



Resisting Hegemony in Teacher Education: Possibilities for Transformational Teaching and Learning Within Neoliberal Systems

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ABSTRACT

Education both replicates and reinforces hegemonic power structures in society. To change educational systems, it is imperative that teacher educators resist neoliberal forces and normative assumptions that value some over others, prioritize competition over collaboration, and use mechanisms of standardization and accountability to operationalize both. This study explores how embracing multiplicity, prioritizing collaboration over competition, and enacting Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in instructional design can transform learner and teacher educator relationships, outcomes, and experiences in their courses. The authors draw on their ongoing collective, situated self-study and critical collaborative inquiry of their pedagogical decisions and the impacts of these decisions on themselves and TCs within a demanding graduate teacher education program. As a result of this work, instructors and TCs were both able to simultaneously experience, imagine, and create greater possibilities for expecting, welcoming, and supporting the learner variability into their current and future classrooms.

KEYWORDS

Teacher education; neoliberalism; Universal Design for Learning; accessibility; neurodiversity.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, schools have pursued two goals: normalizing societal morals and expectations, and preparing children as future economic contributors (Lortie, 1975; Peart & Levy, 2005; Persky, 2015). Over the 20th century, two concepts entrenched these goals more narrowly. Psychology proliferated to root out ‘abnormality’ in pursuit of an idealized ‘norm’ in both workers and children (Waltz, 2020). Rising neoliberalism prompted “the redefinition of education from a public good to an instrument to enhance national and international competitiveness and meet the demands of a global economy” (Sattler, 2012), and an increasing global focus on economic competition through the academic performance of students on international assessments. Together, these influences have been ubiquitous in schools, playing a particularly prevalent role in perpetuating racism, classism, ableism—the privileging of certain bodies and abilities seen as economically valuable over others—, and disablism—the stigma and discrimination against perceived outliers (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019; Dymond, 2025; Parekh, 2022).

School systems tend to replicate and reinforce, rather than disrupt, these sociocultural values that advance state priorities (Ahwee et al., 2004; Apple, 2012; Kincheloe, 2003; Giroux & Penna, 1979). Teacher education bears responsibility for shaping justice-oriented future educators yet is subject to the same competing tensions as higher education, which increasingly shifts from a public to private good, operating as a business (Apple et al., 2022). Today, education is at a crossroads in identity politics: is the role of education to instill democratic values and critical thinking, bearing a social responsibility to community, or is it to sell grades, market consumers of education as an employable workforce (Apple et al., 2022), and erase diversity, equity, and inclusion from the annals in response to political pressures?

We argue that neoliberalism hamstrings local and systemic efforts to embrace human diversity, limiting the cultivation of human flourishing in schools and beyond. We know that other ways are possible, and that teachers and teacher educators play a critical role in resisting policies which actively and disproportionately harm marginalized students—including racialized, disabled, and/or working-class students (Parekh, 2022; Pugach et al., 2021).

In recent years, conversations around neurodiversity have drawn attention to the marginalization of neurodivergent/neurominority individuals (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2020; Srinivasan, 2025; Walker, 2021). As we—the authors—reflect on how language is used to perpetuate hegemony, we are shifting our terminology to challenge the ‘difference from norm’ connoted by terms such as ‘neurodivergent’ and ‘neurotypical’. Instead, we replace these with Walker’s (2021) terms ‘neurominority’ and ‘neuromajority’, respectively. Neurominorities (e.g., people who are autistic, ADHD, dyslexic, and/or dyspraxic, to name a few) are disadvantaged by neuronormative beliefs and practices which privilege the cognitive processes and nervous systems of those in the neuromajority. While in this paper we focus on the impacts of ableism and neuronormativity more generally in education, we recognize that neuronormative hegemony is also White, heteronormative, gender normative, middle class hegemony; and that race, gender-diverse, and class subjectivities are harmed by additional barriers, biases, and

epistemic injustices when they intersect with disability (Dewinter et al., 2023; Lewis & Arday, 2023; Srinivasan, 2025).

Indeed, this work recognizes that all teaching, generally speaking, is inherently political (Kincheloe, 2008) and has the capacity to enshrine democracy and create classrooms which are microcosms of a more equitable world, transforming how students view the world, their place within it, and their responsibility to others. Teacher educators must be intentional about the values they wish to impart, requiring iterative reflexivity (Ahwee et al., 2004; Kincheloe, 2003; Symeonidou & Chrysostomou, 2019).

