

2026

# University of Connecticut Neag School of Education

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OF EDUCATION

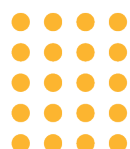
# Journal



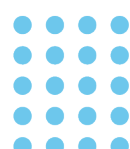
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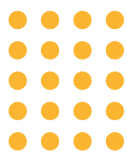
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# MISSION STATEMENT



The Neag School of Education Journal is an editor-reviewed, open-access, annual journal founded and run by graduate students and published through the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut. Its primary purpose is to offer a platform for graduate students to share their research and knowledge with academic communities, and to broaden and deepen the literature of education, as written and experienced by graduate and doctoral students, as well as early-career scholars.

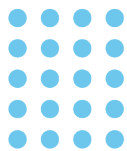
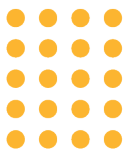
The Neag School of Education Journal highlights the strongest, most robust student and early-career work from a broad range of disciplines such as educational psychology, curriculum and instruction, teacher education, as well as educational leadership.

Of particular interest are pieces providing reflection on student experience with their research processes and manuscripts showcasing research in the preliminary stages. The journal offers students and early-career scholars the chance to publish work through diverse types of academic writing including, but not limited to, research articles (e.g., qualitative and quantitative research), essays, literature review, as well as personal experience and reflective pieces.

Aligning with the mission of its governing institution, the Neag School of Education Journal places significance on pieces seeking to improve education and social systems in order to facilitate increasingly effective, equitable, and socially just practices for educators and practitioners from a variety of fields, perspectives, and theoretical lenses as they serve their local communities. Reflections are also sought after to foster relations and collaboration amongst graduate students and their colleagues, to pass along wisdom, innovation, and creativity in pursuit of fostering a graduate community rooted in rigorous and intentional research design and practices. The journal's open access ensures it as a source for current and future practitioners.



# LETTER FROM THE BOARD



We are pleased to share the 4th issue of the Neag School of Education Journal. Leading from our mission, our journal provides a unique space for graduate and early career scholars to develop and share a broad variety of scholarly work, including research articles, essays, literature reviews, and reflective pieces. We take pride in providing a supportive “testing-ground” for graduate authors to refine their original work in collaboration with our graduate-led editorial board. Fundamentally, the Neag School of Education Journal is committed to the growth and development of emergent educational researchers across fields. After much hard work and dedication from our authors and editorial board, we are thrilled to unveil the culmination of their efforts – six pieces that showcase the excellence of our 2026 edition.

Each of this year’s articles exemplify the equity-grounded, methodologically rigorous, and innovative research that this journal endeavors to elevate.

In Integrating Human Rights and Social Justice Education through Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education in Sub-Saharan Africa, Saah Agyemang-Badu proposes a justice-oriented framework that integrates Human Rights Education (HRE) and Social Justice Education (SJE) within Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) by drawing from linguistic human rights scholarship, critical pedagogy, and postcolonial theory. Agyemang-Badu argues that the continued dominance of colonial languages in African classrooms constitutes a form of epistemic violence that disconnects learners from the cultural and linguistic resources needed to engage meaningfully with questions of rights and justice. Agyemang-Badu’s piece illustrates how rights discourse can be reframed in learners’ first languages to strengthen linguistic identity, foster critical consciousness, and expand civic participation by offering curricular exemplars grounded in Ghanaian proverbs, oral traditions, and community knowledge systems. Agyemang-Badu concludes with a series of suggestions to strengthen Indigenous language policy, sustained teacher preparation, and genuine collaboration with local communities.

In Co-Generating a Dissertation: Camaraderie, SEL Competencies, and the Cohort Community, Vae L. Champagne provides a reflective narrative of their own journey through a Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning (SEAL) doctoral program focused on the value of community. Champagne leverages the strengths of this doctoral process to provide recommendations and highlight the value of community focused collective wisdom in academia. The piece examines how this collective model operates in alignment with the stated goals of SEL/SEAL learning, and Champagne argues that this alignment strengthens the overall value of the program to learners. This is framed as being both a critical component of the quality of the program and integral to their own process. Champagne concludes with a call for programs to adopt these values of care and community, both in





cohort models and in an ethos of collective learning.

In *The Politics of Language: Linguistic Justice and the Unfinished Revolution in Myanmar's Education*, Luyi No argues that Myanmar's current educational crisis is the direct outcome of a long-unresolved struggle over linguistic justice by tracing how successive regimes have mobilized schools to impose centralized authority. Moving across the pre-colonial monastic system, British colonial rule, post-independence "Burmanization," socialist-era centralization, and the democratic transition of 2011–2020, No shows how language policy has repeatedly served as a tool of nation-building that has also entrenched linguistic, ethnic, and cultural exclusion. No ultimately frames the State Administration Council's 2022 amendments mandating Burmese as the sole language of instruction as the predictable culmination of these persistent tensions. No concludes that any meaningful reform must confront this history by centering linguistic justice, by recognizing community-led and faith-based educational traditions, and by engaging ethnic communities as equal partners in shaping a more inclusive system.

In *Evaluating Two-Way Immersion Programs: A Literature Review of Their Role in Advancing Equity for Emergent Bilingual Learners*, Pinyi Wang and LeAnne Salazar Montoya examine how U.S. based Two-Way Immersion (TWI) programs promote academic equity and biliteracy for K-12 Emergent Bilingual Learners. Wang and Salazar Montoya's review synthesizes 64 peer-reviewed studies, dissertations, and book chapters published between 2018 and 2025. Wang and Salazar Montoya use an analytical approach grounded in Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy to organize the literature into three thematic domains—instructional practices, community engagement, and post-secondary outcomes—to trace how TWI programs shape students' academic trajectories across the P-20 continuum. Wang and Salazar Montoya find that TWI programs hold genuine promise for advancing biliteracy and academic achievement when supported by balanced language practices, multimodal instruction, inclusive leadership, and active family engagement. However, disparities in implementation, resource access, and digital inclusion continue to limit the consistent success of these programs. Wang and Salazar Montoya's review argues that sustaining TWI's equity potential requires an explicit commitment to linguistic justice and structural alignment across classroom practice, family partnership, and policy.

In *Easier Said Than Taught: Navigating the Development and Application of Critical Thinking*, Jia-han Yang performs a narrative literature review of scholarly research of Critical Thinking (CT) development for students. Yang examines how the context of transfer for CT skills has been shown to impact development, as well as how classroom practices shape these factors. Yang discusses how near and far transfer of CT intersects with domain specificity for students, acknowledging the literature's indication of content specific CT development as more effective while



also framing generalized CT development as crucial for learners. Yang highlights the limits of current research into CT in terms of diverse contexts, and encourages a broader examination of these factors going forward. Yang concludes that CT development is a survival competency for undergraduate students that shapes how they interact with the world beyond academic contexts.

In *From Classroom to Community Spaces: The Intersection of Peace, Democracy Education, and Public Dialogue in Norway*, Cindy Yovanov explores how facilitated public dialogue in Norway extends democratic learning from K-12 schooling into community spaces that confront racism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia. Drawing on Communities of Practice theory, Yovanov's pilot study applies Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis to semi-structured interviews with two experienced dialogue facilitators in southern Norway. Findings show that participants initially approach dialogue through the debate-style argumentation learned in formal education but through engagement with the public dialogue space, Yovanov traces how participants move toward fuller democratic participation. Yovanov argues that facilitated dialogue serves as a bridge between institutional and experiential democratic learning, and offers implications for educator development and democratic curriculum design.

We are proud to present the work of our graduate and early career authors. The Neag School of Education Journal is committed to student development through a high-dose, collaborative review process, and we hope authors leave this experience better prepared for future peer-reviewed publication. Our copyright policy is designed with emerging scholars in mind, ensuring they retain full ownership of their work.

We have many fantastic and dedicated people to thank for the realization of our 4th issue. First, we owe an immense debt of gratitude to Dr. Jennie Weiner, our founding advisor, whose tireless dedication to this journal and to students has shaped everything we do. Dr. Weiner concludes her service with this edition, and we are deeply grateful for her leadership and the enduring lessons she has imparted to us as reviewers and researchers. We also extend our heartfelt thanks to Dr. Jason Irizarry, our dean, whose enthusiastic support from the journal's inception has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to student research and development.

Much thanks to Mikala Kane and the design team at UConn who help ensure that each edition is beautifully formatted.

And thank you to our board members whose hard work and enthusiasm made this issue possible. We are excited to continue advancing this work!

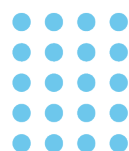
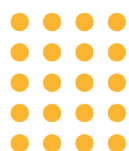
Finally, thank you to the authors of the pieces featured in this issue and all who submitted work. It goes without saying that this would be impossible without your contributions. We are immensely proud to feature your work in this issue.

***To learn more about our team and mission, please visit us at [education.uconn.edu/neag-journal](http://education.uconn.edu/neag-journal)***





# BOARD



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## Integrating Human Rights and Social Justice Education through Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

### Abstract

**Background:** Language-in-education policies across many African countries continue to privilege colonial languages, often marginalizing Indigenous languages and limiting access to culturally grounded and equitable education. Instruction conducted primarily in English, French, or Portuguese can distance learners from community knowledge systems and constrain critical engagement with issues of justice and human rights.

**Purpose:** This paper proposes a justice-oriented framework that integrates Human Rights Education (HRE) and Social Justice Education (SJE) within Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE).

**Methodology/Approach:** The study employs conceptual analysis informed by linguistic human rights scholarship, critical pedagogy, postcolonial theory, and research on multilingual education. Curricular exemplification is used to illustrate how human rights and social justice concepts can be embedded in first-language instruction.

**Findings/Conclusions:** The analysis suggests that integrating HRE and SJE within MTB-MLE can strengthen linguistic identity, foster critical consciousness, and expand opportunities for academic engagement and civic participation. However, effective implementation depends on coherent language policy, sustained teacher preparation, and collaboration with local communities.

**Implications:** Reframing language policy as a human rights issue shifts debates about multilingual education from questions of efficiency to questions of justice. The proposed framework contributes to scholarship on culturally sustaining pedagogy and justice-centered language education, highlighting the importance of positioning African languages at the center of equitable educational futures.

### Keywords

Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education; Human Rights Education; Social Justice Education; Linguistic Human Rights; Sub-Saharan Africa

### Acknowledgments

*During the development of this manuscript, ChatGPT (GPT-5, OpenAI) was used selectively to support the author's writing process. The tool assisted in refining phrasing for clarity, suggesting sentence structure improvements, and generating preliminary outlines based on author-provided notes and written memos. All AI-assisted contributions were carefully reviewed, revised, and contextualized by the author, who retains full responsibility for the content's originality, accuracy, and scholarly integrity.*

African education systems are in contention about what language should be used to teach young Africans in their classrooms. This struggle is not merely an issue of pedagogy; it reflects deeply ingrained political power relationships, cultural heritage, and the contested concept of justice itself. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the continued reliance on colonial languages for schooling, English in Nigeria or Kenya, French in West Africa and Middle Africa, and Portuguese in East Africa and Mozambique, is perpetuating

inequities in ways that both mirror and extend what happened during colonial times. As Thiong'o (1986) argues, language is never neutral; language is the carrier of culture, tradition, memory, and national ethos. When African children are required to learn in colonial languages, their literate practices are delegitimized and their cultural patrimonies reduced to a form of background information. Research across various contexts has shown that such processes not only disadvantage learners cognitively and socially, but they also diminish the

transformative potential of education as a site for liberation (Bamgbose, 2000; Brock-Utne, 2012; Heugh, 2015).

The advantage of using a colonial language for instruction in education is often justified on practical grounds. For example, if someone knows English and French as a foreign language then one will be able to access global networks in different regions of the world. (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998). Yet this rationale obscures the deeper structural violence embedded in language policy: the consistent relegation of African languages to the private sphere, while colonial languages dominate schooling. Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (2017) have framed such practices as violations of linguistic human rights, explaining that one's mother tongue should not be suppressed; to deny expression in the language that is closest to them is nothing other than a breach of human rights. In many classrooms, speaking one's first language is still punished, reinforcing internalized hierarchies of value between "local" and "global" identities (Trudell, 2016). These policies not only perpetuate educational inequalities they also constrict the civic imagination, narrowing the terms through which young people can articulate justice, rights, and belonging.

This paper starts out with the assumption that language policy cannot be separate from human rights and that education in Africa must be reimagined not only in terms of access and outcomes but also in terms of epistemic justice. Human Rights Education (HRE) and Social Justice Education (SJE) provide pedagogical and ethical tools for cultivating critical consciousness, civic responsibility, and equity-oriented learning (Adams & Bell, 2016; Freire, 1970). Yet in those same languages of conquest, the contradiction occurs. These approaches are often mediated through colonial languages, creating a contradiction: Learners read and write about freedom from slavery, inalienable rights, and dignity, all while using the colonial tongue that has historically denied them this possibility. In effect, HRE and SJE run the risk of becoming disembodied ideals that are disconnected from practice. Integrating HRE and SJE within Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) addresses this paradox by rooting justice discourses in learners' own languages and cultural epistemologies.

This paper is both a scholarly intervention and

a personal reckoning. As a product of colonial schooling turned critical pedagogue, I argue MTB-MLE needs to be reclaimed as an action of resistance. The classroom is not neutral; rather, it is a place where linguistic hierarchies are made or unmade unless it is deliberately reimagined as a space for justice and affirmation. By blending personal experience with theory, I take up the dual task of exposing how current language-in-education policies constitute epistemic violence and offer an alternative framework for transformation.

The suggested framework draws on four overlapping traditions: linguistic human rights, critical pedagogy, postcolonial theory, and multilingual education. Each of these contributes its own insights into how language mediates identity, power, and participation. Linguistic human rights emphasize the ethical and legal imperatives of mother-tongue instruction (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2017). Critical pedagogy makes education an act of freedom and insists on dialogic, problem-posing approaches that cultivate learners' critical awareness (Freire, 1970). Postcolonial theory scopes out language hierarchies as vestiges of colonialism and advocates for the recovery of African ways of knowing (Thiong'o, 1986). Multilingual education research has demonstrated that MTB-MLE, when it is systematically supported, brings cognitive, social and academic benefits (Cummins, 1981; Heugh, 2015; Trudell, 2016). Together, these communicate that teaching through mother tongues should not be seen as a remedial concession but rather an imperative for justice.

The question behind this work is not only intellectual, but personal as well. As someone shaped by the complexities of the blended festering pot of multilingual education, I am interested in how the educational system can both respect students' linguistic abilities and foster in them a critical awareness and understanding of rights, power, and justice. This essay argues that integrating HRE and SJE in their native languages can simultaneously increase students' academic accomplishments, build civic power, and cultural resilience. Such integration affirms linguistic and cultural identities, disrupts colonial hierarchies of knowledge, and reimagines education as a tool for equity and transformation.

Rather than offering a universal template, this paper advances a context-responsive approach that examines how learning can be grounded in







the linguistic and cultural resources of African communities while still interrogating the power dynamics embedded within those contexts. This orientation positions justice-centered language education not as a neutral pedagogical choice but as a necessary intervention in systems that have long marginalized African epistemologies. In reclaiming African languages as legitimate sites of human rights and social transformation, the paper underscores the structural urgency of rethinking language policy as a matter of equity, dignity, and epistemic repair.

To develop this argument, this paper first outlines the conceptual foundations that position language policy as a matter of human rights and epistemic justice. It then details the methodological and analytical approach guiding the study, followed by a curriculum framework demonstrating how HRE and SJE can be embedded within MTB-MLE in practical terms. Building on this, this paper analyzes the curricular modules and the role of teacher preparation before turning to the broader findings and implications for policy and practice. Together, these sections advance a reimagined model of language education rooted in justice, cultural relevance, and linguistic rights.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Theoretical Foundations**

Incorporating Human Rights Education (HRE) and Social Justice Education (SJE) into Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) is based on a variety of traditions that question how power, knowledge, and identity are made and contested. This framework draws on five overlapping paradigms: Linguistic Human Rights, Critical Pedagogy, Postcolonial and Decolonial Theory, Epistemic Critique, and Multilingual Education. Each of these perspectives exposes the inequities embedded within language policy while also offering routes to justice-centered transformation.

### **Linguistic Human Rights**

Linguistic Human Rights (LHR) affirm the rights of individuals and communities to use, keep, and transmit language across generations and particularly in public domains such as education or the media, or in governance. Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (2017) note that negative rights (non-discrimination in language) are complemented by positive rights (access to education and public life in one's own language). In African contexts

where state-sanctioned policies often favor English, French or Portuguese, denial of LHR means restricted access to education, cultural alienation, and epistemic exclusion (Bamgbose, 2000; Brock-Utne, 2012). Language becomes a substitute for power: competency in colonial tongues is a frequent deciding factor when it comes to access to higher education, employment prospects, and exercising political rights. This study highlights that the omission of African languages is not merely a policy decision but a breach of human rights with significant societal ramifications.

### **Critical Pedagogy and Social Justice Education**

Freire (1970) criticizes the “banking model” in which learners are cast as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge being built from the top down. Instead, he suggests a “problem-posing” pedagogy with students as co-constructors of knowledge. Adams and Bell (2016) broaden this vision to include Social Justice Education (SJE), which emphasizes identity, privilege, and systemic disparities as critical components of teaching. Together, these show the importance of classrooms that not only offer content but also foster critical literacy to question systems of oppression. In multilingual African contexts, these observations reveal how language operates as a tool of power and exclusion. Colonial languages frequently categorize learners as either legitimate or illegitimate, perpetuating hierarchies of intelligence and belonging. Including SJE in MTB-MLE, therefore, goes beyond the rationale of “good development start”. It defines mother tongue instruction as both affirmative and resistant. Unlike Adams and Bell's and Freire's paradigms, which emerged in Latin America and the United States, respectively, SJE/MTB-MLE application in multilingual contexts on the African continent must account for overlapping colonial practices and multiple epistemologies that intersect in several languages spoken by indigenous groups and migrants. The amalgamation of these frameworks argues that SJE-infused MTB-MLE is not simply about access and results, but it is about beginning to develop our critical consciousness concerning these very systems that have turned language into a site of inequality

### **Postcolonial Theory and Language**

In *Decolonizing the Mind*, the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) criticizes African education systems that emphasize European languages that

separate students from their cultural worldviews. He describes how African children were chastised for speaking their mother tongues at school, leading to internalized guilt and an associated brilliance with English. This is not just a continuation of colonial control but also what Spivak (1988) calls epistemic violence, rendering subaltern voices inaudible under dominant discourses. Decolonial scholars like Mignolo (2009) raise the concept of epistemic disobedience, which is a refusal to accept Eurocentric knowledge as the only valid form of value. With such an approach, embedding HRE and SJE in mother tongue-based multilingual education is an act of epistemic disobedience: it legitimizes African languages as modes of theorizing justice and human rights. Fanon (1967) further examines the psychological dimensions of language imposition. He argues that internalized oppression and inferiority are perpetuated by colonial languages. According to Foucault (1980), the creation, administration, and instruction of knowledge are all inextricably linked to a language. Ojaide (2015) also remarks that African oral traditions, usually denigrated as “folklore,” in truth contain many rich repositories of philosophy and knowledge. Together, these conceptualizations establish MTB-MLE not as a wistful return to tradition but forward-looking strategy in which the people reclaim control over their knowledge and culture.

### **Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE)**

MTB-MLE supports learners’ first language (L1) as a basis for instruction before introducing additional languages (L2, L3) in a sequenced approach. Cummins’ (1981) interdependence hypothesis offers a cognitive rationale, suggesting that literacy and academic skills developed in a first language will transfer to additional languages when supported.

MTB-MLE has primarily taken transitional forms across much of Sub-Saharan Africa, where authorities support learners’ L1 or a regional lingua franca during Primary 1–3 (roughly equivalent to Grades 1–3 in U.S. systems) and then transition to using English, French, or Portuguese almost exclusively from Primary 4 (Trudell, 2016). In elite private schools, colonial languages are prevalent from Primary 1. This structure advantages urban or elite children who have had prior exposure to colonial languages while systematically

disadvantaging the rural majorities and working-class learners who have a L1 different from the school’s language. The transition to a different language halts cognitive development, which leads to widespread literacy failure, high rates of repetition, and dropping out of school (Brock-Utne, 2012).

Studies offer additional evidence of harm and possibility. Brock-Utne (2012) conducted a classroom analysis in Tanzania and found that learners only taught in English tended to rely on rote memorization, reciting what they did not understand, while teachers avoided deeper explanations due to understanding the limitations of the learners’ language ability.

Trudell’s (2016) ethnographic study conducted in East and West Africa indicates that when children are taught in their home languages, not only does learner participation increase, but also parental participation is strengthened to a point that schooling feels like a part of everyday life. Nonetheless, the study also cautioned that where the implementation of MTB-MLE was developed organically in communities, resistance occasionally arose from parents about their child’s schooling experience. In some cases, parents indicated that local language schooling may be detrimental to their ward’s socioeconomic progress.

Heugh’s (2015) comparative studies of long-term MTB-MLE programs in Ethiopia and South Africa confirmed that mother tongue instruction for an extended period of time leads to better educational outcomes. In Ethiopia, learners who received 8 years of L1 schooling achieved higher literacy rates in the home language, but also higher levels of proficiency in English than peers who transitioned from home language schooling earlier. In South Africa, however, the 3-year early-exit model led to lower literacy rates and ultimately affected educational inequality. These findings effectively dispel the myth that African languages are a hindrance to learners’ ability to acquire a global language. In contrast, they show that prolonged MTB-MLE can robustly support indigenous language development and as well as lead to greater levels of proficiency in the acquisition of international languages.

These studies above indicate that when properly designed and implemented, MTB-MLE is not merely a technical language policy but a justice-oriented educational model of practice that validates the





identities of learners, promotes cognitive growth, and prepares students to engage productively in their local and global contexts.

However, these traditions do not align seamlessly. Freire's (1970) dialogic pedagogy emerged from Latin American struggles against dictatorship, while Adams and Bell's (2016) social justice education framework reflects U.S. debates on race, identity, and inclusion. Their direct application to African multilingual classrooms risks oversimplification. Likewise, linguistic human rights emphasize institutional guarantees, whereas postcolonial and decolonial theory often stress the limits of rights discourse as a Eurocentric construct (Mutua, 2002; Zembylas, 2017). Rather than assuming harmony, this paper treats these frameworks as an assemblage: partially overlapping, sometimes contradictory, yet mutually generative. The value of this synthesis lies not in resolving their tensions but in mobilizing their insights to design educational practices that affirm linguistic identity, cultivate critical consciousness, and resist colonial hierarchies

### **METHODOLOGY/APPROACH**

This paper employs a conceptual and theoretical methodology rather than an empirical one. It draws on human rights education scholarship, postcolonial theory, decolonial thought, and multilingual education research to construct a justice-oriented framework. The goal is not to give a one-size-fits-all solution but rather to propose a conceptual framework that can guide curriculum development and teacher training policy across different contexts. By combining theory and reflective insight, the methodology exposes both the challenges and transformative potential of incorporating HRE and SJE into MTB-MLE.

### **Positionality and Researcher Stance**

This analysis is informed by my lived experience within African multilingual schooling systems. My first experience with linguistic violence came at the age of six, when a teacher hit me on the wrist for speaking Twi in class. Like millions of African children, I was taught through colonial schooling that intelligence equated to proficiency in European languages, a lesson that has shaped my entire educational trajectory and scholarly commitments.

This positionality is not incidental to the research but central to it. As a product of colonial schooling turned critical pedagogue, I bring both insider

knowledge of the harms produced by language hierarchies and scholarly distance to analyze their structural dimensions. Following feminist and decolonial research traditions (Haraway, 1988; Smith, 1999), I acknowledge that all knowledge is situated. My experiences as a Twi speaker educated in English-dominant systems inform both my theoretical framing and my commitment to justice-oriented reform. These experiences translate into concrete analytical choices: why I prioritize postcolonial theorists (Thiong'o, Fanon, Spivak) over Western frameworks alone; why I propose participatory curriculum design that centers community and educator voice; and why I treat indigenous knowledge systems as epistemologically legitimate rather than supplementary. The classroom is not neutral; it is a space where linguistic hierarchies are either reproduced or disrupted. By blending personal experience with theoretical analysis, I expose how current language-in-education policies constitute epistemic violence while offering an alternative framework grounded in linguistic human rights and critical pedagogy.

### **Conceptual Approach to Curriculum Design**

The curriculum design advanced in this article addresses the long-standing criticisms of Eurocentrism and human rights education (Mutua, 2002; Zembylas, 2017), which tend to make liberal rights discourse universal at the expense and marginalization of non-Western epistemologies and experiences. To counteract this trend, this framework situates rights discourse in indigenous languages and cultural formats through pedagogical processes of indigenization. Proverbs, oral narrative, songs, and the community-based repository of knowledge are not considered "add-ons" to supplement learning and teaching but are integral pedagogic resources.

For example, the Akan proverbs of Ghana or the Yoruba folktales in Nigeria offer rich implicit lessons on dignity, reciprocity, and justice. Integrating these into classroom discourse enables students to interact with rights principles in culturally relevant terms, rather than as abstract concepts that are imported from international conventions. Oral storytelling, a pervasive feature of African societies, gives students a narrative place where they can grapple with moral issues, contest interpretations of fairness, and build meanings around responsibility together. Likewise, community



forums, intergenerational conversations, and role-play activities grounded in local traditions can contextualize HRE and SJE within established cultural frameworks of knowledge and authority.

However, as the process unfolds, it is important to avoid the creation of new hierarchies and exclusions. One prevalent risk is the idealization of “tradition” while favoring privileged or dominant cultural groups, effectively silencing minority perspectives. To reduce this danger, the curriculum follows three principles:

- **Participatory Co-Design:** Teachers, learners, parents, and community elders are all involved in curriculum development as co-creators. This means that multiple perspectives contribute to shaping both content and pedagogy.
- **Pluralism in Knowledge Systems:** Indigenous practices come into play along with critical global frameworks. This plurality rejects binary opposition between “local” and “universal” and instead encourages dialogue across epistemic traditions.
- **Critical Reflexivity:** Educators and students are emboldened to not just challenge the hierarchies at the service of colonialist policies but also examine national, ethnic, and generational exclusions within indigenous knowledges. From this perspective, cultural forms like proverbs and stories should not be put on a pedestal; they are instead given a platform for discussing what justice should look like and how human rights can be realized.

By anchoring the curriculum in both indigenous traditional frameworks and critical pedagogy, this approach develops learners’ ability to critically analyze rights in ways that are relevant to their lived experiences. The aim is not to replace one discourse that is dominant with another, but rather to create dialogic and multilingual learning spaces where African epistemology in all its diversity is respected while preparing learners to engage in global rights and justice discourse.

## **COLONIAL LANGUAGE HIERARCHIES AND THEIR EFFECTS**

The language hierarchies found in African education systems are not coincidental. They are the result of colonial structure and post-colonial accommodation, in which language functioned as a tool to impose governance, stratification, and exclusion (Alexander,

2005; Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998). During the colonial era, European powers imposed English, French, and Portuguese not merely as means of communication but also as instruments for subjugation. Language policy served as a vehicle to limit access to power, breed local elite intermediaries, and destroy the legitimacy of indigenous epistemologies. Education in the colonial languages, hence, served as both a barrier to entry for the poor and a symbol of social distinction.

Post-independence reforms throughout Africa often did not succeed in dismantling these hierarchies. For example, in Ghana, Nigeria, and Tanzania, children are provided with only two to three years of mother tongue instruction before they are moved to English as the only medium (Heugh, 2015). Similarly, in francophone states such as Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, and Cameroon, children are taught in French from Primary one, despite that many children do not speak French at home (Djité, 2008). In Mozambique and Angola, Portuguese remains the default language of schooling, even though it is the home language of only one minority group (Mutua, 2002). These policies have been justified in the name of national unity, international diplomacy, and economic integration, yet such policies continue to marginalize learners whose home languages have been excluded (Bamgbose, 2000).

It is crucial to recognize, however, that the persistence of colonial languages cannot only be rationalized without reference to their colonial origins. In many states in Africa, they serve the function of lingua francas among populations that are ethnolinguistically diverse (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998), and parents believe they offer an opportunity towards social and economic mobility. Furthermore, inequities in educational contexts cannot be framed solely in terms of language policy, because they interact with longstanding issues of underfunding, teacher shortages, and poor governance. What is clear from the research, however, is that when children are taught in colonial languages they do not have familiarity with, from the beginning of schooling, it will severely impede their learning and literacy development (Brock-Utne, 2012; Heugh, 2015). It is important to emphasize that this theoretical construct does not dispute the utilitarian function of colonial languages, but rather to emphasize that their uncritical elevation within a hierarchy maintains an inequality that systematically disregards and depletes indigenous linguistic repertoires.



The literature repeatedly emphasizes the disconnect between the languages used in educational settings and the language abilities of the children who are educated in their home language. In his study, Brock-Utne (2012) describes instances in Tanzania when students receiving instruction fully in English used rote memorization as a strategy for learning without understanding. Heugh's (2015) comparative study across Ethiopia and South Africa also indicates that extended mother-tongue instruction has stronger literacy outcomes than both L1 and L2, undermining the assumption that local languages hinder the acquisition of global languages. Trudell (2016) further illustrates that when schools use languages that are not familiar to the community, it weakens parental support and lowers student motivation.

The effects of learning through unfamiliar languages are not only academic, but also psychological and sociological. In many rural areas, children's exposure to colonial languages starts in schools (UNESCO, 2010). This leads children to experience frustration, disinterest, and ultimately makes them likely to drop out of school. More insidiously, students internalize shame and inferiority when their home languages are deemed unintelligent or irrelevant (Prah, 2009; Thiong'o, 1986). Fanon (1967) warns that this is a potent source for "colonial alienation" when a colonial language becomes associated with intelligence and worth, while indigenous languages are dismissed as ignoble and primitive.

In addition, there is the elevation of colonial languages, which adds to the system of what Bourdieu (1991) calls linguistic capital. The proficiency to speak English or French is often associated with intelligence, professionalism, and mobility. These perceptions of language shape parent aspirations, teacher expectations, and student self-worth. In many homes, parents actively discourage the use of home languages because they believe these languages limit opportunities. This creates a cycle of cultural eradication and language insecurity that goes beyond school settings and permeates family and community life.

