



BUILDING KNOWLEDGE TOGETHER: ERIKSON INSTITUTE PRESIDENT, MARIANA SOUTO-MANNING, ON THE UNFINISHED LESSONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

DOI: 10.47677/gluks.v22i2.401

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ABSTRACT: In this interview, Erikson Institute of Chicago President, Mariana Souto-Manning, responds to questions about how her experiences across two decades of teacher education and innovation in “languaging education” informed her transition her current leadership role in and beyond multiple global crises. A Recife, Brazil native, Souto-Manning is grounded in Freirean values and principles, and she honors these in her commitment to reinvent rather than to reproduce his work. The Covid-19 pandemic raised new questions among educators, and Souto-Manning describes how critical approaches to language can support educational work spanning basic and advanced education, teacher formation, and professional growth across multiple locales and differences. Souto-Manning is particularly concerned with we position traditionally and intersectionality marginalized families and children to show their brilliance rather than pathologizing them and treating them as problems to be solved.

KEYWORDS: Languaging education, COVID-19, Educational leadership, Responsibility, (in)equity, Reframing readiness

Introduction

Born in Recife, Brazil and the child of a political activist, Dr. Mariana Souto-Manning began her career in education as a nursery school teacher. In the 1990s she traveled to the southeastern United States where she earned three U.S. degrees including undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Georgia. Her dissertation (SOUTO-MANNING, 2005) under the direction of linguistic anthropologist Betsy Rymes, focused on the critical

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analyses of metanarratives that domestic workers in Brazil drew on to rationalize their choices, which matched societal norms for the women's social class, education, and gender but were not reflective of their deep desires to continue education and pursue their own unique dreams. In studying culture circles in her native Pernambuco, Souto-Manning innovated a research design, critical narrative analysis, which opened space for the women to use language to take collective action to transform the ways they had been the object of society's narratives and instead begin crafting their own narratives.

An award-winning author, scholar, and teacher educator, Souto-Manning taught as an assistant professor at the University of South Carolina and the University of Georgia, as well as an associate, and eventually, full professor of early childhood teacher education at Teachers College, Columbia University before assuming her current title and role as President of The Erikson Institute, a graduate school of child development in Chicago, Illinois, where she currently resides.

Prior to becoming the President of Erikson, Souto-Manning was the Principal Investigator for The Researching Teaching and Learning Project in Brazil through a Lemann Foundation grant from 2019-2022, throughout the height of the pandemic. This project served to collectivize teacher education research across regions in south, central and northeastern Brazil and was responsive across eight research contexts to the pressures of teacher education and student learning during the pandemic. Buffalo worked as an assistant to the project the entire time while completing her doctoral dissertation under Souto-Manning's advisement and later served as vice director with Souto-Manning during Souto-Manning's presidential transition. The two sat down to discuss pandemic learnings in and beyond the context of the project and how the politics of language inform their professional transitions at a florist and coffee shop in Manhattan Valley, New York City in October of 2022. This interview was co-created during their time together that day.

Interview

BUFFALO: You said that you studied linguistic anthropology to be able to *language* education. What does it mean to *language* education in your specific area, and how did that change during the pandemic, particularly in New York and across Brazil?

SOUTO-MANNING: In the past I studied linguistic anthropology to be able to *language* education. A lot of times the field of education doesn't take up the notion that words and language are action, and that we can change paradigms and mindsets by engaging with wording. For example, “Are you researching *on* or are you researching *with*?” What are some of the seemingly small changes that can really change education and what we do? Now, my specific area, not only early childhood education but teacher education as well, has been very deficit ridden. It has positioned children, families, and communities from what they call *disenfranchised* or *marginalized* or *disadvantaged* communities as needing to be fixed.

So, in this deficit view, the pathology resides in the individual—the individual child, the individual family, the individual community. What I have done is really move away from that to recognize that the communities are not under-invested in, or marginalized, or disadvantaged. They are divested, which means that there has been a divestment in the development of that community and that we need to recognize that. Now, I also think about children not as being at risk. I think we create that language of risk and that becomes in a way part of the child's identity or part of how educators see the child.

