

Lessons from a Unified Interdisciplinary Assignment Across Four Courses in a Teacher Education Program

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ABSTRACT

This article reports a critical ethnographic study of a cross-course, interdisciplinary assignment that engaged teacher candidates with equity, diversity, inclusion, decolonization, Indigeneity, and anti-racism (EDIDIA) in a university teacher education program in Ontario, Canada. Thirteen faculty implemented one public service announcement (PSA) assignment across four required courses (Special Education; Multilingual Language Learners in the English-Dominant Classroom; Equity and Diversity in Schools; and First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) Topics in Educational Contexts) to shift students from knowledge consumers to knowledge producers. Using a community-of-practice lens and self-reflection ethnography, the study examines candidates' perspectives on the promise and complexities of equity-centred interdisciplinary learning. After the six-week courses, all participating students ($n = 246$) received an anonymous survey; 118 responded (48% response rate). Thematic analysis identified four interwoven growth areas spanning cross-course coherence, asset-based reorientation, power deconstruction, and multimodal technology integration.

Keywords: interdisciplinary assessment, teacher education, culturally responsive pedagogy, student engagement, EDI

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article rend compte d'une étude ethnographique critique portant sur un travail interdisciplinaire et transversal qui a permis à de futurs enseignants de se pencher sur les thèmes de l'équité, de la diversité, de l'inclusion, de la décolonisation, de l'indigénéité et de la lutte contre le racisme (EDIDIA) dans le cadre d'un programme universitaire de formation des enseignants. Treize enseignants ont mis en place un projet consistant à réaliser un message d'intérêt public (MIP) dans le cadre de quatre cours obligatoires (« Éducation spécialisée », « Apprenants multilingues dans une classe où l'anglais est la langue dominante », « Équité et diversité à l'école » et « Thèmes relatifs aux Premières Nations, aux Métis et aux Inuits (FNMI) dans les contextes éducatifs »), afin de faire passer les étudiants du statut de consommateurs de connaissances à celui de producteurs de connaissances. En s'appuyant sur une approche axée sur les communautés de pratique et sur l'ethnographie de l'autoréflexion, cette étude examine les points de vue des candidats sur les perspectives et les complexités d'un apprentissage interdisciplinaire centré sur l'équité. À l'issue des six semaines de cours, tous les étudiants participants ($n = 246$) ont reçu un questionnaire à remplir de manière anonyme, auquel 118 ont répondu (taux de réponse de 48 %). Une analyse thématique a permis d'identifier quatre domaines de progression étroitement liés : la cohérence entre les cours, la réorientation axée sur les atouts, la déconstruction des rapports de pouvoir et l'intégration des technologies multimodales.

Mots-clés : évaluation interdisciplinaire, formation des enseignants, pédagogie adaptée à la culture, engagement des étudiants et EDI

INTRODUCTION

Teacher education programs face growing calls to embed equity, diversity, inclusion, decolonization, Indigeneity, and anti-racism (EDIDIA) more authentically into curricula, pedagogy, and assessment (Eizadirad & Walton, 2025; Kubota & Motha, 2025). While many Faculties of Education integrate EDIDIA themes into individual courses, research suggests that equity-focused teacher education often remains unevenly conceptualized and inconsistently enacted across programs with efforts ranging from surface-level to discrete and often siloed initiatives (Ko-Wong, 2025; Leung et al., 2024). This fragmentation limits the effectiveness of intersectional engagement and prevents teacher candidates from connecting equity, anti-racism, decolonization, disability, and language inclusion across courses, practicum, and professional identity formation (Davis et al., 2024;

Gandolfi et al., 2024; Storms et al., 2020). Teacher candidates may learn about inclusion in one context and colonial legacies in another, but without opportunities to synthesize across disciplines and apply this knowledge holistically, their capacity to address systemic disadvantages in practice is limited (Anumenechi, 2025; Beudels et al., 2021; Noori & Eizadirad, 2026). At the same time, teacher candidates have identified program coherence as an ongoing challenge, especially when courses, instructors, field experiences, and assessments are not intentionally aligned across a shared vision of teaching and learning (Aalde & Jensen, 2024; Cavanna et al., 2021; Levine et al., 2023). In higher education more broadly, assessment overload can shape students' perceptions of curriculum demands, while in teacher education, burnout may influence teacher candidates' confidence and engagement before they enter the profession (Organisation for Economic Co-

operation and Development, 2020; Williams et al., 2022). These challenges were also observed in our own teacher certification program interval reviews where teacher candidates and instructors identified redundancy, uneven expectations, and the need for cross-course coherence as key reasons for the need to design a unified interdisciplinary assignment. These intersecting challenges emphasize the need for integrated, interdisciplinary approaches in teacher education that move beyond fragmented EDIDIA learning and equip teacher candidates with the dispositions and skills demanded by today's complex classroom contexts. This article responds to that challenge by documenting a self-reflective ethnographic study of a public service announcement (PSA) assignment implemented across four required courses by 13 faculty with 246 teacher candidates. While prior scholarship documents the promise of interdisciplinary assignments for enhancing synthesis and professional identity in teacher education (Coleman et al., 2023; Lindvig & Ulriksen, 2019), few studies examine their impact across multiple EDIDIA-focused courses at scale. This study addresses that gap.