These hierarchies are also institutions that reinforce linguistic hierarchies. African languages are underrepresented in curricula, absent from textbooks, and are not assessed nationally (Wolff, 2017). These institutions function as sites of epistemic reproduction, excluding not only children

from multilingual and multicultural engagement but also parents, communities, and educators from shaping linguistic and cultural futures. By privileging colonial languages as the dominant medium of legitimacy and social mobility, they perpetuate linguistic imperialism and reinforce cultural hierarchies, thereby foreclosing the possibility of more pluralistic and decolonial forms of knowledge production and transmission. The consequences are far-reaching beyond the school context. In many African countries, being able to speak a colonial language is a requirement for accessing higher education, formal employment, and engaging in political processes (Alexander, 2005), thus disempowering women, rural populations, and speakers of less common language groups. Language, then, becomes a marker of citizenship and legitimacy.

It is important to be clear that any challenge to colonial language hierarchies is not just a matter of cultural nostalgia. It is necessary for educational equity, cultural revitalization, and inclusive development. What is therefore required is not just the translation of curriculum stories but a critical reimagining of the role of language in the construction of knowledge, power, and identity. An education system that situates African languages at the core, rather than the periphery, empowers learners to engage with the world on their own terms, rather than through borrowed lenses.

### **CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK: INTEGRATING HRE AND SJE THROUGH MTB-MLE**

The integration of Human Rights Education (HRE) and Social Justice Education (SJE) in Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) presents an opportunity to disrupt language policy and pedagogical practices in Sub-Saharan Africa. This curriculum framework sits on the conceptual foundation laid out previously and is informed by culturally responsive pedagogies, critical literacy, and community knowledge systems toward constructing locally relevant and globally conscious education.

The model serves as a response to criticism in which traditional HRE is perceived as European-centric and irrelevant to the lived experiences of African learners (Mutua, 2002; Zembylas, 2017). By instituting human rights concepts in local languages and cultural practices, this curriculum framework validates students as linguistically accountable while

encouraging engagement and criticality around notions of justice and equity.

### Curriculum Goals and Learning Outcomes

This curriculum is organized into three interrelated goals:

- Knowledge: Acquire knowledge and understanding of key concepts of human rights, like dignity, equality, and justice, within the context of local cultures.
- Skills: Facilitate critical thinking, dialoguing, working collaboratively, and advocacy through participatory learning methods.
- Attitudes: Foster empathy, pride in cultural identity, and a desire to work for social action and justice.

These objectives are synchronized with the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (2011), which requires states to implement human rights education at all levels of education. The Declaration clarifies that human rights education is not only an exercise in transferring knowledge, but that such education also includes the development of values, attitudes, and skills that instill in learners the belief they can be rights-holders and rights-defenders. By invoking the Declaration, this framework is firmly set within global standards despite the chasm between global obligations and local action and implementation of education systems in Africa. The curriculum presented here seeks to amend that chasm by anchoring a rights discourse to indigenous languages, oral traditions, and participatory pedagogies ensuring that human rights education is both accessible and transformative for African learners.

### Pedagogical Principles

The curriculum is grounded explicitly in Freirean critical pedagogy (Freire, 2020) and culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2014), providing the pedagogical underpinnings for this curriculum. Freire's work focuses on the movement from "banking education" to "problem-posing pedagogy," where learners use dialogue and inquiry to name and challenge oppression. This approach frames human rights and justice as lived experiences that are co-constructed in community, rather than intellectual constructs imposed from above.

Together with this, Ladson-Billings' framework holds pedagogy to a higher standard, in that pedagogy must recognize and position students' cultural and linguistic identities as assets, rather than deficits. This is especially important in African multilingual contexts where colonial schooling has historically positioned indigenous languages as inferior.

Collectively, these traditions legitimize the curriculum's three foci:

1. Dialogic learning: Lessons are designed to promote dialogue and inquiry, while respecting students' voices and experiences as sources of knowledge.
2. Experiential methods: Storytelling, role play, debates, and community mapping direct learners' considerations of rights concepts to their lived reality.
3. Cultural grounding: Local proverbs, oral traditions, festivals, and community knowledge become entry points for exploring the principles of human rights and allow learners to understand these principles as culturally relevant rather than foreign concepts.

These foci are neither gratuitous nor random; they are the result of combining the principles of critical pedagogy and culturally relevant pedagogy to African multilingual classrooms. When taken as a whole, they create a pedagogical framework around which to affirm identity, develop critical consciousness, and prepare learners to actively produce local and global struggles for justice.

Although integrating HRE and SJE into MTB-MLE may have transformative potential, it is not guaranteed. The feasibility of implementing the framework hinges on several mediating factors: meticulous preparation and training of educators in both pedagogical methodologies in their native language and the integration of rights-based content into the curriculum; participatory curriculum development that incorporates community perspectives while avoiding the perpetuation of exclusions; the availability of sufficient materials and resources for educators and community organizations; and supportive policy environments that facilitate the continuation and enhancement of educational programs through collaborative initiatives. In the absence of these conditions, the MTB-MLE implementation may be a tokenistic or elite reform rather than a rights-based alternative

For this reason, the framework must be read as a necessary enabling model for reducing barriers to rights learning, and not as a remedy on its own.

### **Sample Curriculum Modules**

The following sample modules illustrate how Human Rights Education and Social Justice Education can be integrated into Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education through culturally responsive curricular design. The examples draw upon established pedagogical principles and practices that incorporate local languages, cultural values, and community-based knowledge.

#### ***Introduction to Human Rights***

Students explore the concept of rights through Akan proverbs, community stories, and local experiences. Concepts such as dignity and fairness are linked to cultural values like Sankofa (learning from the past) and Abusua (family/community solidarity).

#### ***Dignity and Equality***

Through storytelling and role play, students examine scenarios involving dignity and equality, reflecting on how these values are practiced within their own communities and cultural traditions.

#### ***Justice and Fairness***

Students participate in mock traditional court proceedings, drawing on local models of restorative justice. They analyze how customary practices align with or challenge modern human rights frameworks.

#### ***Cultural Identity and Rights***

A Cultural Marketplace activity allows students to explore the relationship between cultural identity and rights, using Ghanaian festivals, crafts, and oral histories to understand how cultural preservation intersects with human rights.

#### ***Empowerment and Community Engagement***

Students engage with themes of empowerment through music (such as Yen Ara Asaase Ni) and collaborative projects. They identify local human rights issues and develop action plans to address them.

#### ***Assessment Strategies***

Assessment within this framework is formative and reflective, emphasizing growth in understanding and critical consciousness. Strategies include:

- Reflective journals documenting personal connections to rights concepts.
- Storytelling and community mapping projects.
- Group presentations and dialogues.
- Community-engaged projects addressing local human rights concerns.

### **Curricular Innovations**

This approach differs from traditional rights education in several ways:

- It localizes rights discourse through the use of indigenous languages and cultural knowledge.
- It positions learners as active agents rather than passive recipients.
- It explicitly addresses intersectionality, exploring how language, gender, class, and culture intersect in shaping rights experiences.
- It connects classroom learning to community action, fostering a sense of responsibility and agency.

### **Toward a Justice-Centered Language Education**

By centering human rights and social justice education within mother tongue-based instruction, this curriculum framework offers a pathway toward educational equity and linguistic justice. It affirms that African languages are not barriers to human rights education but powerful tools for fostering critical awareness, cultural pride, and transformative action.

In the following section, the paper turns to the role of teacher preparation and professional development in supporting this approach, recognizing that transformative curricula require equally transformative pedagogical practices.

### **DISCUSSION: TEACHER CAPACITY AND SYSTEMIC TRANSFORMATION**

The successful integration of Human Rights Education (HRE) and Social Justice Education (SJE) within Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) hinges on the preparation of educators who are not only linguistically competent but also critically conscious and pedagogically equipped to deliver transformative curricula. Too often, language-in-education reform initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa falter not because of poor policy design, but due to inadequate investment in teacher capacity. For justice-centered language education to take root, teacher



preparation must address both technical and ideological dimensions of pedagogical practice.

A foundational element of professional development for MTB-MLE lies in building teachers' competencies in multilingual and intercultural education. Many African educators were themselves schooled in monolingual, colonial-language environments and may lack formal training in delivering instruction through indigenous languages. Therefore, teacher education programs must include robust coursework and practicum experiences in mother tongue instruction, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and translanguaging strategies. These components not only strengthen linguistic proficiency but also affirm the legitimacy of African languages as vehicles of academic and critical discourse.

Equally important is the cultivation of teachers' capacities to integrate HRE and SJE into their classroom practice. This involves moving beyond rights education as a set of abstract principles and toward a pedagogy that fosters critical inquiry, empathy, and civic agency. Professional development should engage teachers with the philosophical underpinnings of human rights and social justice, encouraging them to reflect on their own positionalities and to recognize the ways that language, identity, and power intersect in educational spaces. Through workshops, collaborative learning communities, and reflective practice, educators can develop the skills to facilitate dialogue, mediate classroom tensions around justice issues, and connect rights education to students' lived experiences.

Community involvement is also integral to teacher preparation in this model. In many African contexts, elders, cultural practitioners, and local leaders are vital custodians of indigenous knowledge and languages. Creating avenues for teachers to engage with these community resources enriches both their cultural competence and their pedagogical repertoire. Partnerships between schools and local communities can foster a more holistic and grounded approach to human rights education, ensuring that classroom learning resonates with broader social and cultural realities.

Addressing structural challenges in teacher preparation remains a significant concern. Many education systems in Africa face shortages of qualified teachers, especially in rural areas where linguistic diversity is greatest. Furthermore,

existing teacher training curricula often prioritize preparation for colonial-language instruction and national exams, leaving little space for mother tongue-based or justice-centered pedagogy. Policy interventions must therefore support the development of specialized teacher training programs for MTB-MLE and provide incentives for teachers to work in linguistically diverse settings. Models such as cascade training and peer mentorship can also help build capacity at scale, especially when combined with ongoing professional support and resource development.

Ultimately, the transformation envisioned by this integrated approach to language education cannot be achieved through curriculum alone. It requires a parallel transformation of teacher education, grounded in the recognition that educators are not mere implementers of policy, but key agents of change. By investing in their linguistic, cultural, and critical capacities, education systems can empower teachers to enact an inclusive and justice-oriented vision of schooling, one that affirms the dignity and voices of all learners.

## **SYNTHESIS AND DISCUSSION**

This conceptual analysis affirms that integrating Human Rights Education (HRE) and Social Justice Education (SJE) within Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) offers a powerful, justice-centered approach to educational reform in Sub-Saharan Africa. Through the synthesis of linguistic human rights, critical pedagogy, postcolonial theory, and multilingual education research, the analysis demonstrates that language policy and curricular innovation can play a transformative role in advancing educational equity.

One key conclusion is that cultural and linguistic relevance significantly enhances the effectiveness of rights learning. When human rights education is delivered through learners' mother tongues and connected to local cultural values and practices, it fosters both deeper understanding and stronger personal engagement. Participatory pedagogies, such as storytelling, community mapping, and dialogic teaching, further support this process by helping students connect abstract rights principles to their lived experiences and community contexts.

The integrated framework also promotes important academic and civic outcomes. In addition to supporting cognitive development and literacy, the approach cultivates empathy, agency, and a





commitment to social justice. However, the success of such initiatives depends heavily on teacher preparation. Robust professional development and meaningful community collaboration are essential to ensure that educators are equipped to implement justice-oriented, culturally responsive pedagogies. Teachers must be supported as reflective practitioners and cultural mediators who can navigate the complex linguistic and cultural dynamics of African classrooms.

Overall, this paper contributes to the growing body of scholarship advocating for justice-centered language education. It underscores that the continued marginalization of African languages in education constitutes a profound equity concern, with implications for identity, citizenship, and social inclusion. Re-centering these languages through integrated HRE and SJE offers a promising pathway for decolonizing education systems and advancing linguistic human rights.

The following section outlines concrete suggestions for policy and practice, identifying strategies to support the scalable and sustainable implementation of this integrated framework.

### **Suggestions for Policy and Practice**

The integration of Human Rights Education (HRE) and Social Justice Education (SJE) within Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) has significant implications for educational policy and practice in Sub-Saharan Africa. As this conceptual analysis suggests, advancing linguistic human rights through justice-oriented curricula requires not only shifts in classroom practice but also broader structural reforms. The inclusion of HRE and SJE in MTB-MLE is best understood not as a technical reform, but rather as part of a larger struggle around epistemic justice. It also requires humility: no single framework or model can solve the deeply ingrained hierarchies that operate in African education systems. Yet, at the same time, the horizon it opens is important—an education that affirms local languages and identities while also allowing learners to engage in critical issues of justice and power.

First, ministries of education should adopt language policies that explicitly recognize the role of indigenous languages in promoting educational equity and justice. Rather than viewing local languages as transitional tools or secondary to global languages, policies should position them as

central to cognitive development, cultural identity, and civic empowerment. This requires sustained investment in developing curricular materials, teacher training programs, and assessment tools in African languages.

Second, teacher education programs should integrate coursework on linguistic human rights, multilingual pedagogy, and social justice education. Preparing teachers to implement integrated HRE-SJE-MTB-MLE frameworks necessitates moving beyond technical language instruction toward a broader understanding of the cultural, political, and ethical dimensions of language in education. Professional development initiatives should also foster partnerships with community elders and cultural practitioners to enrich curricular content and pedagogical practice.

Third, educational leaders should promote participatory curriculum development processes that engage teachers, students, families, and community members. Such collaborative approaches ensure that curricula reflect local realities and cultural knowledge systems while fostering community ownership and support. They also help bridge potential tensions between global human rights frameworks and local epistemologies.

Finally, monitoring and evaluation systems should be reoriented to prioritize equity, cultural relevance, and learner empowerment. Standardized assessments that privilege dominant languages and narrowly defined academic outcomes risk undermining the goals of justice-centered language education. Alternative assessment models that value linguistic diversity, critical thinking, and community engagement can better capture the transformative potential of integrated HRE and SJE.

In sum, advancing this framework requires a comprehensive and context-sensitive approach to educational reform. It is not enough to introduce new curricular content or shift the language of instruction. Systemic change must address the underlying power dynamics that shape language hierarchies and educational inequalities. By centering indigenous languages and justice-oriented pedagogies, African education systems can move closer to realizing the promise of linguistic human rights and educational equity.

Appendix A: Curriculum Table

| Module Title                         | Key Concepts                                 | Sample Activities                            | Learning Outcomes                                             |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Introduction to Human Rights         | Dignity, Fairness, Sankofa, Abusua           | Proverbs, storytelling, community stories    | Understand rights as embedded in cultural values              |
| Dignity and Equality                 | Equality, Respect, Collective Responsibility | Role plays, story analysis                   | Reflect on dignity and equality in local contexts             |
| Justice and Fairness                 | Restorative Justice, Fairness                | Mock traditional courts, community dialogues | Compare customary and modern justice practices                |
| Cultural Identity and Rights         | Cultural Preservation, Identity Rights       | Cultural Marketplace, oral histories         | Recognize the link between cultural identity and human rights |
| Empowerment and Community Engagement | Agency, Community Action                     | Song analysis, action projects               | Develop and implement local rights-based projects             |

Appendix B: Full Sample Lesson Plan

Lesson Plan 3: Justice and Fairness (60 minutes)

Overview

This lesson immerses students in Ghanaian cultural practices, such as storytelling (Anansesem), mock traditional court proceedings, and community dispute resolution, to explore the concepts of justice and fairness. Students will actively participate in cultural simulations to understand these concepts and apply them to their lives.

By connecting justice and fairness to Akan values, such as Nyansa boni ye fe, nanso enye cdc (Cleverness without kindness is not good), the lesson highlights the role of wisdom, kindness, and collective well-being in resolving conflicts.

Essential Questions

1. What is justice, and how does it differ from fairness?
2. How do Akan cultural practices teach justice and fairness?
3. What can we learn from traditional dispute resolution methods?
4. Why is fairness essential for maintaining peace in a community?
5. How can we apply the values of justice and fairness in our daily lives?

### *Learning Outcomes*

By the end of this lesson, students will:

1. Define justice and fairness and explain the difference between them.
2. Analyze the role of traditional Ghanaian practices in resolving conflicts.
3. Participate in a mock court to apply the principles of justice and fairness.
4. Reflect on the importance of fairness in building trust within their communities.
5. Commit to resolving conflicts using justice and fairness in their daily interactions.

### *Curriculum Glossary and Concepts*

- Justice: Justice refers to what individuals deserve based on their actions or circumstances. (Fletcher, 2005)
- Fairness: Fairness, on the other hand, relates to equal treatment and procedural consistency. miscellaneous
- Anansesem: Traditional Akan storytelling featuring Ananse the spider, often used to teach morals.
- Customary Law: Customary law refers to traditional justice systems that operate outside of formal state legal structures. International Development Law Organization.
- Nyansa: Wisdom or intelligence.

### *Materials for Teachers and Students*

Teachers:

- Ananse storybooks or oral narratives.
- Props for the mock court (e.g., headscarves for elders, sticks for authority).
- Large poster paper and markers for the Fairness Tree.

Students:

- Notebooks for reflections.
- Handouts explaining key terms (justice, fairness, customary law).

### *Formative Assessment Strategies*

1. Mock Court Reflection: Students write about their experience, focusing on what they learned about justice and fairness.
2. Fairness Tree Review: Teachers assess students' understanding based on their

contributions to the tree.

3. Class Discussion: Open discussions to evaluate how students interpret justice in their cultural context.

### *Lesson Plan with Estimated Time*

#### 1. Introduction Through Anansesem (15 minutes)

- (i) Begin the lesson with an Anansesem story such as The Trial of Ananse.

In this story, Ananse tricks the animals, and the village assembles to decide his punishment.

- (ii) After narrating the story, facilitate a discussion:

- Was Ananse treated fairly?
- How did the village demonstrate justice?
- (iii) Building Connections: Relate the lesson to modern justice systems, emphasizing similarities and differences, restorative over punitive, etc.

#### 2. Justice in Action: Mock Traditional Court (30 minutes)

- (i) Organize students into roles for a mock court inspired by a Nananom Mpanyinfo (Council of Elders) session.
- (ii) Case Scenario: A student broke a communal rule (e.g., taking someone's food without permission).

Assign roles:

1. Plaintiff (victim)
2. Defendant (accused)
3. Elders (judges)
4. Community members (students providing perspectives).

Simulate the trial, ensuring students follow a process of evidence, arguments, and resolution.

- (iii) Debrief:

- Was the judgment fair?
- How was justice achieved?
- What could be done differently?



### Alternative Activity: Community Dispute Resolution (30 minutes)

- Introduce the concept of Abusua Fie (family house) meetings, where disputes are resolved by elders.
- Facilitate a group activity:  
Divide students into small groups and give them a conflict scenario (e.g., a disagreement over shared resources). Students act as a family resolving the dispute using fairness and justice principles. Groups present their resolutions, highlighting fairness in their decision-making.

### 3. Collaborative Art Project: The Fairness Tree (15 minutes)

Set up a large drawing of a tree on poster paper.

Activity:

- On the tree trunk, write Justice and Fairness.
- Each student writes a behavior or action that represents fairness on a leaf (e.g., sharing, listening, telling the truth).
- Attach the leaves to the tree.
- Discuss how these actions create a tree of peace in the community.

### 4. Homework Assignment

Option 1: Write about a time you or someone you know was treated unfairly.

- What happened?
- How could the situation have been resolved fairly?

Option 2: Interview a community elder about how disputes were traditionally resolved and summarize their insights.

#### *Notes for Teachers*

1. Facilitating the Mock Court: Guide students to focus on fairness and not favoritism in their decisions.
2. Cultural Context: Highlight how Ghanaian practices of justice promote reconciliation rather than punishment.
3. Encouraging Reflection: Create a safe space for students to discuss personal experiences with fairness. Building Connections: Relate the lesson to modern justice systems, emphasizing similarities and differences.●





## CONCLUSION

Integrating Human Rights Education and Social Justice Education within Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education offers a coherent, justice-centered framework for rethinking language education in Sub-Saharan Africa. By grounding language policy in critical pedagogy, postcolonial theory, and linguistic human rights, this paper reframes MTB-MLE not as a technical instructional choice but as a decolonial intervention that affirms learners' identities, restores epistemic agency, and positions African languages as legitimate sites of rights-based inquiry and democratic learning.

Without this integrated approach, African children continue to receive the message that their languages, and by extension their knowledge systems and cultural epistemologies, are inadequate vehicles for intellectual work and democratic participation. The curriculum framework developed here challenges this epistemic violence while demonstrating that meaningful implementation requires sustained community partnerships, robust teacher education, and systemic policy shifts. Evidence from extended MTB-MLE programs in Ethiopia and South Africa demonstrates that such transformation is both pedagogically sound and practically achievable.

In doing so, the paper contributes to HRE by situating rights learning within culturally rooted epistemologies; to SJE by demonstrating how linguistic identity and critical consciousness can be mutually reinforcing; and to multilingual education by articulating a model that challenges language hierarchies and resists the tokenistic use of indigenous languages. While further research is needed to understand how this model adapts across diverse linguistic and political contexts, the analysis underscores a central claim: centering indigenous languages within justice-oriented pedagogies is fundamental to realizing linguistic human rights and repairing epistemic harm.

The theoretical foundations, pedagogical frameworks, and empirical evidence needed to advance this model exist. What remains is the commitment to implementing educational policies that prioritize linguistic justice alongside academic outcomes. Advancing this integrated approach offers a compelling pathway toward more equitable, culturally grounded, and decolonized educational futures in Africa. Specifically, this work contributes to human rights education by situating rights learning in culturally rooted epistemologies, to social justice education by demonstrating how linguistic identity and critical consciousness are mutually reinforcing, and to multilingual education by articulating a framework that challenges language hierarchies and resists linguistic imperialism.



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## CO-GENERATING A DISSERTATION: Camaraderie, SEL Competencies, and the Cohort Community

### Abstract

**Background:** A doctoral program need not be an individualistic and isolationist academic endeavor; instead, it should be communal and foster a sense of belonging, appealing to the hearts and minds of adult learners. My experience in a Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning (SEAL) doctoral program unearthed these discoveries.

**Purpose:** This article aims to inform and inspire doctoral students and programs to intentionally embrace community and collective wisdom.

**Methodology/Approach:** The approach is a reflective narrative using storytelling and first-hand examples from a scholar-practitioner's recent doctoral program completion. Through a participatory lens, I gathered qualitative data from conversation, inquiry, and observation.

**Findings/Conclusions:** The hybrid cohort model is a lever for building community and fostering friendship and social capital ties among an intergenerational group of adult learners with varied degrees of professional and lived experiences. It may serve as one remedy for the social isolation epidemic.

**Implications:** Creating a community of care at the outset of a doctoral program has the potential to increase program retention, bridge intergenerational relationships, and augment opportunities for co-generating new ideas, conceptual frameworks, and expansive thinking about problems of practice. As a result of this work, doctoral students should think of their programs as compassionate organizations that prioritize empathy, relationships, perspective-taking, and the deep value of collective wisdom. Programs can implement seven best practices, referred to as the seven "I's," to foster greater collaboration and allow for social and emotional expression and development.

### Keywords

Collective Wisdom, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Competencies, Trusted Adults

A doctoral program is much more than an individual academic exercise; it is a collective experience. It requires a set of social and emotional competencies to navigate the emotional turbulence and social isolation that adult learners may face. The doctoral coursework and process will test the student's stamina and limits. Students learn to maximize their time, the most precious commodity. They also find compassionate communities and intergenerational solidarity with their classmates and professors to vent, brainstorm, and solicit feedback. The dynamism and camaraderie of the doctoral program can keep a student invested for the long haul. Setting aside research skills, the earned and learned social and emotional learning (SEL) skill set is the most vital lesson gained throughout the doctoral journey. Humor, sunrise work blocks, self-talk during long walks, and the collective wisdom of my cohort community were the coping and grounding

mechanisms that helped me reach the dissertation defense, the point of no return.

### COLLECTIVE WISDOM AND THE COHORT COMMUNITY

For the past three and a half years, I have been a student in a one-of-a-kind, cohort-based Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning (SEAL)-focused Doctor of Education program at Sacred Heart University in Connecticut. Throughout the journey, I discovered that the doctoral and dissertation experience is much more than an individualistic and personal academic endeavor; it is the formation of bonds with classmates and professors who challenge your thinking, push your perspective, substantiate your work, and share a passion for the topics with which you are invested and hold emotional ties. My twenty-four classmates, numerous professors, and dissertation chair have formed a community of SEAL experts from whom I can draw fresh ideas and grapple with palpable and relatable problems plaguing



schools and districts. Together, we have learned new concepts and acquired tools for our research and practice, including, but not limited to, neuroscience breakthroughs that impact teaching and learning, a Black SEL Framework, and a storyboarding approach to curriculum development (Jacobs & Zmuda, 2023; *Our Framework - Blacksel*, 2024). Our past and current academic and practical experiences combined to form a unique reservoir of collective wisdom

The collective wisdom reservoir helped me get to the final stage of this journey: the Dissertation in Practice (DiP). The DiP enables Ed.D. students to address an authentic Problem of Practice (PoP) in their workplace and apply improvement science methodology to test solutions in a cycle of continuous planning, implementation, analysis, and reflection. Hinnant-Crawford (2020) synthesizes the improvement science process as “a methodological framework that is undergirded by foundational principles that guide scholar-practitioners to define problems, understand how the system produces the problems, identify changes to rectify the problems, test the efficacy of those changes, and spread the changes” (p. 29). The iterative and reflexive nature of improvement science played out within our cohort, beyond the borders of our problems of practice and workplaces. Due to this process and collective wisdom, I created a new conceptual framework and a suite of tools to enhance and advance the training and preparation of school-based staff as trusted adults in high schools.

As a fiercely independent and professionally seasoned human being, I discovered and embraced a beautifully unexpected aspect of the program: the experience of belonging that comes with the communal cohort structure. I found that ruminating on roadblocks or facing defeat and fatigue alone was far too isolating in this journey. Further, perspective-taking and criticality of current social justice issues could not be accomplished from my singular positionality. Moreover, the emotions that percolated from frustrations over an onslaught of whiplash policy upheavals that shook the education and nonprofit sectors were deeply unpleasant and challenging to navigate and manage on one’s own. Therefore, I seized every opportunity to connect with a classmate over the phone, linger in a group project on Zoom, chat back and forth on a discussion board, and share tea or a meal with cohort members during in-person residencies. These small moments of connection have formed a collective container of generosity and wisdom that I drew on

as I wrote dissertation chapters and prepared for a dissertation defense.

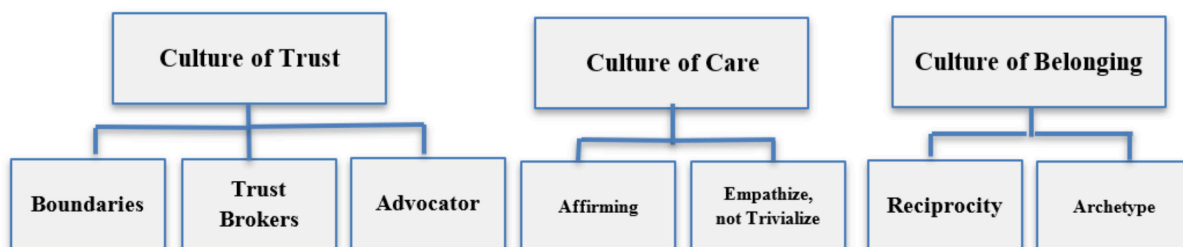
Our collective wisdom derives from my talented and empathetic classmates, who represent various roles, including teachers from across disciplines, mental health professionals, and district administrators. The intergenerational group also brings a wealth of personal experiences, contributing to a bank of tappable expertise that includes a sports coach, musician, pastry chef, business owner, and numerous caregivers for individuals of all ages, from birth to aging parents. My cohorts’ multidimensional perspectives as “trusted adults” helped me expand my thinking about my problem of practice, specifically cultivating better trusted adults in high school settings, to improve school safety. For instance, I was asked if I considered the sense of fear and mistrust students from vulnerable populations may feel from authoritative figures due to the political climate and the cultural and racial mismatch that often exists between high school students and their teachers. The diversity in perspectives within the reservoir of collective wisdom has helped me design a better research study and produce impactful results that will reach a large cross-section of educators.

From my experience as an urban high school teacher and working in the nonprofit space at Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City and Sandy Hook Promise, I was eager to research the topic of “trusted adults” because of their proximity to mentors, their role as a buffer against school violence, lever for school connectedness, and their potency as protective factors for adolescents (Bottiani et al., 2016; Hurd et al., 2018; Meltzer et al., 2016). Despite my interest, the problem of practice and root cause analysis was hazy and difficult to grasp and articulate. In weekly virtual meetings, my group members and chairperson helped to refine my topic and problem of practice. I was teaching the group that trusted adults are a school safety lever that is both undervalued and under-theorized in research. At the same time, they became invested in my work. They continually asked clarifying questions to ensure I had the literature to support my position and a rationale that underscored the importance of trusted adults to people outside our small group. To elucidate the power of my cohort’s collective wisdom, they provided feedback on my dissertation proposal and defense presentations. I felt safe within my group to express



**FIGURE 1**

*A Conceptual Framework of Trusted Adult Relationships*



authenticity and humor, never feeling the need to be defensive about my work. They challenged a new conceptual framework on trusted adult relationships and encouraged me to have confidence in my methodologies and framework (see Figure 1). Derived from qualitative research, including focus groups and design-based activities, the new framework captures the primary themes and subthemes that interplay to cultivate better trusted adults in high school settings. While this framework was emerging from the data, my own cohort of trustworthy adults had constructed a community based on a culture of trust, care, and belonging.

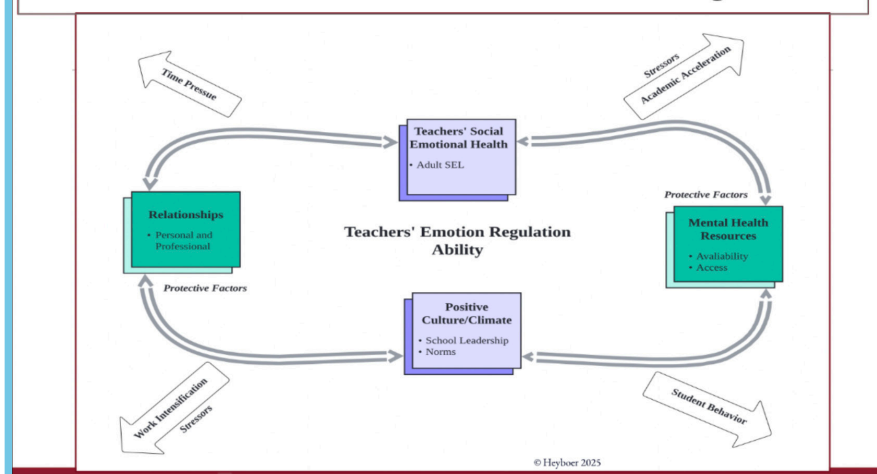
The scholar-practitioners who comprised my tightknit group were closely connected by a steadfast desire to advance SEL practice and literature. Through the improvement science process, our group members challenged collective thinking about our varied problems of practice. Initially, I framed my problem of practice more myopically, seeking to understand the phenomenological qualities and characteristics that comprise a trustworthy adult figure in a school setting. However, this more unilateral, one-dimensional thinking did not expand on

the dynamism of trusted adults in high school settings or give credence to the symbiotic nature and intricacies that contribute to a level of trust between adolescent students and often racially and generationally mismatched school staff, creating safer and more connected schools. If it were not for my dissertation cohort, I would have abandoned or glossed over a term central to my study, “trust brokers,” or the classmates and adult colleagues who serve as trustworthy intermediaries and the voices and gatekeepers who help keep school communities safe (Champagne, 2025).

