



A CRISIS UNFOLDING: THE DECLINE OF U.S. EDUCATION AND ITS IMPACT ON TRADITIONAL TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS

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Abstract

Traditional teacher preparation programs in the United States are confronting a pivotal moment marked by underlying inequities, evolving policy landscapes, and escalating societal pressures. The following article examines the ongoing decline of traditional teacher education programs by analyzing four related challenges: declining enrollment, erosion of robust clinical experiences, the proliferation of fast-track licensure alternatives, and persistent equity gaps in cultural responsiveness and educator representation. The specified trends are analyzed in the article through the theoretical lenses of critical scholars, including Paulo Freire, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, James A. Banks, and Linda Darling-Hammond, who collectively illuminate how reform endeavors and systemic disruptions are reshaping the purpose and practice of teacher education.

The article includes a brief discussion on the recruitment and retention of Black male educators, addressing the topic in three paragraphs, though it is not a central focus of the overall analysis. Researchers have noted that higher education institutions with teacher preparation programs recognize that traditional programs continue to fall short despite a longstanding awareness of the positive impact of teacher diversity on student academic outcomes. The piece highlights the distinct challenges faced by rural school districts, particularly in recruiting skilled educators and ensuring that their teachers receive sufficient preparation. It also raises apprehension about the persistent neglect of equity-focused pedagogical processes in many teacher education programs. This issue limits the ability of future teachers to effectively serve students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

In response to these current trends and issues, the article presents a series of research-informed recommendations aimed at revitalizing traditional teacher education pathways. The reimaged curricula of traditional teacher preparation programs should include justice-oriented recruitment strategies, the development of equity-infused clinical partnerships to support internships, and practical policy advocacy centered on sustainability and inclusion as institutions support educational preparation programs not just to identify and address the pipeline crisis but also as a moral and civic responsibility. The article calls for a continued commitment to teaching that is grounded in social justice and responsive to the communities it serves. Through this transformative lens, the transformation of teacher education becomes a vital act of equity, accountability, and collective responsibility in response to ongoing changes in education and society.

Keywords

Teacher Preparation, Teacher Shortages, Clinical Experience, Equity In Education, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Alternative Licensure, Black Male Educators, Rural Education, Educational Policy, Critical Pedagogy

Introduction

The educational preparation programs that produce teacher education graduates in the United States stand at a paramount moment—one that carries significant consequences for the future of public schooling, educational equity, and the profession itself. For generations, traditional university-based educational preparation programs have functioned as trusted gateways into PK–12 classrooms, shaping educators who have gone on to shape the lives of countless students. Today, however, that legacy is under duress. Following the global pandemic, amid heightened sociopolitical pressures and persistent systemic inequities, these programs now tackle challenges that compromise not only their organizational structure but also the essential mission they were designed to serve.

If left unaddressed, this quiet crisis will have lasting repercussions—weakening the pipeline of qualified teachers, widening opportunity gaps for students, and diminishing the role of education as a driver of social progress. Much attention has been given to the national teacher shortage and the rapid expansion of alternative licensure pathways aimed at filling classroom vacancies. What remains less understood, however, is how these stopgap solutions intersect with—and in some cases undermine—the foundational structures of traditional teacher preparation. While public discourse often centers on immediate staffing needs, fewer conversations interrogate the long-term implications of declining enrollment, eroded clinical experiences, and the shifting perception of what it means to be “prepared” to teach. What happens when rigor gives way to expediency? What is lost when cultural responsiveness, mentorship, and pedagogical depth are no longer at the center of the preparation process? These questions expose critical tensions at the heart of teacher education—tensions that demand urgent and sustained examination.

