

Preparing Teachers for Deeper Learning at Montclair State University

Maria E. Hyler, Akeelah Harrell, and Steven K. Wojcikiewicz

Abstract

This brief is based on a [case study](#) of Montclair State University's Teacher Education Program, one of seven cases examined by the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) as part of its study *Preparing Teachers for Deeper Learning*. The study sought to explore how leading programs are creating ways to prepare future teachers for deeper learning and equity and to understand the policies needed to transform teacher education systemwide. LPI research teams collected data in 2015–16 through site visits, interviews, observations of university and school classes, reviews of program documents, and surveys of teacher candidates in each program.

Additional briefs related to this research can be found at <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/preparing-teachers-deeper-learning>.

Acknowledgments

The case study on which this brief is based benefited from the insights and expertise of two external reviewers: Etta Hollins, Kauffman Endowed Chair for Urban Education, College of Education, University of Missouri, Kansas City; and Monika Williams Shealey, Dean, College of Education, Rowan State University.

This research was supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Core operating support for the Learning Policy Institute is provided by the Sandler Foundation and the Ford Foundation.

“Students, the Earth needs our help! We all need to keep the Earth clean and safe! We all need to put in our fair share to help keep our Earth clean!” So begins a kindergarten lesson run by Janine, a teacher candidate in Montclair State University’s undergraduate teacher education pathway. The lesson is one in a weeklong series of integrated reading and writing activities leading up to an Earth Day celebration at the end of the week.

The dimmed classroom is teeming with 22 students, a racially diverse group, exercising their choice to sit on the floor, sit in a chair, or stand for the lesson’s launch. “We want to relax your body,” Janine says as she begins a quick, 2-minute video on ways to take care of the Earth.

*When the video concludes, Janine switches the lights on and transitions the class to the mat, on which each student claims a large circle on the carpet pattern. She asks for a volunteer to retell Dr. Seuss’s *The Lorax*, a story on conservation they had read the day before. This serves the dual purpose of connecting the theme of the video to prior learning and catching up a student who had been absent. The response is enthusiastic, and Janine greets the flying hands and volunteer chatter with affirmation and gently prompts for key concepts: “Dirty, right?” “Remember that ‘p’ word?”*

Reminding students of Earth Day, she introduces a chart displaying the “3 R’s” of conservation orbiting an image of the Earth and then asks the class to give examples of recycling, reducing, and reusing that they have observed. One small voice breaks the brief pause, and this initial response sets off a chain reaction of shared student experiences. Janine affirms each example by adding it to the chart paper.

The student who had been absent the day before raises his hand to tell the class he recycles at home. Janine seizes the opportunity to rope him in, exclaiming, “That’s awesome! What are some of the things you recycle?”

She then segues these shared experiences into the day’s read-aloud, Beautiful Oops, a book about transforming scribbles and spills into crafts. As she narrates, Janine ad-libs connections between the text and class, “Thumbs up: how many of you have ever had a torn piece of paper? Every single one of us.” After showing the crafts in the story, she produces an example of her own: a pool noodle and tissue paper fashioned to look like one of the Lorax’s Truffula trees.

Excitement piques, and Janine calms the class with a redirection to sit now along the edges of the carpet. This transition marks the beginning of the day’s culminating activity: students are challenged to create a craft of their own using recycled materials. Janine dismisses students to their mixed-ability table groups, in which they collaborate for the next 10 minutes on fashioning various animals, shapes, and figures out of recycled scraps.

Janine circles the room, crouching at each table in a hum of excited chatter: “Look at this!” “What part is this?” “What else do you need?” “Very clever!”

Introduction

Housing one of the largest educator preparation programs in New Jersey, Montclair State University (MSU) has been recognized for its outstanding work in preparing teachers. Teacher candidates at Montclair learn to promote active learning and critical thinking while running inclusive classrooms that take student development and needs into account. The Teacher Education Program consists of multiple pathways into the profession, including undergraduate, graduate, and post-baccalaureate programs; two residency programs; and multiple dual teaching/special education certification pathways, one focusing on inclusive STEM education. Despite their differences, all the pathways are intentionally linked through common conceptual roots, shared organizational structures, and faculty and staff who work across them.

