



Editorial Introduction: (Re)Designing Education for Better Futures: Student-Centered and Collaborative Approaches to Equity and Transformation

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Abstract: In this editorial for Volume 26, Issue 1 of *Current Issues in Education*, we build on the editors' previous call to slow down and imagine what can/is emerging, even amidst crisis. Against the backdrop of escalating political attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in education—particularly under the second Trump administration—we highlight how scholars and practitioners are intentionally designing education rooted in care, belonging, and justice. This issue features ten articles organized into three thematic strands: *Centering Student Identity and Well-being to Improve Educational Experiences*; *Reimagining Support Systems: Experiences of Belonging in Higher Education*; and *Building Bridges: Collaborative Approaches to Educational Transformation*. Collectively, these works exemplify the power of interdisciplinary, student-centered, and equity-driven research to sustain transformative educational practices in turbulent times. We argue that the future of education must be shaped not only through resistance, but through ethical, relational, and creative redesign—reflecting the futures we dare to imagine.

Keywords: Current issues in education; student belonging; student well-being; educational transformation; equitable education.

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Editorial Introduction: (Re)Designing Education for Better Futures: Student-Centered and Collaborative Approaches to Equity and Transformation

In the previous issue of *Current Issues in Education (CIE)*, our editors called for slowing down—not as an act of passivity, but as a necessary intervention in a world gripped by uncertainty and instability. They invited readers to pause, reflect, and recognize the emerging possibilities arising amidst crisis (see Desimoni et al., 2024). In this first issue of Vol. 26 (Spring 2025), we take the next step: from emergence to intention.

The ten articles in this volume remind us what it means to move with care and intentionality in educational research, even while attacks on education continue to rise. What becomes possible when we design education not in reaction to crisis, but in alignment with equity, belonging, and justice? The manuscripts in this issue address this question by exploring how educational experiences can be transformed when we center student identity, reimagine support systems, and build bridges across institutional and disciplinary divides. Together, they reveal a field in motion—one that is not only responding to complexity, but actively shaping educational futures with purpose and care.

As an interdisciplinary, student-led journal, *CIE* continues to serve as a space for bold, boundary-crossing scholarship. This issue reflects our commitment to bridging diverse disciplines, reaching global audiences, and embracing a wide range of theories, methodologies, and educational concerns. The works featured here span continents and contexts, from primary and secondary schools in Perú (**Lee Fergusson, Javier Ortiz Cabrejos, Anna Bonshek**) to graduate STEM-focused learning communities in the United States (**Andrew Pendola, John Appiah, William Murrah, Clarissa Beavers**), highlighting the shared challenges—and creative responses—emerging across educational environments. Whether through narrative inquiry (**Tijuana Rollins**), cross-sectional design research (**İlhan İter and Stefan Rathert**), or scale development (**Ed Harris, Katherine Curry, Jentre Olsen, Ashlyn Fiegenger, Jam Khojasteh**), these articles exemplify the diverse methodologies represented in this issue.

This kind of scholarship—rooted in student experiences, grounded in well-being and belonging, and attentive to the complexities of educational issues—is not just timely; it is necessary. As educational spaces face increasing political pressure, the work featured in this issue reminds us of the power of research to resist erasure, affirm diverse student identities, and envision more equitable educational systems.

While the previous editorial centered on global educational crises and rollbacks, it also anticipated the sweeping changes a second Trump administration might bring. In this issue, we turn our attention to the fallout already unfolding within the first four months of the second Trump presidency—specifically, the escalating attacks on education in the United States. Since January 2025, a sweeping set of executive orders, legal threats, and agency directives have targeted any educational practice perceived to center diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), race, gender, sexuality, or systemic inequality (Binkley, 2025; Shultz, 2025). These efforts have not only made public schools the target of attacks by the very government meant to support them, but also directly threatened the safety and well-being of historically marginalized students (Annamma & Stovall, 2025).

In PreK–12 schools, the Trump administration has moved to withdraw federal funding from districts that continue race-conscious programming, including tutoring, mentorship, and curricula such as Ethnic Studies and Black history (Goldstein, 2025). The U.S. Department of

Education's Office for Civil Rights issued a “dear colleague” letter threatening investigations and enforcement against any use of race in admissions, financial aid, staffing, or even teacher training programs. The administration has gone as far as demanding that districts sign attestations declaring they do not use “illegal D.E.I. practices” (Goldstein, 2025, para. 2)—a vague and sweeping mandate that could jeopardize critical services for low-income students, including free meals and access to counselors (Goldstein, 2025; Shultz, 2025).

