

# **Cultivating Dialogue, Language, and Literacy for Social Justice in Teacher Education**

Edited by

**Adam Devitt**

*California State University*

**Series in Education**



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# Foreword

Daniel Soodjinda

Teacher education stands at a critical crossroads. Terms like equity, inclusion, and social justice have become ubiquitous in discussions of educational reform. Yet, despite the prominence of these ideals, they are often treated as stand-alone components in teacher preparation programs—confined to isolated diversity-related courses or short-lived workshops. This fragmented approach undermines the potential of equity-focused pedagogy and leaves many educators ill-equipped to integrate these principles into their everyday practice.

A core tension in teacher education today is the tendency to separate equity work from content-specific teaching. Candidates may encounter frameworks for culturally sustaining pedagogy in a “multicultural education course” but rarely see these frameworks modeled in literacy or STEM instruction. This division can perpetuate a deficit mindset—one in which students’ cultural and linguistic differences are seen as barriers to overcome rather than assets to build upon. Moreover, equity initiatives are often reduced to tokenized “heroes, holidays, flags, and food” related diversity events, with minimal attention to the systemic barriers that shape student experiences.

Across the United States and globally, policies and mandates increasingly call for the integration of social-emotional learning and culturally relevant pedagogy in teacher education. In the U.S., teacher preparation programs are expected to align with frameworks such as the InTASC Standards, which emphasize responsive teaching, while states like California and New York have implemented policies requiring candidates to demonstrate competency in culturally relevant pedagogy. Internationally, education systems in Canada, Finland, and Australia have embedded equity-focused approaches into their teacher preparation models, aiming to move beyond surface-level inclusivity toward systemic transformation. Yet, in many places, these efforts remain inconsistent and fragmented. The integration of social justice pedagogy is often reduced to performative checklists that fail to connect with the daily work of teaching math, literacy, or science. Candidates may deliver a polished “social justice lesson” but then inadvertently contradict its principles in subsequent instruction. This dissonance is not just a failure of individual teachers but a systemic issue—one that reflects a broader need for institutional transformation in how educators are prepared.

Recent teacher education reforms in the U.S. and beyond have attempted to address these challenges by requiring candidates to plan instruction grounded

in students' cultural and linguistic assets. Programs such as the redeveloped CalTPA in California, Ontario, Canada's Inclusive Education Strategy, and the United Kingdom's frameworks for teacher development emphasize student-centered, equity-driven teaching. However, challenges remain in ensuring these reforms lead to meaningful, sustained change. Teacher educators must go beyond compliance with policy mandates, fostering institutional cultures that prioritize ongoing dialogue, collaboration, and critical reflection.

This book, *Cultivating Dialogue, Language, and Literacy for Social Justice in Teacher Education*, addresses this challenge by advocating for dialogue as a transformative tool in education. Social justice pedagogy, the authors argue, is not a static list of strategies but a dynamic and evolving process. Effective equity work requires educators to engage in continual reflection, critique of existing structures, and adaptation to meet the needs of diverse learners. Through critical inquiry and dialogic engagement, educators can dismantle the hidden biases that shape curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

### **Context and History of the Project**

This book grew out of years of collaboration among scholars, educators, and teacher candidates who share a commitment to equity-driven education. These conversations were inspired by the work of foundational thinkers in culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy, including Ladson-Billings (1995), Gay (2002), and Paris (2012). However, while these frameworks have influenced teacher education discourse, moving them from theory to consistent practice has proven difficult. Programs often approach equity in fragmented ways, reinforcing surface-level multiculturalism rather than deep institutional change.

The contributors to this book seek to challenge that status quo. They emphasize that authentic equity work involves embedding reflective dialogue into every aspect of teacher preparation—not as an abstract concept, but as a lived, day-to-day practice. From coursework to clinical experiences, this approach fosters sustained inquiry and equips candidates to critically engage with both local and global educational discourses. By centering dialogue, the authors aim to create a blueprint for transformative teacher education that integrates social justice across all aspects of teaching and learning.

