

Restructuring for Equity and Belonging in Teacher Preparation at High Tech High Teacher Center

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About EdPrepLab

EdPrepLab, an initiative of the Learning Policy Institute and Bank Street Graduate School of Education, aims to strengthen educator preparation in the United States by building the collaborative capacity of preparation programs, school districts, and state policymakers. For more information about EdPrepLab, visit [EdPrepLab.org](https://edpreplab.org).

About This Brief

This brief describes efforts to focus on the social and emotional aspects of teaching and learning and their relation to identity, cultural competence, and equity at the High Tech High Teacher Center and in its professional development schools (PDS) partner schools.

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High Tech High Teacher Center

The High Tech High Teacher Center was founded in 2004 to diversify the teacher workforce and provide the 16 schools that are part of the High Tech High (HTH) network with educators steeped in the design principles of project-based learning. Over the years, the HTH Teacher Center has grown to include teachers from all over San Diego County who are interested in earning a California teaching credential with an emphasis on inclusion, equity, deeper learning, and personalization. It offers fully accredited single subject programs, as well as multiple subject and education specialist pathways. The HTH Teacher Center provides a 2-year credential pathway through a district intern program that allows participants who have prior teaching experience in educational settings to work as teachers while earning their California teaching credentials. Candidates without prior experience go through the San Diego Teacher Residency program and are placed in the classrooms of veteran mentor teachers as they initially learn to teach. The internship program (on which this brief focuses) includes job-embedded learning with coursework, supervised teaching, weekly support of an on-site mentor, observations, reflective practice, and a teaching performance assessment.

In this brief, we begin by laying out the HTH approach to teacher preparation, highlighting its focus on recruiting and retaining a diverse teacher workforce. We then share the program's process of continuous improvement, which begins with inviting stakeholders' perspectives and critically examining the structures of the program, including the course sequence and the need to include a strand

of equity across the sequence. The brief then provides a deep dive into the HTH process of collaboratively restructuring courses and syllabi to lessen “othering” and ensure a sense of belonging for candidates, which can ultimately help teacher candidates develop this same lens and practice with their own K-12 students.

The HTH Teacher Center Approach

The HTH Teacher Center programs are dedicated to improving public education by preparing diverse, reflective practitioners. Teacher preparation is embedded within K-12 clinical sites where participants can experience a practical context for teaching and learning while being supported by collegial mentors, engaging in practitioner-led coursework, and using their classroom experiences as text. In practice this involves:

- **Teaching for equity.** Participants learn by observing their mentors’ modeling and directly supporting the creation of **equitable learning environments** and conditions that contribute to the success of all students. The HTH design principle of inclusion is the focus as participants are asked to ensure their teaching practices are culturally responsive as well as universally designed for learning. Ed specialist candidates and general education candidates are intentionally grouped to attend courses together and collaborate on coursework to ensure that all candidates understand how to serve students in the least restrictive environment—the classroom!
- **Connecting theory and practice.** The teaching experience serves as a text for program coursework and course discussions. Interns are able to apply their learning in their classrooms the next day. This allows them to bring dilemmas to the table in their program classes to utilize **collaborative design** in problem-solving. In addition, instructors are able to identify trends and adjust courses to serve the needs of interns.
- **Modeling teaching strategies.** Course instructors are K-12 educators who model student-centered, constructivist pedagogical strategies. Special attention is paid to the HTH design principle of deeper learning. Course instructors model **authentic learning experiences** with an intentional approach toward depth of knowledge.
- **Centering student voice.** Participants learn to create classroom environments that value student voice and experience; K-12 students serve as collaborative designers and faculty consultants. Interns are asked to design engagements for their students based on the HTH design principle of **personalization**, meaning interns are tasked with designing classrooms that respond to the unique needs and assets of their students.

