and build teachers' knowledge and capacity to approach students, families, and communities from an asset-based orientation. Asset-based dispositions, mindsets, and practices highlight what students bring to the classroom that can be used to build learning opportunities, rather than focusing on students' perceived deficits. In order to engage productively in such communities of practice, teachers need to develop culturally sensitive, respectful, and opportunity-centered listening and questioning skills that enable them to learn about their students' lives and learning strategies in order to create more coherent, well-reinforced learning opportunities between home and school. These, in turn, can help create environments where students feel culturally respected and emotionally and intellectually safe. This type of shared learning can occur only when preparation programs have authentic, reciprocal relationships with partner districts, families, youth, and communities. (See also Supportive Developmental Relationships in Communities of Practice).

These skills, knowledge, and dispositions build the foundation on which preparation programs help candidates learn how to translate knowledge of students' lives, experiences, and prior learning into rich, relevant tasks with appropriate scaffolding and supports. To engage in this type of culturally responsive pedagogy, teacher candidates need to know how to surface and build on prior experience, understand how children are thinking, and construct tasks that are approachable and motivating. Using a "funds of knowledge" framework,[39] candidates can learn how to captivate children's interest and foster deep learning by linking experiences and skills from children's everyday lives and cultures to classroom instruction.[40]

Building on Students' Experiences and Connecting With Families

Teachers should think of their learning community as including students, families, community members, and other experts who have knowledge of students and their learning. Teacher candidates can benefit from learning how to access students' own views about their learning through conferencing, students' reflections on their work, exit tickets, group discussions, and other means.

Schools that create meaningful relationships with families and actively engage them in having a voice, programming, and the learning environment increase student achievement and create a positive culture. Teaching must be a collaborative endeavor that taps into the expertise of all members of a community.[41] Family and community members have expert knowledge of their children and lived experiences that teachers can learn about and use in their lesson planning and instruction.

Teacher candidates can develop an asset-based view of students and families by engaging with them in the context of community-based organizations and services in the place where they are student teaching. In some programs, candidates complete clinical placements in after-school or recreation programs in order to experience families and the community in a different way than school allows. Candidates can also hear from well-regarded community organizers and leaders of grassroots organizations who are trying to improve living conditions and spend time studying the local community. By studying the sociopolitical

histories of the neighborhoods in which they conduct their clinical placements, preservice teachers become familiar with community assets (e.g., churches, community-based organizations and activities) and challenges (e.g., environmental pollution that breeds health concerns) and learn to appreciate the resilience of those who live there. Preservice teachers can also learn ways to make the curriculum culturally relevant by connecting subject matter to community-based contexts and causes.

Likewise, teachers can offer family members tools and strategies to connect in-school learning to students' everyday learning and problem-solving at home in English and their native language—for example, sending home bilingual books or keeping in mind families' literacy and language proficiency levels.[42] The more candidates learn to support students' academic development outside of school, the more students can be ready to learn once at school.

One example of how to support students outside of school can be found in Art Backpack, a family–school–university intervention at Benjamin Franklin Elementary School in Newark, NJ.

Art Backpack Program: A Family–School–University Partnership

In this program, which is designed to increase children's educational success in and through the visual arts, students take home backpacks containing several activities that will help them develop their art-making and literacy skills. Parents, family members, and neighbors work with students to complete at-home art experiences by looking at art reproductions with their children, talking to their children about their responses to works by professional artists, asking children questions about the life and art of an artist, discussing the outcome of a story, listening to stories their children have written, examining and discussing comparisons of visual images with their children, asking their children to talk about a picture they made, and reading what their children have written in a community journal.

Montclair State University preservice teachers preview the activities of the Art Backpack with children before they take them home and review students' at-home art experiences when children return to school with their assigned backpacks. Led by Montclair Art and Design faculty member Dorothy Heard, preservice teachers reflect upon their teaching strategies and children's learning strategies and link both teaching and learning to theories and pedagogical practices. The art teacher at Benjamin Franklin Elementary School in Newark, NJ, a Montclair State graduate, supports and reinforces child and family at-home art, aesthetic, and creative thinking experiences through his ongoing curriculum and offers Art Backpack workshops to parents. Franklin Elementary's classroom teachers support and reinforce child and family at-home art, language arts, and critical thinking experiences through their ongoing curriculum activities, which include trips to the local museum. The school's principal helps supervise and monitor the project. Since the program's initiation to the school, students who participate in Art Backpack consistently score higher than their peers on standardized tests.