Higher education has faced similar scrutiny. The Trump administration gave colleges just two weeks to dismantle DEI programs or risk losing federal funds (Brinkley, 2025). Scholarships designated for students of Color, culturally relevant curricula, and race-conscious admissions are now being flagged as discriminatory under an expansive reinterpretation of the Supreme Court’s 2023 affirmative action ruling (Brinkley, 2025; Schultz, 2025). The administration has also begun suspending and threatening to cancel billions in research funding to elite universities—including Columbia, Harvard, and Princeton—as part of a broader campaign to eliminate what it deems political and ideological bias on campuses (Bender et al., 2025). These measures are not only destabilizing institutions but also chilling academic freedom and stifling educational research on race, equity, and social justice—prompting lawsuits against the U.S. Department of Education by Democracy Forward on behalf of the Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness and the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2025).

In this political climate, it is tempting to retreat or focus on compliance. But as Lange and Lee (2024) remind us, educational responses to anti-DEI attacks must not only resist systemic erasure—they must center our shared humanity. Their call for honest conversations, standing by our commitments to equity and justice, and using all available tools to accomplish our goals serves as a guiding framework for educational researchers and practitioners navigating this moment. We also draw inspiration from scholars of Color who have long resisted oppressive educational systems, from bell hooks’ (2018) call for radical love in teaching, to Gloria Ladson-Billings’ (1995) foundational work on culturally relevant pedagogy. And we take heart in the collective resistance emerging across institutions: universities in the Big Ten Academic Alliance have begun forming a mutual defense compact to share resources, legal counsel, and public support when targeted by political attacks on DEI and academic freedom (Pendell, 2025). These acts of solidarity remind us that we are not alone, and that even in difficult times, we can continue the work by showing up, speaking out, and protecting one another.

In their editorial, Desimoni and colleagues’ (2024) imagined *CIE* as a beacon of hope during turbulent times—a space to slow down and recognize the emergent—with this issue we aim to carry that light forward, illuminating how educators and researchers are continuing equity-oriented, student-centered work, even as the storm grows stronger. This issue of *CIE* offers examples of how educational researchers imagine more just educational systems that value student well-being, belonging, and empowerment. From highlighting the experience of Mexican American women preservice teachers (**Blanca N. Ibarra**) to examining how collaborative Esport spaces empower female students (**Mila Zhu**), these articles move beyond compliance to actively sustain the work of care, equity, and inclusion in education.

To illuminate the many ways educators and researchers are designing education with care—especially in times of political pressure and systemic retrenchment—we have organized the ten articles in this issue into three thematic strands: *Centering Student Identity and Well-being to Improve Educational Experiences*; *Reimagining Support Systems: Experiences of Belonging in Higher Education*; and *Building Bridges: Collaborative Approaches to Educational Transformation*. These themes reflect intersecting commitments to student identity

and well-being, the reimagining of support systems, and collaborative approaches to educational transformation.

Theme 1: Centering Student Identity and Well-being to Improve Educational Experiences brings together four articles that examine how educational environments shape, affirm, and challenge identity, particularly for those who have been historically marginalized, and how these identities influence engagement and persistence. First, in their article, “Empowering Female Students through Esports Programs: Insights from a Vocational High School,” **Mila Zhu** explores how Esports environments, including educational practices, digital cultures, and social-cultural contexts can both reinforce and challenge gender norms for female students. The author found that collaborative design and coding spaces can empower female students and foster more inclusive participation. This study reveals how Esports programs can serve as powerful spaces for reimagining participation in tech-related learning environments, disrupting traditional gender norms through collaboration, expanding who feels welcome, and offering a model for more equitable futures in education.

