



## *Editorial Introduction*

### **Gradient Voices in Education**

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**Abstract:** In this editorial introduction to the Fall 2025 Special Issue of Current Issues in Education, we listen to the gradient voices of those navigating traditional academic structures with non-traditional methods. Across the ten articles in this special edition, we offer a space for scholars to share not only their lived experiences, but also the opportunity to explore various methods of qualitative methods. Together, these texts showcase how the need for a variety of voices in different educational spaces. As the educational landscape continues to evolve, it is more important than ever for others to see that trials and triumphs of people that look like them, speak like them, and have the same cultural beliefs navigate all levels of education systems.

**Keywords:** Gradient voices, narrative inquiry, race, identity, language, humanizing educational research

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Across the United States, marginalized communities have lived through overlapping and ongoing forms of violence that shape who is able to speak, learn, and be seen as fully human. Immigration raids and the constant threat of ICE surveillance, racialized policing and state violence, the disproportionate deaths and economic devastation caused by COVID-19, and renewed attacks on LGBTQIA+ communities have made difference increasingly dangerous, particularly for those who are not white, monolingual, cisgender, or institutionally protected. These realities do not stop at the schoolhouse door. Instead, they seep into classrooms, teacher preparation programs, graduate seminars, and academic workplaces. Education is often framed as a pathway to mobility, safety, and opportunity despite the many who are forced to navigate fear, loss, exhaustion, and self-censorship simply to remain present.

For those most impacted by these violences, education becomes a paradoxical space—one that promises transformation while simultaneously reproducing the very structures that silence, discipline, and marginalize their voices. Research on school reform underscores this contradiction, showing that even equity-oriented initiatives frequently leave racialized systems of expectation intact, allowing silencing and marginalization to persist despite structural change (Liou & Rotheram-Fuller, 2016). Recent scholarship further demonstrates that expectations themselves function as a mechanism of racial power rather than a matter of individual belief. Drawing on theories of racialized property, Liou (2023) conceptualizes expectations as an epistemological force that differentially assigns assumptions of capacity, legitimacy, and worth—shaping who is presumed capable, educable, and deserving within educational institutions. From this perspective, the marginalization of voice is not incidental but produced through historically sedimented expectations that organize recognition, audibility, and belonging, even in spaces committed to equity. As Powers (2017) reminds us, these patterns are not incidental but reflect “deeply entrenched social practices grounded in the racial subordination of minority students and White race privilege” (p. 252S).

It is within this landscape of precarity, surveillance, loss, and contradiction that this special issue takes shape. When speaking carries risk, when silence becomes a strategy for survival, and when institutions demand neutrality in the face of harm, whose voices are heard—and how they are allowed to speak—matters profoundly. Education, often imagined as the pathway to mobility and possibility, becomes one of the primary sites where these struggles over voice, legitimacy, and belonging are negotiated, resisted, and lived. This special issue of *Current Issues in Education* centers gradient voices—voices that emerge through movement, transition, blending, and relational positioning rather than fixed or binary categories. Contributors to this issue include people whose lived experiences reflect layered identities across race, language, immigration, gender, sexuality, caregiving, spirituality, and professional roles. Collectively, these articles examine how gradient experiences shape learning, teaching, research, and educational practice across K–12 schooling, teacher education, graduate study, and academic life, particularly within institutions that simultaneously promise opportunity while reproducing exclusion.

## Theorizing

### *Gradient*

In the call for papers, we used *layered identities in education* as a working description of gradient voices, building on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) and scholarship that explicitly theorizes “layered identities” as enacted across contexts and mediated by power (Compton-Lilly, 2014; Heard Harvey & Ricard, 2018). Common definitions of *gradient* describe gradual change over distance or time, often visualized as a smooth transition rather than a sharp boundary. In art and design, a gradient refers to the blending of colors or shades into one another, emphasizing continuity and multiplicity rather than separation. At its core, gradient signals movement, transition, and relational positioning. This understanding is grounded in longstanding scholarly traditions. In linguistics, *gradient* has been used to describe phenomena that are continuous rather than categorical. Sociolinguistic and phonetic research has demonstrated that pronunciation, grammatical judgments, and accent perception vary by degree, shaped by listener interpretation and social ideology rather than fixed competence (Labov, 1972; Pierrehumbert, 2001). Later work extended this perspective to show how speakers are heard as “more” or “less” legitimate, native, or intelligible depending on racialized and ideological contexts (Lippi-Green, 2012; Rosa & Flores, 2017). Within education and identity scholarship, these insights support understandings of identities and voices as partial, shifting, and unevenly recognized across institutional spaces. The term *gradient* is also grounded in lived educational histories and personal relationships. I (Tipsuda) was first introduced to the term through conversations with a close friend, Andrew John De Los Santos (see Figure 1), who shared that he was among the founding members of GRADient, an LGBTQIA+ graduate student organization formed around 2019–2020 at Arizona State University. GRADient emerged in response to the absence of a queer graduate student organization on campus, taking shape through informal gatherings that later evolved into collective organizing, advocacy, and community-building. Rather than adopting the traditional rainbow flag, the founders intentionally chose a gradient design to represent fluidity, movement, and expansiveness. What began as informal gatherings evolved into tabling events, outreach, and advocacy aimed at building visibility, resources, and community across disciplines. GRADient continues to exist today, sustained by newer generations committed to collective care and change. Taken together, these theoretical traditions and lived histories position *gradient* not as a metaphor of difference alone, but as a way of understanding how identities, voices, and forms of belonging are continuously negotiated, recognized, and contested within educational institutions.

**Figure 1.**

Photograph of GRADient founders at a tabling event on the Arizona State University's Tempe campus, April 2019. From left to right: Dane Whittaker, Peiyuan (Boki) Wang, Michael Kintscher, Andrew De Los Santos.