TEACHER CERTIFICATION IN CANADA

In Canada, education is a provincial responsibility. Teacher certification in this study's province is governed by the *Ontario College of Teachers Act, 1996* (1996) and Ontario Regulation 347/02 (*O. Reg. 347/02: Accreditation of Teacher Education Programs*, 2002), requiring four academic semesters in a Bachelor of Education program (*Ontario College of Teachers Act, 1996*, 1996). Students in these programs are referred to as teacher candidates, internationally known as pre-service teachers. Following the province's 2015 extension from one-year to two-year certification programs, additional curricular space was created for deeper professional preparation while also raising questions about coherence and meaningful cross-course integration (Government of Ontario, 2013). Since the pandemic, the provincial landscape has shifted considerably as of 2024—46% of elementary schools reported weekly unfilled teacher

absences (People for Education, 2024), which demonstrates the urgency of preparing equity-ready, resilient educators and making this integrated assignment both timely and pedagogically necessary. More recently, the Ministry of Education in Ontario has announced returning to a one-year (three-semester) teacher certification program starting in 2027.

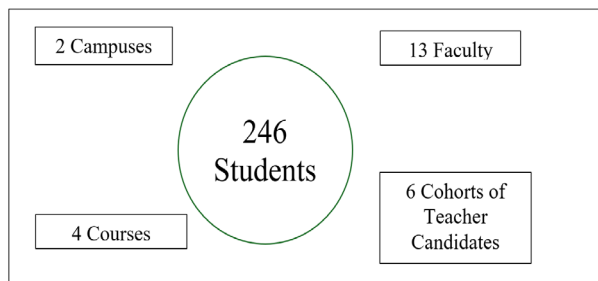
FOUR COURSES AND ONE UNIFIED, INTERDISCIPLINARY ASSIGNMENT

The four courses that offered the unified, cross-curricular assignment are mandatory classes for second-year teacher candidates in their final term prior to graduation at Wilfrid Laurier University. The program operates on a cohort model. Upon entry to the program, teacher candidates are placed in cohorts, remaining predominantly with the same colleagues throughout their two years in the program, including their progression through mandatory courses. This cohort structure promotes peer collaboration and development of inclusive communities across multiple sections in the program (Hale et al., 2024).

The scale of this initiative was notable. The initiative united 13 instructors (one course lead for each of the courses) and 246 students across six different cohorts and four courses between two campuses (see Figure 1). The four mandatory courses included: Special Education; Multilingual Language Learners (MLLs) in the English Dominant Classroom; Equity and Diversity in Schools; and First Nations, Metis, and Inuit (FNMI) Perspectives. Through Special Education, candidates learn differentiated instruction and universal design for learning. With the Multilingual Language Learners (MLLs) course, the class emphasizes asset-based assessment and instruction for MLLs with diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. In Equity and Diversity in Schools, the course reinforces anti-oppressive and critical pedagogies to confront systemic bias and establish culturally sustaining pedagogies. In FNMI Perspectives, the course fosters authentic integration of Indigenous histories in alignment with the 94 Calls to Action for Truth and Reconciliation.

liation, further centring land-based learning, drawing attention to the importance of community partnerships, and honouring oral culture and traditions. As a collective, the courses support teacher candidates to navigate today's diverse educational landscape and honour provincial equity and reconciliation mandates and policies (Danyluk et al., 2023; Le Pichon et al., 2023; Whitley & Hollweck, 2020) in alignment with the Deans' Accord on Indigenous Education (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2025).

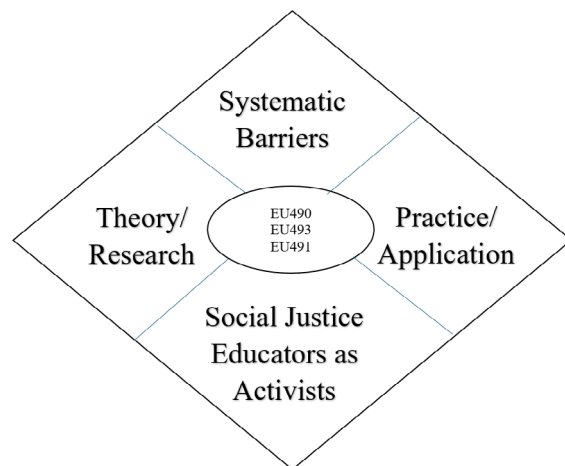
Figure 1
Relevant Research Project Details



Offering these four courses in the final term prior to graduation was intentional. Together, they supported candidates to move beyond learning about equity as discrete concepts and toward critically examining how power, privilege, and systemic inequity shape educational outcomes (Ghaffar-Siddiqui & Eizadirad, 2026). Teacher candidates engaged in self-reflection on their positionalities and assumptions while analyzing how ableism, colonialism, racism, and linguistic hierarchies are reproduced through curriculum, policy, and classroom practice. This grounding supported application of equity-driven strategies, culturally sustaining lesson planning, inclusive classroom design, differentiated instruction, and collaboration with families, which positioned equity not as an abstract commitment but as an ongoing pedagogical responsibility (Abawi et al., 2025; Eizadirad & Trifonas, 2025).

The unified assignment across multiple courses was also, with intentionality, grounded in authentic assessment theorized as assessment that asks learners to apply knowledge, skills, and professional judgement to complex,

Figure 2
Four Courses and Their Foundational Frameworks



real-world problems resembling the decisions and responsibilities they will face beyond the program (Zhan et al., 2025; McArthur, 2022). Authenticity in the public service announcement was reflected in the process of selecting a contemporary equity problem, analyzing it through four intersecting course lenses, and translating course-based learning into a multimedia public-facing artifact with a practical call to action. The assignment required students to work in groups of four to six to create a public service announcement (PSA) video (see Appendix A for assignment description and success criteria). Each class consisted of approximately 45 students.