Although researchers have continued to write and research teacher shortages and the expansion of alternative licensure pathways as potential solutions, far less attention has been paid to the slow erosion of traditional teacher preparation programs. Public discourse often focuses on immediate staffing concerns, yet it obscures deeper, systemic disruptions that threaten the profession’s future. What is missing from the conversation is a closer look at how traditional pathways—once central to ensuring pedagogical rigor, cultural responsiveness, and ethical practice—are being destabilized by mounting pressures. As education preparation programs struggle to adapt, they continue to face compounding challenges and isolated problems rather than symptoms of a larger structural shift. To bridge this gap in understanding, the following section examines four critical and interrelated issues confronting traditional teacher preparation: (1) declining enrollment, (2) erosion of clinical experience quality, (3) policy shifts favoring fast-track or alternative licensure, and (4) widening equity gaps in preparation practices. Together, these critical issues illuminate the systemic forces reshaping how—and for whom—educational preparation programs are preparing teachers in the United States.

Declining Enrollment: A Shrinking Pipeline

A growing body of research confirms a troubling national trend: Enrollment in traditional teacher preparation programs has declined sharply over the past decade. According to the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE, 2022), enrollment has dropped by more than one-third, with undergraduate pathways experiencing the steepest declines. This contraction in the pipeline is driven by multiple interrelated factors, including the profession’s low wage competitiveness (Podolsky et al., 2016), high emotional labor and burnout (Santoro, 2018), and a broader societal narrative that frames teaching as undervalued and politically embattled (Futrell et al., 2003). These factors collectively undermine the appeal of teaching as a long-term career, particularly for younger generations who weigh economic stability and social prestige in their career choices.

The impact of this enrollment decline is especially acute in subject-shortage areas such as mathematics and science, where districts continue to face persistent recruitment challenges (Sutcher et al., 2019). In rural districts, these shortages are often compounded by geographic isolation, limited teacher pipelines, and fewer financial or housing incentives to attract candidates. As a result, students in rural schools disproportionately experience instruction by underqualified or long-term substitute teachers, particularly in mathematics—a foundational subject with long-term implications for academic and career trajectories.

Equally concerning is the persistent underrepresentation of Black male educators in the teaching profession. While Black male teachers comprise less than 2% of the national teacher workforce (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), their presence has been shown to positively impact student achievement, discipline outcomes, and aspirations, particularly for Black students (Egalite et al., 2015). However, the dual challenges of low recruitment and high attrition among Black male teacher candidates remain largely unaddressed in traditional preparation pipelines. These trends not only echo broader issues of access and inclusion but also identify the need for culturally sustained recruitment strategies and programmatic support designed to retain educators from historically underrepresented backgrounds.

Education preparation programs that do not focus on developing targeted, strategic interventions—especially in rural areas, in high-need subjects like mathematics, and among underrepresented populations such as Black male educators—risk making the teaching profession both less diverse and less sustainable. This narrowing pipeline of highly qualified teachers from diverse backgrounds threatens to amplify existing educational disparities and further undercut the foundation of an equitable public education system.

Erosion of Clinical Experience Quality: A Weakening of Pedagogical Foundations

Clinical experiences have long been considered the cornerstone of high-quality teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2006), providing critical opportunities for teacher candidates to integrate theory with classroom practice. However, the quality and accessibility of these pedagogical experiences have weakened significantly in recent years due to both longstanding systemic limitations and recent disruptions. The COVID-19 pandemic

exacerbated the existing strain on placement systems, particularly in high-need schools and rural districts, where the capacity to host teacher candidates is often limited (Burns et al., 2021).

In many teacher education programs, the shortage of experienced and available mentor teachers has led to diminished placement options, shorter field experiences, and an increasing reliance on virtual simulations that cannot replicate the dynamic complexities of live classroom environments (Zeichner, 2010). These challenges are specifically acute in rural areas, where geographic isolation, limited school-university partnerships, and professional K–12 staffing shortages compound obstacles to sustained, high-quality mentorship. Without access to diverse and context-rich placements, pre-service teacher candidates—particularly those equipped to serve rural or underserved populations—are entering the educational workforce without the experiential depth needed to navigate instructional, relational, and cultural challenges effectively.