### **Themes and Structure of the Book**

The book is organized into four parts, each offering insights into how dialogue, language, and literacy can advance equity in teacher education:

*Part 1: Social, Political, and Textual Discourses in Education:* The first part of this book explores how sociopolitical and institutional discourses shape teacher

identity, policy, and curriculum. Karis Jones and Lillian Ardell explore the tensions bilingual educators face as they navigate conflicting language policies and their own beliefs about equity. Mrunal Chavda analyzes educational policies in South Asia, highlighting ongoing struggles with decolonization and the persistence of colonial legacies in curriculum and language instruction. Rebecca G. Harper presents a case study on writing instruction, illustrating how institutional discourses shape literacy pedagogy. Xiali Chang investigates how China's official discourses define the characteristics of a "good teacher," influencing professional identity and classroom practice. Together, these chapters call for teacher candidates to critically engage with both local and global discourses to develop more equitable practices.

*Part 2: Fostering Reflective Discourse with Teacher Educators:* This section explores how reflective discourse helps teacher candidates develop critical, justice-oriented teaching practices. Emily Hanke van Zee examines how structured reflection in a physics course fosters inquiry-based learning and student-driven discussions. Virginia Montero Hernandez and Jaskaran Dhesi emphasize empowering STEM teachers as critical, agentic professionals who engage with inclusive and active learning. Anna Katarzyna Woźniczka and colleagues present a collaborative self-study on creating inclusive learning spaces, highlighting how teacher educators' identities shape dialogue on equity. Mona Beth Zignego examines how discourse analysis and care theory helped her navigate pandemic-era challenges in teacher literacy education. These chapters show how structured reflection and collaborative inquiry can embed social justice across STEM areas and other disciplines.

*Part 3: Practice and Pedagogy for Learning and Development:* This section explores how teacher candidates can bridge theory and practice through pedagogical tools that foster student-centered learning. Susan Kirch, Pooneh Sabouri, Moyu Zhang, and Kara Naidoo introduce a framework for co-authoring instructional tools, guiding teacher candidates in developing theory-driven, adaptable strategies for understanding student learning. Cristina Dumitru examines dialogue techniques in digital learning environments, emphasizing the role of communicative literacy in fostering interactive and meaningful engagement. Adam Devitt presents a digital video ethnography on radical listening, illustrating how teacher candidates can use deep, reflective listening to understand and respond to students' standpoints in science instruction. Together, these chapters highlight how reflective, dialogic, and multimodal approaches enhance teacher preparation by integrating social justice and student voice into pedagogical practice.

*Part 4: Critical and Transformative Perspectives for Social Justice in Teacher Education:* The final part presents anti-racist and intersectional frameworks as essential components of equity-focused teaching. Jean Kaya explores critical

literacy as a tool for equity and inclusion, illustrating how pre-service teachers can challenge systemic injustices through text analysis and classroom practices. Sherri Castillo examines LGBTQ+ inclusion in teacher preparation, highlighting the historical and ongoing barriers that queer educators and students face, and advocating for teacher education programs to prioritize affirming and inclusive pedagogies. Cassandra Drake and Adam Devitt introduce “Flagging and Tagging,” a critical pedagogical heuristic that helps teacher candidates identify and disrupt racist themes in children’s literature, providing a concrete framework for anti-racist teaching. Christian George Gregory queers Bakhtinian discourse, showing how queer students navigate authoritative discourses, internalized narratives, and moments of resistance, with implications for fostering affirming educational spaces. Together, these chapters offer transformative strategies for integrating justice-oriented frameworks into teacher preparation and classroom practice.

These thematic sections underscore the book’s central argument: that dialogue, when deeply embedded in teacher preparation, can drive both individual and institutional transformation.

### **Key Messages for Readers**

Three key messages emerge from this work:

1. Social justice pedagogy is dynamic and context-sensitive: Education does not happen in a vacuum; it is shaped by the social, cultural, and political realities that influence students’ lives both inside and outside the classroom. Teachers must continuously reflect on their practices, interrogate their biases, and adapt to meet their learners’ needs. Effective teacher education encourages candidates to ask: How are my methods reinforcing or disrupting existing power dynamics? How do I ensure that my students’ diverse lived experiences are seen, heard, and validated? This reflective process is crucial for building authentic, equity-driven learning environments.
2. Institutional transformation is essential for sustainable change: While individual educators can make a difference, sustainable reform depends on institutional commitment to equity. Collaboration among teacher education faculty, university supervisors, mentor teachers, school leaders, and communities is key. Programs that prioritize collective learning and accountability are better positioned to dismantle systemic barriers. Schools must foster cultures where faculty and staff regularly engage in dialogue about equity, share strategies, and support one another in implementing justice-oriented practices. This book provides numerous case studies illustrating how

institutional support empowers teachers to create inclusive and socially just classrooms.

