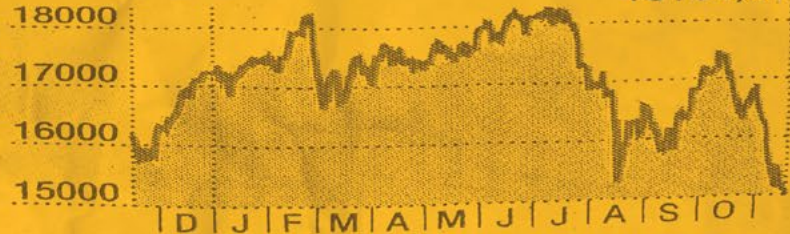


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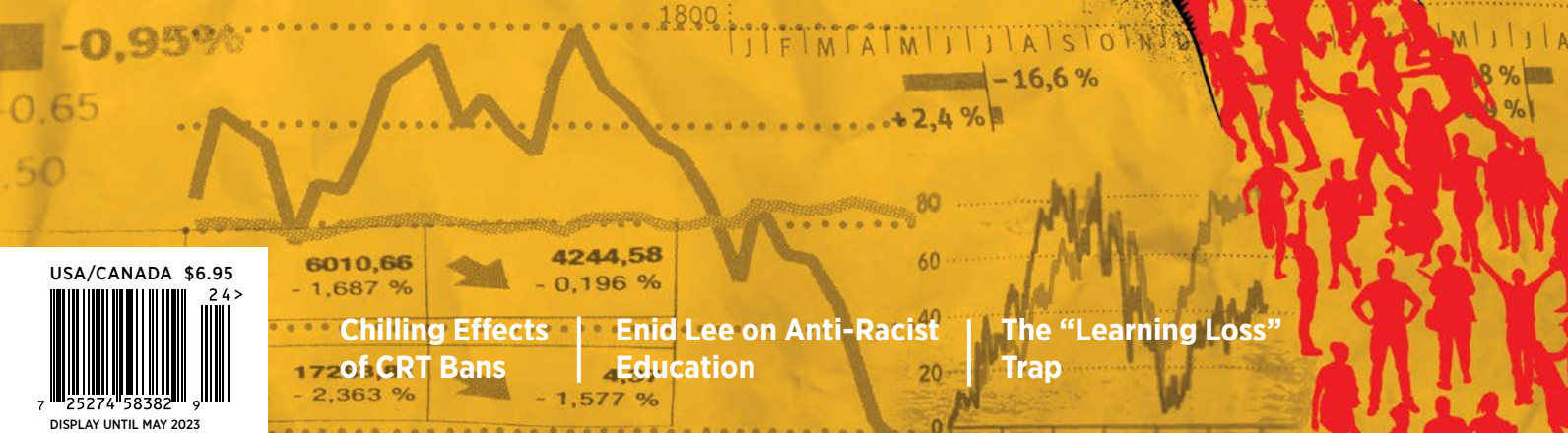
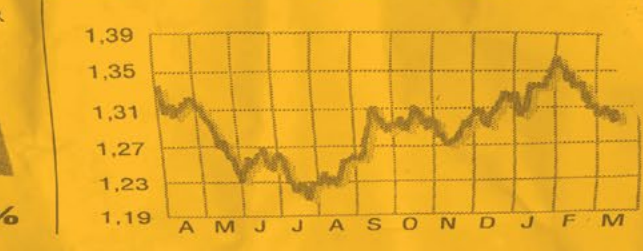
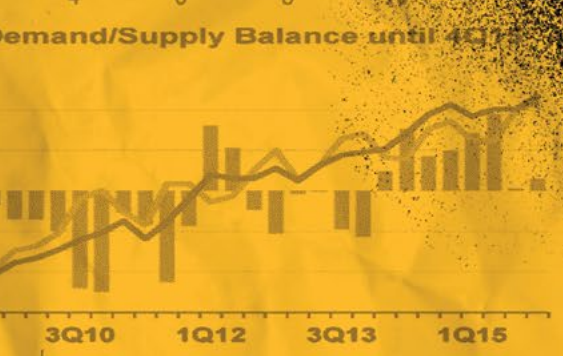
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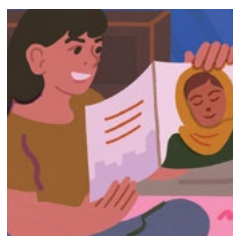
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Got an idea for an article?

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Contact Bill Bigelow at

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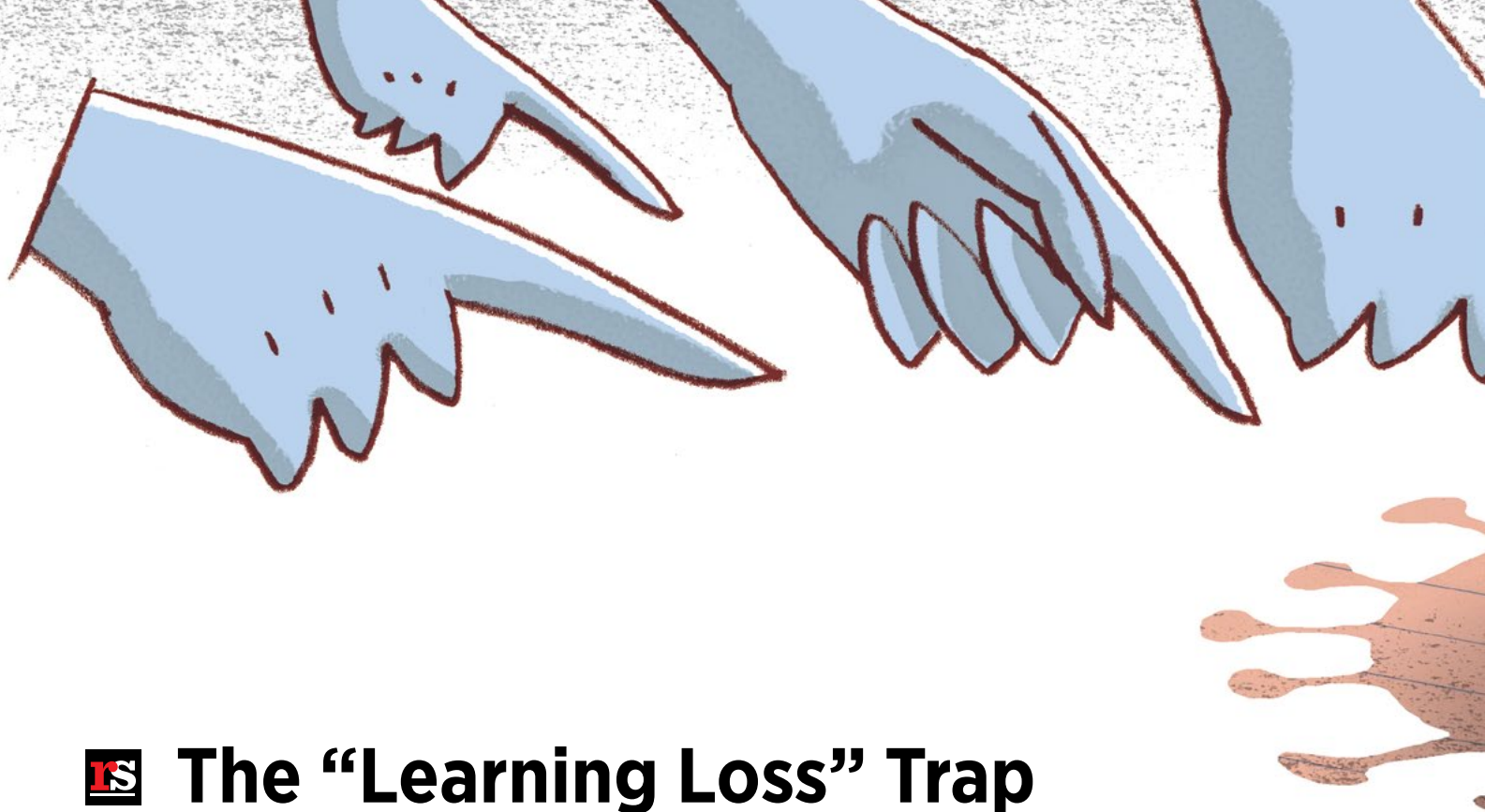
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Cierra Kaler-Jones becomes Rethinking Schools’ first executive director.