The research highlights the connection between thorough clinical preparation and favorable outcomes, including teacher retention, classroom effectiveness, and student achievement (Ronfeldt et al., 2014). Thus, the degradation of clinical experience conveys a threat not just to individual teacher readiness but also to the broader educational outcomes of the communities they will serve. Bolstering clinical partnerships, particularly in rural and high-need districts, must be prioritized to ensure that educational preparation programs are equipping teacher candidates to thrive in the diverse and demanding environments they will encounter.

Policy Shifts: The Rise of Fast-Track Licensure Models

In response to persistent teacher shortages—especially in high-need content areas, rural communities, and under-resourced urban schools—many states have turned to fast-track licensure models created and administered by organizations outside of traditional higher education institutions. These alternative pathways—often endorsed by nonprofit organizations, for-profit education ventures, and state-level initiatives—are designed to fast-track entry into the classroom, circumventing the comprehensive coursework and clinical experiences typically embedded in university-based preparation. Unlike Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) or other graduate-level certification programs, these models frequently do not culminate in a graduate degree, nor do they consistently meet the pedagogical standards established by nationally accredited teacher preparation programs (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Zeichner, 2010).

While these programs may serve as a short-term fix to teacher vacancies, they often lack the developmental rigor and cultural grounding necessary for sustained, high-quality instruction. Research has consistently shown that abbreviated preparation correlates with lower teacher self-efficacy, limited instructional effectiveness, and increased attrition during the early years of teaching (Boyd et al., 2008; Redding & Smith, 2016). Candidates entering the profession through these expedited routes frequently report minimal exposure to essential topics such as classroom management, differentiated instruction, trauma-informed pedagogy, and culturally responsive teaching—areas critical to serving the diverse needs of today’s student populations (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019).

A pressing concern within these fast-track models is the increasing influx of career changers who may possess content expertise but enter classrooms with underdeveloped pedagogical skills and deficit-based perceptions of students. Without adequate training in anti-racist education, youth development, or inclusive practice, these individuals may inadvertently reproduce harmful narratives and implement classroom strategies that marginalize, rather than empower, historically underserved students (Gay, 2000, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The reliance on behavioral compliance models or scripted curricula—often associated with these programs—further strips teaching of its intellectual, relational, and justice-centered dimensions (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011).

Moreover, many of these alternative pathways function with limited oversight from university-based teacher education programs, reducing accountability for candidate quality and the longstanding impact on school communities. This shattering in the professional pipeline contributes to a dangerous redefinition of what it means to be “qualified” to teach. By highlighting convenience and speed over reflective preparation and equity-based outcomes, these models risk deprofessionalizing teaching and undermining decades of research on effective educator development (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Sutchter et al., 2019).

To move forward, policymakers must critically examine the long-term implications of endorsing licensure programs that prioritize workforce entry over pedagogical and ethical readiness. Teacher preparation must remain grounded in a vision of education as a transformative, justice-oriented profession. Without rigorous, coherent, and equity-centered preparation—regardless of where and how it occurs—the teaching profession will continue to struggle with retention, relevance, and its ability to serve all learners equitably.

Widening Equity Gaps in Preparation: A Crisis of Cultural Relevance

Equity gaps in teacher preparation are long-standing but have broadened in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated academic, social, and emotional disparities for students—particularly those in historically marginalized communities. Despite growing national discourse around equity and justice in education, many

teacher preparation programs continue to lack robust, integrated coursework and field experiences in anti-racist teaching, trauma-informed care, inclusive practices for students with disabilities, and strategies for multilingual learners (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Sleeter, 2008). These oversights leave candidates ill-equipped to meet the diverse needs of today's classrooms and fail to defy the systemic forces that produce educational inequity.