Our community fostered and generated creative energy, another benefit to working within a cohort structure. As an example, our colleague Heyboer (2025) proposed a new conceptual framework based on a DiP mindfulness intervention (see Figure 2). The scholar-practitioner was able to test and iterate on the concept with our group in a safe, honest space.

**FIGURE 2**

**The Rubber Band Framework for Teacher Emotion Regulation**



**Note.** Reprinted from *Teaching on the Edge of the Snap: Exploring the Constraints and Capacities of Emotion Regulation*, by Kate Heyboer, 2025, Doctoral dissertation, Sacred Heart University. (<https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/edd/72/>). Copyright 2025 by Kate Heyboer. Reprinted with permission.

The group validated and championed our teammate's ingenuity and generated a range of ways to implement the new framework in schools to raise awareness of the stressors educators face and the protective factors that can prevent them from "snapping" or "burning out." Creativity flourished in the intertwined cohort structure.

Through the bonding process, my cohort has also become its own alert circle, a term used for elder elephants who come together in community to surround and protect their young calves in the wake of danger (Whisnant, , 2025). We surround one another to celebrate, redirect, and caution against possible pitfalls and hurdles. We also share research articles and stories that provoke fresh perspective-taking. My small dissertation cohort and chairperson form an alert circle that anticipates the "dangers." When we disperse from a weekly meeting or class, there is a mutual understanding that we are only a group text or email away for support. Our group often texts each other funny GIFs to celebrate a win, schedules a virtual meeting to practice a presentation, or shares a pertinent article featuring timely and relevant research. The cohort's supportive network parallels what I sought to replicate in my study, a close-knit group of educators striving to create a community of care and trust. Anyone embarking on a doctoral program should seek to develop a community of classmates and professors and form their own alert circle for when dissertation self-doubt or fatigue inevitably sets in.

Ultimately, the dissertation work should not be done in isolation, yet a healthy and supportive cohort community does not always emerge organically. Therefore, I offer advice to current and future Ph.D. and Ed.D. students to intentionally curate moments for connection with classmates and professors. Within the Sacred Heart University (SHU) Education Leadership Doctoral Program structure, opportunities for connection are facilitated through in-person summer residencies, a research symposium, student-created chat groups, and group assignments that foster interaction. Intentional interactions and the emergence of an unexpected community amid an isolation epidemic revived my spirit and my long-term investment in creating educational spaces where empathy and healing are the heart center.

Doctoral programs can learn from the SHU program's best practices and build on what has been both organically and intentionally nurtured with my cohort.

Doctoral programs should structure the academic program around the SEL competencies, primarily self-regulation, relationship-building, and social awareness, and cultivate a community of compassion and care at the program's onset to ensure retention, bolster the concept of collective wisdom, and boost the likelihood of feelings of belonging. The blend of online and limited in-person courses and summer events strikes the right balance for full-time educator-professionals to flexibly do the bulk of the work online while also gaining a deeper understanding of the collective group's immense contributions through in-person presentations, research symposiums, local conferences, and meal-sharing.

### **SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES FOR A SUCCESSFUL DOCTORAL PROGRAM EXPERIENCE**

The SEAL doctoral program is a holistic social and emotional learning experience. My dissertation group, which comprises four educators and one advisor, has practiced and parroted the social skills and emotional intelligence inherent in our improvement science studies as we aim to improve cultures and climates through SEL interventions. In sum, we intentionally and unintentionally applied the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) competencies to our study problems of practice as well as our individual and collective program and research journeys. The SEL competencies include self-awareness, which consists of a sense of self-efficacy and healthy identity formation; self-management, which provides for emotion regulation; social awareness, which involves perspective-taking and empathy; responsible decision-making, which ushers open-mindedness and curiosity; and relationship skills, which encompass everything from respectful communication to being supportive that aid in feelings of belonging and bonding (Casel's Sel Framework, n.d.). Cipriano et al. (2023) conducted a meta-analysis of universal school-based (USB) SEL interventions, demonstrating that the inclusion and implementation of SEL significantly improved school climate and safety, civic attitudes and beliefs, prosocial behaviors, emotional distress, externalizing behaviors, school functioning, and academic achievement (p. 13).

In essence, each of us is also our own SEL improvement science project. At different inflection points, resilience and social skills, such as endurance, hope, and connection, were essential





for sustaining the diligence and work ethic necessary to balance compassion-centric full-time jobs in the education and nonprofit sectors while pursuing academic coursework. Additionally, as my dissertation group navigated processes such as Internal Review Board (IRB) applications, we employed emotional strategies and coping skills, including practicing mindful breathing and engaging in self-care routines, to reduce stress, which were also incorporated into several of our interventions. Through the mirrored experiences, we had moments of joy, celebration, and frustration, which were relatable and palpable because we were collectively going through the DiP stages. As we learned and studied effective SEL practices and programs and applied research-based practices in our schools and programs, we improved and adapted our own SEL competencies, both individually and collectively. Our group became a *collaboratory*, or a combination of collaboration and laboratory “without walls,” in which group members from New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and New Mexico could leverage technology to network and share resources (Wulf, 1993). Our group co-created this SEL laboratory, or collaboratory, utilizing iterative processes of discovery, prototype ideation, and evaluation to define, refine, and implement SEL-based interventions.

In an unexpected turn, I also discovered that the progression of the dissertation mirrored my cohort’s in-group experience. My classmates and I were not simply taking classes together and posting on Blackboard discussion threads; we were constructing the unique experience as a connected community using blended concepts of *acompañamiento* and co-generative dialogues (Emdin, 2016; Sepúlveda Iii, 2011). *Acompañamiento* implies that we accompany each other, students and professors alike, on our SEL and academic journey, rather than pursue individualized paths that never intersect or interact. Co-generative suggests that we co-design the experience together, creating our own guidelines, norms, and ways of producing work as we go. For example, my small group co-created a peer debriefing rubric and process through a co-generative dialogue to address the need for an additional measure of reliability and validity, a unique approach that other DiP groups did not co-construct. Assuredly, the group processes were social and emotional, mirroring the dissertation interventions we are implementing with participants in professional learning sessions and focus groups with students and educators.

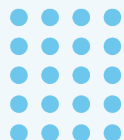
## IMPLICATIONS

The reflection and findings offer concrete suggestions for cultivating collective wisdom and community, as well as infusing social and emotional competency practice and skills in any doctoral program. I have framed these suggestions as the seven “I’s.”

1. Implement a regular peer debriefing protocol to present research findings and hear group feedback (Hail et al., 2011; Spall, 1998).
2. Identify one social and emotional competency that the group will focus on each meeting time or semester. For example, focus on self-awareness and institute an emotion check-in and mindfulness practice and procedure using a tool like the mood meter. As another example, for social awareness, conduct a perspective-taking exercise to understand what makes each individual feel valued, seen, and heard within the group.
3. Iterate on problems of practice and research activities together.
4. Institute small moments for fun and laughter. Virtual tea-and-talks, in-person game nights, and routine icebreakers that evoke humor are a few examples.
5. Invest in the intergenerational and diverse wisdom of the group and intentionally discuss different perspectives on the problems of practice.
6. Invite guests to your group to listen to simulated presentations or offer a fresh perspective on the problems of practice and viable solutions.
7. Identify communication tools that allow for a collaboratory to flourish. Our cohort used WhatsApp, Google Docs, Google Meets, Microsoft Teams, and texting. We also explored time-saving software together, like Zotero and NVivo.

Regular and routine implementation of the seven “I’s” offers a blueprint for doctoral programs to bolster the concepts of collective work and community and place SEL at the forefront, allowing students and faculty to apply and develop social and emotional learning competencies.





## CONCLUSION

New and prospective doctoral students may be allured by a program that promotes the co-creation of a community of care and emphasizes SEL skill development and practices across doctoral disciplines, especially in times of social upheaval and polarization. The purposeful construction of compassionate organizations that prioritize relationship-building not only amongst Ph.D. and Ed.D. students, but also students and professors, is inviting to those craving not only intellectual stimulation and career advancement, but also human connection. A focus on relationships and respect adds longevity to a program as well. For instance, my cohort members continue to support and celebrate classmates who complete the dissertation defense and gain job promotions. Therefore, to foster a community of care steeped in SEL competencies at the outset, doctoral programs should consider introducing and unpacking the seven “I’s” as a group, reframing and personalizing each “I” to meet the needs of the specific doctoral community, and producing a community agreement using the “I’s” to revisit over the program’s course to ensure accountability and uphold a commitment to a community of care.

Overall, due to a commitment to community-building and our own social and emotional well-being, our cohort stayed unified against social and political injustices and co-constructed ideas and solutions to address the backlash against the topic we are passionate about, SEL. We accompanied each other, side by side, as we stumbled or stalled in the research process, fueling one another with SEL tips and strategies to stay the course and complete our goals. The group affirmed each other for the research that will make a dent and a difference in the lives of educators and students. We helped and championed one another as we refined presentations and adjusted measures to capture participants’ perceptions of SEL topics accurately. Ultimately, we unknowingly designed an SEL think tank through the improvement science process, allowing us to apply our own SEL skills while simultaneously innovating SEL interventions to improve the PoP. We co-generated a doctoral community steeped in camaraderie, belonging, joy, and a passion for SEAL, and I encourage all students and programs to be emboldened to replicate this model and place community, care, and social and emotional health and growth at the forefront of the doctoral experience.



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# THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE: Linguistic Justice and the Unfinished Revolution in Myanmar's Education

## Abstract

This essay argues that the current educational crisis in Myanmar is the direct outcome of a long-standing, unresolved struggle for linguistic justice. It traces this historical conflict from the moral and linguistic foundations of pre-colonial monastic schools, through the centralized, elite-focused structures of colonial rule, the post-independence push for 'Burmanization,' and the ideological control of successive military regimes. Across these periods, education was repeatedly mobilized as a tool of authority, creating a persistent tension between centralized state efforts to impose a singular Burman-centric identity and the resistance of ethnic nationalities demanding linguistic and cultural recognition. By examining these dynamics, the essay demonstrates that the post-2021 fracturing of the education system, which culminated in the SAC's 2022 amendments mandating Burmese as the sole language of instruction (Independent Mon News Agency, 2022), is not a sudden break but the predictable culmination of these enduring political and cultural struggles. The paper concludes that any future reform must confront this deep-rooted history by centering linguistic justice as a cornerstone of a more inclusive and equitable system.

## Keywords

Myanmar Education, Language Policy, Ethnic Diversity, Burmanization, Political Authority

## Acknowledgments

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Myanmar's education system is facing a deep crisis, intensified by the February 1, 2021, military coup and the reversal of earlier democratic reforms. In response, hundreds of thousands of teachers joined the nationwide Civil Disobedience Movement. The junta, formally known as the State Administration Council (SAC), enforced punitive measures such as mass suspensions of educators, compulsory reopening orders, and the banning of teacher and student unions. This has created a divided system, with state-run schools on one side and alternative schools on the other, both competing for the future of the country's children. However, this collapse did not emerge suddenly. It reflects a long and turbulent history in which schools have repeatedly become contested spaces where struggles over national identity, language rights, and political authority have played out.

This essay argues that a recurring, unresolved struggle for linguistic justice is the central driver of conflict in Myanmar's education system. The question

of whether education should promote a unified Burmese national identity or recognize the nation's extraordinary linguistic diversity has shaped every era of its development. From the moral foundations of pre-colonial monastic schools and the colonial privileging of English to the post-independence policy of 'Burmanization' and the SAC's 2022 amendments to the National Education Law (Independent Mon News Agency, 2022), the politics of language have defined Myanmar's educational trajectory and created the fractures visible in today's crisis.

Beyond Myanmar, this case also speaks to wider debates in education. The tension between dominant and minority languages connects to global discussions on multilingual education and the challenges of ensuring equity for linguistically diverse learners. The colonial and postcolonial experiences highlight how educational systems often carry legacies of empire long after independence. At the same time, the enduring role of Buddhist monastic schools underscores how

religion can both sustain literacy and shape national identity, offering lessons for understanding the broader relationship between faith and schooling.

To understand the roots of the current crisis, this paper begins with an overview of Myanmar's ethnic, linguistic, and political context. This review also advances the argument that enduring struggles over linguistic justice are central to understanding Myanmar's educational crises, past and present. It then examines the historical development of education across the pre-colonial, colonial, post-independence, socialist, and democratic transition periods, highlighting how struggles over religion, language, and power have repeatedly shaped the nation's educational development. By situating the present crisis within this longer history, the essay underscores how the politics of identity remain central to Myanmar's educational future.

## **THE ETHNIC AND LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF MYANMAR**

Myanmar's education system cannot be understood without first considering the country's deep ethnic and linguistic diversity. This diversity shapes national life but has long been managed in politicized ways, fueling many of the country's conflicts. Following the enactment of the 1982 Citizenship Law, the government formally recognized 135 ethnic groups, grouped into eight major "national races": Bamar, Shan, Kayin, Rakhine, Mon, Kachin, Chin, and Kayah (Burma Citizenship Law, 1982; International Crisis Group, 2020). This classification, introduced during military rule, is widely disputed. Many ethnic communities reject it, arguing that it divides populations for political purposes and overlooks the identities of some groups.

The Bamar people make up around two-thirds of the population and live mainly in the central lowlands. Burmese, their language, is the country's official language (Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust [HART UK], 2021). The remaining one-third of the population consists of other ethnic groups such as the Shan, Kayin, Rakhine, Mon, Kachin, and Chin, who mostly live in mountainous border areas. This ethnic diversity is matched by a wide linguistic range, with more than 100 languages and dialects spoken (Aye & Sercombe, 2014). For many children from non-Bamar families, Burmese is a second language, which creates serious challenges for equal access to education when it is enforced as the only medium of instruction.

Because of this history, many communities prefer to describe themselves as "ethnic nationalities" rather than "ethnic minorities," emphasizing their role as co-founders of the union rather than subordinate groups (Yawngnhwe, 2001). Understanding this context is essential, as debates over which languages, cultures, and histories are taught in schools are closely tied to broader struggles for recognition, autonomy, and the creation of a more inclusive federal identity in Myanmar.

## **THE MILITARY AND POLITICAL CONTEXT**

Myanmar's modern political history has been dominated by military rule. After seizing power in 1962, the armed forces (known as the Tatmadaw) governed for decades under various authoritarian regimes (Devi, 2014). In Myanmar and internationally, the term "junta" is widely used to describe military councils that seize power and suspend democratic governance. Following a partial democratic transition beginning in 2011, the military once again overthrew the elected government on February 1, 2021, and established the State Administration Council (SAC) (Reuters, 2021).

## **PRE-COLONIAL ERA (BEFORE 1885)**

Myanmar's pre-colonial education, during the time when it was known as Burma, was deeply rooted in history and culture. In this early period, education served as both a spiritual and civic foundation, with monastic schools shaping moral life and literacy in ways that would later influence debates about national and linguistic identity. According to Shah and Cardozo (2018), education revolved around monastic institutions, which emphasized religious knowledge while operating autonomously through community support. These schools admitted students without discrimination by class or religion, a notable departure from the norms of the time, and achieved remarkable results, with literacy rates among Burmese men estimated at around 60% (Cady, 1946). For children of wealthier families, private tutors offered additional instruction in literature, history, and religious studies, but monastic schools remained the backbone of education, aiming to nurture scholars who would contribute to society through wisdom and knowledge. While the moral foundation of monastic education centered on cultivating virtuous individuals devoted to Buddhist teachings, its social function extended beyond religious instruction. Monastic schools also served practical and civic purposes, preparing young men





for roles in administration, record-keeping, and community leadership. In this way, the pursuit of spiritual wisdom was intertwined with broader social advancement, reflecting how religion and governance were mutually reinforcing in pre-colonial Myanmar (Cady, 1958; Charney, 2009).

As Cheesman (2003) notes, this system was informally structured yet deeply embedded in Buddhist traditions, with its core purpose being the cultivation of individuals devoted to the Buddhist way of life. This religious base promoted literacy and fostered social cohesion. Literacy in this context referred primarily to reading and writing in Pali and Burmese, the languages of Buddhist scripture and royal administration. Mastery of these languages allowed ordinary villagers to participate in religious and civic life, while also reinforcing Burmese as the dominant cultural medium of the kingdom. At the same time, other local languages remained largely excluded from formal instruction, foreshadowing later tensions over linguistic representation in education (Cheesman, 2003; Shah & Cardozo, 2018). Over time, this base of religiously grounded education became a powerful source of cultural preservation and resistance, linking later to nationalist movements such as the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA).

This history complicates Western assumptions that modern education must be secular. While secularization theory often associates higher education levels with reduced religious participation (Dhima & Golder, 2021; Flatt, 2023), Myanmar's case demonstrates the opposite: monastic schools were not obstacles to progress but the foundation of widespread literacy. By intertwining religion and education, the monastic system laid the groundwork for both cultural preservation and the emergence of a shared Burmese identity. While these schools fostered unity through Buddhist moral teaching, they also privileged a single linguistic and religious framework that did not encompass Myanmar's broader ethnic diversity. This dual legacy, of moral cohesion on one hand and cultural exclusion on the other, continues to shape debates about linguistic and educational equity in Myanmar today.

### **COLONIAL ERA (1885-1948)**

Before British administration, formal education opportunities in Myanmar were limited, with monastic schools serving as the primary source of learning (Cady, 1946). Under British colonial

rule, education became a means of social division, as English-medium instruction and missionary schools produced an urban elite while marginalizing indigenous languages and monastic traditions. An exception was the presence of Christian missionary schools, although girls were generally restricted to home-based education due to cultural and religious norms (Cady, 1946). The colonial period marked a transformative phase in Myanmar's educational landscape, introducing new structures and tensions.

Initially, the British sought to add secular subjects to the monastic curriculum and gradually expanded a system of government-run schools modeled on Western education (Tinker, 1958). This push toward secularism unfolded alongside a strong missionary presence, with Christian organizations establishing schools that blended Western academic subjects with religious instruction, complicating the colonial claim of neutrality (Cheesman, 2003). These schools mainly served urban elites. In 1871, the colonial administration further diversified provision by establishing local-language schools, bilingual schools, and English-medium schools, all with fee structures; students unable to afford fees continued to rely on monastic education (Cheesman, 2003). In practice, urban elites and the children of civil servants or merchants tended to enroll in English-medium or missionary schools, while the vast rural majority continued their studies in monastic schools that remained free and community-supported.

By the early 20th century, the colonial state had created a full framework of government elementary and secondary schools, along with teacher training colleges (Lopes Cardozo & Maber, 2019). A defining feature of this system was its strong emphasis on English, the language of governance and commerce, which offered students access to better career opportunities (Chai, 2014). Yet this approach marginalized Myanmar's cultural and linguistic diversity, cultivating a small English-educated elite while sidelining most local communities (Chai, 2014).

Although the system was exclusionary, it nonetheless produced a small class of educated Burmese who later played pivotal roles in the nationalist movement. By the 1920s and 1930s, many began to call for reforms and founded national schools that promoted Burmese language and culture, directly challenging colonial dominance (Cheesman, 2003). Nationalist organizations such as the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) pushed for the preservation

of Buddhism in the curriculum, linking education to broader struggles for identity and independence (Hillman, 1946; Tinker, 1958).

### **POST-INDEPENDENCE ERA (1948-2011)**

Following Myanmar's independence from British colonial rule in 1948, the new government placed education at the heart of national reconstruction. In this period, language policy became the main tool for forging national identity, but it also intensified ethnic tensions by privileging Burmese as the sole medium of instruction. Establishing a state-owned system was viewed as essential for dismantling the colonial framework, which had privileged a small English-speaking elite while neglecting the majority of the population (Lall, 2021; Tin, 2008; Zaw, 2023). Policymakers presented education as both a means of promoting equality and a symbol of national sovereignty. The 1947 Constitution affirmed education as a right and duty of citizens and designated Burmese as the common language of the Union (Constitution of the Union of Burma, 1947, Art. 152). These principles were reflected in early initiatives such as the Education Reconstruction Committee of 1947 and the 1950 Education Act, which sought to expand access to free primary schooling in Burmese while phasing out English as the language of instruction (Lall, 2021; Matelski, 2015). The Department of Education, established in 1945, played a key role in implementing these reforms and coordinating efforts to expand access to primary, secondary, and higher education nationwide.

The promotion of national identity was pursued most directly through language. Burmese was made the medium of instruction at all levels to build a shared sense of citizenship across Myanmar's diverse populations (Lwin, 2019). While this linguistic shift aimed to decolonize the curriculum by replacing British-centric subjects with Burmese history and culture, it also became associated with 'Burmanization,' marginalizing ethnic and linguistic minorities. Although by the 1950s, Myanmar achieved one of the highest literacy rates in the region (Skidmore & Wilson, 2008), these policies planted the seeds of long-standing ethnic tensions that continue to shape the country's educational landscape. These tensions over language and identity set the stage for the more centralized and authoritarian approaches that followed under military rule after 1962.

### **SOCIALIST ERA AND MILITARY TAKEOVER (1962-1988)**

The 1962 military coup marked a decisive turning point in Myanmar's education policy, turning schools into a central instrument of state-building and social control. During socialist rule, education was centralized and politicized, with language and curriculum tightly controlled to promote ideological conformity and suppress ethnic and linguistic diversity (Lall, 2021; Shah & Cardozo, 2018). For the socialist regime, centralizing education was a political priority because it was viewed as essential for securing loyalty to the "Burmese Way to Socialism" and for preventing universities from serving as hubs of dissent. The 1972 Basic Education Law centralized administration under the Ministry of Education and restructured curricula to meet the labor needs of the socialist economy. Building on this foundation, the Education Law of 1973 introduced the 6-4-2 system (six years of primary, four years of secondary, and two years of higher secondary education), designed to standardize educational progression nationwide and produce a uniform pipeline of students trained in socialist ideology (Vrieze, 2017). Together, these laws prioritized vocational and technical training to align schools with state-controlled economic development (Tin, 2008) and enforced rote learning over critical thinking, reinforcing ideological conformity and discouraging any challenges to authority (Lall, 2021; Shah & Cardozo, 2018).

Academic freedom was sharply restricted. Subjects such as history and political science were censored to reflect state narratives. At the same time, the regime entrenched Burmese as the sole language of instruction. This policy not only limited access to global knowledge but, more critically, deepened linguistic inequality and excluded ethnic communities from full participation in public education (Lall, 2021). Although the state invested in infrastructure, persistent underfunding, declining teacher salaries, and widespread censorship revealed a system that valued political loyalty over intellectual growth. The result was deteriorating educational quality and a generation left with restricted opportunities (Shah & Cardozo, 2018).

These structural weaknesses left the education system fragile, paving the way for the emergence of private and non-formal education in the decades that followed.





## **EMERGENCE OF PRIVATE AND NON-FORMAL EDUCATION (1988–2011)**

In the wake of growing dissatisfaction with state education, the late 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of private and non-formal educational options. Private schools gained popularity, though they often faced regulatory constraints and inconsistent oversight (Shah & Cardozo, 2018). At the same time, non-formal education programs were introduced to address adult illiteracy and out-of-school populations, offering basic literacy training to marginalized groups. Non-formal education initiatives emerged from multiple actors: the Ministry of Education launched programs such as the Post-Literacy and Continuing Education Program (PLACE) in collaboration with UNESCO and UNICEF to improve adult literacy and life skills, while ethnic education departments and local community-based groups organized their own schooling systems in areas affected by conflict or limited state presence (Lall, 2021; UNESCO, 2000). While urban populations turned to private schools to escape declining quality, ethnic communities established their own systems to resist linguistic and cultural suppression. These community-led systems often prioritized mother-tongue instruction and culturally relevant curricula, reflecting ongoing efforts to reclaim educational space from an increasingly centralized, monolingual state model.

Higher education, however, remained under tight state control. Although the Council for the Development of Higher Education (CDHE) had been established in 1964, its influence persisted into this period. Appointments continued to be made on the basis of political loyalty rather than academic merit, limiting institutional autonomy and innovation (Maber et al., 2022). While private actors played a growing role in education provision during this era, the overall system remained fragile, constrained by political interference, limited funding, and a lack of long-term policy continuity.

## **REFORM AND CHALLENGES IN THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION (2011–2020)**

The democratic transition period revived hopes for a more inclusive education system, yet debates over language of instruction and local autonomy continued to reflect deep-rooted inequalities. Since the establishment of a quasi-civilian government in 2011, Myanmar's education system underwent a series of ambitious reforms aimed at improving

quality, expanding access, and modernizing school governance (Hayden & Martin, 2013). Long characterized by centralized control over management, finance, and curriculum, the system began a gradual shift toward decentralization, allowing states and regions greater autonomy to tailor policies to local needs.

A major turning point came in 2014 with the enactment of the National Education Law, which introduced compulsory and free education for children aged five to sixteen and established the National Education Commission to oversee system development (Lall, 2021). These reforms emphasized student-centered learning and introduced a new 2017 curriculum that promoted critical thinking, problem-solving, and workforce readiness through vocational and technical education aimed at employability in a market-oriented economy shaped by private enterprise, foreign investment, and ASEAN labor mobility (W. Z. Htet, 2020). Despite these policy shifts, the persistence of Burmese-only instruction and the limited recognition of ethnic education systems underscored how linguistic hierarchies remained embedded even within democratic reform.

Despite these initiatives, the reforms faced substantial challenges. Schools across the country continued to suffer from chronic shortages of textbooks and qualified teachers, especially in rural and conflict-affected regions (Campbell, 2018). The gap in attainment between urban and rural areas persisted, reflecting broader inequities in infrastructure and development. These material shortages also had linguistic and cultural dimensions: most government-produced textbooks were available only in Burmese, limiting access for ethnic-minority students, while a shortage of teachers fluent in local languages further constrained inclusive instruction in multilingual areas (Lall, 2021; UNICEF, 2019). As a result, the promise of equitable reform remained unevenly realized across Myanmar's diverse communities.

The 2014 law also generated significant public controversy. Critics argued that it was drafted without sufficient input from civil society and ethnic minority groups, and that its centralized structure marginalized non-Burmese languages and cultures within the education system (Lall, 2021). These concerns were reinforced by the 2014 Census, which revealed that school attendance and attainment

were particularly low in conflict-affected ethnic minority areas. This evidence underscored the gap between the government's centralized education policies and the lived realities of ethnic communities, intensifying long-standing debates about inequality and exclusion in Myanmar's education system (Yamada & Matsushima, 2020).

In response, student-led protests erupted, organized by groups such as the Action Committee for Democratic Education (ACDE) and the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU). They demanded greater public consultation, protections for teacher and student unionization, and stronger support for ethnic education (Mooney, 2014). Despite promises of negotiation, government forces responded with violent crackdowns. Although revisions were made in 2015, including a budgetary target of 20 percent for education, Burmese remained the dominant language of instruction and centralized control remained largely intact (Saning, 2023; Vrieze, 2017).

Despite these controversies, the government pressed forward with its reform vision through the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) for 2016–2021. The plan outlined a long-term strategy for improving quality and inclusivity, prioritizing teacher training, ongoing professional development, and curriculum reforms that aligned with national goals and student needs (Rwehera, 2017; Sin, 2021). These needs focused on equitable access, improved learning outcomes, and inclusive support for disadvantaged, rural, and ethnic-minority students, identified through national consultations and education-sector assessments (Ministry of Education, 2016). Yet, in practice, efforts to integrate ethnic languages and local priorities into the public system progressed unevenly. Although the National Education Strategic Plan (2016–2021) recognized ethnic-language instruction in principle, implementation remained largely symbolic, as teaching in minority languages was still not formally permitted within most government schools (N. M. Htet, 2021) (Htet, 2021). Empirical research has shown that students from minority backgrounds continued to face cultural, linguistic, and religious exclusion in public schools, reflecting the persistence of dominant Bamar ideologies across curricula and school practices (Aung et al., 2023). Coordination between state and non-state education providers also remained limited (Salem-Gervais et al., 2025). Teachers were nevertheless encouraged to

play more active roles in curriculum design and classroom innovation. NESP also attempted to balance market-oriented goals with social equity by promoting access for marginalized groups and aligning education with labor market demands (Howson & Lall, 2019). However, implementation was uneven, as many schools lacked the resources or institutional capacity to meet its objectives.

In sum, while the democratic transition raised hopes for a more inclusive and modern education system, the reforms of 2011–2020 reveal the limits of top-down policymaking in a context still shaped by ethnic tensions, weak institutions, and authoritarian legacies. The groundwork for change was laid, but its realization remained fragile and incomplete, foreshadowing the collapse that followed the 2021 military coup.

### **THE CURRENT CRISIS: A FRACTURED EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE**

Myanmar's education system was profoundly disrupted by the military coup of February 1, 2021, which overthrew the democratically elected government and triggered a nationwide Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). The military coup reignited long-standing struggles over authority and inclusion, as the SAC's education policies reinstated linguistic control and deepened social divisions. Education quickly became a frontline of resistance: more than 300,000 teachers and education personnel joined the CDM, creating severe staff shortages (Maber et al., 2022). In retaliation, the SAC suspended over 125,000 educators and intensified violence across the country, displacing millions of people, including countless school-aged children (Reuters, 2021). Many families lost trust in the junta-controlled system, leading to a sharp decline in student attendance and exam participation (No, 2024).

The crisis deepened in October 2022, when the SAC amended the 2014 National Education Law. The amendment mandated Burmese as the sole language of instruction, undermining the linguistic rights of ethnic nationalities and reversing earlier efforts toward inclusivity (Independent Mon News Agency, 2022; PEN International, 2023). It also abolished teachers' and students' unions, silencing organized resistance (Independent Mon News Agency, 2022). Meanwhile, alternative education initiatives led by the National Unity Government (NUG), a parallel government formed after the coup by elected parliament members, ethnic







representatives, and civil society leaders, as well as ethnic providers, were deliberately targeted, with attacks resulting in casualties among both teachers and students (Saito et al., 2024).

