

# Intersektionalität und die Rolle der Digitalität in der sprachlichen Bildung

Podcast mit Dr. María Cioè-Peña (PennGSE)

Carolyn Blume:

I'm sitting here today with María Cioè-Peña, who is an educator and a researcher at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania in the United States. Thank you so much for coming here today.

María Cioè-Peña:

Oh, thanks for having me.

Carolyn Blume:

I'm really excited to have you here because your interests and your research really speak to a whole number of issues, because your research is so intersectional, that you look at not just issues of linguisticism and not just issues of racism, not just issues of ability or disability, but how those things intersect with each other in educational and general social environments. So we're focusing a lot on the educational aspects today. But in looking at some of your publications, for example, you also look at the role of mothers, especially.

And you have a text, I think, with the title Bad Mothers, right? We're very often titled as bad mothers when our children don't conform to certain social or especially educational institutional expectations. And that really creates a lot of pressure, obviously, not just for the child who needs to be educated, certainly for the education personnel, but also for the mothers.

And sometimes those roles overlap as well.

María Cioè-Peña:

Yeah, and it's also, you know, we expect a lot from parents, but we don't necessarily pay attention to the ways in which we also hinder their ability to be fully participating.

Carolyn Blume:

And that probably has a lot of different layers that you could probably talk very expensively about. But I think a lot of it also has to do with pedagogy and having pedagogies that are inclusive in a number of different ways. And you've written about culturally sensitive pedagogy, right?

Can you tell me what you mean about culturally sensitive pedagogy? And what really interests me also with that is we talk a lot about digitality and digital media and digital tools and the role that plays in education today. Is there a connection between those two issues?

María Cioè-Peña:

Yeah, so I think, so first culturally sensitive pedagogies are really important.

And they come from Gloria Ladson-Billings and then Paris, who were able to really highlight the ways in which we need to involve children's cultures in their learning, right? That there is no such thing as a cultural learning. There is no such thing as a cultural teaching or a cultural practices, because children are constantly being immersed in culture, whether it be

the cultures of their families, their communities that they're carrying with them, or the cultures that they're being exposed to at school.

So that's one. So culturally sustaining pedagogies are really about recognizing what's in the room, right? Not just what we are trying to create in the room, but what students are bringing and the ways that culture is just in the air, right?

It's the water. And so then when we're thinking about digital literacies and digital interventions that are available, it's really an opportunity for us to extend ourselves as teachers. I think often when we have a lot of students from different cultures or backgrounds, we can feel overwhelmed because there's this weird thinking within education that we have to be a match to our students in order for us to connect with our students.

But I actually think that we just have to be willing to stretch ourselves in order to connect with our students. And so digital media really allows us the opportunity to fill in some of the gaps. So whether those gaps would be around language, around text, around literacy, around voice, that's an opportunity for us to think about how can I show up for this learner in a way that makes them feel seen and held, even if I can't do it myself actively.

Carolyn Blume:

When you say, kind of, teachers should stretch themselves or maybe could stretch themselves, and you say that digital tools could help us, I hear a lot of teachers and the teacher in me saying, I've got 35 different kids from 30 different nations in my class, and many of those are hyphenated backgrounds. Are you asking me to learn their languages? Are you asking me to learn about their cultural heritage? That's not possible.

María Cioè-Peña:

No. So what I'm thinking about, I'm a student of Ofelia García's, and she's a big proponent of translanguaging pedagogy and translanguaging practices. And one of the things that we talk about there is the multicultural and multilingual ecology. So it's not necessarily about you, the teacher, having to hold all those languages and cultures, but inviting your students to do it, allowing your students to recognize that there's space for them to name the ways in which they don't feel seen so that then they can create visibility for themselves.

So I've had classrooms where I don't share the same language with my students, so I just invite them to bring those languages in. That might mean posters, that might mean bringing in parents to teach us something. But it's about recognizing that we can't do it all and that we can both rely on community and rely on technology.