A particularly urgent apprehension is the persistent underrepresentation of Black male educators across all school contexts. While Black male teachers comprise less than 2% of the national teaching workforce (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), their presence has been shown to yield significant benefits for student achievement, school climate, and social-emotional outcomes—especially for Black boys (Egalite et al., 2015). Yet preparation programs often lack the targeted recruitment, mentorship structures, and culturally sustaining curricula necessary to attract and retain Black male candidates. Many who do enter teacher education experience isolation, microaggressions, or a lack of institutional belonging, which contribute to their early exit from the pipeline.

These representation gaps are predominantly pronounced in rural areas, where the teacher workforce is not only less racially diverse but also less supported by systemic resources for equity-focused training. Rural teacher preparation programs often struggle to offer field experiences that expose candidates to diverse student populations, further narrowing their understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy (Azano & Stewart, 2016). Additionally, rural communities—many of which include growing populations of multilingual learners and students experiencing poverty—require educators who are prepared to teach at the intersections of race, language, geography, and socioeconomic status.

Research by Gay (2018) and Villegas and Lucas (2002) underscores that culturally responsive teaching must be intentionally and systematically cultivated through scaffolded coursework, guided fieldwork, and faculty modeling—components that are too often inconsistently implemented or entirely absent in under-resourced programs. Furthermore, candidates from underrepresented groups are commonly left without institutional supports such as financial aid, mentorship, or affinity spaces, which deepens the lack of diversity in the profession (Albert Shanker Institute, 2015).

Addressing these equity gaps requires more than curricular updates—it demands a systemic overhaul of how teacher preparation programs define “readiness,” value diversity, and structure access. Culturally sustaining pedagogy must be central, not peripheral, to teacher education, particularly for programs preparing teachers to serve in racially and geographically marginalized communities. Until programs are restructured to support equity in both theory and practice, the profession will continue to fall short in cultivating a workforce that reflects and responds to the full diversity of the students it serves.

Literature Review

The continued deterioration of the U.S. education system—magnified in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic—has intensified scrutiny of traditional teacher preparation programs. Challenges such as declining enrollment, reduced clinical practice opportunities, the expansion of alternative licensure models, and persistent inequities demand an urgent reexamination of teacher education. The present review draws on the foundational scholarship of Paulo Freire, Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, Sonia Nieto, Linda Darling-Hammond, and James A. Banks. These scholars collectively have advanced frameworks of critical pedagogy, culturally responsive practice, and multicultural education to reimagine teacher preparation as an agent of systemic transformation.

Critical Pedagogy: Freire, McLaren, and Giroux

Paulo Freire (1970) conceptualized education as a practice of freedom, where the development of critical consciousness (*conscientização*) enables learners to recognize and act on social injustices. In teacher preparation, Freire's pedagogy calls for a departure from transmission-based models toward dialogic, reflective, and emancipatory practices that empower future educators to be agents of change.

Peter McLaren (1998) extended Freire's vision by identifying teachers as cultural workers who must resist neoliberal reforms that reduce teaching to managerial tasks. McLaren critiqued the dominance of efficiency-based licensure models, arguing that they deprofessionalize teaching and strip it of its democratic and critical potential.

Henry Giroux (1988, 2011) contributed by framing public education as a space for civic imagination and ethical responsibility. He asserted that teacher education should cultivate “transformative intellectuals”—educators who understand their role in challenging dominant ideologies and policies that sustain inequality. His concept of *public pedagogy* supports a vision of teacher education that is explicitly political, critical, and oriented toward justice.

Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogies

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) introduced *culturally relevant pedagogy* to describe teaching practices that support academic success, cultural affirmation, and sociopolitical consciousness. Her work has been foundational for

positioning teacher education as a space where candidates engage in culturally grounded and justice-oriented teaching, especially in contexts marked by racial and economic disparities.

Geneva Gay (2000) has advanced *culturally responsive teaching* by highlighting the integration of students' lived experiences and cultural identities into instructional design. Her work urged teacher educators to embed cultural competence and responsiveness throughout both coursework and field experiences to address long-standing equity gaps.