Second, **Blanca N. Ibarra**, in their article “Motivations for Entering the Teaching Profession: Illuminating the Voices of Female Pre-Service Teachers on the U.S.-Mexico Border,” sheds light on how cultural identity, lived experiences, and intrinsic motivations shape Mexican American women's decisions to pursue teaching careers. Through qualitative survey responses, Ibarra reveals that many pre-service teachers are fueled by a deep desire to make a difference, which is often rooted in both the encouragement they receive and the harms they endured in their own schooling. By centering voices often pushed to the margins, this study underscores the transformative potential of educators who carry forward not only knowledge, but commitments to justice, care, and representation in classrooms that mirror the communities they serve.

Third, **Lee Fergusson, Javier Ortiz Cabrejos, and Anna Bonshek**, in their article, “A Comparative Study of Health, School Performance and Wellbeing in Peruvian School Children and Adolescents Who Meditate,” examine how meditation practices influence students’ physical health, academic performance, and personal well-being, expanding conventional metrics of student development. Drawing from a cross-sectional study of students in high-altitude regions of Perú, the authors found strong correlations between the regular practice of Transcendental Meditation and improved cognitive, emotional, and academic outcomes. In doing so, this study invites us to consider how integrating holistic practice into school routines can nurture student well-being in ways that are culturally responsive, low-cost, and community-centered, particularly in under-resourced or rural settings.

Fourth, **İlhan İlter and Stefan Rathert**, in their article “Academic Achievement and Postgraduate Career Commitment among Pre-Service Teachers: The Mediating Role of Science Identity,” the authors highlight the importance of science identity and how students perceive themselves as part of the scientific community in mediating the relationship between academic achievement and postgraduate career commitment among pre-service teachers. The findings suggest that a stronger science identity encourages students to pursue further education, promoting their academic and professional growth. The authors stress the need for educational practices that enhance recognition, competence, and interest, which supports students’ personal development and long-term well-being. This work underscores how cultivating science identity, alongside academic achievement, can support more inclusive, student-centered approaches that improve teacher development and contribute to educational advancement.

Theme 2: Reimagining Support Systems: Experiences of Belonging in Higher Education includes three studies that examine how higher education institutions can more intentionally support diverse learners through student-centered design. These articles highlight the power of responsive learning communities, flexible pathways, and adaptable pedagogies to foster belonging, especially for students navigating structural barriers in postsecondary education. For example, in their article, “Returning to Reach Higher: Exploring the Perceptions and Lived Experiences of Adult Learners Pursuing Bachelor's Degrees,” **Tijuana Rollins** uses narrative inquiry to explore the challenges and motivations of adult learners re-entering higher education. Rollins highlights how adult learners navigate institutional barriers, financial strain, and multiple identities and responsibilities while pursuing academic goals. This study reminds us that designing educational systems with care means understanding the material and emotional labor these students carry—and reshaping institutional practices to offer them belonging and support.

Next, in “Strategies for Efficacy and Belongingness towards Foundational STEM Skills for At-Promise Graduate Students: The QMER Learning Community,” **Andrew Pendola, John Appiah, William Murrah, and Clarissa Beavers** present the QMER learning community as an innovative, community-driven model aimed at enhancing both research skills and belonging among *at-promise* graduate students, particularly those who are first-generation, low-income, or from racially minoritized groups. The QMER model stands out for its emphasis on non-hierarchical, inclusive learning environments, peer-led workshops, and practical skill development. Survey and interview findings underscore the program’s impact, with participants, especially Black, first-generation, and low-income students, reporting greater inclusion, academic confidence, and a sense of belonging. The program’s thoughtful design, centered on accessibility, validation, and interdisciplinary connection, demonstrates how supplementary learning environments outside traditional coursework can serve as effective support systems. By fostering identity, voice, and value, the QMER model not only promotes academic success but also strengthens social integration, offering a powerful framework for reimagining support systems in higher education.