Throughout the PSA assignment process, each group received formative feedback from instructors during dedicated in-class work periods across the four courses. Instructors met with groups to support topic selection, clarify the educational inequity being examined, strengthen connections to course readings and key concepts, and help students refine the scope, structure, and persuasiveness of their PSA. Feedback also focused on the development of the call to action, encouraging students to move beyond general awareness-raising toward practical recommendations at the classroom, school, and community levels. When students used digital or AI-supported tools for scripting, storyboarding, or production, instructors guided them to consider ethical media use, bias, repre-

sentation, citation, and the risks of overgeneralizing equity-denied communities. Instructors drew on the AIME architecture (adaptive and differentiated learning; inclusive and culturally responsive; multiple and critical AI literacies; experiential, ethical, and evolving AI practices) to support ethical application of video production websites and tools (Ewart & Mueller, 2025). The AIME architecture guided students to use AI not as a shortcut but as a pedagogical and ethical tool: interrogating whether AI-generated content reinforced stereotypes or erased lived experiences, questioning whose knowledge is privileged in AI outputs, and remaining accountable to transparency, citation, and social impact. This framework positioned AI use as an opportunity for ethically grounded, critically reflective, and equity-responsive practice.

The feedback ensured that students could refine their work iteratively to satisfy the PSA assignment expectations outlined in the success criteria resulting in the student being awarded an A grade. While the PSA assignment was submitted once as a shared assignment across all four courses to earn the group an A grade, if all the criteria was met, students were also invited to submit an optional one-page critical reflection for each course to advance their grade to an A+. The reflections were designed to extend the PSA beyond product completion by asking teacher candidates to examine their positionalities, connect course-specific concepts to broader EDIDIA commitments, and reflect on what they had learned, unlearned, and relearned. However, this structure also revealed a tension within the assignment design. Although the project sought to move beyond transactional assessment by centring critical self-reflection, collaboration, and professional growth, it remained embedded within institutional grading systems that often frame learning through marks. The optional reflection thus functioned as both a pedagogical extension and a site of critical inquiry about how assessment can support learning for the sake of becoming more reflective, responsive, and equity-oriented educators while mitigating burnout.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: ETHNOGRAPHIC SELF- REFLECTION STUDY AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Our study is anchored in an intersectional critical ethnographic tradition that foregrounds how overlapping social identities shape teacher candidates' learning experiences and their future classroom practices (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989). Drawing on Carspecken's (1996) and Madison's (2005) conceptualizations of critical ethnography as a methodological and ethical approach that examines how power, culture, identity, and institutional structures shape lived educational experiences, we designed curriculum and pedagogy that invited students and instructors into reflexive practices (writing, dialogue, and collaborative analysis). Furthermore, building on Ellis and Bochner's (2006) conceptualization of autoethnography as a reflexive approach that treats personal experience, emotion, positionality, and lived reality as legitimate sources of knowledge, we invited participants to interrogate their own identities, assumptions, and social locations as part of the learning and engaging with research with social justice topics.

This reflexive stance was enacted by students through their PSA projects, but also by instructors, who met biweekly throughout the course as a community of practice to document and analyze their evolving teaching and share how classes were progressing. Our team of 13 instructors included educators who identify as racialized, Indigenous, multilingual, neurodivergent, queer, and/or living with visible and invisible disabilities, alongside those with extensive experience in K–12 teaching, community activism, and teacher education. The diversity of perspectives enriched the collaborative process, which allowed the team to model the same reflexivity and equity commitments expected from the teacher candidates. Faculty members' varied identities, lived experiences, disciplinary expertise, and professional histories shaped how we interpreted course concepts, supported student groups, and responded to the ethical complexities of EDIDIA teachings. This multiplicity became a pedagogical strength be-

cause it allowed the instructor group to highlight overlaps and tensions across the four courses, challenge one another's assumptions, and provide students with more nuanced feedback. This positionality statement is a methodological transparency practice consistent with intersectional and critical ethnographic traditions that require researchers to locate themselves with the power relations they examine (Crenshaw, 1989; Madison, 2005). Through reflective journaling, dialogic interrogation, and ethnographic self-reflection, we discussed as instructors our experiences teaching a course in relation to multiple sections of the same course with different student cohorts. We also made comparisons across different courses in relation to key themes and how to make interconnections amongst them.

DATA COLLECTION AND METHODS

This study took place in a two-year teacher certification program in Canada at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario. The Faculty of Education operates across two campuses, and the program emphasizes critical pedagogy, equity, and experiential learning. The program also includes multiple practicum placements; in-school placements across primary, junior, and intermediate divisions in both years; and a first-year community-based placement, with candidates taking on greater planning and instructional responsibilities in their second year.

The faculty's commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration is reflected in this initiative, which merged one assignment across four courses to foster a more cohesive and integrative learning experience (Ewart, 2025). To capture the complexity of the cross-course assignment, the research team collected multiple data streams to triangulate them to identify emerging findings. These included instructor- and student-written reflections, PSA video artifacts produced as final assignments, and short "one wish and one star" responses from a survey that was administered and collected after courses were completed and grades submitted. Central to our approach was biweekly structured sense-making and alignment meetings during which instructors shared reflective notes, identified

emergent patterns or challenges, and interrogated assumptions about EDIDIA pedagogies. These sessions drew on Weick et al.'s (2005) sense-making protocols: attending to cues, testing interpretations, and negotiating shared meaning, which enhanced coherence and criticality. For example, some instructors felt that specific cohorts were more resistant to learn about equity issues in relation to specific topics and we discussed strategies of how to navigate resistance. This collaborative reflexivity strengthened the trustworthiness of our thematic analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and cultivated a sustained community of inquiry that extended beyond the assignment itself.

