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Editorial Introduction
Gradient Voices in Education (Volume II): Listening and Writing Critically in a Time of Retrenchment

Tipsuda Chaomuangkhong
University of Northern Iowa

Jaclyn Naster
Basehor-Linwood Middle School

Abstract: This editorial introduction to the second volume of *Gradient Voices in Education* returns to the concept of gradient voices as a way of understanding identities, experiences, and expressions shaped through movement, contradiction, relationality, and uneven recognition. Rather than treating marginalized voices as simply additive to existing conversations about diversity, this volume positions them as central to understanding how education organizes, naturalizes, and sustains inequality. Situated within a political moment marked by intensified attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion, antiracist teaching, queer and trans life, and historical truth-telling, the special issue examines how educational institutions continue to operate through racialized, gendered, colonial, and linguistic regimes of recognition. The stories in this volume refuse to separate educational critique from lived complexity. Across critical autoethnography, collaborative autoethnography, oral history, case study, testimonio, phenomenological reflection, poetry, playlist, and Indigenous storywork, contributors show how students, educators, and scholars navigate harm, build relation, reclaim voice, and imagine otherwise within and against institutional constraints. As editors, we argue that these manuscripts are not supplemental conversations about diversity, but indispensable analyses of education itself. Together, they expose the fault lines of schooling and affirm that gradient voices are central to understanding what education has been, what it continues to reproduce, and what it might yet become.

Keywords: *Gradient voices, narrative inquiry, marginalization, critical qualitative research, identities*

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Listening and Writing Critically in a Time of Retrenchment

As we bring forward this second volume of *Gradient Voices in Education*, following the publication of the special issue in Fall 2025, we return to the concept that first anchored this project: gradient voices. By gradient, we do not mean a softened difference or a gentler way of naming identity. We refer to identities, experiences, and forms of expression that are dynamic; voices shaped through transition, contradiction, relationality, and uneven recognition rather than fixed categories or stable institutional labels. Gradient voices are not simply "diverse voices." They are voices produced in motion, through layered histories of race, language, gender, sexuality, migration, spirituality, kinship, and labor, and through the institutional logics and expectations that decide whose ways of being are heard as credible, whose are read as excessive, and whose are forced into silence. In this sense, gradient is not only a description of people; it is also a description of how power works. It helps us name the unstable terrain on which many students, educators, and scholars are expected to survive, perform legitimacy, and speak in ways institutions can tolerate (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Chaomuangkhong & Naster, 2025a; González et al., 2017; Rosa & Flores, 2017). This volume returns to that concept not as a metaphor alone, but as an analytic for understanding how educational institutions continue to sort, regulate, and condition human possibility. As I (Tipsuda) read this section aloud while proofreading, my five-year-old daughter asked, "What is going on, Mommy? Is it a tornado or anything? What is going on with students feeling unsafe? It sounds dangerous." I told her that I was helping introduce nine very important stories about people's experiences in education. Her question captures the dissonance at the heart of this issue: so much harm in education is real, yet often remains invisible to those who are not living it.

At this point, it is safe to assume that most educational institutions in the United States have statements in their handbooks addressing support for marginalized students, a list of infractions that will not be tolerated, and resources describing how students can receive the support they need. School districts and universities alike post statistics showing the diversity of their campuses and list the programs created to ensure that all students feel safe and supported. Yet despite these statements of equity and diversity, marginalized students and educators are still struggling to feel safe and supported not only in K-12 schools, but within higher education institutions as well. What seems to be lacking, again and again, are the voices of those navigating these institutions and the lived experiences that reveal what official language cannot. Across this volume, we see that representation does not necessarily translate into belonging, and visibility does not necessarily translate into safety, recognition, or transformation. If earlier diversity rhetoric promised recognition without redistribution, then what these papers show is how fragile and conditional even that promise has always been.

This second volume arrives in a political moment that makes the urgency of such a framework impossible to ignore. Across the United States, public attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion, curricular truth-telling, queer and trans life, antiracist teaching, and even the naming of structural inequality have intensified. We are cautious not to romanticize Diversity, Equity and Inclusion as though it had already transformed the material conditions of marginalized communities in schools and universities. In many cases, it did not (Jack, 2019; 2024). Too often, DEI remained managerial, symbolic, or folded into the public-relations language of institutions more committed to optics than structural transformation. Yet its rollback is still revealing. It shows how quickly schools and universities can retreat from even minimal forms of accountability and return more openly to familiar logics of discipline, compliance, marketability, and political palatability. What becomes visible in this moment is not a sudden emergence of racism, xenophobia, cisnormativity, or antiblackness, but the renewed permission to circulate them more openly as common sense, neutrality, or institutional pragmatism (Dumas, 2014, 2016; Dumas & Ross, 2016; Liou, 2023; Powers, 2017). German et al. (2026) make this especially visible by situating Black Student Unions and Black Education Spaces within the broader context of CRT and SEL bans, the dismantling of supports, and the shrinking institutional tolerance for affinity-based spaces that have long functioned as sites of healing, protection, and political education.

