

## The Power of Example? Lessons Learned About Equity and Inclusion Through COVID-19 Teacher Education Courses

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**Abstract:** The shift to remote teaching during COVID-19 raised awareness of inequities built into traditional teacher education, as well as limitations to the inclusiveness of teacher educators' accepted practices. Findings from student (n=170) and instructor (n=30) questionnaires are presented from a mixed-methods study that explores how the pandemic experience affected teacher educators' equitable teaching practices, and the impact of their modeling on the future instructional priorities of their in-service and pre-service students.

### Introduction

Teacher educators must always be concerned both for their students' learning, and their students' own future teaching. Moreover, teacher educators not only teach through the material they cover, but also through the modelling they provide (Moore & Bell, 2019). The shift to remote teaching during COVID-19 raised awareness of inequities built into traditional teacher education, and limitations to the inclusiveness of teacher educators' prior accepted practices. Snapshots of students' homes and lives, realizations about what tools and conditions for learning were(n't) at students' disposal, and insights about assumptions baked into traditional program structures all fostered new awareness of barriers to equitable participation and learning in teacher education. Many of these equity issues were not actually new during COVID-19, only more visible. Long-standing inequities related to race, gender, socio-economic status, diverse learning needs and mental health challenges were well-documented before the pandemic (e.g., Linden, Boyes, & Stuart, 2021); but the necessity to re-design courses to accommodate COVID-19 protocols provided an opportunity for teacher educators to rethink traditional assumptions and practices, some of which had treated such inequities as normal and acceptable.

Many faculties of education in Canada have made commitments to pursue equity and inclusion in their programs and practices, and have made some progress meeting them. However, it was uncertain to what extent such progress could or would be maintained under the limitations of remote teaching conditions. Our study generated data about the equitable and inclusive practices that teacher educators at one Canadian faculty of education implemented during emergency COVID-19 remote teaching, and the insights their pre-service and in-service students took away from this modeling for their own teaching practice.

### Methods

This data comes from a multiple-case study of teacher educators' design choices intended to address challenges of equity and inclusion. We took a sequential mixed-methods approach, using instructor questionnaires to inform case selection. Student questionnaires were not linked to specific courses or instructors, but were used to provide a general backdrop for the instructor data. Both questionnaires were administered in Fall 2021 and included a combination of selected-response and open-ended items. Questions focused on innovations that respondents deemed successful, that is, their "best" pandemic learning or teaching experience. The student questionnaire (n=268, 11% of enrolled students enrolled in summer 2021) captured the challenges students faced, their opinions regarding strategies their instructors used to support them, and the lessons they learned from those strategies for their own future teaching. The instructor questionnaire (n=30, 22% of instructors in summer 2021) captured how instructors ascertained what challenges students faced, the strategies they used to respond to them, and their opinions about which of these strategies were most effective. Descriptive statistics, such as frequency counts, percentages and means are provided for some of the selected response items. We also present responses to an open-ended question posed to students: "If you already teach or plan to teach, in what ways has your experience as a student in this course influenced your thinking about your own flexible and equitable practices as a teacher?" Responses from current teachers seeking graduate degrees and intending (pre-service) teachers (n=170) were coded by the first two authors into 12 categories related to three themes (student needs and voice; flexibility and designing for difference; communication and organization). Percent agreement across all coding categories was 95%. Finally, the first two authors coded teacher educators' responses to the question, "What teaching strategies

that you typically use to promote learning and/or equitable participation in this class were hampered by pandemic conditions?" in five categories with 94% agreement. Consensus discussions were held to finalize all coding.

### Teacher educators' adaptations

The most common challenges teacher educators noted among their students were non-school commitments, (e.g., childcare, work, 92%), general worries or stressors (e.g., crowded conditions or isolation, 91%), and mental health concerns (83%). Instructors' awareness of students' mental health needs and complex life circumstances drove greater flexibility in the form of reduced synchronous class time (88%) or better access to alternatives to that class time (e.g., pre-recorded or live-recorded lectures, 54%), more flexible deadlines (77%), reduction or elimination of late penalties (62%), more choice around how students demonstrated their learning (54%), and more opportunities to revise work (58%). Such adaptations mirrored those at other institutions (e.g., Goin Kono & Taylor, 2021; Johnson, Veletsianos, & Seaman, 2020). Our teacher educators also demonstrated care by regularly checking in with their students (81%). However, teacher educators found these approaches insufficient to address the social challenges of pandemic teaching and learning. In the open-ended responses, two-thirds of teacher educators described difficulty with one or more of the following: fostering productive group work (40%), circulating among groups (20%), fostering community or connection with students (27%), facilitating discussions (20%) and "reading the room" (17%), all of which could potentially hamper equitable participation for students. Nevertheless, most students from marginalized and equity-seeking groups (87%) or those who were uncertain of their writing, reading and presenting (67%) felt their learning experiences in their "best" pandemic class were *not* affected by such status. Thus, despite struggling with the affordances of the remote teaching format, instructors appeared to have been successful in creating space for diverse students to participate comfortably.

### Current and intending teachers' learning from those adaptations

When asked how their experience as learners would affect their future teaching, most students either did not answer (35%) or provided short, general statements (51%), e.g., "Importance of flexibility and understanding." A few (28%) provided more detailed plans, such as, "Having varied assessments where students can display their learning. Flexible deadlines and connecting with students who may not participate as much. Having different forms to participate in class to manage anxieties."

A commitment to flexibility and/or designing for difference was most common (41%). Some students simply indicated they would be flexible (26%), such as, "Being flexible and comfortable with change." Others would give students choice in assignments or assessments (9%) or explicitly design for difference (14%), such as, "Should I become a teacher, I plan to put an emphasis on inclusivity and working with the UDL guidelines, as well as guided instruction." Very few intended to make learning materials available in multiple forms (3%).

About a quarter of students (24%) mentioned increased awareness of or attention to students' needs and voices. Some (18%) indicated more awareness of students' needs than before. A few noted the importance of being kind, patient and open-minded (9%), the need to be aware of the mental and physical demands of the learning context (6%), to listen and attend to students (8%) and to give them voice (4%). On rare occasions students expressed more nuanced insights such as, "It has made me realize that my students may struggle without speaking up, and as an instructor, it is important that I look out for signs of non-verbal struggle such as a sudden change of grades. Otherwise, it can create a vicious cycle where the student begins to fail, is too depressed or unwell to mention or care about it, and goes on and on."

Besides two students who indicated a desire to incorporate Indigenous perspectives and/or pedagogies in their teaching, none explicitly mentioned ways in which they might attend to the needs of marginalized or equity-seeking groups; though general statements regarding opportunities for all student voices to be heard or to engage in inclusive practices may be based on such concerns.

### References

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