Recruiting and Retaining Diverse Teachers

The HTH District Intern Program is dedicated to improving public education by preparing reflective practitioners. The program is centered around the HTH design principles of **equity**, **collaborative design**, **authentic learning experiences**, and **personalization**. HTH's approach to teacher preparation involves modeling for interns the pedagogy they will embody with their K-12 students. With this ideal in mind, HTH recently took inventory of its approach, purpose, and coursework.

HTH charter schools are composed of students from across San Diego County. Nearly 50% of the HTH district student body receives free or reduced-price meals, and 50%-70% of students, depending on school site, identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC). A growing body of research demonstrates the positive influences that teachers of color have on all students—particularly on the achievement and attainment growth of historically underserved students of color.¹ With this realization, the team prioritized goals that centered on recruiting, affirming, and retaining a teacher candidate pool that reflected the diversity of the student body with regard to race, ethnicity, and gender. If the purpose is to provide diverse teachers skilled in HTH's design principles, then focusing on these goals is paramount.

Since 2017, HTH has made tangible progress on these goals. Currently, 55% of general education teacher interns and 53% of special education teacher interns identify as BIPOC. Making progress on teacher recruitment and retention has been a vital aspect of HTH's equity goals, and yet HTH understands how branding a program as equity-driven rings hollow if it stops only at increasing the diversity of teacher candidates. Therefore, HTH practitioner faculty also represent the diversity of teacher interns, with 53% of course instructors identifying as BIPOC. HTH remains committed to growing this number.

While HTH made strides in recruitment, it also focused on retention. HTH conducted empathy interviews with interns to better understand the factors that contributed to them feeling a sense of belonging and status within the program. This helped HTH critically examine how its design principles, including equitable learning and inclusion, were showing up in coursework and experienced by candidates. HTH learned that a sense of belonging could be improved by auditing all course readings to ensure that works by persons with disabilities, BIPOC, and LGBTQ people were not just included but centered. For example, in an education specialist course titled Autism and Transition, the vast majority of texts are now authored by people with autism or by adults parenting a child with autism. HTH also learned that it needed to think beyond inclusion and diversification to lessons about othering and shared power.

Moves to Increase Shared Power and Lessen “Othering”

While conducting empathy interviews and completing reading list audits, HTH noticed a tension between the word “inclusion” and its intended purpose. The intended purpose of inclusion is to cultivate access to rich, meaningful academic content and social belonging for all. Yet the word **in**clusion suggests that there must first be **ex**clusion and that the students being included are the “others,” the outsiders—the ones being accommodated or invited into sanctioned and elevated spaces. To address this tension, faculty shifted their focus from simply including diverse perspectives to creating shared power between teacher and student to lessen “othering.”

HTH further focused on lessening othering within the program structure, starting with a course titled Equity and Diversity. While this course was devoted to program ideals and tenets, HTH did not want equity to live in only one course. So they sought to restructure all courses to include connections and practices for students with exceptionalities and Individualized Education Program (IEP) status, emergent multilingual learners, and students from historically oppressed or marginalized backgrounds. These connections and practices were not just confined to syllabi but were specifically taught in each class session and meeting. For example, in the education specialist course around standardized assessment, class activities were specifically named and centered around the intersectionality of race, gender, and social and economic status.

Courses highlighted how these identities relate to the historical underpinnings that have led to the underrepresentation of historically marginalized groups in special education via IQ testing. In practice, interns listened to [The Miseducation of Larry P](#), a podcast that introduces listeners to the man behind the California legislation that made it illegal to give an IQ test for special education placement to Black students, prior to understanding how to conduct assessments.

Creating a Throughline for Equity and Inclusion in All Courses

The following connections and practices taken from the Autism and Transition course syllabus show how equity and inclusion are intentionally woven into HTH Teacher Center courses.

- **Students With Exceptionalities:** Connections and practices for how to support students with exceptionalities with transition planning and disability pride and identity.

