ISSN: 2325-3290 (online)
Dialogic Pedagogy
A Journal for Studies of Dialogic Education

How to be just in the face of differences?

Adail Sobral
Federal University of Rio Grande – RS, Brazil

Karina Giacomelli
Federal University of Pelotas – RS, Brazil

Abstract
This commentary examines Eugene Matusov's editorial "Against Equity: Toward a Uniqueness Model of Educational Justice" (2026), which challenges the dominance of equity as the primary framework for social justice in education. The editorial argues that, despite its compensatory intent, equity often becomes anti-educational by enforcing standardized curricula and outcomes that diminish students' authorial agency. Drawing on the "Animal School" fable, the editorial illustrates how uniform expectations can harm learners by disregarding singular abilities. It then contrasts the equality, equal-opportunity, and equity models and advances a "uniqueness model" grounded in sociocultural theory and democratic schooling, emphasizing rights to self-education, self-governance, and freedom from paternalistic schooling. The commentary seeks and articulates points of contact between Matusov's proposal and our ongoing work on alteritary dialogic education and "alteritary listening," which frame education as an ethical encounter with the Other and as responsibility enacted in speech and listening. Core principles highlighted include the primacy of alterity, dialogic responsibility, and pedagogical practices that cultivate relational competencies. The commentary concludes that educational justice should be conceived less as distributing resources toward the same endpoint and more as supporting each learner's singular trajectory within ethically interdependent relations.
Keywords: *educational justice, uniqueness model, dialogic pedagogy, alterity, alteritary listening*

Adail Sobral, PhD, Applied Linguistics and Language Studies - Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo (2006). Post-Doctoral Studies at Université de Paris VIII - Vincennes Saint Dennis - Bakhtinian Studies (2017). Assistant Professor of the Graduate Program of Letters- Federal University of Rio Grande and Federal University of Pelotas – RS – BRAZIL. Awarded in 2022 (until 2025) a Productivity in Research Grant from CNPq - National Council for Research. Awarded another in 2025, which goes to 2028. Member of the Coordinating Board of the Forum of Editors of Anpoll, a representative institution of Language and Literature Graduate Programs in Brazil. MA in Letters – University of São Paulo (1999). Specialized in Linguistics - UNICAMP (1985). BA in Portuguese/English at Federal University of Bahia (1977). Author of books, papers and book chapters about Bakhtin and the Circle, semiotics, translation, alteritary dialogical education, literature, and language in general.

Karina Giacomelli, Full Professor at Federal University of Pelotas, where she works in the licentiate and bachelor's degree courses in Letters as well as in the Graduate Program in Letters. She carried out postdoctoral studies at the Catholic University of Pelotas (2017). PhD in Letters from the Federal University of Santa Maria (2007) and MA (2002) in Letters from the same University. BA in Letters-Portuguese from the State University of Maringá (1990). She is interested in the areas of theoretical and applied linguistics, with a focus on Bakhtin's Circle and Dialogic Discourse Analysis, Portuguese language teaching, textbook, alteritarian dialogic education, PIBID (an undergraduate teacher training program) and Pedagogical Residency (another undergraduate teaching training program). Author of papers and book chapters about Bakhtin and the Circle, alteritary dialogical education and language in general.

A brief evaluative description of the Editorial

The editorial "Against Equity: Toward a Uniqueness Model of Educational Justice," by Eugene Matusov, proposes a provocative and much-needed reassessment of the foundations of social justice in education. The author challenges the hegemony of the equity model in education (as well as certain alternative models; see below), arguing that, despite its intention to correct systemic inequalities, the equality approach becomes fundamentally anti-educational by reducing students to recipients of standardized outcomes and thereby eroding their authorial agency.

As an alternative, Matusov advances the uniqueness model, grounded in a sociocultural approach and in the practices of democratic schools. This model affirms learners' rights to self-education and self-governance, challenges dominant educational frameworks, and proposes a radical alternative centered on individual agency.

The author begins with the fable of the "Animal School" to illustrate the shortcomings of standardized education. In the story, animals are compelled to study the same subjects—such as running and flying—regardless of their natural abilities, which results in injuries and diminished potential. The fable underscores how equity-based systems may harm students by disregarding their unique strengths in pursuit of uniform outcomes.

