

Education Review

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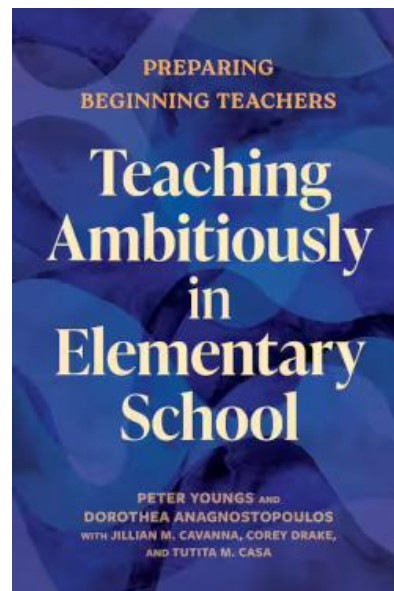
Youngs, P., & Anagnostopoulos, D., with contributions by Cavanna, J. M., Drake, C., & Casa, T. M. (2025). *Teaching ambitiously in elementary school: Preparing beginning teachers*. Harvard Education Press.

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What happens to ambitious teaching ideals when beginning elementary teachers leave the university and enter the classroom? This question sits at the heart of *Teaching Ambitiously in Elementary School* by **Peter Youngs** and **Dorothea Anagnostopoulos**. The authors and their contributors address a persistent gap in the teacher education literature by crossing the boundary between two worlds that are too often studied separately: what universities teach future teachers, and what those teachers actually do once they enter schools. For teacher educators, school district leaders, and researchers committed to improving the quality of beginning teachers' instruction, this book offers an unusually comprehensive look at how preparation and school context together shape what teachers do in their first years in the classroom.



The authors bring substantial expertise to this work. Peter Youngs is a professor and Chair of the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education at the University of Virginia. Dorothea Anagnostopoulos is Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Connecticut. Jillian Cavanna, Corey Drake, and Tutita Casa contribute expertise in elementary mathematics and literacy education, strengthening the book's grounding in subject-specific pedagogy. Their collective background positions them well to conduct the kind of multi-site, longitudinal, mixed-methods investigation that this book represents.

The authors draw on findings from the Development of Ambitious Instruction (DAI) study, which followed 175 beginning elementary teachers from five university-based teacher preparation programs as they transitioned from

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student teaching into their first two to three years of full-time teaching. Using a convergent mixed-methods approach, the authors collected classroom observation data using the Protocol for Language Arts Teaching Observation (PLATO), surveys, and interviews across four years. The study examined how preparation program learning opportunities, individual teacher characteristics, and school-based resources were associated with beginning teachers' enactment of ambitious instructional practices in mathematics and English language arts (ELA). The authors define ambitious instruction as teaching that "promotes students' deep, conceptual understanding of academic content" (p. 4), positioning every student as capable of engaging in disciplinary thinking, reasoning, and argumentation rather than rote recall.

The book is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 establishes the conceptual framework and introduces the DAI study, situating the work within the broader policy context of rising accountability demands and calls for more rigorous instruction. Chapter 2 examines the five preparation programs' opportunities to learn (OTL), finding more variation in candidates' reported learning opportunities within programs than between them, a sobering finding for those who assume program-level policies translate uniformly into candidate experiences. Chapter 3 draws on PLATO observation data to examine beginning teachers' trajectories across their first and second years of teaching, finding that novice teachers demonstrated "small but statistically significant improvements" in both mathematics and ELA composite scores (p. 132), with the most growth occurring in the disciplinary demand domain and the least in instructional scaffolding. Chapter 4 deepens these quantitative findings through the in-depth cases of three novice teachers, Jessica, Roberto, and Nora, tracing how each drew on preparation resources and school-based supports in ways shaped by their individual goals, beliefs, and professional contexts. Chapter 5 is a synthesis of the key findings into implications for teacher preparation programs, school districts, and researchers.