Beyond immediate violence, the coup halted ongoing reforms initiated under the civilian government, including increased education budgets and the National Education Strategic Plan. Although the junta ordered schools to reopen in 2022–2023, millions of children did not return, citing insecurity, displacement, or political opposition to the regime (Aung, 2023). The shadow NUG responded by creating its own schools and online platforms, further entrenching a dual system of education.

The upheaval has also worsened long-standing inequalities. Urban–rural gaps in access remain stark, while underfunding, inadequate training for new teachers, and excessive workloads for those who stayed in SAC schools undermine quality (San & Bexci, 2025). As students and parents increasingly seek alternative options, the sector stands at a critical juncture. The coup has transformed education into both a casualty and a battleground of the wider conflict, leaving the future of an entire generation in jeopardy (Saning, 2023). This dual system of education mirrors the long-standing tensions that have defined Myanmar’s educational history, a reality that the following implications and conclusion will now address.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

Although this essay is grounded in Myanmar’s historical and political context, several insights may be relevant for broader discussions in education. First, the Myanmar case demonstrates how imposing a single dominant language in schools has tended to intensify inequality rather than foster unity. The repeated elevation of Burmese as the sole medium of instruction, while intended to strengthen a shared national identity, has systematically marginalized non-Bamar communities and contributed to long-standing ethnic tensions. This experience adds to global debates on multilingual education, showing how the suppression of linguistic diversity in schools can deepen social divides rather than resolve them. Future policy should therefore promote multilingual education that values ethnic languages alongside the national language, ensuring equitable access to learning for all linguistic groups.

Second, the historical interaction between Buddhist monastic schools, colonial missionary institutions, and state-run systems illustrates that education in Myanmar has never been neutral but has always been intertwined with political authority and cultural identity. This dynamic underscores how colonial legacies continue to shape education globally, as structures once designed to serve empire often persist in modern schooling. It also highlights the significance of religious institutions, reminding us that faith-based schooling can simultaneously promote literacy, preserve cultural traditions, and act as a site of resistance to political power. Policies should recognize the continuing role of faith-based and community schools as legitimate partners in education reform, integrating their cultural and moral contributions within national planning while maintaining inclusive standards.

Finally, Myanmar’s experience shows the dangers of top-down reforms that overlook the perspectives of marginalized groups. These dynamics point to the importance of more participatory approaches to policy, particularly those that engage diverse communities and respect linguistic and cultural pluralism, if education is to contribute to greater inclusion and stability. Future policy should adopt participatory approaches to educational planning, engaging teachers, ethnic education providers, and local communities in decision-making, to build a more inclusive and context-responsive system that supports long-term stability.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This analysis is based primarily on secondary literature and publicly available policy reports. Given the continuing instability in Myanmar with limited access to primary data constrains the ability to verify how national reforms have been implemented in practice. Some recent developments, especially after the 2021 coup, may also not yet be fully documented in academic sources. Future research could build on this work by incorporating primary data through interviews or field studies, and by comparing Myanmar’s experience with multilingual and post-conflict education reforms in other Southeast Asian contexts.



## CONCLUSION

What emerges from this review is a long-standing struggle over how education should serve the nation. Across different eras, schools have been used to impose centralized authority, whether through colonial control, socialist ideology, or military rule. Language has been the most contested area of policy, with repeated attempts to elevate Burmese at the expense of other languages and cultures. At the same time, monastic and community-led education traditions show that alternative models rooted in local contexts can sustain both literacy and identity.



The current collapse of Myanmar's education system is not an abrupt rupture but the predictable outcome of these historical patterns. For researchers, Myanmar's case shows that educational challenges cannot be separated from the country's history of contested identity, cultural diversity, and political control. For policymakers and practitioners, it highlights the urgent need to involve ethnic communities as equal stakeholders in shaping future reforms. While Myanmar's political future remains uncertain, understanding how education has been shaped by these struggles is essential for imagining a system that is more inclusive, equitable, and resilient.



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# EVALUATING TWO-WAY IMMERSION PROGRAMS: A Literature Review of Their Role in Advancing Equity for Emergent Bilingual Learners

## Abstract

**Background:** Emergent Bilingual Learners (EBLs) in U.S. public schools often experience academic inequities rooted in systemic language and cultural marginalization. Two-Way Immersion (TWI) programs are frequently promoted as an equity-centered solution, yet their effectiveness varies based on implementation, access, and stakeholder support.

**Purpose:** Our literature review examines how U.S.-based TWI programs promote academic equity and biliteracy among K-12 EBLs in U.S. context, with particular attention to long-term outcomes and contextual challenges.

**Methodology/Approach:** Our review synthesizes findings from 64 peer-reviewed studies, dissertations, and book chapters published between 2018 and 2025 that examine TWI programs in U.S. K-12 educational settings. We thematically organized the literature into three domains: instructional practices, community engagement, and post-secondary outcomes. The analysis is grounded in Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy and equity-driven bilingual education theory.

**Findings/Conclusions:** We found that U.S.-based TWI programs show promise in enhancing biliteracy, academic achievement, and identity development for EBLs when supported by balanced language practices, community involvement, and inclusive leadership. However, disparities in implementation, resource access, and stakeholder alignment limit consistent success across contexts.

**Implications:** Our findings suggest that TWI programs in the United States must be designed with an explicit commitment to linguistic equity, digital inclusion, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Sustaining long-term impacts requires alignment between classroom practices, family engagement, and structural supports across the U.S. K-12 policy and accountability landscape, as well as, continually influencing P-20 educational continuum.

## Keywords

Educational Equity, Dual Language Immersion, Emergent Bilingual Learners, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Educational inequality remains a deeply entrenched issue in the United States, particularly for students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. Among the most affected are Emergent Bilingual Learners (EBLs), students who bring rich multilingual resources yet often encounter systemic barriers in schools predominantly designed for monolingual, English-speaking populations. Rather than framing these disparities solely as “achievement gaps,” Ladson-Billings (2007) conceptualized them as part of a broader “education debt” which is a historical accumulation of social, economic, and political neglect that continues to disadvantage marginalized student communities.

This educational debt is particularly visible in the outcomes of EBLs, who frequently face compounded challenges related to language learning, cultural

misrecognition, and access to inclusive pedagogy (Hung et al., 2020; Kieffer et al., 2009). For instance, federal data and prior scholarship report a persistent 20-percentage point gap in high school graduation rates between EBLs and their English-proficient peers (Office of English Language Acquisition, 2023). These disparities are not simply linguistic; they reflect systemic misalignments between educational structures and the diverse identities of EBLs in the United States.

In response, Two-Way Immersion (TWI) programs have emerged as a promising educational model that promotes dual-language proficiency while fostering cross-cultural learning and academic achievement. Although TWI programs operate internationally, this review focuses exclusively on U.S.-based TWI programs because they are uniquely shaped and influenced by U.S. federal and

state language policies, accountability systems, immigration dynamics, and histories of racialized language preferences. These contextual and historical factors attribute to how TWI programs are designed, implemented, and evaluated, making findings from other national context may not directly transferrable in some extents.

These programs integrate students from different language backgrounds in the same classroom to cultivate bilingualism, biliteracy, and intercultural competence (Ruiz-Funes, 2020). Unlike transitional bilingual education models that prioritize English acquisition, TWI approaches value linguistic diversity as a resource for all learners.

Our literature review critically examines recent research on the perceived benefits and implementation experiences of TWI programs in promoting academic equity. It also explores how specific instructional practices and programmatic designs contribute to more inclusive learning environments. Guided by the following research questions, the review synthesizes key themes and insights across empirical and theoretical studies published within the past decade:

1. How have recent studies (2018–2025) examined the role of Two-Way Immersion (TWI) programs in advancing equity for emergent bilingual learners?
2. What program features and pedagogical orientations are identified in recent research as advancing equity and sustaining bilingualism in TWI programs?

## LITERATURE REVIEW: PRE-2018

TWI and related bilingual education models have been studied extensively in the United States, as they originated from Canada in 1965 (Genesee, 1985), with early syntheses demonstrating both promise and persistent inequities. Genesee's (1985) landmark review of immersion programs concluded that students in U.S. immersion contexts achieved high levels of second language proficiency without long-term detriment to their English or academic development, though he cautioned that outcomes were shaped by different program quality and contextual variation. Building on this foundation, Thomas et al. (1993) and Thomas and Collier's longitudinal analyses (1997, 2000, 2002) showed that dual language programs consistently outperformed English-only or transitional bilingual

education models in supporting emergent bilingual learners' long-term academic achievement, though achievement gaps persisted for students from low-income and marginalized backgrounds.

Another subsequent historical overview (Y. K. Kim et al., 2015) traced the evolution of bilingual policy in the U.S., documenting how TWI gained traction amid restrictive "English-only" legislation while still facing challenges of uneven implementation and contested goals. Their synthesis confirmed that TWI programs generally foster stronger L1 and L2 outcomes than alternative models, but also emphasized limitations in program reach and sustainability.

By the early 2010s, empirical studies reinforced these patterns. Umansky and Reardon (2014) found that Latino students in dual immersion were reclassified to English proficiency more slowly in the elementary grades but surpassed peers in long-term English proficiency and academic benchmarks. Reardon (2016) further highlighted these structural barriers, showing that racial and socioeconomic segregation remained key drivers of academic inequality, constraining the potential benefits of bilingual programs. Y. K. Kim et al.'s (2015) historical review also emphasized that while TWI holds promise, its equity impact must be understood in light of broader policy environments and demographic shifts.

At the classroom level, scholars have demonstrated that teacher language practices and translanguaging approaches shaped student participation and equity in TWI classrooms (J. Li et al., 2016; Kleyn & García, 2019). Within the specific race groups, L.M. López and Tápanes (2011) reported that Latino children in TWI settings benefited academically and socially but continued to encounter structural inequities. There are also tools and different technological approaches to facilitate the TWI classrooms, Andrei (2017) showed that technology integration could expand access for English learners, while Polat and Cepik (2016) assessed the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol as a tool for more equitable pedagogy, and this mode of using visual, audio techniques within the classroom to facilitate emergent bilingual instruction are also further discusses and analyzed in the literature after 2018, and it often time referred as "multimodality".

Over time, critical perspectives increasingly





questioned whether TWI was meeting its stated equity goals. Cervantes-Soon et al. (2017) argued that programs often reproduced racial and class hierarchies, urging the addition of “critical consciousness” as another important goal of the TWI program, other than bilingualism and literacy. This critique resonated with Paris’s (2012) call for culturally sustaining pedagogy, which re-framed bilingual education as a practice of maintaining and expanding students’ cultural and linguistic repertoires rather than assimilating them. Complementary work by Dearing et al. (2016) showed that community and school-based supports could mitigate opportunity gaps for immigrant children, underscoring the role of broader ecological factors in shaping outcomes.

Taken together, the pre-2018 literature established three key insights: (a) TWI programs generally promote biliteracy and academic achievement more effectively than English-only models, (b) structural inequities in poverty, segregation, and accountability systems constrain these benefits, and (c) a critical lens on equity, pedagogy, and sociopolitical context is necessary to assess program effectiveness.

While these pre-2018 studies advanced the field by documenting both the potential and limitations of TWI, important gaps remained. Much of the earlier literature relied on small-scale case studies, focused primarily on Spanish–English programs, or emphasized program outcomes without sustained attention to questions of equity, critical pedagogy, or multiliteracies. Moreover, the sociopolitical landscape has shifted in the past decade with the rise of the Seal of Biliteracy, demographic diversification of emergent bilingual populations, and the spread of translanguaging scholarship. For these reasons, we believed that a systematic literature review of research published between 2018 and 2025 is warranted. Our updated synthesis builds on the pre-2018 foundation but centers more recent insights into equity, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and program design, thereby offering a novel contribution to understanding how TWI programs can narrow opportunity gaps for emergent bilingual learners today.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY (CSP)**

Our literature review adopts a theoretical framework grounded in Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP)

as articulated by Paris (2012), whose theory is based on Ladson-Billings’s (1995) Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. CSP moves beyond the concepts of merely being culturally relevant or responsive, which seeks to perpetuate and foster linguistic and cultural diversity as part of the democratic project of schooling. In the context of TWI programs, the CSP framework can support students not only in learning a second language but in maintaining and valuing their home languages and cultures. This framework challenges the often monocultural and monolingual aims of traditional education policies and practices, advocating for a pedagogy that is explicitly committed to cultural pluralism and equity.

Our literature review will employ CSP to assess how TWI programs represent and foster equity in bilingual or multilingual development in instruction by analyzing whether these programs provide balanced opportunities for students to develop literacy skills in both their native and second languages, thereby avoiding exacerbating systemic inequalities. According to Paris (2012), CSP supports linguistic and cultural flexibility to gain global awareness and competence to be successful in a globally interconnected world. To realize the CSP-driven goals, the instruction in the TWI programs should not only aim at academic proficiency but should also prepare students to navigate and contribute to a multilingual and multicultural society. For example, in Curiel and Ponzio’s (2021) study, the CSP helps improve EBLs’ writing skills via scaffolding and integration of multimodal and translanguaging approaches within TWI programs.

The framework also involves a critical stance against deficit-based approaches to education, which have historically viewed the cultural practices and languages of non-dominant students as deficiencies to be corrected. Instead, CSP advocates viewing these diverse practices as assets. This review will thus evaluate how TWI programs incorporate and value the cultural assets that students bring to their learning, actively resisting deficit narratives. There is some research emphasizing the significant role of CSP in empowering EBLs to critically engage with and question prevailing cultural norms and languages, meanwhile, enabling educators to leverage the knowledge, experiences, and perspectives of EBLs to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of their learning experiences (Chang, 2022; Darling-Aduana & Heinrich, 2018; Lu & Troyan, 2022). CSP is described as forward-looking, aimed

at sustaining cultural and linguistic practices and preparing students for future societal roles. This aligns with the goals of TWI programs, which should aim not only to preserve heritage languages but also to innovate in ways that prepare students for future challenges and opportunities.

Finally, our review will explore how TWI programs integrate community and heritage practices into the curriculum. This includes looking at how these programs engage with the communities they serve, potentially transforming educational spaces into sites where cultural and linguistic practices are not only preserved but also celebrated and extended.

## RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

As the first author and the major reviewer of this review, I approached the study of TWI programs as a bilingual international scholar whose research centers on equity in education. My training in educational leadership and policy and my lived experience as an Asian woman and international student shape my attention to issues of access, marginalization, and opportunity structures in U.S. schools. I draw on equity-oriented frameworks such as culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012) to foreground how systemic forces such as race, language, class, and immigration status intersect with program design. This perspective informs and guides my reading and interpretation of the literature: I view TWI not only as a pedagogical model but as a policy and social justice project that can either disrupt or reproduce inequities. While I recognize my standpoint may sensitize me to questions of equity, I have sought to maintain transparency in coding and synthesis, and introduce the second author for reviewing, guiding, and double-checking, so that findings reflect the weight of the evidence rather than solely my interpretive stance.

The second author is a bilingual education researcher and an assistant professor of educational leadership and policy whose career spans more than two decades across K-12 and higher education settings. Her professional trajectory from classroom teaching to administrative leadership roles and ultimately to academia, has afforded her deep insight into the organizational, instructional, and policy dimensions that shape students' educational experiences. Her scholarship interrogates issues of equity, leadership preparation, and systemic change, reflecting a longstanding commitment to

improving educational opportunities for diverse learners. In this review, the second author served as a methodological consultant. She supported the refinement of research questions, verified a subset of screening and coding decisions, and provided critical feedback on the conceptual framing and overall coherence of the manuscript. Her extensive experience leading equity-driven work in K-12 systems and preparing future educational leaders helped ensure that the review's analyses remained grounded, coherent, and attentive to practical implications.

Together, our positionalities and shared commitments to culturally and linguistically sustaining educational environments shaped our analytic decisions and the themes highlighted in this review. We acknowledge that our identities and professional backgrounds inevitably influence how we interpret the literature. At the same time, we intentionally adopted transparent decision-making and verification processes to ensure that the synthesis is rooted in the evidence base and reflective of current research on TWI and equity.

## METHODOLOGY

### Rationale for the Time Frame

We limited the review to studies published from 2018 to 2025 due to several factors. First, this period marks a new wave of scholarship influenced by translanguaging and culturally sustaining pedagogy, which extends beyond traditional bilingual education paradigms (Paris, 2012). Second, U.S. policy developments such as the rapid adoption of the Seal of Biliteracy (2017 onward) created a distinct sociopolitical context for bilingual program implementation. Finally, narrowing to this period allows our review to build on prior syntheses (e.g., Genesee, 1985; Y. K. Kim et al., 2015) and provide a timely update that highlights contemporary challenges and opportunities.

We employ a systematic literature review to examine the effectiveness of TWI programs in reducing educational disparities experienced by EBLs in U.S. K-12 public schools. We aim to synthesize recent empirical and theoretical findings that address how TWI programs contribute to academic equity and bilingual development.

### Search Strategy

The first author conducted a comprehensive search in 2023 across multiple scholarly databases,







including ERIC, JSTOR, Springer, ProQuest, Google Scholar, and School Library databases. Keywords and Boolean combinations used in the search included: “Two-Way Immersion,” “TWI programs,” “Dual Language Immersion,” “Emergent Bilingual Learners,” “EBLs,” and “Opportunity Gap.” The first author focused on literature published in English between 2018 and 2025 to capture the most recent and relevant research.

The first author then identified grey literature through several complementary strategies: (a) reference checking of all included studies and prior reviews; (b) searches of ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global to capture doctoral and master’s theses from my school library searching engine to ensure as many full accesses as possible under the school’s licensure. Note that the first author did not search APA PsycINFO because the focus of this review was on education and bilingual program outcomes rather than on psychological or clinical studies.

#### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria (PICO Framework)**

- Population (P): Emergent Bilingual Learners (EBLs) (K-12, U.S. context) and their English-dominant peers.
- Intervention (I): Two-Way Immersion (TWI) or dual language immersion programs implemented in U.S. K-12 educational settings
- Comparison (C): Studies with either explicit comparison groups (e.g., English immersion, transitional bilingual education) or no direct comparison but reporting equity-related outcomes.
- Outcomes (O): Academic achievement, biliteracy development, language proficiency, sociocultural integration, or equity-focused indicators (e.g., narrowing of achievement/opportunity gaps).

#### **Eligible Study Designs:**

Consistent with the purpose of this review, we included quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies, including longitudinal analyses, program evaluations, classroom-based ethnographies, case studies, and policy analyses, provided they contributed empirical evidence related to equity, bilingual development, or program implementation. Experimental and quasi-experimental designs were included when available, but they were not required for inclusion. Because

the review aimed to synthesize equity-oriented evidence across diverse educational contexts, we did not restrict inclusion to experimental or quasi-experimental designs.

#### **Exclusion criteria included:**

Studies were excluded from this review if they met any of the following criteria:

1. Context: Studies conducted outside the United States, as the review focuses on U.S. educational, policy, and sociopolitical contexts.
2. Population: Studies examining participants younger than kindergarten age (e.g., early childhood-only samples) or postsecondary/adult populations, as the review is limited to K-12 students.
3. Program Focus: Studies that did not examine equity, opportunity gaps, or outcomes that meaningfully inform equity in TWI contexts, such as academic achievement, biliteracy development, language proficiency, or sociocultural integration.
4. Analytic Focus: Studies that did not address equity, opportunity gaps, bilingual development, or related outcomes for emergent bilingual learners.

#### **Delimitations of the Review**

Our literature review is intentionally bounded to maintain coherence and feasibility. We included peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, and book chapters published in English between 2018 and 2025 and limited the scope to U.S.-based studies to ensure contextual comparability. We focused on scholarship examining instructional practices, biliteracy development, stakeholder engagement, program structures, leadership practices, or equity outcomes within TWI or closely related dual language models, while excluding opinion essays, policy briefs without empirical data, international TWI models, and studies unrelated to emergent bilingual learners. Although the review was led by the first author, we strengthened the process through deliberate checks and balances: both authors engaged collaboratively at multiple points, including secondary verification of screening decisions, joint discussions to resolve discrepancies, and iterative rounds of cross-checking during analysis to ensure alignment with inclusion criteria. This structured peer-validation approach served as an internal audit mechanism, enhancing the

reliability, credibility, and overall trustworthiness of the review.

**Study Designs**

Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies were all eligible for inclusion. We also included program evaluations, longitudinal analyses, classroom-based ethnographies, and policy analyses if they contributed empirical evidence. We excluded purely theoretical works, descriptive commentaries, or editorial pieces without data.

**Screening and Selection Process**

I initially identified approximately 4,120 articles using the search strategy. I conducted the first-round screening by reviewing titles, abstracts, and conclusions to assess alignment with the study’s inclusion criteria. I excluded articles for reasons such as thematic irrelevance, lack of empirical grounding, or being situated outside the U.S. educational context. Following the first round, 99 sources remained. A second-level screening refined the pool further based on publication quality, research design, and relevance. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles; however, high-quality doctoral dissertations, book chapters, and policy reports were included when offering unique insights or underrepresented perspectives. However, after the major revision, I went back to filter again and introduced the second author on board to help with double-checking and verification, by including some new releases in 2025 (n = 3), and some historical reviews (n = 3) as the paradigms to refer, and 2 pieces of literature before 2018 (n =2) along with the other selected ones to prepare for a short literature review as the contextual background for this particular synthesis. Across the final rounds of filtering and verification, I retained a total of 64 sources for full review, consisting primarily of peer-reviewed journal articles (including a small number of review articles used for contextual framing), along with doctoral dissertations (n = 6), book chapters (n = 3) , and policy reports (n = 3) included for their distinct contributions to the evidence base.

**Descriptive Overview of the Final Sample**

The final sample comprised 64 empirical studies, as documented in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1), examining TWI and dual language immersion programs in U.S. K-12 contexts. In terms of publication type, the sample included peer-reviewed journal articles (n = 55), doctoral

dissertations (n = 6), and book chapters (n = 3).The studies reflected meaningful diversity in program language configurations. While a substantial subset focused on English-Spanish programs (n = 21), additional attention was given to English-Chinese/Mandarin (n = 6) and English-Portuguese (n = 4) programs, with smaller representation of English-Vietnamese (n = 1) and English-Korean (n = 1) programs. The remaining studies (n = 31) examined multiple language pairings and/or did not specify a single focal language configuration, which is consistent with multi-site investigations, district/state program evaluations, and policy-oriented research that aggregates evidence across varied dual language models. Methodologically, the corpus spanned a range of empirical approaches. Among studies clearly classified using conventional design labels, quantitative designs accounted for n = 6, qualitative designs for n = 10, and mixed-methods designs for n = 4. The remaining studies (n = 44) consisted of program evaluations, case studies, and policy/document analyses that were empirical but did not map cleanly onto a single methodological category as coded in this review (e.g., descriptive program evaluations without an explicit qualitative/quantitative analytic frame, multi-method reports combining administrative and documentary evidence, or policy analyses drawing on administrative and document-based data).Participants across studies included emergent bilingual learners, English-dominant peers, teachers, school leaders, families, and district stakeholders, with most research situated in elementary settings and fewer studies examining secondary or longitudinal trajectories. Analytic foci spanned academic achievement, biliteracy development, instructional practices, leadership and policy contexts, family engagement, and sociocultural dimensions of equity, collectively providing a comprehensive evidence base aligned with the review’s equity-oriented purpose.

**Review Workflow and Procedures**

*Phase 1: Initial Search and Single-Reviewer Screening*

The first author conducted the initial search across ERIC, PsycINFO, JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar using combinations of keywords related to Two-Way Immersion (TWI), dual language education, emergent bilingual learners, biliteracy, and educational equity. After exporting all search



results into a single database workplace (NVivo 14), the first author manually removed duplicates and screened titles and abstracts for relevance. I then conducted full-text screening of all studies that met the inclusion criteria. This phase was carried out solely by the first author to ensure consistency in the application of the initial screening criteria.

### **Phase 2: Secondary Review and Verification**

To enhance rigor and reduce potential bias, the first author independently reviewed a subset of studies selected during Phase 1 to verify inclusion and exclusion decisions, and introduced the second author on board for verification, proofreading, and double-checking.

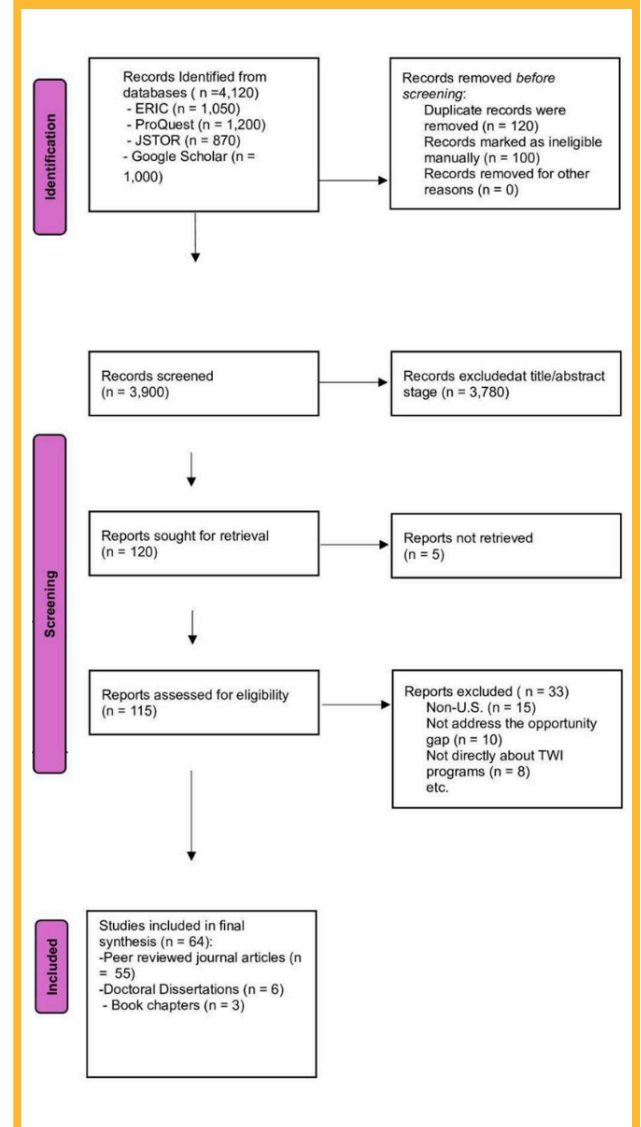
In Phase 2, the second author independently reviewed a subset of the included studies (approximately 31% of the final sample;  $n = 20$ ) to verify the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria. In addition, the second author also helped to check and assess the quality of each peer-reviewed empirical study, and some selected doctoral dissertations. Specifically, the second author examined each study's population, program focus, study design, and reported outcomes to confirm alignment with the review's eligibility criteria. During this stage, we discussed ambiguous or borderline cases and resolved them through consensus. The second author also provided methodological guidance related to coding consistency and the organization of extracted data. This verification process strengthened the reliability of the review without conducting full dual independent screening.

### **Phase 3: Collaborative Coding and Synthesis**

Following study selection, the first author conducted the initial thematic coding using an inductive approach grounded in the principles of CSP. The first author organized studies into preliminary categories, identified patterns across instructional, community, and systemic dimensions, and drafted the initial axial coding and thematic summaries. The second author reviewed the emergent coding framework, offered feedback on theme refinement, assessed alignment between individual studies and the overarching analytic categories, and helped with the revision process. Together, we synthesized the final themes and interpretations, ensuring that the analysis reflected both the empirical evidence and a shared equity-oriented perspective.

A manually-created PRISMA flowchart (Figure 1) can indicate the filtering process.

**FIGURE 1 - PRISMA Flowchart**



**Notes:** Screening was conducted by a single reviewer. Although this may introduce bias, decisions were guided by explicit inclusion/exclusion criteria and ambiguous cases were re-checked against the coding rubric to enhance reliability.

From: Page M. J., McKenzie J. E., Bossuyt P. M., Boutron I, Hoffmann T. C., Mulrow C. D., et al. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ*, 372, Article n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71

## Screening and Reliability

The first author screened all records for eligibility using the predefined inclusion/exclusion criteria. To enhance reliability, the first author also re-checked ambiguous cases against the criteria and discussed with a second reviewer before a final decision was made. Although this was not a dual-screener process, we provided explicit coding rubrics and transparency in reporting, and the second author was brought on board in the review stage, to mitigate potential bias.

## Quality Assessment

We evaluated the study quality during the coding process rather than used as a pre-screening exclusion criterion. Each included study was assessed for methodological transparency and rigor using three guiding dimensions:

1. *Clarity of research design and methods:* whether the study clearly described its design (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods), data sources, sampling, and analytic approach.
2. *Adequacy of evidence:* whether findings were supported by sufficient data, such as sample size, duration of study, or triangulation across sources.
3. *Analytic depth and relevance:* whether the study moved beyond description to provide analysis connected to equity, biliteracy, or sociocultural outcomes in TWI programs.

We held the same criteria for dissertations, book chapters, and policy reports ; those with insufficient methodological detail were included for comprehensiveness but contextualized cautiously in synthesis. This approach ensured that the review reflected the full scope of recent TWI scholarship while also allowing readers to understand the relative strength of the evidence base. It should also be noted that our study quality assessments were descriptive rather than based on a formal scoring rubric, consistent with qualitative traditions in education and allowing for nuanced consideration of methodological strengths and limitations without reducing them to numeric ratings.

## THEMATIC ANALYSIS

To analyze the 64 included studies, I used a hybrid coding process that combined deductive coding (guided by the research questions and CSP framework) with inductive coding (to capture new patterns emerging across studies). Deductive

codes were initially drawn from the two research questions: (1) equity outcomes in TWI programs, and (2) program features and pedagogical orientations that advance equity. Inductive codes emerged during iterative reading of studies, allowing the analysis to account for unanticipated findings such as digital equity, student language brokering, and gentrification dynamics.

Our codes captured (a) the program focus (instructional practice, community engagement, policy/leadership, or postsecondary outcomes), (b) the type of equity addressed (academic, linguistic, sociocultural, or structural), and (c) specific pedagogical or contextual strategies. Codes were then grouped into broader categories through constant comparison, leading to the development of four interrelated themes. As Table 1 displays the challenges of implementing TWI, Table 2 summarizes the coding framework, sample codes, anchor studies, and links to CSP for each theme.

To synthesize the existing literature on TWI programs, our reviewed studies were organized into three overarching thematic categories that reflect the educational journey of emergent bilingual learners across key stages of development: *Instructional Equity and Academic Advancement*, *Community Engagement and Stakeholder Collaboration*, and *University Access and Beyond*.