A survey was provided to all teacher candidates enrolled in the courses after the completion of the course ($n = 246$). No identifying information was collected. The survey was available for completion for one week from February 10 to 17, 2025. Teacher candidates received multiple reminders to complete the survey through email, course announcements on MyLearningSpace (the university's LMS), and in-class verbal prompts. The survey prompted participants to respond to two questions: identify a "star," which referred to an aspect of the assignment that the teacher candidates liked, and a "wish," which would be a recommendation for improvement. It was completed by a total of 118 teacher candidates, representing a 48% response rate, considered high for online surveys (Menon & Muraleedharan, 2020). Analysis of the data was done by multiple researchers carefully reviewing the responses and using a customized generative artificial intelligence (ChatGPT) to complete frequency counts for repeated keywords within responses. As described in Table 1, the AI tool supported initial pattern recognition only; all thematic interpretation, contextual analysis, and final coding decisions were made by human researchers through multiple rounds of collaborative discussion. The AI-generated frequency data were treated as descriptive rather than analytical, which functioned as a preliminary mapping tool rather than a source of findings (see Table 1). Codes were analyzed through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. Research team members independently reviewed data sources

to generate initial codes before negotiating them collectively. Attention was paid to both repeated language and more nuanced expressions of critical self-reflection, unlearning, resistance, and application to practice. Table 1 illustrates the movement from AI-assisted keyword frequency mapping to researcher-led thematic interpretation and analysis. Themes were finalized when convergent patterns appeared across at least two data sources.

FINDINGS: INTERPRETING THE FOUR THEMES

The four themes below are presented as both findings and describing patterns in teacher candidates' experiences while examining what those patterns reveal about interdisciplinary assessment and equity-focused teacher education. Together, they respond to the guiding research question by tracing how a unified, cross-course assignment shaped candidates' critical engagement with EDIDIA, moving from structural and collaborative dimensions toward the more affective and critical dimensions of the work.

Table 1
AI-Assisted Keyword Frequency Review for Emerging Themes

Emerging Theme	Recurring Codes/Keywords	Research Interpretation
Cross-course collaboration supported coherence and reduced redundancy	coherence; connections; alignment; less redundancy; reducing burnout; working across courses; thinking across courses	These terms demonstrated students' recognition that the shared PSA assignment helped them connect learning across four courses while reducing repetitive assessment demands.
Shifting from deficit perspectives to asset-based practice	equity; universal design for learning; differentiation; culturally responsive; deficit thinking; strength-based; lived experiences; valuing identity	These terms reflected shifts in how teacher candidates understood inclusive pedagogy, moving from deficit-oriented interpretations toward asset-based and culturally responsive approaches.
Unlearning and deconstructing power through emotional tensions	unlearning; relearning; discomfort; positionality; bias; assumptions; colonialism; racism; ableism; power	These terms helped identify moments where students and instructors grappled with power, privilege, systemic inequities, and the emotional dimensions of equity-focused teaching and learning.
Growing with technology through the production of multimodal artifacts	synthesis; intersection; multiple lenses; overlap; technology; AI; storyboarding; multimodal; audience; call to action	These terms reflected how students used multimodal and digital tools to synthesize course learning and communicate equity-focused calls to action.

The research team met collectively to review preliminary codes, collapse overlapping categories, discuss discrepant examples, and finalize themes.

Theme 1: Collaborative Efforts for a Cohesive Experience Led to a Decrease in Redundancy

The first theme emerged through iterative coding. Initial codes such as “coherence,” “connections,” “alignment,” “reducing burnout,” and “less redundancy” were grouped into a broader category focused on cross-course coherence and reduced redundancy situated in relation to workload, interdisciplinary learning, and assignment design. Together, the theme suggests that teacher candidates experienced the integrated four-course assignment as a meaningful way to connect key big ideas across different courses, reduce repeated assessment demands, and apply theory to practice through a shared call to action. As one student put it, “The learning was rich and the research into one specific barrier and call to action was engaging.” Students also expressed appreciation for the depth of learning that the PSA prompted. Illustrative of this sentiment were participant comments such as “I appreciated how the assignment had us engage with academic literature” and “The intersectional nature of the assignment prepares us for the complexities of the ‘real world.’” One candidate wrote, “This assignment helped me think across courses rather than in separate boxes,” while another commented, “I appreciated that I didn’t feel like I was repeating the same ideas across four different classes. It pushed me to see how equity issues show up differently in special education, language learning, and Indigenous education.” Survey responses further confirmed this pattern where many “stars” praised reduced redundancy, while “wishes” asked for clearer expectations and better coordination across instructors. It is important to note that the assignment required considerable effort from faculty to sustain alignment across multiple instructors and campuses. Faculty reflections complimented these student highlights, with instructors observing that the PSA encouraged the integration of critical thinking across disciplinary silos, while also revealing challenges in maintaining consistent messaging as engagement differed across student cohorts. This was addressed through ongoing biweekly instructor meetings, where faculty clarified expectations, compared

cohort experiences, adjusted messaging, and aligned feedback practices to support greater consistency across sections. In subsequent iterations of the assignment, instructors identified the need for a shared FAQ document and a unified verbal script for introducing the PSA across all sections. These structural supports would reduce cohort-to-cohort variation without requiring instructors to script their facilitation entirely. For instance, instructors teaching the Special Education and FNMI courses identified recurring student resistance to understanding colonialism’s relationship to disability classification, a pattern that surfaced only because instructors compared notes across courses in biweekly meetings. This cross-course awareness shaped how subsequent classes were facilitated.