The book's most significant contribution is its insistence on studying teacher learning as a process that spans the boundaries between university preparation and school-based practice. As the authors argue, "Beginning teachers forge their instructional practice as they move between teacher preparation programs and K–12 schools" (p. 7). Many studies of teacher education focus either on what universities provide or on what teachers do in classrooms, but rarely on how the two connect (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Grossman, 2021). The DAI study's longitudinal design, which followed teachers across preparation and into their first three years of teaching, enables the authors to ask whether what was learned in preparation programs showed up in classroom practice and under what conditions. Despite its title, this book is ultimately less about elementary education specifically than about the conditions under which beginning teachers translate preparation into practice, a question with implications far beyond the elementary grades. The case study chapters are particularly compelling in this regard. Jessica, for example, described her preparation as an "advantage," noting, "I have a bit of an advantage . . . but for me as a new teacher . . . I was just taught (this) in college" (p. 92). Such moments illuminate the personal sense teachers make of their preparation experiences and how that sense shapes their

instructional decisions, a dimension of teacher development that survey and observation data alone cannot capture.

The book is also noteworthy for the practical orientation of its final chapter. Rather than concluding with nothing more than calls for more research—though those are made as well—the authors offer concrete recommendations: For preparation programs, the sequencing of learning opportunities to build coherence between coursework and clinical placements; For school districts, ensuring that instructional coaching supports the specific ambitious practices novice teachers are still developing. This dual audience focus makes the book useful not only for researchers but for the practitioners and administrators who design and support early career teaching.

Evaluated on its own terms, the book has several limitations worth noting. The study is limited to elementary teachers, leaving open the question of whether these dynamics operate similarly at the secondary level. The five participating preparation programs, while varied in structure, are all university-based, which means the findings may not generalize to alternative certification pathways that are increasingly common across the country. The book's focus on mathematics and ELA, though appropriate given the DAI study's design, leaves untouched the question of how ambitious instruction develops in other content areas such as science or social studies. Finally, the primary measure of ambitious instruction, PLATO, is a well-validated observation instrument, but it necessarily captures only what is observable in a limited number of classroom observations per teacher per year, and its domains may not fully represent the range of practices that constitute ambitious teaching across all contexts.

These limitations point to natural directions for extending this line of work. The study sample was predominantly white (88%) and female (94%); and while the authors acknowledge this demographic skew, the book does not deeply examine how the dynamics of ambitious instruction might operate differently for teachers working with racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse student populations. Given that English learners represent a growing segment of elementary school students in the US, future research might examine how teacher preparation programs specifically support beginning teachers in enacting ambitious instruction with multilingual learners, including the role of language-responsive pedagogical practices not addressed here. Similarly, the authors do not take up technology as an instructional resource or as a mediator of ambitious teaching, an absence that is increasingly difficult to overlook as digital tools become central to how students engage with disciplinary content. These are not failures of the book's design so much as openings for the next generation of research building on this foundation.

Teaching Ambitiously in Elementary School is an essential reference for anyone seeking to understand how ambitious instructional ideals become or fail to become sustainable classroom practices. Teacher preparation faculty, especially those in mathematics and literacy education, will find the study's evidence base directly relevant to how they structure and sequence learning opportunities for their candidates. Faculty in teacher education will find a valuable lens for examining how pedagogical knowledge acquired in university coursework

translates into practice, even as they will note the need to extend this framework to linguistically diverse contexts. School district leaders and induction program designers will appreciate the book's clear-eyed analysis of how school-based resources either support or constrain novice teachers' development. And researchers in teacher education will find in the DAI study a model of the kind of large-scale, longitudinal, mixed-methods work the field needs more of. The authors' honest account of modest growth, complex associations, and ongoing challenges is ultimately more valuable than a simpler story would be. That honesty is itself a contribution. By showing that ambitious teaching develops through interactions among preparation, induction, and school context, *Teaching Ambitiously in Elementary School* makes an important contribution to contemporary scholarship on teacher learning and teacher education at a time when education systems seek ways to support both teacher effectiveness and student success.

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About the Reviewer

Francisca Briandt (briandt_1@tamu.edu) is a PhD candidate in educational psychology at Texas A&M University, where she serves as a graduate teaching consultant, graduate teaching assistant, and President of the Educational Psychology Student Organization. With experience teaching K-8 English language arts and reading, Briandt brings both classroom and research perspectives to her scholarly work. She has served as a mentor to new teachers, supporting their professional growth in the early years of their careers. Her research focuses on technology integration to improve K-8 English learners' science achievement, framed by the Four-Dimensional Bilingual Pedagogical Theory. Her scholarly work is committed to advancing equitable, evidence-based instructional practices for linguistically diverse learners in elementary school contexts.



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 of The Math Learning Center, Tunitia M. Casa of the University of Connecticut, and innovation expert Jillian M. Cavanna of the University of Hartford.

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