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Practice-Based Teacher Education: Definitions, Design, and Directions

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Editor's Introduction

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69670/mje.3.1.1><https://mje.williamwoods.edu/>**William Waychunas and Stephanie M. Moody (co-editors)****Abstract**

Practice-based teacher education (PBTE) has generated significant scholarly debate, yet the field lacks a shared understanding of what PBTE truly entails. This special issue addresses that gap by assembling a diverse collection of research, practitioner reflections, and theoretical contributions that collectively advance knowledge about PBTE design, implementation, and impact. The articles highlight the breadth of PBTE approaches across content areas, grade levels, and course contexts, while challenging the false dichotomy between practice-based and equity-oriented teaching. Two core principles emerge as essential to authentic PBTE: organizing instruction around a defined set of core practices and providing preservice teachers opportunities to rehearse those practices before entering the field. Together, the contributions affirm that experience is not equivalent to practice, and that practical coursework is not inherently practice-based. We hope this issue inspires teacher educators to thoughtfully integrate practice-based approaches into their programs in service of a stronger, more just teaching force.

Keywords

Practice-Based Teacher Education (PBTE), Teacher Education Programs, Preservice Teachers, Educator Preparation Programs

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Introduction

Practice-based teacher education [PBTE] approaches have been a hot topic in teacher preparation over the past decade, with researchers hotly debating the potential shortcomings and risks of their use. Advocates have trumpeted the potential for better preparation of preservice teachers [PSTs] when PBTE is applied to coursework, as these experiences provide safe spaces for PSTs to try out methods before being in front of a real classroom (Ball & Forzani, 2011; Grossman et al., 2018). Critics of PBTE cast such approaches as a deprofessionalizing neoliberal scheme that minimizes issues of justice and equity by reducing teaching to the robotic implementation of strategies (Philip et al., 2019). In this special issue, we intend to continue the conversations around PBTE by providing the field with a more robust understanding of what PBTE entails, how it can be applied in coursework, and its impact on PST development.

Finding an academic home for PBTE research has been a challenge for some researchers because of the field's apprehension toward the subject. In our special edition, we hoped to provide a safe space for researchers to share what they had learned about PBTE approaches, including small-scale self-studies and outcomes of practice-based pedagogies. This special edition will also provide teacher educators interested in PBTE with practical work that can directly inform their instruction and courses. In creating the call for proposals for this special issue, we explicitly sought a variety of manuscript types, including pieces that focus on program evaluation, theory-building, or practitioner reflection, which may have struggled to find homes in other publications. The highly descriptive and practical implications of the articles in this special issue should help readers to better understand PBTE, how to engage in this approach, and different considerations and outcomes to take into account. We are especially excited that, given MJE's open-access format, these articles will be widely available to anyone interested in learning more about and integrating practice-based approaches into their teacher education coursework.

Beyond the field's need for a more robust knowledge base about PBTE, we, as co-editors of the issue, would like to acknowledge the collective contributions to the field that these articles suggest. Throughout the review and revision process, several key themes stood out to us and are worth noting; they will be detailed in the sections below.

So, You Think You're Using PBTE...

First and foremost, we were struck by the wide range of understandings and uses of PBTE-related terms. Our interactions with those who came together to assist in preparing this issue, including inquiries, initial submissions, and peer reviewers, left us with the impression that the field is still unclear about what PBTE is in practice. If you asked a teacher educator whether their courses or program were practice-based, most would agree, pointing to their methods courses and clinical placements. However, very few of those courses or programs would truly be practice-based. There is still significant confusion about defining what really counts as PBTE.

The first, and perhaps more significant, issue that arose is a persistent confusion between PBTE pedagogies and program elements such as methods courses and clinical or field placements. Every

teacher preparation program includes practical elements, such as course planning and instructional methods. Every teacher preparation program teaches some practices, methods, or strategies. Every teacher preparation program includes some sort of field experience or clinical assignments. However, simply having those practical elements does not make a program or course practice-based.

From our perspective, two key elements must be in place for a program or course to be truly practice-based. First, practice-based programs/courses are designed, often from the start or at their core, around a clearly defined, agreed-upon set of teaching practices or methods that become the central organizing principle for courses and instruction. These can be the more general practices that apply across grade levels and content areas, such as TeachingWorks' high-leverage practices, which include methods like *Explaining and Modeling Content*, *Leading a Discussion*, *Checking Student Understanding*, and *Designing Single Lessons and Sequences of Lessons*. These can also include more discipline-specific examples of core practices that have recently emerged in areas such as social studies (Cuenca, 2021; Fogo, 2014), social justice teaching (Schiera et al, 2025), or science (Kloser, 2014).

The next essential component of a true practice-based approach is that *PSTs must have the opportunity to implement and receive feedback on a method before going into the field*. This is a step that many well-intentioned scholars skip; in typical teacher preparation programs, PSTs learn *about* a method or practice in coursework, and then we hope that they use it in their practicum, often through a field-based assignment. The missing component here is the practice step. The field experience, although a potential space for applying a method, is not inherently practice. To be practice-based, PSTs need to practice the practices in coursework through simulations, rehearsals, or role-playing activities. Field experiences should *not* be the first place where PSTs try out methods.

