Final Report

Motivation for the Research
This dissertation is a response to several problems facing teachers and teacher educators working in public schools today. These problems relate to the combined influences of rapid demographic changes, global economic and political shifts, and high-stakes school reforms rooted in standardizing ideologies (e.g., Common Core, English-only mandates). The result of these combined forces is that all teachers are now responsible for teaching disciplinary knowledge and related literacy practices to all students, including those in the process of learning English as an additional language. Research demonstrates that most teachers are not prepared for this task, thereby foreclosing on the promises of public education in a democratic society.

In response, language education scholars suggest teachers need disciplinary linguistic knowledge: an understanding of the relationship between text and context, an understanding of the meaning-making resources at play in disciplinary classrooms, and pedagogical tools to engage all students in disciplinary meaning-making. However, secondary teacher education programs have not typically included coursework on language learning, disciplinary literacy development, or language ideologies, and developing this coursework is a persistent challenge as many sociocultural theories of language lack clear pedagogical applications. A small but growing number of U.S. teacher educators are using theoretical and pedagogical tools from critical social semiotics to support teachers’ development of disciplinary linguistic knowledge. Critical social semiotics is a context-sensitive and multimodal theory of language, learning, and social change. It provides a meaning-focused alternative to behavioral, cognitive, and psycholinguistic conceptions of language, which focus more on fixed sets of language forms. The purpose of this dissertation is to analyze the influence of critical social semiotics on teacher education in the United States, with an empirical focus on secondary teachers.

Research Questions
RQ1. How has a critical social semiotic perspective on language, learning, and social change been taken up in coursework and professional development for U.S. K-12 teachers to date?
RQ2. How have these efforts influenced teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, and classroom practices?
RQ3. How has teachers’ implementation of pedagogy from this perspective influenced student learning?
Research Methodology
The dissertation addresses these guiding questions in three papers, each of which explores a separate complementary aspect of the topic through different research methods.

Paper 1: Systematic literature review (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
Paper 1 reviews 99 publications from the fields of teacher education, literacy research, and applied linguistics to explore how critical social semiotics has been taken up in U.S K-12 teacher education in the years 2000–2018 and to what effect. The paper indicates that, to date, the main vehicles for introducing teachers to critical social semiotics have been grant-funded university-school partnerships, university courses in teacher education programs, and self-contained professional development workshops.

Summary of Findings. The paper presents five trends in how teacher educators across these contexts have packaged critical social semiotic theory for K12 ESL teachers and teachers of diverse learners in “mainstream” contexts, what teachers tended to take away from this approach, how teachers’ takeaways influenced students’ literacy practices, and what supports and challenges seemed to most influence teaching and learning. These five trends are:

1. Teacher educators focused on introducing teachers to functional metalanguage and engaging them in critical text analysis.
2. These efforts nearly always result in increases in teachers’ semiotic awareness and ability to design more focused disciplinary literacy instruction. Critical awareness, confidence for literacy instruction, and content knowledge were less studied outcomes.
3. Teachers’ implementation of this knowledge supported increases in students’ semiotic awareness, which facilitated students’ simultaneous development of disciplinary knowledge and associated literacy practices. Some students also experienced increased critical awareness and confidence for reading and writing in school.
4. The most influential support was sustained investment in teachers’ professional development. University-school partnerships led to greater gains in teacher and student learning, and fostered teachers’ and students’ critical awareness of the relationship between disciplinary literacy practices and ideologies more effectively than individual university courses or workshops.
5. The most significant challenges were the knowledge demands of teaching and learning social semiotics and the influence of dominating language ideologies.

Implications. To my knowledge, this paper is the first systematic review of critical social semiotic teacher education in the United States. It provides important context as interest in this theoretical perspective increases in the United States, especially among teacher educators. The subsequent two papers are empirical studies that build on and add to this landscape.