Carolyn Blume:

Paris and Alim say that there's a big danger with the idea that we try to be culturally sustaining or have culturally sustained pedagogies on the one hand, but on the other, school has a culture itself and that there's an expectation that children learn the school culture in order to be able to succeed in it. And I guess the other question, if you turn that around, I'm trying to challenge those exclusionary school cultures, and they very frequently are exclusionary, but am I doing my students a disservice if they don't learn this very, in German we say it's a middle-class school habitus. Is there a risk that they're then not going to be able to be part of or not going to be able to benefit from the institution because there's so much emphasis on validating the culture they bring that does not align with the institution?

María Cioè-Peña:

I think it's a "Yes, and".

I think one, to think that students' cultures don't align with the institution is reductionist. And I think similarly, to think that we can't allow students' cultures to be there and that will result in success is also reductionist. Children want to be successful.

It's the same thing that I tell parents when they're concerned about whether or not their child will learn English in a bilingual program. I have yet to meet a child who did not want to learn English. They want to be part of their community. They want to be part of the social networks. They want to be in the know. And I think it's the same thing when we think about school culture and school practices.

Students want to be successful, so they're going to want to figure it out. I think the responsibility or potentially the shift that we can make as teachers is exposing that culture and saying, hey, you're great, you're valid, and these are some of the practices that are required in these spaces.

I'm an academic now. I wasn't always an academic. I had to learn the rules of that, you said, Habitat Center. Now I'm thinking about that, the field. So that's one field. And I have other fields. And I can recognize myself that I have the capacity to move across all of those fields. Some of them require changes, but some of them don't. And I think, honestly, we could just be talking to children about this in the same way.

I tell my kids all the time. So, for example, I am not the language police. My kids can use profanity at will whenever they want to. But we have conversations about consequences. We have conversations about how some people may respond. I don't mind that you say those words, but your grandparents might. Your teachers might. And that's a different conversation and context. It's the same thing with different academic behaviors. So, yes, here you have to be sitting and you have to behave in these ways. But then let's also create spaces for children to be free and to expo- Oh, what is that word? To show up as themselves, essentially. Rather than having to be in this box the entire day.

Carolyn Blume:

I have lots of thoughts, and I could go in lots of different directions. We could always go back afterwards. I'm wondering if it would be too far to say that for kids coming to school where the school is so alien to them in so many ways, whether they're forced to adopt a kind of masking in order to get through the day.

María Cioè-Peña:

They are.

And honestly, I would say it's really isolating. Even in spaces where we think we are expansive and inclusive. I think about bilingual classrooms where it's a 50-50 model.

And you have a student who just arrived and they don't have that other 50. That means that for half of the day that kid is alone in their head, in their thoughts. And then we wonder why we see behavioral problems.

We've made no effort for connection, for entry here. So how can we expect someone to feel cared for when we're very clearly isolating them? So I think those are the ways in which we can think about that.

Carolyn Blume:

Your context is so different than mine because you're talking about English as a second language, and we're talking about English as a foreign language. And there are two things. One is that we do propagate here the theoretical, and it's in the curricula, the idea of using only one language in the classroom, and that language is the target language, which of course is English.

And of course that's problematic in a whole number of ways. But then I'm thinking also more concretely about a teacher who asked me a question yesterday, and I don't think I had a good answer, which is she said, you know, yes, I try and let my kids, because they're like fourth graders learning English, and even though they're only supposed to use English, sometimes I do use their language, which for many is German. But I have several children in this class. I have 30 children, five of whom are so recently arrived, they do not share any language resources, either in English or German. How can I include and support these learners, along with my 25 other learners who have this curriculum, when they have no L1 that we can share or even L2 or anything, that there's such an enormous diversity, and they don't share a language with each other, how can I possibly explain to these kids how they're supposed to, for example, make a poster or create an e-book, which was the topic we were talking about?

María Cioè-Peña:

I think we've become really reliant as a society on spoken and written language. I am here. I don't speak very much German. I could easily say I don't speak German at all, right? And yet I made it from Frankfurt to Heidelberg, right?

Carolyn Blume:

Very successfully.

María Cioè-Peña:

Successfully, right? I didn't miss a train, I wasn't late for anything, I didn't get on the wrong place, I didn't get in the wrong class of the car. I was able to understand which seats were available, which ones aren't. And that's because we have a lot of other cues. We have a lot of visual cues, we have a lot of hand gestures, and yet we devalue all of that communication. And then we feel frozen and static.

