From Nouns to Verbs

Exploring Educators' Learnings, Beliefs, Actions, and Growth

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Abstract

Our education system promotes moving from *theory to practice*; however, this often ends up being performative and thus perpetuates the disenfranchisement of historically marginalized communities. Preservice and in-service teachers share dissatisfaction with the amount of time, training, resources, and support they are given. This response highlights how educators and educator preparation programs can move from *nouns* (mere words) to *verbs* (intentional action) as we work to reimagine our current education system. Within this issue, recommendations are made to eliminate deficit language, dismantle ableist practices, increase teachers' self-efficacy, amplify students' voices, and support the development of teachers' pedagogy.

Introduction

In spring 2022, I heard Dr. Lisa Delpit's call for educational leaders and educators to move from *nouns to verbs* during a critical conversation event. This sentiment tasks educators working toward creating socially just school systems and institutes of higher education (IHE) with moving beyond words and ideas towards

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reflection and actions. This echoes scholars' (e.g., Dunn et al., 2021; Love, 2019) urge for abolitionist pedagogy using radical joy (awareness of and celebration of historically disenfranchised individuals), radical trust (repairing harm), radical imagination (reimagining learning opportunities), and radical disruption (actively dismantling of oppressive systems).

This volume of *Teacher Education Quarterly* (TEQ) addresses these assertions within four articles that focus on educators' learnings, beliefs, actions, and growth. From university personnel in educator preparation programs (EPP) to preservice and in-service TK-12 educators serving our youth, the road to equity is centered around our belief systems and how we integrate them into our practice. For all of the professional growth opportunities educators go through in their career, there is a need for educators to intentionally apply the pedagogical knowledge they have gained in coursework and workshops. There is also a need to move from *nouns to verbs* in order to challenge the status quo of our current education system. Yet, transforming teaching practices is rarely done without sufficient time and energy invested into the process (Jez & Luneta, 2018; Kennedy, 2016; Sims et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2020). Many educators have not been given adequate time or resources to engage in a continuous cycle of praxis to critically examine their beliefs and actions, and this absence of reflective work contributes to the perpetuation of inequities in schools (Freire, 1970; Gorski, 2016; Sprott, 2019).

Within this issue, Connor and Mason (2022) explored the continuation of deficit language even after the EPP worked to educate preservice general educators about the negative impact of terms such as disability and inclusion have on learners. Next, Putman, Cash, and Polly (2022) compared the self-efficacy of interns and traditional preservice teachers in regard to their classroom management, student engagement, and instructional strategies. Then, Conner (2022) challenged veteran teachers to examine how they amplify students' voices as well as how they learn from them in their classrooms. Finally, Sawyer (2022) examined the delayed influence that EPPs have on their graduates through their longitudinal study on the development of teachers' beliefs over ten years of teaching. Many studies have shown us that although most EPPs promote transformative educational practices, many educators regress into more traditional, teacher-centered practices years later (Saultz et al., 2021; Scott, 2005). Sawyer purports that even if an EPP did not influence the preservice teacher initially, with time and experience, educators grow in their understanding of how to apply theory to practice throughout their careers. The following sections outline shifts teachers make to incorporate the learnings, beliefs, and actions EPPs present in their programs and how that growth continues throughout their careers.

Learnings

In this issue, Mason and Connor (2022) outlined the persistence of deficit language that general educators in TK-12 school settings use, even after their teacher

preparation program worked to frame disability from an asset-based view. In their study, they examined what general education preservice teachers' learned in their special education course about inclusion and the nature of disability compared to what they shared about their beliefs after finishing the course. Their findings indicated ableist rhetoric prevailed. This was not necessarily surprising knowing that the social constructs of *disability* and *inclusion* would require a change in our schemas, or mental structures in the brain that organize what we believe and how we see things play out, and these types of shifts are extremely difficult (Duncan & Rewine, 2019; McCray & McHatton, 2011). Moreover, merely having knowledge about a topic does not necessarily lead to changes in beliefs or practice. This is true with the complexity of dismantling deficit language commonly used when referring to individuals with differing abilities (Annamma et al., 2013). For this reason, Mason and Connor (2022) conceptualized *disability* using the complex embodiment approach to center disability as the way in which we know and value the body for what it is now and what it will be in the future, instead of the medical or social models often used in EPPs (Chao et al., 2017; Harry & Klinger, 2007). This progressive model encourages novice teachers to challenge what they learn from society and begin to examine ability on a more individual basis. Yet historically, teachers have reported that although they have a basic understanding of what disability and inclusion mean, they lack the training, resources, and time necessary to support all learners effectively (Hehir et al., 2016; Jez & Luneta, 2018; Lawrence-Brown & Sapon-Shevin, 2014; Mason & Connor, 2022).