The first theme, *Instructional Equity and Academic Advancement*, includes research on school-level strategies to enhance educational equity, biliteracy development, and implementation challenges within TWI classrooms. The second theme, *Community Engagement and Stakeholder Collaboration*, encompasses studies that examine the roles of parents, teachers, school leaders, and broader community dynamics, including the influence of gentrification, language ideologies, and digital access. This section also explores how collaborative leadership and responsive teaching practices affect program sustainability and student experiences. The final theme, *University Access and Beyond*, highlights the long-term academic and social benefits of TWI participation, including increased rates of biliteracy credentialing, improved college readiness, and broader implications for postsecondary access and adult success. This organizational framework allows for a holistic analysis of how TWI programs influence student outcomes across the P-20 educational continuum,





capturing the program's layered and evolving impact from early schooling through to higher education and life beyond.

### **Instructional Equity and Academic Advancement in TWI Classrooms**

Robust school-level support plays a foundational role in promoting educational equity and academic success for EBLs enrolled in TWI Programs. Despite their promise, U.S.-based Dual Language Bilingual Education (DLBE) models often prioritize English language development at the expense of sustaining EBLs' home languages—an imbalance that raises critical equity concerns (Arteagoitia & Yen, 2020; Becker et al., 2022; Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017). For instance, Arteagoitia and Yen (2020) analyzed biliteracy development in Spanish English TWI classrooms and found measurable gains for both EBLs and English-dominant students. However, they also noted a recurring trend in which Spanish outcomes were under-emphasized in research and assessment, reflecting a broader tendency to center English in instructional practices.

Similarly, Lu and Troyan (2022) examined Chinese English immersion programs in K-12 settings and reported significant academic improvements for multilingual learners, not only in language acquisition but also in content areas such as mathematics and science. Their findings suggest that effective TWI models can reduce cross-ethnic achievement gaps, especially among Latinx and African American student populations.

To address these disparities, scholars advocate for pedagogical frameworks that center linguistic equity, particularly Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) and *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*. These frameworks promote instructional strategies that recognize students' home languages and cultural assets as essential components of the learning process (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). Within TWI classrooms, such pedagogies are most effective when paired with multimodal learning environments. Curiel and Ponzio (2021), Escamilla et al. (2022), and Hyun et al. (2022) emphasized that integrating multimodal and translanguaging approaches, such as visual, gestural, and auditory learning, enhances student engagement and deepens comprehension. These approaches not only support academic achievement but also foster identity affirmation and linguistic confidence.

Hyun et al. (2022) and Pacheco et al. (2021)

contributed to this conversation by exploring multilingual multiliteracies projects in TWI settings. Their research shows that collaborative, multimodal activities help students draw from their full linguistic repertoires, thereby reinforcing both biliteracy and cross-cultural understanding. Pacheco et al. (2021) further analyzed scaffolding strategies that support writing development in multilingual learners, while Hyun et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of student collaboration and peer modeling. Together, these studies underscored that multimodal instruction is not merely supplementary; it is foundational to effective, equity-centered bilingual teaching.

An additional layer of instructional equity relates to digital access and inclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic magnified disparities in technological access, a factor that has disproportionately impacted students from low-income, linguistically minoritized backgrounds. Child and Song (2023) and King et al. (2022) documented how these inequities constrained meaningful participation in remote TWI instruction. Both the research called for the integration of *digital justice* principles into program design, ensuring that all students, regardless of socioeconomic status, can engage with high-quality, bilingual digital resources. Richerson's (2022) doctoral study further illustrates how hybrid instructional models can shape emergent bilingual learners' language learning opportunities during and after the COVID-19 disruption. Although the study is not situated exclusively in TWI settings, its findings are relevant to dual language program implementation because it highlights how instructional continuity in hybrid formats depends on intentional scaffolding, educator coordination, and students' access to reliable technology. Richerson (2022) reports that hybrid delivery can support language development when teachers design consistent routines and align language objectives with content learning, but it can also reproduce inequities when access, teacher capacity, and instructional coherence vary across classrooms. Similarly, Smith et al. (2021) explored how digital multimodal composition can empower EBLs to express themselves more fully and develop stronger literacy skills. These digital practices, when equitably distributed, can reinforce bilingual students' progress in both English and their home languages (Curiel & Ponzio, 2021; Smith et al., 2021). Beyond pedagogical practices, research consistently

highlights the long-term academic benefits of sustained TWI participation. Polanco and Luft de Baker (2018) contributed to the evidence base on academic outcomes by synthesizing and comparing results across bilingual program models, including TWI. Their analysis suggested that, across the studies they reviewed, English reading outcomes for emergent bilingual students were often comparable across TWI and transitional bilingual education designs, with differences frequently small or inconsistent. Importantly, they cautioned that interpreting “program effects” requires attention to how bilingual programs are defined and implemented, because variation in instructional quality, language allocation, and student composition can obscure or inflate apparent differences between models. Further, La Serna (2022) illustrated how integrated Spanish English literacy instruction, combined with cross-language standards alignment, supported a more coherent biliteracy trajectory for students. Likewise, Padilla et al. (2022) provided longitudinal evidence showing that students who engage in TWI programming over time demonstrate significant academic growth across subjects, increased biliteracy, and stronger college readiness outcomes. Supporting these findings, Neukirch (2020) emphasized the enduring advantages of TWI for minoritized language students, particularly when programs are thoughtfully designed and adequately resourced.

One of the most recent meta-syntheses also emphasized the importance of integrating content and language instruction to advance equity for multilingual learners. Domke and Cerrato (2024), in a systematic review across diverse contexts, found that when language development is embedded within meaningful content instruction, emergent bilinguals not only gain stronger biliteracy skills but also show improved outcomes in general academic achievement. This aligns with findings from Lu and Troyan (2022) and Padilla et al. (2022), suggesting that TWI programs are most effective when content and language are co-constructed rather than treated as separate goals. Moreover, Domke and Cerrato’s (2024) review underscored the role of intentional interactions (e.g., dialogue instruction) and multiple pedagogical approaches in supporting equitable access to rigorous academic content, reinforcing the centrality of instructional design in sustaining bilingualism and equity.

As outlined in Table 2, the codes associated with this

theme, such as balanced language allocation, multimodal scaffolding, and translanguaging as pedagogy.

### **Linguistic Development and Biliteracy Expansion in TWI Programs**

Effective language development is a central pillar of TWI programs, aiming to cultivate bilingualism, biliteracy, and cultural competence for all students. Within TWI classrooms, the integration of translanguaging, explicit vocabulary instruction, and multiliteracy practices has shown promising outcomes in enhancing students’ linguistic proficiency in both their home and partner languages. However, achieving balanced language development remains a complex task that requires intentional pedagogy, equitable design, and culturally responsive instruction.

*Translanguaging*, the practice of drawing upon one’s full linguistic repertoire to make meaning, has emerged as a transformative approach in bilingual education. Scholars advocated for translanguaging not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a framework for honoring students’ cultural identities and linguistic strengths (Ascenzi-Moreno, 2018; Curiel & Ponzio, 2021; Davis, 2023; Kleyn & García, 2019). In classrooms where translanguaging is encouraged, students demonstrate improved biliteracy, enhanced oral expression, and deeper engagement with academic content (Kleyn & García, 2019). For instance, Harvey and Wong (2024) illustrated how covert translanguaging in a Mandarin-English preschool setting enriches children’s extended discourse and supports emergent literacy.

Complementing these classroom-based translanguaging studies, Zoeller and Briceño (2022) demonstrated how teacher learning can be structured through a transliteracy cycle (observe–analyze–teach) that prompts educators to examine students’ oral language and writing across languages, identify cross-linguistic strengths, and design targeted mini-lessons to leverage those assets. Their findings illustrate how strength-based, language-focused pedagogy can help reframe students’ positioning from “English learners” to bilinguals, aligning translanguaging with identity-affirming instruction in TWI contexts.

At the same time, researchers also cautioned against the uncritical or inconsistent application of translanguaging practices. Becker et al. (2022), Chang (2022), and Sah and Uysal (2022)





highlighted instances where translanguaging is unevenly applied—often privileging English—and warned that without adequate teacher preparation, such practices can unintentionally reproduce linguistic hierarchies. In Becker et al. (2022) study of a Portuguese-English TWI program, English-dominant instruction was far more developed than its Portuguese counterpart, resulting in limited language exposure for emergent bilinguals. Similarly, Chang (2022) found that Mandarin was often de-emphasized in favor of English to accommodate English-dominant students' preferences, reflecting implicit language ideologies that position English as more legitimate or useful.

On the other hand, Sah and Uysal (2022) documented a case where EBLs expressed greater comfort using their home languages, but minimal English development raised concerns among teachers who feared students might remain isolated in linguistic “bubbles.” These contrasting cases underscore the importance of balanced and purposeful translanguaging that values both languages equally and provides all students with structured opportunities to engage in rich, bilingual discourse.

*Vocabulary development* is another critical element in language acquisition for emergent bilinguals. Crosson et al. (2019) emphasized the need for direct, robust vocabulary instruction that includes multiple exposures to academic language, opportunities for contextualized use, and active engagement. Similarly, Graham et al. (2023) conducted a meta-analysis revealing that well-designed reading interventions significantly boost vocabulary outcomes for bilingual learners across grade levels. These interventions, particularly when aligned with students' linguistic needs, contribute to meaningful academic language acquisition in both English and the partner language.

Curiel and Ponzio (2021) further demonstrated how integrating cultural content, such as Día de Los Muertos-themed projects, into vocabulary instruction enhances students' connection to language through meaningful, multimodal engagement. Their findings showed that students not only retain more vocabulary but also develop greater pride in their cultural and linguistic identities. Complementing this, Y.-S. G. Kim et al. (2024) explored how ecological and instructional factors influence bilingual students' vocabulary and

listening comprehension. Their findings affirmed that TWI settings, when implemented equitably, can support students' linguistic development without compromising English proficiency.

Finally, the development of *multiliteracies*, the ability to interpret and produce meaning across diverse modalities and languages, is a key asset fostered in TWI classrooms. Multiliteracies encompass more than traditional literacy; they involve navigating digital, visual, oral, and cultural forms of communication. When supported by translanguaging strategies and multimodal resources, multiliteracy practices deepen students' understanding of both language and content (Curiel & Ponzio, 2021; Smith et al., 2021).

In sum, while TWI programs offer strong potential for promoting biliteracy, their success depends on the thoughtful implementation of instructional strategies that prioritize linguistic equity. Translanguaging, vocabulary scaffolding, and multiliteracy development, when approached critically and consistently, can empower students to thrive across languages, cultures, and academic domains. Table 2 highlights biliteracy-focused codes, including explicit vocabulary instruction, assessment equity, and biliteracy trajectory development, which guide the synthesis presented in this theme on how TWI programs cultivate balanced, asset-based linguistic growth.

### **Implementing TWI Programs: Challenges, Complexities, and Adaptive Practices**

The implementation of TWI programs is an inherently complex endeavor shaped by sociopolitical contexts, institutional structures, and the diverse needs of multilingual learners. While TWI holds great promises for promoting academic achievement and linguistic equity, realizing its full potential requires navigating a host of practical and ideological challenges. These range from resource limitations and uneven instructional quality to leadership dilemmas and community tensions over language policy. As summarized in Table 1, these challenges range from resource limitations and uneven instructional quality to leadership dilemmas, linguistic hierarchies, and community tensions over language policy.

Instructional resource disparities remain one of the most persistent challenges reported in the literature. Teachers often face difficulties accessing high-quality materials in non-English partner languages,

particularly for content-area instruction. As Ayscue and Uzzell (2022) noted, this imbalance tends to favor English instruction and places added strain on educators attempting to implement equitable dual-language models. Similarly, Arteagoitia and Yen (2020) cautioned that literacy development in partner languages like Spanish is often underrepresented in both instructional design and assessment practices, reinforcing an implicit English-dominant orientation even within bilingual settings.

School leaders, particularly principals, also play a pivotal role in shaping TWI implementation. S.M. Arredondo (2023) and S.M. Arredondo et al. (2024) highlighted how administrators must navigate conflicting demands, from aligning curriculum with state standards to staffing classrooms with qualified bilingual teachers. Principals are frequently called upon to make high-stakes decisions regarding program structure, resource allocation, and instructional priorities, all while responding to accountability pressures. These structural tensions can dilute the integrity of TWI programs and lead to implementation drift, particularly in districts with limited institutional capacity or shifting political support.

Student-level challenges further complicated implementation. EBLs in TWI settings must often allocate cognitive and emotional energy toward learning in two languages simultaneously. While many ultimately benefit from bilingual development, some experience frustration or anxiety, particularly when instruction leans heavily toward the dominant language or when peer dynamics privilege English (Chang, 2022; Lu & Troyan, 2022). S.M. Arredondo (2023) and S.M. Arredondo et al. (2024) reported that closing the academic gap between EBLs and English-dominant students may take five to seven years, underscoring the need for long-term commitment and sustained instructional support.

Equity concerns are also compounded when access to TWI programs is limited by social or geographic factors. L. Li (2024) warned that elite bilingualism, a model that primarily serves middle- or upper-income students, can inadvertently exclude emergent bilinguals with disabilities or those from underserved communities. Darriet and Santibañez (2024) provided evidence that while TWI programs in Los Angeles have recently expanded into more Latinx-majority neighborhoods, this shift is partially driven by charter school competition and enrollment pressures. Without safeguards, such trends risk reproducing rather than remedying

existing inequalities, particularly if access is not equitably structured.

Community dynamics, especially in rapidly gentrifying or politically polarized areas, also shape program success. Chaparro (2021) argued that neoliberal education reforms, such as school choice policies and parent-driven program demands, have led to uneven implementation across districts. In some cases, white, English-dominant families have leveraged their influence to secure TWI placements, steering the program toward enrichment rather than equity. These patterns reinforce the need for program designs that explicitly prioritize inclusion, transparency, and anti-racist practices.

Nevertheless, the literature also points to adaptive strategies that enhance program resilience and effectiveness. Collaborative leadership involving teachers, families, and administrators is essential. Ee (2023) emphasized the role of parental involvement in maintaining program integrity and fostering culturally responsive learning environments. Becker and Oliveira (2024) underscored the often-overlooked contributions of immigrant children who act as language brokers, performing essential but invisible labor that supports both peers and educators. Zoeller and Briceño (2022) similarly underscored that transnational teachers often recruited to fill bilingual staffing needs. This approach would benefit from preparation that builds explicit knowledge of language and provides concrete routines for cross-linguistic observation, reflection, and instruction, which in turn supports more equitable, asset-oriented teaching for bi/multilingual writers.

Teacher development is another critical factor. Studies by Heineke et al. (2020, 2022) showed that preservice and in-service training focused on linguistic justice, multilingual pedagogy, and sociopolitical awareness can significantly strengthen instructional quality. Scholars further advocated for differentiated professional development, particularly for international or novice teachers entering U.S. TWI contexts (Baldwin, 2021; He et al., 2022; Hill, 2023; Wong & Hill, 2023). Programs that provide mentoring, peer collaboration, and opportunities for critical reflection are better equipped to support educators as they navigate linguistic and cultural complexities in the classroom (He et al., 2022; Hill, 2023).





Taken together, as the adaptive strategies shown in Table 1, these studies reinforce that successful TWI implementation requires more than programmatic fidelity. The TWI programs demand structural support, visionary leadership, and an explicit commitment to equity at all levels. Addressing these challenges proactively can help ensure that TWI programs remain not only linguistically rich but also socially just and inclusive.

**TABLE 1 - Challenges & Solutions for TWI Programs**

| Implementation Challenges                                                   | Adaptive Strategies & Solutions                                               |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Lack of high-quality instructional materials in partner languages           | Invest in dual-language content materials and culturally relevant resources   |
| English-dominant instruction is overshadowing home language development     | Implement balanced translanguaging practices and biliteracy targets.          |
| Leadership tension between policy mandates and local program needs          | Promote distributed leadership models with collaborative decision-making      |
| Cognitive and emotional strain on EBLs in dual-language settings            | Provide SEL supports and differentiated instruction for language learners     |
| Inequitable access to TWI for minoritized or disabled students              | Design inclusive placement policies with disability and equity considerations |
| Gentrification and school choice pressures are altering enrollment dynamics | Gentrification and school choice pressures are altering enrollment dynamics   |
| Insufficient recognition of student language brokering roles                | Acknowledge and validate student brokering through classroom practices        |
| Limited teacher preparation in multilingual, culturally responsive pedagogy | Offer differentiated, justice-oriented PD for bilingual educators.            |

## Community Engagement and Stakeholder Collaboration in TWI Programs

As mentioned in the previous section, the success of Two-Way Immersion (TWI) programs is not solely dependent on instructional quality or school leadership; rather, it is significantly shaped by the perspectives and engagement of community stakeholders. Families, educators, school leaders, and students all play integral roles in the development, implementation, and sustainability of equitable bilingual education. Research emphasizes that meaningful stakeholder collaboration enhances not only academic outcomes but also cultural belonging and program legitimacy.

*Parental engagement* emerges as a vital element in the health and responsiveness of TWI programs. Ee (2023) found that parents generally support integrated classrooms, valuing both the cultural and linguistic benefits. However, concerns about limited transparency and inconsistent communication from schools persist. Huang et al. (2025) similarly reported that families' willingness to enroll in Mandarin-English immersion programs was strongly influenced by the perceived alignment between school practices and home literacy values. Bilingual families emphasized cultural preservation, while English-dominant families tended to view bilingualism as a means for future academic and career advantages.

Alvarado (2025) and García et al. (2021) expanded on this by highlighting the agency of families, particularly Latina mothers, in advocating for their children's educational needs. Alvarado (2025) described how Latina mothers redefined dominant notions of "competence" by asserting their children's right to wellness, bilingual expression, and access to interdisciplinary learning. These mothers actively participated in shaping TWI spaces as affirming environments, challenging institutional biases that often devalue non-dominant languages. García et al. (2021) also noted that multilingual families contribute to biliteracy development through rich home-based literacy practices, which schools should recognize as assets.

The *COVID-19 pandemic* added layers of complexity to stakeholder relationships. Franco-Jenkins et al. (2023) documented both parent and teacher experiences in remote TWI instruction, revealing disparities in perceived language development. While many families appreciated the adaptability of remote formats, concerns emerged about reduced oral practice, particularly in the partner language.

Notably, in Flavin et al. (2024) study, Portuguese-speaking parents expressed confidence in their children's continued development, whereas some English-dominant families questioned the efficacy of bilingual instruction online, a reflection of differing language ideologies. Educators also express ambivalence when navigating bilingual expectations. Becker et al. (2022) noted that teachers in a Portuguese English TWI program faced pressure to prioritize English due to parental expectations, despite recognizing the importance of dual-language equity. Oliveira et al. (2020) found parallel tensions: while both English- and Portuguese-speaking parents shared enthusiasm for bilingualism, divergent expectations regarding language dominance and instructional clarity revealed underlying cultural mismatches between home and school.

*School leaders* and administrators contribute further nuance to these dynamics. Hancock and Davin (2020) analyzed perceptions of the Seal of Biliteracy (SoBL) and found that both students and administrators recognized its value for affirming bilingual competencies and expanding access to postsecondary opportunities. Leaders acknowledged that such recognition could help advance racial equity and motivate students to persist in bilingual learning pathways.

*Teacher preparation* and identity also play a key role in fostering inclusive stakeholder engagement. F. López and Santibanez (2018) underscore that teacher preparation for emergent bilingual students is not simply a technical matter of coursework or professional development; it is deeply shaped by state language-in-education policy contexts that define minimum expectations for EB instruction. Their policy-focused synthesis highlights substantial cross-state variability in what teachers are expected (and required) to know: Ranging from superficial exposure to EB needs to more robust preparation that attends to bilingual learners' linguistic resources, language development trajectories, assessment, and culturally responsive instruction. This uneven policy landscape matters for TWI and dual language implementation because program models that aim to cultivate bilingualism and biliteracy require teachers who can integrate language and content goals, leverage students' home-language resources as assets, and enact instruction aligned to both linguistic and academic standards (F. López & Santibanez, 2018). Moreover, studies showed that educators trained through linguistically responsive





and equity-centered professional development demonstrate stronger efficacy and adaptability in working with diverse student populations (Heineke & Giatso, 2020; Heineke et al., 2020; Heineke & Vera, 2022; Heineke et al., 2022). These experiences build confidence in engaging with families and tailoring instruction to reflect students' cultural contexts. Becker et al. (2022) and Oliveira et al. (2020) reinforced this point, emphasizing that culturally responsive instruction requires deep trust between families and educators to build trust through clear communication, mutual respect, and shared values.

*Student perspectives* offer the most immediate insight into whether these collaborative efforts are succeeding. García-Mateus (2023) studied bilingual students' reflections in a gentrifying TWI program and found that students held nuanced understandings of language expertise and social positioning. They noted shifts in classroom dynamics that privileged English over Spanish, signaling to researchers the need for more consistent multilingual affirmation. Vera et al. (2021) added that students' social-emotional well-being is inseparable from their experiences of cultural inclusion, peer relationships, and access to counseling services tailored to their identities.

Finally, Chaparro's (2024) work and Bauer and Sánchez's (2024) work illustrated how hybrid language practices and embodied translanguaging foster cross-cultural understanding, particularly for African American multilingual students often excluded from bilingual education spaces. These studies argue that community-level support must include not only representation and voice but also curricular and pedagogical practices that affirm all linguistic and racial identities.

### **University Access and Beyond: Long-Term Outcomes of TWI Participation**

While much of the research on Two-Way Immersion (TWI) programs focuses on K-12 academic outcomes, growing evidence points to their lasting effects on students' postsecondary trajectories, linguistic identities, and professional readiness. TWI participation has been linked to increased eligibility for university admission, higher rates of biliteracy certification, and expanded college and career opportunities, especially for students from linguistically diverse backgrounds. However, these benefits are not uniformly distributed, and access to postsecondary advancement remains influenced by a constellation of social, institutional, and linguistic factors.

A compelling line of research documents the positive relationship between sustained TWI enrollment and academic preparedness for higher education. Padilla et al. (2022) found that 42% of students who completed K-5 Spanish English immersion programs earned the California SoBL upon graduating high school, a rate nearly four times higher than the state average of 11% in 2019. These students not only demonstrated advanced proficiency in two languages but also outperformed their peers in cumulative GPAs and completed college entrance requirements at higher rates. The SoBL thus serves not only as a credential for bilingualism but also as a gateway to college eligibility and scholarship opportunities.

Hancock and Davin (2020) further illuminated the symbolic and material value of the SoBL from the perspectives of both students and administrators. Students view it as a formal recognition of their bilingual identities and a competitive advantage in college admissions. Administrators, meanwhile, acknowledge their role in promoting multilingualism, closing equity gaps, and increasing student motivation. These findings underscore the importance of institutional support for biliteracy as part of long-term educational planning.

However, access to higher education is shaped by more than just linguistic development. Jiang's (2021) longitudinal analysis of national datasets spanning three decades reveals that while TWI can improve college readiness, EBLs still encounter structural barriers that influence their postsecondary outcomes. Socioeconomic status, familial support, and school-level guidance all play significant roles in shaping students' trajectories. Thus, while TWI can mitigate some inequities, it must be part of a broader ecosystem of support that addresses systemic disadvantages.

The transition from secondary schooling to university also requires targeted professional development for educators who work with adult and college-bound EBLs. Housel (2020, 2021) and Housel and Oranjian (2021) emphasized the importance of preparing instructors to support emergent multilinguals in postsecondary and adult learning contexts. These studies call for sustained training in culturally responsive pedagogy, critical language awareness, and the integration of digital tools like New Seal Pro to scaffold academic reading and writing for bilingual learners.

Technological fluency, especially digital literacy in both languages, is increasingly crucial for college access and persistence. Guise et al. (2020) highlighted the role of ongoing supervision and feedback in strengthening educator preparation to meet the evolving needs of bilingual learners across educational transitions.

Ultimately, the benefits of TWI programs extend beyond linguistic competence, they contribute to more inclusive and equitable pathways to higher education. Yet to realize this potential fully, program designers and policymakers must ensure that dual language models are not isolated interventions but embedded within a continuum of culturally and linguistically sustaining support from preschool to college and beyond. As shown in Table 2, codes related to family agency, student identity development, and biliteracy recognition inform this theme’s emphasis on how community engagement and P–20 trajectories sustain equity across students’ long-term educational pathways.

**TABLE 2 - Coding Framework and Sample Codes**

| Theme                                                   | Research Question                             | Sample Codes                                                                            | Example Studies                                                           | Connection to CPS                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Instructional Equity and Academic Advancement</b>    | RQ1: Equity in TWI outcomes                   | Balanced language allocation;<br>multimodal scaffolding;<br>translanguaging as pedagogy | Arteagoitia & Yen, 2020; Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017; Becker et al., 2022 | Sustains students’ linguistic repertoires and validates bilingual practices in classroom instruction. |
| <b>Linguistic Development and Biliteracy Expansion</b>  | RQ1: Equity in TWI outcomes                   | Explicit vocabulary instruction;<br>biliteracy trajectory;<br>assessment equity         | Ascenzi-Moreno (2018), Curiel and Ponzio (2021), Davis (2023)             | Positions biliteracy as an equity outcome by affirming linguistic diversity as an asset.              |
| <b>Program Implementation and Structural Conditions</b> | RQ2: Features/ orientations sustaining equity | Leadership advocacy;<br>resource inequities;<br>policy alignment                        | Chang, 2022; Lu & Troyan, 2022                                            | Highlights systemic supports and challenges, reflecting CSP’s institutional orientation.              |
| <b>Community Engagement and Long-Term Pathways</b>      | RQ2: Features/ orientations sustaining equity | Family agency; Seal of Biliteracy; student identity development                         | Alvarado (2025); Huang et al. (2025)                                      | Extends CSP by centering family and student voices, sustaining equity across P–20 trajectories.       |





## Limitations

Although we conducted this literature review through multiple rounds of rigorous screening and filtering of the most recent literature related to EBLs and TWI programs, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, we limited our search to studies published between 2018 and 2025. As a result, significant foundational empirical research and doctoral dissertations conducted before 2018 were not incorporated. Although the theoretical frameworks informing this study (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012;) are grounded in earlier scholarship, excluding empirical findings before 2018 may limit the historical depth of the review.

Second, because the review spans the COVID-19 pandemic era, many of the included studies may reflect outcomes influenced by pandemic-related disruptions. Although most studies suggested that students generally adapted to technology and remote learning, the pandemic revealed profound digital inequities, disproportionately affecting minority students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Casey et al., 2022; King et al., 2022). Variations in teachers' digital literacy and adaptability to remote instruction likely introduced additional variability into the reported outcomes. Furthermore, the persistence of the hybrid teaching model post-pandemic raises concerns about the long-term impacts on students with limited access to technology or digital skills.

Third, we did not dis-aggregate findings by specific student age groups. Given that experiences and outcomes in TWI programs may vary significantly across developmental stages (e.g., early childhood, elementary, secondary), the absence of age-specific analyses is a limitation.

Fourth, our search was confined to major academic databases such as ERIC, JSTOR, Springer, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. We did not search study register (e.g., PROSPERO), possibly omitting ongoing or recently completed but unpublished studies.

Fifth, for this particular review, we only include the studies that publish in English, which may overlook some high quality studies that published in other languages that would potentially draw implications to support the findings of this review.

Finally, although our review followed a structured, multi-phase workflow, the first author conducted

the majority of searching, screening, data extraction, and multiple rounds of coding and reviewing, without automation tools, which introduces the possibility of human error or subjective bias in study selection. Even though the second reviewer were included during the preparation of the major revision, the second reviewer may only contribute to the proofreading, grammar fixing, and sentence polishing rather than conducting a full independent review of inclusion and exclusion criteria. As a result, the study selection process may not fully meet the standards of inter-rater reliability, and the findings should be interpreted with this limitation in mind.

## DISCUSSION

In this review, we demonstrate that Two-Way Immersion (TWI) programs hold significant potential to advance equity for emergent bilingual learners (EBLs), though outcomes vary depending on program features, pedagogical orientations, and broader sociopolitical contexts. Across studies published between 2018 and 2025, we identified two intertwined dimensions of equity: (a) the extent to which TWI addresses academic disparities between EBLs and English-dominant peers, and (b) the features and orientations that enable programs to sustain bilingualism and equity over time.

### Academic Outcomes and Equity Gains.

Our synthesis shows that TWI programs support biliteracy and yield strong long-term academic outcomes. Research has shown that students in TWI settings often meet or exceed their monolingual peers on standardized measures while developing bilingual proficiency (Lu & Troyan, 2022; Padilla et al., 2022). These findings corroborate earlier longitudinal analyses (Thomas & Collier, 2002; Umansky & Reardon, 2014) that linked dual immersion to higher graduation rates and stronger English attainment. Beyond test scores, TWI classrooms cultivate critical thinking, problem-solving, and cross-cultural competencies, positioning bilingualism as both a cognitive and social asset. Yet, equity gains are uneven. Some programs continue to privilege English-dominant students or reproduce racialized hierarchies (Bauer & Sánchez, 2024; Chaparro, 2024), particularly when deficit ideologies devalue Black Englishes or immigrant language practices. Pandemic disruptions further magnified disparities, as digital inequities disproportionately constrained the learning of minoritized families (Flavin et al., 2024).

These examples caution that equity benefits are contingent, not automatic.

### **Program Features and Pedagogical Orientations.**

Across the reviewed studies, we identified several program features and pedagogical orientations as central to sustaining bilingualism and advancing equity. Importantly, these features do not operate independently; rather, they function as interrelated mechanisms shaped by broader sociopolitical and institutional contexts.

First, teacher preparation and professional development emerged as a foundational mechanism for equity. The literature consistently suggests that dual-language instructional skill alone is insufficient; teachers must also develop critical sociocultural awareness to navigate immigration politics, racialized language ideologies, and deficit framing of emergent bilingual learners (Becker et al., 2022; Becker & Oliveira, 2023, 2024; Heineke & Giatsou, 2020; Heineke et al., 2020, 2022; Heineke & Vera, 2022). This pattern likely reflects the reality that TWI classrooms are embedded within English-dominant systems where accountability pressures, curricular mandates, and societal ideologies implicitly privilege English. Without intentional preparation, teachers may default to English-centric practices: not because of resistance to equity, but because institutional norms and assessment structures reward such orientations (Arteagoitia & Yen, 2020). These findings extend prior scholarship by showing that teacher preparation functions not only as a technical input, but as a mediating mechanism between program design and equity outcomes.