Source: Darling-Hammond, L., Oakes, J., Wojcikiewicz, S. K., Hyler, M. E., Guha, R., Podolsky, A., Kini, T., Cook-Harvey, C., Mercer, C., & Harrell, A. (2019). *Preparing teachers for deeper learning*. Harvard Education Press. p.188.
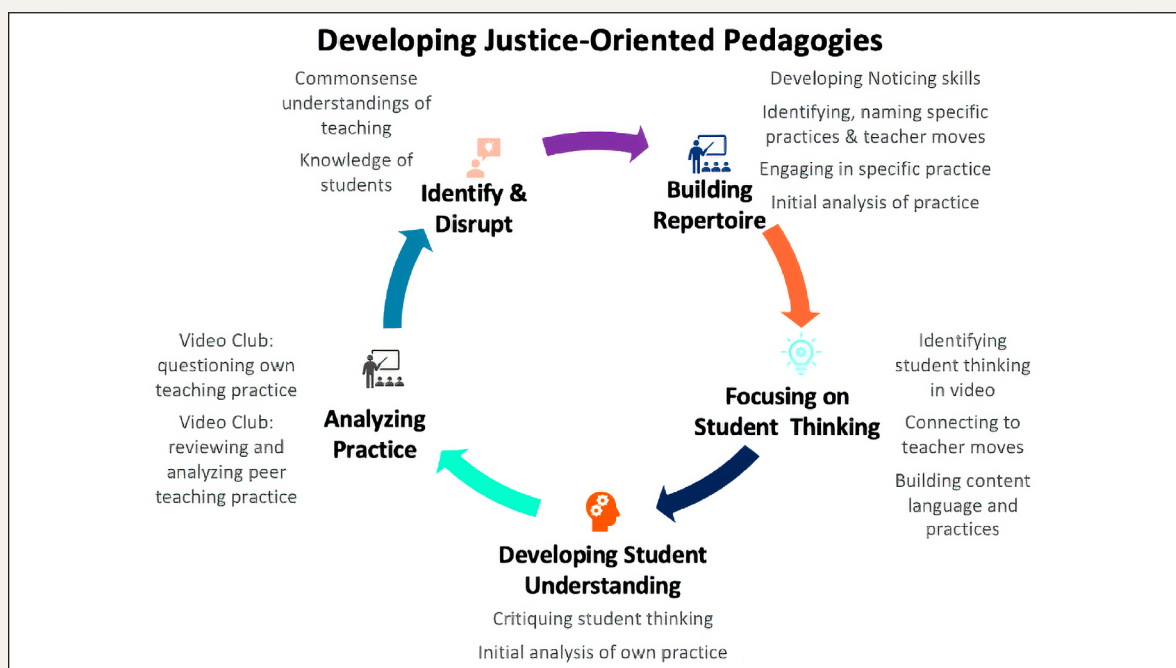
Finally, because inequities are often baked into school structures and systems, it is important for preparation programs to enable teachers to understand and negotiate more equitable school policies. Candidates need to be ready to think about, act on, and navigate within the sociopolitical contexts of schools to advocate for more just and equitable opportunities and outcomes for their students. In order to develop as equitable educators,

it is critical that teachers develop self-awareness and skills of inquiry to guide continuous learning. These skills will help teachers identify and eliminate inequity-creating and -sustaining routines and practices. The results of a set of equity-oriented inquiries that were intended to help candidates in one teacher education program develop these skills are described by Stanford University student teachers in *Learning to Teach for Social Justice*.[43] These inquiries can include reading case studies of the learning experiences of English learners, students with disabilities, and others who are often marginalized in school; shadowing a student through a full day of school to understand their experience; examining a school's allocation of curriculum opportunities across classrooms and tracks; interrogating cultural assumptions in both teacher education and student teaching classrooms; and reflecting on the results of lessons aiming to be culturally affirming.

The vignette in Student-Centered Inquiry and Reflection describes a student-centered inquiry process grounded in video analysis.

Student-Centered Inquiry and Reflection

At Vanderbilt University, video analysis across the teacher preparation program is used, in part, to develop justice-oriented pedagogies that disrupt existing inequities in schools by providing access and opportunities for students who have historically been marginalized. Analyzing video clips of teaching offers a way of centering teacher candidates' learning around video-based classroom evidence while also attending to the complexity of power and status differentials across PreK–12 classroom contexts. As the illustration below shows, the process begins with identifying and disrupting commonsense understandings of teaching and students, then moves on to learning to notice what teachers are doing as a basis for analyzing practice; learning to surface and identify student thinking and looking at one's own practice in relation to student learning; questioning one's own practice and offering insights into the practice of peers; and then further identifying and disrupting understandings of teaching and students that may perpetuate inequities.

Developing Justice-Oriented Pedagogies

Commonsense understandings of teaching
Knowledge of students
Identify & Disrupt

Developing Noticing skills
Identifying, naming specific practices & teacher moves
Engaging in specific practice
Initial analysis of practice
Building Repertoire

Identifying student thinking in video
Connecting to teacher moves
Building content language and practices
Focusing on Student Thinking

Developing Student Understanding
Critiquing student thinking
Initial analysis of own practice

Video Club: questioning own teaching practice
Video Club: reviewing and analyzing peer teaching practice
Analyzing Practice

Just as students need restorative circles to help them understand how to regulate their emotions and actions, preparation programs can use these kinds of self-analysis activities to help candidates unpack their journey toward becoming more equitable. For example, teacher candidates can be led through a series of self-reflective questions such as "Why did I say that comment to my students?" or "What am I doing to become a stronger educator?" or "How can I be more equitable with my students?" Society is constantly changing, which necessitates a continual examination of the world and how teaching and learning are impacted by the social, economic, political, and cultural contexts of the United States. Preparation programs can equip candidates to develop the skills to understand how these realities may impact students in new and evolving ways and adjust their teaching and learning supports in order to meet the challenges and embrace the opportunities of a changing world.

Source: Dunleavy, T., Hundley, M. K., Johnson, H. J., Palmeri, A., & Peter, J. (2020, February). *"I used to think. … Now I think. …": Using video clubs to blow up and disrupt teacher candidates' perceptions of what counts as student understanding.* Presentation at the annual conference of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education.

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