The “Learning Loss” Trap

By the editors of *Rethinking Schools*

This school year, as teachers carefully construct unit plans, build community with students, and navigate ongoing staff shortages, they also have to contend with a barrage of media coverage catastrophizing about so-called “learning loss.” Headlines suggest the losses are “historic,” “devastating,” and that students are “critically behind.” This fearmongering comes not only from the political right; there is a dangerous liberal-conservative consensus. President Biden’s Secretary of Education, Miguel Cardona, said: “I want to be very clear: The results in today’s Nation’s Report Card [delivered by the National Assessment of Educational Progress] are appalling and unacceptable.”

The learning loss narrative shrouds itself in moment-in-time data from standardized tests, but it is not really about *this* moment. Rather, it is a weapon wielded against the past, to shift blame for pandemic school closures, and

against the future, to narrowly frame the policy choices ahead.

The last few years have negatively impacted — sometimes terribly — young people’s lives. In what is likely an undercount, more than a million people in the United States have died of COVID-19. And the pandemic is not over; people in our students’ families continue to become debilitated or die. Each lost life is a thread in the tapestry of relationships that knit together families, communities, neighborhoods, and schools. The very groups that make up the bulk of public school families — people of color and poor folks — also disproportionately bear the burden of the pandemic, suffering the highest rates of infection, severe illness, hospitalization, and death.

Was the shuttering of schools and move to remote learning necessary? Yes. Did it exacerbate the emergency for families and young people? Of course. *Schools matter.* Schools are hubs of community and care, and without them we



CHRISTIANE GRAUERT

are all worse off. In a country that offers no public childcare to families, schools make it possible for parents and caregivers to work. In a country in which roughly 10 percent of the population struggles with hunger — again, disproportionately represented in public schools — schools make it possible for children to eat. And yes, schools are places where children learn: to read, multiply, and sing; to be a good friend and community member; to ask questions and seek answers — how photosynthesis works, what activists mean when they call themselves “water protectors,” and so much more.

Given the importance of schools, and the magnitude of the pandemic’s devastation, what is puzzling is not that students’ academic skills were impacted, but that anyone would imagine otherwise. We are almost three years into an ongoing health crisis that has shaved years off the average life expectancy in the United States. Of course it has left marks on us.

But the learning loss narrative does not invite reflection on the whole range of collective losses we’ve suffered, nor does it encourage asking why our government — and our political and economic system — failed so spectacularly in anticipating, planning for, and coping with the coronavirus.

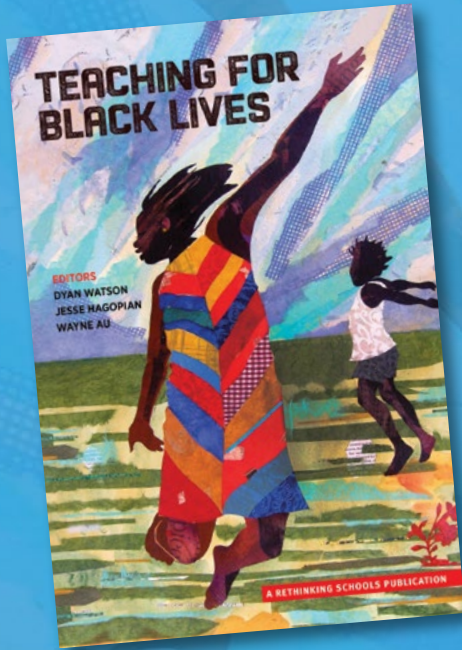
Shifting blame away from the for-profit healthcare system and the government’s response to the coronavirus is part of what makes the learning loss narrative so valuable to politicians who have no interest in challenging existing patterns of wealth and power. It is a narrative meant to distract the public and discipline teachers. Here’s the recipe: 1. Establish that closing schools hurt students using a narrow measure like test scores; 2. Blame closure of schools on teacher unions rather than a deadly pandemic; 3. Demand schools and teachers help students “regain academic ground lost during the pandemic” — and fast; 4. Use post-return-to-normal test scores to

argue that teachers and schools are “failing”; 5. Implement “teacher-proof” (top-down, standardized, even scripted) curriculum or, more insidiously, argue for policies that will mean an end to public schools altogether.

The path ahead looks eerily like what Naomi Klein has called the “shock doctrine,” where powerful actors, like politicians, corporate tycoons, and pundits, use people’s disorientation following a collective shock — whether a devastating earthquake or a deadly pandemic — to push pro-business, neoliberal policies. The *Washington Post* quoted a statement from former Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos that the pandemic test scores proved children were “hostages” in a “one-size-fits-none system that isn’t meeting their needs.” Her solution, of course, is what she has long pushed: more “school choice” and privatization.