Second, technology and multimodal resources can serve as equity levers when thoughtfully integrated, expanding access to differentiated learning opportunities (Darling-Aduana & Heinrich, 2018). However, the uneven benefits observed across studies suggest that technology amplifies existing structural conditions rather than neutralizing them. Pandemic-era research highlights how disparities in device access, connectivity, and digital literacy constrained participation for many emergent bilingual learners (Flavin et al., 2024). This pattern aligns with broader digital equity literature, underscoring that technology alone does not produce equity; rather, equity depends on the alignment of resources, instructional design, and institutional support.

Third, community and parental engagement

emerge as a defining equity feature, particularly in shaping access, sustainability, and student identity development. Families are not passive stakeholders but active co-educators: For example, Latina mothers in Alvarado's (2025) study reclaimed competence for themselves and their children through advocacy, challenging deficit narratives embedded in school interactions. Similarly, Huang et al. (2025) show that parents' positive orientations toward bilingualism strongly shape access to Mandarin-English immersion. These findings resonate with, and extend, earlier family engagement literature by showing how parental agency operates differently across racialized and linguistic communities, often mediated by power dynamics within school systems.

Finally, assessment and feedback systems must move beyond deficit framing. Responsive, translanguaging-informed assessments (Ascenzi-Moreno, 2018) can illuminate student strengths, whereas neoliberal accountability discourses risk erasing EBLs with disabilities from policy recognition (L. Li, 2024). This pattern helps explain why some TWI programs demonstrate strong instructional practices yet fail to produce equitable policy recognition or resource allocation. Compared with earlier literature that focused primarily on instructional outcomes, the current findings foreground assessment as a site where equity is either enacted or undermined.

### **Toward a Synthesized View of Equity in TWI.**

Taken together, our findings suggest that the equity impact of TWI cannot be understood solely in terms of student outcomes or isolated strategies. Rather, we argue that outcomes and features are mutually reinforcing: programs that achieve strong academic results for EBLs are often those that also invest in teacher preparation, resist assimilationist ideologies, engage families as partners, and design assessments that validate multilingual repertoires. Conversely, when TWI programs are co-opted by neoliberal logics (e.g., market-driven expansion in gentrifying neighborhoods; Darriet & Santibañez, 2024), equity goals risk being diluted, and disparities may persist or even widen.

### **IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Our review highlights that Two-Way Immersion (TWI) programs have the potential to advance equity for emergent bilingual learners (EBLs), but outcomes depend on how programs are designed,





implemented, and sustained. Our findings point to several key implications for current policy and teaching practice:

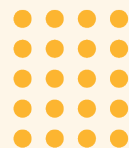
### **Policy and Practice**

Teacher preparation remains foundational. States and districts should invest in professional learning that equips teachers not only with dual-language pedagogy but also with tools to navigate racialized and political contexts. Assessment practices must move beyond English-centric measures to include biliteracy development, translanguaging-informed approaches, and culturally sustaining evaluations. Equitable access to digital resources is essential, especially as the pandemic revealed how technology gaps widen opportunity gaps. Finally, family and community engagement must be treated as central to program design rather than supplemental, with immigrant and racially minoritized families positioned as co-educators and decision-makers.

### **Future Research**

Our literature review also points to areas where further inquiry is needed. First, more longitudinal studies could clarify how TWI participation influences equity outcomes across the P-20 continuum, perhaps emphasizing more college readiness and civic participation. Second, research should examine how TWI programs serve subgroups often overlooked in current scholarship, such as students with disabilities, African American emergent bilinguals, and Indigenous language speakers. Third, more comparative work is needed to understand how different policy contexts, such as state legislation, accountability systems, and charter school expansion, shape the equity promise of TWI in these various settings. Finally, studies should investigate how culturally sustaining pedagogy can be operationalized in daily classroom practice, offering concrete models for teachers and leaders.

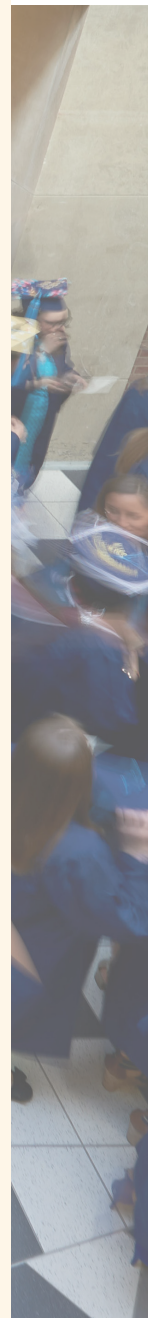
By aligning teaching practices, policy design, and future research with equity-driven orientations, stakeholders can ensure that TWI programs not only reduce disparities but also transform schooling into more democratic, culturally sustaining, and linguistically just spaces.



## CONCLUSION

Our literature review critically examined 64 studies to address how TWI programs impact the academic achievement gap between EBLs and native English-speaking students in the U.S. K-12 education and identified strategies for enhancing these programs. The findings confirm that TWI programs effectively bridge the academic achievement gap by leveraging culturally responsive pedagogies and bilingual education benefits. Students in TWI programs often outperform their monolingual peers, indicating the potential of bilingual education for academic equity. Key strategies for enhancing TWI effectiveness include integrating technology with adequate educator support, fostering strong leadership, providing comprehensive teacher training, and involving the community to ensure culturally inclusive curricula.

Our review indicates that while TWI programs hold significant potential for closing educational gaps, continuous efforts are necessary to refine and adapt these programs to changing educational landscapes and demographic shifts. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to track the long-term impacts of TWI education on various demographic groups, examining both academic and socio-emotional outcomes. Furthermore, as digital tools continue to permeate educational settings, additional studies are needed to explore the most effective strategies for their integration into bilingual education settings, ensuring that all students have equitable access to technological resources.





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## EASIER SAID THAN TAUGHT: Navigating the Development and Application of Critical Thinking

### Abstract

Critical thinking (CT) is a key competency for undergraduates to be informed decision-makers. However, educators face challenges in fostering students' CT. Effective CT instruction is not a monolithic enterprise; it must account for domain-specific nuances, instructional design, and individual learner differences. This narrative review synthesizes existing literature to identify the crucial elements of CT development, examine the extent to which students cultivate CT during college education, and explore the transferability of these skills across academic disciplines and to real-world scenarios. Findings reveal that robust CT development hinges on a combination of student agency, pedagogical design, and co-constructed learning opportunities. While domain-specific instruction effectively promotes near transfer—the application of skills and dispositions to similar contexts—far transfer to novel situations is elusive. Achieving far transfer requires practice and innovative instructional designs that activate inert knowledge in unfamiliar contexts. The review calls for a more integrated approach to centering CT in higher education. Beyond isolated interventions, institutions should embed CT education systematically throughout the curriculum. This integration can be reinforced through professional development for faculty members and through high-impact practices, enabling students to apply CT effectively in their lives.

### Keywords

Critical Thinking, Higher Education, Learning Transfer, Instructional Design

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*All the content and analysis in the article were original and first conceived by the author. Tools with generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), including ChatGPT (GPT-4.1) and Gemini (Gemini 2.5 Pro), were subsequently used to enhance the flow and organization of the article, as well as to check grammar. The author occasionally prompted GenAI to correct grammatical errors and paraphrase sentences to streamline the meanings the author intended to convey. Additionally, ChatGPT (GPT-5) was used to improve the organization of the information in Tables 3 and the Appendix. Suggestions on grammar and cohesion from Grammarly were verified and edited again to ensure no hallucination and the use of a natural cadence. Finally, the author would like to thank tutors at the Student Success Center for polishing the language of this manuscript.*

Critical thinking (CT), a cognitive and reflective endeavor related to one's ability of evaluation and generation as well as creativity (Zhou, 2022), is crucial to undergraduates given their forthcoming involvement in careers and high-stakes life events (Halpern & Butler, 2019; Holmes et al., 2015; Wong & Kowitlawakul, 2020). An OECD (2022) study reveals CT skills as a predictor of employability in written communication and problem-solving. However, simply framing the teaching and learning of CT with the expectation of measurable gains from pre- to post-test assessments is problematic. Additionally, effective CT instruction does not adhere to a one-size-fits-all model (Abrami et al., 2015). Studies have shown that students primarily practice

CT within the same class or field (As'ari et al., 2017; Holmes et al., 2015). Together with Zhou's (2022) framework, the studies offer a glimpse that CT development for learners is often domain-specific. Furthermore, the development of CT takes a significant amount of time, and the time needed varies depending on students' capacity and the curriculum they receive (Abrami et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2024; Ralston & Bays, 2015), and it can be complicated by cultural differences (Lu et al., 2021).

While substantial groundwork has been established to define CT instruction, scholars often approach CT through established models and a pre-post perspective. This approach, as apposite as it seems for researchers launching experiments

and reforming curriculum within limited time and resources, overlooks the nature of CT. CT transcends the mere development of cognitive skills and taps into the impacts of curriculum and pedagogical practices beyond classrooms. Hence, the review aims to investigate these three elements: (1) the elements needed to develop CT, (2) the level of CT that students develop over the course of a 4-year college education, and (3) the transferability of CT across academic disciplines and other real-world scenarios. In the end, this review aims to propose future research directions and instructional and practical implications to foster more cohesive approaches to developing and teaching CT.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

This section details the research design of the narrative literature review, including its guiding parameters and constraints, the research questions, and the researcher's positionality.

### Methodology

I conducted a narrative literature review to address broad research questions and incorporate studies conducted in different methodologies (Pautasso, 2019; Taherdoost, 2023) (see summary table in the Appendix). This method allows for the synthesis of findings into theme-based narratives relevant to CT education. The search process was conducted from February to September 2025. The primary databases used were Google Scholar, ERIC, and ProQuest. Given the scope of the review and the breadth of the literature, ResearchRabbit and STORM by Stanford University were also employed to discover additional literature on near and far transfer of CT missed in the initial search. ResearchRabbit, which visualizes connections between papers, was applied to identify related works. Due to the lack of articles on learning transfer in the context of CT in traditional databases, I resorted to ResearchRabbit, which I fed with six seed articles to identify additional relevant articles. Eventually, among 21 articles (with one replicate entry), I identified Barnett & Ceci (2002)'s article as explaining far transfer. On the other hand, Synthesis of Topic Outlines through Retrieval and Multi-perspective Question Asking (STORM), an artificial intelligence tool that provides synopses of literature within a user-defined scope, was used to expand the range of literature by tracing sources cited in its reviews. It can generate an overview of a specific topic (e.g., critical thinking) through a keyword

string in two steps. First, it conducts a thorough search and outlines the overview beforehand. During the writing process, it identifies different perspectives on the topic and interrogates itself based on the literature it has gathered, ultimately producing a multi-page introductory article (Jiang et al., 2024). A search on STORM highlighted two additional articles (Fong et al., 1986; Sellier et al., 2019) on far learning transfer that meet my inclusion criteria. No AI-generated content was taken directly from STORM; only bibliographic references to articles were used.

For article selection, except for works used in the sections "On Defining CT: What Constitutes It" and "Development of Students' CT," as well as theoretical frameworks on transfer and one illustrative case, all studies were published after 2010, with more than half published after 2015, to capture current developments in teaching and learning CT. Selected cases spanned STEM (Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), business, and the humanities. The process began with an extensive search guided by keyword strings and inclusion/exclusion criteria (see Tables 1 and 2). Fifty-nine articles were identified for analysis using databases and tools such as ResearchRabbit and STORM. During the search process, a quick review was employed to assess relevance immediately, rather than indiscriminately downloading results. This approach facilitated the first round of selection. Subsequently, a second screening of these potential sources yielded 31 articles used to frame the theories, findings, and perspectives in this section. Selection was determined by the criteria listed in the Appendix. This two-stage process ensured that the final selection aligned with the core research questions established for this review. Articles were then reviewed and annotated, grouped by theme, and synthesized into sections based on the knowledge base. Regrouping was carried out when necessary to ensure alignment with the analysis scope, as addressed in the three research questions presented below.

**TABLE 1 - Sample Keyword Strings**

| Dimension                                                           | Example Keyword String                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Definition of critical thinking                                     | critical thinking AND definition<br>critical thinking AND (Facione OR Paul OR Elder OR Ennis)<br>critical thinking AND (Brookfield OR McPeck OR Kurfiss OR Siegel)<br>dispositions AND critical thinking                                                                                                                                               |
| Students' critical thinking development<br>(primarily case studies) | {undergraduate OR colleges} AND students AND critical thinking AND {development OR building}<br>{undergraduate OR colleges} AND students AND critical thinking AND {development OR building} AND {instructors OR professors}<br>{undergraduate OR colleges} AND students AND critical thinking AND {development OR building} AND {student perspective} |
| Transfer of critical thinking                                       | {transfer OR transferability OR application OR practice} AND {undergraduate OR colleges} AND students AND critical thinking<br>{transfer OR transferability OR application} AND {challenges OR obstacles OR process} AND {undergraduate OR colleges} AND students AND critical thinking<br>domain-specific instruction AND critical thinking           |

**TABLE 2 - Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria for Studies Included to Address the Three Research Questions**

| Criterion               | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Geography               | Cases are selected from North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia to reflect diverse instructional settings and practices                                                                                      |
| Publication date        | Except for the theories and one experimental study on learning transfer, all the articles featuring cases in classrooms were published after 2010                                                            |
| Settings                | Predominantly university instruction settings. Cases from secondary education in classroom settings are occasionally used as a supplement                                                                    |
| Language of publication | Only articles written in English are included                                                                                                                                                                |
| Featured construct      | Must adhere to the definition of critical thinking set at the beginning of this review; articles that feature a related but distinct construct (e.g., computational thinking) will be excluded from analysis |





## Research Questions

The research questions include the following:

1. In what ways do college students develop CT within classroom practices shaped by the curriculum and teachers' pedagogy?
2. In what forms do college students demonstrate CT in near transfer contexts?
3. In what forms do college students demonstrate CT in far transfer contexts?

## Researcher Positionality

I served as a facilitator for the “Future Issues and Social Development” courses at two municipal high schools for the non-profit Lead for Taiwan between 2022 and 2023. During my short tenure, I examined my teaching and revised lessons on CT after every session. Occasionally, I experience post-teaching epiphanies sparked by “what if...” questions. While some students exhibited interest in the subjects I presented, I observed instances of disengagement from CT and limited progress in appreciating and analyzing topics with substantiated arguments and diverse perspectives. Moreover, CT can be applied across various settings, such as in classes and in personal life. Inspired by my teaching experience, I drafted this literature review.

## ON DEFINING CT: WHAT CONSTITUTES IT?

Early definitions of CT emphasized the evaluation employed by thinkers (Ennis, 1964; Halpern, 1998). Subsequent accounts incorporated reflective control and metacognition, emphasizing the thinker's capacity to monitor and regulate reasoning (Ennis, 1991; Paul, 1988). The experts at the American Philosophical Association (1990), for example, frame CT as purposeful, self-regulated judgment supported by explicit attention to “evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, and contextual considerations.” Contemporary authors argue that CT necessitates both mindware (rules, knowledge, procedures, and strategies) and dispositional tendencies (open-mindedness, intellectual humility, and prudence), and that the operation of these elements varies across different domains (e.g., Eigenauer, 2024; Zhou, 2022). As such, in this article, CT is defined as effortful, metacognitively guided reasoning — both general and domain-sensitive — in which individuals interpret, evaluate, and synthesize information using appropriate strategies and dispositions to produce reasoned judgments and purposeful, self-regulated action.

The interest of the article, importantly, lies in understanding how CT is initiated and unfolds in higher education instructional settings. Thus, a review of the cluster of concepts on how CT works will be helpful. According to Davies (2015) and Zhou (2022), the development of CT encompasses a combination of skills, dispositions, and values. Skills and dispositions are intertwined. Skills refer to the ability to argue and think about one's thinking, such as “interpretation, analysis, inference, explanation, evaluation, metacognition, or self-regulation” (Davies, 2015, p.54). Dispositions, or “habits of character” in Zhou's (2022, p. 158) words, refer to the “attitudes and a sense of psychological readiness of the human being to be critical” (Davies, 2015, p.55). Finally, values can be regarded as mindware (the ‘program’ in our brain that guides our thinking; Clark, 2001) that drives one's actions and future trajectories, in consideration of one's social relations (Davies, 2015), similar to the intellectual virtues proposed by Zhou (2022).

Davies (2015) recognizes that one's dispositions and, subsequently, values and actions are determinants to actualize CT in real life (e.g., addressing inequity). Similarly, CT development helps individuals transcend fear and arrogance, allowing students to be humble and navigate mentally challenging questions (Zhou, 2022). These attributes enable individuals to act with prudence while remaining both organized and visionary. They also foster reflective awareness of one's actions and facilitate the translation of internal dispositions into behaviors that demonstrate humility and courage, particularly in time-consuming and cognitively demanding situations.

An individual's CT is fostered through the educational environment, especially as it pertains to problem-solving, decision-making, and collaboration (Davies, 2015). CT is considered to facilitate the execution of these tasks, as evidenced by instructions where coursework and assignments are structured to develop one's skills in examining interconnectedness, argumentation, balanced presentation of information, and generating sound conclusions and plausible implications (Ralston & Bays, 2015). Equally important, CT is associated with one's ability to communicate in both written and spoken forms, as information is exchanged during such processes (Hyytinen et al., 2024).

Additionally, CT development is discipline-specific; in philosophy and science, logic is central, while the

humanities prioritize holistic perspectives, and the social sciences emphasize methodical, evidence-based analysis (Zhou, 2022). Its development—shaped by both individual learning and instructional guidance—extends beyond purely cognitive dimensions.

### **Challenges of Teaching and Learning CT**

CT can be taught both explicitly (e.g., regular classes) and through student-teacher or student-student co-construction (e.g., inquiry-based learning or practicum) (Pnevmatikos et al., 2023; Wong & Kowitlawakul, 2020). When such instructional approaches are absent or insufficient, students often equate CT with specific cognitive activities (e.g., reasoning or discussion) rather than considering certain dispositions or activities as the components of CT (Pnevmatikos et al., 2023).

A myriad of challenges in the development of CT has long been standing for teachers and students. Bassok and Holyoak (1989) identified challenges that students face when applying similar concepts in physics and algebra. Additionally, insufficient interactions or discussions, stress, and students' characteristics (e.g., shyness) can hinder students' development of CT (Wong & Kowitlawakul, 2020). Another challenge is the time span required for the development of CT. Studies of CT typically present only a snapshot of students' CT development, often in experimental designs (Holmes et al., 2015). Yet, an extended duration is required to develop CT (Ralston & Bays, 2015), warranting the need to examine how college students develop CT and how CT can be transferred in both the short and long term.

### **DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS' CT**

This section will mainly address the first question: In what ways do college students develop CT within classroom practices shaped by the curriculum and teachers' pedagogy? To address this question, perspectives are drawn from studies focused on students, instructors, and co-constructed student-instructor interactions. Both the content and the design and implementation of instruction are considered together, given that the subject matter in lessons itself cannot stand alone if the instruction aims to introduce thinking practices to students (Perkins, 1995).

#### **Teachers, Curriculum, Pedagogy, and (Ultimately) Students**

Developing students' CT to benefit their learning in the long run has been perceived as a challenge, as it requires instructors to build students' knowledge,

skills, and dispositions, ultimately ushering in a mental and habitual shift (Holmes et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2024). A handful of studies on CT pertain to STEM education (Booth et al., 2015; Holmes et al., 2015; Ralston & Bays, 2015; Tiruneh et al., 2018), with language education (Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015) and pre-service teacher education (Golden, 2023; Slade et al., 2019) being another stream of studies on teaching CT.

A number of common elements can be distilled. For example, the close relationship between instructors and students is conducive to lively in-class engagement, leading to the co-construction and meaning-making of lessons as suggested by Vygotsky's view on the interactionist approach; this outcome can be attributed to students' feelings of safety and shared knowledge (Abrami et al., 2015; Golden, 2023).

Students' holistic understanding of the tasks and approaches also matters, regardless of their previous training. Mehta and Al-Mahrooqi (2015) reveal that even when students might know how to read critically, they may perform poorly in writing critically. However, when students understand the purpose of a task and receive guidance after discussions and brainstorming, their performance in writing that involves analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of ideas improves.

Experiments have demonstrated that after instruction over a duration, there is usually an increase in students' CT competencies (Holmes et al., 2015; Ralston & Bays, 2015; Straková & Cimermanová, 2018; van Peppen et al., 2021). For instance, Holmes et al. (2015) found that the effects of reflective instruction persisted. Once the instruction ended, students in the experimental group continued to revise their work 12 times more than those in the control group. Additionally, students in the experimental group were four times more likely to recognize and articulate a limitation of a physical model based on their data.

However, the complex nature of CT instruction should not be overlooked. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to CT instruction (Abrami et al., 2015), given the variations across academic disciplines and contexts. Scholars have also advocated diverging approaches to CT instruction. van Peppen et al. (2021) suggest that explicit instruction on CT, followed by practice, can elevate students' CT through comparisons of test results. They also note that the effect of instruction can last for months.



However, this does not guarantee that students will transfer CT to another task or domain. Students' performance on CT within a certain parameter can improve due to multiple factors, such as test-taking needs and motivation. Tiruneh et al. (2018) found that deliberately aligning instruction with an existing model may facilitate students' transfer of CT into the same or similar fields, but not into general life skills.

Still, Abrami et al. (2015) recognize that students benefit from developing their CT after instruction. For example, the infused model, which posits that CT concepts should be highlighted and that students ought to be primed about the instruction (Dumitru, 2013; Haber, 2020; Tiruneh et al., 2018; Zhou, 2022), is designed to develop students' skills and dispositions of CT (Zhou, 2022). The efficacy of this model, which demonstrates and reminds students of the target CT skills supplemented by reflections, outperforms that of the immersion model in which CT is implied in class activities (Tiruneh et al., 2018). Nonetheless, a cautionary note by Abrami et al. (2015) should be considered when opting for a single model, given the variability of classroom contexts. They suggest that content and CT should be integrated to maximize learning efficacy, given that authentic contexts allow students to use CT to address a problem directly, and techniques of "dialogue, authentic instruction, and mentorship," whether used separately or altogether, can best support students' CT development.

However, even when classes are designed for embedding CT, efficacy can still be limited. For example, fewer than 20% of teacher candidates in a context-situated, reflection-oriented practicum demonstrated reflections that extended beyond connecting themselves to knowledge and experiences (Slade et al., 2019). Even when opportunities for discussion abound, students may be constrained by the time and size of the class (Wong & Kowitlawakul, 2020) or by cultural differences that hinder them from meeting Westerners' expectations (e.g., raising questions in class) (Lu et al., 2021).

Finally, students' agentic role in shaping their CT development should not be neglected. Students' low expectations for themselves, their limited language proficiency—which is exacerbated by their failure to seek resources for assistance—and their tendency to rely on instructors are barriers to developing CT (Aouaf et al., 2023). CT is fully realized by

students when they persevere in sharpening their approaches to mentally challenging tasks, apply CT beyond a single class, and appreciate its value after experiencing its applications across scenarios (Lee et al., 2024). Furthermore, Hyytinen et al. (2024) report that students who think ahead and plan multiple approaches to solving questions, guided by prudence and effort, perform better on their CT assessment.

### **Co-construction of CT by Instructors and Students**

Learning and teaching CT involves parameters from the instructors (e.g., course objectives), the course content, instructional settings, peers, and even students' awareness and motivation (Aouaf et al., 2023; Davies, 2015; Lee et al., 2024; Ralston & Bays, 2015; Wong & Kowitlawakul, 2020) to ensure that students practice CT both inside and outside their domains. Students' development of CT can be demonstrated through the products of their learning. Nevertheless, the scope and efficacy of acquiring CT from a learner's viewpoint—as well as the potential strategies and dispositions learners may cultivate—warrant further discussion.

In Mehta and Al-Mahrooqi's (2015) tertiary-level English writing class for non-native English-speaking writers, some provided cogent arguments and clear thesis statements tightly connected to the main prompts that instructors asked for. Still, students missed intricacies, such as identifying potential biases in the prompt and strategizing the writing scope according to the essential questions in the prompt. This is similar to Slade et al.'s (2019) findings. Teacher candidates became aware of identifying niches to apply professional knowledge, and were aware of their attitudes and dispositions while examining the impacts of and needed changes in their personal actions and beliefs.

Students in STEM fields, while able to improve their CT, may still miss complexities and connections to the broader body of information in their writing (Ralston & Bays, 2015). Notably, though, students' evaluation skills and subsequent action-driven approaches have become more ingrained (Holmes et al., 2015). An instance is that students receiving instructions displayed an incremental improvement in exhibiting their CT, from pondering changes to their experiment and improvement of experiment results to evaluating the underlying causes of discrepancies between their experiments and the model. Holmes et al. (2015) and Lee et al. (2024) demonstrate that central to students' CT

development are ample opportunities to prepare students to translate CT into dispositions and to engage in inquiry rather than to assess the information visible at the surface level. Still, robust CT development lies in instructors' scaffolding, where students are given analytical approaches and workable frameworks before they develop their tactics, as opposed to getting instructors' views (Lee et al., 2024). Additionally, students should be immersed in authentic contexts supplemented with opportunities to look into interconnectedness (Abrami et al., 2015).

Moreover, how instructors perceive and approach CT in their classes should be at their discretion, given that an all-purpose model does not always serve their purposes in highly heterogeneous educational contexts (Abrami et al., 2015; Booth et al., 2015; Zhou, 2022). Findings on improvements in students' general CT skills have been conflicting (Abrami et al., 2015; Tiruneh et al., 2018). As different disciplines require CT to be performed differently, teachers are advised to be trained on field-specific schemas to think critically (Janssen et al., 2019). Note, however, that instructors can also be overconfident, which hinders their ability to recognize biases as they provide incorrect reasoning in tasks with which they are unfamiliar.

Finally, instructors must be aware of diverse demonstrations of CT from students (Lu et al., 2021). Beyond explicit instruction in analytic reasoning using acquired rules, interaction-driven discourse and rapport (Abrami et al., 2015; Golden, 2023), as well as manageable class size and classroom inclusivity (Wong & Kowitlawakul, 2020), play an equally important role in training students to perform analytic reasoning with acquired rules.

## TRANSFER OF STUDENTS' CT

After an examination of CT from the perspective of teaching and learning, our focus will be on another topic: transfer of learning. In this section, two questions will be addressed: (2) In what forms do college students demonstrate CT in near transfer contexts? and (3) In what forms do college students demonstrate CT in far transfer contexts?

Transfer of CT can be defined as the process by which learners actively apply, adapt, and extend the knowledge and skills they have acquired in one context to different and often unfamiliar contexts, whether in other academic disciplines or real-life situations (Haber, 2020; National Research Council, 2000, Chapter 3). This ability involves not only

recalling learned concepts but also activating and reshaping knowledge to solve problems, innovate, and create tools tailored to emerging challenges. As such, transfer equips learners with advantages by fostering flexibility, adaptability, and a problem-solving mindset. Although there is a need to experiment with the effectiveness of transferable principles of CT, CT is invaluable (Dumitru, 2013). One's foundations in premise formation, argumentation, and decision-making abilities across life scenarios, as well as an individual's capacity to consider multiple facets within a given context, are benefits that arise from CT (Haber, 2020).

Transfer can be broken down into two types: near transfer and far transfer. Near transfer in CT refers to the ability to apply learned knowledge or skills to situations that closely resemble the original learning context (Mat Said et al., 2021; van Peppen et al., 2022). This type of transfer is typically observed when students encounter exam problems or exercises that require the same underlying concepts (van Peppen et al., 2022). It involves recognizing common traits or patterns between the original and new situations, whether within the same subject, across different subjects, or between related disciplines or academic years (Mat Said et al., 2021). On the other hand, far transfer involves applying CT from a learning situation to a new application context (Mat Said et al., 2021; van Peppen et al., 2022). This means using CT across different knowledge domains, functional contexts (e.g., social or physical situations), and varied physical, temporal, and social contexts (Barnett & Ceci, 2002).

## What Transfers, What Doesn't, and Why

As a concept review, *near transfer* refers to applying the acquired principles to new tasks that preserve a problem's underlying structure within the same (or closely similar) domain; *far transfer* denotes application to different domains or everyday decisions. However, transfer distance is not binary; it covaries with structural similarity and assessment alignment (Bassok & Holyoak, 1989; van Peppen et al., 2021), as well as with the mindware a discipline demands.

Embedding CT outcomes, terms, and activities into subject courses yields dependable near-domain gains (Dumitru, 2013; Haber, 2020; Tiruneh et al., 2018; Zhou, 2022). Infusion approaches have remained effective across studies (Bensley & Spero, 2014; Tiruneh et al., 2018). Extended implementation in STEM fosters error detection and evidence-



based argumentation (Holmes et al., 2015; Ralston & Bays, 2015). Compact designs can also work: brief video instruction plus aligned practice produces immediate—and sometimes stronger delayed—benefits (van Peppen et al., 2021), and approaches that compel learners to retrieve and re-map prior knowledge onto unfamiliar problems show promise (Corral et al., 2023). In humanities, focused discussion and clarification cycles strengthen argumentation quality and integrative thinking on the same prompts/topics (Mat Said et al., 2021; Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015).

However, the ultimate purpose of schooling is to transfer from school to the environments we encounter every day (National Research Council, 2000), with dividends for personal and social reasoning (Davies, 2015; Haber, 2020). Although multiple-context exemplars can broaden CT (Halpern & Butler, 2019) for everyday life, and successful cases do exist (E.g., Fong et al., 1986), studies have demonstrated that far transfer often falters (Tiruneh et al., 2018; van Peppen et al., 2018, 2021, 2022) and that, currently, the literature mostly features successful cases of near transfer. Learners may fail to notice applicability or retrieve relevant schemas (Bassok & Holyoak, 1989); memory limits and incentive structures (e.g., grades) can boost near performance yet leave far tasks unaffected (van Peppen et al., 2021). Fortunately, extended duration generally strengthens outcomes (Huber & Kuncel, 2016). Table 3 summarizes the findings of the case studies conducted on undergraduate students. Details and analysis of the literature will be presented in later sections of this article.