Multicultural Education and Identity: Nieto and Banks

Sonia Nieto (2000) underscored the importance of multicultural education and teacher identity development in fostering inclusive teaching practices. She emphasized the role of teacher preparation in developing candidates' critical self-awareness and understanding of schooling as a sociopolitical process.

James A. Banks (2004) provided a comprehensive framework for integrating multicultural education into teacher education. His five dimensions—content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture—offered a strategic model for preparing culturally competent educators. Banks argued that multicultural teacher education must go beyond content knowledge to include structural and ideological reform. In doing so, he expanded the field's capacity to prepare teachers who can navigate and challenge systemic inequalities, particularly in pluralistic societies.

Equity-Centered Policy and Practice (Darling-Hammond)

Linda Darling-Hammond (2006, 2017) offered an evidence-based approach to equity-focused teacher preparation, grounded in extended clinical experiences, coherent curriculum, and sustained mentorship. Her critique of alternative licensure pathways highlighted how such models often sacrifice depth and integration in favor of speed. Darling-Hammond argued that high-quality traditional programs are essential for preparing educators who can serve diverse learners effectively and remain in the profession long-term.

Synthesis and Implications

The body of reviewed scholarship has collectively challenged deficit models of education and has called for a transformative reimagining of teacher preparation. Critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988, 2011; McLaren, 1998) urges programs to cultivate educators as democratic agents. Culturally responsive and multicultural frameworks (Banks, 2004; Gay, 2000, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021; Nieto, 2000) guide the development of pedagogical practices rooted in equity, identity, and justice. Policy-oriented research (Darling-Hammond, 2006, 2017) reinforces the structural supports needed to sustain these visions.

As the U.S. education system confronts a new era of instability, these scholars have provided a foundation for revitalizing teacher preparation through intentional design, cultural responsiveness, and resistance to neoliberal pressures. Traditional teacher education must not only adapt to the challenges at hand but also serve as a critical space for constructing a more inclusive and democratic future.

Recommendations

To address the growing challenges confronting traditional teacher preparation programs, a transformative reimagining is required—one grounded in research and equity-centered frameworks. Drawing from the scholarship of Banks (2004), Darling-Hammond (2006, 2017), Freire (1970), Gay (2000), Giroux (2011), and Ladson-Billings (1995), the following recommendations offer an actionable path forward to restore the relevance, quality, and justice-oriented mission of traditional pathways into the teaching profession.

First, institutions with educational preparation programs must reframe teaching as a justice-driven profession. Amid declining enrollment, especially among undergraduate students and individuals from underrepresented backgrounds, teacher education programs have a responsibility to cultivate a renewed public image of teaching—not as a fallback career but as a profession of purpose and impact. Recruitment strategies should highlight teaching as a vehicle for social transformation and educational equity. Programs should establish reciprocal partnerships with high schools, community colleges, and minority-serving institutions that can be leveraged to develop pipelines for aspiring educators motivated by a commitment to public service. In early coursework, integrating themes from critical pedagogy and public pedagogy can help students see themselves as civic actors, poised to make meaningful changes in classrooms and communities. Educational preparation programs can identify methods to secure and provide financial support, including scholarships for those preparing to teach in underserved and rural schools, which is also essential in reinforcing this vision.

Second, preparation programs must strengthen clinical experiences by expanding and formalizing partnerships with community-based and rural schools. Clinical practice remains one of the most powerful levers in teacher readiness, yet its quality is uneven and often insufficient in under-resourced contexts. Year-long residencies that allow teacher candidates to immerse themselves in school communities, supported by trained mentor teachers, have proven effective in boosting both confidence and retention rates. Rural districts, in particular, which often face

difficulties attracting and retaining qualified teachers, should be prioritized in placement planning. Collaborating with rural school systems to provide travel stipends, housing assistance, and technology-enhanced mentorship could enhance the appeal and feasibility of these placements for pre-service teachers. Moreover, sustained partnerships—with shared responsibility between universities and districts—are critical to ensuring that clinical experiences reflect the diversity and complexity of contemporary classrooms.