One of the things that I often think about is how we look at children, we look at families with a question of “What can they do?” And part of my research, part of my understanding, I seek to turn the mirror on ourselves and ask, “What can I do differently?” So, when folks think about readiness they think about whether children are ready or not. When I think about readiness, I think, “Is an early childhood classroom and is every teacher ready to support the development of every child so that their brilliance can shine, so that their practice can be sustained?” And I think that that makes a big difference.

It's not that children are language poor or that they have a language gap. It's that they have different ways of languaging so different from the norm, of course, and the norm, which is often called academic language is by and large the language of power or as DELPIT (1988) has said, the language of “those who have power.” So, it's not that one language is better than the other. In fact, if we are comparing languages, Black English would be a lot more sophisticated and more similar to Spanish or Portuguese, because it really gets the “to be” verb in such nuanced ways. Whereas, in really the academic White English it's like “I am going, I will go, I have gone.” And those three do not really nuance enough in terms of “I'm

getting ready to” or “I just did” or “I could.” So, there are a lot more possibilities there now in terms of the comparative nature, particularly in New York and across Brazil.

One of the things that I have come to realize is the legacy of slavery on languaging. When I think about the two areas in these countries where enslaved Africans were shipped to, it is the northeast of Brazil and the south of the United States, especially the southeast. And one of the things that I started seeing is that some of the very same stereotypes permeate both communities, even though there is no significant connection or relationship aside from the transatlantic enslavement culture and practice and history of enslavement. Forty percent of enslaved Africans were shipped to the northeast of Brazil, and a lot of times folks do not apprehend this, because in Brazil there was *de facto* segregation, not *de jure*. There were lots of rapes of Black women by White men. In fact, ongoing research shows how Brazil is a nation that has really been born out of rape (see TSAVKKO, 2023).

The regions are similar in terms of racialized language stereotypes as well. Myths such as, “Those people are slow, lazy, speak wrong Portuguese, wrong English, incorrectly,” that “They have lower intellect somehow,” and “They are responsible for the political ills of the country” pervade in both places and construct harm for the communities being stereotyped. Having come from that region and then moved into the U.S. south before I moved into New York, it became very clear that some of the deficit discourses of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, the south of Brazil, which were the Whiter parts of the country (SALES, 2002), really were the discourses of the northeast of the United States³. That really helped me think about how language constructs different regions, constructs identities, myths, stereotypes, and serves as borders—to other and to order—right? So really thinking about, “Who is American? Who is Brazilian? Who is the prototypical Brazilian? Who is the prototypical American?” Now *that’s* where there is a difference. Folks, regardless of whether they are Black, White, or Asian, they are considered Brazilian. In the US., though, as Toni Morrison said in an interview with The Guardian in 1992, “In this country (the U.S.), American means White. Everyone else is hyphenated.”

³ In a series of over sixty charts and graphs assembled for an exhibition in Paris, sociologist, writer, and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois demonstrated the late nineteenth and early twentieth century demography of Blacks in the U.S. Certain of these images debunk myths such as the myth that the U.S. Black population resided mostly in urban centers (see e.g. “City and Rural Population 1890”; Battle-Baptiste & Rusert, 2018; DuBois, 1900; Francis & Hall, 2019).

So, there are some contrasts in terms of language and in terms of descriptions of identity. At the same time, it's important to think about the stereotyping of an entire region of people and in both cases, regions that are darker than the rest of the country historically, how that diminishes the power of their contribution, their knowledge, and their ways of communicating, of storytelling. For example, in Appalachia, the oral traditions; in Brazil, there is what's called *repente*. In *repente*, people tell stories while singing and playing the guitar, and that's seen as being uneducated. In reality, they create that story based on the facts that another person gives them *in the moment*, and they make it in music, composing poetry (SAUTCHUK, 2010). It is really sophisticated, and it's not something that we often value because it's not seen as the “academic.”