- **Emergent Bilingual Learners:** Connections and practices for the experiences of families whose home language is not English as they navigate transition planning.
- **Antibias and Antiracist Teaching Practices:** Connections and practices for the intersectionality of disability and transition planning with race and privilege. We will specifically learn about the experience of a Black family that is raising a young man with autism. The family discusses the implications of the Black Lives Matter movement and the tragedies that gave rise to that movement and its impact on the choices they are making with and for their son.

By adding these connections and practices to every course, HTH sought to ensure that teacher interns did not see inclusion, or equity, as something that resides in one course or as “another thing they have to do” but rather as the foundation for their teaching practices. HTH also viewed it as a way to move toward increased belonging for teacher interns and, by extension, their K-12 students.

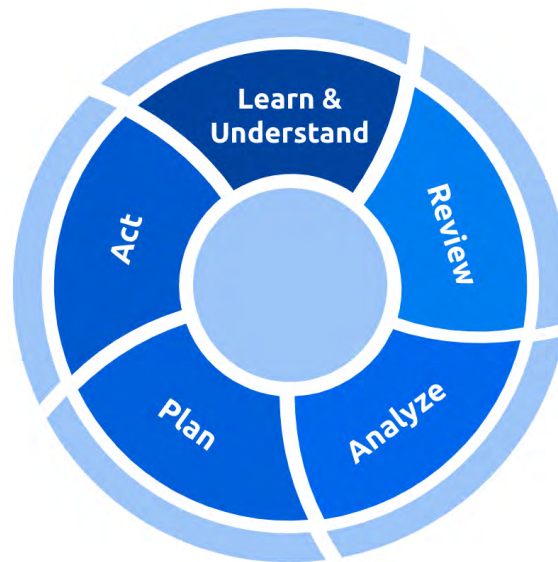
Additionally, adding these connections and practices to courses led to a focus on sharing power with the adult learners in the intern program. Many connections and practices asked interns to center student voice and choice. This forced HTH faculty to consider whether they were modeling that for program interns. Were the voices of interns being centered? Did interns have choice? A focus on shared power involved examining how to cocreate syllabi, assignments, assessments, and learning experiences to be responsive to the needs and lived experiences of the adult learners as well as their students.

The Process Toward Shared Power

In partnership with course instructors, colleagues, and teacher interns, HTH deconstructed each syllabus to balance supporting interns’ social emotional development with building their capacities to lead culturally responsive social and emotional learning with their K-12 students. The Program Collaboration Cycle in Figure 1 illustrates this process. Specifically, HTH began the cycle by providing opportunities for learning via literature and webinars, followed by analyzing the course syllabus and student work, and then coplanning for implementation.

The Program Collaboration Cycle was driven by essential questions that were cocreated with the course instructor and program director and centered around work by scholars of color in an effort to move toward an antiracist and antibias program.

Figure 1. High Tech High Teacher Center’s Program Collaboration Cycle



Source: Cornejo-Sanchez, D. (2020).

For example, **essential questions** for the Brain Health and Social Emotional Development course include:

- Are the readings, theories, and practices culturally relevant to marginalized students?²
- Where are there signs of compliance-driven practices that highlight the behaviors of Black and brown students?³
- Where are there components of healing-centered work?⁴

The way the **Program Collaboration Cycle** is demonstrated in this course is as follows:

- **Learn and understand.** Review and unpack text related to course content, program, and pedagogy while ensuring the works of persons with disabilities, as well as BIPOC and LGBTQ individuals, are not just included but centered.
- **Review.** Dive into the course syllabus with the essential questions driving the review.
- **Analyze.** Examine past student work guided by the essential questions.
- **Plan.** Revise the syllabus with the text, student feedback, and student work in mind.
- **Act.** Present to students for input.

The essential questions provided an avenue to look at student work and see what implications the current syllabus for a course had on the adult learners and thus on their K-12 students. This was accomplished by auditing the readings provided and examining the assignments and their purpose. Through this cycle, HTH uncovered that within the literature on social and emotional learning, there was a focus on the standardization of coping strategies that could lead to a compliance-based practice and potential harm, instead of centering students. With

this realization, HTH researched a more culturally responsive, healing-centered approach that centers student experience and supports students as they celebrate their resilience and design their own coping strategies.⁵

Theories and course content were not the only components dismantled in this process. HTH also looked at how assignments and assessments could privilege some while disenfranchising others. For instance, they realized instructors were giving assignments simply to check teacher interns' comprehension rather than as ways for them to show transformation in their thinking and practice.

As interns exercised their learning in their K-12 classrooms, HTH wanted to see how its courses influenced interns' instruction and relationship with their students. This meant that interns' final projects and assignments needed to be constructed to monitor their understanding of concepts over time as well as reflect on their practice and the implications on their classrooms. In a program with design principles founded on equity, inclusion, deeper learning, and personalization, there needed to be more choice in how to display learning.

To do this, final projects became personalized tools created by interns for their particular practices. This freedom resulted in intern final projects that ranged from ways to provide their students support to a professional development option for their school to a spoken word performance. For example, Damon J. Shearer shared his poem "[Speaking Minds](#)," created for the Brain Health and Social Emotional Development course, a project that allowed him to heal. That course was then redesigned so that adult learners not only had input but were also supported in their development of healing-centered approaches.⁶ This further served interns by bringing awareness to their emotional needs and the necessity of tending to those needs in order to sustain themselves in the profession.

Conclusion and Implications

Through the Program Collaboration Cycle, HTH recognized that to dismantle the ways that power, privilege, and authority show up in programs, all stakeholders must be involved. The voices of adult learners in the intern program need to be intentionally included, and leaders must act with urgency to transparently and critically examine how the systems that oppress K-12 students manifest within teacher training coursework. Without these steps and the urgency of immediate action, programs risk regressing to the norm and complacency. Co-ownership (among adult learners, instructors, and program directors) shifts the idea that faculty are the sole experts and creates the collective community that education requires to be truly liberated.

By critically engaging adult learners in the process, the HTH Teacher Center provides teacher interns with a model they can use in their classrooms—a model that centers and uplifts student voices and experiences and continuously examines curriculum with a critical lens. This lens ultimately disrupts the way power, privilege, and authority show up in the classroom.

Endnotes

- 1 Carver-Thomas, D., Garcia, E., Leung-Gagné, M., & Darling-Hammond, L. (Forthcoming). *Teacher diversity: New directions for research and policy*. Learning Policy Institute.
- 2 Simmons, D. (2019). *Why we can't afford whitewashed social-emotional learning*. ASCD.
- 3 Kaler-Jones, C. (2020). *When SEL is used as another form of policing*. Medium.
- 4 Ginwright, S. (2018). *The future of healing: Shifting from trauma informed care to healing centered engagement*. Medium.
- 5 Ginwright, S. (2018). *The future of healing: Shifting from trauma informed care to healing centered engagement*. Medium; Kaler-Jones, C. (2020). *When SEL is used as another form of policing*. Medium; Simmons, D. (2019). *Why we can't afford whitewashed social-emotional learning*. ASCD.
- 6 Ginwright, S. (2018). *The future of healing: Shifting from trauma informed care to healing centered engagement*. Medium.

About the Authors

Diana Cornejo-Sanchez started her educational journey as a high school Humanities teacher with San Diego Unified School District. She then had the opportunity to be a founding teacher of High Tech High Media Arts, where she taught and mentored new teachers for more than 10 years. After teaching, she joined the University of San Diego Jacobs Institute for Innovation in Education, where she supported large urban school districts in strategic thinking to bring about systemic change. She later became a school director who worked to transform a charter school to project-based learning. Cornejo-Sanchez previously served as Director of the HTH Teacher Center, and she currently supports HTH's 16 schools as the Director of Instructional Leadership and Development. She holds an EdD with a focus on Educational Leadership.

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