These findings extend prior research on interdisciplinary curriculum design by demonstrating that cross-course coherence supported conceptual synthesis but also affective and equity-oriented growth. While previous studies document gains in academic self-concept, confidence, and retention through integrative coursework (Beudels et al., 2021; Milankovic-Jovanov et al., 2022), our contribution lies in documenting the affective and culturally responsive gains that accompanied integration, patterns of increased confidence, deeper equity-focused reflection, and stronger readiness for enacting culturally sustaining practice (Eizadirad et al., 2022). Students reported gaining a clearer understanding of intersectionality, universal design for learning, asset-based multilingual education, and Indigenous perspectives while also feeling more motivated and less overwhelmed. This affirmed the importance of both curricular integration and collaborative teaching in teacher education (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Qualitative data showed that students valued seeing collaboration modelled authentically by instructors. Instructor collaboration supported interdisciplinary integration by helping students see connections across course concepts, professional perspectives, and equity-focused teaching responsibilities. At the same time, our study revealed that this collaboration required significant coordination, shared planning, and ongoing communication to sustain coherence across courses, cohorts, and campuses. Fin-

dings suggest that multidisciplinary communities of practice can challenge normalized teaching practices by fostering more equitable and innovative pedagogies. Yet, it is important to note that collaborative initiatives are not without their challenges, particularly when the size of the group gets larger. Melasalmi et al. (2024) identified tensions in “knotworking” collaborations among pre-service special education teachers. Difficulties with role clarification, boundary crossing, and professional agency development emerged as persistent barriers. These barriers reinforce the need for intentional planning and communication in cross-course faculty collaboration.

Our study highlights the hidden labour and sustained effort required to maintain integration across multiple courses and cohorts. Faculty sense-making notes indicated that biweekly meetings were necessary to clarify expectations, compare how the assignment was unfolding across cohorts, align feedback practices, and respond to student confusion. This labour was also visible in student feedback, as one candidate noted, “Myself and many other students found that we were receiving mixed information. We have even found out that the information was different across the cohorts.” Therefore, cross-course integration requires ongoing coordination beyond the initial assignment design. Collaboration was crucial to ensuring coherence; however, lapses in consistency still emerged, and students quickly noticed when guidelines or expectations varied for various sections of the same course. While the same assignment description and materials were presented in the course syllabi and supplementary materials, they were not received uniformly by all cohorts in terms of expectations. This reflects the complexity of coordinating expectations across 13 instructors. This tension echoes Fermelis et al.’s (2008) ethnographic study of a large-scale interdisciplinary initiative where faculty emphasized the logistical and emotional demands of coordinating across disciplines and campuses.

Carbacho’s (2020) six-pillar framework helps explain why integration proved to be rewarding yet challenging, with pillars such as teamwork, academic motivation, and stress management clearly reflected in our findings. Among these benefits, students emphasized the value of

collaborating across courses, describing their efforts as meaningful. However, they also reported stress when expectations were not uniform or when contributions were uneven within group members. Faculty similarly noted these dynamics by identifying that sustaining alignment demanded deliberate teamwork and a willingness to negotiate pedagogical differences. In this sense, our study confirms Carbacho’s (2020) argument that interdisciplinary design supports student and faculty growth but also reveals that without adequate institutional support—especially in terms of time, resources, and recognition—faculty may struggle to sustain the model, particularly part-time or sessional instructors who are not compensated for the additional meetings as part of their workload.

Theme 2: Shifting From Deficit Perspectives to Asset-Based Practice

The second theme emerged from triangulating codes related to “equity,” “universal design for learning,” “differentiation,” “culturally responsive,” “deficit thinking,” “valuing identity,” “strength-based,” and “lived experiences.” These codes clustered around a noticeable shift in how students conceptualized equitable teaching, which deviated away from deficit-oriented understandings and toward asset-based frameworks that centred inclusion (Eizadirad & Trifonas, 2025). Students frequently contrasted past assumptions with new insights gained from the PSA process. One teacher candidate wrote, “Equity is not about treating everyone the same. It’s about recognizing where students are coming from and adjusting our instruction so everyone can thrive.” Another reflected, “Meaningful instruction for multilingual learners requires understanding that their cultures are who they are. Recognizing that speaking different languages is a strength, not a limitation, shifted my perspective.” Faculty notes reflected similar themes as instructors observed that students increasingly drew on universal design for learning principles, Indigenous pedagogies, and differentiated instruction in their written work and PSA narratives, though the extent and depth of this integration varied across groups and cohorts.

These findings strongly resonate with McArthur's (2022) argument that authentic assessments have social value because they affirm learner identity and agency while resisting standardized, transactional models of evaluation. By creating PSAs, students were positioned as knowledge producers instead of passive recipients of equity content. Teacher candidates were empowered to understand how they could shape and reshape narratives of inclusion through group work with others (activism through an awareness video campaign), each with unique identities and life experiences. This shift, from consuming equity content to collaboratively constructing a public-facing equity argument, mirrors the professional work of educators who must diagnose and mitigate inequality, collaborate with colleagues, and communicate with diverse partners simultaneously to support students and their families in schools. As one survey response indicated, "As a future teacher, I know I have a responsibility to create space for all students to feel seen. This assignment helped me understand how to actually do that." These expressions of agency reflect findings from Coleman et al. (2023) and Baker and Pollard (2020), who emphasize that modelled collaboration and interdisciplinary assignments foster perspective-taking and long-term professional commitment. This also aligns with Winn's (2011) call for authentic, situated learning tasks that challenge students to connect theory with real-world practice. These studies collected observational and performance data in real classrooms, capturing actual pedagogical change. By contrast, our data reflect intentions and conceptual reorientations at the pre-service stage for teacher candidates across multiple courses. This methodological difference affirms the importance of distinguishing between shifts in thinking and enacted teaching practice and impact on future praxis (Freire, 1970). For example, several teacher candidates articulated a stronger commitment to culturally responsive and differentiated practice. They also named uncertainty about how these commitments would be received in practicum contexts shaped by standardized curricula, time pressures, and mentor teacher expectations (Courtney et al., 2023; Eizadirad et al., 2023). This illustrates that the PSA assignment supported important

conceptual and professional reorientation while also highlighting the need for future research to examine how these commitments are enacted in classroom practice.