Candidates and graduates are well prepared to teach in ways that support what educational researchers and practitioners refer to as deeper learning (see “What Is Deeper Learning?”). Janine’s ability to teach in ways aligned with deeper learning, engaging her kindergarten students in a contextualized, collaborative, developmentally appropriate classroom experience, reflects skills developed through her coursework and fieldwork at MSU.

Employers have noticed MSU’s effectiveness at developing those skills. As one Newark, NJ, principal put it:

I think overall when I am looking at candidates and applications, I am definitely putting Montclair State students at the top of the list just because I know that they are going to be prepared.

What Is Deeper Learning?

Deeper learning is both a new and an old idea, rooted in the findings of research on learning over the past century yet also aligned with the needs of 21st-century students. Deeper learning experiences allow students to apply challenging academic content to real-world problems and contexts that engage them in communication, collaboration, and critical thinking. Such experiences equip students with the skills to find, analyze, and apply knowledge in new contexts and situations, preparing them for college, work, civic participation in a democratic society, and lifelong learning in a fast-changing and information-rich world. We identified five dimensions that define the practices and the vision that enable deeper learning for both students and prospective teachers:

- Learning that is developmentally grounded and personalized
- Learning that is contextualized
- Learning that is applied and transferred
- Learning that occurs in productive communities of practice
- Learning that is equitable and oriented to social justice

Teacher candidates at MSU also rate their preparation experience highly: 89% of those surveyed by LPI in 2016 agreed they were well or very well prepared for teaching. Candidates shared comments such as “It was wonderful!” and “It was an amazing experience. They truly prepared me to step into the classroom.” Commenting at greater length, another candidate had this to say:

The Teacher Education Program at Montclair State University has some professors [who] have inspired me forever and have given me the knowledge, confidence, strategies, and tools that I’ll be sure to take into my future classroom.

In addition to comments like these, candidates responded positively when asked about aspects of teaching that address deeper learning, with more than 90% of respondents reporting they felt well or very well prepared to engage in practices such as using instructional strategies that promote active student learning and supporting students’ social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. High percentages of respondents reported similar levels of preparation for other deeper-learning-aligned practices, including engaging students in cooperative group work as well as independent learning (89%) and teaching students from diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (87%).

MSU’s success is rooted, in part, in the way that all teacher preparation pathways are united by a common vision, known as the Portrait of a Teacher, which itself embodies the competencies of deeper learning.

The Portrait of a Teacher consists of six statements that demonstrate MSU's commitment to preparing educators for a multicultural and democratic society, and they assert that a teacher should:

1. Have expert knowledge of subject area content and relevant pedagogy
2. Understand learning and development as complex processes that take place across the lifespan
3. Apply knowledge of learners, disciplinary content, pedagogy, and assessment to teach effectively
4. Create curriculum, instruction, materials, and assessments that are universally designed and accessible to support the intellectual, social, and personal development of all students
5. Embrace leadership roles to create collaborative partnerships with school colleagues, families, and agencies in the community to support students' learning and well-being
6. Demonstrate dispositions critical to the teaching profession

Embedded within Montclair's Teacher Education Program, the Portrait is used to guide the admission of candidates as well as their assessment throughout the program. It is also employed in the evaluation of cooperating teachers and supervisors and integrated into Montclair's Standards for Initial Teacher Programs.

Program Coursework and Practices Support Teacher Preparation for Deeper Learning

Teacher preparation for deeper learning at MSU is rich, complex, and multifaceted. Deeper learning is embedded in the culture and values of the program, and these translate into a range of knowledge and skills that candidates acquire in their coursework, supported by shared practices of program faculty.