The Biden administration has offered some respite from billionaire free market fanatics like DeVos, but its

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policies are woefully inadequate. (See [“Activists Mobilize for Waivers and Opt Outs as Biden Mandates Tests”](#) in the Spring 2021 issue.) The latest iteration of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund allocated a relatively generous \$122 billion to “help safely reopen and sustain the safe operation of schools and address the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the nation’s students.” But the law prioritizes speed — schools must spend all of the money by 2024 or forfeit it — over investments in teachers, counselors, school librarians, and nurses. Many school districts cannot quickly fill positions or, knowing that the federal windfall is only short term, choose not to. According to Marianna McMurdock, a staff reporter at *The 74*, a recent survey of 291 district leaders found that districts are expanding hiring of substitutes, paraprofessionals, and tutors while shying away from hiring full-time teachers and lowering class sizes — reforms that would have more impact on student learning and better inoculate schools from the overcrowded classrooms that made shuttering schools necessary.

We know what comes next — a round of dismal math and reading scores and the right’s favorite chestnut: “See? Just throwing money at schools doesn’t work.” Schools are racing to spend short-term government funds before they run out. But the point is that adequate funding for schools should never run out. Tripling Title I funding, a Biden campaign promise popularized by Bernie Sanders, would only cost one-fiftieth of the [\\$1.5 trillion in wealth U.S. billionaires have added to their fortunes during the pandemic](#). Truly confronting the many losses students in the United States have shouldered requires connecting the dots to the gains of the wealthy.

The learning loss drumbeat reveals the mainstream media to have more contempt than curiosity about what might actually improve schools’ long-term health. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, writing in *The New Yorker*, is an exception.

Noting the recent teacher strikes in Columbus and Seattle, Taylor wrote:

A real plan for recovery from the devastation of the pandemic in public education can be found in the strikes initiated by teachers and their unions. Their demands — for smaller class sizes, better conditions within school buildings, more resources to attend to students’ mental health, and higher pay for teachers and teacher assistants — have created a map for how to boost learning achievement.

This pandemic has brought real losses, and like our friends in Seattle and Columbus, we know what schools need to help students heal from the traumas of the last several years: more teachers, counselors, and nurses; smaller class sizes; planning time for educators to develop curriculum and pedagogical strategies centering students’ lives and realities; beautiful spaces to learn, make art, garden, and play.

Let’s not fall for the learning loss trick that shifts blame from the catastrophic results of decades of disinvestment in public goods to the victims of that catastrophe and those organizing to recover from it. It is not students and teachers who are failing the test of this pandemic, but a political and economic system that puts profit over people. ●

Illustrator Christiane Grauert’s art can be seen at christiane-grauert.com.

RS The First CRT Election

By the editors of *Rethinking Schools*

Rethinking Schools was glad to see the midterm elections bring significant setbacks to MAGA Republicans and the most egregious “election deniers.” But overall the results were a decidedly mixed bag for supporters of public education and a reflection of the limits of our not-so-democratic electoral system.

U.S. elections are defined by two political parties both beholden to corporate interests, one worse and more dangerous than the other, especially as Republicans have become the party of unapologetic white supremacy and reaction. But half the eligible population doesn’t vote at all, and the Trump years have shown repeatedly that corporate Democrats are not a reliable line of defense against the rising threat of fascism and racist violence. U.S. elections have real stakes, but they are not the sustained democratic social mobilization our society desperately needs.

To be sure there were victories worth celebrating:

- Colorado raised taxes on the wealthy to fund free meals for students in the state’s public schools.
- New Mexico voters supported increased spending on early childhood education and public schools with taxes on oil and gas revenues.
- California’s Proposition 28 increased spending on art and music education for all K–12 public schools.

• In Wisconsin and Michigan, pro-public education governors were re-elected, providing public schools some protection from multiple right-wing assaults, including expanded voucher plans.

But there were also discouraging defeats.

In Ohio, progressive candidates captured control of the State Board of Education, only to see the gerrymandered



RICARDO LEVINS MORALES

Ohio legislature strip the Board of its policymaking powers a week later.

In Florida, Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, who has sponsored some of the most reactionary, homophobic legislation in the United States, endorsed 30 local school board candidates. Almost all of them won and immediately began firing superintendents who had resisted right-wing COVID and curriculum policies.

The Texas State Board of Education was captured by reactionary Republicans who made purging critical race theory the centerpiece of their platforms and who set their sights on wrecking the state’s social studies curriculum standards, up for revision in 2025.

In Arizona, Tom Horne, a former superintendent who tried to outlaw bilingual education and abolish the

Mexican American Studies Program in Tucson, was narrowly elected superintendent of public instruction. According to *The New Yorker*, in addition to attacking CRT, Horne vowed to increase police presence in schools because “the police are what make civilization possible.”

All-Purpose Bogeyman

In some ways, this was the first “CRT election.” It was just about a year ago that Christopher Rufo, the right-wing ideologue who led the effort to turn critical race theory into an all-purpose bogeyman, declared it was time to “abolish the teacher unions, and overturn the school boards.” Absurd rhetoric about how “woke” schools were “indoctrinating children instead of educating them” became what Rufo called “the most successful line of argument in GOP politics.” In an overheated boast on election day — before the votes were counted — Rufo spouted “The Left has spent the past two years pushing chaos in our economy, critical race theory in our schools, and radical gender surgeries onto our children. Tonight, they pay the price.”

Mercifully, enough young people and women voted in impressive numbers to turn the predicted red wave into a red washout. But there is no denying the growth of a right-wing, anti-public schools movement fueled by a toxic mix of dark money, sickening and dangerous anti-LGBTQ rhetoric, and fever dreams of all-out voucher privatization.

Frenzied messaging about critical race theory will continue to be a tool of this movement, mobilizing right-wing activists like Moms for Liberty and threatening educators who stand up for teaching the truth about both the past and the present to their students.

But in the wake of these midterms and in preparation for future elections, there’s another, more appropriate use for critical race theory, and that is to shine a lens on the historical and structural aspects of the U.S. voting system that continue to undermine democracy. These include:

- An electoral system borne of the slavery era that installed Donald Trump and George W. Bush as presidents despite their loss of the popular vote.