The text distinguishes three common models of social justice: the *equality* model, which provides identical resources to every student regardless of background and ensures universal access but ignores varying levels of disadvantage; the *equal opportunity* model, which seeks to level the playing field for fair competition and to reward merit and talent, though it often overlooks disparities in prior preparation; and the *equity* model, which offers differentiated support to ensure that all students attain comparable, standardized educational outcomes.

While the equity model aims to address structural injustice, the author argues that it is deeply flawed. It may generate stigma, foster dependency traps, and stifle innovation by enforcing conformity. More importantly, he claims that the equity model is fundamentally anti-educational: by imposing predetermined curricula and goals defined by external authorities, it deprives students of authorial agency and of the capacity to evaluate and shape their own learning.

Matusov's central argument hinges on the distinction between education as *poiesis* (production oriented toward a predetermined end) and education as *praxis* (action whose ends emerge through the process itself) (Aristotle, 2000). He argues that curricular standardization—typical of the equity model—violates individuals' singular aptitudes in the name of an unattainable and undesirable average. In his view, equity encourages a totalizing educational paternalism in which curricula and goals are defined by third parties, thereby precluding authentic dialogic encounters and students' own evaluation of learning.

As an alternative, the author introduces the "uniqueness model" of social justice, which safeguards individuals' rights to self-education and to freedom from totalizing paternalistic schooling. Rather than compelling all learners to pursue identical societal goals, this model empowers students to decide what, how, when, and with whom they wish to study. The potential advantages of the uniqueness model are substantial.

It fosters intrinsic motivation, authorial agency, creativity, and self-directed learning. Drawing on the example of a democratic school in which students autonomously formed a "Gaga Ball Game Corporation," the author shows how learners can engage in substantive problem-solving, negotiation, and democratic self-governance when they have ownership of their activities. The uniqueness model thus shifts

educational justice away from enforced sameness, redefining it as the cultivation of human dignity, diversity of thought, and authentic personal growth.

The editorial emphasizes that education should not be a process of fabricating the other; rather, it should constitute a space of encounter among irreducibly distinct subjects. Matusov's concept of uniqueness speaks directly to the principle of radical alterity: the recognition that the other (the student) is neither an extension of the self (the teacher or the system) nor an object to be molded to achieve external ends.

Seeking Points of Contact between the Equity Model and Alteritary Dialogic Pedagogy

The editorial addresses a central question in education: how can one be just in the face of differences? It does so both theoretically and practically. The same question led us (the authors of this commentary) to develop the concept of the "listening project" (in analogy with a "speech project"), grounded in "alteritary listening," that is, listening to the other on her own terms, notwithstanding our active reception of her utterances. Because no two persons are equal—even though, as humans, we all are equal due to having the same rights of being —only by treating different people differently, in accordance with their uniqueness, can one enact an ethically egalitarian stance.

Alteritary dialogic education conceptualizes education as an ethical encounter with the Other: a practice that privileges alteritary listening (i.e., listening to alterity), reciprocal dialogue, and the recognition of each person's singularity (uniqueness) as constitutive of learning. This approach reframes schooling from the transmission of content to the cultivation of relational capacities, empathic attention, responsible speech, emancipatory practices, and the co-construction of meaning and knowledge.

Matusov's critique of imposing comparable outcomes parallels alteritary dialogic education's critique of monologic pedagogies, which, under the pretext of educating, seek to annul the fundamental differences among subjects. The editorial helps to further develop the proposal for alteritary dialogic education, grounded in "alteritary listening" (Sobral & Giacomelli, 2020): a mode of listening that approaches each student from their own perspective (I-for-the-other) (Bakhtin, 2012) and in light of their uniqueness, rather than through a generalized conception of what all students are—or should be.

Matusov's discussion of responsibility and authorship also helps to clarify a dialogic, alteritary perspective. When he describes the "Gaga Ball Game Corporation" in a democratic school, he illustrates a dynamic in which rules and learning emerge from negotiation of differences rather than from vertical imposition. This is instantiated as an ethical and responsive act in education. In this shared view, justice ceases to be an arithmetic distribution of resources toward the same end (equity) and becomes an ethical commitment to respond to each subject's unique needs in their process of becoming.