This paper reports on our efforts to model a different kind of approach in teacher education—a relational, responsive, and compassionate orientation towards teaching, learning, and learners. We seek to add to the work of many other teacher preparation programs exploring ways to be more inclusive in their approach (Forlin, 2010; Nijakowska & Guz, 2024), to make disabled educators and disability visible in non-pathologizing ways in teacher education (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019; Pugach et al., 2021), as well as increasing efforts to make higher education more accessible generally (Filippou et al., 2025). We draw on insights from critical disabilities scholars (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019; Parekh, 2022; Pugach et al., 2021; Waldschmidt et al., 2017) who have highlighted and interrogated ableist assumptions in a myriad of contexts and articulated new conceptual frameworks for educational settings.

Ultimately, this research is an effort to resist the current hegemony in teacher education (Pugach et al., 2021) and to break open spaces for a wide array of possibilities and for all learners. As Maxine Greene (2005) professed: “The new educator must be awake, critical, open to the world. It is an honor and a responsibility to be a teacher in such dark times—and to imagine, and to act on what we imagine, what we believe ought at last to be” (p. 80). This resonates in today’s educational climate, which increasingly pushes for the deprofessionalization teachers by reducing educator autonomy via neoliberal thrusts to standardize the who, what, and how of classrooms.

Neoliberal Impacts

Hegemonic neoliberal forces have had myriad impacts on schools and teacher education. While a full review is beyond the scope of this paper, we have prioritized three areas to engage, resist, and reframe dominant narratives for teacher educators and teachers-in-training: (1) valuing individuals based on their perceived future economic and cultural contributions to society, (2) prioritizing competition to develop and identify a hierarchy of individual, group, and institutional value, and (3) imposing systems of standardization and accountability to maximize (1) and (2). These narratives are briefly outlined below.

Perceived Value

From a neoliberal lens, students are sorted according to their perceived future economic and cultural contributions to society. A hallmark of neoliberalism is the ever-narrowing constructs of ‘normal’ and ‘ideal’ (Waltz, 2020) and systemized comparisons and rankings. This is accomplished in schools through testing, ability grouping, and directing ‘low ability’ students

onto set pathways via placement in part-time or full-time segregated settings, which begins as early as Kindergarten (Parekh, 2022). These and other exclusionary practices—such as suspensions, expulsions, and a differential curriculum which contributes to a skills gap—disproportionally impact learners who are racialized, working class, neurominority and/or disabled (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019; Gilliam, 2005; Hammond, 2015; Parekh, 2022). Subjective measures can determine which trajectory a learner is directed toward while downplaying the impact of access and resources to metrics of ability or intelligence (Darling-Hammond, 1995; Fendler & Muzaffar, 2008; Parekh, 2022).

Competition

Neoliberalism inculcates hierarchical and bell curve thinking, which suggests learner groupings should be comprised of a limited number of high achievers, a limited number of low achievers, and a larger group of middle performers. International assessments like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), designed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), provide global comparison of education systems, students, and economies, ranking countries against one another. Nations compete to outperform others and some countries have been criticized for skewing data by restricting certain students from test-taking (Rycroft-Smith, 2016), potentially erasing disability or less “productive” learners from assessments. Conversely exceptional results are expected from other learners. For example, Finnish politicians decried consistently high PISA results across Finnish student demographics as a failure of teachers to adequately support the projected superior achievement of gifted students, rather than lauding equitable outcomes (Rautalin & Alasuutari, 2009). At local levels, in Ontario, Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) test results are compiled by the Fraser Institute, which assigns scores to schools across the province which impact neighbourhood desirability and house prices (Ross, 2015).

Standardization and Accountability

In contrast to more holistic approaches to teaching and learning which embrace a depth and breadth of human experience and interconnectedness (Miller, 2019), the systemization of standardization and accountability focus narrowly on individualistic and measurable outcome metrics that are explicitly focused on workforce readiness (Parekh, 2022, Shiels et al., 2025). These efforts have reinforced and further entrenched input-output mechanistic views of teaching as a purely technical job, with a set of ‘best practices’ to which all should aspire (Miller, 2014; Rodriguez & Fitzpatrick, 2014; Schön, 1984). Consequently, improvement efforts are often simplistically conceptualized as changing teacher practice (input) to improve measurable student outcomes (output) (Desimone & Garet, 2015; Merchie et al., 2018; Vermunt, 2014).

