

Language Policy and Identity in Chinese Classrooms: The Case of Mandarin and Local Dialects

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of language policy and identity formation in Chinese classrooms, focusing on the dominance of Standard Mandarin (Putonghua) and its impact on students who speak local dialects such as Cantonese, Shanghainese, Hokkien, and others. While national language policies have promoted linguistic unification as a means of fostering national identity and socioeconomic mobility, these policies often marginalize regional linguistic identities. Drawing from sociolinguistic theory and a review of policy documents and existing literature, this study examines how students experience language regulation in educational settings and how their linguistic identities are shaped, negotiated, or suppressed in the process. The paper argues for a more inclusive approach to language education that acknowledges linguistic diversity as a cultural asset rather than a barrier to national cohesion.

Keywords: Language policy; Linguistic identity; Mandarin (Putonghua); Local dialects in China

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Significance

Language policy in China has long been used as a tool for political cohesion and national integration. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the government has promoted Putonghua (Standard Mandarin) as the lingua franca to unify its linguistically diverse population (Dong, 2010; Zhou & Sun, 2004). Education has played a central role in this project, with policies mandating Mandarin as the primary medium of instruction across all provinces (Spolsky, 2004). While these policies have been effective in raising national Mandarin proficiency levels, they have also led to the marginalization of regional dialects such as Cantonese, Shanghainese, and Minnanhua, which continue to be spoken by millions (Chen, 1999).

The tension between top-down language policies and bottom-up identity practices is particularly pronounced in classrooms. Students who grow up speaking regional dialects at home are often required to suppress these identities in favor of a standardized linguistic norm (Tsung & Cruickshank, 2009). This dynamic has implications not only for language

maintenance but also for cultural belonging, psychological well-being, and social inclusion within the school system (Zhang & Yang, 2017).

This paper aims to explore the relationship between language policy and identity formation in Chinese educational settings, focusing on how Mandarin's dominance affects students who speak local dialects. Rather than drawing on primary empirical research, this study is literature-based, relying on scholarly analysis, government policy documents, and sociolinguistic theory. The scope includes historical policy review, identity theory, and an examination of educational discourse, with a focus on understanding the classroom as a site of linguistic and cultural negotiation.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- How have historical and contemporary language policies in China shaped the role of Mandarin and local dialects in education?
- In what ways does the prioritization of Mandarin affect students' linguistic and cultural identities?
- What are the sociolinguistic implications of dialect suppression or marginalization in the classroom setting?

2. Historical and Political Foundations of Language Policy in China

China's contemporary language policy is the result of long-term political, ideological, and administrative processes aimed at linguistic standardization and national cohesion. From the early 20th century onward, successive governments have treated language as a critical instrument for modernization, governance, and identity construction. This section traces the historical evolution of language policy in China, examines the political motivations behind the promotion of Putonghua, and analyzes how Mandarin became institutionalized within the education system.

2.1 Evolution of Language Policy from the 20th Century to the Present

Efforts to standardize a national language in China began in the late Qing Dynasty and intensified during the Republican period (1912–1949). Intellectuals and reformers viewed linguistic diversity as an obstacle to modernization and mass education, advocating for a common spoken language based on northern dialects (Chen, 1999). The term *Guoyu* (national language) was formally adopted during this period, laying the foundation for later policies.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, language planning became a centralized state project. In 1956, the government officially designated Putonghua as the standard national language and emphasized its promotion as essential for socialist development and national unity (Zhou & Sun, 2004). Subsequent decades saw large-scale literacy campaigns, phonetic reforms (such as the introduction of *Pinyin*), and systematic efforts to reduce regional linguistic variation in public life. In the post-reform era (after 1978), language policy continued to prioritize Mandarin, though with limited recognition of linguistic diversity. While minority languages received some legal protection, regional Han dialects were largely excluded from institutional support, particularly in education and media (Li, 2016). As a result, contemporary

language policy reflects both continuity and tension: strong state endorsement of Mandarin alongside growing public concern about dialect loss.

2.2 The Promotion of Putonghua and National Integration Goals

The promotion of Putonghua has been closely linked to the Chinese state's broader goals of political stability, economic development, and national integration. From a policy perspective, linguistic uniformity has been framed as a prerequisite for effective governance and social mobility (Spolsky, 2004). Mandarin proficiency has also been associated with access to higher education, urban employment, and upward socioeconomic mobility.