It is within this climate that the manuscripts in this volume speak. Taken together, they remind us that education is not merely a site where inequality appears; it is one of the places where inequality is organized, narrated, and naturalized. One of the central interventions of this special issue is that it refuses to separate educational critique from lived complexity. These manuscripts do not present marginalization as an abstract condition or a demographic variable. They show how institutional life is felt in the body, in memory, in hiring and admissions, in curriculum, in mentoring, in family relations, in research design, and in the psychic labor of having to become readable within systems that were never built for you. They ask us to take seriously the idea that institutional harm is not only structural, but intimate; not only historical, but ongoing; not only policy-based, but also discursive, affective, and embodied.

A joke common among some politicians is the creation of safe spaces on university campuses. One can scroll through social media and find comments such as “aww, do you need a safe space?” or “my page is not a safe space, so get your [slur] out of here.” But as we read through these manuscripts, it becomes difficult to deny that many marginalized individuals do not feel safe in educational institutions. It has caused us to ponder the idea of safe spaces and what it truly entails to create one. Are school districts and universities simply providing diversity statements in order to avoid lawsuits and bad PR? Or are these institutions actually doing the work required to create environments where all people can just *be*, and/or grow and flourish? More pointedly, are they willing to transform the institutional logics and expectations that make those environments unsafe in the first place?

Something important to point out is that these institutions in North America are shaped by institutional logics and expectations that were built long ago. Is writing a few sentences in a handbook and having a link on a website to resources actually changing anything fundamental? What kind of training is provided for employees and instructors? Who is doing the training? Who created it? How is it being overly assessed/policed? Are we fully assessing the impact, both positive and negative, that these initiatives have on people? Many of the stories in this issue

highlight programs, reforms, and forms of inclusion that were believed to be progressive and positive at the time, only for us to later see their painful and sometimes devastating repercussions. Goldin et al. (2026), for example, remind us that even the national story of school desegregation, so often narrated as uncomplicated progress, obscures the profound losses carried by Black teachers, Black schools, and Black communities whose infrastructures of care and brilliance were devalued and erased (Dumas, 2014; Fairclough, 2003; Samuels et al., 2025).

We are not suggesting that these supports or efforts should be thrown out because they are imperfect. We are suggesting that we take a moment to listen to the voices of people who have navigated these spaces and ask, more honestly, how educational institutions can do better. However, many of these institutions were built within institutional logics and expectations shaped by capitalism, white supremacy, settler colonialism, and misogyny. So, despite individuals' best intentions in attempting to create spaces where all people feel safe in academic institutions, the system itself was built to exclude them, sort them, or require their transformation into something more institutionally tolerable. Education is not merely a site where inequality appears. It is one of the places where inequality is organized, narrated, and normalized. What these manuscripts offer, then, is not a supplemental conversation about diversity. They offer indispensable analyses of education itself.

One example we see of this is in both Díaz (2026) and Bernard (2026). Both articles engage the literature surrounding Black male educators and the importance of their presence in K-12 settings. Yet neither paper leaves that conversation at celebration. Díaz shows that the presence of a Black gay male elementary music teacher can broaden representation, challenge dominant narratives, and positively shape interactions with students, staff, and families, while also revealing how fragile that inclusion remains when race is only addressed superficially and authenticity must be carefully managed. Bernard (2026) similarly demonstrates that Black male educators are too often positioned as both the problem and the solution, desired for what they symbolically represent while simultaneously burdened by stereotype, tokenization, vulnerability, and attrition. Together, these papers push against simplistic calls for more Black male teachers by showing that recruitment without transformation simply relocates the burden onto those being recruited (Bristol & Goings, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2019; Kohli, 2018, 2019; Milner, 2016; Redwine Johnson et al., 2024). Institutions often say they want Black male educators, but do not create the conditions in which they can remain whole.