Another layer of complexity lies in emotional labour. For racialized, Indigenous, or multilingual candidates and faculty, the push toward asset-based frameworks can feel like a double burden: they were both learners and representatives, expected to educate peers about their lived experiences as part of the group processes involved. Student feedback also pointed to the emotional labour that can occur when candidates with lived experience of linguistic or cultural marginalization are expected to explain, represent, or validate those experiences for their peers. This suggests that while the PSA assignment created space for asset-based and identity-affirming learning, it also required careful facilitation to avoid positioning individual students as representatives of entire communities. This aligns with critiques in equity scholarship about uneven distribution of advocacy work and the need for trauma-informed approaches for inclusion (Pitzer, 2025). A trauma-informed approach would require instructors to anticipate this possibility by establishing clear norms for dialogue, reminding students that no individual should be positioned as a spokesperson for a community, offering multiple ways to participate, and creating opportunities for reflection that do not require students to disclose personal or painful experiences. For the PSA assignment, this could include structured group agreements, guidance on using course readings and a peer's lived experience as evidence, and instructor check-ins to ensure that identity-based labour is not unevenly distributed.

Comparisons with other research highlight both convergences and divergences. Beudels et al. (2021) and Milankovic-Jovanov et al. (2022) documented growth in professional confidence and self-concept through integrative coursework, which suggested that reimagining equity may correlate with a stronger sense of agency. Yet those studies did not explicitly engage the affective toll of equity learning. Our ethnographic self-reflection foregrounds this tension: equity work inspired commitment as teacher candidates expressed a stronger responsibility to create inclusive classrooms

but also demanded emotional resilience as students and instructors navigated discomfort, identity-based vulnerability, and the difficult process of confronting how schooling can reproduce harm. In instructor sense-making meetings, we regularly noted our own emotional labour alongside our students' moments of sitting with discomfort, rethinking our facilitation and pedagogical approaches after difficult class discussions, and wrestling with how to name systemic harm without (re)traumatizing students with lived experience of marginalization. The implications for teacher education are significant. Integrated, authentic assessments like the PSA can catalyze asset-based thinking, but to ensure sustainability and greater effectiveness, teacher education programs must scaffold enactment through practicum partnerships, mentorship, and policy alignment. Without holistic support, students' reimagining of equity risks stalling at the level of intention. As one student reported through the survey,

As a future educator and community member, I plan to apply my new knowledge by creating an inclusive classroom culture using universal design for learning strategies, providing multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement. I will advocate for accessibility and equity in school policies and decision making while also engaging families and communities in discussions about inclusion and special education resources.

Theme 3: Unlearning and Deconstructing Power Through Emotional Tensions

The third theme emerged from grouping codes such as "unlearning," "relearning," "discomfort," "positionality," and "colonialism not in the past." These pointed to a recurring process of interrogating assumptions and coming to recognize the enduring, intergenerational impacts of racism, colonialism, and ableism in education. Student reflections vividly captured this process. One wrote, "This course challenged many of my previous assumptions. I didn't realize how much I had internalized the deficit

thinking about multilingual learners." Another commented, "I have unlearned the myth that colonialism is a relic of the past. This realization was uncomfortable, as it required acknowledging how I have benefited from these systems." These reflections mirror Chrona's (2022) claim that deep equity work involves dismantling entrenched narratives and confronting discomfort as part of the learning process.

These moments of discomfort signalled, for teacher candidates, movement from passive awareness toward critical self-reflection about power, privilege, and professional responsibility. The PSA assignment created structured opportunities for this work by requiring students to publicly name systemic inequities and propose action-oriented solutions through a collaborative group project involving different personalities with varied lived experiences. As a task, it pushed teacher candidates to confront difficult truths and multiple perspectives that may differ. Students reported this as an intellectually enriching experience because it allowed them to make connections that they did not previously notice. As one mentioned, "I didn't realize how interconnected language access, special education, and racism were until we had to build our PSA around them. It made the work more meaningful." Another teacher candidate emphasized that, "Throughout the program, I've reflected on equity, diversity, and inclusion, but this was the first time I could synthesize my learning across all four courses in a single, cohesive way." Another student indicated, "As a biracial student who has been in special education, I understand firsthand the ways in which Black students are disproportionately streamed into special education programs.... In this course, I relearned my understanding of representation and advocacy in education."

There were also challenges with pushing some teacher candidates to reflect and engage with more depth around equity topics. Faculty sense-making notes suggested that engagement with difficult equity topics varied across cohorts, with some discussions requiring additional facilitation and prompting such as around anti-Black racism, colonial legacies, and systemic inequities. One instructor noted in their reflective journal: "Some students pushed back on the idea that colonialism affects their

classrooms today, they saw it as history, not pedagogy.” That resistance became the starting point for deeper inquiry. Instructors also experienced parallel processes, exposing their own assumptions in biweekly meetings and challenging one another to model reflexivity. This dual reflexivity supports Ellis and Bochner’s (2006) conception of autoethnography, where participants and researchers treat positionality and emotion as legitimate data. Comparisons with the literature show that unlearning is a fragile, at times messy, and uneven process. For example, Adams and Kaczmarczyk (2023), in a design-based study of literacy courses, found that students often articulated culturally responsive goals superficially when given only limited cross-course exposure. Their evidence suggested that without sustained scaffolding, critical synthesis remained shallow. In response, our four-course integration into one assignment, paired with instructor collaboration, provided extended opportunities for unlearning to deepen. Yet even in our case, the depth varied: Some PSAs articulated structural critiques with depth, while some PSA videos remained more descriptive rather than analytical.