Although Matusov foregrounds negative liberty (the right not to be interfered with) and self-education, he clearly acknowledges that autonomy does not entail isolation but rather ethical interdependence: the student's singularity is fully realized only in relation to the alterity of teachers and peers. His caution regarding the limitations of his own model—such as cases of immoral or exploitative forms of self-education—reinforces, in our view, the need to foreground the ethical dimension of alterity: one's freedom to learn finds both its limits and its meaning in responsibility for the other.

The uniqueness model also recognizes—and seeks to address— a modern paradox in efforts toward inclusion (Sobral & Giacomelli, 2018): diversity is acknowledged, but difference is not. In this framing, diversity presupposes equal conditions and reduces variation to differences in performance: we

become merely diverse versions of the same model, and equal opportunities appear sufficient for justice. Such a view, however, neglects the fact that individuals do not share the same starting conditions. To recognize difference is also to recognize the existence of inequality in conditions.

Accordingly, offering the same opportunities to all persons when their starting conditions are unequal is unjust. By contrast, recognizing difference entails respecting uniqueness. Alteritary dialogic education argues that treating people as merely "diverse" effaces salient differences and sustains a myth of equality and/or equity. Recognizing diversity in the sense that we are all different and unique—while remaining equal in our human status—enables educators to respond to persons in ways that consider their specific ways of being and needs, rather than treating them as varied instances of an idealized model that defines what counts as "equal."[1]

From a position attentive to the constitutive singular difference that distinguishes self and other—and through which both are mutually constituted—listening is understood as openness to contestation, including a willingness to hear what one would prefer not to hear. This sensitivity responds to the need to move beyond school practices that reduce teaching and learning to the transmission, verification, and quantification of content, as well as to rigid disciplinary compartmentalization, particularly amid teacher displacements produced by instrumentalist logics that calls teacher's indispensability into question, such as the commodification of teaching and the increasing use of information technologies for content delivery (cf. Amaral, Sobral, & Giacomelli, 2026).

Alteritary Dialogic Education, therefore, affirms teachers as indispensable mediators who create conditions for co-participation and respect for uniqueness, and whose relevance is assessed by the extent to which they foster student independence. Teachers are thus committed to engaging with the polyphony of voices that traverse the macro- and micro-dialogues initiated by students and other participants in educational practices. In a context marked by polarization and the refusal of contradiction, "Alteritary Listening" supports recognition that the other is not a duplication of the self; rather, the self is constituted by the other while simultaneously constituting itself as the other's other (cf. Amaral, Sobral, & Giacomelli, 2026). In the next section, we deepen these points of contact.

Alteritary dialogic education's core principles and the uniqueness model: some remarks

Alteritary dialogic education has as its core principles:

a) The primacy of alterity — difference is not a problem to be erased but a resource for learning; educators are called to recognize others as real co-participants rather than objects of correction.

b) Dialogic responsibility — drawing on dialogic theory, the proposal links ethical agency to speech acts: speaking and listening are moral acts that shape subjectivity and community.

c) Pedagogical practices — the proposal translates theory into classroom routines, including structured listening, co-authorship of tasks, and the assessment of relational competencies (e.g., listening quality and responsiveness).

[1] Some papers published in Brazil, in Portuguese, outline notions related to alteritary dialogic pedagogy, e.g., "Concentric Circles: Openings That Touch the Margins" (Sobral, 2015), "Bakhtin's Dialogic Ontology and the Question of Identity" (Sobral, 2011), and "Dialogy in School Practices: Between Symmetries and Dissymmetries" (Sobral, 2014). There are also studies that develop the notions of Alteritary Dialogic Education and Alteritary Listening in greater detail, such as Sobral's paper "Dialogic Relationships in Language and Education: Some Considerations" (Sobral, 2022); Sobral and Giacomelli's (2020) "For a Proposal of Alteritary Dialogic Education"; Amaral and Sobral's (2024) "Alteritarian Dialogic Education for a Practice of Responsible Teacher Activism"; and Sobral, Guimarães, and Giacomelli's (2022) "Proposals for an Alteritarian Dialogic Perspective in Textual Production from the BNCC."