- The gutting of the Voting Rights Act, the 1965 civil rights-era legislation that for the first time in the nation’s history made a multiracial democratic voting system even a possibility. Reauthorized unanimously by the Senate in 2006, the far-right capture of the Supreme Court has led to the evisceration of its most important provisions, while Republicans now use the filibuster to prevent its restoration.

- The partisan gerrymandering that allows perpetual minority rule and disenfranchisement of communities of color and urban voters.

- The very structure of the Senate that allows 18 percent of the population to capture 52 of 100 seats and control the most powerful body in Congress.

- The domination of the news and social media by corporate and billionaire interests that substitute cynical horse-race punditry for real voter education about policy choices and special interest influence.

Perhaps the most telling recent example of why civics education in U.S. public schools must continue to draw lessons from this history is the story of the Florida voting rights referendum. In 2018, 65 percent of Florida voters supported a state constitutional amendment to restore the voting rights of those who had been convicted of felonies and completed the terms of their sentences. More than 1.6 million Floridians had lost their voting rights through such felony disenfranchisement, including more than 20 percent of the adult Black population. It was a stark example of what author Michelle Alexander famously called “the New Jim Crow.”

In the 2018 midterms, 5 million Florida voters said “yes” to Amendment 4, which went into effect on January 1, 2019. Within six months, newly elected Gov. Ron DeSantis pushed through legislation that echoed the “poll tax” laws of

the post-Civil War period and required former felons to meet ill-defined financial obligations before their voting rights would be restored. A federal district court found this “pay to vote” system unconstitutional, but that ruling was overturned on appeal.

Not content with overturning the will of Florida voters, this year DeSantis created an “election police force” to hunt down virtually nonexistent “voter fraud.” Twenty former felons were charged with voting illegally, including several who had received voter registration cards from the state in the mail. This racist stunt was wholly orchestrated by DeSantis, who has never challenged the “big lie” that Trump won the 2020 election.

The struggle to make elections and voting rights fair and meaningful is a crucial one. For valuable curriculum resources about these issues, see Ursula Wolfe-Rocca’s suite of lessons, [“Who Gets to Vote? Teaching About the Struggle for Voting Rights in the United States.”](#) at the Zinn Education Project.

U.S. elections won’t save us from the existential crises we face: climate catastrophe, unsustainable social and economic inequality, and a political system designed to protect the powers that be. The limitations of our elections reflect an acute lack of democracy throughout our communities, workplaces, media, and economic institutions. Changing that landscape will take massive social struggle, the work of a movement, not a midterm. ●

Illustrator Ricardo Levins Morales’ art can be seen at rlmartstudio.com.

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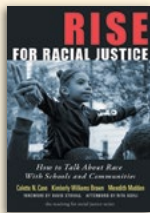
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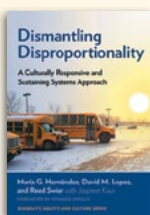
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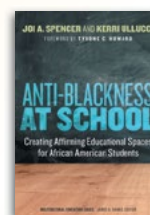
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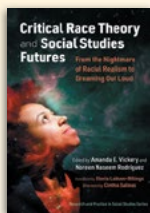
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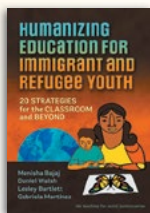
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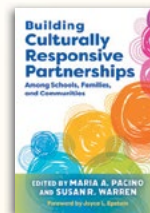
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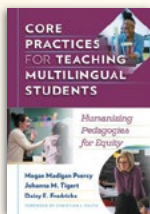


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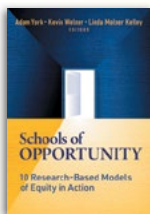
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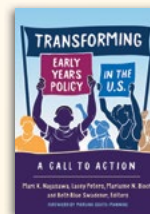
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Goodbye to Ari Bloomekatz

This fall, *Rethinking Schools'* managing editor Ari Bloomekatz accepted the position of executive editor at the venerable social justice magazine *In These Times*. We will miss Ari's humor, imagination, warmth, and commitment to make the world a better place through activist journalism.

Ari was with us for five eventful years, which included special issues on "#SchoolsToo" (on gender justice), "Art Fuels the Teachers' Rebellion," "Teaching and Learning in the Pandemic," "The Uprising and Our Schools," and "Racial Justice Bans: Teachers Fight Back." In addition to his editorial work on the magazine, Ari was production editor for one of the most influential books in *Rethinking Schools'* history, *Teaching for Black Lives*. Edited by Dyan Watson, Jesse Hagopian, and Wayne Au, *Teaching for Black Lives* continues to be used as the core text in more than 100 study groups around the United States and Canada.

During his tenure at *Rethinking Schools*, Ari interviewed Kateryna Maliuta-Osaulova, Ukrainian teacher union activist; Curtis Acosta,



a founder of the acclaimed Mexican American Studies Program in Tucson, Arizona; and conducted a Black Lives Matter at School roundtable, with Awo Okaikor Aryee-Price, Kyna Collins, Jesse Hagopian, and Christopher R. Rogers.

Rethinking Schools editors and staff wish Ari well in his new role at *In These Times*. ●

Welcome, Cierra Kaler-Jones!

Rethinking Schools editors and staff are thrilled to welcome Dr. Cierra Kaler-Jones as our first-ever executive director.

Cierra may be new to this position, but she is no stranger to *Rethinking Schools*. Readers will know her byline from the recent articles "[Coming Home to Ourselves](#)," about Cynthia B. Dillard's *The Spirit of Our Work: Black Women Teachers (Re)member* (Summer 2022); and "[Through the Lens of Those We Love: Uplifting Oral Histories and Finding Common Threads](#)" (Fall 2021).

Cierra is also on the leadership team of the Zinn Education Project, which *Rethinking Schools* coordinates with Teaching for Change, and has hosted many of our Teach the Black Freedom Struggle classes, which launched in March 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic.

Cierra is a teacher, a dancer, a writer, and a researcher. Most recently, she has been director of storytelling at the Communities for Just Schools Fund, a national collaborative that links philanthropy with grassroots organizing, which grew out of Black parents in Mississippi demanding justice for their children in schools.

Cierra remembers her first encounter with *Rethinking Schools* magazine: "I will never forget the moment I received my first copy. The illustrations danced off the page, the writing was rich with personal narrative and tangible teaching ideas, and the content was unapologetically radical. I felt a surge at that moment — the warmth of being introduced to an aligned community committed to education justice."