Official discourse often presents Putonghua as a neutral and unifying medium; however, sociolinguistic research suggests that its promotion implicitly constructs a hierarchy in which Mandarin is positioned as modern, educated, and legitimate, while local dialects are perceived as backward or informal (Dong, 2010). This hierarchy reinforces symbolic power relations and contributes to the marginalization of non-Mandarin speakers. Moreover, the emphasis on Putonghua plays a significant role in shaping national identity. Speaking Mandarin fluently is frequently associated with being a "modern" and "proper" citizen, aligning linguistic behavior with ideological expectations of belonging (Zhang & Yang, 2017). As a result, language policy operates not only as a communicative tool but also as a mechanism of identity regulation.

2.3 Institutionalization of Mandarin in Education

Education has been the primary site through which Mandarin has been institutionalized and normalized. National regulations mandate Putonghua as the principal language of instruction at all levels of schooling, with teachers expected to meet standardized Mandarin proficiency requirements (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2013). These policies have significantly increased Mandarin competence nationwide but have also reshaped classroom language practices.

Research indicates that the strict enforcement of Mandarin in schools often discourages the use of local dialects, even in informal interactions (Tsung & Cruickshank, 2009). In some contexts, students are explicitly corrected or penalized for using dialects, reinforcing the perception that dialects are inappropriate in academic spaces. This contributes to a hidden curriculum in which linguistic conformity is equated with discipline and academic legitimacy. Over time, the education system has functioned as a powerful agent of linguistic socialization, transmitting not only language skills but also ideological messages about which languages and by extension, which identities are valued (Bourdieu, 1991). The institutional dominance of Mandarin thus plays a crucial role in shaping students' linguistic self-perceptions and long-term identity trajectories.

3. Theoretical Framework and Key Concepts

To analyze the intersection of language policy and identity in Chinese classrooms, this study draws on interdisciplinary frameworks from language policy and planning (LPP), sociolinguistic identity and language ideology, and critical theories of linguistic power. These frameworks situate language not merely as a communicative tool but as a socially embedded system tied to political control, symbolic capital, and identity construction. To guide the

analysis, Figure 1 presents a conceptual model illustrating the relationship between state-driven language policy, the ideological shaping of identity in education, and the reinforcement of linguistic hierarchies through symbolic power.

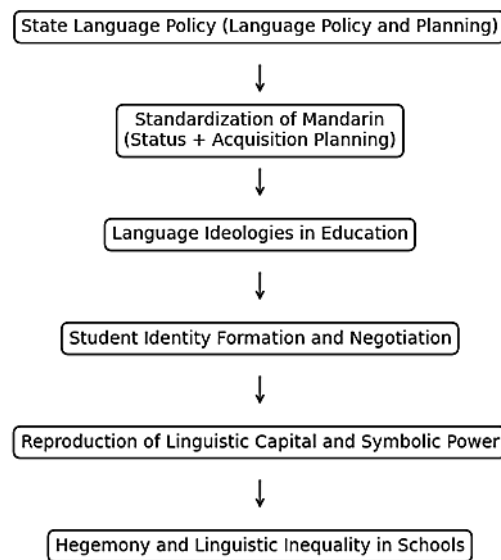


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Linking Language Policy, Identity, and Linguistic Power in Education

3.1 Language Policy and Planning (LPP) Theories

Language Policy and Planning (LPP) refers to deliberate efforts by institutions to shape language use through legal, educational, or cultural instruments (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Spolsky, 2004). LPP is traditionally divided into three domains:

- Status planning – designating official languages or elevating the prestige of particular varieties;
- Corpus planning – standardizing grammar, vocabulary, and scripts;
- Acquisition planning – promoting language learning through formal education.

In China, all three are evident: the elevation of Putonghua, the reform of writing systems (*e.g.*, Pinyin), and the embedding of Mandarin across all levels of schooling (Zhou & Sun, 2004). However, critical LPP scholars emphasize that language policies are not ideologically neutral; they often privilege dominant groups while suppressing regional or minority languages (Tollefson, 1991; Hornberger, 2006).