The practical and social relevance of alteritary dialogical education rests on two considerations: *democratic formation*—by cultivating students' respectful engagement with difference, this approach supports civic capacities needed in plural societies (deliberation, mutual recognition, and shared responsibility); and *inclusion without assimilation*—it offers a way to include marginalized voices without enforcing conformity, emphasizing contextual understanding of each learner's standpoint. Alteritary dialogic education aims to transform education into an ethical practice that cultivates relational skills essential to democratic life, social inclusion, and critical subjectivity, thereby promoting pedagogical change in both educational theory and concrete classroom practice.

Matusov's editorial similarly advances a model of dialogic, alterity-oriented education, arguing that school spaces can be designed to foster genuine encounters with otherness. In this view, school environments become sites for ethical listening, reciprocal recognition, and co-constructed meaning, where learners and educators engage across difference in ways that transform both knowledge and relationships.

In this respect, we highlight several aspects of the editorial that resonate with the proposal for alteritary dialogic pedagogy:

1) Designing for alterity rather than assimilation, grounded in the question (in our terms): "How do we structure classroom interactions so that difference is preserved, respected, and generative?"

2) Proposing concrete interaction patterns (e.g., paced turn-taking, reflective prompts, and multimodal testimony) that scaffold sustained, reciprocal dialogue rather than one-way content delivery.

3) Foregrounding attention as an ethical practice by offering strategies to counter fragmentation and superficial engagement, and by integrating emotional and epistemic dimensions—encouraging practices that allow personal narrative while maintaining critical standards.

Portuguese-language publications (e.g., Sobral & Giacomelli, 2019, 2020, 2025) emphasize alterity as foundational: education is an ethical encounter with the other rather than a mere transmission of content, and it requires teachers to listen to the other on her own terms. The editorial operationalizes these commitments by translating philosophical principles into pedagogical design. We understand dialogue as an individualized, transformative practice, and this orientation is reflected in Matusov's editorial proposals for activities that preserve responsiveness, reciprocity, and mutual transformation.

Final remarks

Whereas alteritary dialogical education provides a normative and conceptual foundation, the editorial offers practical design heuristics (e.g., interaction templates, assessment rubrics, and moderation norms) that instantiate alteritarian dialogue. Our proposal for alteritary listening and Matusov's editorial critique neutralized notions of "equity" that disregard uniqueness; the editorial further recommends practices that protect plural expression. In this sense, treating all learners as equal can amount to disregarding their uniqueness: justice requires acknowledging unequal conditions and students' unique goals in education, as well as responding to students accordingly, rather than treating them as if they were the same.

The alteritary listening proposal also has practical implications for educators. For instance, teachers may integrate structured dialogic sequences (e.g., story-sharing, critical questioning, and collective sense-making) that require learners to respond to, summarize, and build on others' perspectives. In addition, evaluation may move beyond individual correctness to include "relational competencies," such as listening quality, responsiveness, and the capacity to revise one's position.

Thus, Matusov's editorial offers a timely and actionable bridge, both to alteritary dialogic education and beyond it. Its principal contribution lies in translating ethical and dialogic theory into classroom design and practice, making it a valuable resource for educators who seek to cultivate genuine encounters with difference rather than reproduce sameness. The text's contribution to dialogic education is therefore situated in its radical defense of plurality and its rejection of justice grounded in sameness, proposing instead that educational justice consists in supporting each subject's singular trajectory.

Matusov's text offers a philosophical, political, and practical foundation for dialogic education, countering technocratic logics that transform subjects into statistics. The uniqueness model emerges not only as a proposal for pedagogical freedom but also as an ethical demand to respect human dignity: educating is not a matter of ensuring that everyone arrives at the same destination, but of guaranteeing that each person can pursue, with responsibility and support, their own path.

References

Aristotle. (2000). *Nicomachean ethics* (R. Crisp, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.

Amaral, M. R. dos S., & Sobral, A. (2024). A educação dialógica alteritária para uma prática de ativismo docente responsável [Alteritarian dialogic education for a practice of responsible teacher activism]. *Revista Diálogos, 11*(3), 160–183. https://periodicoscientificos.ufmt.br/ojs/index.php/revdia/article/view/15984

Amaral, M. R., Sobral, A., & Giacomelli, K. (2026). Por uma Educação Dialógica Alteritária e uma Escuta Alteritária: diálogo com Adail Sobral e Karina Giacomelli [Towards an Alteritary Dialogic Education and an Alteritary Listening: a dialogue with Adail Sobral e Karina Giacomelli. *Revista Linguagem em Foco, 17(1)*, 1-16. https://revistas.uece.br/index.php/linguagememfoco/article/view/15430.10.46230/lef.v17i1.15430

Bakhtin, M. M. (2012). *Para uma filosofia do ato responsável* [Towards a philosophy of the act] (V. Miotello & C. A. Faraco, Trans.; 2nd ed.). Pedro & João Editores.