But we have our hands, we have images that we can create. When I talk about my practice, this is why I think it's really important not to just talk about language, but to also talk about *Universal Design for Learning*. Because *Universal Design for Learning* then gets us out of the box of just translation.

I think often when we're thinking about inclusion in linguistically expansive spaces, we only think about translation. We don't think about the other modes and mediums of communication that exist. And that's why we have to think beyond just how are we talking, how are we speaking the languages that we speak, but really dig deep into meaning making.

How do we communicate? How do we build community here?

Carolyn Blume:

I mean, this is a silly anecdote, but it reminds me when you explained we could rely more on nonverbal cues or on visual symbols, gestures, and our body language. My father doesn't speak a word of German, came to visit me 20 years ago, and I was in the hospital. And the doctor came in and said something that I barely understood as a teenager. My father nodded and walked out. I said, how did you know to walk out? He said, well, it was obvious. A doctor comes into a room where there's two women, and he looks at the man in the room, and he makes a gesture with his hands towards the doorway. I understood that he wanted to give you women some privacy. And it's so stupidly obvious that it's almost not worth commenting on, but we don't make those kinds of communication forms explicit either.

So that, yeah, I needed someone to say, you know, this is what this means, and this is how I interpreted it.

María Cioè-Peña:

I also feel like we think about many points of inclusion as infantilizing, and so we don't use them. I saw this great TikTok yesterday of a teacher who has a sign up at her door with eight different types of greetings that her students can choose from. They had visuals, right? These are really young kids who are not reading, but they are able to make selections. We could do the same things for adults, but we somehow don't because we make it seem as if because we're adults, we have to be fully cooked. We have to be perfect, right?

That really restricts our capacity to grow and our ability to learn new things and to navigate new spaces. I could have become increasingly anxious the more that I travel to places where I don't speak the language. Instead, I just become really confident in reminding myself that I know certain cues, that I have certain skills that I can recognize, right?

So I know how to cross the street because I know how to look at the different colors and different signs. There's a lot of language that is actually very universal, but because we don't think about it explicitly, then we dismiss it. And I think we just need to be a little bit more creative about how are we creating space for people to connect.

Carolyn Blume:

That really, to me, connects to the idea of neuroqueer reading, right? So the idea that the way we think reading has to happen or what counts as successful reading is very narrowly framed, is very academically framed, and kind of, again, elevates the written word to a status of prestige that doesn't only harm some children and adults who don't read in those ways. I think that's made very clear in the texts.

But also in light of AI, I see some kind of ability to make connections there and say AI is robbing us of this ability to elevate the written word on this pedestal and give it all the status and prestige and say this is the way we know things and this is the way we communicate things, and that we need to rediscover or create new ways of conveying meaning that don't rely on written texts.

María Cioè-Peña:

What I think that technology is also going to do is it's really going to reduce for us, or it's really going to bring to focus what it is that makes human communication human. Because you're right. I can use AI to read to me. I can use AI to translate things for me. I have students. I teach predominantly Chinese international students, and they are getting by, even though some of them may not have the most perfect English, and it's because we have all these resources and tools available.

Does that student not deserve a place in my class? No, that student has totally earned it because they have figured out a way how to navigate. What that creates, though, is a challenge for me in how I teach, because then I have to show up in a way that breaks through the text, that actually builds some relationship, that actually gets this person to want to grow and develop their knowledge background without it necessarily being about these resources.

I think a lot of us are at a point right now where we're having to rethink our assessments, where we're having to rethink our assignments and even the materials that we're using. I think that's an opportunity for us, instead of to panic, to lean in and say, okay, what else is there for us to build on?

Carolyn Blume:

That maybe brings us to the next point, and it's all interrelated, clearly. The digitality and the issues around digitality are related to issues of inclusion, like you just said. In Germany, we're really struggling with inclusion at a number of different levels, depending on how you define diversity.