Cierra describes how she came to her own political awareness:

My experiences growing up as a Black and Filipina girl navigating anti-Blackness inside and outside some of my schooling experiences, as well as the love and care of teachers who supported me in my resistance, shape my commitment to education justice. These experiences ultimately led me to become a community-based

dance and arts educator. Dance was my tool for harnessing my righteous rage and allowed me to tell stories with choreography that made audiences contend with racism, sexism, heteropatriarchy, and also joy and humanity. In my teaching, I sought to co-create spaces with students that encouraged creative freedom and where they could generate art that named their truths and made political statements. Students shared their frustrations about the corporate curriculum they learned at school and asked if we could learn about people's history in dance class. Together, we delved into what we would want to learn if we crafted our dream curriculum. Young people taught me what liberatory curricula and pedagogy could look like before I had the language for it.

Cierra earned her PhD in education from the Department of Teaching and Learning, Policy and Leadership at University of Maryland. Her dissertation explored how Black girls use arts-based practices (e.g., movement, music, hair) as mechanisms for identity construction and resistance. (To get a sense for some of the issues Cierra addresses in her dissertation, see her *Frontiers in Education* article "I Rewrote Their Story and You Can, Too": Black Girls' Artistic Freedom Dreams to Create New Worlds.") Her master's in Curriculum & Instruction is from George Washington University, and she attended Rutgers University and Douglass Residential College as an undergraduate, where she received her bachelor's degree in social work, with minors in women's and gender studies and race and ethnic studies.

As part of the Zinn Education Project's [Teach the Black Freedom Struggle series](#), Cierra has been in conversation with renowned scholars like Robin D. G. Kelley on the Black Left: 1930s to the Early 1950s; Jarvis Givens on his book

Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching; Martha Jones on "Black Women in the Fight for Voting Rights"; Alaina Roberts on "Black Freedom on Native Land"; Ashley Farmer on "Queen Mother Moore, Black Nationalism, and the Centuries-Long Fight for Reparations," and with poet and *Atlantic* staff writer Clint Smith about his book *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America*.

Cierra also moderated our Rethinking Schools webinars "[Teaching for Black Lives During the Rebellion](#)," with *Teaching for Black Lives* editors Dyan Watson,

amidst of multiple book projects, and have been able to turn several books into broader organizing efforts. Our Zinn Education Project continues to offer people's history curriculum to tens of thousands of teachers, and help educators find community to push back against despicable initiatives to ban teaching about race, gender, and justice.

Please join us in welcoming Dr. Cierra Kaler-Jones to the Rethinking Schools family at this key moment in the history of our organization, and the history of this country. There is no one better situated to be our first executive director. ●



Jesse Hagopian, and Wayne Au, and [Anti-Racist Teaching During the Pandemic: Lessons from *The New Teacher Book*](#), with Dyan Watson, Kara Hinderlie Stroman, and Ikechukwu Onyema. In October, she moderated the keynote panel, "Teaching for Joy and Justice in Dangerous Times" for the Northwest Teaching for Social Justice Conference, which featured Rethinking Schools editor Adam Sanchez and contributor Erin Green.

Rethinking Schools just began our 37th year of publication. We are in the





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the most
revolutionary act
one can engage in
is ... to tell the
TRUTH"
-Howard Zinn

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Taking Multicultural, Anti-Racist Education Seriously

An interview with Enid Lee

We are in the midst of a right-wing assault on anti-racist education. The cynicism reflected in statements from legislators, conservative activists, and Fox News pundits is breathtaking. As the authors of “The Chilling Effects of So-Called Critical Race Theory Bans” demonstrate in this issue (see p. 18), the measures are intended to stifle any classroom discussions of racial justice. At last count, 36 states have passed or are considering 137 bills to restrict teaching about racism or LGBTQIA issues. And the RAND Corporation reports that almost a quarter of school administrators in the country have warned teachers to stay away from social/political issues.

We thought that now would be a good time to revisit one of the most-read articles Rethinking Schools has published: then-managing editor Barbara Miner’s 1991 interview with the renowned anti-racist educator Enid Lee. It was one of our earliest statements on what anti-racist education is — and is not. Following the original 1991 interview, Lee responds to some questions about the context of anti-racist education today.

—Rethinking Schools editors

ANNIE ROWLAND



What do you mean by a multicultural education?

The term “multicultural education” has a lot of different meanings. The term I use most often is “anti-racist education.”

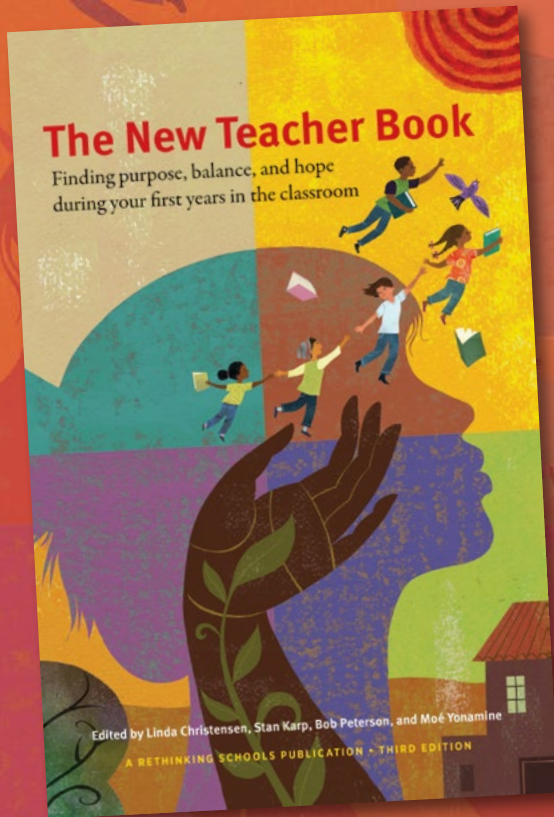
Multicultural or anti-racist education is fundamentally a perspective. It’s a point of view that cuts across all subject areas, and addresses the histories and experiences of people who have been left out of the curriculum. Its purpose is to help us deal equitably with all the cultural and racial differences that you find in the human family. It’s also a perspective that allows us to get at explanations for why things are the way they are in terms of power relationships, in terms of equality issues.

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So when I say multicultural or anti-racist education, I am talking about equipping students, parents, and teachers with the tools needed to combat racism and ethnic discrimination, and to find ways to build a society that includes all people on an equal footing.