By viewing Chinese language policy through a critical LPP lens, this paper highlights how state efforts to unify language through education are embedded in broader ideological projects of national identity and cultural homogenization.

3.2 Sociolinguistic Identity and Language Ideology

Language is central to identity construction, functioning both as a marker of group membership and as a medium for performing and negotiating selfhood (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). In Chinese classrooms, where Standard Mandarin is strictly promoted, students from dialect-speaking

backgrounds must navigate conflicting linguistic identities balancing school-imposed norms with regional linguistic affiliations.

Language ideologies the beliefs and assumptions about language and its value play a key role here. In China, dominant ideologies frame Putonghua as modern, educated, and nationally unifying, while dialects are often seen as backward or emotionally charged (Dong, 2010; Tsung, 2014). These ideological distinctions shape classroom dynamics, influencing how students perceive their own speech and that of their peers.

As shown in Figure 1, language ideologies act as a bridge between policy and identity. The classroom becomes a site where students internalize or resist these ideologies, leading to outcomes such as dialect shame, self-censorship, or strategic code-switching. Understanding this process is essential to unpacking the sociocultural impact of language policy.

3.3 Hegemony, Power, and Linguistic Capital in Education

To understand how language policy shapes not just identity but social inequality, this paper draws on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of linguistic capital, symbolic power, and hegemony (Bourdieu, 1991).

- Linguistic capital refers to the social value attached to language proficiency in dominant codes. In China, Putonghua fluency enables access to better schools, exams, and employment opportunities.
- Symbolic power describes the way dominant language norms (e.g., Mandarin) are seen as neutral or natural, masking the disadvantages they impose on dialect speakers.
- Hegemony, following Gramsci (1971), occurs when such dominance becomes internalized even by those it marginalizes.

In educational settings, these dynamics manifest as both explicit rules (e.g., Mandarin-only policies) and implicit norms (e.g., teachers correcting dialect use). As Figure 1 illustrates, the system of language education reinforces a cycle where language policy feeds into ideology, which shapes identity and maintains symbolic power structures that favor Mandarin speakers. Consequently, schools function not only as sites of linguistic instruction but also as arenas of social stratification (He, 2006).

4. Mandarin and Local Dialects: A Sociolinguistic Tension

The sociolinguistic landscape of China is marked by profound internal diversity, where national efforts toward linguistic standardization have collided with deeply rooted regional linguistic traditions. While Putonghua (Standard Mandarin) is promoted as the national language for education, administration, and media, regional dialects and minority languages continue to serve as vital tools for local identity, intergenerational communication, and cultural heritage. This section examines the tension between Mandarin and local dialects by exploring China's linguistic diversity, the dominance of Mandarin in educational institutions, and shifting language attitudes among students, educators, and communities.

4.1 China's Linguistic Landscape: Regional Dialects and Minority Languages

China is home to one of the world's most linguistically diverse populations. Within the Han majority alone, there are dozens of mutually unintelligible Sinitic varieties, commonly referred to as dialects, though many function more like distinct languages (Chen, 1999). These include widely spoken varieties such as Cantonese (Yue), Shanghainese (Wu), Hokkien (Min), Hakka (Kejia), and Jin, among others.

In addition to Sinitic dialects, China officially recognizes 55 ethnic minority groups, many of which have their own languages, including Zhuang, Tibetan, Uyghur, Kazakh, and Korean (Zhou & Sun, 2004). While minority languages receive limited legal protection and may be used in certain localized educational contexts, regional Han dialects despite being spoken by hundreds of millions receive no official status and are largely excluded from formal institutions (Li, 2016).

This linguistic diversity creates a complex tension: Putonghua is promoted as a unifying force, yet its dominance often comes at the expense of local speech forms, contributing to language attrition and identity erosion among dialect-speaking populations.

4.2 Mandarin as a Dominant Language in Schools

Mandarin's privileged position in the Chinese education system is a direct result of national language policy and curriculum reform. Since the 1980s, the Ministry of Education has intensified efforts to enforce "Putonghua-only" environments in both urban and rural schools (Spolsky, 2004). The Language Law of 2000 further codified Mandarin as the standard language of instruction across all state-run institutions, reinforcing its dominance through policy mechanisms.