**TABLE 3 - Evidence on Near and Far Transfer in Critical Thinking Interventions**

| Near and/or far transfer        | Author and date          | Instructional contexts                                                | Duration of intervention/practice | Approaches to intervention/practice                                                        | Evidence and demonstration of transfer                                                                                                                                                                           |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Near (within physics)</b>    | Holmes et al. (2015)     | Calculus-based physics labs (R1 university) + follow-on sophomore lab | Full course of weekly 3-hour labs | Repeated then faded cycles of data-model comparison; student-driven method/model revisions | Students were 12 times more likely to propose/implement method improvements and 4 times more likely to identify/interpret model limitations; these effects persisted in the next-year lab (behavioral transfer). |
| <b>Near (structure-mapping)</b> | Corral et al. (2023)     | University participants; lab tasks                                    | Short study/practice sessions     | Retrieval practice vs. reread-study of base problems                                       | Retrieval practice improved solving of novel analogs (structurally similar but new), evidencing near transfer.                                                                                                   |
| <b>Near</b>                     | van Peppen et al. (2021) | University CT tasks                                                   | Short sessions                    | Study of correct vs. erroneous examples                                                    | Erroneous examples were not uniquely beneficial across outcomes; example-based studies alone may be insufficient for far transfer without additional supports.                                                   |

**TABLE 3 - Evidence on Near and Far Transfer in Critical Thinking Interventions**

| Near and/or far transfer         | Author and date            | Instructional contexts                                        | Duration of intervention/practice                                                                                              | Approaches to intervention/practice                                                                                                                       | Evidence and demonstration of transfer                                                                                                                                                         |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Near (within writing)</b>     | Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi (2015) | EFL(English as a Foreign Language) university writing courses | Semester                                                                                                                       | Writing-integrated CT activities                                                                                                                          | Reported improvements in CT within the writing context after instruction and student discussion.                                                                                               |
| <b>Near (within CT tasks)</b>    | van Peppen et al. (2018)   | First-year Applied Sciences CT course; classroom setting      | Session 1 ≈ 90 min (pretest, instruction, practice, immediate posttest)<br>Session 2 ≈ 30 min 2 weeks later (delayed posttest) | Explicit instruction on two task categories (logical/statistical) with worked examples; practice with or without self-explanation prompts after each task | Transfer was asymmetric—training on Wason/conjunction (WC) led to larger improvements on syllogism/base-rate (SB) than the reverse; prompting self-explanations did not add transfer benefits. |
| <b>Near (within engineering)</b> | Ralston & Bays (2015)      | Engineering under graduates, large urban research university  | 4-year program (freshman -> senior); required courses each year                                                                | Paul-Elder framework infused across curriculum; authentic CT assignments; faculty training; holistic rubric                                               | Significant increase in CT scores across four years for each cohort; authentic artifacts include internship reflections (application in work setting within the discipline).                   |

**TABLE 3 - Evidence on Near and Far Transfer in Critical Thinking Interventions**

| Near and/or far transfer | Author and date        | Instructional contexts                                                 | Duration of intervention/practice    | Approaches to intervention/practice                                                                                       | Evidence and demonstration of transfer                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Near</b>              | Bensley & Spero (2014) | College psychology course                                              | Course-length (duration unspecified) | Direct infusion of CT (explicit rules for argument analysis & critical reading) with practice, assessment, and feedback   | CT-infused group > memory-infusion and content-only groups on argument analysis & critical reading; better metacognitive postdictions, albeit approaching significance only; effects demonstrated on course-aligned CT tests.                                                 |
| <b>Near and Far</b>      | Tiruneh et al. (2018)  | Introductory Electricity & Magnetism class at a university in Ethiopia | 8 weeks<br>3×2-hr/week (24 lessons)  | Immersion vs. Infusion embedded CT; problem-centered tasks; instructor modeling; coached practice; chapter-end reflection | Near: Both Immersion and Infusion > Control.<br>Far: Infusion > Immersion/Control; no group differences on CT for everyday problems.<br>Authors argue the feasibility of developing “near-far” (within sciences) but not “far-far” (from sciences to everyday life) transfer. |

**TABLE 3 - Evidence on Near and Far Transfer in Critical Thinking Interventions**

| Near and/or far transfer                  | Author and date          | Instructional contexts                                            | Duration of intervention/practice                               | Approaches to intervention/practice                                                   | Evidence and demonstration of transfer                                                                                                         |
|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Far (everyday reasoning)</b>           | Fong et al. (1986)       | Laboratory & college courses                                      | Exp. 1-3: ~25 min training<br>Exp. 4: semester-long courses     | Examples + principle abstraction in statistical/causal reasoning                      | Trained participants made better judgments on everyday problems requiring statistical principles.                                              |
| <b>N/A (focus on boundary conditions)</b> | As'ari et al. (2017)     | Prospective math teachers (under graduates and graduate students) | Three case studies; single-session problem-solving + interviews | Diagnostic tasks (incomplete, illogical, open-ended problems) + observation/interview | It explains why near transfer may not occur, as students simply follow conventions without thinking outside the box.                           |
| <b>N/A (focus on boundary conditions)</b> | van Peppen et al. (2022) | University-level CT tasks                                         | Not an intervention (diagnostic studies)                        | Three-step model: Recognize -> Recall -> Apply                                        | Many learners fail at the application step, even when they can recognize/recall, clarifying why far transfer is rare without explicit support. |





## **Fostering Near Transfer and Far Transfer: Conditions and Challenges**

The capacity to transfer CT—including the application, adaptation, and extension of skills, mindwares, and dispositions to novel contexts (Haber, 2020; National Research Council, 2000)—stands as a central goal of education. Effective practice to activate the transfer of CT, however, requires extensive time to learn, deliberate prompting for reflection and elaboration, and hands-on practice (van Peppen et al., 2021)

The provided literature suggests distinct conditions for fostering near versus far transfer. Near transfer appears achievable when CT is explicitly integrated into subject-specific curricula rather than taught in isolation (Dumitru, 2013; Haber, 2020; Tiruneh et al., 2018; Zhou, 2022). Additionally, instructional designs incorporating video instruction with practice (van Peppen et al., 2021), structured group discussions (Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015), and focusing on argumentation (Holmes et al., 2015; Ralston & Bays, 2015) have demonstrated success in fostering near transfer within specific domains or disciplines. However, contextual factors like teaching approaches (As'ari et al., 2017), learner support (van Peppen et al., 2021), and the potential unidirectionality of transfer (Bassok & Holyoak, 1989) must be considered. The feasibility of fostering near transfer is relatively well-supported, with studies showing measurable improvements in domain-specific reasoning and skills following targeted interventions (e.g., Holmes et al., 2015; Ralston & Bays, 2015; Tiruneh et al., 2018).

Far transfer, conversely, demands additional conditions. Although far transfer is difficult to achieve, it is a critical educational goal for ensuring that students can use what they have learned in real-world and unfamiliar contexts (National Research Council, 2000, Chapter 3). While memory retrieval training can help learners activate prior knowledge for unfamiliar problems (Corral et al., 2023), the explicit, deductive approaches effective for near transfer may not suffice (Bensley & Spero, 2014; van Peppen et al., 2021).

Furthermore, far transfer is often described as notoriously difficult to achieve (Bensley & Spero, 2014; van Peppen et al., 2021). This inherent difficulty likely contributes to the relative scarcity of research demonstrating robust far transfer compared to near transfer studies. Achieving far transfer is complicated

by learners' potential inability to recognize the applicability of learned skills in superficially different contexts (Barnett & Ceci, 2002) and fundamental issues with retrieving relevant knowledge when needed (van Peppen et al., 2021). Furthermore, factors like student motivation, which is tied to grades, may facilitate near transfer within academic settings but may not necessarily translate to the intrinsic motivation required for far transfer (van Peppen et al., 2021). However, Fong et al. (1986) suggest that explicit instruction and guided induction via examples can foster far transfer, although the effect may not be universal.

Temporal factors also influence CT transfer. Extended duration and consistent engagement yield great benefits for the development of CT, which is understood as a non-linear process (Huber & Kuncel, 2016; Lee et al., 2024). Studies demonstrating CT gains over semesters or years support this (Holmes et al., 2015; Ralston & Bays, 2015). While shorter interventions can produce effects, particularly for near transfer (Booth et al., 2015; Tiruneh et al., 2018; van Peppen et al., 2021), applying far transfer requires sustained practice over a considerable period (van Peppen et al., 2021). van Peppen et al. (2021) also argue that delayed post-tests show greater gains in CT performance than immediate ones.

Although transfer effects can be limited (Dumitru, 2013), the development of these skills equips students with capacities for argumentation, decision-making, and navigating the complexities of their personal and academic lives (Davies, 2015; Haber, 2020). Understanding the distinct conditions required for near and far transfer and acknowledging the significant roles of time and practice are essential for instructors to factor in when designing stimulating activities for CT development, even under limited class time.

## **EMERGING THEMES TO CONSIDER**

After the three proposed questions on students' development of CT and learning transfer of CT are addressed, let us return to the bigger scope that this review aims to answer: (1) the crucial elements and sophistication of CT that students develop over the course of a 4-year college education, and (2) the transferability of CT across academic disciplines and other real-world scenarios. To answer these questions, prominent topics drawn from the literature on CT development and learning transfer in CT will be distilled.

## CT Development as a Longitudinal Process

CT can be developed in a short amount of time, such as within a few weeks or even just a single intervention session (Fong et al., 1986; Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015; Tiruneh et al., 2018; van Peppen et al., 2021), as proven by both qualitative and quantitative analysis. However, concluding that CT can be developed through crash courses is an oversimplification. The CT that the authors referred to is mostly about near transfer, or applying CT within the same subject. Secondly, most of the cited studies are conducted in experimental settings, and the content covered in pre-tests and post-tests is similar, which may pose a question of whether students have acquired CT or merely the paradigms deeply rooted in a particular academic field.

Importantly, short-term experiments suggest that CT requires time to mature beyond instruction. van Peppen et al. (2021) suggest that a telltale jump in students' exhibition of CT, as well as their sophistication in thinking, manifested after instruction ended for a few weeks or months. On a positive note, facilitating far transfer does not necessarily mean having extended instructional time (Fong et al., 1986). The key lies in instructional design and consistent practice (Holmes et al., 2015; Ralston & Bays, 2015)—student engagement is central, and time is required to see noticeable gains in students' CT.

## CT Instruction: Finding the Right Balance

Although research supports the infusion model (see the subsection “Teachers, Curriculum, Pedagogy, and (Ultimately) Students” for further information), the key to considering an approach to teaching CT lies in (a) a model's compatibility with the academic subject that one has been teaching and (b) the contexts of a particular classroom setting. Furthermore, CT instruction in classrooms is domain-specific unless one's instructional design is specifically designed for general CT (Tiruneh et al., 2018). Given the diversity of educational contexts, Abrami et al.'s (2015) perspective offers a guiding principle: there is no single best practice.

The central part of students' CT development also includes students' agency and the “take-the-initiative” mindset with tolerance for uncertainty (Aouaf et al., 2023; Hyytinen et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024). Since instruction centered on CT is not equally effective for every student (Slade et al., 2019), opportunities to practice CT in authentic

situations, including those directly and indirectly related to a specific academic field, matter most (Golden, 2023; Holmes et al., 2015).

What is equally important is mentorship and guidance. CT is formed through co-construction, which also supports the argument that the size of CT classes should be manageable for instructors to build bridges for individuals (Golden, 2023; Wong & Kowitlawakul, 2020). Ultimately, CT is meant to allow students to learn beyond digesting knowledge, and a student's action should be reflective of the elements of CT, which is the goal of far transfer and the value of university education (Davies, 2015; Haber, 2020; National Research Council, 2000, Chapter 3).

## Bridging the Gap Between Near and Far Transfer

Effective near transfer is feasible, provided explicit CT integration occurs within subject-specific curricula rather than as isolated instruction (Dumitru, 2013; Haber, 2020; Tiruneh et al., 2018). Instructional strategies supporting near transfer include using worked examples (Booth et al., 2015), structured discussions (Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015), and explicit video instructions combined with practice tasks (van Peppen et al., 2021). Studies across STEM and humanities demonstrate measurable improvements in domain-specific CT abilities following interventions lasting from a few weeks to several years (Holmes et al., 2015; Ralston & Bays, 2015; Tiruneh et al., 2018).

However, the deductive teaching approaches effective for near transfer might not suffice for far transfer (Bensley & Spero, 2014). While retrieving memory and linking previously learned knowledge to new knowledge or examples benefits far transfer (Corral et al., 2023), activating far transfer requires extensive practice, reflective prompting, and hands-on problem-solving to overcome inert knowledge barriers (van Peppen et al., 2021). Game-based training has shown potential to engage learners in decision-making and reduce bias in novel scenarios because it is not only tied to curricular content but also emphasizes hands-on practice; moreover, such training introduces debiasing strategies at an abstract level and provides opportunities for learners to apply those strategies across different types of problems, as evidenced by experimental group's 29% lower likelihood of selecting a suboptimal, hypothesis-confirming solution compared to the control group (Sellier et al., 2019).



Still, near and far transfer can be and should be fostered together. CT, after all, taught as a competence with preconceived notions and dispositions, is similar to any other construct (e.g., self-regulation) that we hope individuals can apply outside classroom settings (Davies, 2015; National Research Council, 2000, Chapter 3). Although studies suggest that promoting near transfer or developing CT specifically for a given domain is more feasible (Tiruneh et al., 2018; Zhou, 2022), CT development should not be limited to domain-specific training. If one's reasoning skills are consolidated through far transfer, an individual will be afforded a critical lens on past and current affairs. An illustration is in Holmes et al.'s (2015) class, where students eventually learned to examine the applicability of theories in experiments.

## DISCUSSION

While this review has identified significant elements contributing to students' development and transfer of CT, several questions and counterarguments warrant further clarification. First, it could be argued that this review implicitly supports the appropriate application of several instructional strategies, such as explicit infusion, authentic contexts, and mentorship, which will reliably yield measurable improvements in students' CT (Abrami et al., 2015; van Peppen et al., 2021; Zhou, 2022). Such an assertion could be criticized for overlooking the complexities inherent in teaching and learning, especially when we factor in the nesting issue and interconnectedness of a classroom environment (Kaplan & Garner, 2020). The reality of classroom instruction often varies across factors such as instructor expertise, student motivation, class size, and cultural context (Lu et al., 2021; Wong & Kowitlawakul, 2020).

Even if an instructor-driven approach works well, its implementation can be time-consuming due to an instructor's trial and error (Golden, 2023). Thus, it remains unresolved how instructors can implement instructional practices flexibly to address potential complexities and constraints (e.g., class time and course objectives). While explicit instruction appears beneficial, the relative merits of relying on structured guidance and prompting independent exploration and critical reflection warrant additional research.

Moreover, the effectiveness of the instructional methods discussed throughout the review has been mostly measured through standardized assessments

for CT. Critics may argue that standardized tests capture only a subset of CT skills, focusing predominantly on domain-specific knowledge and limited problem-solving abilities, thereby neglecting broader dispositional and reflective aspects critical to CT (Davies, 2015; Tiruneh et al., 2018; Zhou, 2022).

Another unresolved issue pertains to the transferability of CT across contexts. Although near transfer within disciplinary boundaries is well-supported, the conditions facilitating far transfer remain to be clarified. van Peppen et al. (2021) indicate that robust instructional approaches yielding near transfer fail to guarantee that students can apply their CT to significantly different or novel situations. Tiruneh et al.'s (2018) and Fong et al.'s (1986) studies both highlight that while far transfer is possible, no evidence of improvement on exercising CT across situations (especially in life situations where contexts are starkly different from the instruction) exists. Namely, "near-far" transfer is feasible, but a real far transfer is not.

A final important consideration is the developmental aspect of CT, which is insufficiently addressed in the reviewed studies. Despite evidence indicating measurable gains from short-term interventions (Fong et al., 1986; van Peppen et al., 2021), the longitudinal trajectory of CT development over a typical four-year college education remains opaque. Although there have been studies tracking students' development of CT throughout their four-year college enrollment, the studies either operate on a limited view of CT (Ralston & Bays, 2015) or inconsistent definitions of CT given its nature of meta-analysis (Huber & Kuncel, 2016).

## Implications for Theory Development

Although there is an abundance of theories regarding learning transfer and established approaches to teaching CT, a targeted theory could elucidate how learners transfer CT skills from classroom settings to other disciplines and daily life. Such a theory could further illuminate the mechanisms underlying near and far transfer, as well as other forms of transfer beyond this traditional dichotomy. Although this review identifies instructional practices in CT that may facilitate learning transfer, the findings may be superficial due to the diverse contexts examined, including variations in class sizes and countries. Moreover, significant effort is required to formulate a theory that addresses the longitudinal development

of CT, as the review indicates that both long-term and short-term interventions can promote far transfer, though their effectiveness warrants further investigation.

Theories of transfer of learning are well established in other areas, such as education in general skills and academic subjects (Barnett & Ceci, 2002) and composition studies (DePalma & Ringer, 2011). These theories denote when and how different types of transfer may occur, facilitating research into optimal learning contexts. They also offer guidance for educators. Nevertheless, the absence of a dedicated theory for CT transfer—especially for far transfer—represents a gap for future investigation.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Further studies on facilitating far transfer should be conducted, given that results from numerous designed experiments are inconsistent. Researchers may disentangle complexities by adopting various research designs and employing comprehensive approaches (e.g., state-space grids, as seen in Hollenstein, 2013) to capture the multifaceted nature of undergraduates' CT development throughout their college attendance.

A nuanced understanding of how sustained engagement with CT instruction contributes to students' long-term cognitive growth and intellectual maturity is also lacking. An approach to address this gap in literature is to undertake a small-scale study involving a small cohort (e.g., an honors college in the US) to assess individuals' advancement in CT development through their engagement with curricula, encompassing courses and activities. Students in an honors college typically involve themselves in common activities that boost their CT, such as research experiences, and they share homogeneous traits (e.g., being self-motivated). This approach will ensure tracking of students' progress, allow researchers to adhere to the same framework of CT throughout four years, and limit the confounds in research—ideal for a pilot study.

### **Implications for Instructional Practices**

Given that a student's CT development unfolds at various temporal scales and that students' CT can have significant improvement (Huber & Kuncel, 2016) over the four years, with consideration of feasibility, institutions can mandate CT as an embedded component in select undergraduate classes as a pilot test and gradually expand

CT embedment to other professional courses. Additionally, given the low feasibility of far-far transfer (i.e., transfer across conceptually and disciplinarily distant contexts; Fong et al., 1986; Tiruneh et al., 2018), achieving Halpern & Butler's (2019) vision of CT as a central component of learners' lives requires broad implementation across the curriculum.

Meanwhile, instructors should receive training on CT instruction, both from a domain-specific perspective and a general perspective. Some pedagogies can also be introduced to instructors, such as problem-based learning (PBL), which actively engages students in probing into knowledge and untangling the complexity of problems while fostering students' agency (Yew & Goh, 2016). The benefit of this approach is that instructors can create courses that blend CT to meet their needs without the constraints of an all-purpose model. In addition to being introduced to this pedagogy, instructors ought to perform a teaching demonstration and design a mini syllabus, while receiving assessment from both content and educational experts to identify appropriate methods for incorporating CT into courses.

Although transforming our professional courses to incorporate CT development can benefit undergraduates, a single, uniform solution may not suffice for students' CT development. For instance, Loes and Pascarella (2017) concluded that collaborative learning is effective, but it is significantly effective only for White students who scored below 26 on the ACT for college admission. Colleges may consider policies and extracurricular activities that build students' CT as a component that may be more effective at facilitating the far transfer of CT.

### **Implications for Future Institutional Practices and Policies**

CT involves one's attitudes, actions, and dispositions. Experimenting with how CT can be best taught remains a prominent area for further work (Davies, 2015). While individual instructors play a vital role, sustainable CT development requires institutional support. To this end, colleges should leverage High Impact Practices (HIPs)—defined by Kuh (2008) as active learning practices that promote deep engagement, such as service learning, internships, and capstone projects. In addressing curriculum and instruction, this article focuses on both the class level and the institutional level, drawing on exemplary examples across institutions.







A launchpad can be Gen Ed (General Education) 3.0 by Hanstedt (2023), which can be considered learning beyond rote memorization and developing the dispositions conducive to CT development through a series of challenging activities in general education. In such a context, general education happens within and beyond the classroom, facilitated by HIPs (Hanstedt, 2023). HIPs center on the *whats* and *whys* of learning, emphasizing frequent interactions, high expectations, and applications to real-world problems. These practices are distinct from standard coursework because they demand sustained effort and interaction over time.

In the interest of practicality and broad applicability of this article, HIPs within classes should be considered, given that the classrooms are the most common places where students engage in educational experiences. At Sam Houston State University, an emphasis on CT was introduced in a restructured general education course (Rowe et al., 2015). There, students were exposed to texts that scaffolded their ability to evaluate arguments and build a schema of reasoning, bolstered by active learning activities and topics that helped them overcome their limitations in using heuristics. Students in this course had a 28% increase on their Critical Thinking Assessment Test (CAT) within a semester, compared to most college students, who had a 26% increase over four years in undergraduate programs.

Zooming out, we may consider how institutions orchestrate policies conducive to students' CT. At Wagner College in New York City, learning activities and communities go beyond taking courses across multiple disciplines; students are also required to complete a capstone project and engage in service learning (Hanstedt, 2023).

Another exemplary model is implemented at NUS College, National University of Singapore. There, students are required to take courses and team projects around the four pillars: Critical Competencies, Global Orientation, Making Connections, and Impact Experience. They cover the skills that students need (e.g., reasoning and argumentation), offer interdisciplinary and discipline-specific challenges inside and outside classrooms, and enable them to reflect on their perspectives, which ultimately translates into their developed propensities into action through Impact Experience. On top of the curriculum, students are required to complete a practicum in which they

expand their perspectives or wield their impact to fulfill requirements for Global Pathways. Students are also entitled to a support system, such as Life Mentoring, which guides students on their life trajectories and possibilities to stimulate a student's growth beyond the curriculum (National University of Singapore, n.d.). Despite the many options being offered to instructors and administrators, the main ingredient, deliberately designed project-based learning, which empowers students to build connections and leverage their agency, remains consistent across the cases discussed.

## APPENDIX - Summary of Research Studies Included in the Review

| Authors                | Study design                                   | Data sources                     | Foci of paper                                          | Age group                                       | Discipline                   | Country       |
|------------------------|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------|
| Aouaf et al. (2022)    | Qualitative; non-experimental; classroom       | Open-ended questionnaires        | Barriers to students' CT in EFL settings               | Undergraduate students                          | Language education           | Morocco       |
| As'ari et al. (2017)   | Qualitative case study                         | Interviews, tasks, reflections   | CT dispositions in prospective math teachers           | Preservice teachers                             | STEM                         | Indonesia     |
| Bensley & Spero (2014) | Quantitative quasi-experimental; Classroom     | CT tests, meta-cognitive tasks   | Effects of direct CT instruction                       | Undergraduate students                          | Social sciences & humanities | United States |
| Booth et al. (2015)    | Quantitative quasi-experimental; middle school | Algebra assignments and tests    | Worked examples in algebra learning                    | Secondary students                              | STEM                         | United States |
| Corral et al. (2023)   | Quantitative experiments; lab                  | Analogical problem-solving tasks | Retrieval practice vs. restudy in analogical reasoning | Undergraduate students                          | Social sciences & humanities | United States |
| Fong et al. (1986)     | Quantitative experiments; lab                  | Statistical reasoning tasks      | Impact of statistical training on everyday reasoning   | High school students and postsecondary students | Social sciences & humanities | United States |

*The summary table includes the studies analyzed in the two sections of this review article: "Development of Students' CT" and "Transfer of Students' CT."*

## APPENDIX - Summary of Research Studies Included in the Review

| Authors                | Study design                                                          | Data sources                                        | Foci of paper                                                              | Age group                      | Discipline                   | Country               |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Golden (2023)          | Qualitative self-study; classroom                                     | Instructor journals, artifacts                      | Designing planning tools to support CT                                     | Undergraduate students         | Social sciences & humanities | Ireland               |
| Holmes et al. (2015)   | Quantitative quasi-experimental; lab course                           | Physics lab reports                                 | Data-based reasoning in physics labs                                       | Undergraduate students         | STEM                         | United States         |
| Hyytinen et al. (2024) | Quantitative cross-sectional                                          | CT tests, self-regulation scales                    | Role of self-regulation and effort in CT performance                       | Undergraduate students         | General CT                   | Finland               |
| Janssen et al. (2019)  | Quantitative cross-sectional correlational; higher-ed faculty context | Cognitive Reflection Test; surveys; background data | Teacher characteristics linked to CT performance and CT-teaching attitudes | University faculty/instructors | Social sciences & humanities | Netherlands           |
| Lee et al. (2024)      | Qualitative case study                                                | Interviews                                          | Students' views on CT development                                          | Undergraduate students         | General CT                   | Singapore             |
| Lu et al. (2021)       | Quantitative cross-sectional                                          | Surveys                                             | Cultural differences in CT style                                           | Undergraduate students         | Agriculture                  | United States & China |

*The summary table includes the studies analyzed in the two sections of this review article: "Development of Students' CT" and "Transfer of Students' CT."*

## APPENDIX - Summary of Research Studies Included in the Review

| Authors                    | Study design                                        | Data sources                    | Foci of paper                                      | Age group              | Discipline                   | Country       |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|---------------|
| Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi (2015) | Qualitative; classroom                              | Writing tasks, observation      | CT development through writing in EFL              | Undergraduate students | Language education           | Oman          |
| Ralston & Bays (2015)      | Quantitative; longitudinal; engineering program     | CT rubric scores across 4 years | CT development across curriculum                   | Undergraduate students | STEM                         | United States |
| Slade et al. (2019)        | Qualitative; practicum                              | Written reflections             | Reflective practice in teacher education           | Preservice teachers    | Social sciences & humanities | United States |
| Tiruneh et al. (2018)      | Quantitative quasi-experimental; science classes    | CT tests                        | Immersion vs infusion CT instruction               | Undergraduate students | STEM                         | Ethiopia      |
| van Peppen et al. (2018)   | Quantitative experiment                             | CT tests                        | Prompting self-explanations for unbiased reasoning | Undergraduate students | General CT                   | Netherlands   |
| van Peppen et al. (2021)   | Quantitative experiment; repeated delayed posttests | CT learning and transfer tasks  | Contrasting examples and transfer                  | Undergraduate students | General CT                   | Netherlands   |

The summary table includes the studies analyzed in the two sections of this review article: "Development of Students' CT" and "Transfer of Students' CT."



## APPENDIX - Summary of Research Studies Included in the Review

| Authors                    | Study design                                    | Data sources               | Foci of paper                                                | Age group              | Discipline      | Country     |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| van Peppen et al. (2022)   | Quantitative experiments; lab + classroom       | CT transfer tasks          | Exploring why CT transfer fails                              | Undergraduate students | General CT      | Netherlands |
| Wong & Kowitlawakul (2020) | Qualitative interviews; natural nursing program | Semi-structured interviews | Nursing students' experiences with CT and clinical reasoning | Undergraduate students | Health sciences | Singapore   |

*The summary table includes the studies analyzed in the two sections of this review article: "Development of Students' CT" and "Transfer of Students' CT."*

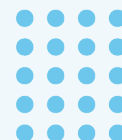


## CONCLUSION

The review concludes that CT development is a non-linear process, far from a steady growth of this competency throughout the four years of college. While studies have provided guidelines for designing impactful instruction to support CT development, these guidelines do not apply to every educational setting. Furthermore, the absence of a theory on the learning transfer of CT, complicated by temporal factors, signifies a need for empirical research on theories and teaching practices of CT.

While CT education has been implemented for decades, around 20% of graduates leave their institutions with limited critical thinking capacity (OECD, 2022). This is compounded by employers' dissatisfaction with the preparedness of these graduates' competencies. Most students showed improvements in CT as indicated by the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA+) test results, highlighting a mismatch between their qualifications and workplace expectations (OECD, 2022).

Critical thinking should be framed as a survival competency that students can demonstrate in real-world contexts. While theories and instructional models of CT development continue to evolve, classroom-based evidence from the humanities (e.g., Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015) to STEM (e.g., Ralston & Bays, 2015) indicates that effective CT development is attainable. Ultimately, CT is most likely to extend beyond the classroom when students perceive themselves as capable agents whose reasoning can shape decisions and actions in authentic settings (Davies, 2015).



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# FROM CLASSROOM TO COMMUNITY SPACES: The Intersection of Peace, Democracy Education, and Public Dialogue in Norway

## Abstract

**Background:** Democratic education in Norway emphasizes values like tolerance, cross-cultural understanding, and collective responsibility, yet significant gaps exist in understanding how these principles transfer from K-12 schooling to community dialogue spaces addressing societal challenges like racism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia. Despite Norway's commitment to democratic education, rising social tensions suggest that formal education alone may be insufficient for developing authentic democratic engagement.

**Purpose:** This pilot study investigates how public dialogue facilitators in Norway observe community members utilizing their previous knowledge of democratic principles in facilitated dialogue sessions.

**Methodology/Approach:** Using an interpretive qualitative design grounded in Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 2011) theory, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two experienced public dialogue facilitators in southern Norway. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach, focusing on how dialogue participants move from peripheral to full democratic participation.

**Findings/Conclusions:** Facilitators observed that dialogue participants initially approached dialogue through institutionalized debate practices learned in formal education, characterized by competitive argumentation and reliance on external authority. Through sustained engagement, dialogue participants transformed toward more authentic democratic approaches marked by personal responsibility, collective accountability, and genuine listening, with facilitators identifying specific "turning points" in this transformative process.

**Implications:** These findings illuminate how democratic learning extends beyond formal education into community spaces where previously learned principles are reconstructed through dialogical practice. This pilot study contributes to peace education literature and suggests that facilitated dialogue serves as a bridge between institutional and experiential democratic learning, offering insights for educator development and democratic curriculum design.

## Keywords

Democratic Education, Public Dialogue, Peace Education, Communities of Practice, Norway

Democratic education and peace education are interconnected practices that promote values, knowledge, and skills essential for understanding and advocating for human rights and freedoms through pedagogy. Democratic education emphasizes principles like tolerance, participation, and collective responsibility, while peace education focuses on creating environments where individuals are empowered to encourage harmonious relationships and mitigate physical and structural violence (Bajaj & Hantzopoulos, 2016; Dewey, 2001).

The approach to democratic education covered in this study differs from models that emphasize national identity formation, instead recognizing that authentic democratic engagement requires

navigating differences within communities. In increasingly diverse societies experiencing demographic changes driven by global migration, meaningful democratic participation must account for varied cultural perspectives, lived experiences, and ways of knowing, moving beyond assimilationist approaches toward practices that value and integrate community diversity.

Together, principles that support peace and democracy prepare citizens to engage in meaningful democratic interactions in diverse communities. Facilitated dialogue has been utilized to create spaces where individuals from diverse backgrounds, including those whose voices are often silenced, can freely communicate their experiences, and it

can be one very effective way to educate *about, for,* and *through* peace, social justice, democracy, and human rights (Bajaj, 2017).