In terms of shifts in languaging education during the pandemic, I would say that the shift during the pandemic had to do with the fact that the inequities were exacerbated. And I think that no one could then ignore that there were inequities. When we talk about teachers teaching online, they were able to meet members of the family here. They were able to see how grandparents were supporting grandchildren, for example. They were able to see the care that the children had at home and the comfort, instead of relying on assumptions. Now, in general, the population initially saw teachers as heroes/sheroes. And right now, that has completely flipped, which is super problematic. But it's the reality that we're living here in the U.S. In Brazil, basically, public education stopped.

Brazil is highly segregated in terms of private education and public education. Public education is primarily comprised of low-income People of Color. Private education is primarily higher income, middle income people who really approximate or work in the White proxemics, actions. And so those inequities were really thrust in front of us. Now, we haven't really done much with it. We haven't really taken the invitation to re-envision the pandemic as a way of reinventing, as a way of thinking of freedom, as a way of engaging in abolition, of abolishing systems that disempower, but we did have that opening. At least no one can say there is no inequity in terms of access.

In terms of the borders in languages, we ask, “Who is intelligent? Who is smart?” and there's a level of ableism there. “Who speaks correctly? Who speaks incorrectly?” And those are highly racialized (FLORES & ROSA, 2015; SOUTO-MANNING et al., 2021) and oftentimes students, children, here in the U.S. and in Brazil, feel this tension between wanting

to assimilate and wanting to do well academically, which is really the tension in approximating Whiteness in languaging and remaining part of their communities. You see in both cases in the middle school years, children finding belonging in other places, like gangs, because they don't feel that they belong at school, and school is telling them that their community's way of communicating is wrong. Therefore, the message is that part of who they are is wrong or broken in some way. That tension really creates a lot of trauma, and we don't really look at that in terms of how we actually *school* children into believing that they are “lesser than,” and we also do not look at the psychological consequences of such deficit schooling. We talk about trauma-informed practices, but we don't talk about the suspension of trauma that exists through language.

Finally, there is like this performance of language. If you are going to speak in an academic way, you're supposed to speak in ways that are aligned with White English, which means that for those who speak White English or standard White Portuguese at home—the languages of power—those students then end up being advantaged, because they don't have to acquire a secondary discourse⁴ on their own, without support. Language privileged students don't have to learn to translanguage or code switch. Anybody who does not speak the language of schooling at home does have to learn to do all these things. It's no surprise, then, that in the northeast of Brazil, children don't do as well as in the south, even in public schools. Part of it has to do with the fact that the northeast of Brazil is seen as having communities that speak broken languages. So, there's the construction of not belonging, and belonging then becomes a political project. That's why language matters. So many of these borders are hypervisible to people who experience them day in and day out, and they are completely ignored by those who don't have to cross them. It's as if they weren't there.

BUFFALO: Before becoming President of the Erikson Institute, you were a full professor of early childhood education at Teachers College, Columbia University. You transitioned to your new role as the worst of the pandemic was coming to a close. How did your expertise in early childhood, in languaging education, impact your transition to higher education administration? How did the work change? In what ways was it the same?

⁴ In the U.S., where discourse analysis and linguistics have more overlap than in Brazil, scholar James Gee (1989/2001) has theorized that there is a primary discourse of home and secondary discourses that people learn from language experiences beyond the home. The primary discourse or language is theorized as most natural, and the secondary discourses or languages are more labored and unnatural.

SOUTO-MANNING: Before becoming President of Erickson, I was a Full Professor of Early Childhood Education at Teachers College and transitioned during the pandemic. It was hard and at the same time, the pandemic facilitated the transition, because so much of the work was still happening online, and I was working from home most of the time.