The process of unlearning was not without risks. Instructors noted tensions around how much discomfort to introduce, with some instructors prioritizing slow, trauma-informed pacing and others encouraging rapid confrontation of bias. This mirrors Melasalmi et al.’s (2024) findings about the challenges of role clarification in collaborative teaching. These complexities highlight the importance of careful pedagogical scaffolding. Structured reflection prompts, small-group discussions, and building welcoming, inclusive, and supportive learning environments can mitigate harm while still promoting critical engagement. For teacher education more broadly, promoting deep equity pedagogies requires emotional care and the institutional structures to support it (Noori & Eizadirad, 2026).

Theme 4: Growing with Technology Through the Production of Multimodal Artifacts

The fourth theme captures how technology-mediated production of the PSA fostered growth in teacher candidates’ digital and pedagogical literacies. Codes clustered across the data included “connections,” “intersection,” “multiple lenses,” and “synthesis,” which highlighted the assignment’s role in encouraging students to use technological platforms and AI tools while engaging in culturally responsive micro-prompting to avoid overgeneralizations (Ewart, 2025). Students described learning to storyboard, script, layer audio-visual evidence, and ethically integrate AI as new skills that expanded their meaning-making repertoire. They described it as challenging yet rewarding. Reflecting on the process, one student stated, “The interconnectedness of issues discussed across courses and the connections each of these had was eye-opening.” Another teacher candidate noted that synthesizing across four courses allowed them to “see the bigger picture” of systemic inequities and how to challenge them as systemic structures.

Instructor reflections confirmed that students who embraced integration produced more nuanced PSAs, while groups who divided tasks by course produced patchwork projects with more superficial analysis where they overgeneralized about MLLs or Indigenous students rather than connecting the diversity within these populations to specific equity issues. This theme builds on research that documents the benefits of integrative pedagogies. Milankovic-Jovanov et al. (2022) and Jelena et al. (2022) found that interdisciplinary teaching improved retention and knowledge transfer. Their outcomes were measured through tests and surveys whereas our multimodal PSA artifacts captured what students knew but also how they framed problems, constructed narratives, and engaged audiences through a solution-oriented call to action. However, the requirement to synthesize ideas across multiple classes and in groups of four to six came with some challenges. For instance, some groups defaulted to multidisciplinary work while others settled for parallel contributions that were stitched toge-

ther, rather than true interdisciplinary synthesis. This complements Blithe and Fidelibus's (2022) observations indicating that co-created assignments often reveal disparities in engagement and contribution.

Technology added another layer of complexity (Estaiteyeh et al., 2025). Instructors consistently emphasized that students were not being graded on their video production skills but more so on the depth of their analysis, to encourage students to take risks to learn new skills related to video production. Several groups used generative AI for scripting or editing from a list of vetted tools provided by the instructors. This raised questions and discussion points about ethics, sourcing, and bias. While students appreciated the efficiency, they often lacked guidance on critical use which underscored the need for explicit instruction and scaffolding and the need to integrate AI in inclusive, culturally sound, and adaptive ways using a framework like AIME (Ewart & Mueller, 2025). The six-week nature of the course added to this challenge. If courses were 12 weeks instead of six, the additional time could be used to provide guidance and scaffold the tasks.

The use of AI in authentic assessment contexts remains an emerging area in teacher education (Ewart & Mueller, 2025). Our findings suggest that AI can amplify creativity but risks undermining critical reflection if not carefully scaffolded. Accordingly, assignments requiring synthesis must include explicit guidance on ethical media use, equitable group-work structures such as group contracts, and scaffolding that positions AI as subject to critical interrogation rather than uncritical use.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Integrated cross-course assignments offer meaningful potential for equity-focused teacher education, but their effectiveness depends on deliberate institutional investment. Our study offers four interdependent design principles for programs considering this approach: (1) intentional cross-course alignment around shared EDIDIA commitments; (2) formalized faculty collaboration through communities of practice, with compensation for part-time and sessional

instructors; (3) authentic, multimodal assessment that positions candidates as knowledge producers; and (4) scaffolded ethical engagement with technology, group equity, and trauma-informed facilitation, including explicit guidance on AI use through frameworks such as AIME (Ewart & Mueller, 2025). Future iterations of this assignment will incorporate earlier introduction of PSA expectations, clearer shared messaging across cohorts, more structured group-work protocols, and explicit trauma-informed dialogue norms. We encourage future research to adopt longitudinal, mixed method approaches to combine reflective ethnography with classroom observations and practicum follow-up as part of examining whether equity commitments through interdisciplinary assignments translate into durable teaching and pedagogical practices.

CONCLUSION

Overall, findings from our study demonstrate that interdisciplinary, cross-course assignments grounded in ethnographic self-reflection can meaningfully engage instructors teaching different courses and advance teacher candidates' engagement with EDIDIA topics. This type of innovative use of assignments contributes to reducing redundancy and mitigating burnout amongst both faculty and students. The themes outlined illustrate that interdisciplinary assignments do more than improve academic retention. They invite teacher candidates to think and feel their way through educational inequities as part of putting theory into action as educators responding to students' structural realities across diverse local contexts. The assignment enabled grappling with inequitable education in both intellectual and affective ways. Such work challenges the tendency to engage with EDIDIA topics in silos. Instead, it promotes more substantive pedagogical coherence, authentic assessment, and culturally responsive practices. At the same time, the challenges students and faculty encountered, such as uneven group dynamics, emotional labour, resistance, and the tensions with in-depth synthesis, highlight the need for careful design and ongoing institutional support. Ultimately, findings from this initiative emphasize that equity-focused

pedagogy in teacher education is not achieved through isolated lessons but through integrative, collaborative, and authentic experiences, which at times can be messy, but are essential to prepare future educators to act with reflexivity, confidence, and care in diverse classrooms. We close with a reminder from one teacher candidate, whose words encapsulate the transformative potential of this work: "This assignment made me realize that I am not just learning to teach. I am learning how to learn differently, with care, with others, and with purpose."

