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Editors

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Professing Education is a journal of the **Society of Professors of Education**. The Society was founded in 1902 when the National Society of College Teachers of Education was first formed in cooperation with the National Education Association. Among its early presidents were Charles DeGarmo and John Dewey. The Society is an interdisciplinary, professional and academic association open to all persons, both theoreticians and practitioners, engaged in teacher preparation or related activities. Its purpose is to serve the diverse needs and interests of the education professoriate. The Society's primary goal is to provide a forum for consideration of major issues, tasks, problems, and challenges confronting professional educators. We invite you to join us. Visit www.societyofprofessorsofeducation.com for more information.

Call for Papers: *Professing Education* publishes articles focused on the practice of teaching in education. Recognizing that the field of education is inter- and trans-disciplinary, the editors seek essays and studies from a variety of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, on all matters related to teaching, "education," and pedagogies. Further, we also value and encourage creative forms of writing. Submissions are peer and editor reviewed. Manuscripts should generally be 4000-7000 words in length, 12-point Times New Roman, double spaced, APA-style, with 1 inch margins. In support of the Society's goal of stimulating and sustaining dialogue among its members, all accepted authors must be members of the Society of Professors of Education, or join prior to publication. To view the membership form, go to www.societyofprofessorsofeducation.com/membership.html.

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From the Editors

This journal is a labor of love, and we take great pride in bringing you scholarship that challenges us to think more critically and ask deeper and more relevant questions as we imagine new possibilities for the future of education. We believe this is the vision the founders of *Professing Education* held for the journal. We think they aspired to create a space for inquiry, dialogue, and most importantly, ideas that challenge conventional thinking and transformational change. We are pleased to present three articles that embody this spirit and invite us to reflect more deeply, ask more intentional questions as we consider new pathways toward a better future.

In *Student Activism and AI for Social Justice: A Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) Approach*, Banoğlu, Mullen, and Orucu, reconceptualize AI as a tool positioned to support dialogue, student voice, and justice-oriented action if it is ethically co-created and supported with students. In *Invest \$500, yield \$50,000: How to use limited funds to help underrepresented teacher candidates*, McNeil, Kelley, and Wilkens remind us that no matter the tool or the technology available, if we want to support historically underrepresented teacher candidates and diversify the teacher pool, then we must be prepared to support candidates financially. Their paper describes what happened when they did. Finally, Mullen and Young in

Educational Leader as Critical Cultural Dialoguer: A Textual Analysis of Professing Education, use a textual analysis to explore social justice advocacy, cultural dialogue as transformative practice, leadership for social justice, difficult conversations in education, and the roles of dialogue and solidarity in a *Professing Education* issue. They use the analysis to ask provocative questions, encouraging a deeper exploration of each.

Together the three articles featured in this issue reflect what we love most about this journal and they do so in distinct but complementary ways. Each invites us to pause, question what we have come to accept, and engage more deeply with the ideas and experiences that shape our work. Whether it is what our assumptions are about the role of AI, how to bridge financial gaps, or how to ask the deeper question, together, the articles embody the spirit of *Professing Education* by creating space for critical reflection, meaningful dialogue, and the pursuit of new understandings. We hope these contributions challenge your thinking, spark new and important conversations, and encourage us to imagine and work toward more just, thoughtful, and promising possibilities for the future of education.

--Gretchen Givens Generett, Mary Kay Delaney, and Paula Groves Price, co-editors

The Constitution of the Society of Professors of Education stated that the society shall emphasize the following:

1. Promotion of an increasingly comprehensive understanding of the relationship between education and the social complexities in which professors of education function;
2. Recognition and appropriate utilization of the inherent power and responsibility of the Society in voicing its interest in and concern for the realization of desirable educational ends;
3. Concern for fostering inquiry into the history, current status, and future alternatives of the education professoriate. (SPE Constitution and Bylaws, 1969) At its core, *Professing Education*, was created by scholars engaged in teacher preparation to contemplate and discuss critical issues, major tasks, and problems and challenges facing our profession."

Source: Armstrong, J (2009). A brief history of SPE. *Professing Education* 4(2).

<https://societyofprofessorsofeducation.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/professing-education.pdf>

Student Activism and AI for Social Justice: A Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) Approach

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Abstract

As artificial intelligence (AI) reshapes educational systems, debates about efficiency, governance, and equity have intensified. Yet student agency and activism—critical drivers of socially just and inclusive schooling—remain largely absent from policy and research discussions. This conceptual analysis examines the intersection of AI, student activism, and social justice through the lens of cultural–historical activity theory (CHAT). Drawing on critical scholarship and empirical insights, we challenge technocratic approaches to AI that prioritize standardization, prediction, and personalized feedback while marginalizing democratic participation and collective agency. We reconceptualize AI as a mediating artifact that can support dialogue, student voice, and justice-oriented action when ethically governed and co-designed with students. Using CHAT, we demonstrate how AI reshapes activity systems by transforming subjects, objects, rules, communities, and divisions of labor, while generating contradictions that can catalyze expansive learning and systemic change. We propose a participatory AI re-mediation framework that emphasizes co-configuration, power sharing, and iterative responsiveness, positioning student activism as central to democratic and socially just educational futures. This framework advances a novel theoretical perspective on AI in education, shifting the focus from instructional optimization to democratic participation, collective problem-solving, conflict mediation, and socially just decision-making across diverse educational contexts.

Introduction

A critical moment for rethinking governance and advancing equity-driven advocacy has been signaled by the convergence of artificial intelligence (AI) and social justice (SJ) leadership in educational systems. As AI becomes increasingly enmeshed in education infrastructures and policy frameworks, conventional understandings of leadership and agency are disrupted, prompting critical reflection on whose interests are prioritized and voices are heard (Banoğlu & Mullen, 2025). Through a conceptual analysis, we propose a re-mediation framework for AI in education, foregrounding participatory design, dialogical spaces, and student activism as cornerstones for a

democratized and just educational future (Banoğlu, 2027; Mullen, 2026). The authors are three educational leadership professors—a Turkish male based in China, a White female in the United States, and a Turkish female in the United Kingdom—who share interests in SJ leadership, critical pedagogy, and education policy.

This re-examination is urgent given the rapid expansion and rising dominance of AI integration in schools globally and the evolving international policy landscape shaping its deployment. Although principals, teachers, and students may perceive themselves as exercising control over AI tools, the causal mechanisms

underlying these systems are often opaque (Moore, 2016). For instance, AI-driven processes that generate recommendations, personalize content, or provide feedback involve multiple hidden computational steps, rarely visible to users. This opacity can fuel the *illusion* of agency, making people feel in control while subtly constraining decision-making and influencing behavior (Vassen, 2022). Such dynamics underscore the importance of uncovering how AI mediates relationships, shapes participation, and affects collective agency through human-technology interactions (Andrada et al., 2023) towards socially just practices and democratic society.

Educational policy actors and technology developers often emphasize AI's potential for efficiency and innovation, yet they frequently overlook its broader societal ramifications within educational communities (Mouta et al., 2025). These narratives reinforce technocratic paradigms that tend to neglect ethical, relational, and democratic imperatives (Banoğlu, 2027). The steadfast focus on individual achievement and standardized outcomes, a phenomenon that Biesta (2020) interrogated and named *learnification*, often obscures education's potential for collective transformation. Elbakoury (2025) observed that this paradigm has contributed to apathy and individualism, especially among marginalized student populations in schools failing to foster spaces for collective empowerment, organizing, and agency.

While dominant narratives often frame AI as diminishing the autonomous teacher role, perpetuating the human-versus-machine narrative (Banoğlu & Gümüş, 2022), AI, in fact, has three levels of engagement—subjective, intersubjective, and collective—that shape human understanding of agency (Mouta et al., 2025). Here, we revisit SJ through the lens of intersubjective and collective uses of AI, challenging the prevailing personalized AI discourse. To this end, we leverage the analytical power of cultural–historical activity theory (CHAT; Engeström, 1987). This theory provides a robust framework for examining how AI

mediates relationships, power dynamics, and collective action in educational communities, while illuminating pathways toward enhanced student agency and democratic participation in school leadership.

To address these challenges, we draw on empirical studies and theoretical frameworks that illuminate limitations and possibilities of contemporary AI integration efforts. The next section interrogates the technocratic logic that underpins mainstream AI adoption in education, highlighting some risks associated with algorithmic governance and depoliticization (Banoğlu & Mullen, 2025; Gardner-McTaggart & Blyth, 2025). Building on the critiques, we reconceptualize AI as a mediating artifact for dialogical spaces.

Our thinking is informed by dialogic pedagogy (Wegerif & Major, 2019) and Buber's (1971) philosophy of *I–Thou* relations, which views human existence as fundamentally relational and dignity as inherent in authentic encounters. From this perspective, AI can serve as a tool for enhancing communication and human dignity by fostering collective inquiry, shared leadership, and relational learning.

In the quest for socially just schools and societies, we contend that AI has the potential to foster critical inquiry, reveal systemic tensions and educational inequalities, and create dialogical spaces that support collective reflection and transformative action when utilized strategically and ethically (Mullen & Eadens, 2026). In relation to SJ efforts in education and educational leadership, AI creates challenges and opportunities (Arar et al., 2025; Wymer, 2025). Hence, SJ is inherently a complex concept in theory and praxis, accounting for why definitional consensus seems elusive (Bogotch, 2024). SJ focuses on expanding and equalizing opportunities for marginalized groups due to their race, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, gender, family structure, sexual orientation, age, and disability (Theoharis, 2007). So far, SJ scholars in educational leadership focused predominantly on how SJ and its leadership have been understood and enacted by

principals and teachers mainly in K12 settings (Arar et al., 2020), using diverse methods and critical lenses.

Hence, limited research has examined student activism and agency in advancing SJ efforts within schools (Banoğlu & Mullen, 2025; Banoğlu et al., 2025). Here, we focus on the intersection of AI and SJ in schools, keeping the student as actor uppermost in mind. Ideally the core “subject” of schooling processes, instead students are objectified (Freire, 1970) as, for example, test-takers by neoliberal and capitalist discourses and testing regimes globally.

The intersection of AI and social justice (SJ) advocacy is critical to student empowerment. As active users of educational technologies and primary stakeholders in schooling, students are often most directly affected by systemic inequities and are therefore well positioned to identify, challenge, and transform unjust practices.

Entire student populations are prone to vulnerable situations and injustices whether from a physical or intellectual disability, gender or racial discrimination, or harassment. Those who drop out typically endure financial struggles while far too many are subjected to bullying at school, family violence, sexual abuse, and cyber violence. Being schooled in a warzone and displacement from conflict are traumatizing experiences that generate extremely challenging educational and healthcare needs. We propose a participatory approach that situates every student as co-actor in claiming their power, authority, and influence.

Our central argument is that educational AI has a critical role to play in promoting student voice and activism for SJ and leadership. Drawing on Banoğlu and Mullen’s (2025) conceptualization of AI-informed student activism and Banoğlu et al.’s (2025) research, we demonstrate how participatory design and ethical co-governance can empower students to influence their educational experiences and the technologies that mediate them. These empirical insights are enriched by the principles of responsible innovation (Penuel et al., 2025),

emphasizing reflexivity, inclusion, and responsiveness as necessary conditions for just and democratic AI design.

We conclude by proposing a CHAT-driven re-mediation framework for educational AI that prioritizes co-configuration, ethical transformation, power redistribution, and iterative responsiveness. In doing so, it seeks to address contradictions inherent in educational technology, offering practical strategies for leveraging AI as a catalyst for SJ, democratized leadership, authentic advocacy, and collective world-building. Thus, we encourage movement beyond rhetorical critique and simplistic optimism. An actionable roadmap is presented for reclaiming AI as an instrument of equity, empowerment, and SJ, thereby ensuring that technological innovation truly serves individual and collective needs and influence.

From Technocratic Integration to Participatory Agency

The European Union (2024), the OECD (2025), and the AI Action Summit (2025), among other major policy actors, have framed AI as a transformative technological innovation in education. However, policy attention to AI’s broader educational implications has remained circumscribed by ethical risk management and instructional efficiency. While global frameworks—notably the European Parliament’s (2024) Artificial Intelligence Act and the OECD’s (2025) recommendations on generative AI (GenAI)—acknowledge AI’s potential contributions to economic development and democratic investment in education, the dominant discourse privileges standardization, optimization, and performance metrics (Banoğlu & Mullen, 2025; Mullen, 2026).

A technocratic orientation risks reducing complex human needs, values, and aspirations to what digital systems can measure or automate (Gardner-McTaggart & Blyth, 2025). Such orientations marginalize the relational, moral, and emancipatory purposes of education, reinforcing learnification, which emphasizes

individualized learning outcomes at the expense of collective agency, democratic participation, and meaningful human relationship. Central to Biesta's (2020) concern was the reduction of education to measurable learning outcomes and individual achievement and the objectification of students.

Hypothetically, consider a high school classroom where an AI-driven learning platform structures the entire lesson. Students receive personalized tasks designed to boost their performance on standardized assessments. While the interface offers choices (e.g., deciding which module to complete first) these options are algorithmically constrained to optimize efficiency and compliance with preset benchmarks. Students' focus is on earning badges and improving scores, while opportunities for collaborative dialogue or civic engagement are absent. The teacher is unable to answer questions because the algorithm's logic is unclear. This vignette illustrates Biesta's (2020) concern: education becomes transactional and technocratic, privileging optimization over deliberation, and sidelining the normative aim of forming reflective citizens capable of judgment and democratic participation.

Consider, in contrast, a dialogical classroom. In high school civics, students are exploring ethical implications of AI in education. The teacher organizes a dialogical circle where students collaboratively analyze how AI systems influence decision-making in schools. Using an AI-powered discussion tool, students co-create questions, share perspectives, and vote on which issues to explore in depth. The technology serves as a mediating artifact—not to optimize performance metrics, but to amplify student voice and facilitate inclusive dialogue. Roles are co-constructed: moderation of the discussion, synthesis of ideas into a shared document, and a report with recommendations for the school's technology committee. This participatory process exemplifies democratic education, where agency is authentic, rules are negotiated, and contradictions—such as efficiency—equity tensions—become catalysts for collective

learning and systemic change. This vignette shows AI as a dialogical tool; student as co-leader and co-designer; and collective agency and ethical reasoning as central goals.

Empirical evidence from school contexts further underscores these concerns. Dehumanizing forces have constrained human agency in decision-making by translating qualitative human characteristics into quantitative metrics and ratings and narrowing the scope for discretionary judgment (Wang, 2025). Likewise, Elbakoury (2025) noted a growing sense of apathy and individualism among students, particularly from marginalized communities for whom formal education can be a means to an end (economic survival), not a space for collective empowerment or social transformation. In a similar vein, Marland & Arantes (2025) called for expanding definitions of bias, inclusion, and accessibility in AI frameworks to reduce barriers for students with disabilities.