In practical terms, this means that teachers are evaluated on their Putonghua proficiency, textbooks are produced in standardized Mandarin, and students are assessed through national examinations that require fluency in the standard variety (Tsung & Cruickshank, 2009). The result is that dialect use in classrooms is discouraged, and in many cases, explicitly punished (Zhang & Yang, 2017).

This situation creates a linguistic mismatch for students whose home language is a regional dialect. They are required not only to learn academic content but also to shift linguistic codes an added cognitive and emotional burden. This can result in alienation, reduced classroom participation, or linguistic insecurity, particularly among younger children in dialect-dominant regions.

4.3 Language Attitudes and Perceived Prestige

Language ideologies in China contribute significantly to the devaluation of dialects and the elevation of Mandarin. National campaigns have framed Putonghua as a symbol of modernity, progress, and patriotism, while dialects are often associated with localism, informality, or backwardness (Dong, 2010). These perceptions have led many young people and even parents to actively distance themselves from dialects, believing that Mandarin competence is essential for academic and professional success.

However, language attitudes are not monolithic. Recent sociolinguistic studies have shown that dialects can also function as markers of local pride, authenticity, and cultural rootedness, particularly in metropolitan areas like Guangzhou or Shanghai where regional identities remain strong (Zhou, 2012; Lai, 2014). In such contexts, code-switching becomes a strategic tool, allowing speakers to navigate between national and local identities depending on context.

Among students, attitudes toward dialects are shaped by family practices, school environments, and peer dynamics. Some may experience dialect shame, especially if they are corrected in school, while others embrace dialect use as a form of resistance or identity affirmation. The prestige differential between Mandarin and dialects thus reflects broader social and political hierarchies, with language serving as both a symbolic and practical gatekeeper to mobility and belonging.

5. Identity Formation and Classroom Language Practices

Language plays a central role in the construction and performance of identity, particularly in educational settings where linguistic norms are both explicitly taught and implicitly reinforced. In Chinese classrooms, where Putonghua is both the official medium of instruction and a symbol of national identity, students who speak local dialects face unique challenges in navigating their linguistic and cultural identities. This section explores how language use shapes identity, the ways in which dialect-speaking students are marginalized, and the psychological implications of dialect suppression.

5.1 Identity Construction Through Language Use

Identity is not fixed but is continually negotiated through social interaction, with language serving as one of its most powerful markers (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). In the multilingual context of China, students are often required to shift between home dialects and school-mandated Putonghua, leading to what researchers describe as “double consciousness” in language use (He, 2006). This duality is especially pronounced in younger learners, who may speak a dialect fluently at home but feel pressure to adopt Mandarin identities in formal education contexts.

In classrooms, linguistic identity is often shaped by:

- Teacher expectations (which privilege Mandarin use);
- Peer interaction (which may penalize dialect usage through teasing or exclusion);
- Curricular content (which largely ignores regional linguistic diversity).

This process of identity formation is deeply influenced by language ideologies that link Putonghua with academic success, professionalism, and social acceptance (Dong, 2010), leaving little room for the affirmation of dialect-based identities.

5.2 Marginalization of Dialect-Speaking Students

Students who speak regional dialects as their first language often face forms of marginalization both overt and covert in Mandarin-dominant classrooms. Although they may acquire fluency in Putonghua over time, these students frequently begin school with a linguistic disadvantage,

especially in rural areas where dialects are used exclusively at home (Tsung & Cruickshank, 2009).

Marginalization occurs through:

- Correction or punishment for speaking dialects;
- Peer stigma or labeling (“uncivilized,” “rustic,” etc.);
- Unequal participation, as dialect speakers may be hesitant to speak up in class due to accent or fluency concerns.

These experiences can result in lowered self-esteem, language anxiety, and in some cases, educational disengagement (Zhang & Yang, 2017). The linguistic hierarchy embedded in school environments implicitly teaches students that their home language and by extension, their home identity is less legitimate than the national norm.

5.3 Dialect Suppression and Its Psychological Impact

The active suppression or erasure of dialects in classrooms can lead to a range of psychological effects on students. While language shift is often discussed in terms of policy and cultural loss, it also involves emotional and cognitive stress for individuals who must reject or conceal a part of their identity to succeed in school (Canagarajah, 2004).