As educational researchers and practitioners increasingly recognize the urgent need for more equitable and socially just educational practices, understanding how democratic values learned in formal educational settings translate to community engagement becomes increasingly important. This study explores the intersection of formal education and community practice investigating how public dialogue participants in Norway confront challenging societal issues that threaten democratic cohesion within communities through their participation in facilitated dialogue.

A growing body of research supports facilitated dialogue as a tool to create cross-cultural understanding and empathy between groups (Zúñiga et al., 2014). Despite extensive studies on dialogue as a conflict prevention and resolution tool in the U.S. context (Gurin et al., 2013; Nagda et al., 2018; Zúñiga et al., 2014), research examining these practices in the Nordic countries, particularly Norway, remains limited. This research addresses this gap by investigating how public dialogue facilitators in Norway observe participants translating democratic principles they have learned in classrooms into broader community spaces.

## BACKGROUND

Norway is well-known for its peace-building efforts and history of prioritizing democratic values (Pisarska, 2016). Norwegian society places significant importance on teaching democratic values throughout formal education to promote peace, human rights, and social justice (Skåland, 2010; Stray, 2013), and intentionally implements methodologies that foster cross-cultural understanding across educational environments (Biseth et al., 2021; Nustad et al., 2020). One of the primary objectives of these initiatives is to promote a more inclusive and democratic society, encouraging individuals to prioritize the needs of the community alongside their personal interests. The core curriculum is built on these values, which include maintaining human dignity, fostering identity and cultural diversity, respecting nature and environmental awareness, and actively participating in Norway's democracy (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2020).

In formal educational contexts, authentic democratic participation may manifest in several ways. Intentionally including student voices in curriculum decisions or collaborative problem-solving around real community issues is one way, however, some studies have shown that institutional constraints often impede these practices (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003). In Norwegian classrooms specifically, structured dialogue about immigration policies in which students share personal or family experiences alongside policy analysis (Solbue et al., 2017), student governance councils with genuine decision-making authority (Jones & Dehlin, 2025), or collaborative projects addressing local community tensions can encourage students to consider multiple perspectives rather than simply debating predetermined positions (Kjellander et al., 2023). In community settings, meaningful democratic engagement includes facilitated dialogues addressing local tensions, participatory decision-making processes around shared concerns, or civic organizing efforts (Krick, 2025). These practices also face barriers that include time constraints, power imbalances, and limited spaces for genuine cross-cultural exchange.

Moreover, informal educational opportunities are conducted through non-governmental organizations responsible for organizing programs to promote peace, tolerance, and cultural awareness within communities. These programs come in many forms and are implemented in various environments, including public spaces where community members participate as a way to confront complex issues with the assistance of trained dialogue facilitators. These facilitated public dialogue sessions focus specifically on structured community conversation around challenging topics and create spaces where individuals can share their experiences and perspectives, which is essential for building trust and reducing prejudices - core components of social justice work (Zúñiga et al., 2014). Although there is limited research on how facilitated dialogue is implemented in Norway, even fewer studies explore how the emphasis on democratic values in formal education influences these community environments, representing a significant gap in our understanding of how these educational practices translate to community-based social justice efforts.





## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Research indicates that individuals who have participated in an education where democratic values and engagement with difference are prioritized are more likely to advocate for inclusive and tolerant societies, drawing on those democratic values to interpret and discuss issues like racism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia (Eidsvåg et al., 2004). However, this relationship is neither automatic nor straightforward. Studies show that formal civic education often fails to translate into active democratic participation (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003; Levinson, 2012).

While Norwegian students demonstrate strong civic knowledge in international assessments, research indicates that civic knowledge levels do not consistently predict future political participation (Biseth et al., 2021). Further, how that knowledge translates to authentic community engagement is unclear and faces similar challenges to those documented in other democratic societies (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003; Levinson, 2012). It can be argued, however, that this focus on democratic education has led to more nuanced and empathetic public conversations, as citizens apply critical thinking and principles learned in school to these complex societal issues, positively impacting Norwegian society (Dessingué & Wagner, 2024). Despite these positive outcomes from civic education throughout formal schooling in Norway, there are criticisms regarding its effectiveness and reach. Scholars have noted gaps in how democratic values are internalized and acted upon in broader societal contexts (Broderstad & Josefsen, 2023; Haraldstad et al., 2022; Tow, 2024). The persistence of racism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia in Norway indicates that formal education alone is insufficient, necessitating further research into how individuals bring their experiences with democratic educational initiatives into their communities, where societal attitudes, media representations, and political discourse also play a role (Mårtensson, 2014; Osler & Lybaek, 2014; Thomas & Abdul-Razak, 2019).

Norway's educational system is relevant for its commitment to democratic values within a context of increasing diversity and social tension. Unlike educational systems that treat democratic education as supplementary, Norway's core curriculum mandates democratic participation as fundamental (Norwegian Ministry of Education and

Research, 2020). This provides a unique context for examining how formal democratic education experiences influence community-based dialogue practices, particularly as Norwegian society struggles with the same challenges facing many democratic societies: translating educational ideals into authentic community engagement.

## PURPOSE

This study explores how individuals bring their previous understanding of democratic values to public dialogue experiences in Norway addressing racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, as well as other community concerns. Rather than dismissing formal education as simply inadequate, this study examines how education experiences function as a starting point that must be transformed through community practice. By investigating how facilitators observe participants drawing on and reconstructing their previous knowledge of democratic principles, this research bridges institutional learning and authentic democratic engagement, revealing both the limitations of formal approaches and pathways toward transformation.

The research question is as follows:

*In what ways do public dialogue facilitators in Norway see community members utilizing their previous knowledge of democratic principles in public dialogue sessions?*

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Communities of Practice: Theoretical Foundations

This study employs Communities of Practice (CoP) theory, a social learning framework examining how learning occurs through participation in shared practices within specific communities (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). CoP theory emerged from situated learning research, proposing that learning is fundamentally a social process occurring through participation in communities organized around these shared practices (Lave & Wenger, 2011). Communities of Practice can be characterized by three elements: a shared domain of interest, a community of people who interact regularly around this domain, and a shared practice that members develop through sustained interaction (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Central to CoP theory is the concept of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP), where newcomers to a practice gradually develop expertise through sustained engagement with more experienced



practitioners (Lave & Wenger, 2011). This involves movement from peripheral participation toward fuller participation as newcomers develop competence and assume greater responsibility. Learning occurs not through explicit instruction but through ongoing participation in the community's practices, developing what Wenger and Wenger-Trayner (2015) describe as a "shared repertoire of resources, experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems" (p. 2).

CoP theory has been applied to examine teacher professional development (Buysse et al., 2003), student learning in collaborative environments (Jonassen & Land, 2000), informal learning spaces and identity development (Pahl & Allan, 2011), and how civic education translates to community engagement (Kahne & Sporte, 2008). However, limited research has specifically examined how formal democratic education experiences—as forms of legitimate peripheral participation—transform through community-based dialogue practice.

### **Communities of Practice in This Study**

The application of CoP theory to democratic education contexts offers new insights into how learning and practice intersect in community-based social justice work. Participants' K-12 experiences represent initial legitimate peripheral participation in democratic practice, where students learn "fundamental democratic values, such as mutual respect, tolerance, individual freedom of faith and speech, and free elections" (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2020, p. 10).

Public dialogue sessions function as distinct communities of practice where new democratic norms and expectations develop through collective engagement. Facilitators serve as more experienced practitioners who guide participants toward fuller participation in democratic practice, supporting a transformation of their previously learned knowledge into new forms of democratic engagement. Dialogue sessions typically last 2-3 hours and can accommodate 100 or more participants, although many typically include a group of 15-30. Regardless of the size, the same format is generally followed.

Sessions are structured around specific topics such as "Discrimination of migrants in our community" or another topic of the community's choosing, and they follow a carefully crafted process that begins with a shared set of "ground rules" established by the group

for interactions, then moves through an open forum for sharing where participants articulate experiences from their own perspectives, and a specific style of follow-up questioning from facilitators that guide participants through personal reflection to "turning points" in their thinking. The facilitators create what they describe as "brave spaces" through these practices where participants can share personal experiences related to the topic while engaging with others whose perspectives may differ—sometimes significantly. The transformation process observed by facilitators represents the movement from legitimate peripheral participation to fuller participation with this new community of democratic practice.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Historically, democracy in Norway has been emphasized through *Bildung*, a holistic approach to democratic development emphasizing personal responsibility toward community alongside individual growth (Nordic Bildung, 2022). Educational institutions in Norway bear tremendous responsibility for teaching democratic values with schools considered vital in establishing these values among citizens (Biseth et al., 2021; Dalehefte et al., 2022; Strand, 2016). Yet, critics argue that contemporary implementation has become increasingly procedural rather than transformative (Stray, 2013). Students are given opportunities to engage in democratic participation in formal and informal spaces, yet those experiences often center around rhetoric and debate (Haraldstad et al., 2022). Further, an increased emphasis on individual student achievement contributes to neoliberal reforms that contradict democratic ideology emphasizing collective values (Lovlie & Standish, 2002; Lowe, 2007; Stray, 2013).

Current scholarship indicates that Norwegian educational policy is shifting away from a long-held commitment to collective values and toward individual development, the "cultivation of human capital" (Stray, 2013, p. 171), and a focus on scientific competency measurement in mathematics, reading, and natural sciences. These neoliberal policy reforms emphasize market-driven efficiency, standardized assessment, and individual competition over collaborative problem-solving and community engagement (Ball, 2012). School performance quality is increasingly measured through standardized testing results and international comparisons (such as PISA rankings),





with policymakers and educational administrators using these metrics to prioritize reforms rather than democratic competencies (Stray, 2013).

While these policies have shifted, other changes have also occurred in Norway. Those changes include increasing economic, political, and social inequalities, growing marginalization of certain groups (Strand, 2016), concerns about xenophobia and racism (Osler & Lybaek, 2014; Strand, 2016), and rising threats of extremism and anti-democratic movements (Osler & Lybaek, 2014).

Defining what constitutes “democratic” education proves challenging, as competing ideas exist. Dewey (2001) defines it as “a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (p. 91)—a social phenomenon created through shared values and collective participation. This contrasts with procedural approaches that reduce democracy to voting mechanisms or debate competitions without attending to the relational and communal dimensions Dewey emphasizes. Norwegian democratic education has historically aligned with Dewey’s relational vision, emphasizing collective responsibility and community participation, though more recent forms threaten this normative definition.

There are theories proposed in the literature specific to democracy that are worth exploring in the context of this study. In addition to Dewey’s (2001) seminal work, the ideas proposed by Iris Marion Young (1996) elucidate how democracy may be viewed in the context of community-based public dialogue in Norway. Young proposes a revised approach to traditionally referenced deliberative democracy theories, which she calls *communicative democracy*. Where deliberative theories advance the idea that democratic discussion aims to reach a shared understanding or obtain a common goal (Habermas, 1985), Young challenges this as a failure to consider cultural differences and varying social perspectives as resources critical to any political or social discussion (Young, 1996). There is an assumption in deliberative theory that democracy requires “an equal voice for all citizens to press their claims, regardless of social position or power” (p. 122) and that these differentials can be separated from democratic discourse. Young (1996) argues that social power preventing equal participation derives not only from economic and political domination but from “an internalized sense of the right one has to speak or not to speak” (p. 122) and

cultural devaluation of different speech styles.

Young’s (1996) critique is particularly relevant for understanding how democratic education in Norway may perpetuate certain forms of discourse while marginalizing others, making her framework important for examining how dialogue practices move beyond superficial conversation to create more inclusive spaces. And Dewey (2001) asks, “Is it possible for an educational system to be conducted by a national state and yet the full social ends of the educative process not be restricted, constrained, and corrupted?” (p. 102). This question becomes relevant when examining how formal democratic education translates to community-based dialogue practices aimed at addressing social inequalities. Combined, these ideas create a foundation for thinking about how formally educating for democratic values would translate into broader community interactions—especially when they are thoughtfully designed to induce critical thinking as they are in facilitated dialogue sessions.

## METHODOLOGY

### Positionality

My positioning as a researcher exploring Norwegian democratic education and public dialogue emerges from personal transformation and sustained scholarly engagement with these practices as an American citizen and student. Growing up in a predominantly White, middle-class rural town, I was sheltered from discussions on race, class, and equity. During my first year as a Ph.D. student, I experienced a paradigm shift in my thinking, realizing that consciousness-raising (Freire, 2000) could occur in others within a thoughtful environment where exploration of intersecting identities was encouraged, leading to improved cross-cultural understanding and moving us closer to peace. This understanding of critical consciousness through dialogue fundamentally shaped my interest in how educational experiences translate to community-based democratic engagement.

As I developed a deeper understanding of the U.S. education system during my doctoral studies, it became apparent that students are affected by striking inequities in resources, systemic and institutional racism, classism, and other deeply rooted issues that impact the quality of education they receive. This awareness fundamentally shifted my understanding of education’s role in either perpetuating or dismantling systems of oppression, creating the foundation for my interest in examining similar tensions in other national contexts.

As a White American researcher investigating predominantly White Norwegian contexts, I bring both advantages and limitations to this work. My outsider status allows me to identify patterns that might be taken for granted within Norwegian contexts, yet I remain mindful of risks of misinterpreting cultural nuances or imposing external frameworks on Norwegian practices. Shared racial positioning can be both an advantage and a hinderance, and I have attempted to address this by focusing on facilitators' observations about diverse participants rather than making claims about participants' own experiences.

### Research Design

A pilot study was chosen for this research to inform future inquiry into facilitated dialogue in the Nordic region. Pilot studies provide an opportunity to gain insight into a phenomenon without the time and expense of a full-scale study (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). There are several topics that have emerged, inspiring refinement of the interview protocol which will sharpen future investigation.

This study employs an interpretive qualitative design, which seeks to understand how individuals make meaning of their experiences within specific cultural and social contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Interpretive qualitative research is particularly appropriate for this pilot study because it allows for deep exploration of facilitators' perspectives on complex social processes—specifically, how they observe and interpret participants' use of democratic knowledge in dialogue settings. Unlike positivist approaches that seek to generalize, interpretive qualitative research emphasizes understanding phenomena within their specific context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), making it well-suited for examining the nuanced process of democratic learning and transformation in Norwegian dialogue spaces.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to explore facilitators' observations while maintaining flexibility to pursue unexpected insights (Billups, 2021; Seidman, 2019). Sample questions include: "Does participating in these dialogues deepen individuals' understanding of democratic values?" and "How do you distinguish between a 'safe' and 'brave' space. The semi-structured format supported follow-up questions to make sure that key topics were addressed. This methodological choice reflects my commitment to center facilitator's voices and experiences, recognizing

that those engaged in frontline social justice work often possess insights that can inform both theory and practice in meaningful ways.

### Participants

This study investigates the manifestation of democratic values in public dialogue sessions through the perspectives of two public dialogue facilitators in southern Norway. Anna and Iris have been working in public dialogue facilitation for a combined 20 years. Their commitment to continuous learning and reflection—both through ongoing professional development and collaborative practice—demonstrates their alignment with Communities of Practice principles that recognize learning as mutual and ongoing within communities (Adams & Bell, 2016; Lave & Wenger, 2011). Interview participants were selected using purposeful sampling (Seidman, 2019). This method of sampling does not require randomization or a large population, and it is also less likely to generate generalizable results (Seidman, 2019). While the findings are context-bound to southern Norway, the goal is in-depth understanding rather than generalizability, providing opportunities for future research (Seidman, 2019). Access to facilitators was available through my existing relationship with the Norge Center where this community dialogue program is centralized. I initiated an inquiry via email to gauge interest in participating in the study. The facilitators shared my concern for the lack of research supporting their work and were eager to participate.

The decision to interview facilitators rather than dialogue participants was based on several methodological and theoretical considerations. First, facilitators occupy a unique observational position, witnessing multiple dialogue sessions with diverse participants over extended periods. This longitudinal perspective allows them to identify patterns in how participants utilize democratic knowledge that might not be apparent to participants themselves, or observable in a single session.

Second, facilitators serve as what CoP theory describes as "more experienced practitioners" who guide newcomers' development within the community's practices (Lave & Wenger, 2011). Their role requires them to actively observe and respond to participants' democratic engagement approaches, making them particularly attuned to the transformation process this study investigates.







Third, practical considerations influenced this choice. Dialogue participants often attend single sessions and can be difficult to contact for follow-up research, while facilitators are generally available and have developed sophisticated reflective practices around their observations. Additionally, focusing on facilitator perspectives in this pilot study allows for future research expansion to include participant voices with better understanding of patterns initially identified through facilitator observations.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, scheduled to last 45-60 minutes each, and transcribed using Zoom's recording feature. Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide to performing theoretical thematic analysis was engaged to analyze the interview data. Defined by Braun & Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). Initial patterns were identified focusing on the specific research question and theoretical framework. The thematic analysis was conducted at the latent level, examining the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations—and ideologies—that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). NVivo software assisted with analyzing and coding the transcripts. The initial coding resulted in dozens of codes, reduced to six categories and three themes. This article focuses on one theme directly addressing the research question.

### **Study Limitations and Ethical Considerations**

This pilot study has several important limitations that affect the scope and transferability of findings. First, the small sample size of two facilitators from one organization limits the breadth of perspectives represented. While these facilitators have extensive experience, their observations may reflect the specific approaches and participant populations of their organizations rather than broader patterns in Norwegian dialogue facilitation. Second, focusing on facilitator perspectives rather than participant voices only provides one viewpoint of the phenomena being explored. Participants themselves may describe their experiences differently or identify aspects of the transformation that facilitators miss. Third, as a pilot study, this research provides preliminary insights rather than a comprehensive understanding of how democratic education translates into community practice. The findings point toward patterns that prompt further

research but should not be considered conclusive in any way. As an American researcher studying Norwegian dialogue practices, cultural nuance may be missed or misinterpreted.

Informed consent was obtained emphasizing participants' right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Data was anonymized to protect interview participants' identities, and sensitive information was securely stored and accessed only by the researcher.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Finding 1: Institutionalized Democratic Practice**

Norwegian dialogue facilitators observe a distinct tension between participants' previously learned democratic practices and the alternative forms of engagement required in dialogue spaces. This tension manifests in how participants initially approach democratic discourse through debate-style interactions. Across interviews, facilitators consistently identified debate culture as a barrier to authentic dialogue that aims to improve cross-cultural understanding and reduce prejudice. Specifically, Anna and Iris noted that participants often enter dialogue sessions with argumentative techniques that have likely been learned through formal education, prepared to defend positions rather than listen and engage in genuine exchange:

*Anna directly challenged the value of debate practices:*

*But what comes out of a debate? Nothing, actually nothing. Nobody learns anything. No, you just arguing against each other, and then those who have the best facts, or who are best in rhetoric. They win in the debate.*

Facilitators work to redirect participants from debate toward active listening, self-reflection, and mutual support—approaches they view as necessary for authentic dialogue.

These barriers extend beyond those evidenced through individual behavior to reflect broader societal influences. Facilitators noted that participants often rely on external authority—whether through expert opinions or institutional knowledge—rather than engaging with their personal experiences and perspectives. As Anna explains:

*We live in a world of experts. We believe so much in experts. What you do in this method is to believe in people regardless of whom they are...it doesn't matter what an expert said. It*



*matters what you think it is, or what you think. It's what you can say or not say, and what you can stand for or not stand for.*

Anna explained that the dialogue method shifts focus away from expert knowledge to participants' own perspectives and experiences.

Both facilitators expressed concern about Norwegian society's reliance on debate skills to demonstrate democratic participation. They described seeking dialogue approaches that prioritize personal experience, authentic voice, and collective responsibility over competitive argumentation.

### **Finding 2: The Process of Transformation**

Facilitators observed participants developing new approaches to democratic engagement through two key shifts: taking personal responsibility for their statements and recognizing collective responsibility.

*This transformation is demonstrated here as Anna observes:*

*People need to take responsibility because you, you can say what you want absolutely in the public dialogue... but then there are questions. You have to explain more, you have to reflect on what you're actually saying.*

This emphasis on explanation and reflection marks a shift from debate-style assertions to dialogic engagement. Facilitators observed participants shifting from individual performance to mutual accountability—a change they viewed as essential to authentic dialogue. As Anna again explains:

*So if I say something hateful to you, there's a group around there listening... then they also sit with responsibility... the group can then say, 'Yeah, but you can't say this.'*

Both facilitators communicate their observation of a degrading of the collective sense of responsibility in Norwegian society, which they believe manifests through a growing sense of individualism. Iris mentions it here when she says:

*Often there's a situation or a topic that the community wants or needs to talk about. It's quite common there's always someone else that should be handling this situation or that is in the wrong, instead of kind of taking accountability or seeing yourself not just as a participant of the dialogue, but a participant of your community and your so yeah, kind of shifting away responsibilities.*

Through sustained engagement, facilitators observe participants developing new democratic competencies marked by personal responsibility, collective accountability, and authentic listening. They described these moments as “turning points” when participants shifted from competitive argumentation toward dialogic engagement.

## **DISCUSSION**

This discussion examines three key dimensions of this transformation: first, how the tension between institutionalized and dialogic democratic practices reflects different levels of participation in democratic engagement; second, how dialogue spaces function as distinct communities of practice with their own democratic norms and expectations; and finally, how the shift from debate to dialogue represents a necessary reconceptualization of how democratic values are enacted in Norwegian society with important implications for educational practice. The transformation observed by facilitators confirms scholarly critiques about the limitations of formal democratic education (Apple & Bean, 2007; Biesta, 2007) while illuminating potential pathways for bridging this gap through dialogical practices.

### **Tension Between Institutionalized and Dialogic Practices**

The facilitators' observations elucidate how formal democratic education creates legitimate peripheral participation that must be transformed for authentic community dialogue. As Anna noted, “In Norwegian school, it's debate that is in,”—educational institutions position debate as a primary form of democratic engagement. This serves as an entry point, providing basic tools, yet the debate skills, expert reliance, and competitive argumentation that facilitators observed represent peripheral rather than full participation in the kind of cross-cultural dialogue necessary for addressing social inequality. While these practices serve as legitimate points of entry to democratic discourse, they constrain participants' capacity for the genuine engagement necessary for building more equitable communities. The facilitators' observations reveal how participants must transform those institutionalized practices to achieve fuller democratic participation, connecting to critiques of neoliberal reforms that emphasize individual achievement over collective engagement (Stray, 2013).

The tension emerges as facilitators guide participants toward more complex forms of



democratic practice. Participants arrive with what could be considered valid peripheral democratic knowledge—debate skills, fact-based argumentation, and reliance on expert authority—all emphasized within Norway’s educational framework (Broderstad & Josefsen, 2023; Haraldstad et al., 2022). However, facilitators observe that this knowledge, while legitimate within educational contexts, often impedes deeper democratic engagement.

Iris critiques this phenomenon during her interview when she says people are “very used to trying to convince each other.” Her insight here reveals how institutionalized democratic practices, though providing initial access to democratic participation, may constrain movement toward fuller participation in democratic dialogue in the context of community spaces.

This observation aligns with Young’s (1996) critique of deliberative democracy, where the assumption of equal voice fails to account for how “social power can prevent people from being equal speakers” through an “internalized sense of the right one has to speak” (p. 122). The facilitators’ work addresses this challenge by creating spaces where personal experience becomes valued over expert authority, potentially disrupting the power dynamics Young identifies.

Facilitators support participants in reconstructing democratic practice with the goal of addressing social injustice and stereotypes based on misunderstandings. Rather than dismissing participants’ prior learning, facilitators observe how this knowledge provides a foundation that must be transformed.

### **Dialogue Spaces as Distinct Communities of Practice**

Dialogue spaces function as distinct communities of practice where participants develop a “shared repertoire” (Lave & Wenger, 2011) emphasizing mutual accountability over individual performance. As Anna explained, “You can say what you want, but you have to take responsibility. So that is on the individual level. And then there’s a group there, and the group also has to take responsibility.” This collective responsibility represents democratic principles moving beyond individual acts toward shared engagement focused on creating more equitable outcomes. The facilitator’s observations provide evidence for the critiques of formal democratic education’s limitations. While schools emphasize democratic values in the curriculum, classroom practices often fail to develop the

collective attitudes necessary for authentic engagement in diverse communities (Haraldstad et al., 2022; Osler & Lybaek, 2014).

These spaces create unique conditions for democratic practice that differ from institutionalized settings. Rather than relying on external authority or predetermined structures, dialogue participants develop their “shared repertoire” for democratic engagement addressing complex social issues. As Iris noted, this transformation becomes evident when “people talk to us afterwards, and (tell us) they had the most cathartic experience.” Such “turning points” demonstrate how dialogue spaces function as sites where previously learned democratic principles are not merely applied but fundamentally reconstituted through collective practice aimed at improving community relationships.

This addresses Dewey’s question about state-conducted education corrupting “the full social ends of the educative process.” While formal education may constrain democratic development through hierarchical relationships, community-based dialogue spaces can reconstruct democratic engagement beyond institutional limitations.

### **Reconstructing Democratic Values Through Dialogue Practice**

Participants arrive to community dialogue with what could be considered valid peripheral democratic knowledge. Rather than simply applying learned democratic principles, participants transform how they understand and enact them through the dialogue process. Where participants initially approach democratic engagement through the competitive lens of debate, facilitators observe their movement toward what Lave and Wenger (2011) describe as authentic practice toward true collective well-being. As Iris reflected, a notable change occurs “when you’re able to talk about things from that level instead of the superficial level,” highlighting how participants transform their previous democratic knowledge into more profound forms of engagement.

This evolution addresses how participants reconstruct democratic learning through dialogue, developing new ways of engaging that reflect fuller participation rather than relying on normative school-based markers. Anna captured this transformation, noting, “When you first have this experience to be heard, with 30 other people sitting around you, that’s very empowering.” This shift from performing democracy through debate to embodying democratic principles through dialogue demonstrates how Communities of

Practice theory (Lave & Wenger, 2011) illuminates not just the utilization of democratic principles but their fundamental reconstruction through participation. This example connects to Norway's traditional emphasis on holistic democratic development. Current educational practices have become procedural and superficial while dialogue spaces may represent a return to more authentic Bildung-inspired universal development through collective engagement.

Through Communities of Practice theory, this study reveals how participants move from legitimate peripheral participation grounded in their formal education toward fuller participation in democratic dialogue. Democratic learning in Norway occurs not just through institutional instruction but through sustained engagement in dialogue spaces where previously learned principles can be reconstructed and deepened. The facilitators' observations illuminate how democratic knowledge, initially shaped by institutional practices, transforms through participation in new communities of practice. While context-specific, these findings contribute to international scholarship by demonstrating how formal democratic learning transforms through authentic and vulnerable community interactions, addressing identified gaps in democratic education research.

## IMPLICATIONS

This study reveals implications for practice, theory development, and future research relevant to creating more equitable educational practices. Facilitated dialogue represents one method for developing cross-cultural understanding and reducing prejudice. The dialogue facilitators interviewed for this study have many years of experience and have witnessed incredible transformations through this mode of community engagement. Their insights provide the field of peace education with important findings that can push researchers and educators toward improved theoretical understandings and more effective practices.

The findings challenge current approaches to democratic education emphasizing debate and individual achievement over collective dialogue. Peace education as a field can benefit from dialogical spaces that bridge institutional and experiential learning. Facilitated dialogue plays a significant role in that facilitators' support guides the transformation that has been shown to increase awareness of societal issues like racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other harmful ideologies. Not only

does awareness increase, but the facilitators also go to great lengths to create conditions to encourage collective responsibility to create change.

Teacher education programs should incorporate training in dialogue facilitation rather than focusing primarily on debate skills. The "turning points" observed could inform pedagogical approaches that support students' movement from competitive to collaborative democratic engagement—and further, from peripheral to full participation. The study also suggests the need for curriculum developers to consider restructuring democratic education around experiential learning and community engagement rather than strictly knowledge acquisition. The observations that participants need to "unlearn" debate practices suggest that current curricular approaches may actually impede the kind of democratic engagement necessary for addressing complex social issues. Educational leaders might consider how to better integrate dialogical practices that prepare students for authentic democratic participation in diverse communities.

## Theoretical Contributions

This study demonstrates how CoP theory elucidates transformation of formal learning into community practices, showing how legitimate peripheral participation in one community (formal education) transfers and transforms across communities of practice. The study provides empirical evidence for critiques of democratic education, showing how neo-liberal institutional approaches constrain democratic engagement. Facilitators' observations confirm arguments about debate-centered curriculum limitations.

## Future Research Directions

The preliminary nature of this pilot study suggests significant potential for additional research that could inform both educational practice and social justice efforts more broadly, and several avenues for future investigation exist that may develop these findings. Longitudinal studies could examine whether the "turning points" facilitators observe lead to lasting changes in democratic practice outside dialogue sessions. Research focusing on marginalized voices could examine how power dynamics influence the transformation process and identify practices that most effectively support inclusive democratic engagement. Additional investigation could explore the role of physical presence in democratic dialogue and how welfare state structures affect democratic participation and collective responsibility.





## CONCLUSION

Democratic learning in Norway occurs through a complex interplay between formal education and public dialogue spaces, where principles taught in schools transform through practice when confronted with alternative approaches to societal challenges. Through the lens of Communities of Practice theory (Lave & Wenger, 2011), the findings elucidate a complex process of democratic learning that extends beyond institutional education into spaces of public dialogue.

The transformation from debate to dialogue, expert reliance to personal responsibility, and individual to collective engagement demonstrates how democratic principles are reconstructed through dialogue participation. These transformations challenge assumptions about formal democratic education translating to authentic practice, showing how community dialogue bridges educational knowledge and meaningful engagement.

These findings contribute to both Norwegian and international discussions about democratic education by providing empirical evidence of how institutional limitations can be addressed through community practice. While this pilot study focused on formal educational settings, schools are only one environment in which democratic values are emphasized. As Lave and Wenger (2011) have helped us to understand, learning occurs everywhere. Furthermore, what we learn in school is often much more than what is being formally taught (Apple, 1971).

Facilitators witness dialogue participants moving from peripheral to full participation as they develop new ways of engaging with democratic principles. This suggests that democratic learning in Norway occurs through an ongoing process of practice and transformation rather than superficial knowledge application. This understanding offers important insights for dialogue facilitation and democratic education, highlighting the vital role of

creating spaces where democratic principles can be actively reconstructed through collective engagement while pointing toward specific research direction that could further illuminate these processes

As societies grapple with questions of democratic participation across cultural differences, these findings suggest that understanding how democratic knowledge is transformed through practice may foster more authentic engagement. The identified research directions provide pathways for expanding this work to better understand how formal educational experiences can be enhanced to prepare students for meaningful participation supporting social justice and equity in their communities.





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