Coursework is designed around research-based teaching and learning theories that candidates explore and apply in fieldwork experiences. The program distributes course sequences into three strands that correspond with program progression: Pre-Professional, Content Methods, and Clinical Experience. The Pre-Professional courses focus on fundamental knowledge for teaching and learning, such as child and adolescent development, working with children with special needs, and educational foundations. Content Methods coursework focuses on pedagogical content knowledge for different subject areas, as well as equity and diversity, in courses such as Cultural and Social Contexts of Families and Communities, Working With Diverse Families, Meeting the Needs of English Learners, and Inclusive Classrooms in Middle and Secondary Schools. Clinical Experience courses focus on content that candidates need in their field placements and are carefully constructed to complement those fieldwork experiences and sequenced to align with candidates' developing practice. These courses include continued methods courses as well as student teaching seminars.

A key focus of coursework is the development of **critical thinking** and the use of **inquiry-based learning**, concepts used interchangeably at MSU. Instructors help candidates to construct their own inquiry-based learning by engaging them in discussions based on critical questions about teaching practice and student

learning. This, in turn, helps candidates understand how to use individual students' thinking and learning to create inquiry-based lessons that are developmentally grounded, personalized, and contextualized. One assignment asks candidates to create an inquiry-based unit to demonstrate their understanding of how to implement this type of learning in their own classrooms. Instructors then help teacher candidates revise their units to deepen their focus on critical thinking. An alumnus who still uses the practices learned at Montclair reflected, "The program ... I think a lot of it is centered around the pedagogy and the questioning skills. I think that's where I really started my preparation as a teacher."

Another important step in getting candidates to understand how to engage in inquiry-based teaching and learning is a focus on **backward planning**, a key concept in MSU candidates' preparation. Backward planning, or a focus on what students should know and be able to do at the end of a learning unit, helps teacher candidates to understand the ideas of scope and sequence for planning and instruction. Central to backward planning is knowledge of the learner and his or her prior knowledge and skills, background, and experiences, along with a knowledge of child or adolescent development. All of these elements, emphasized in candidates' preparation, allow teachers to backward map learning from goals that are rigorous and appropriate for their students. Additionally, backward planning helps candidates ensure that assessments are meaningful, relevant, and well aligned to the knowledge and skills they want students to learn. A faculty member described how candidates work through assessment design through this type of planning:

We try to help them match their assessments to their learning goals and student needs. [It's] a massive feedback loop. We do some reading, we discuss a concept, and we ask them to create [an assessment]. Then they share out and workshop it in their classroom and get feedback, revise, and resubmit. And they can resubmit as many times as they want.

The knowledge of students that candidates gain in their preparation for inquiry-based learning and backward planning not only helps Montclair candidates make learning relevant to their students, but also engages them in Montclair's **commitment to equity and social justice**. The Teacher Education Program accomplishes this in multiple ways across its various pathways. Many courses, some mentioned above, have learning opportunities that challenge teacher candidates' perceptions of students and communities, especially historically underserved students. The program continually directs teacher candidates to the notion that understanding their students is key to supporting students' deeper learning in classrooms, and multiple courses require teacher candidates to spend time in students' communities to get to know them outside of the school environment. In one example, the Master of Arts in Teaching program requires candidates to complete a field placement at a community organization during their summer component. One alumnus recalled this component and how it helped him to learn more about students:

We are working in the summer program and it let us really get to see who the children were; who we would be serving; what the area was like. You get a better grasp of things that they were dealing with and becoming part of the community that way.

It is not enough to simply know students and where they come from, although this is an important step, and so faculty at Montclair translate this knowledge of students into planning, instruction, and assessment, **tying social justice to rigorous learning**. One way faculty help candidates understand the connection among knowledge of students, equity, and pedagogy is by emphasizing teaching strategies that are student centered and personalized. For example, MSU candidates are taught that differentiating instruction is a teaching strategy of equity or, as one candidate in a residency program described it, “meeting the learner where they are and working from that place to develop them into everything that they can be.”