It also has to do with how the school is run in terms of who gets to be involved with decisions. It has to do with parents and how their voices are heard or not heard. It has to do with who gets hired in the school.

If you don't take multicultural education or anti-racist education seriously, you are actually promoting a monocultural or racist education. There is no neutral ground on this issue.

Why do you use the term “anti-racist education” instead of “multicultural education”?

Partly because, in Canada, multicultural education often has come to mean something that is quite superficial: the dances, the dress, the dialect, the dinners. And it does so without focusing on what those expressions of culture mean: the values, the power relationships that shape the culture.

I also use the term anti-racist education because a lot of multicultural education hasn't looked at discrimination. It has the view “People are different and isn't that nice,” as opposed to looking at how some people's differences are looked upon as deficits and disadvantages. In anti-racist education, we attempt to look at — and change — those things in school and society that prevent some differences from being valued.

Oftentimes, whatever is white is treated as normal. So when teachers choose literature that they say will deal with a universal theme or story, like childhood, all the people in the stories are of European origin; it's basically white culture and civilization. That culture is different from others, but it doesn't get named as different. It gets named as normal.

Anti-racist education helps us move

that European perspective over to the side to make room for other cultural perspectives that must be included.

What are some ways your perspective might manifest itself in a kindergarten classroom, for example?

It might manifest itself in something as basic as the kinds of toys and games that you select. If all the toys and games reflect the dominant culture and race and language, then that's what I call a monocultural classroom even if you have kids of different backgrounds in the class.

I have met some teachers who think that just because they have kids from different races and backgrounds, they have a multicultural classroom. Bodies of kids are not enough.

It also gets into issues such as what kind of pictures are up on the wall? What kinds of festivals are celebrated?

What are the rules and expectations in the classroom in terms of what kinds of language are acceptable? What kinds of interactions are encouraged? How are the kids grouped? These are just some of the concrete ways in which a multicultural perspective affects a classroom.

How does one implement a multicultural or anti-racist education?

It usually happens in stages. Because there's a lot of resistance to change in schools, I don't think it's reasonable to expect to move straight from a monocultural school to a multiracial school.

First there is this surface stage in which people change a few expressions of culture in the school. They make welcome signs in several languages, and have a variety of foods and festivals. My problem is not that they start there. My concern is that they often stop there. Instead, what they have to do is move very quickly and steadily to transform the entire curriculum. For example, when we say classical music, whose classical music are we talking about? European? Japanese? And what items are on the tests? Whose culture do they reflect? Who is getting equal access to

knowledge in the school? Whose perspective is heard, whose is ignored?

The second stage is transitional and involves creating units of study. Teachers might develop a unit on Native Americans, or Native Canadians, or people of African background. And they have a whole unit that they study from one period to the next. But it's a separate unit and what remains intact is the main curriculum, the main menu. One of the ways to assess multicultural education in your school is to look at the school organization. Look at how much time you spend on which subjects. When you are in the second stage you usually have a two- or three-week unit on a group of people or an area that's been omitted in the main curriculum.

You're moving into the next stage of structural change when you have elements of that unit integrated into existing units. Ultimately, what is at the center of the curriculum gets changed in its prominence. For example, civilizations. Instead of talking just about Western civilization, you begin to draw on what we need to know about India, Africa, China. We also begin to ask different questions about why and what we are doing. Whose interest is it in that we study what we study? Why is it that certain kinds of knowledge get hidden? In mathematics, instead of studying statistics with sports and weather numbers, why not look at employment in light of ethnicity?

Then there is the social change stage, when the curriculum helps lead to changes outside of the school. We actually go out and change the nature of the community we live in. For example, kids might become involved in how the media portray people, and start a letter-writing campaign about news that is negatively biased. Kids begin to see this as a responsibility that they have to change the world.

I think about a group of elementary school kids who wrote to the manager of the store about the kinds of games and dolls that they had. That's a long way from having some dinner and dances

that represent an "exotic" form of life.

In essence, in anti-racist education we use knowledge to empower people and to change their lives.

Teachers have limited money to buy new materials. How can they begin to incorporate a multicultural education even if they don't have a lot of money?

We do need money and it is a pattern to underfund anti-racist initiatives so that they fail. We must push for funding for new resources because some of the information we have is downright inaccurate. But if you have a perspective, which is really a set of questions that you ask about your life, and you have the kids ask, then you can begin to fill in the gaps.

Columbus is a good example. It turns the whole story on its head when you have the children try to find out what the people who were on this continent might have been thinking and doing and feeling when they were being "discovered," tricked, robbed, and murdered. You might not have that information on hand, because that kind of knowledge is deliberately suppressed. But if nothing else happens, at least you shift your teaching, to recognize the native peoples as human beings, to look at things from their view.

There are other things you can do without new resources. You can include, in a sensitive way, children's backgrounds and life experiences. One way is through interviews with parents and with community people, in which they can recount their own stories, especially their interactions with institutions like schools, hospitals, and employment agencies. These are things that often don't get heard.

I've seen schools inviting grandparents who can tell stories about their own lives, and these stories get to be part of the curriculum later in the year. It allows excluded people, it allows humanity, back into the schools. One of the ways that discrimination works is that it treats some people's experiences, lives,

and points of view as though they don't count, as though they are less valuable than other people's.

I know we need to look at materials. But we can also take some of the existing curriculum and ask kids questions about what is missing, and whose interest is being served when things are written in the way they are. Both teachers and students must alter that material.

How can a teacher who knows little about multiculturalism be expected to teach multiculturally?

I think the teachers need to have the time and encouragement to do some reading, and to see the necessity to do so. A lot has been written about multiculturalism. It's not like there's no information. If you want to get specific, a good place to start is back issues of the *Bulletin of the Council on Interracial Books for Children* [published from 1966 to 1989 —eds.].

You also have to look around at what people of color are saying about their lives, and draw from those sources. You

culture and biases affect your view of non-dominant groups in society." You don't have to fill your head with little details about what other cultural groups eat and dance. You need to take a look at your culture, what your idea of normal is, and realize it is quite limited and is in fact just reflecting a particular experience. You have to realize that what you recognize as universal is, quite often, exclusionary. To be really universal, you must begin to learn what Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, the Aboriginal peoples and all silenced groups of Americans have had to say about the topic.

How can one teach multiculturally without making white children feel guilty or threatened?

Perhaps a sense of being threatened or feeling guilty will occur. But I think it is possible to have kids move beyond that.