Several key impacts include:

- **Dialect shame:** Students may internalize negative stereotypes about their home language and begin to feel embarrassed or ashamed of speaking it, even in family settings.
- **Identity conflict:** Constant code-switching between dialect and Mandarin may create confusion or fragmentation in self-perception, especially in adolescence.
- **Intergenerational tension:** When students reject dialects, it can strain relationships with parents or grandparents who use those languages as primary forms of communication (Zhou & Sun, 2004).

While some students adapt by embracing Putonghua for pragmatic reasons, others may experience resistance, expressing identity through deliberate code-switching or dialect use in peer groups. These patterns reflect broader dynamics of language ideology, identity negotiation, and symbolic resistance in a context of linguistic hegemony (Bourdieu, 1991).

6. Perspectives from Teachers and Educational Institutions (Literature-Based)

While much of the debate on language policy in Chinese classrooms centers on students, it is equally important to examine how teachers and educational institutions implement and reinforce these policies. Teachers occupy a unique role as both policy enforcers and cultural mediators; they interpret national language guidelines in real-time, within highly diverse linguistic classrooms. This section reviews literature on teachers’ attitudes toward dialect use, the structural challenges posed by multilingual settings, and the implicit biases that contribute to linguistic inequality.

6.1 Teachers as Enforcers of Language Policy

Chinese teachers are often positioned as the front-line implementers of state language policy, especially in the context of Putonghua-only mandates. National standards require teachers to achieve and maintain certified levels of Putonghua proficiency (Ministry of Education, 2013). These standards are not merely formalities; they are actively enforced through teacher assessments, classroom observations, and school inspections.

Studies show that many teachers perceive their role as ensuring linguistic conformity, and they may correct or penalize dialect use by students (Tsung & Cruickshank, 2009). This behavior is often driven by both internalized language ideologies and institutional pressure to meet performance benchmarks. As Dong (2010) notes, many educators associate Mandarin with professionalism and national unity, while dialects are seen as disruptive or inappropriate in formal learning spaces.

Yet, not all teachers enforce policy rigidly. Some adopt more pragmatic or empathetic approaches, especially in regions where dialect use is deeply embedded in daily communication. These educators may allow limited dialect use for clarification or emotional expression, though often within unofficial or “hidden” spaces of classroom interaction (Liu & Wu, 2019).

6.2 Challenges in Multilingual Classrooms

Teachers in dialect-rich or minority language regions often face significant challenges in delivering standardized instruction. For students with limited exposure to Putonghua at home, the classroom becomes not just a site of learning subject matter but also of linguistic assimilation. This requires additional scaffolding, code-switching, and often, non-verbal strategies to ensure comprehension (Tsung, 2014).

However, national curricula and teacher training programs typically do not equip teachers with tools for multilingual pedagogy (Zhang & Yang, 2017). As a result, educators are often left to improvise, balancing the need for student understanding with pressure to maintain strict language policy compliance. This disconnect between policy and practice creates a pedagogical dilemma: how to support student learning while reinforcing a monolingual national language ideology.

In some contexts, particularly rural or under-resourced areas, teachers may themselves be dialect speakers who must modify their own language practices to conform to institutional norms. This can produce identity conflicts and even linguistic insecurity among educators, further complicating classroom dynamics (Gao & Park, 2015).

6.3 Implicit Biases and Linguistic Discrimination

Even when dialect use is not explicitly punished, implicit biases can shape teacher attitudes and influence classroom equity. Research has documented how students who speak with non-standard accents or use dialectal features may be perceived as less intelligent, less disciplined, or less articulate (He, 2006). These judgments are rarely acknowledged outright, but they manifest in ways such as:

Differential expectations for participation and achievement;

Selective encouragement of “standard-sounding” students;

Language-based tracking into lower-performing groups or classes.

These practices reflect deeper ideologies that tie linguistic purity to academic legitimacy, and by extension, social worth. Such biases not only affect student performance but also reinforce linguistic hierarchies that marginalize dialect-speaking populations.

Teachers, often unintentionally, reproduce these biases through everyday language choices and disciplinary actions. Institutional structures such as standardized testing, Mandarin-only signage, and curriculum materials further legitimize these biases by excluding regional linguistic variation altogether (Spolsky, 2004).