I went for my interview for the Erikson presidency in Chicago in late June, and had my appointment confirmed by the Board of Trustees in July. That's when I chose an apartment. I moved to Chicago in August, and I started my job in September. That wasn't an imposition. It was something that I wanted to do, because so much had changed during the pandemic, people needed a responsive leadership. The moment was just too urgent to ignore or delay the transition. One of the things that resulted from the pandemic is that it took a while for me to get to know people. From September and to the end of November, I had what they call, "Chats with Mariana," which was ten to twelve people on Zoom. I conducted myself rooted in some of the principles of restorative justice in terms of asking them, "Who are you? Why are you here? What are your hopes for the future of Erickson?" And that allowed me to get to know the person who cleans my office as well as the director of finance. So that meant that I knew something that was particular to each person. I also had someone from communications there always to take very careful notes. And those notes became the data set from which the strategic plan revision, *Justice. Quality. Impact.* (https://issuu.com/eriksoninstitute/docs/ei_impactreport_june2023_final_061523) was born.

There were five things that came up. One of them has to do with the need to diversify Erickson in terms of impact and reach. The second one has to do with the need to really prioritize financial sustainability. Part of that is, yes, the work that we do is important, but it also has to continue, because if we don't have sustainability, people really are not going to be supported into the future. The third one had to do with providing mental health services to divested communities.

We made the decision to invest in mental health, especially given the mental health needs related to the pandemic. We were able to be responsive to that. And so that's one of our goals, to really serve—throughout the state—young children and families in an assets-based, positive mental health model. Not in terms of mental health as something that people who have problems are in need of, but everyone needing to be mentally healthy. For children, for

families, especially those who are navigating whether they belong in terms of language or not, in terms of culture or not, that they have the support to process that.

Then the fourth one was really thinking about the leaders, policymakers, and judges, to educate them about the need of early childhood. We have what's called the Early Childhood Leadership Academy. Influential Fellows are selected from our community to participate in the academy. They include senators, representatives, judges, and CEOs of not-for-profit organizations. And they come together to learn about early childhood, the importance of investing in early childhood, and most importantly, to also always in their work—find the child. "Where's the child in what I'm doing?" So that has resulted in legislation, for instance, such as the Too Young to Test Legislation. The other thing that happened out of that is that a judge started really thinking about, in terms of incarceration and its consequences for young children, asking: "Where is the child? What's the fallout of whatever sentencing to the child?"

We are really committed to continuing to push leadership in policy, because we can't function in isolation. And then finally, the last thing that I heard again and again is that faculty didn't feel that they were invested in in terms of research, infrastructure, time, and all of that. We are revitalizing the Herr Research Center, but also putting together teams of people to support faculty in terms of their research, so that we can continue to inform knowledge production.

There were further challenges. I didn't just run into people, but I was very intentional to do that, to meet people. In the beginning, my team was like, "Do you really have time to do this?" I realized that I didn't have time not to, because if I wanted us to act collectively, if I wanted them to see me for who I am, and for us to work together toward a mission, I had to get to know them.

We continued to cancel events in the spring of 2022 due to safety, but we have persisted in building community. For example, on September 1 of this year, we scheduled a get together by the river so that we could get to know each other. And Natalie Dowdell (<https://www.erikson.edu/staff/natalie-dowdell/>), who is our advisor, facilitated an activity that she had facilitated with students during orientation—almost like a speed dating—with questions about likes and interests, such as “Would you rather go to the beach or go skiing?” I asked Natalie to facilitate that within the context of our get together with faculty and staff. And that allowed for folks who never work together to get to know each other and who,

perhaps did not click, to say, "Oh! Me too. I like to watch documentaries and romantic comedies." The key was to use the structured interactions there, because most everyone was working in isolation, especially at Erikson, because we oversee programs such as Home Visiting that are facilitated by people who live all throughout Illinois, so there are people who never have to come in to the Erikson building. So, we made sure to schedule that during a time that these staff could come.