The findings from Mason and Connor's study noted a majority of the students entered the course with a deficit-based characterization of *disability* and most finished the course with a practical or conceptual shift in their understanding but continued use of biased language. Past research (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Villegas, 2007) asserts that EPPs have a responsibility to shift preservice teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and actions; however, many EPPs continue to only provide one course focused on special education. This approach runs the risk of "othering" students with differing abilities and encourages educators to compartmentalize responsibilities, services, and support for all youth. This can lead to the perpetuation of segregated educational experiences and sustain the historic use of deficit ideologies often found in TK-12 school environments. Although merely naming what preservice general education teachers have learned before and after completing their one required special education course is a first step in highlighting the issue. Moving from *nouns to verbs* calls on EPPs to thoroughly examine how delineating special education content into a single course maintains the status quo, whereas integrating inclusive practices into each educational course would promote radical disruption within our EPP. That being said, radical reimagining of courses is only the first step in changing preservice teachers' learning. For real change to be actualized, there is a need to educate and shift the learnings, beliefs, and actions of all involved (preservice teachers, university professors, university supervisors, mentor teachers, and school leaders).

Beliefs

Putman, Cash, and Polly (2022) delved further into the learning process by exploring preservice teachers' belief systems (self-efficacy) related to classroom management, student engagement, and instructional strategies. Using social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1989) and the theory of situated learning (Lave & Wegner, 1991), the authors' learned more about what preservice teachers believed they could do within the context of their placements. In their study, they examined the impact of an embedded, multi-semester internship program versus a more traditional student teaching program. Interns were considered the teacher of record, given unique opportunities to authentically apply their coursework, mentored by the university and school personnel, and guided in their development of teacher identity. The multi-semester internship program's combination of coursework and collaborative support offered during the learning process aided in higher levels of self-efficacy as compared to the preservice teachers in the traditional program. Past research has shown that educators with higher self-efficacy implement more innovative pedagogical practices, effectively differentiate their instruction, increase student engagement, and report more positive classroom management (Poulou et al., 2019; Suprayogi et al., 2017; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Putman and colleagues also found the power of having a supportive community of professionals throughout their internship could have contributed to the higher levels of self-efficacy.

To move from *nouns to verbs*, EPPs with more traditional field placements can radically reimagine their partnerships with TK-12 schools more closely. One way this could be done is through aligning theoretical coursework with their field placements, whereby preservice teachers take on more practical teaching responsibilities. Another opportunity would be to develop more effective professional collaborative networks. This would provide time for reflection and dialogue to increase the preservice teacher's development of identity. For this to be effective (and non-threatening) the relationship between the preservice teacher, mentor teacher, and university support people needs to be nurtured with critical reflection. We continue to be reminded of the heavy responsibility schools, EPPs, and policymakers hold as we usher preservice teachers into the next generation of classrooms. We are called to not only provide subject matter content but mentorship in praxis. Freire (1970) reminded us that praxis, the process of critically reflecting on our practice and then making actionable changes, can transform our world into a more just place. This journey from beliefs to actions is powerful.

Actions

True growth rarely happens in a vacuum. While Putman, Cash, and Polly (2022) prompt educators to share their praxis with their community to move their beliefs about academic and personal growth toward action, Conner (2022) exam-

ined teachers' belief development over time. Research (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Fletcher-Wood & Zuccollo, 2019; Lee, 2018; Lynch et al., 2019) has indicated a clear connection between teacher professional development and improved outcomes for youth in TK-12 schools. From EPPs to school-organized professional development workshops, educators are constantly challenged to learn and apply new practices. Yet, when asked what keeps them from integrating the practices into their pedagogy many respond with barriers such as time, resources, and a lack of support from leadership (Jez & Luneta, 2018; Kennedy, 2016; Sims et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2020). The educators in Conner's (2022) study shared similar sentiments about a lack of time to effectively integrate student voice into their classroom, however, they also alluded to a fear of losing authority, doubts about student capacity, and a lack of willingness to change. If a sustainable change in classrooms is going to occur, educational leaders will need to address these challenges.

Conner's (2022) study challenged educators to reframe the roles of the students and teacher by amplifying students' voices in the classroom. In this study, students were able to make decisions about curriculum and instruction. This article applied recommendations from past research that investigated student voice and educators' mindsets (Hogg & Volman, 2020; Nieto, 2009; Paris, 2021). For example, this study supports the need for educators to shift their mindsets about hierarchy and authority, eliminate deficit-oriented assumptions they hold about students' ability to make sound decisions, and move towards a more culturally sustaining pedagogical approach. The question remains, with all that is being asked of teachers (e.g., extensive content standards, required paperwork and reporting duties, mandated testing, etc.), how can we support them in pushing past their fears and traditional duties to apply new practices?

Conner gives the readers hope for moving from *nouns to verbs* when she shares the changes the three teachers experienced as a result of increasing students' voices in their classrooms. One teacher was able to find new developmentally appropriate tools and revisit their assumptions about students. Another teacher learned to take students' voices seriously and reconsider the role of power in the classroom. The third teacher learned to make sense of discordant data and begin to rethink her own practice (e.g., providing more group activities). Much like the other articles in this issue, the educators examined their cognition, affect, and motivation as they evolved as educators. This work is especially hard because it requires us to critically confront our vulnerability and humility as we learn and apply new skills. As asserted in the spring issue of TEQ (Jez, 2022), it is important that while school districts, EPPs, and policymakers identify new practices for implementation, they also need to consider taking something off the plates of educators who are struggling to balance all of the expectations put upon them.

Growth

As EPPs assess and redesign their programs to prepare effective teachers and address the necessary accreditation expectations, an evaluation of the growth of career educators is useful. Sawyer's (2022) longitudinal study on how general education mathematics teachers took the information they learned from their EPP and integrated it into their practice ten years later emulates the growth educators make in praxis over time. Sawyer mentions in the article, teacher shortages are linked to burnout, untenable workload, and inequitable working conditions (Aargon, 2016; Castro et al., 2018). This is especially troublesome because when teachers are headed towards burnout, past research has shown they revert to the traditional teaching practices in which they were taught rather than the evidence-based strategies being taught in EPPs (Saultz, 2021; Scott, 2005). The current global pandemic and racial awakening have also taken a toll on educators across the globe, with many reevaluating their role in schools (Jez et al., 2022). To address the continuing loss of teachers, many EPPs are creating alternative teacher education pathways (e.g., expedited EPPs). As EPPs reimagine their programs, they need to question what learnings, beliefs, and actions are being reduced or eliminated within these accelerated programs. What impact does this have on the next generation of teachers? Finally, Sawyer interviewed teachers who had been in the classroom for over ten years, which is longer than the average years of teaching. Between 40-50% of teachers leave the profession within five years of becoming a teacher (Ingersoll et al., 2014). Therefore, we need to ask what radical disruption needs to happen at the EPP and in-service levels in order to retain teachers in the field.

Sawyer's findings indicate that EPPs influence may not always be apparent right after graduation, but they do emerge as teachers grow in experience and awareness of their belief systems. Some recommendations on how EPPs can move from *nouns to verbs* is to promote educators' growth within and beyond their programs. The hope is that as teachers grow in their awareness and continue to reimagine their role (radical imagination). Additionally, because many preservice teachers come in with expectations of what teaching entails, EPPs can help to mitigate surprising revelations about teaching by providing authentic field opportunities whereby preservice teachers take on responsibilities systematically. They should also provide guidance on how to critically reflect on their teaching (content, skills, dispositions, biases, etc.). EPPs need to acknowledge that changing an individual's belief system is a slow process, especially when theory disagrees with an educator's past experience or the current practices found within schools. Moving beyond mere acknowledgment of what needs to be done and into more critical action can prompt EPPs to provide ways in which individuals can disrupt the status quo (radical disruption).

Summary

Each of the articles in this issue examined educators' learnings, beliefs, actions, and growth in some fashion. Preservice and in-service teachers report barriers to creating new paradigms of teaching. Some fear change, showing their vulnerability, or losing authority; while others report a lack of time, resources, and support from leadership. Whatever the reason, sustainable change will not occur until educators from TK-12 schools, EPPs, and policymakers move outside of their comfort zones to challenge what they learned in the past and how that has influenced their belief systems. If we want to radically disrupt our school systems and implement culturally sustaining pedagogical approaches, we must eliminate the hierarchical system we currently have. Social justice reform requires programs to not only provide resources for sound practice but to also cultivate a desire to reflect and institute those practices with fidelity. Each of these articles gave a nod to the need for an abolitionist lens when examining how we are shifting mindsets and preparing our next generation of teachers. We have an opportunity to reimagine schools where students' voices are amplified, teachers examine their relationship with power, community members acknowledge and repair past harm, and equitable pedagogy is instituted.

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