A similar issue emerges in Goldin et al. (2026), where the authors interviewed former teachers and community members regarding *Brown v. Board of Education*. This deeply insightful piece showcases how Black teachers excelled in teaching their students in segregated schools despite profound material inequities. It also reveals that desegregation, as popularly remembered, often erases the Black educational worlds that already existed and the loss that followed state intervention. The article offers more than a critique of a dominant historical narrative; it offers a theory of narrative justice, one that insists the stories we tell about schools matter because they determine whose suffering counts, whose brilliance is remembered, and whose worlds are made disposable in the name of reform. In this piece, the problem is not only what happened, but how it has been retold. The master narrative of desegregation made Black schools legible only through lack, and in doing so, devalued the human resources, professional expertise, and community ethic of care present within them. That is why the article feels so

central to this volume. It shows how narrative itself can become a technology of erasure, and how counterstory becomes necessary not only for healing, but for history.

In response to the physical and psychological violence Black children experienced in these spaces, groups such as Black Student Unions attempted to create places where Black students could feel camaraderie, protection, and safety. German et al. (2026) discuss the lived experiences of Black Student Union advisors in K-12 settings and the ways they worked to create and protect Black Education Spaces for their students. Their article reminds us that safety is not just a feeling or an institutional promise. It is something people labor to build and defend within hostile conditions. Their concept of fugitive mentorship shows that care in education is sometimes subversive, sometimes fragile, and always deeply political. These spaces do not simply help students cope. They help students heal, strategize, imagine otherwise, and cultivate expansive futures. In that sense, the article pushes beyond the discourse of inclusion and toward one of stewardship, protection, and radical relationality (Crenshaw, 1991; Crenshaw & Bonis, 2005; Dziengue & Esposito, 2025; Givens, 2021).

When educational institutions in the United States opened their halls to a greater variety of people, the inner workings of the system still struggled to make space for different ways of knowing, being, and living. We see this clearly in Whitehat's (2026) autoethnography about becoming a Diné woman scholar. Her article shows that the issue is not simply a lack of Indigenous presence in academic institutions; it is that Western academic spaces remain structured through colonial assumptions about what counts as knowledge, who gets to produce it, and under what terms. Whitehat writes from Diné epistemologies, relational accountability, and K'é not as decoration or cultural supplement, but as methodology, pedagogy, and scholarly grounding. Her article powerfully reminds us that storytelling is not a lesser form of scholarship. It is theory, relation, sovereignty, and refusal. It is also a form of rigor grounded not in distance, but in accountability, intergenerational teaching, and community responsibility (Le Roux, 2018; van Manen, 2016; Wilson, 2008).

Gómez Marchant (2026) shares a similar but distinct experience of almost drowning in the whitestream, a phrase that captures the burden placed on minoritized people to assimilate into the whiteness of U.S. schooling. His use of drowning is not accidental. It names both violence and survival. The metaphor of lungs healing and regenerating, but never without a trace, helps him narrate schooling not only as a site of erasure, but as a site where one learns to read the currents of whiteness well enough to resist them. What is especially powerful about this piece is that it treats storytelling as a healing act and testimonio as both a method and a political tool. Through counterstory, Gómez Marchant shows how marginalization defines the boundaries of the mainstream and how testimony can work to make visible the assimilative project of schooling while also creating counterspaces in which expanded realities become thinkable (Anzaldúa, 2007, 2015; Delgado, 1989; Delgado Bernal, 2012; Hatt & Urrieta, 2020; Valenzuela, 1999).

What else are minoritized people asked to abandon for the sake of fitting in and going with the flow? What other identities are not welcomed in educational spaces? Maganaka (2026) shares how intersecting identities such as race, gender expression, linguistic background, and migration shape professional legitimacy in English language education. His paper shows how native-speakerism, gendered expectations, and racialized assumptions do not operate separately,

but together. It also moves us beyond critique alone by showing what it might mean to redefine legitimacy away from "nativeness" and toward pedagogical competence, lived expertise, translanguaging, and inclusive assessment. In this sense, the article does not just document harm. It offers a different vision of what language education could be if institutions actually valued multilingualism and identity-affirming practice instead of merely tolerating them. It also resonates strongly with the larger concerns of this issue by showing how legitimacy is never neutral. It is produced through norms that determine who appears professional, teachable, respectable, and real.