So, I think that my expertise in early childhood education was: we have to get to know people. We have to build relationships. We have to listen and learn. We have to consider questions seriously, even when we feel like, "Why are we asking that?" And, we really have to think about, "How is it that we need to imagine together?" I think that young children are a lot better at imagining. A lot of times we call that fantasy. But I would say that we're future casting, we're future planning. A lot of times as adults we tend to—and that's something I'm still working on with the community—we tend to want to undo things in the past instead of building a more just future.

In terms of language, I have very purposefully shifted the talk from anti-racism to justice. And part of that is anti-racism is a part of justice, but it's not everything. We can't just deconstruct. We have to move *forward* together and construct a better future and really work in the pursuit of justice. And part of my communications has been in terms of educating the community. So last year I established Indigenous People's Day as a paid holiday for Erikson employees. It had not been. They had established Juneteenth but not Indigenous People's Day. Also, every month I would have these short videos that are called Mission Moments. And those are educative moments where I would share sometimes about books, sometimes a story, but it always has to do with not judging people for their own miseducation, but *building knowledge together* so that we can engage in those conversations. And the library started purchasing the children's books. For the Indigenous People's Day, I introduced Traci Sorrell's (2021) book, *We Are Still Here*, which really talks about so much, many concepts like sovereignty and people can access that in a very non-threatening way, in a way that doesn't divide but brings people together.

So, in my transition I was really excited about making a difference, like I never dreamt of becoming a professional, director, president. That was not part of my plan. My plan has always been to make sure that things are more just and equitable, so investing in the

communities that have been the most divested in. The transition was in terms of role and in terms of location. But my North Star, my compass, is still the same. And some of the practices are the same. When you become a leader, whether you are a president, whether you are a teacher leader, and you are trying to promote change that will remove people's entitlements and privileges, there will always be resistance.

And I think that by human nature, we want to be liked. And as a leader, you cannot gauge your actions based on that. So, I often say that what I do is I think of prizing my integrity when I put my head on the pillow at night, "Do I know that I acted with the utmost integrity and that I will do better tomorrow?" I can't control what people say or what they do. I don't have as much control over my reputation as my integrity. So that's really what guides me. And it was something that guided me before I got to this position.

BUFFALO: Finally, you have been working with colleagues on the notion raised that the pandemic could be a portal for change. What advice can you give to language scholars committed to equity to make this goal actionable?

SOUTO-MANNING: I have worked with colleagues based on the notion that was first brought to bear by Arundhati Roy (2020) in the *Financial Times* article and in her video, that the pandemic could be a portal for change. I'm really disappointed that we have not taken that up. I think that we started imagining and then all of a sudden, the discourse of learning loss has been pushed to the front, has been thrust into the priorities. Some of that reprioritizing has to do with the fact that publishing companies, that racial capitalism has really guided the conversation.

Teachers know that children do not need to accelerate two years in terms of reading levels in a year, because we invented reading levels.

It's not something that exists aside from our languaging of education. Right? Suddenly, when we think about learning loss, we focus on content. We don't focus on the development of the individual child as a scientist, as an author. And so, we need to again shift the lens from what we can do to children, to what we can learn and how we can help them develop in terms of their brilliance and in terms of their everlasting shine throughout their lives.

I would say that even though it feels that we're going back, resistance matters and languaging matters, and if we really want to work toward equity, we can't be bullied by or stopped by this other discourse. Resistance to change has always been there, but it didn't stop the Civil Rights Movement. It didn't stop the Black Lives Matter Movement. It didn't stop now the Roe vs. Wade resistance. In fact, it galvanizes us. The advice that I would have is: organize, be in collectives, work with each other, but keep moving forward and pushing toward your North Star, towards the pursuit of justice. Because at any point people who do have the power, the money, the entitlement, they will seek to safeguard that. A common law definition of justice is not the justice I'm talking about. The justice I'm talking about is moving toward equity, righting wrongs, recognizing that regardless of whether we directly caused something or not, we're all responsible, because we're all part of an interconnected web of individuals who make up this society.

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