7. Policy Reflections and Future Directions

China's language policy has been highly effective in achieving national linguistic unification through the widespread promotion of Putonghua. However, this success has come with significant social, cultural, and educational trade-offs. In light of the sociolinguistic tensions explored in this paper, it is necessary to critically reflect on current language policies and explore more inclusive approaches that balance national goals with regional linguistic realities.

7.1 Evaluating the Effectiveness of Current Policies

From a policy implementation perspective, the state's objective of raising Mandarin proficiency has largely been achieved. National assessments and sociolinguistic studies consistently show high levels of Putonghua fluency among younger generations, particularly in urban areas (Spolsky, 2004; Tsung, 2014). The educational system has functioned as a successful conduit for language acquisition.

However, effectiveness must also be assessed against social and cultural outcomes. The marginalization of local dialects, identity conflicts among students, and evidence of implicit linguistic discrimination suggest that current policies may inadvertently undermine social cohesion and cultural diversity paradoxically weakening the very unity they aim to foster (Zhou & Sun, 2004; Zhang & Yang, 2017).

7.2 Balancing National Unity with Linguistic Diversity

Promoting a common national language does not necessarily require the erasure of linguistic diversity. International language policy literature has long emphasized the possibility of "additive bilingualism" where national and local languages can coexist and mutually reinforce each other in formal education (Hornberger, 2006).

In the Chinese context, this would involve recognizing regional dialects not as threats to unity but as cultural assets. Policy documents often invoke slogans like "多样统一" (diversity within unity), but practical implementation tends to favor monolingualism in classrooms. A true balance would require greater flexibility at the local level, along with institutional recognition of dialects as legitimate forms of communication and identity.

7.3 Proposals for Inclusive and Flexible Language Education

Moving forward, Chinese language education policy could benefit from the following reforms:

- Localized policy adaptation: Allow schools in dialect-rich regions to implement flexible language use strategies, including allowing dialect use for clarification or cultural education.
- Teacher training on language diversity: Equip educators with the tools to support multilingual learners and recognize the legitimacy of non-standard varieties.
- Curriculum inclusion of dialects: Develop elective courses or extracurricular programs that celebrate and teach regional dialects, helping to preserve linguistic heritage while promoting student pride.
- Public campaigns to shift language ideology: Promote the idea that bilingualism (or dialect-Mandarin duality) is an intellectual and cultural strength, not a liability.

Such reforms would not threaten the status of Putonghua but would instead humanize the learning environment, support identity development, and foster more equitable classrooms.

8. Conclusion

This paper has examined the sociolinguistic consequences of China's language policy through the lens of classroom experience, focusing on how national language planning intersects with student identity, teacher practice, and institutional norms. While Putonghua promotion has been largely successful from a national policy standpoint, it has also produced tensions that merit further reflection and policy refinement.

8.1 Summary of Key Arguments

- China's language policy reflects centralized goals of national unity but often disregards the rich internal linguistic diversity among both Han and minority populations.
- In classrooms, Putonghua dominance reshapes student identities, leading to the marginalization of dialect-speaking students and creating cognitive and emotional stress.
- Teachers act as enforcers of language norms, often unintentionally reproducing biases that disadvantage non-Mandarin speakers.
- Current policies prioritize monolingualism, which may conflict with cultural inclusion and linguistic equity.

8.2 Implications for Educators and Policymakers

For educators, this study highlights the importance of linguistic sensitivity and the need for inclusive pedagogy that acknowledges students' linguistic backgrounds. For policymakers, the findings suggest that greater flexibility and decentralization could enhance both educational outcomes and cultural preservation.

Promoting Putonghua need not come at the expense of dialects. With thoughtful policy innovation, China can model an approach to language planning that supports unity without uniformity.

8.3 Recommendations for Further Theoretical Exploration

Future research could explore:

- Longitudinal studies of students navigating multiple linguistic identities in varying policy contexts;
- Comparative studies between dialect and minority-language education practices in China;
- Applications of translanguaging theory to Chinese classrooms, focusing on how students fluidly draw on multiple language resources;
- Ethnographic research on teacher attitudes and decision-making in linguistically diverse settings.

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