First of all, recognize that there have always been white people who have fought against racism and social injustice. White children can proudly identify with these people and join in that

things so that more people will benefit.

If we say that we are all equally discriminated against on the basis of racism or sexism, that's not accurate. We don't need to be caught up in the guilt of our benefit, but should use our privilege to help change things.

I remember a teacher telling me last summer that after she listened to me on the issue of racism, she felt ashamed of who she was. And I remember wondering if her sense of self was founded on a sense of superiority. Because if that's true, then she is going to feel shaken. But if her sense of self is founded on working with people of different colors to change things, then there is no need to feel guilt or shame.

What are some things to look for in choosing good literature and resources?

I encourage people to look for the voice of people who are frequently silenced, people we haven't heard from: people of color, women, poor people, working-class people, people with disabilities, and gays and lesbians.

I also think that you look for materials that invite kids to seek explanations beyond the information that is before them, materials that give back to people the ideas they have developed, the music they have composed, and all those things that have been stolen from them and attributed to other folks. Jazz and rap music are two examples that come to mind.

I encourage teachers to select materials that reflect people who are trying and have tried to change things to bring dignity to their lives, for example Africans helping other Africans in the face of famine and war. This gives students a sense of empowerment and some strategies for making a difference in their lives. I encourage them to select materials that visually give a sense of the variety in the world.

Teachers also need to avoid materials that blame the victims of racism and other "isms."

In particular, I encourage them to look for materials that are relevant. And

can't truly teach this until you re-educate yourself from a multicultural perspective. But you can begin. It's an ongoing process.

Most of all, you have to get in touch with the fact that your current education has a cultural bias, that it is an exclusionary, racist bias, and that it needs to be purged. A lot of times people say, "I just need to learn more about those other groups." And I say, "No, you need to look at how the dominant

tradition of fighting for social justice.

Second, it is in their interest to be opening their minds and finding out how things really are. Otherwise, they will constantly have an incomplete picture of the human family.

The other thing is, if we don't make it clear that some people benefit from racism, then we are being dishonest. What we have to do is talk about how young people can use that from which they benefit to change the order of

relevance has two points: not only where you are, but also where you want to go. In all of this we need to ask what's the purpose, what are we trying to teach, what are we trying to develop?

What can school districts do to further multicultural education?

Many teachers will not change curriculum if they have no administrative support. Sometimes, making these changes can be scary. You can have parents on your back and kids who can be resentful. You can be told you are making the curriculum too political.

What we are talking about here is pretty radical; multicultural education is about challenging the status quo and the basis of power. You need administrative support to do that.

In the final analysis, multicultural or anti-racist education is about allowing educators to do the things they have wanted to do in the name of their profession: to broaden the horizons of the young people they teach, to give them skills to change a world in which the color of a person's skin defines their opportunities, where some human beings are treated as if they are just junior children.

Maybe teachers don't have this big vision all the time. But I think those are the things that a democratic society is supposed to be about.

* * *

We first published this interview with you more than 30 years ago. What else should be emphasized all these years later about how we can take anti-racist education seriously?

We continue to take anti-racist education seriously when we renew our focus on two aspects of our work: standards and student voice. We must reclaim the curriculum standards, making sure to infuse the skills and processes that we expect students to understand with anti-racist content and approaches. In my earlier *Rethinking Schools* interview,

I described anti-racist education as “a point of view that cuts across all subject areas, and addresses the histories and experiences of people who have been left out of the curriculum. . . . It's also a perspective that allows us to get at explanations for why things are the way they are in terms of power relationships, in terms of equality issues.” To keep the anti-racist focus in this era of harassment, we must embed the elements of the missing and marginalized in our content. We should encourage students to find answers to the root causes and remedies to racial injustice — from the playground to the political arena — with questions like “Who else was part of this?” “What happened before this event?” “Who had the power to decide?”

The main thrust is to reclaim the standards, reclaim the work we are employed to do and ensure that all students feel included and acquire the skills and knowledge they need to function in the world and to change it so that they and others might experience greater justice and joy.

What is crucial is the application of anti-racist principles to students' lives and the wider society. It's what I call “making the mandated meaningful.”

In terms of student voice, let us make sure that we share and include in reports and conversations with families and district leaders, school board members, the press what students say they are learning — the empowerment they experience and the enlightenment they enjoy from the anti-racist curriculum. It seems as if the only student voices aired in the media are the ones of students who feel “uncomfortable” in the classroom. Where are the voices of the students of all racial backgrounds who are saying, “How come we did not learn about these things before?” “How can we make things better if we don't find out what has gone on before?”

We can encourage students to share their feelings of discomfort within the context of the class. This does not have to wait until they get home. We need to

recognize discriminatory language when it is used and repair harm. It's not always a smooth journey, but one that teachers are undertaking with increasing courage, clarity, and compassion.

What you urge in the interview with Barbara Miner is under attack. Legislation outlawing what the right wing calls critical race theory has been introduced around the country. School board elections are being fought around issues of anti-racist curriculum. These efforts are having a chilling effect in schools, even where there are no new laws. How can educators respond to these attacks?

We must continue to organize across all kinds of identity and institutional differences. The accounts in *Rethinking Schools* and *Teaching for Change* provide examples of this kind of organizing. The 8,000 teachers who signed the Zinn Education Project pledge to teach the truth about the history of racism and resistance to racism, despite the laws being passed against this, give us hope.

We encourage others to take a stand when we share the acts of resistance to racism that take place on a daily basis. These accounts of and engagement with struggle serve as the only springboard I have for carrying on with a sense of hope and urgency. ●

*Enid Lee (enidlee.com) conducts online and on-site professional development with school communities working to ensure academic excellence for all students through anti-racist education. She presents institutes, gives talks, and writes about language, culture, race, and racism in education. Her publications include [Beyond Heroes and Holidays: A Practical Guide to K-12 Anti-Racist, Multicultural Education and Staff Development](#), which she co-edited. She is a Virtual Scholar at *Teaching for Change*.*

The Chilling Effects of So-Called Critical Race Theory Bans

BY LAURA BETH KELLY, LAURA TAYLOR, CARA DJONKO-MOORE, AND AIXA D. MARCHAND

“It’s a slap in the face.”

