



## **Healing and Well-Being in a Time of Precarity**

### **Cultivating Caring Teacher Preparation Pathways to Humanize Schools**

**James O. Fabionar**

#### **Abstract**

This article encourages teacher educators to focus their work on healing and well-being in response to the array of precarities in the world. Framing this work is a driving question inspired by the current political moment and articles in this issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly*: How can teacher educators promote well-being and healing in our programs as models for healthier schools? In response, three phases of the pre-service to profession pathway are discussed: (1) pathways to teacher education programs, (2) pre-service preparation, and (3) transitions to the profession.

#### **Introduction**

This issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly* goes to press during times that are difficult to characterize. A year and a half into a deadly global pandemic and

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six months into a new presidential administration, a mixture of fear and hope fills airwaves, news and social media, and our day-to-day conversations. Vaccines for COVID-19 have become readily available in the United States and elsewhere, allowing the world to imagine a life beyond the pandemic. Yet many in our nation stubbornly remain unvaccinated as a deadly variant puts them increasingly in harm's way. Our federal institutions struggle to reestablish democratic norms after four years of authoritarian rule that culminated in an attempt to undermine the results of the last presidential election and a failed takeover of the U.S. capitol by armed demonstrators, militia, and hate groups. After months of delays, a bipartisan commission has been convened and is investigating the deadly attack to bring perpetrators to justice.

Against this backdrop, signs of new norms are emerging. As the economy recovers, service workers revolt against low wages, companies consider new work-from-home models, and many contemplate job and career changes. Movements for racial justice have spurred systemic change in many of our institutions, in education in particular. In California, as a case in point, the state's four-year university (California State University) and community college systems have implemented ethnic studies requirements. In addition, after a contentious process, both the State Board of Education and legislators have approved and adopted a curriculum framework in ethnic studies for K-12 public schools. Similarly, in Illinois, in response to the increased violence against Asian Americans, state legislators now mandate that Asian American history be taught in schools.

Amidst all of this, at least one certainty is clear: the developments of today will shape the teaching profession for years to come. In the past, schooling has been configured and reconfigured to serve the national interest. The race to space era of the Cold War pushed millions in federal monies into local schools to cultivate a workforce in science and engineering. More recently, deindustrialization and globalization led to the standards-based movement in an effort to create a more competitive national economy. In these and other instances when national interest drove school reform, educators were not at the table. Instead, we were recipients of the visions of politicians and corporate sector leaders, visions that often ran counter to what we know works and what we know is right.

In this moment, educators should articulate a focus on health, well-being, and healing in schools to address the precarities of the day. In many ways, such an articulation is more of an amplification than a new vision. For years, the notion of healing has driven large segments of education discourse, both as a literal call to address trauma in order for learning to occur and as a metaphor for humanizing systems that are outdated and harmful. As the mental and emotional impact of the state of the world surfaces in our mind-bodies, now more than ever we need schools with the capacity to respond to a wide variety of hurts and forms of human diversity. To this end, the sections that follow center on this question: How can teacher educators promote well-being and healing in our programs as models for healthier schools?

## **Schooling for Healing and Well-Being**

The scholarship in this issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly* helps to answer this question. In recent years, the call for humanizing schools has grown louder and louder through topics such as trauma-informed practices, social emotional learning, abolitionist teaching, and inclusive education, with each making the argument for stronger configurations of care and liberation in, among, and through classrooms, schools, and communities. Together, these bodies of scholarship often resist the prevailing view of public education today, one grounded in neoliberalism, with its tendency to standardize every facet of schooling and govern primarily from the middlemost sections of normal distributions. The studies in this issue are “on trend” with this shift and hold insights on how to orient teacher preparation programs around healing and well-being across three stages of the pathway to a career in teaching: entering preparation programs, preparing to teach, and transitioning to the profession.

### **Entering Preparation Programs**

The process of entering a teacher preparation program often reveals a variety of fears and anxieties rooted in the schooling experiences of incoming students. Advocates of greater diversity in the teaching profession argue that the battery of standardized tests required to become a teacher is an impediment to getting more people of color into the pipeline to the profession. Critics note that the cost of preparing for and taking the exams can be prohibitive (CARE-Ed, 2019) and argue that performance disparities among racial and ethnic groups likely reflect cultural biases grounded in Eurocentrism and white normativity (Education Deans for Justice and Equity, 2019).