**Why Voice?**

While the concept of *gradient voices* may initially appear synonymous with identity, our decision to foreground *voice* is intentional. Identity is often treated as something one has—a category that can be named, fixed, or assigned. Voice, by contrast, emphasizes expression, enactment, and relation: how identities are lived, negotiated, and made meaningful across contexts. Drawing on scholarship that understands identity as performed, dialogic, and constituted through discourse rather than possessed as a stable object (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Goffman, 1959; Taylor, 1989), we conceptualize voice as the medium through which identities come into being. Voice allows for plurality, contradiction, and movement; it makes space for partiality, hesitation, and change. In this way, gradient voices are not simply identities speaking, but identities in motion—emerging through language, silence, embodiment, spirituality, and relationship.

If *gradient* speaks to movement, *voice* speaks to expression, recognition, and power. Voice is not merely the act of speaking; it is a political and representational construct shaped by historical, institutional, and social forces (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Goffman, 1959; Taylor, 1989). How voices are heard, evaluated, and legitimized, however, is deeply influenced by language attitudes and social ideologies (Baker, 1992, 2003), reflecting a shift from earlier notions of voice tied to national unity and homogeneity toward contemporary framings that link voice to subgroup identity and representation. In educational research, the promotion of teacher voice and student voice has been framed to celebrate difference and challenge dominant narratives—forcing listeners to hear difference rather than fear it. Yet whose voices are heard, how they are interpreted, and under what conditions they are legitimized remain deeply uneven. These conditions are often navigated through strategies of silence, self-regulation, and selective disclosure, particularly by racialized scholars whose voices are read through deficit, foreignness, or institutional risk (Chaomuangkhong, 2022; Chaomuangkhong et al., 2025).

Scholars have cautioned against treating voice as inherently empowering. Gonzalez, Hernández-Saca, and Artiles (2017) warn that voice can become monolithic or essentializing

when it assumes bounded group identities or equal audibility across contexts. Voice is always mediated by power: some voices are amplified, while others are silenced, surveilled, or dismissed. This tension is central to our framing of gradient voices, which foreground the uneven, conditional, and context-dependent nature of expression. Rather than assuming voice as a given, this special issue attends to how voices emerge, fracture, and persist within educational spaces shaped by inequality—and how speaking, writing, and silence themselves become acts of navigation, resistance, and care.

### **Gradient Voices as Unboxable Experiences**

As we read submissions for this special issue, we found a clear pattern: nearly every author described moments in which their voice was not welcomed or was actively silenced within educational institutions. These experiences occurred across roles—as students, teachers, scholars, caregivers, and community members—and often led to doubt, emotional exhaustion, and barriers to participation and advancement. In response, the authors turned to methods and genres that resist academic boxing. Autoethnography, *pláticas*, *testimonio*, collaborative writing, family narratives, and spiritually grounded inquiry provided spaces where gradient experiences could be expressed without being simultaneously justified or reduced.

Guerrero et al. (2025) employ *pláticas* to center teachers in and from U.S. territories, highlighting how professional development, civic engagement, and mentorship contribute to personal, cultural, linguistic, and leadership identities within often-overlooked contexts. Joseph (2025) offers a family narrative that frames translanguaging as an act of love, resistance, and relational belonging, illustrating how multilingual parenting is shaped by memory, emotion, and care rather than correctness. Krause et al. (2025) foreground collaboration as knowledge-making, demonstrating how teaching and research are transformed through accompaniment, reciprocity, and community accountability. Baker (2025) examines wayfarer identity, duality, and insider–outsider positioning, showing how internal struggle and external success coexist in urban educational contexts. Coughlin et al. (2025) center m(o)therhood, community, and matricentric feminism, exposing how academic institutions demand identity fragmentation while relying on invisible caregiving labor.

Fernandez (2025) draws on Anzaldúa to frame writing as healing, resistance, and transformation, challenging institutional pressures that flatten identity and voice. Jackson et al. (2025) theorize *vibe* as embodied, racialized knowing, exposing how Women of Color navigate safety, surveillance, emotional labor, and spirit murder within higher education. Fernández Morgado (2025) brings spirituality and *testimonio* into academic space, reclaiming La Regla de Osha and ancestral knowing as legitimate sources of insight and strength. Taylor et al. (2025) frame voice as service and advocacy, emphasizing the ethical responsibility of using one’s voice to amplify others. Lastly, we, the editors, wanted to share our own gradient experiences of using a more non-traditional qualitative method for our dissertations: portraiture. In this article, we share our individual experiences in completing our dissertations and argue that non-traditional research methods are perfect vehicles to uplift traditionally silenced voices. Together, these contributions illustrate how gradient voices emerge through relational, emotional, spiritual, linguistic, and collective practices that defy traditional academic containment.

## Editors' Note

We created this special issue to intentionally carve out space for life stories in educational research, particularly for scholars whose ways of knowing and writing have been historically positioned as nontraditional within academia. More importantly, this issue seeks to legitimize the telling of our own stories—personal, relational, embodied, and spiritual—as rigorous forms of research rather than departures from it. By centering life stories as sites of knowledge production, we challenge narrow definitions of rigor and affirm narrative, testimonio, and lived experience as essential to understanding education and inequality. As guest editors, we are deeply grateful for the trust authors placed in us by sharing their most vulnerable, powerful, and intimate work. Reading these manuscripts reminded us that scholarship is not separate from life; it is shaped by pain, joy, survival, love, and inherited legacies. This special issue aims to offer an academic space where gradient voices can be heard without defense, fragmentation, or erasure. Your stories matter. Your lived experiences matter. Your voices matter. Each time you use your voice, you create conditions for others to stand, speak, and be heard. We are honored to hold this work with you.

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