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APPENDIX A

Shared Assignment Description and Instructions for Teacher Candidates

Final Product should be a Public Service Announcement (PSA) Video which is 4 to 6 minutes (approx. 5 minutes) and accompanied with individual reflections by each person. All students get “A” as letter grade for the course if they do the video and meet the expectations outlined. Submitting the one-page reflection for each course instructor gets you the “A+”.

This course has very strong self-reflective components. As such students are expected to engage in high levels of self-reflection from multiple perspectives. By the end of this course, students will have developed and applied the following: an understanding of some of the complexities of historical and contemporary contextual factors shaping the realities of learners in the particular context; better understanding of the needs of diverse students particularly equity-denied groups such as Indigenous students, MLLs, and those with special learning needs; better understanding of the impacts of colonial relations of power and privilege that impact all learners; and how we as educators have a profound influence and responsibility on the ways to move forward in our teaching practices in respectful and inclusive relationships.

It is important to note that each of you comes into this course from diverse and shifting multilingual and cultural backgrounds. As well, you may have been positioned within different educational and employment backgrounds and, therefore, the demographics of this class represent complex, varied, and diverse interests and needs. We acknowledge the strengths that each student brings to this course and respect the diversity of interests and needs so that we may work collaboratively and promote success for everyone creating a safer, brave, and balanced learning community where we can all learn from one another. Our beliefs about teaching, learning, and our role as an educator shape our countless classroom decisions and interactions with students. It is therefore important to examine our own experiences, understandings, attitudes, biases, assumptions, and belief systems from an intersectional perspective with regards to diverse ways of being. Now and in the future, being a reflective practitioner is fundamental to our and students’ growth. In this assignment, you are encouraged to complete a one-page reflection (single spaced or double-spaced) for each course about what you learned, unlearned, and relearned in relation to big ideas specific to the course and across the courses with references to course reading(s) to support your responses and critical analysis.

Guiding Prompts:

1. What has stood out for you in this course in terms of big ideas? Support it with citations and connections to the course readings. What are your big take-aways?
2. What did you unlearn and start to question? What shocked you or made you uncomfortable? How did you cope with it?
3. How will you apply the knowledge gained in this class as an educator and community member in your various roles as caring adults in the lives of people you interact with? How will you continue to grow? What is your call to action and commitment moving forward?

Rubric for Written Reflections

Criteria	Single Point Rubric
Depth of personal reflection on discussions and class activities	In-depth personal reflection and connections to the questions outlined with depth, quality, and specific examples with consideration for biases and assumptions (personal and systemic).
Engagement and interconnections across <u>readings</u>	In-depth connections to the course readings with holistic analysis between their interconnections. Citations are included (in-text and a reference list at the end).
Overall <u>communication</u>	Organized ideas, chooses appropriate style, and uses concepts, conventions, and vocabulary with a high degree of effectiveness with little to no mistakes.

Public Service Announcement Video in Groups of 4.

This project is done in groups of 4 due by the end of Week 5. Be prepared to share in small groups in final class. We will assign which groups will present within each course to avoid duplication of presentations. You must, as a collective group, produce a collective public service announcement video which outlines what is problematic and inequitable in the current educational system with respect to the needs of diverse students and communities reflecting big ideas learned across the four courses you are taking during the Winter 2025 term.

1. Select a systemic barrier or issue (look at your weekly course syllabus themes to start or generate some ideas)
2. Identify and emphasize intersections with big ideas in disability/special education, Indigenization, EDI, multilingual education, and decolonization but also departures, nuances, disagreements, and uniqueness to each discourse
3. Incorporate at least one reading from each course (minimum 4 readings in total): must be a combination of at least 2 peer-reviewed articles or book chapters and 2 other sources used as part of course readings/learning content. Must include qualitative research findings and quantitative statistics in the local context related to the issue you are examining from either the course readings or from external sources (if struggling with this, please see your course instructor for support or discussion).
4. Outline and commit to a call to action as a solution (see examples from [2015 Truth and Reconciliation 94 Calls to Action](#) as a starting point)- actions must be practical focusing on implementation at 3 levels: in the classroom, at the school level, and at the community level (micro, meso, and macro).

Guiding Prompts and What Should Be Covered Throughout the Video:

- Who Are You? Identities of group members from an intersectional lens.
- What and Why? Beliefs and counter-narratives in relation to the systemic barrier being examined and how different identities are impacted: grounded in an analysis that includes qualitative narratives and statistics from a range of local, provincial, or national contexts.
- How, What, and Where? How do you show up and change systems? Strategies for resistance, change, and reform at the micro, meso, and macro levels.
- Call(s) to Action and Commitment as Educator-Activists in the classroom, schools, and community level to work towards dismantling systemic barriers and meeting the needs of diverse students and families, particularly equity-denied groups.

Success Criteria: You will be assessed based on the following 2 key areas and provided with descriptive feedback from your different instructors. You get an “A” letter grade if your group meets all the expectations outlined.

- *Quality of Your Public Service Announcement Video (minimum 4 minutes and maximum 6 minutes):* Include in an engaging and creative manner what is the issue you are shedding light on, how the issue impacts your own identities and lives, and what are possible alternative solutions/implications for educators. Think outside of the box about what is normalized or accepted in education and how to challenge it when inequitable or unjust. You are assessed by the quality of the video, flow, use of statistics and research findings to support your stance, clear presentation of ideas, level of persuasiveness, and the extent of it being engaging and captivating.
- *Scholarship & Critical Thinking:* synthesis of ideas from weekly readings across 4 courses, depth of analysis, identification and comprehension of key concepts, integration of various perspectives related to the systemic barrier being examined, consideration of different contexts, conclusions drawn, and implications for theory, practice, and policy as educator-activists.