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Introduction to Special Issue “Designing for Equity within Problem-Based and Project-Based Learning”

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2024 SPECIAL ISSUE

Introduction to Special Issue “Designing for Equity within Problem-Based and Project-Based Learning”

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Dear Readers,

We are pleased to introduce this special issue of the International Journal of Problem-Based Learning (IJPBL), titled “Designing for Equity within Problem-Based and Project-Based Learning.” In this issue, we focus on designing intentionally for equity within project-based and problem-based learning to foster educational equity, advance justice, and promote deeper, more meaningful learning experiences for all students.

Problem-based learning (PBL) and project-based learning (PjBL) have long been recognized for their ability to engage students in active, inquiry-driven learning that connects classroom experiences to the real world. This special issue seeks to explore how PBL and PjBL can move beyond being merely equity adjacent—a term describing practices that are peripheral to the issue of equity—towards a more intentional, equity-centered approach. The contributions in this issue demonstrate how PjBL can be explicitly designed to be an asset-based equity-centered approach that reflects the diverse identities, cultures, and experiences of all students.

Interest in implementing and researching PBL and PjBL practices has grown substantially in the past fifteen years (Hallinger, 2021), yet only a few researchers have considered how PBL and PjBL can be designed and implemented to support equity and promote social justice in schools. The literature acknowledges that cultural differences can impact the PBL process (Wijnia et al., 2019), and a need to be aware of the impact of culture when designing and researching PBL (Hallinger, 2021). Multiple researchers, including Avendano and colleagues (2019), have promoted PBL as a means of bringing equity to underserved communities, but PBL and PjBL are not inherently equitable. Caires-Hurley et al. (2020) examined PBL lessons developed for culturally and linguistically diverse learners and found the purportedly meaningful, real-world problems were centered on mainstream, dominant perspectives. Their study called into question the usefulness of PBL for diverse learners when

developed without a multicultural perspective. Teachers need professional learning opportunities to explore what equity and justice looks like in their context (Felton-Koestler, 2019; Holincheck et al., 2024). Teacher engagement in inquiry and critical reflection around their equity-oriented actions (Dodman et al., 2022) can help teachers develop beliefs and practices that support the learning of each and every student in their classroom.

Systemic equity challenges in education place students from minoritized populations on an uneven footing, restricting access and opportunity for these students. The use of culturally relevant teaching strategies (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000), culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris, 2012), and culturally and historically responsive literacy (Muhammad, 2022) have all been promoted to address inequities in education. These approaches focus on student learning, uphold students' cultural integrity, and nurture the development of a sociopolitical consciousness. PBL can be positioned as an asset-based, equity pedagogy when it includes "caring and supportive classroom environments, coursework that is real-world relevant, opportunities for cooperative learning, scaffolding and differentiation, high expectations, development of sociopolitical consciousness, and respect and appreciation for a student's home culture" (Hinnant-Crawford et al., 2023, p. 3).

Through examining a range of case studies and research, this issue highlights key principles and strategies for embedding equity within the PjBL and PBL framework. These include: the integration of culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies; the incorporation of socio-cultural perspectives into real-world problems; and the development of collaborative, supportive classroom environments that value students' diverse ways of knowing and being. The work presented here also emphasizes the importance of professional learning for teachers, helping them develop the reflective practices and beliefs necessary to engage in equity-centered teaching.

As researchers and educators, we are committed to ensuring that the fields of PBL and PjBL not only improve academic outcomes but also address inequities, creating more just learning environments for all students. We hope this special issue will serve as a catalyst for further exploration and innovation, encouraging the development of PjBL curricula that are not only engaging and relevant but also deeply transformative in advancing educational equity.

We extend our gratitude to the contributors whose work has shaped this special issue, as well as to our readers for your continued engagement with this important dialogue. It is our hope that this collection of research and practice will inspire further inquiry and action, ensuring that PBL and PjBL can be a powerful tool for creating equitable, socially just classrooms.

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