Bakhtin, M. (2016). *Os gêneros do discurso* [Speech genres] (P. Bezerra, Trans., afterword, & notes; S. Botcharov, Ed. notes). Editora 34.

Matusov, E. (2026). Against equity: Toward a uniqueness model of educational justice. *Dialogic Pedagogy: A Journal for Studies of Dialogic Education, 14*(1), E1–E25. https://doi.org/10.5195/dpj.2026.799

Sobral, A. (2009). *Do dialogismo ao gênero: As bases do pensamento do círculo de Bakhtin* [From dialogism to genre: The basis of the thought of the Bakhtin Circle]. Mercado das Letras.

Sobral, A. (2011, July). *Bakhtin's dialogical ontology and the question of identity* [Conference presentation]. The XIV Bakhtin Conference, Bertinoro, Italy. Università di Bologna.

Sobral, A. (2014). *A dialogia nas práticas escolares: Entre simetrias e dissimetrias* [Dialogy in school practices: Between symmetries and dissymmetries] [Conference presentation]. II Simpósio de Língua Portuguesa e Literatura: Interseções, PUC Minas, Brazil.

Sobral, A. (2015). *Círculos concêntricos: Aberturas que tocam as margens* [Concentric circles: Openings that touch the margins] [Conference presentation]. IV Seminário Escrita Docente e Discente: Avançando pelas Margens e Desenhando as Pesquisas Docentes, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Sobral, A. (2019). *A filosofia primeira de Bakhtin: Roteiro de leitura comentado* [On Bakhtin's first philosophy]. Mercado das Letras.

Sobral, A., & Giacomelli, K. (2018). Alteridade, subjetividade, identidade e variantes enunciativas: Explorações especulativas [Alterity, subjectivity, identity and enunciative variants]. *Linguagem & Ensino, 21*(Special Issue), 13–44. https://periodicos.ufpel.edu.br/index.php/rle/article/view/15115/9292

Sobral, A., & Giacomelli, K. (2020). Por uma proposta de educação dialógica alteritária [For a proposal of alteritarian dialogic education]. *Línguas & Letras, 21*(49). https://doi.org/10.5935/1981-4755.20200001

Sobral, A., & Giacomelli, K. (2025). Em defesa da amplitude heurística da concepção dialógica de linguagem: Observações epistemológicas [In defense of the heuristic breadth of the dialogic conception of language: Epistemological observations]. In M. A. Villarta-Neder, F. L. de Castro Dias, & H. M. Ferreira (Eds.), *Diálogos com Bakhtin e o(s) círculo(s)* [Dialogues with Bakhtin and the Circle(s)] (1st ed.). Parábola.

Sobral, A., & Giacomelli, K. (2018). Das significações na língua ao sentido na linguagem: Parâmetros para uma análise dialógica [From meaning in the tongue to sense in language: Parameters for a dialogic analysis]. *Linguagem em (Discurso), 18*(2), 307–322. https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-4017-180203-9317

Sobral, A., & Giacomelli, K. (2016). Observações didáticas sobre a análise dialógica do discurso – ADD [Didactic remarks on dialogic discourse analysis]. *Domínios de Lingu@gem, 10*(3), 1076–1094. https://doi.org/10.14393/dl23-v10n3a2016-15

Sobral, A., Guimarães, F. T., & Giacomelli, K. (2022). Propostas para uma perspectiva dialógica alteritária em produção textual a partir da BNCC [Proposals for an alteritarian dialogic perspective in text production considering BNCC]. *Línguas & Letras, 23*(55). https://doi.org/10.5935/1981-4755.20220029

Volóchinov, V. N. (2018). *Marxismo e filosofia da linguagem: Problemas fundamentais do método sociológico na ciência da linguagem* [Marxism and the philosophy of language: Fundamental problems of the sociological method in the science of language] (S. Grillo & E. V. Américo, Trans.; 2nd ed.). Editora 34.