

JoVSA Education Special Issue: Introduction

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JOVSA EDUCATION SPECIAL ISSUE: INTRODUCTION

Erin M. Fahle

In Fall 2020, approximately 56.4 million PK-12 students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019, Table 105.20) and 19.7 million postsecondary students (NCES, 2020, Table 105.50) were slated to go back to school across the U.S. This year, however, ‘back to school’ looked different: The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic forced large numbers of students—from prekindergarten through university—to comply with delayed school openings, staggered attendance days, and virtual programming. This unprecedented disruption of “business as usual” in the PK-12 and higher education systems brought renewed attention to inefficiencies and inequalities that have only amplified as a result of the pandemic. While the long-term impact of COVID-19 is uncertain, in the face of acute adversity we are well-positioned to rethink how we can provide high-quality education to all students, especially those on the margins.

The Education Special Issue of the *Journal of Vincentian Social Action* showcases five articles that provide insight into ways we can improve educational experiences for both students and teachers.

EXPANDING LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH POLICY

In *The Impact of Universally Accelerating Eighth Grade Mathematics Students on Participation and Achievement*, Walsh studies the impact of a universal acceleration policy in a school district, which assigned all students to take Algebra I in 8th grade. Prior to the policy, there were large racial differences in 8th grade Algebra I enrollment within the district—34% of white students took Algebra I in 8th grade compared to only 17% of Black and 21% of Hispanic students. As a result of the policy, all students were automatically enrolled in Algebra I in 8th grade, effectively closing gaps in accelerated course taking and

ensuring that all students were on-track to take advanced mathematics courses by the end of high school. Critically, the shift to accelerating all 8th grade students into Algebra I did not significantly affect their educational outcomes. In other words, on average and regardless of race or ethnicity, students were able to take on the challenge of accelerated mathematics coursework when given the opportunity. Thus, the author suggests that challenging course pathways, with appropriate educational supports, should be widely available to all students. As we strive for a more just education system, this study reminds us that school administrators should reevaluate school policies to ensure that they equitably distribute access to high-level instruction and other educational resources to all students.

FOSTERING EFFECTIVE CO-TEACHING PARTNERSHIPS

In *Improving Co-Teachers Relationships*, Samuel studies the partnerships, between general and special educators, that are needed to support the increasing inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms (NCES, 2019, Table 204.60). Samuel surveys co-teachers to understand how different factors predict the efficacy of their co-teaching partnerships, which have downstream implications for the quality of their joint classroom practice. He finds that partners who have been in longer relationships and who report ‘enjoying co-teaching,’ are less likely to experience intragroup conflict. Samuel suggests that principals need to use this information when assigning teachers to co-teaching roles. Specifically, they should take into consideration the factors that contribute to a successful partnership, like teachers’ willingness to collaborate. More broadly, this work motivates that a new model, in which regular and special education teacher collaboration is standard practice, is needed to create truly inclusive classrooms.

BRIDGING DIVIDES IN TEACHER TRAINING

In *Symbolic Boundaries and the Clinical Preparation of Pre-Service Teachers*, Cerezci and McClure describe how preservice teachers are required to manage the competing demands of two distinct systems—the higher education system in which they are being trained and the PK-12 system in which they will teach. The authors articulate the need to bridge the PK-12 and higher education systems in order to improve the quality of teacher preparation, and offer that the foundation of such a bridge must be the establishment of a collective understanding of professional knowledge, skilled practice, and the value of each in teacher training. In light of the global pandemic and the increasing demands placed on teachers to foster academic and social welfare, this is especially salient. Failure to provide cohesive, relevant training may leave teacher candidates unprepared to manage the challenges of real-life classrooms.

TRAINING TEACHERS TO BE CHANGE AGENTS

In *Building Teacher Empathy and Culturally Responsive Practice through Professional Development and Self-Reflection*, Rieckhoff and colleagues emphasize that traditional pre-service and in-service professional development programs tend to fall short in training teachers to effectively work with students of diverse backgrounds. The authors evaluate the impact of a sustained professional development partnership, between a non-profit organization and a university teacher preparation program, that is designed to promote teacher empathy and culturally relevant practice. They demonstrate that the program helped teachers to identify with their students and to create spaces for students to think critically about social justice issues. Expanding the scope of teaching training to include these important topics, particularly given our increasingly politically polarized society, is vital to intentionally cultivating a positive classroom environment in which all students can thrive.

PARTNERING TO SHARE RESOURCES

In *Mission-Centered Collaborative Bridges to Increase STEM Motivations*, Duffy provides evidence that PK-12 and higher education partnerships can be mutually beneficial. The author describes an existing partnership between the Catholic School System of the Diocese of Scranton and a collective of local collegiate partners. At the root of this partnership are a shared Catholic mission—to promote students' intellectual, spiritual, and personal development, and complementary needs—the schools needed teaching resources and the collegiate partners needed training placements for preservice teachers. By uniting around the mission, the collegiate and PK-12 partners were able to use their existing resources to support one another: The PK-12 schools received new STEM programming for their students and the colleges provided preservice teachers with hands-on teaching experience. As educational resources become more limited, this study demonstrates the promise of establishing robust, symbiotic partnerships between PK-12 and higher education to fill gaps in curriculum and programming.

While these five articles cover a wide array of topics, they share common themes that we can use to ground discussions about improving the U.S. education system. First, they suggest the importance of establishing a core set of shared values among education stakeholders—students, teachers, administrators, policymakers, and researchers. Shared values are critical for initiating conversations about and setting goals for improvement within classrooms and across educational contexts, as seen in Samuel, Duffy, and Cerezci and McClure. Further, building on these shared values, the articles provide preliminary, but consistent evidence that we can improve equity and efficiency by advocating for our education system to become less siloed and more collaborative. Whether those silos relate to barriers in course access as shown in Walsh, divisions

between regular and special education as in Samuel, or disconnects between PK-12 and higher education as shown in Cerezci and McClure, Duffy, and Rieckhoff et al., students and teachers stand to benefit from breaking them down. These studies provide examples of the benefits on a small scale—providing new learning opportunities to students, better equipping teachers to actively engage with diverse students, and sharing resources across PK-12 and higher education—and there is tremendous potential to apply these concepts across the education system. During and beyond the pandemic, we have the opportunity to take stock of shortcomings of U.S. education, coalesce around a shared mission to provide equitable, high-quality learning opportunities to all children, and build a collaborative education system that embodies that vision.

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Erin M. Fahle is an Assistant Professor at the St. John's University School of Education. In her work, she develops and applies complex statistical methods to study the variation in students' educational experiences across the U.S., with a focus on understanding the mechanisms that reproduce educational inequalities. She holds a Ph.D. in Education Policy from Stanford University, as well as a B.S. in Mathematics (2008) and a M.S. in Applied Mathematics and Statistics (2009) from Georgetown University.

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