Paper 2: Mixed methods study of pre-service teachers’ feedback practices (RQ1, RQ2)
Paper 2 is an empirical study of changes in one aspect of pre-service teachers’ disciplinary literacy instruction following their study of critical social semiotics: evaluation and feedback on student writing. Data collection took place in a one-semester teaching methods course designed from a critical social semiotic viewpoint. Drawing on pre- and post-course surveys, the paper details changes in 55 secondary pre-service teachers’ feedback practices after they were introduced to critical social semiotics. Mixed methods analysis of the survey data shows that studying critical social semiotics did not change how teachers’ numerically rated student writing, but it did influence the types of written feedback that teachers provided.
Summary of Findings. Critical social semiotics support pre-service teachers in providing more cogent and precise written feedback, specifically regarding students’ linguistic strengths, areas for improvement related to purpose and audience, and specific steps for revision. Pre-course feedback was characterized by four predominant types of feedback: (1) vocabulary-oriented feedback that encouraged the student to use specific disciplinary vocabulary to improve their response, (2) broad feedback that directed the student to “be more specific” or “give more details” to improve their response, (3) general encouragement followed by a list of questions or broad, but non-directive feedback, and (4) prompts for oral feedback sessions. However, by the end of the course, instances of these four types of feedback generally decreased. In their place, many pre-service teachers began to use purpose-oriented feedback and feedback that incorporated social semiotic concepts and metalanguage to explicitly address disciplinary writing expectations and prompt students to consider the purpose of their writing and make semiotic choices effective for that purpose. As pre-service teachers studied critical social semiotic theory, many of them were able to explicitly recognize and begin to talk about the multiple systems at play in disciplinary meaning-making (e.g., language, symbols, visual images). While this development was likely also impacted by other courses and increased observation and student teaching time at their practicum sites over the course of the semester, the specific types of feedback that emerged in the post-course data suggest a relationship between the social semiotic content of the course and pre-service teachers’ developing literacy teaching practices.

Implications. This shift toward linguistic explicitness is promising given that new standards require teachers be able to make their tacit understanding of the semiotic systems they use to make disciplinary meanings more explicit to students. However, this study took place entirely within the context of a pre-service course and does not present longitudinal data regarding participants’ literacy teaching practices in actual classrooms with diverse learners. The third paper takes a more longitudinal view on these pre-service teachers’ development.

Paper 3: Longitudinal study of knowledge, beliefs, literacy teaching practices (RQ1, RQ2)
Paper 3 combines qualitative case studies of three participants with quantitative survey data from the larger group (N = 55) to more holistically explore changes in these teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, and practices over two years.

Summary of Findings. Mixed methods analysis of interviews, classroom observations, and survey data suggest that discourses from within a critical social semiotic perspective influenced three trends in participants’ learning over time: (1) movement toward increased language awareness, a finding consistent with those presented in Paper 2; (2) between standard and more plural language ideologies; and (3) away from solely form-focused literacy teaching. Though participant learning trended in these directions over time, this paper shows how such movement is not often straightforward. Participants moved back and forth along pathways of learning, drawing on a critical social semiotic perspective in different ways in different contexts over the course of the study. In other words, context mattered and development was not linear. In addition, while a critical social semiotic perspective did influence some changes in participants’ knowledge about language and beliefs about language teaching, learning, and English learners, there was a general under-examination of ideology within and beyond the course. This issue was compounded by a lack of sustained support.

Implications. These findings suggest that teachers and teacher educators need more clearly developed ways to analyze and discuss ideology, especially racializing language ideologies. With regard to theory, critical social semiotics may benefit from drawing even more heavily on the work of social
theorists who address ideology, inequity, and power within a new critical paradigm. With regard to teacher education, new teachers may benefit from sustained support that supports critical reflection and revised pedagogies in the long-term. Further, if teacher educators are to make such sustained investments in change, they must work together across academic fields to pursue the difficult work of understanding not just how teachers change, but why they change (or not).

**Conclusion**

Together, the three papers make a case for an approach to secondary teacher education in the United States that is built around critical social semiotic theories of language, learning, and social change. However, practically speaking, they also suggest that significant work lies ahead for teacher educators in making this approach accessible for teachers pressed by the demands of new standards, education reforms, and processes of globalization. Further, with regard to theory, the papers collectively suggest more work is needed in the area of ideology and power, as this is the least developed and applied aspect of a critical social semiotic perspective to date. As Papers 1 and 3 point out, this is a crucial piece of teachers’ development if teacher education is in any way meant to equip teachers to enact equity agendas within their roles as disciplinary literacy educators.
References


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