The two most common misconceptions and misunderstandings can therefore be summarized by the following statements:

Experience does not equal practice.
Practical does not mean practice-based.

Another issue that scholars of PBTE have noted is how the variety of different terms used within the field can be interchangeable, ambiguous, or have multiple meanings (Jenset & Klette, 2023). We found that this issue arose with different types of simulated activities, in particular. After all, what is the difference between a rehearsal, microteaching, and simulation? Where does virtual reality or role-playing fit within these categories? Similarly, it's sometimes difficult to parse out the differences between a representation, approximation, and enactment. Could it not be true that this is based on one's perspective? For example, a PST enacting a lesson in front of their peers is an approximation from their perspective while simultaneously serving as a representation of practice for their peer observers. Using these terms with precision and perspective, therefore, is crucial for authors of PBTE research to ensure reader understanding.

With this in mind, we've asked authors in this special issue to be especially clear about the terms and activities that they engaged in with PSTs. Similarly, we suggest that any author considering publishing work in the field of PBTE is especially mindful of the terminology they use and provide thorough explanations of the pedagogical work they do in their coursework.

There's More Than One Way to PBTE

As we looked across submissions and articles, we noted the variety of ways that PBTE can be designed and implemented within coursework. Some of our authors highlight the different approaches to approximations, such as virtual or mixed reality simulations done online (Moody, 2026; Pett et al., 2026), some involving in-person role-playing style rehearsals done in coursework (Jakopovic, 2026; Waychunas & Nusser, 2026), while others drive home the direct connection between practice cycles and clinical work (Pytash et al., 2026; Rudder et al., 2026). Dipping into methods used in other fields, other enactment examples involve interactions between PSTs and trained actors simulating conversations with parents or other educators (Perouse-Harvey; 2026).

Occasionally, we have encountered scholars in the field who have narrow conceptions of what constitutes a PBTE approach, constrained by early scholarship on PBTE. Concurrently, existing conceptions of PBTE are heavily shaped by seminal works that are largely based within elementary math and science methods courses (Matsumoto-Royo & Ramírez-Montoya, 2021). This special issue challenges such a perspective, suggesting that we broaden conceptions of PBTE. The articles that follow highlight how variations in representations, decompositions, approximations, and enactments work in different types of course and preparation contexts while still meeting the definition of PBTE described earlier: organization around a set of core practices and the enactment of practices *before* entering the field. Similarly, we are pleased that the article in this issue demonstrates how PBTE approaches are applicable across many content areas, grade levels, and course types.

PBTE vs. Social Justice Teaching: A False Dichotomy

Several articles in this issue also help to address critiques about PBTE, demonstrating how issues of social justice, equity, and inclusion can be directly addressed and incorporated into practice-based activities. These include articles by (Fundalinski et al., 2026; Perouse-Harvey; 2026) where they use simulations to promote advocacy and disrupt injustice in special education settings. Similarly, two other pieces (Bacevich et al., 2026; Gadd et al., 2026) highlight the process, implications, challenges, and considerations for teacher educators looking to use PBTE as a vehicle for promoting equitable and inclusive teaching practices.

Taking into consideration the articles in this special issue and the other scholarship around social justice teaching through PBTE, we suggest that it is time to put some of these critiques to bed. PBTE and teaching for equity are not inherently in opposition to one another. This makes us wonder if critiques of PBTE are based on flawed logic: *Is it even possible to truly separate purpose from practice?* Rather than turning PSTs into robotic instructors as critics had speculated, the

articles in this issue and other work consistently suggest that PBTE has the potential to cultivate thoughtful and considerate educators who not only know about educational injustice but also how to *do* something about it in their own instruction.

A budding research base about the positive impacts of PBTE

To date, there have been few causal studies linking the use of PBTE methods and outcomes on teachers' instruction. Taken alongside the important finding of (Mancenido et al., 2025) about the positive impacts of PBTE on teachers, the collection of articles in this issue contributes to a collective research base that continues to find that these opportunities in coursework to deeply understand and try out methods are a promising path forward in developing the teaching force that is so needed in our nation's schools. Preservice teachers find value in PBTE learning opportunities. Teacher educators find value in using PBTE learning cycles in their courses. We hope that the articles in this issue continue to encourage and inspire other teacher educators and preparation programs to consider how they might better infuse practice into their coursework.

Recognition and Thanks

To conclude this introductory article, we would like to thank the many people who have volunteered their time and expertise to bring this issue to fruition. Thank you to our reviewers, including the MJE Editorial Board and other volunteer reviewers, including Rosie Defino, Pamela Hickey, Emily Holtz, Lightning Jay, Tirtha Karki, Tegan Nusser, Bethany Rice, AJ Schiera, Meghan Shaughnessy, Calvin J. Stocker, and Sarah Walters. Additionally, we are extremely grateful to Brooke Poston Azzinnaro for her thorough copyediting assistance and help in finalizing the manuscripts. Finally, we would like to thank Lisa Nieuwenhuizen, the MJE Editor, for both her support and insights in putting together this special issue.

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