Equally important is the need to fully embed equity-centered pedagogy into the design and delivery of all program components. Rather than treating culturally responsive teaching, trauma-informed instruction, and inclusive practices as supplemental or elective, these concepts must be interwoven throughout coursework, assignments, and clinical reflections. Curriculum audits, informed by Banks's (2004) five dimensions of multicultural education, can serve as a tool for identifying gaps in representation, voice, and critical engagement. All candidates must complete coursework in anti-racist pedagogy and equity-based instructional strategies, along with equity-focused field experiences. This preparation equips them to lead classrooms that are responsive to the needs of all learners. It is equally vital to ensure that faculty, field supervisors, and mentor teachers are also organized to model and guide these practices, creating consistency throughout the preparation process.

Finally, traditional teacher preparation programs must participate in sustained advocacy for evidence-informed and equitable teacher education policy. The rise of alternative licensure pathways, often endorsed as a quick fix to staffing crises, has had the unintended consequence of lowering standards and limiting opportunities for professional growth. Institutions must take a more active role in shaping licensure policies by sharing data on the outcomes of well-prepared graduates, advocating for policies that fund teacher residencies, and opposing policies that erode preparation quality in favor of expediency. Policy efforts should also target systemic barriers that disproportionately affect candidates of color and those preparing for high-need subject areas. For instance, tuition assistance, loan forgiveness, and housing stipends for candidates in comprehensive, equity-centered preparation programs would help diversify and stabilize the future teaching workforce.

These recommendations are not isolated interventions but interconnected strategies designed to elevate educational preparation programs as both a professional and moral endeavor. Educational teacher preparation programs should consider reframing the teaching profession, investing in immersive clinical experiences, embedding equity throughout the preparation, and pursuing policy reform by collectively offering a roadmap for renewing the promise of traditional teacher preparation programs. In doing so, institutions can fulfill their obligation to prepare educators who are not only skilled practitioners but also advocates for justice and inclusion in every classroom they enter.

Conclusion

The crisis facing traditional teacher preparation programs in the United States is not simply a matter of declining enrollment of traditional teacher education majors or evolving licensure policies—it reflects a more profound systemic shift that challenges the profession's identity, purpose, and future. As the data and critical scholarship suggest, these challenges are rooted in longstanding inequities, intensified by recent disruptions, and compounded by policy responses that prioritize expediency over rigor, justice, and sustainability.

If teacher education is to remain a credible and transformative force within public education, radical reimagining of policy, recruitment, and curriculum is necessary. The ideology of rethinking teacher preparation means centering on the lived experiences of diverse learners, embedding equity and culturally responsive pedagogy into every layer of preparation, and reaffirming the moral imperative of teaching as a form of public service and civic leadership. It also requires strategic investment—financial, structural, and ideological—in comprehensive preparation pathways that honor the complexity of teaching and support the development of a diverse, critically conscious educator workforce.

The recommendations presented here are more than programmatic reforms; they represent a call to action for institutions, policymakers, and communities. By reframing teaching as a justice-centered profession, expanding access to robust clinical experiences—particularly in rural and underserved areas—and embedding equity-driven pedagogy and policy advocacy into the heart of teacher preparation, we can begin to restore both the credibility and impact of traditional programs.

Ultimately, the renewal of educational preparation programs is not just about creating qualified teachers to enter the PK–12 sector—it is about preparing and equipping educators to confront injustice, cultivate inclusive classrooms, and lead transformative changes in schools and society. The moment is urgent, but the path forward is clear. Traditional teacher preparation programs must evolve—not merely to survive but to lead.

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