3. Real change is enacted through micro-level interactions: Social justice cannot be reduced to performative statements or symbolic gestures. It emerges in the micro-level interactions that shape classroom culture—how teachers design lessons, respond to student needs, and foster critical inquiry. Every choice, from selecting instructional materials to shaping assessment policies, has the potential to either reinforce or challenge inequities. The authors offer case studies demonstrating how authentic dialogue can transform these everyday practices, enabling students to critically engage with the world and develop their own voices.

### **A Call to Action**

This book offers both theoretical insights and practical strategies for fostering critical dialogue in teacher education. It challenges readers—scholars, practitioners, and teacher candidates alike—to reflect on their roles in advancing equity. By embracing a holistic approach to social justice, educators can create classroom environments that empower all learners to thrive.

As you engage with the chapters that follow, I invite you to consider how dialogue might transform your own practice. Together, let us commit to cultivating the reflective inquiry and critical engagement necessary to create more just and equitable educational spaces.

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# Introduction

The use of words in live speech communication is always individual and contextual in nature. Therefore, we can say that any word exists for the speaker in three aspects: as a neutral word, which belongs to nobody; as an other's word, which belongs to another person and is filled with the echoes of the other's utterance; and finally, as my word, for, since I am dealing with it in a particular situation, with a particular speech plan, it is already imbued with my expression. In both of the latter aspects, the word is expressive, but we repeat, this expression does not inhere in the word itself. It originates at the point of contact between the word and the actual reality, under the conditions of that real situation articulated by the individual utterance. (Bakhtin, 1986, p.88)

This book emerged from a recent conference presentation at the American Education Research Association, where my Colleague, Dr. Cassandra Drake, and I presented our work "Preparing Future Elementary Teachers for Critical Pedagogical Readings as a Faculty Professional Learning Initiative." Cassandra and I collaborated on co-constructing a literacy lesson in a course for future elementary teachers where we modeled how to approach enacting reading lessons using common elementary books, such as Dr. Suess, from a critical perspective. Our original intention was more for engaging in our own professional learning as course instructors, learning through coteaching and cogenerative dialoguing – *At the Elbow of Another* (Roth & Tobin, 2002). The purpose of our lesson was to learn how to deepen understanding of and complexities of race in books that often go uninterrogated while also helping future teachers learn how to engage young learners in critical dialogue during read-alouds. Pre-service teachers in the course were receptive and impassioned about the idea of accomplishing the two goals of teaching literacy (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) mediated through an activist project about helping [future] elementary teacher candidates talk about race with children.

One realization I had is that our future teachers had education experiences about social justice topics in the course work and received instructional practices and pedagogy about classroom discourse – albeit these practices were typically (if not always) accomplished separately. A social-justice pedagogy is challenging to understand and enact when teachers learn about, for example, issues of race and strategies for classroom discourse as separate topics. Many of our pre-service teachers going through credentialing programs shared that

they did not experience much in the way of engaging in classroom conversations and, moreover, did not experience engagement in critical conversations about race or racism. However, as teacher educators, we ought to be cognizant that culturally, socially, and politically, increasingly, there are attacks on schools or teachers where discussions on race, gender identity, sexual orientation – even science and ‘facts’ - exist. It has become acceptable to ban such topics in K-12 schools. This book is a conglomeration of multiple perspectives and disciplines merging ‘how’ and ‘why’ to foster classroom discourse for and as social justice – it is a series of scholarly contributions for developing a pedagogy for social-justice discourses.

As a former elementary special education teacher, I think about my youngest kindergarteners who used to voice their ideas and present themselves to the class and to the world unapologetically, and yet with eagerness and care to learn about each other and about the world. This kind of expression is what we want for kids as they learn and grow into adults. However, the passion, agency, and eagerness for learning become depleted when dialogue, relevance, or purpose are not cultivated in schools. Instead, educational discourses become replaced by acontextual, banal, standardized abstractions to be memorized without critical thought or application. It is a form of *spirit murdering* when learners are prevented from engaging in topics and discussions that have immediate relevance to their lives and passions (Love, 2016).