Macroscopically, neoliberalism has been consistently and significantly damaging for disabled people. The hyperfocus on individualization and competition has exacerbated the harms of the medical model of disability, which persistently positions disability as in need of remediation, and increasingly a personal responsibility (Parekh, 2022). Students confounding standardization efforts by falling ‘below’ the ‘norm’ or ‘lacking employable skills’ may be dealt

with as burdens on the system who do not yield returns on investment. As noted by Shiels et al. (2025), “a neoliberal perspective merges individualism, competition, and personal responsibility while stripping out institutional care expectations or responsibilities” (Shiels et al., 2025). Secondly, research and education have undervalued disabled perspectives, experiences, contributions, and priorities (Pugach et al., 2021; Symeonidou & Chrysostomou, 2019). Finally, the focus on standardized, technical practices has replaced the heart and art of teacher responsiveness with prescribed, oversimplified quick fixes (Symeonidou & Chrysostomou, 2019). Official, standardized accommodations are often depersonalized and ineffective (Nash-Luckenbach & Friedman, 2024; Koßmann, 2022).

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research was to investigate how we, as teacher educators, might break open possibilities in our own pedagogical imagination and that of our teacher candidates, thereby resisting the desouling impacts of dispassionate, ableist metrics of human value perpetuated by neoliberal ideology. It adds to efforts to reimagine and expand approaches to teacher education and teacher preparation that seek both to develop teacher candidates' inclusive practices (Halder et al., 2023) while simultaneously making the learning space more accessible to a greater diversity of teacher candidates (Fovet, 2021; Grogan, 2015). This research also seeks to further the work of critical disability studies and others that aim to break open restrictive and standardized notions of “normalcy” and move towards embracing a mosaic of what it is to be complex, intersectional humans navigating a multi-layered society (Halder & Assaf, 2017; Michalko & Titchkosky, 2009; Titchkosky, 2011).

Our ongoing study takes place in a large graduate teacher education program of roughly 800 teacher candidates (TCs) in a research-intensive university. We are three teacher educators who formed a critical collaborative inquiry group supporting two of us—Lincoln and Kara—in self-study of their respective courses, with Kathryn acting as a critical friend and collecting programmatic data. We aimed to (a) better recognize systemic, programmatic, and individual barriers experienced by TCs and (b) examine and improve current practices and structures with accessibility in mind. By engaging TCs, we hoped to co-create spaces where all learners in our classrooms would flourish. Furthermore, we posited they may benefit both from experiencing accessible, responsive teaching while simultaneously being challenged to envision how to weave accessibility into their own teaching. We discussed conceptual approaches like the three-block model (Katz, 2013) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (CAST, 2024; Meyer et al., 2016), considering how our practices, observations, experiences, learnings, and feedback from TCs aligned or juxtaposed with each. UDL provided a coherent and tangible framework and was the most resonant with our priorities. We began researching and incorporating UDL into our thinking and pedagogy.

Research Questions

What are the challenges and possibilities of using UDL principles to create more accessible teacher education within a large, complex system?

- Can a UDL approach make course-based learning more accessible and beneficial for all teacher education candidates?
- Can UDL support the well-being of TCs?
- Does using UDL principles shift teacher educators' pedagogical approaches?
- Is a UDL approach being facilitated or obstructed by program design and program supports?

METHODOLOGY

This research used a self-study methodology (Loughran et al., 2020; Kosnik et al., 2006). This approach allowed us to challenge hegemonic norms and prioritize critical collaboration, reflexivity, and lines of inquiry rooted in our contextualized practice. Vanassche and Berry argue that self-study in teacher education context “has the potential to open up a different and critical – in the sense of challenging the status quo and allowing for alternative voices to be spoken and heard – understanding of teacher education practice and knowledge that challenges the more technical-instrumentalist view of practice underlying a conception of demanded professionalism” (2020, p. 206). It is rooted in collaborative inquiry through a group of “critical friends” that demands openness to “outside views, questions, and critiques,” and draws insights from a various method to study teacher education practices (Samaras, 2011, p. 4). Furthermore, self-study additionally draws on principles of action research that centre learning through doing in the methodological approach (Fletcher, 2020).