Finally, in “Adapting Educational Practices and Technologies in the Post-COVID-19 Era: A Scoping Review,” **Sara Gonçalves, Bárbara Longa, Isabel Barroso, Conceição Rainho, and Vítor Rodrigues** explore how educational practices and technologies have adapted in a post-COVID environment. The authors examine how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted traditional learning systems, prompting a rapid shift to online and distance education. Audiovisual tools—such as video conferencing, pre-recorded lectures, and multimedia content—became crucial in maintaining instructional continuity, enhancing flexibility, personalization, and student engagement. However, challenges like technological access, digital literacy disparities, and the digital divide persist. In this scoping review, the authors examine how instructional practices and technologies have adapted in the post-pandemic era, focusing on the impacts of tools like mobile apps, subtitles, flipped classrooms, and scaffolding techniques on learning outcomes and student motivation. The authors identify existing research gaps and offer insights for future educational policies and practices. By exploring audiovisual integration across traditional, blended, and online contexts, this study informs educators, policymakers, and researchers on how to foster more inclusive and effective educational experiences in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Theme 3: Building Bridges: Collaborative Approaches to Educational Transformation represents three articles that underscore the importance of building bridges

between theory and practice, policy and pedagogy, and individual actors and the systems they seek to influence. Educational transformation rarely happens in isolation. Whether responding to external mandates, addressing persistent inequities, or striving to better meet the needs of diverse learners, the authors included in this theme demonstrate how sustainable change emerges through collaboration across disciplines, institutions, roles, and lived experiences. For example, in **Kimberly Davidson, Amy Williams, Cristina Washell, and Kellie Whelan-Kim's** article, "Adopting Science of Reading Standards: One Department's Story," the authors document how a teacher preparation program navigated the complexities of aligning existing curriculum with newly state-mandated literacy reforms. Rather than approaching the change as a compliance mandate, the department utilized internal collaboration to shape the curriculum in pedagogically sound ways. This work highlights how professional communities can act as sense-makers and innovators in moments of top-down change.

Additionally, in "Aligning Education with Student Needs: Lessons from Gifted and Talented Education," **Talbot S. Hook and Gregory T. Boldt** push beyond policy adaptation and into systemic redesign. Drawing on critiques of traditional, age-based models of schooling, the authors advocate for flexible, learner-centered pathways that better align with students' needs, strengths, and aspirations. The article invites educators and leaders to collaborate across roles and structures to reimagine what equity and excellence can look like in tandem. Not as competing ideals, but as co-constructed possibilities. The authors advocate for more adaptable and personalized learning pathways and explore how educational systems can be redesigned to foster both equity and excellence by drawing insights from innovations and critiques in gifted education. As much as the article critiques rigid, age-based learning models, it advocates for more flexible, personalized educational structures, highlighting the transformative potential of embracing diverse entry points into teaching. The focus groups and surveys utilized in the study served as collaborative spaces where teachers, many of whom came to the profession later in life or from different industries, shared how their unique journeys enriched both their classrooms and school communities. By centering their voices, the study not only pushes back on one-size-fits-all approaches to teacher preparation but also offers concrete insights into how educational systems can be reimaged to better support equity, retention, and excellence better. Doing so builds bridges between teacher diversity, professional resilience, and the larger transformation of education itself.

Finally, **Ed Harris, Katherine Curry, Jentre Olsen, Ashlyn Fiegenger, and Jam Khojasteh** explore educational transformation in their article "Value Creation in Social Learning Spaces: Scale Development." The authors transformed an existing theoretical framework into a practical tool for capturing the various values and benefits of social learning experiences. Their work seeks to equip educators, facilitators, and researchers with a means to assess and enhance collaborative environments. This contribution reminds us that educational transformation is not just about relationships but also about creating shared language, evidence, and metrics that can support collective growth over time.

Grouping the articles into these three themes, allowed us to not only organize this issue but also illuminate a shared commitment across diverse contexts: to reimagine education as a space where student identity, belonging, and collaboration are essential to educational equity and transformation. As scholars, educators, and students committed to better educational futures, we are called to defend the values of diversity, equity, inclusion, and access, and to boldly reimagine and redesign education itself. In a moment when political pressures threaten to narrow the possibilities of what education can be, the works in this issue remind us that the future of

education must be crafted with care, justice-oriented innovation, and a deep commitment to student experiences and well-being.

The path forward is not merely procedural or defensive—it is ethical, imaginative, and relational. It demands centering student identity and well-being, rethinking the support systems that foster belonging, and building collaborative bridges that can sustain educational transformation across communities and contexts. The scholars featured in this issue offer blueprints for this work, demonstrating that even in times of retrenchment, educational research can illuminate pathways toward more just, inclusive, and life-affirming futures. We hope this issue inspires readers to continue showing up—for students, for one another, and for the expansive possibilities that intentional, care-centered education can bring.

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