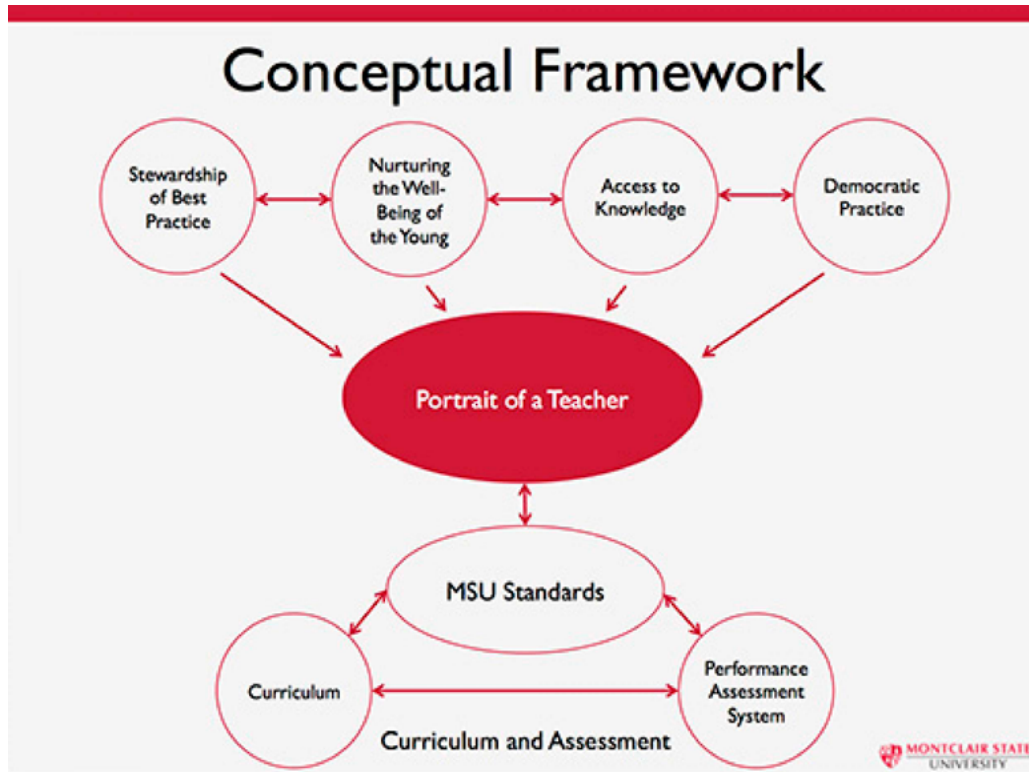
In conveying these essential concepts and practices, **faculty modeling**, in which instructors engage candidates in the sorts of deeper learning experiences they want to see in pre-k–12 classrooms, is used across the program. One faculty member who was deeply intentional about modeling best practices said, “We’re always modeling.... And through the years, [we] have realized that we have to be more transparent; we have to do the meta-narrative.” Essential to that meta-narrative is continually making the implicit explicit, so that candidates can understand the complexity found in teaching for deeper learning. One methods course instructor described pauses during instruction to engage candidates in metacognitive reflection, asking candidates questions such as “What kind of theory are we using?” and “Why would you use that right now?” with the aim of opening up the decision-making processes of teachers. As one instructor put it, “This gives students deeper conceptualizations. They understand why they are doing things; not just how to do things.” In a more direct take on modeling, one MSU alum said simply, “They taught us in the way they wanted us to teach.”

Program Structures Enable Pathway Alignment and Partnerships for Deeper Learning

Montclair’s ability to embed these deeper learning practices across so many programs and pathways, through both coursework and fieldwork experiences, is an impressive example of cohesion in teacher preparation. Administrative and partnership structures and supports are key in enabling Montclair not only to prepare teachers for deeper learning but to do so at scale.

The program maintains this coherent emphasis on deeper learning across multiple pathways through a common framework for all programs run through the **Center of Pedagogy**. This unique organizational structure coordinates all aspects of teacher education as well as Montclair’s partnership network, grant-funded initiatives, and faculty professional development. To support this holistic approach, the Center engages faculty and staff from the College of Education and Human Services, the arts and sciences, and Montclair’s network of partner schools, an inclusionary arrangement known as the “Tripartite.” The Center also houses administrative programs and offices, including the ones highlighted here as essential for partnership work: the **Montclair State University Network for Educational Renewal (MSUNER)** and the **Office of Clinical Internships**. The Center of Pedagogy is itself guided by a conceptual framework that includes the Portrait of a Teacher—described above—and that demonstrates the relationship among MSU’s core commitments, the Portrait, and programmatic standards, curriculum, and assessments, as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Montclair State University Teacher Preparation Conceptual Framework



Source: Montclair State University College of Education and Human Services. (2012). *Programs for the preparation of educators*. Montclair, NJ: Author. <https://www.montclair.edu/cehs/about-the-college/accreditations-and-assessment/ncate-accreditation/conceptual-framework/> (accessed 05/15/19).

