

Preparing Future Teachers for Enrichment as Curriculum: A Candidate Preparation Sequence

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Note from the Authors

This collaboration developed from informal discussions and curriculum planning between the authors, who have experiences at two ends of the spectrum: Joan Sinagra Brilliant was an elementary literacy teacher with expertise in differentiating for gifted learners and gifted education, while Emily George was a secondary-level English Language Arts educator who currently teaches courses in special education on differentiation and inclusion for students with exceptionalities.

Purpose Statement

Enrichment is too often treated as extra. Enrichment is a reward, a separate service, or an experience reserved for students previously identified for gifted programming. This pattern narrows access to rich learning experiences and reinforces the idea that rigor belongs to the few. This stance relies too heavily on systems of identification that have historically missed or misidentified students, especially students from non-White and non-native English speaking families (Cody et al., 2022; Ford, 2010; Plucker et al., 2010) and when students are identified they often do not receive specialized education services unique to their needs and are left with unmet needs in the general education classroom, where most of their time is spent (Gilson et al., 2024; National Association for Gifted Children, 2025). Unfortunately, most Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) do not include substantial coursework in gifted education for teacher candidates, which must be mindfully tailored to student needs (Gilson et al., 2024; Brulles & Winebrenner, 2012). If teacher candidates are not prepared to design and adopt enrichment as part of their routine practice, then access to rigor, depth, and opportunity remains uneven (Cody et al., 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Plucker et al., 2025).

This reflective paper argues that EPPs should prepare teacher candidates to treat enrichment as the curriculum norm. Our claim is practical and dispositional. Candidates must assume competence and potential from the start and offer challenges to promote depth of learning for their students. We suggest a preparation sequence that moves candidates through four stages discussed below: awareness, stance, practice, and implementation, with a goal to provide all students access to meaningful opportunities for depth, complexity, curiosity, and choice with differentiation and support built into instruction and thereby work to close the opportunity and

achievement gaps (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Plucker et al., 2010; Plucker et al., 2025).

Literature Support

A commitment to enrichment for all students begins with the belief that every learner is capable of complex, meaningful work. Teaching Up names that stance and calls for educators to push against labels and assumptions that reduce access to rigor; we must do more than assume competence, but also assume potential (Tomlinson, 2024). Once our teacher candidates believe that enrichment is for all and all students are capable, they will begin to plan for instruction differently.

Our suggested belief is strengthened by gifted education research and the Schoolwide Enrichment Model, which highlights the importance of challenging learning for advanced students while also providing enrichment opportunities for all learners (Reis & Peters, 2021). Enrichment is not inherently exclusive, our systems are, but education must promote equity; therefore, educators must provide enrichment opportunities for all students. Classroom-level enrichment broadens access to complex learning experiences for students historically overlooked by traditional identification practices (Ford, 2010; Plucker et al., 2010). When EPPs provide teacher candidates with practice embedding enrichment into instruction, they provide practical ways to challenge and close the gap between the groups of students who are performing at the highest levels of achievement or close the excellence gap (Plucker et al., 2010).

The excellence gap is the difference between groups of students who reach high levels of academic achievement and was described by Plucker et al. (2010) to draw attention to the ways opportunity and achievement remain uneven even among advanced learners. The enrichment gap is one way to explain the continuation of the excellence gap and is not limited to a lack of gifted programming. The enrichment gap is a specific form of inequity in schools: some students are routinely invited into complex, creative learning experiences that are tied to their interests and strengths, while others remain in low-risk, low-level practice, remediation, or in tasks designed for compliance – busywork. Over time, this difference has deleterious effects for students (Reis & Renzulli, 2010). However, when provided as part of meaningful instruction, enrichment supports academic outcomes (Reis et al., 2008). These ideas about the enrichment gap are based on prior research on excellence and opportunity gaps, gifted education underrepresentation, and schoolwide enrichment (Ford, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Plucker et al., 2010; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Reis & Peters, 2021).

Research on student motivation provides the instructional rationale needed for the proposed educator belief. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) suggests that students are more likely to engage and persist through complex tasks when they also experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000b; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Students are more likely to persist through complex learning tasks when they experience voice, challenge, and connection, which has direct implications for EPPs. Teacher candidates need to experience agency-supportive instruction, just as their future learners do. When EPPs are provided with structured choice, meaningful challenges, and collaborative learning opportunities, they are more likely to understand why this stance and these learning conditions matter, therefore they will carry them into their future classrooms. Another aspect adding to the opportunity gap is the pervasive

perception that students are lacking academic motivation (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000; Whitmore, 1986), but we disagree with these non-starter perceptions and instead suggest providing teacher candidates with learning environments that promote engagement so they gain a deep understanding of motivation so they are able to replicate those experiences for their future learners (Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Ryan & Deci, 2000b; Tomlinson, 2024). Simply stated, enrichment, especially when provided with student agency and support, can promote engagement for all learners at all levels.