We struggle with inclusion of learners with so-called special educational needs. We struggle with disabled people. But also, in some parts of Germany, we have significant cultural diversity. In other parts, we have very little. I think the question becomes, for those teachers who have very little diversity, and we do have selective school forms, as you know, why should they care about this kind of inclusivity? It doesn't affect them.

They can keep going the way things have been, no?

María Cioè-Peña:

That's assuming that it's been working.

Carolyn Blume:

It's been working for a small portion of the population.

María Cioè-Peña:

Yeah, but that's what's created so much stratification in society and stratification in classrooms. We can say that even in classrooms that we think are homogeneous, we are going to find diversity.

I was at an event a couple of weeks ago where everyone there spoke the same language, everyone had the same cultural background, and yet we all had different needs because we're people and we're individual people. I think what's interesting is that we have

particular ideas around disability and neurodiverse people, what that looks like, how it shows up. But the more and more people I meet, the more evident it is that all of us are neurospicy, right?

All of us have something, whether it is that smell that you don't like or the ways that you only like reading in this corner, in this chair, or that your backpack has to have certain balance and weight. There are particular needs that we have, and often we're asking people to deny those needs in order to conform to the center. So teachers actually creating opportunities for all children to be full isn't just focusing on the migrant child or the linguistically diverse child or the stable child or the racialized child.

All children are unique, all children have unique life experiences, so they're going to come into the classroom with different interests, with different voices. I think if we continue to believe that students are homogeneous, then we're just creating a little factory where we're expecting everyone to come in the same and go out the same. But that's not the reality, right?

Societies need diverse people with diverse interests, with diverse talents, so we should be manifesting those rather than denying their existence just because all the kids look the same or all the kids speak the same language.

Carolyn Blume:

I think we can see the dangers of not addressing those different kinds of needs in all sorts of different ways. I mean, we have obviously, as you said, quite a bit of stratification, social stratification. We also have, of course, the conflicts, the very polarized political environment.

One of the things that we're increasingly worried about, of course, is also kind of the resilience of our democratic institutions, and if large people, large numbers of people feel disempowered by those democratic institutions, it becomes kind of clear why there's so little resilience built into the systems.

María Cioè-Peña:

I also think if you have no understanding of your connection across spaces, then it's really easy to be like, well, that's not happening to me, and it won't impact me. I think we're at a moment in time where we're reckoning with hyper-individualism, right? There's been so many ideas of I will take care of myself, I will take care of my family, but now in the United States, we're seeing people disappear, right?

Who takes care of you then? Who takes care of your family in those situations? What happens when your entire neighborhood is decimated, right, and it becomes a ghost town?

So it's not just about creating spaces where children will feel welcome, but also where these children will grow up to be adults who welcome others, right, who see the value in someone being different rather than in wanting... And I think a lot of times, and throughout history we've seen, that difference has been used as a way to drum up fear. But it's not real, right?

It's a manufactured fear, and it's created in order to control us, right, because fear is a really easy way to control and dominate people. People give up so many of their rights at that time. So it's important for us to think about what are we...

The classrooms that we are creating are microcosms of the society that we want to see. So if I want to see a society that is respectful of diversity, respectful, you know, focused on equity, focused on access, then I have to start creating that myself. And so many teachers, particularly now, feel powerless, but our classrooms are a rich and powerful space, right?

One of the reasons why I wanted to become a teacher was because I had the opportunity to contribute to the growth and development of hundreds of people over my lifetime, right? That's amazing. That was an opportunity that I had to create the society that I wanted to see, right?

So I got to talk to students about, your needs and someone else's needs can be different, but they're equal, right? So whenever they're like, that's not fair, this person's doing that. Well, what feels unfair about that? Do you feel like you need something that you're not getting? Then let's talk about that, right? Rather than focusing on denying people things just because they've been denied to us.

And I think that that's the opportunity for us when we're creating these diverse classrooms. It's an opportunity for us to tell people, your needs are not too much. Your needs are just right, and there's actually enough space in society for us to meet them.

Carolyn Blume:

That's a beautiful sentiment, and I have so many more thoughts about it, but I'm going to end it there because I don't think I could add anything more to that. Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me.

María Cioè-Peña:

Thanks for having me.