In this issue, the research by Hardacre, Hafner, and Nakama explores teacher candidates’ anxieties associated with standardized testing requirements for teacher preparation programs and the profession. Their analysis of an array of data, including measurements of physiological reactions associated with anxiety, reveal that general test anxiety, math test anxiety, and students’ beliefs that the tests are barriers to entering a credential program influence students’ test-taking experience. These trends underscore that well-being and inclusion should be a deliberate part of our recruitment processes and remind us that many students, in particular those from underrepresented backgrounds, bring educational traumas into our learning environments. The schooling anxieties incoming teacher candidates bring with them to our programs offer an important learning opportunity and chance for personal development. Activities to draw out these stressors through critical reflection coupled with open and honest dialogue about how to avoid these traumas with future students can diminish the stigma of these anxieties and provide candidates with opportunities to develop a praxis of empathy with their future students.

### ***Preparing to Teach***

For many candidates, their time in teacher preparation programs is an overwhelming experience. Balancing courses, student teaching, and personal lives requires traversing an array of new social settings and experiencing multiple identities in the process. Candidates often find it challenging to develop confidence if supportive conditions are missing across these settings. Two studies in this issue indicate that preparation programs need to be more deliberate about addressing the mental health of candidates both as an act of care and a subject matter critical to success in the profession.

Livers, Zhang, Davis, Bolyard, Daley, and Sydnor explore three preparation programs to examine how they shape pre-service teachers' concerns about and senses of preparedness for entering the field. Among their findings was that two domains—coursework and field work—were particularly influential on how candidates viewed their personal level of preparedness. The scholars further noted that changes in concerns related to sense of preparation evolved over time except for in two areas: managing students and meeting all students' needs. These findings suggest that teacher educators can better promote confidence and well-being among candidates by helping them to cope with stress associated with these two areas.

This idea of building capacity through emotional well-being complements aspects of the study by Flushman, Guise, and Hegg. They argue that supporting the social emotional needs of new teachers through a new teacher learning community can enhance induction models and may decrease teacher attrition. Participants in their study echo previous research that social emotional learning skills are not a primary focus for their teacher preparation programs. Building on this gleaning, the researchers surmise that the reason learning communities can address “soft skills” is because they have freedom from external accrediting agencies that preparation and induction programs do not. By bringing this tendency to light, the charge to teacher educators is clear: providing social emotional learning skills to our candidates is important for success and longevity in the field.

### ***Transitioning to the Profession***

The transition from credential program to the first years in the profession is a particularly challenging part of becoming a teacher. Elements of the job such as navigating new surroundings, developing relationships with colleagues, designing new units and lessons, and engaging families and communities are but a few of the pressures and responsibilities new teachers experience all at once. For these purposes, early career teachers often need mentorship and other forms of support beyond standard induction processes.

In this issue, Guenther and Wexler examine how mentor teachers' thinking about social justice evolves while participating in a mentor study group, which are an inquiry-based learning opportunity facilitated by university personnel as part

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of an elementary teacher preparation program at a large university. Of particular concern is that the majority of teachers in the United States are likely white and may have had limited opportunities to engage notions of social justice in their work as educators. The scholars conducted a qualitative case study of white mentor teachers' learning regarding mentoring for social justice and captured changes to their perspectives and actions. The study finds that participation in the study group facilitated a shift from not attending to race in how they understood social justice to recognizing privilege and oppression in schools and eventually moving toward action. This study is a reminder that before changes in mentoring can happen, changes to the mentors need to happen. Specifically, there needs to be a knowledge base for equity-focused mentoring (Achinstein & Athanases, 2005). It is also a reminder that some of the most influential supports new teachers have are veteran teachers who guide them in their early years and that teacher educators can play key roles in building capacity for humanizing and just mentorship in the profession.

### **Teacher Educators for Healing**

Together, the articles in this issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly* reflect moments on the pathway to the profession that teacher educators can use as entry points to alter practice to shape how schools respond to this particular moment in time. Perhaps more than ever before, schools need to be places where we heal from the past and nurture a healthy future. Teacher preparation often involves an array of reflection exercises to support novice teachers to recognize their biases and privileges to better understand cultures and experiences different from their own. Less frequently found are practices that also build capacity to anticipate and address the mental health challenges associated with teaching. By developing coherent strategies and supports around healing and well-being in our programs, we can meet the challenges of the broader historical moment, improve diversity in the profession, and make schools more humanizing and effective in the process.

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