The authors in this book have come together to contribute to a social justice education project where cultivating dialogue, language and literacy are central to educational transformation, and teachers are positioned as the pedagogic leaders. Our collective aim is to transform a future, an educational world where students will not be banned from engaging in discourses based on fear, homophobia, racism, falsities, hate or ignorance, but rather they thrive in learning spaces where educators are equipped to foster dialogic inquiries that students crave. I hope that our collective aspirations and practices in *Cultivating Dialogue, Language, and Literacy for Social Justice in Teacher Education* provide researchers, teacher educators, and professional developers of all kinds with the spirit and actionable ideas and practices to bring social justice discourses in the lives of current and future teachers.

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**PART ONE**  
**Social, Political, and**  
**Textual Discourses in**  
**Education**



# Chapter One

## **From Policy to Practice and Back Again: *Discursive Tensions in Bilingual Education***

Karis Jones & Lillian Ardell

*Empire State University, SUNY and Language Matters, LLC*

### **Abstract**

Teachers are currently navigating tensions between policies and practices, shown by the current teacher exodus across the US. In-service teachers and emerging educators in teacher education programs have to learn to navigate tensions between research, policies, and on-the-ground realities. One way to make visible ideological tensions in education is through studying discourse. Using tools of discourse analysis and figured worlds to lift up tensions, this chapter will analyze contrapuntal voices of practicing teachers of bilingual learners as they think aloud through a NYS language policy document. We find that some of the teachers espouse language ideologies with a social justice bent while others are still grappling with questions about equity; however, all participants question the policy using the lens of their experiences with emergent bilinguals (EBs) or their language learning experiences themselves. This chapter will explore figured worlds in conflict; how the figured worlds lead to tensions between policy and practice; and implications for teacher education, asking: what figured worlds of language ideologies are indexed by beliefs about classroom instructional practices and instructional methods of leverage discourse for learning?

**Keywords:** Emergent Bilinguals, Figured Worlds, Teacher Education, Bilingual Policy

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### **Purpose**

Teachers are currently navigating tensions between policies and practices, shown by the current teacher exodus across the US. In-service teachers and emerging educators in teacher education programs have to learn to navigate tensions between research, policies, and on-the-ground realities. One way to make visible ideological tensions in education is through studying discourse.

Using tools of discourse analysis and figured worlds to lift up tensions, this chapter will analyze the contrapuntal voices of practicing teachers of bilingual learners as they think aloud through a NYS language policy document. We find that some of the teachers espouse language ideologies with a social justice bent while others are still grappling with questions about equity; however, all participants question the policy using the lens of their experiences with emergent bilinguals (EBs), or their language learning experiences themselves. This chapter will explore figured worlds in conflict, how the figured worlds lead to tensions between policy and practice, and implications for teacher education, asking: what figured worlds of language ideologies are indexed by beliefs about classroom instructional practices and instructional methods of leverage discourse for learning?

### **Taking Up Figured Worlds in Bilingual Education**

To explore how teachers interpret a policy document, we take up a Figured Worlds (FW) framework. Figured Worlds (Holland et al., 2001) are constructed and communally negotiated interpretive frames that give meaning to actors, actions, and outcomes in certain social situations. Holland and colleagues (2001) define figured worlds as:

A socially and culturally constructed *realm of interpretation* in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others. Each is a simplified world populated by *a set of agents* who engage in a limited range of meaningful acts or changes of state as moved by a specific set of forces. (p. 52) [emphasis added]

A figured world provides a frame of reference to make sense of a complex social situation. For example, when we think about how schools make sense of bilingual refugee students entering the district, the community involved might include the youth themselves, their families, general education teachers, bilingual coordinators, school secretaries, administrators, translators, etc., all of these participants in the figured world are considered agents. These agents decide how to position the new bilingual students: are they seen as a positive opportunity for diversifying the school, a drain on limited resources, or a problem that needs to be solved at the district level? Each actor in the system will recruit a figured world to make sense of these situations, and they often act in accordance with the valued outcomes of such a figured world.

Across this study, we see both the policy document and the participants animating certain actors (different categories of teachers, groupings of English language learners and parents, administrators), forces (accountability measures, discourses of high expectations), significant acts (moving up the

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