Exacerbating this disconnection is the limited availability of authentic opportunities for student organization, civic engagement, and activism within schools (Banoğlu et al., 2025). Collectively, these patterns highlight the urgent need to reorient educational applications of AI towards fostering participatory agency and cultivating learning environments that prioritize empathy, equity, shared responsibility, agency, and collective action.

AI as Mediator of Dialogical Spaces

Against this backdrop, we advocate for the reconceptualization of AI as a mediating artifact in dialogical spaces (Wegerif & Major, 2019). Enlivened by Buber's (1971) philosophy, dialogical spaces are intellectual commons where principals, teachers, students, and communities have authentic encounters and engage in critical and collective inquiry. Rather than serving as an interlocutor, AI can enhance human-to-human dialogue, nurturing agency, shared identity, and participatory leadership (Örücü et al., 2026).

Gardner-McTaggart and Blyth (2025) argued, GenAI is not neutral. These tools cannot

provide personalized experiences when constrained by predetermined instructional goals and teaching/learning targets that reduce civic judgment and temporality to “machinic rhythms.” As suggested, the technological “tool” (AI/algorithms) is changing the purpose and outcome of education and civic engagement, including associated activities.

Alternatively, responsible innovation in the design of educational AI is needed, anchored in the principles of anticipation, reflexivity, inclusion, and responsiveness that offer a compelling framework for such a transformation (Penuel et al., 2025). When youth are meaningfully included not only as co-designers but also content providers through collaborative inquiries, AI tools can be reimaged to support community-building, amplify marginalized student voices, and stimulate equitable collaboration (Breideband et al., 2023). This participatory ethos stands in sharp contrast to top-down, efficiency-driven approaches, thereby resonating with calls for student activism and leadership in AI integration (Banoğlu & Mullen, 2025).

Recent research highlights the multifaceted potential of AI to catalyze student activism and leadership. While AI presents compelling possibilities for democratic renewal in education, its successful integration requires more than enthusiasm for innovation. Responsible stewardship is called for, according to scholars (Banoğlu & Mullen, 2025; Banoğlu, 2027) arguing on behalf of a stewardship model for AI educational use that advocates for relational, ethical, and ecologically responsive leadership. A goal is to reclaim learning/teaching and the societal and moral purpose of education, not succumb to the dominance of neoliberal and efficiency logics (Gardner-McTaggart & Bush, 2022).

Likewise, Banoğlu and Mullen (2025) have documented how AI can empower students to organize, advocate for their rights, and dismantle barriers to participation—provided the grounding of its design and governance in ethical principles and cultural sensitivity. Their analysis

of student leader narratives from diverse geopolitical contexts revealed that AI-enabled feedback systems, streamlined communication channels, and accessible information can foster autonomy, bridge-building, and inclusive leadership structures.

Yet, as Elbakoury (2025) asserted, authentic empowerment requires that schools become sites of resistance and organizing. AI should be leveraged to support the ontological development of children—their wellbeing and sense of agency—rather than solely their cognitive readiness for progression to graduation (Mouta et al., 2025). This perspective was reinforced by Souchet (2025), whose retrospective on child participation in the Netherlands underscored the value of safe and inclusive spaces, collaborative planning, and feedback mechanisms that respect children’s agency and manage expectations for systemic change. Meaningful participation proved most impactful at local and subnational levels, where youth experience personal growth and contribute to sustainable community transformation.

Cultural–Historical Activity Theory

CHAT, an alternative to AI-informed student activism, provides a dynamic and systemic framework for analyzing collective human practices (Engeström, 1999). Developed by Vygotsky (see Roth & Lee, 2007) and expanded upon by Engeström (1987), CHAT conceptualizes human activity as a system composed of six interacting components. To summarize, these elements are *subject* (the individual or group engaged in the activity), *object* (the purpose or goal that motivates the activity), *mediating artifacts or tools* (instruments such as codes and technologies, including AI, that facilitate or shape the activity), *rules* (explicit or implicit norms and expectations governing behavior), *community* (all participants who share the object), and *division of labor* (the organization and distribution of roles, responsibilities, and power). Another central concept in CHAT is *contradiction*. This refers to tensions or primary

and secondary conflicts that emerge, respectively, within individual elements of activity systems and between interacting elements, and that can drive reflection, learning, and transformative changes in individual schools and across educational ecosystems (Engeström, 2001).

Problems and contradictions that arise for these “subjects” in their interactions with others, structural mechanisms, and the broader education system serve as uniquely valuable inputs for transforming educational activity (Zhang & Luo, 2025). For example, students may experience internal conflicts when their desire for agency clashes with rigid school routines or standardized assessments. Teachers and principals may encounter tensions between promoting inclusive practices and navigating accountability pressures imposed by policy mandates or algorithmic tools. Additionally, contradictions can emerge between community expectations and the values embedded within AI systems, such as when surveillance technologies undermine trust, autonomy, freedom, or cultural sensitivity (Clancy et al., 2025). All such challenges become opportunities for reflection, dialogue, and innovation for AI use in education.

By critically engaging with these contradictions and educational technologies to situate students as capable learners, collaborators, and civic actors, communities can identify where existing practices fall short of expansive learning (Engeström et al., 2023). More than this, educational communities can collaboratively develop forms of participation, leadership, and justice-oriented action using technologies that work “toward educational justice and explicitly attend to the power relations that teachers navigate professionally, as well as the relationships with communities and families in which they are embedded, while making room for mutual learning among teachers, researchers, and designers” (Jayathirtha et al., 2025, p. 87). To Engeström et al. (2023), contradictions may become catalysts for expansive learning and ongoing transformation of educational systems, otherwise schools emerge as a contested space

where civic involvement breeds doubt and the future carries a hint of desperation (Engeström et al., 2024). As such, the “subject” can be students or others, while the “object” may surpass academic excellence to embrace SJ, student activism, and democratic participation. Because AI is not a neutral instrument, through human action that is purposeful and goal-oriented, AI is dynamically shaped to have influence on relationships, communication, and shared goals.

Regarding student activism, CHAT helps illuminate how AI tools can redefine the rules of school governance. For example, these tools may create new opportunities for student voice and agency or, conversely, reinforce patterns of surveillance and standardization. The school community shapes, and is influenced by, the norms, values, and practices that develop around AI’s use. The division of labor is also subject to transformation, as students are positioned not merely as recipients/consumers of AI-driven interventions but as co-leaders, co-designers, and co-governors within educational activity systems.

It is important to recognize the role of contradictions in this framework. As actors in schools seek to use AI to foster inclusion and activism, tensions may arise between the participatory ambitions of student agency and the efficiency-driven logic often embedded in AI systems. Additional friction can arise from the desire for transparency and the inherent opacity of algorithmic decision-making, or between collective agency and institutional inertia. CHAT regards these contradictions as opportunities for dialogue, negotiation, and expansive learning.

Applying CHAT to AI integration in K–12 education shifts one’s perspective from simplistic, tool-centric models to a holistic understanding of how technologies shape/are shaped by social relations and cultural contexts. Within this framework, neither students, teachers, school leaders nor parental actors are a passive user of technology. Instead, they actively participate in the design, implementation, and ongoing negotiation of technological tools, contributing their experiences, needs, and perspectives to the development of educational practices and

policies. This way, a rethinking of bias in the commonly used algorithms could serve more democratic and equitable outcomes. We turn to problematize AI's dominant discourse through CHAT's four tenets: subject, object, rules, and division of labor.

Subject and Object

In CHAT, the "subject" (student or group engaged in an AI-facilitated activity) acts upon an "object" (problem or motive) to produce an outcome. As Artemova (2024) argued, the creative tension between subjects and the problems they seek to address through conscious AI use has received limited attention in educational studies. Within AI-mediated platforms, however, the subject (child–citizen) is reconstituted as an "algorithmic citizen" or a subject "habituated to obedience by design," whose attention, temporality, and civic judgment are compressed and regulated by machinic rhythms (Gardner-McTaggart & Blyth, 2025). From a CHAT perspective, algorithms thus come to shape and constrain the subject's identity and agency within the activity system, narrowing the student role to so-called "active learner," redefining the object of activity as pure pedagogical. Outcomes are reduced to a binary logic of success or failure, thereby eclipsing the child's unique motives, meanings, and civic possibilities.

In civic and educational activity systems, the "object" has historically been oriented towards forming a well-rounded, reflective, and deliberative citizenry. This object is inherently normative and dialogical: it centers on judgment, ethical reasoning, dissent, and the capacity to participate meaningfully in democratic life. Under dominant AI discourses, however, the object becomes subtly but profoundly warped. Whereas democratic education foregrounds deliberation, contestation, and the slow cultivation of judgment, AI-driven systems prioritize responsiveness, frictionless interaction, and metricized outputs. Consequently, the object of activity shifts from the collective and relational work of nurturing democratic judgment to the

optimization of calculable routines and behavioral compliance. In CHAT terms, this reorientation transforms the motive of the activity itself, redefining educational success in terms of what can be predicted, measured, and automated, not what can be argued, questioned, or collectively negotiated.

Rules and Division of Labor

Within CHAT, "rules" and "division of labor" are closely connected ideas that address how an activity (AI use) is carried out and who performs which roles and with what authority. The misalignment among teachers, leaders, and policymakers may generate challenges when defining rules, roles, and responsibilities for AI use, particularly given the ambiguity surrounding accountability (Lindell & Utterberg Moden, 2025). The obedience by AI design signals a profound transformation of these dimensions through anticipatory governmentality: predictive AI platforms seek to pre-empt deviation and dissent before they occur, embedding compliance directly into system architectures. Student obedience operates through architecture, not authority. This paradigm marks a shift from normative regulation to engineered conformity, in which obedience is no longer enforced through explicit sanctions but subtly produced through design choices, defaults, and algorithmic nudges.

Concurrently, the delegation of educational functions, such as grading, feedback, and behavioral monitoring, to AI systems introduces a reconfigured division of labor. Tasks that were previously relational, interpretive, and ethically situated are recast as technical operations performed by machines. In doing so, AI assumes roles that mediate judgment, recognition, and authority, thereby reducing pedagogical communication to a transactional exchange of inputs and outputs. This algorithmic redistribution of labor erodes the psychological contract between teacher and student, weakening the trust, responsibility, and moral reciprocity that underpin educational relationships. From a CHAT perspective, these shifts destabilize the activity system itself, as the social and ethical

foundations of teaching and learning are displaced by computational logics that prioritize efficiency over human judgment and democratic engagement.

The foregrounding of a critical account of instructional AI use in education through these four core concepts of CHAT allows us to put forward an alternative vision for AI integration in school settings. Here, the object is democratized participation and justice. As a mediating artifact AI is directed by humans to amplify collective inquiry and activism. Rules and the division of labor are constructed with students, and contradictions embraced as catalysts for ethical reflection and systemic change. Providing a foundation for moving beyond dominant, efficiency-oriented narratives, this CHAT-informed approach situates AI within dialogical, justice-driven educational communities. Next, we present a participatory re-mediation framework that operationalizes these commitments in K–12 schools.

Toward a Participatory AI Re-Mediation Framework

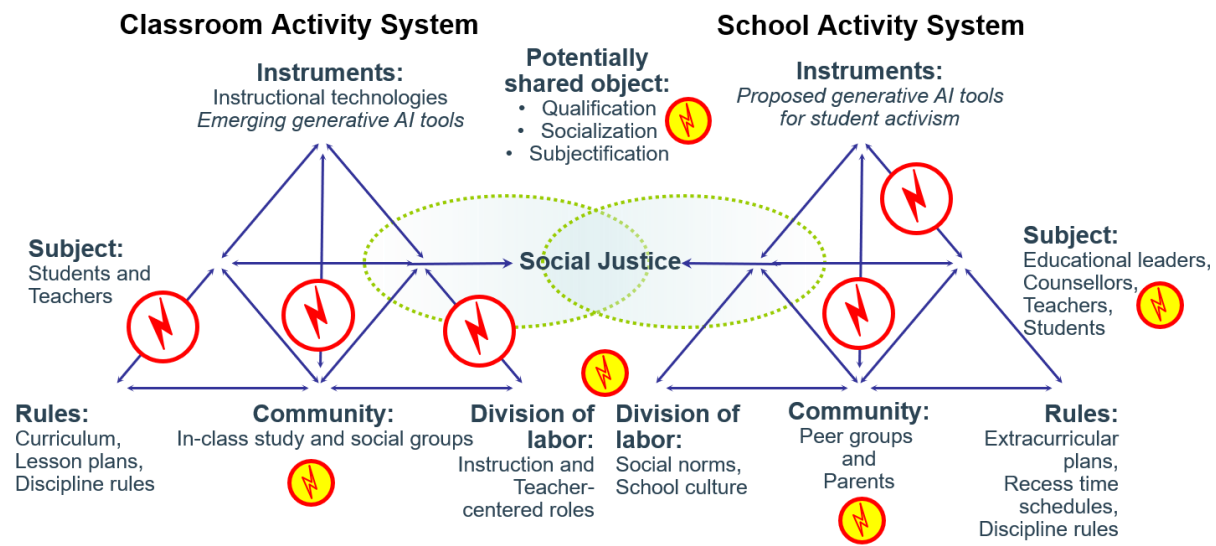
Drawing on the CHAT perspective, we propose a participatory framework for integrating AI into educational leadership that places democratic participation and student activism at its core. Specifically, inspired by Engeström's (2001) third-generation CHAT framework, Figure 1 illustrates how GenAI use could mediate classroom and school activity systems for socially just outcomes. This framework recognizes that main elements of classroom and school activity systems—subjects, objects, mediating artifacts, rules, community, division of labor, and contradictions—require intentional reconfiguration to support SJ, leadership, and collective agency. To that end, we offer a critical appraisal of AI configurations, transformation of rules and norms, redistribution of power, and iterative feedback mechanisms.

Figure 1 operationalizes the CHAT-driven participatory re-mediation framework by

illustrating how student activism, GenAI, and SJ leadership dynamically interact within and across educational activity systems. The two interlinked triangles represent the classroom and school as distinct but overlapping activity systems—each comprising subjects (students, teachers, educational leaders, and counselors), instruments (AI platforms, codes, discussion tools), rules, communities, and divisions of labor. The shaded region in the center denotes the “potentially shared object,” which, per Biesta (2020), encompasses education's foundational purposes of qualification, socialization, and subjectification. These shared objects, which serve as focal points for classroom and school activity systems, depend on the collaborative pursuit of SJ, democratized participation, and collective agency through the co-configuration and ethical governance of AI technologies. The yellow and slightly larger white lightning symbols denote primary and secondary contradictions, reflecting tensions within individual elements and between interacting elements of an activity system. For the sake of clarity, cross-system contradictions are not represented in the model. These tensions often extend to parent–family systems and broader educational ecosystems shaped by AI-related education policies.

Within each activity system, GenAI functions as a mediating artifact that actively reshapes in-class and schoolwide relationships, student/child agency, and the realization of educational purposes. This mediation can either reinforce technocratic norms of compliance and standardization—often narrowing educational aims to qualification alone, a phenomenon described as “learnification”—or, when intentionally reconfigured, amplify student voice, enable authentic participation, and catalyze transformative learning. Therefore, the proposed CHAT framework highlights that each element (subject, community, rules, instruments, division of labor, and shared object) is a source of possibility *and* a site of tension, as the yellow and white tension symbols depict (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



We recognize five primary contradictions (yellow lightning symbols) that are mapped within individual elements, capturing five distinct tensions.

1. Communities (in classroom activity system): Student groups experience tensions over how AI affects their relationships and collective agency based on their personal readiness, technology acceptance, and technology use abilities. These tensions can lead to fragmentation or solidarity within groups where some may feel empowered by AI-driven collaboration while others may feel isolated, left behind, or even threatened by changes to established social patterns.
2. Division of labor (in both classroom and school activity systems): Both teachers and curriculum designers face challenges in adapting their roles and instructional practices to effectively integrate and organize AI within classroom and school environments. New roles require teachers and students to develop familiarity with collective AI use practices, posing substantial tensions.
3. Shared objects of education: Inherent conflicts exist among the purposes of qualification, socialization, and subjectification, especially in navigating these aims with AI mediation and without. Under the influence of dominant AI-use discourses, educators tend to prioritize instructional goals over subjectification and socialization ends (Piazza et al., 2025).
4. Communities (in school activity system): Peer groups and parents grapple with the potential risks and ethical dilemmas posed by AI, particularly as it impacts informal peer dynamics and parental authority. These tensions may reflect concerns about privacy, surveillance, and loss of control, as well as fears that AI-driven student empowerment could undermine social hierarchies, challenge parental influence, or disrupt peer group norms. As students leverage AI tools to advocate for their rights, report bullying, or organize activism, parents and peers may experience uncertainty or resistance, prompting critical conversations about ethical safeguards for ensuring that technology serves the common good.
5. Subjects (in school activity system): Groups of individuals experience tensions over how GenAI should be used

to pursue school-level “objects” (e.g., student activism, rights, democratic participation). Greater student visibility and self-advocacy can complicate issues of power, responsibility, and ethical technology use, requiring educators to balance institutional priorities with increasing demands for inclusion, transparency, and shared decision-making.

Unlike the abovementioned primary contradictions, whose tensions are experienced within relevant elements, secondary contradictions (white lightning symbols) arise between elements. Five key tensions follow.

1. Between subjects and rules (in classroom activity system): Students’ aims and aspirations may conflict with classroom rules and disciplinary norms determined by school authorities, especially as AI introduces new possibilities for agency and activism. Who sets the rules and for whom may be a discussion topic for older student groups.
2. Between mediating instrument (AI) and community (in classroom activity system): Student groups may interpret and respond to AI in diverse ways, resulting in varying degrees of acceptance, skepticism, or resistance to its role in pursuing shared educational objects. AI usage that informs students about their rights, responsibilities, and social opportunities can spark debate and reflection on fairness, inclusion, or the legitimacy of existing group norms. This diversity is an opportunity for the emergence of new social dynamics like alternative student clubs and activity teams.
3. Between mediating instrument (AI) and division of labor (in classroom activity system): Teachers may not be fully prepared or willing to adapt their pedagogical practices to the demands and potentials of AI, leading to tension in

classroom organization and authority.

When the demand is not from educational authorities, bottom-up students’ demands for AI-facilitated alternative classroom practices may produce tension for unprepared teachers.

4. Between mediating instrument (AI) and community (in school activity system): The use of AI for rights and activism can generate substantial tension, especially where it empowers students to recognize and assert their rights in ways that challenge in-school bullying, peer group dynamics, and parental authority. This contradiction is especially significant, as it has the potential to disrupt social structures and provoke resistance from peers or parents.
5. Between mediating instrument (AI) and subjects (in school activity system): Adults may face serious tensions as AI-empowered students develop awareness and advocacy for child rights, democratic participation, and agency—thereby challenging existing school culture. This contradiction is pronounced for new actors who lack agency in stratified systems yet are intent on claiming power and agency.

The framework treats these obstacles as productive sites for dialogue, ethical reflection, and expansive learning. For example, when students’ aspirations for agency collide with restrictive classroom rules or opaque algorithmic decision-making, opportunities arise for renegotiating norms, co-designing more transparent systems, and redistributing decision-making authority. Similarly, the tensions between AI-driven efficiency and culturally responsive practices provoke critical conversations about the values underlying educational technology and invite the reconfiguration of rules and roles.

By foregrounding co-configuration, ethical transformation of rules and norms, redistribution of power, and iterative feedback mechanisms, the figure exemplifies how educational communities

can leverage AI as a catalyst for democratized leadership and SJ. Students are positioned not as passive recipients of technology but as co-actors, co-designers, and co-governors in the ongoing evolution of educational practices. The CHAT-informed approach thus moves beyond the limitations of technocratic AI integration, reclaiming agency for all stakeholders and ensuring that technological innovation serves the broader goals of equity, inclusion, and collective world-building. In sum, the figure depicts a dynamic, participatory process where contradictions within and between activity systems drive continuous reflection, negotiation, and transformation. When governed through collaborative and justice-oriented frameworks, AI becomes a means of amplifying student activism, redistributing power, and fostering dialogical spaces for ethical inquiry and democratic participation in schools.

Co-configuring AI tools require students, educators, and community members to be active partners in the design, implementation, and continuous refinement of AI systems. In the context of CHAT, this process broadens the role of the subject, shifting from passive user to a highly engaged co-designer and decision-maker (Penuel et al., 2025). The object of activity also expands, moving away from narrow academic outcomes to intentionally incorporate equity, inclusion, and student empowerment. By prioritizing transparency and elevating marginalized perspectives, co-configuration ensures that AI reflects and advances the educational community's values (Banoğlu & Mullen, 2025).

Redistributing power addresses the division of labor in educational settings. This framework positions students as co-leaders and co-designers in AI governance and school decision-making. When empowered as equal partners in the design and oversight of AI tools, their agency is acknowledged and actualized. A redistribution of power (Fraser, 1998) supports the development of a genuinely inclusive community, ensuring that all voices, especially those belonging to

historically marginalized populations, are heard and have influence (Souchet, 2025).

Iterative feedback and responsiveness are vital for sustaining the transformative potential of participatory AI integration (Penuel et al., 2025). CHAT highlights the importance of ongoing reflection and adaptation in response to contradictions and emerging tensions within the activity system. By establishing regular mechanisms for feedback, schools can ensure that students' experiences and perspectives are accounted for in AI development and educational policy. Responsiveness to this feedback is essential for maintaining trust, relevance, and equity, and for treating contradictions as opportunities for expansive learning, human development, and ongoing improvement.

By intentionally re-mediating the core elements of the educational activity system, this CHAT-informed participatory framework potentially creates the conditions for AI to serve as a catalyst for democratic leadership, authentic advocacy, and collective world-building in K–12 schools. Through these practices, educational communities can develop the capacity to overcome the limitations of technocratic AI integration while reclaiming agency in the pursuit of SJ and equity.

Discussion

The participatory AI re-mediation framework offers a substantive departure from prevailing mechanistic and technocratic approaches to educational technology (Gardner-McTaggart & Blyth, 2025). By applying CHAT, one can embark on shifting the analytical focus away from AI as a neutral tool for individual learning gains toward a mediating artifact embedded within complex and dynamic contexts of schooling. This perspective brings into relief the ways in which AI integration both reflects and reconfigures subjects, objects, rules, community relationships, and labor divisions that inhabit educational activity systems.

A central contribution of this framework lies in its insistence on student agency and collective action as foundational to just and democratic

schooling. The co-configuration of AI tools by students and educators challenges the belief that technology design is the exclusive domain of experts or vendors. Alternatively, technology design empowers students—particularly marginalized populations—to shape the very technologies mediating their educational experiences (Banoğlu & Mullen, 2025). This approach not only amplifies diverse perspectives but also redefines the object of educational activity to encompass SJ, advocacy, and empowerment.

The transformation of rules and norms through dialogic engagement ensures that AI adoption does not simply reinforce existing structures of standardization or surveillance. By involving all community stakeholders in the ethical governance of AI, schools can create more inclusive, responsive, and culturally sensitive environments (Elbakoury, 2025). This process also highlights the significance of contradictions—such as tensions between efficiency and equity or institutional inertia and the push for innovation—as opportunities for reflective practice and systemic change.

Redistributing power within the activity system, most notably through the elevation of student as co-leader, marks a decisive shift toward participatory democracy in school governance (Souchet, 2025). When students have genuine (not symbolic) authority in AI decision-making, the division of labor is restructured in ways that foster mutual respect, shared responsibility, and authentic leadership development (Örücü et al., 2026)

The institutionalization of iterative feedback and responsiveness helps ensure that AI integration remains adaptive to the needs and aspirations of educational communities (Wymer, 2025). By embedding mechanisms for regular reflection and course correction, schools can address emerging challenges, build trust, and cultivate a culture of continuous improvement (Penuel et al., 2025). Collectively, these interventions move beyond surface-level critiques of AI in education toward practical strategies for reimagining technological innovation as a vehicle

for equity, empowerment, and collective human flourishing.

Conclusion

This conceptual analysis demonstrates that the trajectory of AI integration in education is shaped by values, practices, and power relations underpinning schools, globally. Advancing a CHAT-informed participatory framework that repositions AI governance as a collective that centers co-configuration, ethical transformation, power-sharing, and ongoing responsiveness in educational leadership, we offer a promising alternative to dominant, efficiency-oriented models.

By foregrounding dialogical spaces, student activism, and democratic participation, this approach reclaims AI as a tool for building more socially just and inclusive educational communities. When students, educators, and community members participate as co-designers and co-governors of AI systems, technology becomes an equity tool for advancing SJ and disrupting existing inequalities through reducing the biases embedded in AI tools and flawed algorithms; frequently constructed by hegemonic discourses.

Beyond its conceptual contribution, the proposed CHAT-informed participatory framework provides a theoretical justification for employing AI in ways that strengthen student agency, democratic participation, and dialogical spaces among all educational actors across diverse cultural, national, and educational contexts. In doing so, it moves beyond dominant AI-in-education paradigms centred on learnification and individualized AI tutoring by repositioning AI as a catalyst for collective inquiry, democratic deliberation, and socially just educational transformation.

This perspective recognises that meaningful conflict identification and resolution require the active participation of students, educators, school leaders, and communities, while acknowledging that educational stages, cultural values, and national policy environments produce context-specific challenges that cannot be addressed

through universal AI solutions. Rather than focusing solely on learning optimization, AI is conceptualized as a mediating tool that can support the identification, negotiation, and resolution of authentic educational conflicts through AI-informed student activism and collaborative problem-solving. Such conflicts may include peer bullying, cyberbullying, child abuse and neglect, discrimination against underrepresented students and their families, social exclusion, school violence, mental health concerns, and the marginalization of student voices in school decision-making.

Accordingly, we argue for the development of a new generation of AI tools explicitly designed to support the democratic identification, mediation, and resolution of educational conflicts from perspectives of student agency and participatory school leadership, rather than primarily serving instructional optimization and individualized tutoring. In this regard, we contend that the prevailing commercialized AI agenda has largely positioned social justice within the domains of *de jure* policy reforms and instructional optimization, emphasizing

regulatory adjustments and equitable access to AI while overlooking the more complex *de facto* realities of inequality experienced within schools. We therefore make the case for reclaiming AI as a democratic and emancipatory resource for engaging with these lived realities, enabling educational leaders, students, educators, and other stakeholders to co-construct contextually responsive, participatory, and equitable educational practices.

Finally, the re-mediation of AI in education requires commitment to equity, transparency, and collective agency at all levels of the activity system. By enacting these principles, educational leaders and practitioners can harness AI's transformative potential, seeking to ensure that technological innovation genuinely serves emancipatory ends. This way, we reckon, students can be engaged as agents of social transformation towards parity of participation, recognition, and equal redistribution of resources and power. Schools as places of authentic dialogue and shared leadership could grow into collective world-building for all.

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Invest \$500, yield \$50,000: How to use limited funds to help underrepresented teacher candidates

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Abstract

Teachers in U.S. public schools are less diverse than their students. There is evidence that teacher-student diversity gaps harm students, and that schools are keenly interested in hiring a more diverse teacher workforce. We describe results from a foundation-backed program at a university-based teacher preparation program that sought to increase racial and ethnic diversity of graduates by providing direct cash support via randomized lotteries. We wanted to know what “historically underrepresented” teacher candidates needed, and what they would do if provided modest cash awards. Results indicate that a high percentage of teacher candidates worked while pursuing teacher education; a high percentage of teacher candidates reported carried substantial debt while in school; and, among teacher candidates provided lottery-allocated funds, no one spent money on certification costs. The authors calculate the cost of delayed certification for program completers, and suggest that a relatively modest investment (around \$500) in teacher candidates can speed completers to certification and teaching jobs (\$50,000).

Introduction

Here is the main point of our paper, in one sentence:

If you're trying to support historically underrepresented teacher candidates, spend some of your first dollars on certification fees, testing, and/or required fingerprinting.

For decades, the underrepresentation of teachers of color has been a serious problem in our public schools. An unrepresentative teacher workforce means students may struggle to find their cultures or identities in the fabric of their schools and may suffer academically (see, for example, [Dee, 2004](#); [Blazar, 2024](#); [Gershenson et al., 2022](#)). The U.S. Department of Education noted in its summary of research on teachers of color that “...teachers of color can benefit all students [and] can also help to address educator shortages” ([U.S. Department of Education, 2024, 2](#)).

It's a known, longstanding problem with a straightforward answer: *Schools need to hire more diverse teachers*. Why haven't they? It's a big, important question – and we don't present anything approaching a comprehensive answer here. Perry ([2020](#)) suggested a variety of push-pull factors, including problems with recruitment into the profession, high costs of entry, and retention in the work. Our study examines one small aspect of teacher supply mentioned by Perry: high costs of entry, particularly getting certified to teach. Here, we explore what happens when teacher candidates are provided modest cash awards, with the intent of reducing those high entry costs.

First, some definitions. We use the term “historically underrepresented” as defined by the New York State Education Department ([2023, 8](#)): “...historically underrepresented in the teaching field includes American Indian and Alaskan Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian and

Pacific Islander; Black/African American; and Hispanic/Latino.” We also use the term “teacher candidate” to mean any student enrolled in a university-based teacher preparation program leading to initial-level state licensure to teach in public schools. A teacher candidate might be taking classes (only), may be taking classes and also doing field experience hours, or may be out in a school doing full-time student teaching. A teacher candidate might be an undergraduate or a graduate student, and could be pursuing certification in any field our university offers. And if useful to know, we work in New York State, at the State University of New York (SUNY) Brockport, a comprehensive, mid-size public university in Western New York, not far from Rochester. The school communities we serve include rural, suburban, and urban settings, along with charter schools and (occasionally) private and/or specialty schools. The specifics of our contexts may not match those of all readers, but we are confident our findings will prove worthy of consideration by programs elsewhere.

Below we’ll explore briefly the literature on representation in teaching and why teacher preparation programs need to graduate more historically underrepresented teacher candidates. Then we’ll explore some of the experimental work we have done over the last eight years, allocating cash awards to teacher candidates by lottery and asking teacher candidates what they spent extra money on. Next, we’ll explain why we recommend spending whatever money your teacher preparation might have available – even small dollars or vouchers can help – on certification fees, testing, and/or fingerprinting. This paper presents just one small – but unexpected – finding from our overall exploration of the causal impact of cash awards on retention, program completion, and graduation of historically underrepresented teacher candidates.

Significance of the work

This study seeks to raise awareness of how financial challenges, even seemingly small ones,

can negatively impact certification (hence workforce entry) among underrepresented teacher candidates, and what university programs might do to mitigate those challenges. Our results suggest that modest investments in certification costs can speed entry of teacher candidates into the profession, potentially yielding both financial gains for teacher candidates themselves and increasing supply of diverse teacher candidates for area public schools.

Literature review

Public school teaching has a representation problem, especially by race and ethnicity. Who teaches, and who learns, are different – and have been so for generations ([Carver-Thomas et al., 2025](#)). Nationwide, about 79% of public school teachers identified as white in 2017-18, compared to just 47% of students ([Pew, 2021](#)). Here in New York state, teachers are also mostly white (77% in 2021-22; [Education Trust, 2022](#)), while students are more racially and ethnically diverse. In 2024-25, P-12 students in New York state included 58% of students who identified as American Indian and Alaskan Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander; Black/African American; and Hispanic/Latino ([NYSED, 2025](#); [Education First, 2021](#); [NYSED, 2020](#)).

The representation problem in teaching emerges early – well before teachers are working in schools. SUNY Brockport, our university home, has a teacher candidate body even less diverse than New York or the nation as a whole. In 2020-21 (most recent available data; [SUNY Brockport Division of Institutional Research & Analysis, 2021](#)), just 14% of our teacher candidates were from historically underrepresented backgrounds (see Table 1, below). If SUNY Brockport did nothing, and simply graduated all the teacher candidates in our programs over the years ahead, the teacher representation problem in our area would get even worse. See Table 1: Enrollment of Historically Underrepresented Teacher Candidates at SUNY Brockport (NY), 2016-2021.

Table 1. Enrollment of historically underrepresented teacher candidates at SUNY Brockport (NY), 2016-21.

SUNY Brockport	2016-17 Enrollment (%)	2017-18 Enrollment (%)	2018-19 Enrollment (%)	2019-20 Enrollment (%)	2020-21 Enrollment (%)
Teacher candidates identified as American Indian and Alaskan Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander; Black/African American; and Hispanic/Latino	59 (10%)	68 (12%)	58 (11%)	80 (12%)	131 (14%)

The need to expand teacher representation in our area became a point of substantial discussion a decade ago, when a Rochester-based newspaper, the *Democrat and Chronicle*, published a searchable database of public school teachers in New York State (2019). The database could tell anyone interested about the racial and ethnic backgrounds of teachers working in individual schools or districts. The results were eye-opening; Monroe County (SUNY Brockport's home) had three *entire school districts* who employed one or fewer non-white teachers. And *every district in the county* (n=18) save the Rochester City School District had a teaching workforce with less than ten percent historically underrepresented teachers. The lack of teacher diversity in our area was clear and unignorable. Everyone agreed: something had to be done.

It's worth pausing to ask why. Why is a representation gap between teachers and students a problem? It's problematic on a number of levels – including direct harm to Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) students including, as documented by research, disproportionate referrals for special education; disproportionately low referrals to gifted education; harsh discipline including suspensions; and generations-long disparities in student outcomes such as attainment, grades, dropout rates, and college

matriculation (Egalite, Kisida, & Winters, 2015; Barshay, 2016; Figlio, 2017; Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Isenberg et al., 2014). There is also recent work that has affirmed that P-12 student performance (of all backgrounds) can be positively impacted when historically underrepresented teachers are in the classroom (see Gershenson et al., 2022; Goldhaber, Theobald, & Tien, 2015; Lindsay, Blom & Tilsley, 2015).

Strategies Adopted to Increase Teacher Representation

School districts have tried to improve teacher representation in recent years, using a variety of strategies. Hansen, Quintero & Feng (2018) suggested that school districts could attract diverse teachers through four explicit mechanisms: signing bonuses, student loan forgiveness, funds for relocation, and finder's fees for existing staff. Virtually all research on teacher diversity focuses on a single, shared question: *How do we expand the diversity of the teacher pipeline in the first place?* Some suggestions make sense in theory (see summary from the Learning Policy Institute, 2018) such as “Providing state funding for intensive teacher

preparation support programs offering ongoing mentorship, tutoring, exam stipends, job placement services, and other supports to ensure teachers of color successfully complete preparation programs” – but we have little empirical evidence concerning needed details or impacts. *How much funding? Spent on what, exactly?*

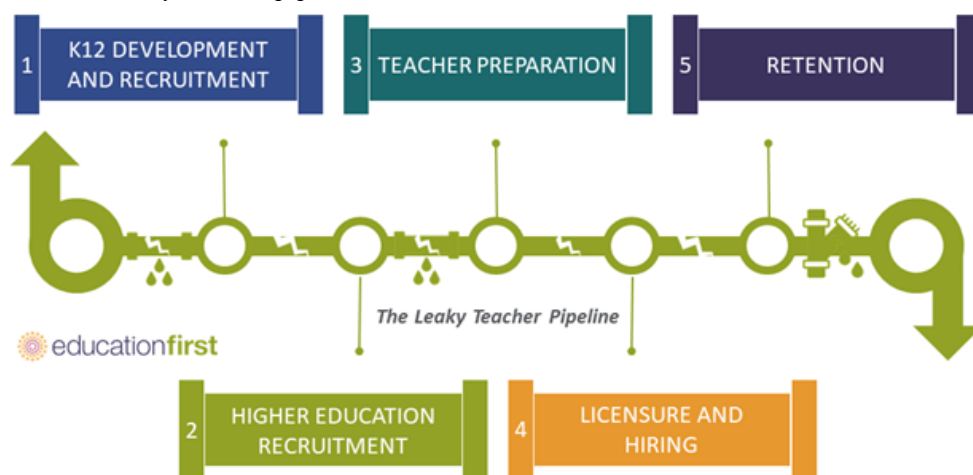
We simply don’t know with any kind of precision. Some work has been done suggesting that providing scholarships for pre-service teachers can increase supply; Podolsky & Kini (2016) found that scholarships, ranging from \$5,000/year (in Illinois) to \$30,000/year (the “Woodrow Wilson Fellowship”) were effective recruitment tools, if very expensive. Current work on teacher residencies, paid apprenticeships, and grow-your-own pathways shows promise (see, e.g., Yun & Fitz, 2025; Dennis, DeMoss & Mansukhani, 2021). One large-scale study on the federal TEACH grant (which pays \$4,000/year for up to four years) found recipients 7% more likely than their peers to continue in and complete teacher preparation programs (Morris, 2025). In any case, few teacher preparation programs have the resources to develop large-dollar scholarships or fellowships on their own (most are state- or private-foundation efforts that cost millions of dollars annually (See Espinoza et al., 2018; Podolsky et al., 2016).

Substantial work has also been done on *current* teachers, exploring whether incentives such as salary increases, ‘merit pay’, or other adjustments to pay or working conditions improve retention (see Pham, Nguyen & Springer, 2021 for a good survey; they find modest but positive associations between financial incentives and teacher retention). But there’s been little clarity on where to direct resources to attract candidates into the pipeline, and retain or graduate them into the workforce.

Even when programs do recruit underrepresented teacher candidates, they often lose them before they begin the work. Education First (2018) noted that one of the most formidable problems in teacher representation is attrition, what they call a “leaky pipeline” of teacher education for historically underrepresented teachers. Many are interested and motivated to do the work – but barriers can turn them away before they enter preparation programs, before they finish, or just as they begin teaching. Their report identified five different leakage points in the teacher education pipeline:

1. K12 Development and recruitment
2. Higher education recruitment
3. Teacher preparation
4. Licensure & hiring
5. Retention

Figure 1. The leaky teacher pipeline.



Source: Education First. (2021). [Diverse Perspectives](#): Findings and Strategies to Improve Teacher Diversity in Rochester, NY.

It's possible to plug leaks with resources. Resources, including but not limited to cash, can help universities expand recruitment, can help students pay tuition or buy transportation, and can help graduating seniors pay for licensure exams and certification fees. Resources, even modest amounts, can make a world of difference for teacher candidates trying to make it all the way to certification and work.

One area of substantial scholarly interest is #4, Licensure and hiring. Castro and Taylor (2024) suggest that licensure requirements, including certification exams, are responsible for both a "massive exodus of Black teachers" in prior decades, and for ongoing "shortages of racially minoritized teachers" (2024, 118). They further note that many certification exams "disproportionately fail [Teachers of Color]," given anti-Black roots and dubious predictive validity. James et al. (2020) outlined strategies several Historically Black Colleges and Universities used to recruit candidates into teaching, including "Financial aid awards" and "In-house scholarships / grants" as two top strategies with potential positive impact. Their study did not, however, distinguish general financial aid from awards targeting licensure or certification exam costs, nor did the authors find significant impacts on candidates who had received either financial aid or scholarships, perhaps given limited statistical power due to small sample sizes (2020, 91-93).

Methods & Data Sources

In 2021, we (the authors) were awarded funds from a local philanthropic organization, the [Max and Marian Farash Charitable Foundation](#). We knew we cared—and schools and school districts cared—about improved teacher representation in our local schools. But we weren't sure how to use dollars most effectively to support teacher candidates. So, before we distributed any money, we asked. In Fall 2021, we surveyed SUNY Brockport's 1,000+ teacher candidates to identify what resources they would identify as helpful for degree progress and retention in the field of teaching (response rate $n=161$, or

roughly 16%). We were particularly interested in the responses of candidates who self-identified as "historically underrepresented in teaching" (per [NYSED, 2023](#), definition; $n=30$, virtually all identified financial concerns for which targeted support could help. Here are a few representative comments from teacher candidates who identified as "historically underrepresented:" comments:

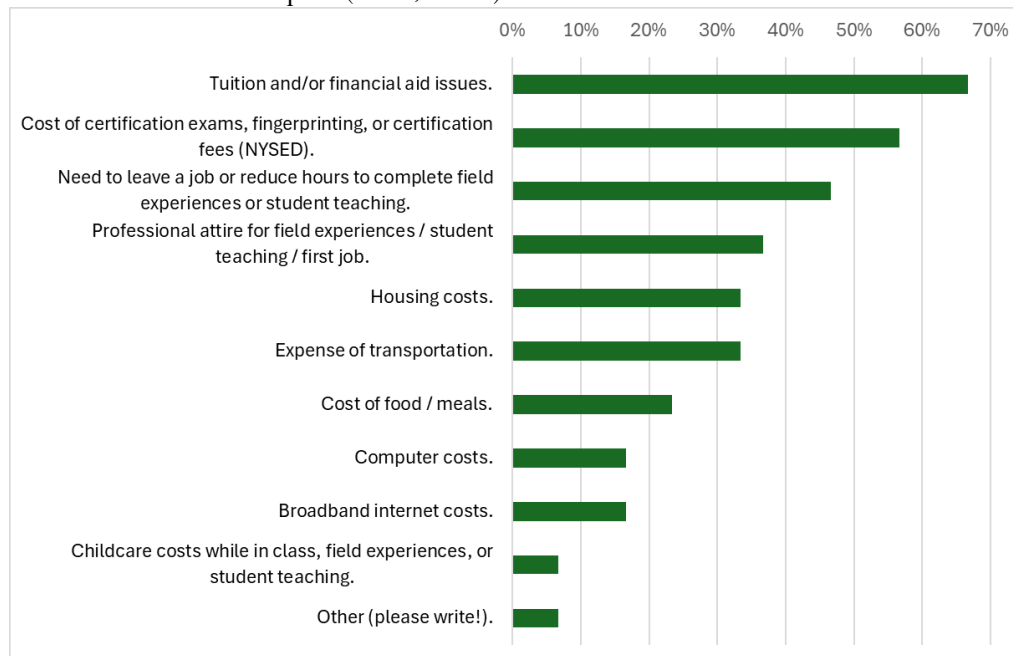
- *Coverage for required examinations would be amazing. Once you get into a program, you don't realize how many extra costs there will be just to get certified at the end.*
- *Help people be able to have what they need to be able to dress appropriately for their placements in the field.*
- *As a commuter student, I would prioritize spending money on transportation costs / wear and tear on your car.*
- *I'd most benefit from some form of compensation for time spent in observations! I'm a substitute teacher in [school district], but on Tuesdays I have to come to school, at the school I work at, to observe/help out for no money.*
- *Many of us had to reduce our work hours to focus on student teaching and/or leave jobs. Going four-five months without a steady paycheck is nerve-racking and stressful. How can we focus on pursuing our certification and still pay off our expenses if we don't have jobs?*
- *Balancing classes, work, and a student teaching placement was difficult and a lot of unforeseen expenses did come up - car maintenance and gas, purchasing materials for lessons, and adding money to printing accounts at the Brockport Library. Giving teachers a stipend of money to spend on their placements each semester would be helpful. Personally, I wanted to create an impactful and memorable experience for all the students I taught in my placements. This almost always meant procuring outside materials and spending more days at school to make the activity work. Fifty extra dollars during those semesters could've secured some really cool activities for my students and given me a little bit more financial security.*

- *Paying for certification exams!! People put them off for longer than they should because of the financial ramifications of them. We often can't take them when we're "supposed" to take them because we don't have money - due to reduced hours from working at field placements or having no income or job while student teaching.*
- *Student teaching is a full time job in itself just with classroom commitments. This does not include*

any outside time spent on exams, studying for exams, preparing for class time, seminars, [etc.].

Figure 2 (below) shows what our historically underrepresented teacher candidates told us in response to the following prompt: *"This question is about financial challenges for teacher candidates. Please review the list below and select all that have impacted your path to certification."*

Figure 2. Perceived financial challenges among historically underrepresented teacher candidates enrolled at SUNY Brockport (2021; $n=30$).



Source: Authors.

The top concern among these candidates was, not surprisingly, tuition and/or financial aid. [SUNY Brockport tuition](#) is not cheap, even if it is more affordable than area private universities. In-state undergraduate student tuition was at the time of our survey \$7,070/year (2021-22 academic year); for graduate students it was \$11,540. However, despite this being a major concern for teacher candidates, we knew directing philanthropic dollars (such as private foundation support) towards individual tuition bills would be terribly inefficient. Costs would be incredibly high to reach even a modest number of candidates, and in any case we didn't have

enough funding to make much of a difference in tuition for thirty (or forty, or fifty) teacher candidates.

Note that second category: "Cost of certification exams, fingerprinting, or certification fees (NYSED)." More than half of our respondents told us those costs were (or would be) a challenge. How much money are we talking about? While the total number of exams vary a bit, here's the minimum cost a teacher candidate in our Childhood Inclusive Education program (our largest at SUNY Brockport) would need to pay for:

Table 2. Cost of certification exams, fingerprinting, and certification fees (NY), 2021

Item	Cost
<i>Exam:</i> Educating All Students	\$80.00
<i>Exam:</i> Multi-subject (1-6)	\$161.00
Fingerprinting fee	\$104.50
Certification fee	\$50.00
Total	\$395.50

Source: New York State Education Department.

Teacher candidates adding another certification area (for example, Students with Disabilities/special education) must pass an additional test (\$122.00) and pay an additional certification fee (\$50.00). These “extra” costs are common, as multiple certifications are often useful in seeking and gaining employment. Many adolescence teacher candidates (in grades 7-12) and bilingual teacher candidates must spend \$567.50 or more to get certified, as they have additional required exams. Moreover, anyone who fails a test must pay to retake it until they pass.

Keep certification costs in mind; they’re an important part of this story.

Overall, financial needs clearly varied, candidate by candidate. We knew we couldn’t meet them all. We had relatively modest grant funding – roughly \$100,000 in 2021-22 (and another \$100,000 the following year) – and knew that grant funds only go so far, and always disappear eventually. Nor were we entirely sure how to prioritize or rank-order needs that merited support (and which not). We suspected needs for support would quickly outstrip our ability to provide funding. So, following a long tradition of researchers who didn’t know what to do, we decided to run an experiment. We made variable amounts of funding available to teacher candidates, told them they could apply for one or more lotteries that would allocate them, and then collected data on how funds were used and whether they had measurable impacts on outcomes we cared about.

We settled on a lottery-based allocation of grant funds because a lottery seemed ...fair. Or perhaps, the least-bad way to go about allocating scarce resources. Importantly, lottery allocations of goods allow researchers to draw causal inferences about the impact of the allocation (for a good overview, see [Hill et al., 2023](#); see also [Murnane & Willett, 2010](#); [AERA, 2007](#)). Allocating funds by lottery facilitates econometric analyses, analogous to random-assignment studies of (perhaps most famously) charter schools ([Cohodes & Roy, 2024](#)). The treatment and control groups, though modest n-size, shared similar characteristics in most respects, except in the lottery-allocated award. We anticipated that we would be able to draw informed conclusions about causal impact that could be powerful for discussions of how to improve teacher diversity at scale. We cared about what teacher candidates spent the money on – and also cared about whether it made a difference in program retention, graduation, certification and employment.

How did our lotteries work? First, we put grant funds into three different bins; “historically underrepresented” teacher candidates could apply for any/all of them as their background and program status allowed:

- **Candidate support fund:** Any teacher candidate could apply. Candidates could request between \$0-1,000. Candidates were not required to provide justification for requested amount.

- **Clinical fellows fund (field experience):** Only those completing 50-hour field experiences in a local school could apply. Those selected were paid an adjusted living wage based on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Living Wage Calculator ([n.d.](#); in 2021-22, this was \$14.55/hour for single Monroe County (NY) residents; in 2022-23, this was adjusted to \$17.10/hour) for 50 hours of Field Experiences in schools during the chosen semester (\$727.50 in 2021-22; \$855.00 in 2022-23).
- **Clinical fellows fund (student teaching):** Only those completing full-time student teaching in a local school could apply. Selected teacher candidates were paid an adjusted living wage based on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Living Wage Calculator ([n.d.](#); in 2021-22, this was \$14.55/hour for single Monroe County (NY) resident; in 2022-23, this was adjusted to \$17.10/hour) for 40 hours/week, 15 weeks of full-time student teaching (\$8,730 in 2021-22; \$10,284 in 2022-23).

All candidates entering a lottery agreed to participate in surveys and share data during the study term (3 years, or until first teaching job offer) whether funded or not. Applicants were initially screened for award eligibility, those identified as eligible were assigned a three-digit identifier (such as 001, 002, etc.), and then we used a randomized list generator with those identifiers (using www.random.org/lists) to select candidates for funding (or not). Those in

the first half of the randomized list were selected for funding and comprised the ~~receiving funding~~ ~~were the~~ "treatment" group; those in the second half of the randomized list were not selected for funding and comprised the ~~not receiving funding~~ ~~were the~~ "control" group. The two groups, though modest in size, were similar in race and ethnicity (though not similar to all teacher candidates at Brockport; this study only presents findings among those "historically underrepresented in teaching." Recipients were paid according to their requests. Outcome variables were tracked for all lottery entrants for up to 3 years or until first teaching job offer, whichever came first.

The use of lotteries to distribute funding allowed us to test whether various amounts or purposes had detectable effects. We'll be reporting on those outcomes elsewhere over time; for this paper, we are simply presenting what these teacher candidates told us they did with award money. And in one area in particular, their answers surprised us.

Research Question

In this paper we consider: *For what purpose(s) would underrepresented teacher candidates enrolled in university-based teacher preparation programs use direct cash support?*

Findings

We begin with summary descriptions of applicant backgrounds. Who applied for support and responded to our surveys? See Tables 3-5, below.

Table 3. Lottery applicants and survey respondents, historically underrepresented teacher candidates at SUNY Brockport, 2022-23. Table includes four semesters of survey data (SP22, FA22, SP23 & FA23), and 97 total survey responses from 58 different teacher candidates. *Source:* Authors.

Semester	Responses
Spring 2022	25
Fall 2022	28
Spring 2023	18
Fall 2023	26

Table 4. Racial and ethnic backgrounds of historically underrepresented teacher candidates applying for lottery-allocated support (N=58) and university-wide enrollment, SUNY Brockport, 2022-23. *Source:* Authors and SUNY Brockport Institutional Research & Analysis.

Racial & ethnic background	Applicant pool	SUNY Brockport university enrollment
American Indian / Alaska Native	7.2%	0.5%
Asian	17.5%	2.9%
Black / African American	50.5%	11.7%
Multiracial	17.5%	2.9%
White	25.8%	74.0%
Hispanic / Latino	39.0%	7.8%

Table 5. Economic backgrounds of historically underrepresented teacher candidates applying for lottery-allocated support, SUNY Brockport, 2022-23 (N=58). *Source:* Authors.

Survey prompt	Percent	
<i>Economically disadvantaged?</i> ¹		
	Yes	36.6%
	No	63.4%
<i>Currently employed?</i>		
	Yes	84.5%
	No	15.5%
<i>Hours worked per week among those employed</i>		
	0-10	16.4%
	11-20	36.1%
	21-30	18.0%
	31-40	23.0%
	40 or more	6.6%
<i>Do you have any debt?</i>		
	Yes	79.2%
	No	20.8%
<i>Average debt among those with debt</i>		\$23,914
<i>I could come up with \$400 in the event of a financial emergency.</i>		
	Very likely	19.7%
	Somewhat likely	39.4%
	Somewhat unlikely	21.1%
	Very unlikely	19.7%

¹ “Economically disadvantaged” included, under [NYSED, 2023](#) definitions, any candidate who is “a member of a household where the total annual income of such household is equal to or less than 185 percent of the amount under the annual United States Department of Health and Human Services poverty guidelines for the applicant’s family size.” This also included students who fell into any of these four categories:

- o The student’s family is the recipient of: (1) Family Assistance Program Aid; or (2) Safety Net Assistance through the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, or a county department of social services; or (3) family day care payments through New York State Office of Children and Family Services Assistance, or a county department of social services; or
- o The student is living with foster parents who do not provide support for college, and no monies are provided from the natural parents; or
- o The student is a ward of the State or a county; or
- o The student is enrolled or was enrolled in a New York State Sponsored Opportunity Program (i.e., Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP), Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK), College Discovery (CD)).

Our rough, back-of-the-envelope summary of our lottery applicants is that they were racially and ethnically diverse (more so than teacher candidates generally or the student body at SUNY Brockport); about a third were economically disadvantaged; most worked part-time jobs; and most carried a substantial amount of debt. We included the last prompt in Table 5 (*I could come up with \$400 in the event of a financial emergency*) because it's a question asked by the U.S. Federal Reserve's *Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking*, and is a common marker of perceived ability to weather immediate financial hardship. It also happens to be roughly the same

amount of money teacher candidates need to pay for various certification costs. Interestingly, while almost 80% of our respondents carried debt, more than half told us it was "very likely" or "somewhat likely" they could come up with \$400 in the event of a financial emergency. We didn't ask – but given their reported debt loads, it made us wonder whether they anticipated covering that emergency \$400 with a credit card, adding to their overall debt?

Who was ultimately awarded funding via lottery? Table 6 shows the number and amount of awards allocated by lottery over the four-semester study period:

Table 6. Lottery award numbers and amounts, SUNY Brockport, 2022-23 (N=97 applications). *Source:* Authors.

Award amount	# awarded	% of applicants
\$0.00	35	36.1%
\$727.50	9	9.3%
\$1,000.00	30	30.9%
\$1,475.00	14	14.4%
\$8,730.00	4	4.1%
\$10,284.00	5	5.2%
Total awarded	\$143,537.50	

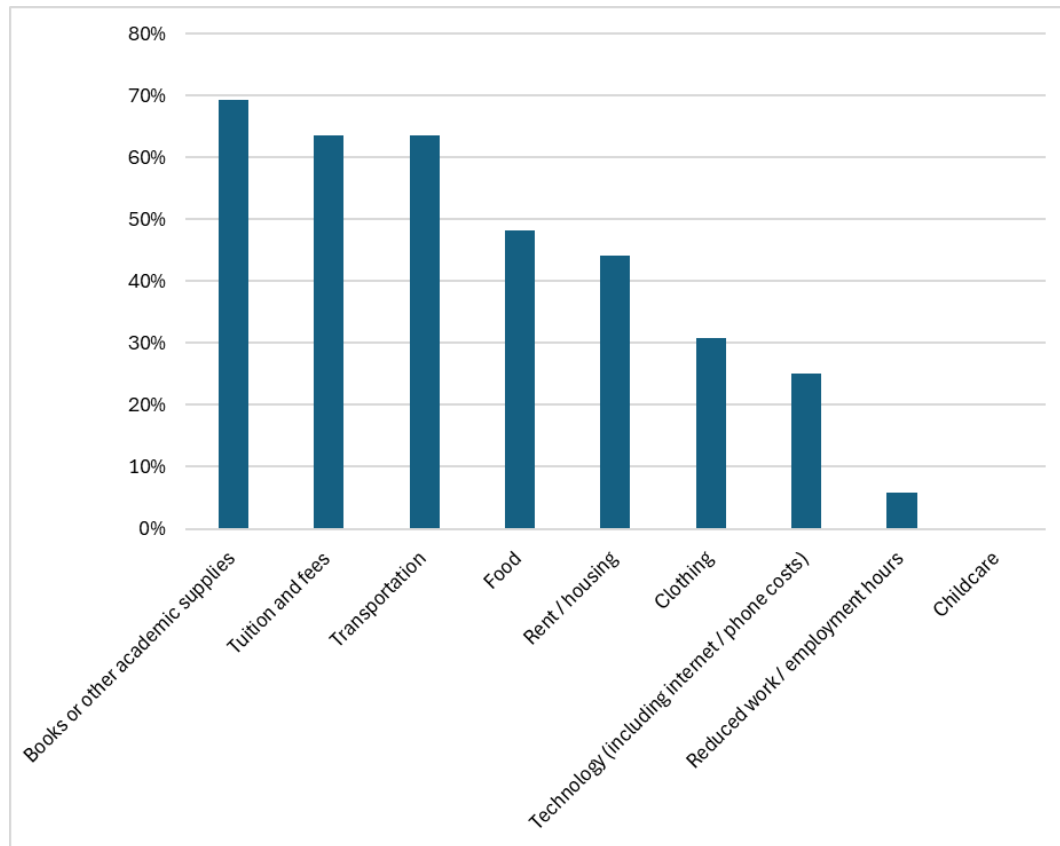
The most common amount awarded to teacher candidates was zero dollars ($n=35$), which was valuable to us as our control group – though surely disappointing for those who had applied. Second and third most common amounts awarded were \$1,000 ($n=30$) and \$1,475 ($n=14$). For the rest of this paper, keep this amount of money in mind – when we awarded cash to teacher candidates, most of the time it was a relatively modest amount, somewhere between \$1,000 and \$1,500 each.

One small note, on the "Candidate support fund." In the application for the lottery, we directed candidates to tell us a requested funding amount if chosen, between \$0-1,000. We were curious about how much money candidates might tell us they could use. We did not ask for any justification or proposed budget. *All* requested

the full amount, \$1,000. This was, perhaps, a "grandmother" finding: something our grandmothers could have told us well before we did the study. *We have money, how much do you want?* Briefly: Whatever you've got. Perhaps we hadn't thought terribly clearly about the ask. When discussing research design, we discussed candidates using award money for specific expenses – a car repair, for example. A new phone. Professional clothing. But clearly, candidates were not willing to leave potential money on the table for the sake of covering a limited expense or expenses. Given what we learned later about their average debt load (over \$23,000 each), this makes a substantial amount of sense to us now. Rational actors, all of them.

What did teacher candidates spend award money on? We asked. Figure 3 (below) summarizes their responses:

Figure 3. Spending of lottery-allocated cash awards among historically underrepresented teacher candidates enrolled at SUNY Brockport (2022-23; $n=62$)



. Source: Authors.

The top three reported uses of lottery-awarded funds in 2022 and 2023 were “Books or other academic supplies,” “Tuition and fees,” and “Transportation.” These expenditures make some intuitive sense; books, tuition, and transportation. These are common costs teacher candidates face.

There is one important contrast, however, between what candidates told us they *actually* used the money for (Figure 3), and what they *perceived* they’d need money to cover when we first asked them a year prior (Figure 2): certification costs. Certification costs, including “exams, fingerprinting, or certification fees” were

the second most-commonly cited financial challenge among our surveyed teacher candidates. *Yet not a single teacher candidate told us they used the money they were awarded to pay certification costs.*

Limitations

Before too much discussion, it’s important to address several limitations. First, the population in our study included teacher candidates enrolled at SUNY Brockport, a predominantly white mid-size comprehensive master’s-level public university in New York State. Results from our

population may vary from populations at other types of institutions, contexts, or locations. As well, our n-sizes were small, generally 50-100 respondents, depending on the survey. As with any survey, we face the limitation of accepting self-report. We asked teacher candidates to tell us, for example, how much debt they had. Surveys are known to have common limitations, particularly inaccuracy due to recall bias and memory errors, to social desirability bias, to selection bias and fatigue ([Andrade, 2020](#); [Goodfellow, 2023](#)). We think our approach mitigated the two most obvious flaws of surveys (ill-defined populations and selection bias into/out of surveys), as we began our work in 2021 with a clearly defined population (all teacher candidates at SUNY Brockport), and continued to be clear in subsequent steps about who was lottery-eligible (all “historically underrepresented” teacher candidates at SUNY Brockport”), and who got surveyed about fund use (anyone allocated funds through random lotteries during the four-semester study period). We acknowledge that we had no means to verify survey responses. We think this limitation, while important, is perhaps not fatal to interpreting what respondents told us. We can imagine little reason they would provide inaccurate responses – as their responses were not connected to funding, nor were their identities ever subject to disclosure. Support funds were clearly identified as being distributed by random lotteries, and anyone responding to a survey was provided the same small stipend (\$25) whatever their responses may have been.

Finally, we focused only on teacher candidates who self-identified in our initial survey as “historically underrepresented” (those identifying as American Indian and Alaskan Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander; Black/African American; and Hispanic/Latino). Results from our population almost certainly vary from results that may obtain from surveys of teacher candidates from all backgrounds (including, for example, white teacher candidates, who comprise a majority of teacher candidates at Brockport, in New York

State ([Education Trust, 2024](#)) and the nation more broadly ([Learning Policy Institute, 2025](#); [NCTQ, 2021](#)). Our results should be interpreted within those contexts and cannot reasonably be generalized beyond. Each of the results we discuss below should, we suggest, be understood to carry the same cautious interpretive preface: “Among teacher candidates enrolled at SUNY Brockport who self-identify as ‘historically underrepresented’...” Readers should keep that preface in mind, and consider the populations they themselves are familiar with or care about when deciding whether our findings are relevant to their own programs.

Discussion & Conclusion

We encountered two main surprises when we did the initial surveys in 2021, and one more surprise when we asked candidates provided funding what they’d done with it.

1. *First surprise:* A high percentage of teacher candidates who worked while pursuing teacher education. 84.5% of our applicants reported that they worked, an average of 11-20 hours per week. We didn’t anticipate this level of co-curricular work, but certainly felt its influence on logistics for things like scheduling meetings – most of which needed to be in the evening hours or via Zoom to avoid school/work conflicts.
2. *Second surprise:* High percentages of teacher candidates reported debt – roughly 79% - and high *amounts* of reported debt, an average of \$23,914. That much debt is hard to pay off quickly, even if our teacher candidates did appear to be somewhat better off than many. For example, the average federal student loan debt in 2025 was \$39,547 ([Hanson, 2026](#)). That much debt also appears likely to influence early career choices – such as accepting and/or keeping *any* job, rather than taking a chance on the pursuit of the *most desired* job, or even a job in teaching at all.
3. *Third surprise:* Among teacher candidates provided funding, no one spent money on certification costs.

This last one was the biggest surprise of all. It flew in the face of what our teacher candidates had told us – that certification costs presented financial challenges, that they were worried about them (and that, we assumed, if provided some funding, *they would spend on it*). It seemed odd. We had provided, on average, awards that far exceeded certification costs, which ranged from \$400-600 per candidate. Our lottery awards averaged \$1,000-1,500.

So why didn't any of our teacher candidates use the money we gave them for certification costs? We don't know, not with any kind of precision. Follow-up surveys were not part of our protocol. We suspect timing played a role in decision-making about fund use. Certification is a delayed reward for current investment. It comes at the end of a long, costly process: completing a university program with required field experiences and student teaching (\$\$\$), getting fingerprinted (\$), passing tests (\$\$), completing required workshops (\$), and paying certification fees (\$). And the reward of gaining certification is uncertain. Getting certified only means a school district *can* hire you to teach, not that anyone *will*. Our teacher candidates are well aware of all this, that money spent on certification is an investment in an uncertain future. And they face real, immediate, costs. Fig. 3 describes them: books, tuition, transportation, food. All of these are bills due now.

It may be useful to remember two areas we asked teacher candidates about on each survey: employment and debt. 84.5% of survey respondents were employed at the time they responded to the survey, working an average of 11-20 hours per week. 79.2% of survey respondents carried debt, an average of \$23,914. Substantial majorities of teacher candidates spent time each week doing paid employment, and most still carried high debt loads. Why do those matter?

Money doesn't provide the same opportunity to everyone, even if everyone gets the same amount. When all your bills are paid, and you already put gas in the car and have groceries for the week, you might feel

comfortable investing in (future) certification. But when you're in debt and the rent is due, do you really have that luxury?

Returning to the timing question—here in New York State, completing a teacher preparation program at a university is separate from getting certified to teach. Certification is granted by the New York State Education Department. Teacher candidates can graduate from SUNY Brockport without completing *any* certification-specific requirements (such as getting fingerprinted, passing exams, and paying certification fees), and they do. It's common, in our experience, for teacher candidates to graduate, and *only then* start the certification process. There's a separation in time (commonly months, sometimes over a year) between program completion and certification.

In a sense, spending money on books and food now, rather than on certification, is rational behavior. Teacher candidates are trying to avoid falling into more debt. Yet any delay between program completion and certification comes with substantial opportunity costs.

In New York state, a teacher candidate cannot get a full-time tenure-track teaching job in a traditional school district until fully certified. A candidate could work at a private school or a charter school. Uncertified candidates can substitute teach. However, teaching at a private school isn't what we prepare graduates to do, and opportunities at charter schools are limited by state law. (NY charters are capped in hiring uncertified teachers – either 30% of staff or five teachers total, whichever is less—and uncertified candidates need to demonstrate additional qualifications, such as three years of teaching experience elsewhere or college teaching experience. See [SUNY Charter Schools Institute, 2007](#)). Many of our graduates decide to substitute teach. Subbing is somewhat *like* teaching but it is not permanent and does not have the benefits associated with tenure track teaching. So, subbing comes with costs—notably the \$50,000 salary we mention in the title of this paper and benefits such as health insurance and pension.

Our local average pay rate for substitute teachers in Western NY is \$115/day (2025-26). A teacher candidate who subbed for 12 months (180 school days) would earn \$20,700, with few benefits and little-to-no mentoring or professional development. The average starting teacher salary in New York is \$50,077 ([National Education Association, 2026](#)). Full-time teachers also earn benefits such as health insurance and employer contributions to retirement, boosting total compensation by around 41%, roughly another \$20,000 ([Richwine & Biggs, 2011](#), Table 5). Total average compensation for a new full-time teacher in our area, therefore, is about \$70,000/year. The difference then between a tenure track teacher's compensation and a substitute teacher's is about \$50,000 per year. Delaying certification: that is, delaying onset of full-time teaching work by a year means accepting a massive opportunity cost *even if a teacher candidate substitute-teaches every day of the following school year*.

Clearly, it is in any teacher candidate's economic self-interest to spend a few hundred dollars now in order to complete certification requirements in order to teach ~~at~~ full-time sooner rather than later. But our candidates didn't do this. Not one teacher candidate spent any money on certification. They spent it on books, transportation, food, and rent. They spent it on clothing, often professional clothing appropriate for teachers in schools. They spent it on phone bills. They spent it on current bills that they needed to pay right now. How could they do anything else?

We learned that our "historically underrepresented" teacher candidates pay current bills to avoid additional debt, potentially delaying certification and work. We learned that even very high opportunity may not be obvious or felt by teacher candidates, particularly when they bear current expenses. We learned, too, that even when institutions like ours are lucky enough to have funding available for teacher candidate support, timing matters. When teacher candidates are working and carrying substantial debt, a modest grant along the way appears

unlikely to speed the path to certification. We've learned that *how* institutions try to support "historically underrepresented" teacher candidates matters; that handing out small cash grants—whatever the *intended use* of those awards (by us, or even by our teacher candidates themselves)—did not speed anyone towards certification, though it certainly could have important indirect effects (such as improved program persistence or completion rates). Given the significant opportunity costs of delayed certification, we think that's a missed opportunity-

What might we do instead of handing out modest cash awards? We might explore simply paying for certification expenses directly. In New York, universities can purchase vouchers for most certification costs, including certification exams, practice exams, exam preparation modules, and fingerprinting fees. We would purchase those and give them out. This is exactly what we are doing now as part of a separate grant program funded by the New York State Education Department, the My Brother's Keeper/Teacher Opportunity Corps II program ([n.d.](#)). Currently there are no voucher opportunity for certification fees. For those, we could reimburse teacher candidates directly for the costs, as of 2025-26, \$50 per certificate.

How do you spend \$500 to get \$50,000? Pay the costs associated with certification so that teacher candidates can start teaching right away. With some behind-the-scenes fundraising, grantsmanship, and/or foundation generosity, we think institutions can provide that \$500, and that doing so will save all teacher candidates tens of thousands of dollars by moving them more quickly towards careers they've already chosen.

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Educational Leader as Critical Cultural Dialoguer: A Textual Analysis of Professing Education

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Abstract

Social justice advocacy is a moral imperative that requires critical cultural engagement in educational and academic settings. Advancing social justice in leadership and teaching calls for critically and culturally responsive actors, conceptualized here as *critical cultural dialoguers*. Using textual analysis, this conceptual essay explores social justice advocacy, cultural dialogue as a transformative practice, leadership for social justice, difficult conversations in education, and the roles of dialogue and solidarity in a *Professing Education* journal issue. Reflective analyses and key insights culminate in provocative questions that encourage deeper consideration of dialogue, solidarity, and advocacy as interconnected practices for social justice work.

Drawing on textual analysis, this conceptual essay positions social justice advocacy as a foundational educational imperative and moral responsibility, realized through meaningful, culturally informed engagement. Realizing this vision requires “critical cultural dialoguers”—educators and leaders who critically examine assumptions, engage across differences, and reimagine education as a democratic, socially just project (Apple et al., 2022; Bogotch & Shields, 2025; He, 2023). In Freire’s (1972/2000) view, dialogue is a catalyst for human flourishing and social transformation, necessitating both critical engagement and praxis: “Dialogue is an encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized” (pp. 88–89). Ethical leadership similarly relies on dialogic processes through which individuals interpret, negotiate, and respond to complex contexts (Johnson & Kruse, 2009; Mullen, 2017).

From this perspective, we invoke the transformative role of critical cultural dialogue (CCD) and critical consciousness, or *conscientização* in Freire’s (1972/2000) lexicon,

in socially just leadership. We contend that CCD is essential for reimagining educational environments, as well as leadership and community and conference spaces. Furthermore, we situate the CCD concept in contemporary sociopolitical contexts, arguing for transformative leadership practices that dismantle systemic inequities and enact justice-centered, energizing ways of seeing and being. In concert with other critical scholars, we confront threats facing democratic principles and the integrity of education, “reimagining education as being for democracy” (Apple et al., 2022, p. 245; Bogotch & Reyes-Guerra, 2014; Bogotch & Shields, 2025; He, 2023; Jemal et al., 2022; Meacham, 2025–2026; Shoho et al., 2011). Like others before us, we call for authentic and systemic transformation through globally collaborative, socially just leadership engaged in sustained advocacy. We, too, believe that leaders, teachers, and policymakers must act decisively to dismantle inequities and advance democratic ideals.

This conceptual article positions social justice advocacy as a foundational imperative for democratic education in educational contexts globally. Derived from a more extensive research

study (Mullen & Young, 2025), the essay was reconceptualized and streamlined to foreground dialogue as a catalyst for social justice advocacy. Through an iterative process of revision and reflection, Carol Mullen reshaped the original manuscript into a new conceptual work and invited Ken Young to contribute as coauthor and critical reviewer. Prepared for the Society of Professors of Education (SPE), the article aims to engage the organization's intellectual community through publication and conference dialogue while contributing to ongoing conversations about equity, democracy, and social justice in education (Mullen, 2026a, 2026b).

The topic of our previously published work (Mullen & Young, 2025) was cultural dialogue with school leaders and teachers that cultivate critical perspectives, with theoretical grounding in critical consciousness and social justice. This new article advances key arguments, convey insights, and offer reflective analyses about social justice advocacy in education on behalf of leaders and teachers cast in the critical cultural dialoguer role imagined for them. As White educational leadership scholars and social justice advocates in Virginia (Mullen) and Texas (Young), we argue for the urgent integration of equity and inclusion into educational systems through CCD.

Before relaying educational ideas associated with CCD, we provide two highly relatable examples outside of formal teaching and learning contexts in which the role of a CCD is engaged. In the first instance, we imagine a family discussing a film they have watched and its portrayal of gender and racial roles. Perhaps they begin analyzing why the depiction of heroism (and superhero) is "masculine" and pondering where this idea may have come from before making connections with culture and power. They may even find themselves revealing how particular gendered and raced experiences from their lives have imprinted them.

In a very different scenario, a gardening society relies on techniques they know from Western society. When a member broaches the subject of ancestral ideas and economic issues, they become curious about power dynamics in

food systems and resource access. To learn about Indigenous gardening approaches, they discuss sources (e.g., Sweetser, 2025) that describe the benefits of working with nature to create self-sustaining, resilient food systems that respect the land and its cycles. Through ongoing dialogue and research, they find themselves drawn to expert Indigenous sources and in search of the best ideas from Western and Indigenous culture.

Social Justice Advocacy

Social justice advocacy in education draws heavily from critical pedagogy and democratic theory (Lowery & Mullen, 2024; Mullen & Young, 2025). Freirean principles underscore the necessity of dialogic engagement as a means of empowerment (Freire, 1972/2000). These frameworks challenge hierarchical structures and promote participatory learning, fostering environments where marginalized voices are heard and valued. Authentic dialogue, in Freire's (1972/2000) seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is presented as a transformative tool for being and gaining knowledge, fostering "epistemological curiosity" by moving beyond static "banking" education. The banking model of education—where teachers deposit information into passive students—is contrasted with a dialogical, cooperative model, where learning occurs through respectful, mutual communication. Genuine dialogue, in Freirean logic, is not merely exchange, but a transformative praxis of reflection and action aimed at remaking reality. Using a collaborative, problem-posing approach, humans question reality, develop critical consciousness, and approach the world as dynamic and transformable, leading to empowerment and liberation (He, 2023).

Dialogue provides a context/environment in which leaders can more readily develop professionally to make meaning of problems, situations, conflicts, and relationships (Meacham, 2025–2026). Curiosity, a catalyst for personal and professional development, encourages teachers and students alike to approach dialogue

as a source of knowing as they engage in collaborative learning about their lifeworld, and practice and pedagogy (Nazari, 2021).

Focusing on process, method, and outcome, justice-focused, dialogic individuals leverage CCD as a pragmatic methodology for confronting educational inequities (Meacham, 2025–2026). Advancing equity through the praxis of critical dialogue and social justice advocacy has in mind a more just and democratic educational system and process of educating. Centering dialogue with People of Color has the potential to expand collective consciousness about social justice advocacy in university classrooms (Mullen & Young, 2025) and college cultures by amplifying marginalized voices and perspectives (Meacham, 2025–2026).

Cultural Dialogue as a Transformative Tool

Dialogue is more than conversation. It is a praxis that, through the creation of cognitive dissonance, creates space for individuals to interrogate assumptions, confront biases, and co-construct knowledge. Cultural dialogue facilitates mutual understanding across diverse identities, serving as a catalyst for equity and inclusion in classrooms and communities. When conducted with mutual respect and openness between participants who are from advantaged and disadvantaged groups, cultural dialogue inherently carries the capacity to transform educational spaces, people, and, eventually, entire systems.

Critical cultural dialogue, a concept we are introducing, blends the popular terms *critical dialogue* and *cultural dialogue* used in scholarly contexts to describe approaches to communication and social analysis (e.g., Morley & Chen, 2005; Wiggershaus, 1995). The “critical” aspect adds a layer of analysis involving power dynamics and social justice, such as in the exploration of issues of power, identity, and representation. We propose that CCD is a process of deep, open conversation between different cultural groups to understand diverse

values, challenge assumptions, and navigate conflicts, focusing on power dynamics, societal structures, and mutual respect for coexistence. Often, frameworks are used from critical/cultural studies to uncover how meaning, identity, and politics are shaped by culture (Jemal et al., 2022). CCD participants, then, go beyond simple exchanges to engage in critical reflection on history and systems (like racism and sexism) that affect marginalized groups, aiming for deeper understanding while insisting on transformative change.

Scholars have been integrating CCD with democratic educational leadership and teaching to advance dialogue as a tool for challenging oppression, promoting social justice, fostering authentic relationships, and cultivating inclusive, collaborative environments (e.g., Holloway & Larsen Hedegaard, 2023; Mullen & Young, 2025). As critical thinkers, democratic educational leaders hold space for debate and dialogue, and with stakeholders, they engage in consciousness-raising. Actively promoting critical thinking and literacy competencies, students and teachers cooperate to verify curricular goals and resist extremist ideologies, such as through open dialogue (Apple et al., 2022). In an educational leadership context for example, at a high school in Ohio, “democratic school leaders encouraged dialogue and debate among students by teaching about controversial, divisive issues,” including fracking (Lowery & Mullen, 2024, p. 258). With the superintendent’s support of teacher time and guidance of student inquiry and debate, educators and students “collaboratively aligned activities with curricular standards, highlighting diverse viewpoints and forming evidence based arguments” (p. 258).

As ethical democratic proponents, educational leaders foster civic teaching and learning by allocating the recognition, time, and resources needed for accountable civic engagement. To cultivate “flourishing minds and lives” (Grant, 2012, p. 910) and political literacy, educational leaders prioritize teaching that nurtures critical, communicative, creative, collaborative, and citizenship skills. They also

dialogue in ways that align with a “robust social justice vision,” including “self-assessment, critical questioning, practicing democracy, [and] social action” (Lowery & Mullen, 2024, p. 910). Civic learning, then, depends not only on building democracy but also on rebuilding it (Jennings et al., 2021), which bestows upon the critical cultural dialoguer a special role necessitating risk-taking by both modeling and enacting substantive dialogue between persons or groups. In response to challenges to democracy in education, they may, for example, strive to develop cultural competence, intercultural fluency, inclusive mindset, and global citizenship. Presumably, the critical cultural dialoguer has skills in cross-cultural communication, empathy, and open-mindedness to bridge differences and resolve issues effectively. By integrating democratic principles into organizational culture and classroom practices, leaders/educators cultivate the development of socially responsible, civically engaged individuals that, importantly, validates such work (Lowery & Mullen, 2024; Hoque & Raya, 2023; Mullen, 2026b).

A key aspect of CCD is the focus it brings to power, specifically examination of how power structures influence relationships, workplace culture, gender relations, communication, identity, media, and social meaning. Another aspect is deeper understanding, which seeks to comprehend the historical and sociopolitical contexts shaping different cultural perspectives, not just surface-level differences. Mutual respect and openness require listening, understanding, and being receptive to others’ views, even when critical, within fair conditions. Challenging assumptions involves questioning dominant norms and exploring how marginalizing processes affect various groups. Goal-oriented, CCD aims for conflict transformation, greater empathy, shared humanity, and building bridges for peace and co-existence.

Critical intercultural dialogue, a specific model for multiethnic societies, directs attention on understanding differing values to promote understanding of group values as well as to resolve common problems (James, 1999).

Another example is cultural studies, a field that uses critical cultural approaches to study media, identity, and politics. Community building is used in groups to develop critical consciousness by reflecting on social inequalities and their impacts.

CCD differs from general dialogue, then, given that the former is not just about talking—it is critical, meaning that it interrogates underlying structures of power, privilege, and oppression. Another differentiation from civil discourse is that CCD transcends the objectives of mutual understanding and problem solving despite differences in an effort to understand why differences exist and how they are shaped by history and power. Thus, CCD moves beyond a focus on *how* to talk across differences to what power dynamics exist in the language used in discourse, as well as the culture that fosters it.

To Freire (1972/2000), “Dialogue cannot exist [without] profound love for the world” and people in that “the naming of the world [depends on being] infused with love” (p. 77). Situating ourselves and our graduate students as critical cultural dialoguers engaged in CCD, we have adopted Freire’s (1972/2000) concept of dialogue, reimagining it by adding the modifiers, critical and cultural. The Freirean meaning of “dialoguer” had a different purpose, we think, of underscoring a critical stance toward dominant, power-based interactions in which one party controls the situation, communication, and outcome, in effect perpetuating social distance (Mullen & Young, 2025). To us, *cultural dialoguer* characterizes (inter)personal agency that awakens possibilities for human interaction and social justice advocacy through dialogue (Shoho et al., 2011). We think of this way of studying educational leadership as creative heuristics for which no formula exists and for which reflective practice is essential to unpacking theories, grappling with unpredictable, complex situations, and seeking resolutions that inspire socially just relations (Bogotch & Reyes-Guerra, 2014). We join the effort of bringing cultural dialogue to life within the social justice contexts of engagement, community, and transformation relative to the

complex processes and effects that occur educationally and publicly.

Foregrounding cultural dialogue in the university classroom as a site for social justice learning, Bogotch and Reyes-Guerra (2014) shared illustrations from scholarship demonstrating that “breakthroughs in transformative learning [occur] when professors make space for interrogative dialogue . . .” (p. 45). The research they described depicts conditions for these breakthroughs in social justice leadership preparation. One such condition entails positioning cultural dialogue as a pedagogical practice in university classrooms to facilitate social justice learning. Through this process, students develop deeper critical and cultural understandings as they interrogate the mental models that sustain inequitable practices and social arrangements. Rather than passively receiving information through what Freire termed “banking education,” students engage as active participants who pose probing questions and enter into critical dialogue, deepening both the meaning and impact of their learning. In social justice-oriented educational contexts, consciousness-raising has been identified as an “initiating move” that fosters critical reflection on issues of leadership and schooling while opening space for new possibilities, alternative perspectives, and transformative action (Bogotch & Reyes-Guerra, 2014; Mullen & Young, 2025).

Methods and Writing Processes

An organizational goal of the SPE is to stimulate and sustain “dialogue”—as explicitly stated—among its members.¹ Another goal is to promote solidarity as a tenet and “collective practice rooted in shared struggle and interdependence” (2026 SPE Conference Call for Proposals, p. 1).¹

Methodologically, *dialogue* served as a key term for locating all uses of it in Meacham’s (2025–2026) guest-edited special issue of *Professing Education*. In reality, examples of dialogue in scholarship and through conversation among members are plentiful and rich, running through the tendrils of this Society and its long

history. Mullen, the first author, a longtime member and leader of the SPE, has witnessed meaningful conversation and dialogic encounters kindle and nourish dialogue at its annual conference, a vibrant community of new and established scholars, and through the Society’s publications and presentations. This holds for the organization’s journal that stipulates the Society’s goal in its masthead.

For this textual analysis, Mullen first located then analyzed all instances of dialogue in a recent volume of *Professing Education*. An initial search of Meacham’s (2025–2026) issue was conducted, among others published in recent history. This collection was selected because of its evocative instances of dialogue, 10 in all, which convey aspects of the CCD concept. *Solidarity* also emerged as a recurring theme across several articles, making it an especially fruitful focus for meaning making.

To clarify, neither dialogue nor solidarity was explicated in the framing of this 2025–2026 collection. The social justice leadership theme, inspired by an “associate/assistant/vice dean panel” of authors that included leaders of color, emphasized leadership in higher education and tensions with undemocratic practices and racial/gender identities, but with a view toward possibilities, alternatives, and solutions. This scholarly group of administrators’ stated purpose was to unveil “internal work” around their own justice-centered professional development as leaders, described by Kumashiro (2025–2026) as an “intervention in educational research and intersectional justice” (pp. 4–5).

All examples cited in the next section are from Meacham’s (2025–2026) publication. Inclusion criteria were explicit use of *dialogue* and variations (dialogic and so forth) and *solidarity* (with alternate wording like solidarities), which encompassed all article contributions.

Although the word *conversation* (and synonyms) appeared throughout the special issue, Mullen’s textual analysis focused on *dialogue*, including variants, to avoid conflating inherent differences between the two terms. While *dialogue* refers to a formal or structured

exchange of ideas with a specific purpose (such as resolving conflict and promoting ethical stances), conversation is informal, spontaneous, and unscripted. Thus, dialogue is more intentional, reflective, and goal-oriented (Kato, 2012); as a hypothetical, a dean's group may conduct a series of dialogues to ensure the integrity of diversity and inclusion in key decisions. Notably, Freire's (1972/2000) concept of dialogue was recognized in the special issue.

Examples of Dialogue in Professing Education

The four examples that follow identify the contributing authors in Meacham's (2025–2026) special issue.²

Example #1—Kumashiro

Each year the SPE conference organizers and presenters of scholarship and different initiatives set about to deliberately encourage “**dialogue** during the sessions in order to learn from others and apply or extend or build on or simply find inspiration from their work” (p. 5). As Kumashiro (2025–2026) also asserted, this interactive activity occurs “with the hopes of sharing research and resources and to build networks and other collaborations for advancing equity and justice in education” (p. 5). Dialogue in this conference setting aims for an exchange of ideas, opinions, and questions among all participants who communicate across differences.

Example #2—Mulholland and Meacham

In their 2025–2026 article, Mulholland (a White dean) and Meacham (an Asian American associate dean) used dialogue to denote “racial justice **dialogues**” as a change process set against the backdrop of systematic racism and tumultuous times. They emphasized the role of “intentional **dialogue**, mutual trust, and structural opportunities [in] leadership development,” underscoring that “leadership development can be co-constructed rather than hierarchical, emerging from **dialogue**, sponsorship, and a willingness

to adapt organizational structures to meet both individual and institutional goals” (p. 9).

The critical leadership development of these higher education leaders was both aspirational and complicated by entrenched political dynamics. Yet the opportunity for meaningful dialogue and collaboration with other People of Color and critical encounters with scholarship played a significant role in paving the way for engagement in this “narrative of becoming” (p. 51). Collaborative mentorship was enacted through “candid” and “open” dialogue by the female leaders/authors engaged in “collaborative agency.” As was realized in hindsight,

*A single honest conversation became the catalyst for a meaningful professional partnership grounded in mutual respect, truth, and transparency. This reminds me of Freire's notion of **dialogic** engagement—the belief that authentic **dialogue** can be a site of transformation. Through this **dialogue**, we both moved from assumption, . . . , to strategy, building a shared understanding that has strengthened our collaboration. (p. 61)*

One such candid exchange held riches, sparking a partnership built on transparency and respect. Animated was Freire's (1972/2000) idea that authentic dialogue transforms relationships—moving Mulholland and Meacham from assumption to shared strategy and strong collaboration.

Example #3—Pitre

Pitre (2025–2026), a Black teacher educator, offered a reflection on workplace survey responses from faculty and staff. Based on summarized feedback, a perception was that intentional and authentic dialogue lacked robustness in the college community around “DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] development” and cultural awareness, including of nontoxic behaviors and practices. “While the survey revealed a genuine commitment to equity work,” Pitre observed, concerns were “that the college lacked shared language, clarity of goals, structures for accountability, and safe spaces for

honest **dialogue**—especially around Whiteness, privilege, and systemic racism” (p. 20).

Thus, dialogue had been positioned by Pitre as a catalytic tool for equity and justice in the college community where renewal of leadership seemed justified. Forward momentum affirmed the critical idea that “meaningful progress requires questioning assumptions, engaging in authentic and sustained **dialogue**, and grounding personal reflection and action in structural change” (p. 22). In our view, this powerful statement captures the essence of transformative change—moving beyond surface-level conversations to deep, systemic engagement. The multifaceted process for achieving significant, systemic change calls for, among other measures, creating spaces for honest, ongoing conversations rather than one-off discussions. Pitre’s writing underscores that substantive progress requires interrogating assumptions, participating in transparent dialogic processes, and situating individual reflection and praxis within broader structural transformations.

Example #4—Hollis

Hollis’s (2025–2026) take on dialogue blends culture and critique through uBuntu-inspired leadership. uBuntu philosophy, summarized as “I am because we are,” values interconnectedness, humanity, ethics, community, and relationship, and promoting values like compassion, respect, and sharing. Guiding restorative justice and collective wellbeing, uBuntu leaders practice “inclusive **dialogues**” to “encourage open channels of feedback and assess policies for equity implications” (p. 85). This African tradition, championed by Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, supports transparency and prevention of harmful practices and policies. Hollis invoked the uBuntu way of thinking as a cultural strategy for countering/resisting superficial equity stances, notably “performative allyship” that in the case of DEI efforts is concerned more with optics than real change.

Examples of Solidarity in Professing Education

We now account for the word *solidarity* (and variations)—explicated 10 times in all—given its persistence and importance in the themed issue. Not only this, but solidarity as a concept also connected implicitly with *dialogue*, a key catalyst of justice, change, collaboration, and praxis by the special issue contributors.

Meacham’s (2025–2026) Introduction specified four usages of solidarity. Taken together, these describe efforts to foster cross-racial unity and the commitment to justice, particularly in university leadership and governance. She overtly referenced solidarity, as noted verbatim in what follows.

*This special issue ... brings together five compelling manuscripts that illuminate the diverse ways mid-level leaders are cultivating trust, reimagining equity, resisting performative gestures, building cross-racial **solidarities**, and disrupting exclusionary leadership norms—often at personal and professional cost. (p. 7)*

*Together, [the authors’] work expands how we understand educational leadership and invites us to consider new epistemologies, geographies, and **solidarities** that shape what justice can look like in higher education. (p. 6)*

*[Pitre’s] narrative underscores that transformative leadership is not about holding a title but about cultivating rootedness, **solidarity**, and vision even in precarious times. Indeed, her metaphor of the weathered Black Lives Matter [BLM] sign still affixed to a neighbor’s door ... serves as a powerful image of perseverance: justice work may lose its public momentum, but those who are committed remain steadfast (p. 7)*

*[Contributing author Amos] also emphasizes the need for mentoring and affinity spaces where women leaders of color can process their experiences, strategize for authentic leadership practices, and find **solidarity**. (p. 11)*

Pitre's (2025–2026) article features a story about a BLM sign in the neighborhood, a worn symbol of solidarity weathered by time yet steadfast in its quiet resolve. Reflecting upon the sign, she thought about the value of cultural solidarity in her life and journey as a faculty member and leader for which justice and equity serve as a compass:

*Since 2020 [a neighbor's] BLM sign has been firmly adhered to their front door, weathered by the changing seasons ..., but their **solidarity** sign is still there. ..., the one remaining BLM sign—a weathered gesture of **solidarity**—reflects certain portions of my faculty journey and my reluctant path to leadership. ... I have been able to persist by remaining proximate to steadfast, equity-focused colleagues and remaining deeply connected to justice-centered work, no matter how weathered, battered and worn the path ... We see each other, light pathways for each other and stand in **solidarity**.* (p. 25)

Heilig et al. (2025–2026) also connected cultural solidarity with race, providing an example of community and representation for students of color on some college campuses:

Witnessing the presence of Greek-letter organizations that have historically served as support systems for Black and Latino students in higher education provided prospective students

*with a tangible representation of how cultural **solidarity** and leadership pathways exist within university life.* (p. 40)

Advocating “a relational, restorative, and nonlinear approach to institutional change,” Hollis (2025–2026) critiqued “tokenism, performative gestures, and superficial [expressions of] **solidarity**.” An alternative rooted in African tradition was ventured for “re-center[ing] leadership as a practice of service, humility, and genuine community engagement, arguing that we must move beyond optics to restore trust and transformative equity in higher education” (p. 78).

Amos (2025–2026) presented networking among Asian women leaders (AWLs) as a means of fostering connection and advancing collective interests through cultural solidarity:

To break the bamboo ceiling, AWLs must use research and scholarship to advocate for themselves as a networking strategy. Although networking is generally not emphasized among Asians, it is a way to **solidify** a group's strength and advance their interests. (p. 72)

Description and Analysis

Table 1 provides a synthesized overview of all occurrences of dialogue in Meacham's (2025–2026) collection, including verbatim usages and their contextual meanings.

Table 1

Occurrences of “Dialogue” and All Variations in Meacham (2025–2026) (Mullen, 2026)

#	Page	Article	Word	Excerpt	Meaning/Context
1	1	Statement about SPE in front matter	dialogue	... goal of stimulating and sustaining dialogue among its members ...	SPE's mission to foster scholarly exchange
2	5	Foreword to Special Issue	dialogue	... and encouraged dialogue during the sessions in order to learn from others ...	interactive discussion at conferences
3	9	Introduction	dialogue	... leadership development can emerge from intentional dialogue, mutual trust ...	conversation-based leadership
4	13	Introduction	dialogue	... built on trust, dialogue, and shared purpose ...	defining justice-oriented leadership
5	20	A Black Teacher Educator's Leadership	dialogue	... safe spaces for honest dialogue—especially around Whiteness ...	need for candid equity conversations

6	22	A Black Teacher Educator's Leadership	dialogue	... progress requires questioning assumptions, engaging in authentic and sustained dialogue, ...	dialogue as a practice for change
7	51	From Silence to Strategy	dialogues	... engagements with critical scholarship, racial justice dialogues, and collaborative spaces with other scholars of color.	dialogue as racial justice-centered talk
8	47	From Silence to Strategy	dialogic	... emphasizing the importance of mentorship, dialogic reflection, and iterative meaning-making ...	dialogue as reflective, two-way leadership learning
9	48	From Silence to Strategy	dialogic	By engaging in collaborative storytelling, dialogic reflection, and iterative meaning-making, ...	dialogue is a strategy for revealing commitments
10	61	From Silence to Strategy	dialogic	... Freire's notion of dialogic engagement—the belief that authentic dialogue can be a site of transformation.	dialogue has the power to transform (Freire)
11	79	Beyond optics	dialogues	... uBuntu-inspired leaders regularly convene inclusive dialogues, ...	authenticity through inclusive dialogues

Analysis of the articles revealed a shared emphasis on cross-racial academic leadership. Extending the concept of the critical cultural dialoguer to the four usages identified in the Introduction demonstrated that dialogue held particular significance as a transformative and equity-centered practice for higher education leaders committed to advancing justice within their educational contexts.

Mulholland and Meacham characterized dialogue as a reflective, racial justice-centered talk involving two-way leadership learning that was a strategy for revealing commitments and had the power to transform. A Black teacher educator's justice work in leadership (Pitre) was the subject of another article. As was conveyed, the role of dialogue for social justice advocacy recognizes candid equity conversations and dialogue as a practice for change. The focus on uBuntu leadership by Hollis presented a view of equity-centered leaders as resisting performative allyship and modeling alternatives. They commit to enacting authenticity through inclusive dialogues in community. This special issue's Foreword and Introduction contained three instances in all depicting how social justice leaders approach dialogue in their work and communities. In essence, they engage in dialogic leadership, such as through interactive discussion at conferences, and explore justice-oriented leadership in depth.

Collectively, in our analysis, the selected contributions coalesced around four overarching themes.

1. Dialogue was underscored as transformative praxis that fosters mutual understanding and equity. In one instance, Freirean principles referenced dialogic engagement as a tool for empowerment and systemic change.
2. Educators and leaders must navigate accountability pressures and political resistance while promoting inclusive practices.
3. Anti-DEI politics and intensifying sociopolitical polarization underscore the urgent need for advocacy in educational settings.
4. Strategies for praxis include authentic and transparent dialogue, conversation-based, justice-oriented leadership, equity-focused professional development, and collaborative relationship.

SPE's timely 2026 conference theme, "Education in Uncertain Times: Solidarity, Responsibility, and Collective Work,"³ reinforces the centrality of solidarity as a defining concept woven throughout this special issue. Framed as "transformative solidarity," the call for proposals advances a vision of collective practice rooted in responsibility, mutual risk, and interdependence. It challenges educators and scholars to engage

democratic uncertainty through critical inquiry, collaborative action, and sustained commitment to the public good. At a time of institutional volatility, political contestation, and democratic strain—concerns increasingly foregrounded in critical scholarship (e.g., Mullen, 2026b)—solidarity emerges as both a moral stance and a practical strategy. SPE thereby elevates solidarity beyond symbolism, positioning it as a relational, collective response to the complex challenges confronting education today.

Leadership for Social Justice

Educational leaders across K–12 and higher education must balance accountability demands with commitments to equity and social justice. Anti-DEI initiatives and political opposition to critical race theory have intensified these challenges, often constraining efforts to foster inclusive educational environments (Mullen, 2026b).

Yet leaders committed to justice-oriented change continue to leverage collaborative networks, strategic advocacy, and collective action to expand equity-centered practices (Mullen & Young, 2025). These leadership challenges are evident in the work of principals navigating racial tensions and DEI initiatives in predominantly White school districts (Theoharis et al., 2023) and higher education administrators championing antiracist solidarity and cultural dialogue as vehicles for justice and equity (Meacham, 2025–2026).

Difficult Conversations in Education

While conversations about race, gender, and power often evoke discomfort, grappling with such emotions is integral to critical reflection, consciousness-raising, and personal growth (Mullen & Young, 2025). Educators must cultivate safe spaces that encourage vulnerability and critical reflection, recognizing that silence perpetuates inequity. Accordingly, Mulholland and Meacham (2025–2026) posited that organizational and cultural goals that foster deep transformation move “from silence to strategy”

through such means as racially aware academic leadership (p. 47).

In our university classrooms, we strive to cultivate critical consciousness and prepare educational leaders to enact socially just practices through critical reflection, dialogue, and action (Mullen, 2017; Mullen & Young, 2025). In this spirit, we have immersed our graduate students (school leaders and teachers) in cultural dialogue using readings from Freire (e.g., 1972/2000) among other critical thinkers, such as those cited in this article. The activities we each use in our respective U.S. states include cultural communication journals, small-group reflective conversations, and open-ended questions about leadership dilemmas and values.

Students’ post course reflections have reported emotional ambivalence (anxiety versus calmness), self-censorship, and fear of judgment (Mullen & Young, 2025). Upon reflection and in conversation with one another, we each observed three learning dynamics at work: (a) self-censorship—openness, a tension was seen between honesty and fear of repercussions; (b) discomfort—comfort, safe spaces were valued for difficult conversations despite discomfort; and (c) exposure—immersion, diverse perspectives were shared, serving to broaden empathy and critical thinking (Mullen & Young, 2025).

Classroom strategies for social justice advocacy are often organized around provocative scholarship (e.g., case studies, theory analysis), structured activities (e.g., service-learning and perspective-taking exercises), and amplifying marginalized voices (e.g., guest speakers, personal narratives). Practical strategies for educators and leaders alike include integrating culturally relevant pedagogy, fostering critical consciousness through reflective dialogue, and engaging communities in collaborative problem-solving. Leadership professional development should prioritize equity literacy, relational, and advocacy skills (Meacham, 2025–2026).

Such strategies are contextualized using culturally relevant teaching frameworks. One such educational justice framework from educational leadership scholars Pijanowski and

Brady (2021) emphasizes the value of four practices in particular: (a) connect students' cultural assets to academic content; (b) engage in critical reflection about society; (c) foster cultural competence and pride; and (d) unmask oppressive systems through critique and action.

Student-centered dialogic studies with children and adolescents focus on younger populations than we teach but are nonetheless relevant for our graduate students who lead and teach in K–12 school districts. We have in mind three readings for preservice as well as practicing teachers and leaders for readers seeking ideas from practical scholarship on difficult conversations in education.

Dialogue has demonstrated transformative potential across varied schooling contexts. Mirón et al. (2001) illuminated how inner-city African American youth engaged in cultural conversations about morality and inequity, while Taines (2011) revealed how urban youth critically interrogated disparities between suburban and urban schooling, using authentic dialogue to amplify marginalized voices and inform leadership action. In a context of longstanding conflict, Levy et al. (2022) further discovered how dialogic interventions can reduce prejudice, foster empathy, and strengthen intergroup relations among Israeli–Palestinian youth.

Reflective Takeaways

The critical cultural dialoguer, theorized here as a form of social justice praxis, offers a framework for raising critical consciousness and advancing equity through dialogue. Dialogic encounters in colleges, classrooms, and communities are often high-risk yet deeply transformative, requiring intentional facilitation, relational trust, and spaces where participants can engage difficult questions with openness and courage. As praxis, CCD bridges theory and action, connecting scholarly inquiry to advocacy and change in schools, universities, communities, and policy contexts.

Social justice advocacy is not an ancillary concern but a foundational imperative for

education. By cultivating critical consciousness through cultural dialogue, educators and leaders can create learning environments that honor diversity, foster democratic engagement, and challenge inequities. The rise of anti-DEI initiatives, book bans, and legislative restrictions on equity-focused curricula reflects broader societal tensions and underscores the urgency of preparing leaders to navigate polarized environments while upholding democratic values. Future efforts must focus on systemic transformation, the ethical use of technology for equity, the amplification of marginalized voices in decision-making, and the strengthening of global and interdisciplinary collaborations that advance social justice agendas.

Importantly, our textual analysis of *Professing Education's* issue demonstrates the value of scholarly dialogue as both an object and method of inquiry. Examining the contributions collectively revealed cross-cutting themes of advocacy, dialogue, leadership, and solidarity, illustrating how social justice commitments are enacted across diverse educational contexts. Our analysis also affirms the value of CCD as a means of interpreting contemporary challenges, fostering critical consciousness, and reimagining democratic education in uncertain times.

SPE is among the professional associations that play a vital role in this broader endeavor by sustaining spaces for critical inquiry, scholarly exchange, and democratic engagement (Mullen, 2026b). Through publications, conferences, and collaborative forums, the Society advances dialogue on enduring and emerging issues in teacher and leader preparation, curriculum, and educational foundations while encouraging socially responsive scholarship and intellectual pluralism. In this respect, SPE carries forward a tradition associated with educational thinkers such as John Dewey, who viewed dialogue, reflection, and collective inquiry as essential to democratic life.

At a time when democratic discourse is increasingly contested, organizations such as SPE provide an important intellectual and civic infrastructure for examining pressing educational

issues, fostering solidarity across differences, and nurturing communities committed to equity, justice, and the public good. Society members use dialogue, publication, and collaborative forums to address pressing educational concerns, encouraging critical thinking and varied viewpoints within the professoriate.³ In the spirit of this scholarly community, we have sought to open a space for provocative conversation that invites critical reflection, intellectual curiosity, and collective engagement with the challenges and possibilities of educational justice.

Provocative Questions for Uncertain Times

Although these aspirations may seem idealistic in today's uncertain sociopolitical climate, they remain necessary for advancing democratic education and social justice. With this understanding, we recognize the enduring importance of SPE, alongside other social justice organizations, in advancing educational justice and shaping democratic discourse for the present and the future. Organized into three categories, we conclude with provocative questions for reflection and dialogue among scholars, students, educators, leaders, and policymakers in classrooms, conference settings, professional associations, schools, and community contexts.

Dialogue and Social Justice Advocacy

If social justice is a foundational condition of democratic learning, why is it too often treated as an elective concern rather than a responsibility?

Why is cultural dialogue typically viewed as high-risk and what factors contribute to its transformative potential?

Are equity advocates creating spaces for candid, critical dialogue or reinforcing echo chambers?

What might an authentic dialogue between collaborating leaders in higher education or schools look and sound like?

Are critical cultural dialoguers actively advancing democratic perspectives and practices within their institutions and learning

environments or are they hesitant to engage?

How can cultural dialogue and critical consciousness transform classrooms into democratic spaces where diversity is embraced, inequities are challenged, and all voices are valued?

Solidarity and Social Justice Advocacy

How do theories of solidarity shape and reimagine curriculum, pedagogy, research, and leadership as collective, relational, and historically informed pursuits?

In what ways might initiatives to build cross-racial solidarity promote justice in university leadership and governance, and what countermeasures or resistive acts be anticipated?

How can educators and leaders translate solidarity with BLM and other social justice movements into sustained action through governance, policy, pedagogy, and practice?

Related Topics

What do anti-DEI movements and book bans reveal about the state of democracy in education?

Are educators and leaders adequately prepared to navigate polarized environments while upholding democratic ideals?

What does systemic transformation look like in practice and who gets to define it?

How can emerging technologies be leveraged to build bridges, not deepen divides?

Whose voices are missing from educational policymaking, and how can governance, policy, pedagogy, and practice be reimaged to ensure their meaningful participation and influence?

To what extent can global partnerships and interdisciplinary research serve as catalysts for advancing social justice, strengthening democratic engagement, and fostering more equitable educational systems worldwide?

How can theory and action be bridged to make praxis tangible in educational and policymaking spaces, enabling university students to develop the critical consciousness, agency, and leadership capacity needed to advance equity and justice?

Author Note

¹Society of Professors of Education. (2026). *Welcome*. Webpage.

<https://societyofprofessorsofeducation.com/#:~:text=Professors%20of%20Education-,Welcome,founders%20of%20the%20organization%20envisioned>

²Editorial partners were Consulting Editor Kumashiro and journal editors Mary Kay Delaney, Gretchen Givens Generett, Paula Groves Price.

³The 2026 SPE Conference Call for Proposals (pp. 1–4). (Same website address as Endnote 1.)

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