For these reasons, we suggest that EPPs move candidates through a sequence of awareness, stance, practice, and implementation.

Enrichment as Curriculum: Candidate Preparation Sequence

Awareness

During the Awareness stage, EPPs connect teacher candidate misconceptions about enrichment, differentiated instruction, and students with exceptionalities. This stage is a necessary starting point because candidates enter preparation with misconceptions and potential concerns about differentiation, and those must be addressed before candidates can plan for enrichment as part of their routine classroom practice (Dack, 2019). To reinforce the importance of enrichment, EPPs connect equity and opportunity, including unequal access to complex, advanced, or deep learning experiences. When candidates begin to build background knowledge, we also suggest including discussion about the historical background of these societal and systemic issues and how they may impact their future teaching practice.

Stance

In the Stance stage, EPPs guide teacher candidates into verbalizing their own teaching philosophies, goals, and desired dispositions. Articulating their own self-awareness is an essential step as it is part of critical reflection, which is necessary for development as a person and an educator. Additionally, language shapes thoughts and our thoughts guide our actions (Boroditsky, 2011). Lastly, teacher talk is part of the implicit curriculum and teacher talk can open or close the opportunity to develop student access, equity, identity, or agency (Bieler, 2018), so EPPs have a responsibility to guide candidate language.

Practice

The practice stage connects that developing stance to instructional decision-making. In this stage, teacher candidates need repeated opportunities to translate values into action. This may include lesson design, small-group literacy instruction, activities to support MTSS groups, and standards-based lesson planning tied to authentic texts or classroom tasks. The purpose is not only to write better lesson plans. It is to practice making decisions that enact an equity-based stance. Teacher candidates should rehearse how to plan for depth while also planning for support. They should consider where student voice and choice appear, how scaffolds preserve rigor rather than reduce it, and how differentiation and inclusive design work together. This connection matters because we expect candidates to plan intentionally for learner variability rather than lowering

expectations due to student struggle (Griful-Freixenent et al., 2020). Moreover, practice matters because beliefs and connections alone do not change teaching. Teacher candidates need structured rehearsal to recognize what enrichment looks like in actual classroom instruction. Research on practice-based educator preparation supports the movement from belief to action by highlighting the need for candidates to rehearse instructional decisions and receive and implement feedback from those decisions before they are expected to teach independently (Mancenido et al., 2025).

Implementation

The implementation stage brings those ideas into enacted teaching; the movement from belief to action as discussed above. Educator preparation programs should provide supported opportunities for teacher candidates to design and carry out projects, lessons, and learning experiences during coursework, field placements, and professional service. In our courses, teacher candidates are supervised during field-based experiences where they practice integrating enrichment into lesson planning and classroom instruction. This matters because implementation turns an abstract belief into a professional habit. Teacher candidates need feedback not only on what they plan, but on what they do. They need support in noticing how students respond to challenges, where access opens or narrows, and how teacher language influences engagement and belonging. As stated above, these moves are supported by recent research in practice-based educator preparation (Mancenido et al., 2025).

Sequence Rationale

This sequence matters because it brings together conversations that are too often separated from teacher education. Rigor, inclusion, agency, and differentiation should not be treated as separate concerns. They belong together. Enrichment is not opposed to equity. Challenge is not opposed to support. Student voice is not opposed to strong teaching. In fact, classrooms are often strongest when these commitments are enacted together. When teacher candidates experience this integration in their own preparation, they are more likely to build it into their own pedagogy. The implications for educator preparation programs are practical. Programs can model Teaching Up in their own instruction. They can provide assignments that ask teacher candidates to plan for both depth and access. This modeling is important because teachers often work within pacing guides and standardized, rigid expectations, so candidates need preparation that helps them exercise professional judgement while still meeting instructional expectations (Hemmler et al., 2024). In addition to developing teacher autonomy in differentiation within limitations, educator preparation programs can supervise field experiences with attention to language, opportunity, and student agency. They can also make visible the idea that enrichment is not a specialized practice reserved for a few students. It is a classroom responsibility. In this way, programs further support developing candidate agency. When teacher candidates repeatedly experience enrichment as part of ordinary, thoughtful teaching, they begin to see it as standard practice rather than exception.

Enrichment should not remain available only to students who are already recognized, already compliant, or already confident. Educator preparation programs can help change that pattern by preparing teacher candidates to treat enrichment as the curriculum norm. Moving candidates

through awareness, stance, practice, and implementation offers one practical way to begin. If we want future teachers to create classrooms where challenge, access, and agency belong together, then those same principles must be present in teacher preparation.

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