Arisandy (2026) forces us to confront another difficult question: what if there is not even space to be yourself in your family of origin, much less at school? In "I am not the braided girl!" Arisandy tells a story of intense bravery and pain, a story of staying true to yourself even when the world insists you are part of a binary system you instinctively know you do not inhabit. What is so powerful about this article is that it does not frame Queer youth merely as vulnerable subjects in need of inclusion. It argues that nonviolent school and home environments are mandatory, and that education must move toward seeing Queer youth as assets rather than deficits or deviance. It also pushes on research itself, urging us to think differently about ethics, categorization, trust, and the violence of forcing people into labels that do not belong to them. In this way, the article does more than add a Queer narrative to the volume. It challenges the binary habits of educational research and reminds us that stories and genders are plural, and that methods too can become violent when they reduce that plurality to what is easily coded, categorized, and institutionally managed (Ahmed, 2006; Anzaldúa, 1987; Butler, 2024).

While several of the previous papers offer roadmaps for how people survive and resist within the education system, Dubberly (2026) provides a different kind of map: how to stay intellectually and emotionally alive in the dissertation process. By centering autobiographical vignettes, poems, and playlists as tools of self-reflection in phenomenological writing, Dubberly reminds us that academic survival itself is a political and methodological question. Her work insists that reflexivity is not just an abstract requirement of qualitative inquiry. It is a lived practice, and one that may require forms of expression that academia has not always taken seriously. In that way, this piece expands our understanding of what counts as rigor, what counts as method, and what kinds of scholarly selves are allowed to remain intact during research. It reminds us that rigor is not the property of distance alone. Rigor can also reside in reflexivity and in forms of inquiry that stay close to the textures of lived life (Golob & Makarovič, 2019; Olmos-Vega et al., 2022; van Manen, 2016).

This is why gradient voices remain such an important framing for this second volume. The phrase allows us to move beyond a celebratory politics of representation in which institutions merely add more kinds of people while leaving intact the conditions that sort, discipline, and devalue them. Gradient voices ask us to pay attention to movement and mediation. It asks us to notice how people are made to shift their languages, soften their uniqueness, fragment their identities, or narrate themselves strategically in order to remain institutionally recognizable or palatable. It helps us see why many of the manuscripts in this volume turn toward genres and methods that exceed academic boxing: collaborative autoethnography, critical autoethnography, oral history, counterstory, case study, phenomenological reflection, poetry, playlist, testimonio, and Indigenous storywork. These are not methodological detours. They are forms capable of holding contradiction, embodiment,

memory, silence, spirituality, and fracture without forcing them into premature coherence. They also remind us that rigor is not the property of distance alone. Rigor can also reside in reflexivity, relational accountability, and forms of inquiry that stay close to the textures of lived life (Chaomuangkhong & Naster, 2025b; Le Roux, 2017; van Manen, 2016; Wilson, 2008). Whitehat's storywork, Goldin et al.'s narrative justice, Gómez Marchant's testimonio, German et al.'s collaborative autoethnography, Maganaka's critical autoethnography, Arisandy's Queer narrative, Bernard's interpretative phenomenology, Díaz's case study, and Dubberly's reflexive tools all show us that method is never neutral either. How a story is told matters because form itself can either reproduce institutional containment or make room for lives that exceed it.

As editors, we see this second volume as both continuation and deepening. It continues the project of the first volume by centering voices too often boxed, dismissed, or made conditional within academic and educational institutions (Chaomuangkhong & Naster, 2025a). At the same time, it deepens the political force of the special issue by confronting the present moment more directly, a moment in which institutions are increasingly permitted to shed even minimal equity commitments and return more openly to the logics of exclusion, discipline, and labor production that have long organized schooling. What these manuscripts offer, then, is not a supplemental conversation about diversity. They offer indispensable analyses of education itself.

Each of the stories in this issue moved us in ways that are hard to describe. There were times we would text each other excitedly, "Did you read this one yet? It is so good!" and other times we would sit with the weight of what we had just read, stunned by how deeply unjust and painful these experiences were. As scholars, women, writers, and storytellers ourselves, we are deeply honored to be trusted with these stories. If there is an invitation in this volume, it is not simply to listen more compassionately, though compassion matters. It is to listen more critically. It is to understand that these voices do not merely add texture to educational research; they expose its fault lines. They show how schooling continues to function through racialized, gendered, colonial, and linguistic regimes of recognition, even as people build relationships, reclaim voices, carry memories, and imagine otherwise within and against those structures. Following the Fall 2025 issue, this second volume affirms once again that gradient voices are not marginal to the story of education. They are central to understanding what education has been, what it continues to reproduce, and what it might yet become.

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Author Notes

Tipsuda Chaomuangkhong, Ph.D
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1009-711X
University of Northern Iowa
Tipsuda.Chaomuangkhong@uni.edu

Jaclyn Naster, Ph.D
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9095-5786
Basehor-Linwood Middle School
Jaclyn_naster@yahoo.com

Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation