

Education Review

Reseñas Educativas



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September 2, 2026

ISSN 1094-5296

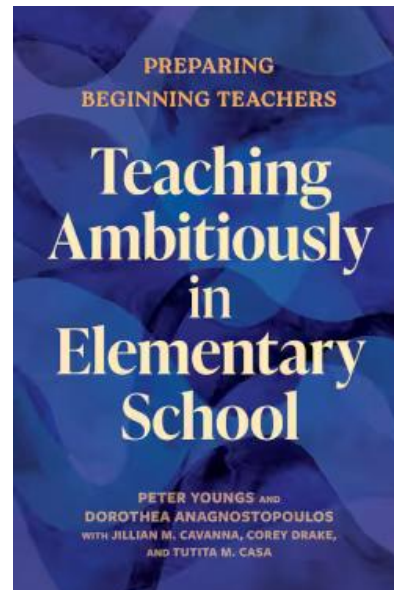
Youngs, P., & Anagnostopoulos, D., with Cavanna, J. M., Drake, C., & Casa, T. M. (2025). *Teaching ambitiously in elementary School: Preparing beginning teachers*. Harvard Education Press.

216 pp.

ISBN 979-8895570272

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In the evolving landscape of elementary teacher education, a persistent challenge has been the "problem of enactment"—the gap between understanding progressive educational theory and executing it amidst the dynamic reality of a live classroom. Published by Harvard Education Press as part of the Core Practices in Education Series, *Teaching Ambitiously in Elementary School* presents a compelling and practice-oriented vision for elementary teacher education. Written by **Peter Youngs** and **Dorothea Anagnostopoulos**, along with Jillian M. Cavanna, Corey Drake, and Tunitia M. Casa, the authors argue that teacher preparation programs should move beyond abstract educational theory. Instead, they must focus on helping teacher candidates learn the actual work of ambitious teaching through authentic practice, reflection, and collaboration.



The importance of this work lies in its massive empirical foundation. Rather than offering purely speculative or localized anecdotes, the authors draw their insights from an extensive, mixed-methods study involving more than 1,000 hours of classroom observation across nearly 70 U.S. school districts. By tracing 125 preservice teachers from their preparation programs into their first years of full-time teaching, the book answers a vital question for the field: How exactly do university-based programs influence the ultimate quality of a novice teacher's instruction?

Rather than treating "ambitious teaching" as an abstract educational philosophy, the authors strictly operationalize the term based on the findings of their extensive, mixed-methods research study. Their data are drawn from more than 1,000 hours of recorded classroom practice spanning nearly 70 US school districts, tracking how graduates from five distinct elementary teacher preparation programs transition from

university training into their first year of teaching. Within this empirical context, the authors ground their framework in three explicit dimensions:

- Subject-Specific Enactment (Mathematics and ELA)

The authors explicitly reject one-size-fits-all approach to instructional methods. Instead, they evaluate ambitious instruction through its subject-matter demands in two foundational areas: 1) Mathematics: Promoting deep, conceptual learning and mathematical reasoning rather than basic procedural recall; 2) English Language Arts (ELA): Engaging students in complex text analysis and advanced literacy development.

- The Link to Pre-Service Learning Opportunities

A foundational pillar of the book's framework is the direct relationship between *what* a candidate experiences during teacher preparation and *how* they teach in their early career. The authors look closely at how specific learning opportunities—including targeted assignments, tailored support, and structured clinical feedback—impact a beginning teacher's ability to implement ambitious instruction under pressure. This evaluation considers individual teacher characteristics, including their personal goals, beliefs, and strategies for instructing diverse student populations (Debnam et al., 2023).

- The Wraparound Support Ecosystem

Crucially, the book establishes that pre-service training alone is insufficient to sustain ambitious instruction. The authors' framework explicitly defines an instructional "ecosystem" required to help these demanding practices survive the realities of the first year. This includes a heavy emphasis on; 1) Effective, aligned classroom management strategies; 2) High-quality mentoring and instructional coaching; 3) District-level professional training and institutional alignment.

One of the primary strengths of *Teaching Ambitiously in Elementary School* is its masterful connection between high-level educational theory and field-level practice. As mentioned above, rather than speaking in abstractions, the authors provide an empirically rigorous foundation by drawing from a massive, mixed-methods study tracking graduates across nearly 70 diverse U.S. school districts. The text carefully details how teacher educators can systematically scaffold preservice teachers' development through deliberate, high-leverage pedagogies, specifically highlighting clinically embedded experiences, instructional rehearsals, collaborative inquiry cycles, and the structured analysis of classroom interactions. By providing vivid, concrete examples from actual elementary school classrooms, the book becomes a highly accessible, practical playbook not just for university-based researchers, but also for K-5 methods instructors and field supervisors.

Furthermore, a particularly vital contribution of the text is its insistence on linking ambitious instruction directly to equity and culturally responsive pedagogy. Youngs and Anagnostopoulos and their contributors consistently argue that true ambitious teaching cannot exist in a vacuum; it requires serious, sustained attention to issues of race, language, identity, access, and social justice. Instead of treating equity as an isolated or purely philosophical module, the text demonstrates exactly how

beginning teachers can view students' diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds as instructional strengths rather than deficits. The book effectively illustrates how these equitable, asset-based practices can be structurally embedded within everyday mathematics routines, literacy workshops, and interdisciplinary elementary instruction.

Another major strength of the text lies in the authors' highly granular, practice-based approach to teacher education. Moving far beyond generalized pedagogical methods or passive educational philosophy, the text focuses heavily on actionable "core instructional practices." The authors break down the exact scaffolding necessary to help beginning teachers lead productive classroom discussions, elicit complex student thinking, facilitate collaborative group work, and strategically respond to common student misconceptions. Crucially, the text details how teacher preparation programs can cultivate these skills before candidates enter their own classrooms, namely, by using guided rehearsals and highly supervised clinical field experiences. This granular focus mirrors current shifting trends in contemporary teacher preparation and aligns seamlessly with modern accreditation standards that demand clinically rich, performance-assessment-driven preparation models.

Finally, the volume's subject-specific chapters are exceptionally rigorous, particularly the section dedicated to mathematics education. Contributing authors Corey Drake (Director of Professional Learning at The Math Learning Center) and Tutita M. Casa (Associate Professor of Elementary Mathematics Education at the University of Connecticut) bring invaluable, specialized perspectives to the text. Drawing on their deep expertise in mathematical discourse, they emphasize how ambitious mathematics instruction must prioritize conceptual understanding, active inquiry, student-led discussion, and robust reasoning over rote procedural recall. The book aggressively challenges traditional, skill-and-drill approaches to early math, showing instead how to construct student-centered learning environments where elementary students are explicitly expected to explain their logic, justify their answers, and critically critique mathematical concepts.

While *Teaching Ambitiously in Elementary School* provides an invaluable empirical map tracking teacher candidate across nearly 70 districts, a deeper scholarly evaluation highlights a critical conceptual tension within its research design: the structural bottleneck between the expansive, flexible nature of university-based "ambitious preparation" and the hyper-bureaucratic, high-stakes institutional realities of modern early-career teaching.

The Pedagogy vs. Cognitive Load Tension. A foundational takeaway from the authors' mixed-methods data is that novice teachers consistently encounter a steep performance drop-off regarding "real-time instructional scaffolding." When elementary students present unexpected mathematical misconceptions or unique interpretations of a text, first-year teachers frequently struggle to model spontaneous conceptual or procedural remedies. However, the volume tends to evaluate this breakdown primarily as a deficit in university-level scaffolding or candidate execution, rather than an inevitable structural constraint of cognitive load. By expecting a novice to simultaneously anchor instruction in a complex task, navigate unpredictable student-led discourse, and maintain classroom management, the book underestimates how easily the working memory of a beginning teacher can be overwhelmed when trying to adapt a lesson plan flexibly in mid-air.

Underemphasizing Systemic and Policy Constraints. From a systemic standpoint, the book masterfully illustrates what ambitious instruction looks like under optimal clinical conditions, yet it occasionally glosses over the severe macro-level policy barriers that dominate urban and underfunded K–6 environments. Classroom practitioners and methods instructors reading this text will inevitably find themselves asking how to realistically sustain highly discursive, student-centered reasoning when bound by: 1) Strict, district-mandated pacing guides that penalize teachers for spending extra time on student inquiries; 2) Highly prescriptive, scripted curriculum packages that leave virtually no autonomy for open-ended discussion; 3) Rigid accountability metrics and high-stakes standardized testing environments that explicitly prioritize procedural compliance and rote test-readiness over deep conceptual exploration.

By framing the successful enactment of ambitious teaching largely around individual teacher characteristics, beliefs, and university program design, the authors risk over-idealizing the agency of a first-year educator. While the text correctly emphasizes the necessity of district-level wraparound supports, mentoring, and coaching, the critique would be far more robust if it included an explicit, politically grounded chapter detailing how novices can strategically "negotiate" or adapt these ambitious pedagogies when placed inside a highly prescriptive, restrictive school culture. Unpacking this friction more directly would elevate the text from an excellent empirical assessment into a genuinely transformative survival guide for the modern, policy-driven elementary classroom.

What elevates this text beyond its conceptual predecessors is its exceptional longitudinal scope and its strict focus on the elementary ecosystem. Rather than offering localized or purely theoretical models, the co-authors utilize a massive, mixed-methods dataset tracking graduates from five distinct preparation programs into their first year of teaching across nearly 70 U.S. school districts. This empirical framework allows them to analyze exactly how ambitious instruction in mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA) survives or fractures during the high-stakes transition from university student to contracted, first-year teacher.

Ultimately, the book's target audience is clear and threefold:

- **Teacher Educators and Methods Instructors:** Particularly those designing elementary mathematics and literacy methods courses. This text provides the rigorous empirical data needed to justify a shift toward practice-based, clinical instruction, offering concrete evidence of how specific pre-service learning opportunities impact early-career enactment.
- **School Leaders and Instructional Coaches:** Who are tasked with supporting novice educators during induction. Because the authors explicitly map out how district context and individual teacher goals interact, this book serves as a blueprint for designing mentoring programs that reinforce—rather than dismantle—the ambitious practices candidates learn in their preparation programs.

- Educational Researchers: Seeking a robust methodological roadmap for conducting large-scale, mixed-methods studies on teacher performance and program efficacy. The study's use of over one thousand hours of documented classroom practice provides an exemplary model for qualitative and quantitative assessment of teacher development.

In sum, *Teaching Ambitiously in Elementary School* makes an enduring contribution to educator preparation by treating teacher development as an empirical, equity-centered science. The volume's true strength lies in its honest examination of the friction points where university-guided training meets the heavy cognitive loads and institutional constraints of real-world school districts. By anchoring their analysis of mathematics and ELA instruction in a robust, multi-district dataset, Youngs, Anagnostopoulos, and contributors empower teacher educators, leaders, and policymakers with the evidence needed to justify practice-based training. Ultimately, this book bridges the gap between high-leverage theory and classroom enactment, offering a sophisticated blueprint that turns ambitious elementary instruction into a sustainable, achievable reality.

Reference

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About the Reviewer

Hsuehi “Martin” Lo, Ed.D. is an Associate Professor at St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud Minnesota. He teaches K-6 mathematics methods and curriculum and instruction courses for elementary teacher candidates. He is researching teacher candidates’ critical thinking abilities in teaching STEM lessons through different inquiry-based models. Dr. Lo’s main research is the implementation of play-based curriculum along with STEM content standards.



About the Authors

Peter Youngs, PhD, 2003, University of Wisconsin, Madison, is Chair of the Department of Curriculum, Instruction and Special Education at the University of Virginia. Youngs conducts research on the effects of educational policy and school social context on teaching and learning in the core academic subjects. He has a special focus on the relationship between policy and practice in the areas of teacher education and induction. Currently, Youngs is conducting research on ways that neural networks can be used to automatically classify



instructional activities in video. He also serves as co-editor of the second volume of the *Handbook of Education Policy Research*.



Dorothea Anagnostopoulos, PhD, 2000, University of Chicago, is a Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Connecticut. She served as the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs from 2021 to 2025 and the Executive Director of Teacher Education from 2013 to 2018, during which she led faculty and K-12 school partners in a practice-based teacher education program redesign. Her research explores questions related to teaching quality, teacher education, and the organization of teachers' work. Dr. Anagnostopoulos has examined the consequences of accountability

policies and other reform efforts on teaching and teachers, especially in urban schools. She has also examined the design of teacher education and its consequences for beginning teachers' development of ambitious instructional practice in diverse contexts.

The authors were joined by content-area experts Corey Drake (The Math Learning Center), Tunitia M. Casa (University of Connecticut), and innovation expert Jillian M. Cavanna (University of Hartford).

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Education Review / Reseñas Educativas / Resenhas Educativas edited by Gene V Glass and Yanming (Ami) Ren (English), Gustavo E. Fischman (Spanish/Portuguese), and Stephanie McBride-

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