This self-study took place over two academic years. The study focused on the courses taught by Lincoln and Kara because Kathryn was on sabbatical for part of the time, and not teaching a course for the other part, and because both Lincoln and Kara were teaching courses that were themselves directly and explicitly focused on accessible pedagogy.

We conducted iterative research in two stages, although the first stage continued through the second stage. In the first stage, Kara and Lincoln reflexively examined their actions and pedagogy with the support of a “critical friend,” Kathryn, during weekly critical collaborative inquiry meetings (Butler & Bullock, 2022). Initial data sources included:

- Course outlines, lesson plans, assignment instructions, and communications to class
- Audio and/or written researcher journals
- Transcribed dialogue and notes from weekly self-study meetings

At each meeting, we would share new data that we had collected that week, and would discuss implications, constantly seeking insights into how we were successfully or unsuccessfully creating spaces of possibility and accessibility, and collaboratively problem-solving challenges and exploring opportunities. We recorded these meetings and revisited the notes in the second stage. With each week, we found ourselves revisiting and revising themes from previous weeks, a refinement process that ultimately led to the emergence of the key principles reported below.

Following course completion and grade submissions, we received ethical approval from their institutional research ethics board and approached course participants. We then entered the second stage, which allowed for the collection of more data. Additional data included:

- Coursework, communication, and interview transcripts from 5 TCs
- Course evaluations
- Anonymous survey data from 304 program evaluations

The student data was collected from students with whom we were able to connect after their departure from the program and who were willing to be interviewed and have their data analyzed. We distributed the interviews so that we were not interviewing our own students, and then analyzed all of the interviews. We then shared our analyses with each other in our weekly meetings, and again, discussed insights and implications in the context of our ongoing dialogue.

Data Analysis

We used Dedoose to individually analyze interview transcripts, meeting transcripts, and reflective notes. We identified emergent codes in Dedoose after using recursive individual and collaborative identification and triangulation of themes (Samaras, 2011) through comparing our coding and thematic analysis work and through our weekly dialogue. Similarly, we used recursive comparative analysis across multiple data sources (e.g. student work, personal reflections, interviews, and course evaluations, and so on) to crystallize themes (Creswell, 2014). The results of this analytical work is presented below in terms of our approach and its impact on teacher candidates.

Our Approach

Our self-study galvanized us with a greater sense of what we were doing and why, refining principles and applying them to our work as teacher educators and to our respective courses. Foremost, we sought to enact disability-focused, anti-oppressive pedagogy (Symeonidou & Chrysostomou, 2019), identifying and removing barriers that disproportionately impact learners who are racialized, working class, disabled, and/or neurominority (Parekh, 2022). Despite teaching different content and formats (e.g., in person/online), we found our own ways of actualizing the following fundamental principles, which included planning for and expecting learner variability in any cohort; the prioritization of student wellbeing over checklists; and a pedagogical commitment to UDL. These exist in direct contrast to the three neoliberal impacts discussed above.

Principle 1: Embrace Multiplicity

We wished to make room for students in all their complexity and to adopt a more holistic (and helpful) view of all students, their strengths, and their support needs. We recognized and celebrated that, since our own pre-service preparation, cohorts of TCs increasingly represent cross-sections of society, coming from varied backgrounds, countries, cultures, religions, genders, sexualities, and increasingly identifying as being a neurominority and/or disabled. While some headway had been made to improve program accessibility, neurominority and/or

disabled TCs still expressed challenges to us and other faculty, mirroring postsecondary research (Clouder et al., 2020; Shiels et al., 2025) and the broader epistemic framing of disability as diametrically opposed to ability and learners with ‘special needs’ as better served elsewhere. Pugach and colleagues (2021) note social justice efforts in teacher education often exclude disability or address it in a surface way, perpetuating deficit-oriented teacher beliefs about students’ perceived abilities and potentials, strongly predicting inclusion or exclusion (Parekh, 2022; Symeonidou & Chrysostomou, 2019). It felt incumbent upon us as teacher educators to rethink how we teach and talk about learner variability within teacher education. We utilized an intersectionality-driven approach which views a multiplicity of identities as ‘natural and routine’ (Pugach et al., 2021); is aligned with neuroscience highlighting the relevance of prior knowledge, culture, and experiences to deep learning (Cozolino, 2013; Hammond, 2015); and recognizes the interplay of disability with other identities, qualities, and experiences through the value-neutral model of disability (Chapman, 2020), which rejects notions of a species norm or of disability as incompatible with wellbeing.

What we did

- Proactively anticipated students’ support needs in designing the course (e.g., using closed captioning, welcoming flexible products for all assignments)
- Stated “accommodations for all” policy in syllabus, explaining our flexibility and willingness to adjust to feedback
- Included racialized, neurominority, and disabled voices (Pugach et al., 2021; Symeonidou & Chrysostomou, 2019)
- Kara and Lincoln shared their neurominority positionality
- Grounded classes in social constructivism (Applefield et al., 2000), learning collaboratively through social interactions, varied perspectives, and reflexivity
- Explicitly discussed educational practices and their potential for harm (e.g., reward systems, disproportionality, whole-body listening), inviting connections
- Taught accessibility tools
- Acknowledged differing TC expertise and interests, through choice (e.g., readings; topics)
- Collectively reimagined better ways, co-constructing documentation of group learning

Principle 2: Prioritize Community

Teaching is relational work. Cultivating a sense of belonging in community is a powerful means towards enriching learning and growth; an act of resistance to the fracturing and isolating impact of individualism; and a worthy and valuable end in itself. We committed to connecting to our students as humans, believing them when they needed support; and creating a culture of interdependence and appreciative inquiry. We sought to prioritize communal, rather than individualistic, engagement in the course material.

What we did

- Built community and community-led activities into classroom structures and rituals

- Created opportunities for feedback (e.g. an anonymous form at the end of every class) and responding to feedback (e.g. at the beginning of the next class)
- Utilized Greene’s collaborative and proactive solutions (2018) with TCs to navigate challenges in instructional design, assignments, or any other aspect of the course
- Assumed positive intent when dialoguing to determine meaningful next steps
- Explicitly modeled vulnerability, and listened to learn when others shared vulnerably
- Adopted ungrading (Blum, 2020) to the extent possible, providing ongoing descriptive feedback to reduce a reliance on quantifiable, comparable (and competitive) metrics to assess progress, and directed TCs to engage with their learning, and learning goals, more qualitatively and personally
- Left audio feedback so tone was apparent

Principle 3: UDL-Driven Instructional Design

Based on decades of experience working with students with ‘exceptionalities,’ all three of us used pedagogical approaches that were responsive to the learners in front of us. Like many who work in education, we do not believe there is one best way to teach, and standardization of teaching and learning restricts proactive and responsive pedagogy rather than ensuring it. We agree with Hamilton and Petty that learners “should not hold responsibility for educating their educators about their differences” (2023, p. 2). Existing models for supporting learner diversity in K-12 and higher educational contexts include Tomlinson’s differentiated instruction and UDL (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2020). We ultimately adopted UDL because, while not perfect, it provides a “good enough” approach for helping us frame and work with diversity in our classrooms in non-ableist ways, working towards broader accessibility for all students (Baglieri, 2020, p. 63). Initially, our hesitation was a perceived lack of focus on the integral role of belonging and community, but these were prioritized in the 3.0 guidelines (CAST, 2024) released during our study.

What we did

- Encouraged agency and choice for TCs by providing multiple means of representations of:
 - content (e.g., audio versions of readings; supporting visuals in slides)
 - expression (e.g., written, audio, images, video)
 - action and engagement (e.g., lecture, small group, whole-class discussion, activities, student-led learning)
- Actively responded to the TCs in our classrooms, continuously adjusting environment and instructional approaches to better meet more needs.
- Carried forward specific feedback to inform structural and systemic changes in our instruction. We sought to change our expectations, routines, and norms in the present and future
- Co-constructed criteria (e.g., class norms, rubrics for assignments)

Impacts

Overall, embracing multiplicity, commitment to community, and adoption of UDL-driven instructional design created spaces for possibilities which surpassed what we initially envisioned. Excitingly, this led to feedback loops with TCs that seemed to take on their own momentum, inspiring further positive change. While some challenges emerged, and are addressed below, the benefits were profound for teacher educators and TCs alike.

Principle 1: Embrace Multiplicity

Embracing multiplicity had a number of expected and unexpected positive impacts. Students came to consider their own experiences as learners and make connections to their current and/or future students. Many appreciated how direct instruction and encouragement to use accessibility tools “helped me learn about myself from sort of a metacognitive place.” This was also true for students who did not identify as a neurominority. Each term, multiple students would report gleaning insights into their own processing, such as comprehending better when listening to a reading using a text-to-speech reader or a particular font, or finding it easier to approach work using the Pomodoro technique, which incorporates setting a goal for a short work period followed by a break. Some expressed newfound confidence as an educator:

I was surprised and impressed by my ability to think out loud on the spot, guided by the structure of the document I was working with. It gives me confidence in my ability to think out loud, which I've been aware of but unsure of how to use. It also showed me that preparing a structure ahead of time can help me do a better job and stay on track when thinking out loud.

Conversations about identities and neurodivergence in particular was embraced as a positive challenge to internalized beliefs, which TCs came to recognize resulted from the zeitgeist of neoliberalism which has led to stratification of individuals across lines of class, race, culture, ability, gender, and sexuality (Parekh, 2022). Kara’s course on neurodiversity had a high ratio of neurominority students (or ones discovering their own neurodivergence) and both Kara and Lincoln were often approached privately for advice or to express gratitude for being openly neurominority. Students who identified as in the neuromajority also appreciated this positionality. Everyone benefitted when neurominority students opted to share their school experiences in whole-class discussions:

we were talking about neurodiversity and because I was learning things that applied to me directly and because I wanted my colleagues, my peers, to be able to benefit and their future students to be able to benefit from whatever I'm learning about myself. I ended up being very open about a lot of that stuff. And I had sort of ... come out to them already before these classes but now it's like, oh, now there's actually some understanding. Now there's actually some support.

As we revisited concepts and shared our varied experiences, TCs would experience dawning of realizations, such as how having structure and order in a classroom does not require rewards or

punishments, which are reliant on the assumption that students do not want to do well on their own. They could recognize that a practice which served them could be harmful to others.

TCs relished new non-pathologizing paradigms and approaches and the process of becoming more aware of their own biases and assumptions. They often expressed a desire for more modeling of non-normative practices in other classroom environments. Several concepts were cited as paradigm shifts, including the value-neutral model (Chapman, 2020), collaborative and proactive solutions to problem-solve with students (Greene, 2018), and limbic braking, an automatic and unconscious shutdown that occurs when effort exceeds current capacity (Shanker, 2020). TCs came to understand their students, selves, and loved ones more holistically. TCs also described how simultaneously experiencing and reflecting on pedagogies that expected and welcomed all learners was personally and professionally transformative. All TCs, regardless of neurology, came to understand the harms of normative thinking and the ways in which neoliberalism shaped their views on productivity and societal value. The course allowed them to disentangle their worth from their work: “it took pressure off of me and allowed me to feel human when days weren't going as great.” Neurominority TCs expressed releasing shame and giving themselves greater grace. As one noted in a multimodal assessment, the course taught them that “I’m not broken. Not a broken robot or failed competitor or weirdo whose entire life is pathologized ... I’m a reasonable and excellent human being with human limits and gifts. I’m part of variety, not deviation.”

Learning through multiplicity also illuminated new possibilities for their own teaching. Most TCs initially expressed apprehension about all of the needs in classrooms. In Kara’s class, TCs co-constructed a record of their evolving learning, listing important considerations for teachers, such as: “Have students read their work to you so you can hear what they’ve written rather than getting distracted by how they’ve written it (messy, spelling errors, etc.)” and “What assumptions do I attach to various disabilities? How do I challenge these assumptions in my practice?” TCs were often emboldened by their new knowledge:

I think it's important to experience this at a graduate level so that we can appreciate how multiple means of expression is simply another way to achieve the same high level of communicating thinking, maintaining high expectations while offering diverse yet equally valid routes to achieve them. I anticipate having a much easier time correcting misconceptions about 'superior vs inferior modes of communication' with this experience in my back pocket.

Throughout the course, TCs shared how they applied new insights to support family members, students, or others. One TC generated ideas with a choir conductor for how to support children: “I brought up having them see our routine visually, to develop their self-regulation and also provide structure that they can adjust to. I also brought up setting up a bit more of a learning community through choral goals that the students can come up with!” Learning as a collective seemed to cause a ripple effect of awareness of neurodiversity-affirming and accessible pedagogy, centred on students.

Principle 2: Prioritize Community

Upholding community over competition improved our instruction, our shared experience of the class, and relationships between TCs beyond the classroom. One TC shared how Lincoln's initial community-building activity in September of their second year in the program united their cohort as a community for the first time, buttressing their journey through the program and into teaching. Another TC spoke about the significance of community-building efforts on the deep sense of cohort community that subsequently developed. Significantly, we saw these effects both in-person and online, as one TC in Kara's class noted:

I felt cared for in check-ins throughout the class and the mindfulness breaks and the learning-resources that were suggested at the end of class. I felt my voice would be heard and listened to when I had thoughts to share, and sometimes I feel that is difficult on Zoom.

Sharing became the norm, as TCs became increasingly comfortable bringing themselves into the community. Examples include TCs leading yoga sessions or bread-making sessions to start the class, and final class mini-concerts, poetry readings and virtual gallery walks. One profound and unexpected impact was TC enhancement of the learning experience. For example, ahead of a challenging class on trauma-sensitive classrooms, one TC reached out

I had an idea of something I would like to contribute if you are okay with it. I was thinking about what I was going to bring with me to class to just support attention issues/anxiety/whatevs that might come up for me, and then I thought that I would actually love to offer that to everyone. My partner and I have purchased a bunch of fidget toys for our future classes, so I was thinking that maybe I could bring in some of those and maybe also some colouring sheets, some funsize treats, and anything else cool that I think of. It would be like a little self-care toolbox that people can use during the class, which I think might be extra useful given the time of year. Let me know what you think!

Another impact was on the space it created for TCs to address their own needs in new ways. Multiple TCs spoke about particular socio-emotional or other challenges for the first time, finding space in our classes and support from the class community. TCs responded to one another and to us with compassion and care. Even beyond TCs as individuals, the space for TCs to contribute to the community led to moments of profound leadership in the face of intense local and international political crises.

Finally, consistent modeling of these principles inspired TCs in their own work and life. Reminders that TC wellbeing is more important than our agenda and that self-care is even more vital when deadlines approach gave TCs permission to rest and to recognize that their worth was not their work. They spoke to the power of seeing through this lens when looking at their own students. It is important to note that the explicit and intentional community building efforts did not take up more than 10-15 minutes of any given class time. However, they created new norms for sharing and vulnerability which consistently generated powerful moments within small group and whole-class interactions.

An essential shift from quantitative assessment to qualitative assessment also enabled TCs to focus on the process and enjoyment of learning rather than on getting the highest mark. We dissuaded TCs from trying to present us with the “perfect answer” or using AI, as assignments were heavily reflexive. We encouraged personal reflections that were raw and unpolished, reflecting the original thinking, questions, and connections of TCs. Their wonderings and ideas were often woven into future classrooms and explicitly acknowledged as coming from TCs. As TCs realized there was no penalty for not knowing, they reported freedom to explore new forms of expression, which would have been stifled if tasks were issued a grade. They expressed greater enjoyment and awareness of learning, and working harder without the validation of a grade: “I learned loads, participated more than I usually do, and overall this course caused me the least stress despite having roughly the same, or even a slightly higher, workload as other courses.”

Not only did TCs quickly move away from a competitive orientation towards each other to a cooperative and collaborative one, but they brought in themselves and enriched the communal space in ways that we never expected or imagined.

Principle 3: UDL-Driven Instructional Design

We combined our UDL-driven instructional design with talking about our pedagogical choices throughout to enhance teacher education (Fovet, 2021). This significantly impacted TC engagement in the course material and their teaching philosophies. First, choice of readings, reading formats, questions, and response modalities allowed TCs to engage in ways that worked better for them, inspiring a sense of what was possible, and acting as positive affirmation for this engagement. One TC appreciated “the freedom to explore in this way, including in weekly self-reflections, has not only given me the joy of multiple means of expression, it has also made my thinking more flexible and creative even when I stick to modes that are more familiar.” New discoveries inspired further exploration, expression, and metacognition. One shared their realization that they “really benefit from the option to make a mind map to visually connect my ideas together. I have found that expressing my learning in a visual way actually consolidates my learning a lot for me.” The depth and quality of TC work, both in smaller less significant tasks and larger, summative assignments was enriched as a result. Instead of formulaic responses to prompts, we received visualizations, interactive websites, videos, and other forms of submissions that capitalized on an intersection of form and function to explore areas of interest and passion, such as infographics, videos, Wikis, podcasts, and more.

Moving beyond simply learning about UDL to *experiencing* it as learners had a significant impact on what they could and would do as teachers in their own classrooms. One TC was asked to present on UDL to the school staff at her practicum placement school. Strikingly, she reported not only feeling up to the task, but inspired to share about the approach because her experiences as a learner in a setting where UDL was intentionally modeled made her appreciate its power and potential in the classroom. Another student reflected on the usefulness of UDL in countering colonial mindsets and structures which limit potential and oppress possibilities:

“resist, resist, resist.” She spoke about how UDL enlightened a path forward through the paradox of systems and institutions of schooling, which are simultaneously powerful opportunities for liberation and mechanisms of oppression and suppression. This impact underscored the sparsity of such experiences in their previous classroom experiences; the benefits of adopting UDL-driven design in terms of TC learning experiences and engagement; and the power of experiencing an explicitly modeled UDL approach to teaching and learning on the capacity and motivation of TCs to adopt a similar approach themselves.

Challenges

While the impacts of our commitment to these three principles were extensive and overwhelmingly positive, there were challenges that emerged. These generally fell into two categories. The first involved tensions within our instructional practices. For example, while our commitment to the multiplicity of our learners and flexibility in TC engagement was strong and explicit, it also required a delicate balancing act between offering concrete clarity in expectations and deadlines to support work completion with flexibility for how assignments are completed and when. The second category of challenge involved tensions with programmatic structures and expectations. For example, university grading expectations undermined efforts to fully commit to ungrading, so course performance was ultimately reduced to a single, comparative grade. Kara mitigated this by having TCs suggest their own grade. We also noted the demands of the overall program on TCs, limiting their capacity to engage in all of their learning as fulsomely as they may otherwise want. This was especially significant for many TCs who are facing barriers such as financial hardship or housing insecurity. Creating spaces for supporting a variety of TCs’ experience in and of the program is another area for exploration.

CONCLUSION

“To be on the side of justice, educators must take seriously the notion that history is open, and that it is necessary for people to think otherwise to act otherwise, especially if they take seriously that the role of higher education is to enable young people and others to be able to imagine and bring into being alternative democratic futures and horizons of possibility.” (Apple et al., 2022, p. 256)

Education propagates normativity through replication of hegemonic values. Teacher educators are on the frontlines of combatting neoliberal and normative assumptions which attempt to standardize students, teachers, teaching, and learning. Through this self-study within a large graduate teacher education program in Ontario, we examined our attempts to resist neoliberal narratives which differentiate our value as individuals, pathologize difference, incentivize competition over collaboration, and which harness the rhetoric of standardization and accountability to further both. We committed to embracing multiplicity, prioritizing the cultivation of community over competition, and the application of UDL guidelines to transform our pedagogy to support all learners. Although the minutiae of enacting UDL varied between our unique classroom contexts, the general principles translated into classrooms bustling with

interactions, with learners prepared to discuss the readings, and with teacher educators and TCs learning with and from each another. Powerful impacts resulted from the simultaneous experience of explicitly-modeled UDL, responsiveness to learners, and the creation of space to collectively imagine better ways of expecting, welcoming, and supporting learner variability in classrooms.

While what we witnessed exceeded our expectations, we realize inclusion and accessibility are iterative processes with moving targets, rather than a finish line (Parekh, 2022). More work is needed to listen to and learn from disabled and neurominority voices, particularly those with intersecting subjectivities such as race, class, sexuality, and gender. Just as students in schools are comprised of a spectrum of neuro- and other forms of diversity, teaching staff and teaching candidates should also reflect the full range of human diversity. Designing spaces of possibility where teacher educators and TCs can envision accessible, affirming teaching and learning together requires ongoing reflexivity and intentional commitment to anti-oppressive teaching. To support this work, teacher education programs can demonstrate an ethos of care—antithetical to neoliberalism—which humanizes and listens to students to improve access and belonging (Dymond, 2025; Shiels, 2025). As bastions to accessible and compassionate pedagogy, programs can redesign curricula to position learner complexities and variabilities as sources of richness and potential within the classroom, rather than as catalysts for additional work and increased burden.

Ultimately, we hope that this study serves as a valuable illustration that resisting the hegemony of neoliberalism in teacher education is not only possible, but that it can be transformative beyond our capacity to imagine.

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