Careful integration of coursework with fieldwork enables course instructors to convey this aligned vision of teaching to candidates. It is the MSUNER that makes this integration possible. The MSUNER ensures that the deep relationships between MSU and partner districts support the work of teacher preparation for deeper learning. For MSU, the term “partner district” is more than a title; it is a formal commitment in which district schools are seen as much more than buildings to house teacher candidates as they complete field placement hour requirements. Districts must go through an application process that includes a site visit by MSU faculty to ensure that teaching practices in the school align with their conception of deeper learning. Every district that joins the network pays dues, makes a commitment to its mission and goals, and promises to give Montclair teacher candidates priority in placements. One MSU faculty member described the relationship in this way:

[It] involves us having a dynamic relationship with a school or district where our mentor teachers are really seen as teacher educators.... There is a reciprocal relationship between us and the school, meaning we are not just asking them to provide cooperating teachers for us, but that there is a dynamic relationship where we see ourselves as growing teachers together. That includes their teachers as well as ours. That is one of the hallmarks of part of our work.

Partner schools commit to the learning and growth of their own faculty, as well as to MSU teacher candidates. Teachers and leaders can participate in a wide variety of professional development and technology workshops, conferences, teacher study groups, and action research teams, and they are eligible to receive small grants to work on specific short-term projects. School-based clinical faculty members also serve on committees and task forces at the university that focus on the renewal and development of teacher preparation.

The Office of Clinical Internships oversees student teaching and field experience placements, and Montclair places teacher candidates from all undergraduate and graduate teaching programs in partner schools within the MSUNER. Within these network placements, teacher candidates are assigned a cooperating teacher, who is encouraged to use the co-teaching model. Cooperating teachers are required at minimum to take a critical thinking course before working with a student teacher, and tenured teachers within the network are recruited to become clinical faculty members. To do so, they take three required mini-courses focused on coaching and mentoring, teaching for critical thinking, and culturally responsive teaching. More than half of cooperating teachers are designated clinical faculty members.

The positive outcomes of MSU's commitment to deep and authentic relationships with partner districts show in how candidates described their field experiences in the LPI survey. One candidate commented, "I had a superb mentor as part of my teacher preparation program; being in the classroom co-teaching ... was critical to the learning I was able to achieve." Another candidate praised the field experience and the rest of the program, commenting, "Student teaching is invaluable experience. It is where you learn the most. It is where you see JUST how well MSU prepared you." A candidate in a residency program noted that the length and quality of the placement made the experience a positive one:

One of the most beneficial portions of my preparation program was having a long-term period to apply the things I was learning.... Being placed an entire year gave me time to revisit strategies and debrief with my cooperating teacher throughout the year. The ability to regularly reflect and debrief with the same veteran teacher allowed me a clear view of my learning arc.

Conclusion

Montclair State University's Teacher Education Program exemplifies how a large, diverse program can prepare educators, at scale, to teach for deeper learning and social justice. MSU accomplishes all this by laying out a vision of educator preparation that combines commitments with practices and structures that support those commitments. This vision is thus implemented from the institutional level down to the level of candidates' experiences. MSU's strong vision of teaching, coupled with structures and policies that support its integration throughout the program, also creates cohesion across the variety of pathways that MSU provides to the profession. Additionally, the vision, structures, and policies that define the program carry over into candidates' field experiences, and through this MSU also shows the possibilities inherent in close partnerships between a state university program and school districts. MSU's values, practices, and organizational structures may provide some answers for how to prepare large numbers of teachers to meet the needs of today's schools and to do so while preserving core commitments that are vital to providing opportunity to all students.