That’s how one teacher described the “Prohibited Concepts in Instruction” law passed by the Tennessee legislature in spring 2021. The law was one of [a series of laws](#) commonly referred to as critical race theory bans, which were passed in 16 states with Republican-led legislatures as of the end of the 2021–2022 legislative session. Tennessee’s version prohibited 11 specific concepts (see box on p. 23), including “This state or the United States is fundamentally or irredeemably racist or sexist.” Such laws, many have argued, are intentionally designed to [prevent K–12 teachers and students from engaging in critical conversations](#) about race, gender, and oppression.

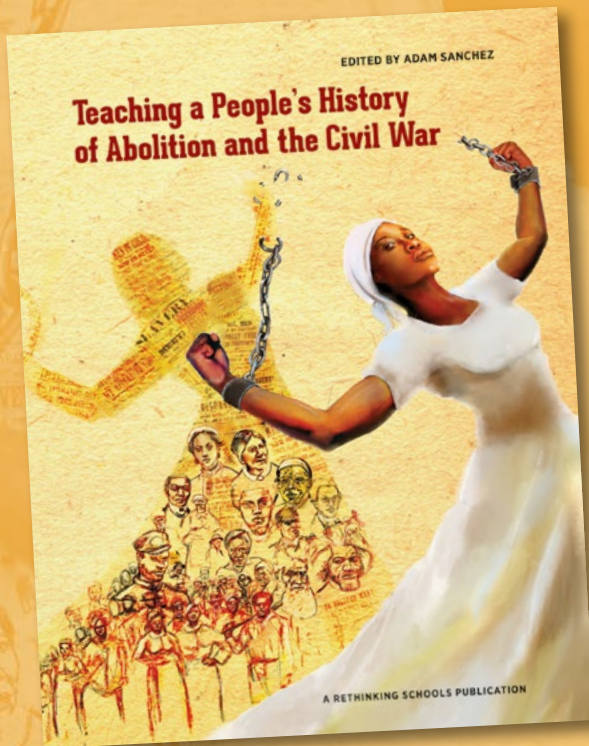
Ironically, so-called critical race theory bans actually exemplify the racist policy structure that critical race theory attempts to explain. Critical race theory explains in part how the law functions to uphold racial inequality. Because prohibited concepts legislation limits how educators teach about racism, these laws themselves maintain the racial status quo, the very phenomenon critical race theory describes (Hamilton, 2021).

As teacher educators and researchers in Memphis, Tennessee, we talked with practicing and prospective teachers and found that they, like us, were staunchly opposed to this new legislation. We are a multiracial team (two Black — African American and Haitian American — and two white researchers) who worked together in a justice-oriented teacher education program. Many of our initial conversations turned quickly toward concerns about effects of the law on everyday teaching and learning. What would it look like to teach about slavery or the Civil Rights Movement? How would teachers guide students in understanding the fundamental role of racism and other forms of oppression in shaping current events?



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Edited by Adam Sanchez



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To better understand how this law might affect teaching and learning toward justice, we engaged 31 practicing and prospective teachers in focus group conversations about the legislation. Twenty-three of our participants identified as female. Of the 31 participants, 19 identified as white, nine as Black/African American, two as white and Latinx, and one as Asian/Pacific Islander. These conversations took place in the 2021–2022 school year, as teachers across the state grappled with how to interpret and respond to the new legislative constraints on their teaching. At that time, 17 participants were practicing teachers, 11 were future teachers, and three had just completed student teaching.

From these focus group conversations, we learned there were significant effects on classrooms, with teachers feeling the need to restrict the ways their teaching engaged with issues of race, racism, and other forms of oppression. These perceived restrictions, in many cases, extended well beyond the specific topics prohibited in the state legislation. Uncertain how to interpret the law's vague language and fearful of the consequences of being “caught” teaching a prohibited concept, most teachers we spoke with described how the new law led them to be less confident in their ability to teach about race and racism, and so they expected to subsequently engage in this type of teaching less often.

The law, in other words, functioned precisely as its Republican proponents hoped it would. (For example, model legislation released by Citizens for Renewing America explained that critical race theory bans should also prohibit social-emotional learning, culturally responsive teaching, anti-racism, equity, and multiculturalism.) The law not only prohibited educators from discussing the specific concepts outlined, but also produced a range of chilling effects. Teachers described decisions to constrain their own lessons in response to fears that their teaching would be scrutinized by parents or administrators, restricting

their teaching beyond the specific letter of the law. Here, we outline some of these suppressive effects.

How Teachers Interpreted the Policy

As we listened to teachers, we realized that these restrictive effects were produced, in part, through the legislation's often-vague language. For instance, the law expressly allows both "the impartial discussion of controversial aspects of history" and "the impartial instruction on the historical oppression of a particular group of people based on race." Although the law's allowance of these topics might suggest an opening for critical conversations, many teachers pointed to the varied ways that a word like "impartial" would be interpreted by the state. For instance, Ellery, a student teacher who entered teaching to promote justice, reflected on a previous unit she believed she could no longer teach, saying, "I guess I was teaching critical race theory in my lesson about the sanitation strike [in Memphis 1968, when Dr. King was killed]. Obviously, we were thinking critically about race." Even though the strict language of the bill might not prohibit a lesson about that event, teachers seemed to view any lessons that explicitly discussed racial oppression as vulnerable to challenges.

Another teacher, Marla, worried that the law would require her to change how she taught her kindergarteners about Rosa Parks. Imagining how she might respond to students' questions, she thought aloud: "She was kicked off the bus because, well, why was she kicked off? Well, why? Oh, because Black people are just seen as less than. How can I state those facts without saying that some people were racist, and some people received adverse treatment because of their race?"

Similarly, she thought about how she addressed Thanksgiving with her students: "Maybe I was breaking the law to say that it wasn't this big, old, happy feast." Although the written policy doesn't prevent teachers from having such a conversation with students, this

more restrictive interpretation of the law was common among the teachers we spoke with, and we believe this restriction was precisely the policymakers' intention. After all, leaders of the movement to ban so-called critical race theory have been clear in their social media and

summer 2020 spurred by the murder of George Floyd, teachers at Isaac's school had collaboratively created a series of lessons on racism and anti-racism. In one lesson, students and teachers responded to a video about racial justice protests in Minneapolis that explicitly critiqued

This more restrictive interpretation was common, and we believe precisely the policymakers' intention.

publications that they aim to make these discussions about race in the classroom considered toxic among the U.S. public.

Marla wondered if she could navigate this tension by emphasizing a distinction between past and present, but she added, "I do feel like it's a conflict because I don't want my students to think that this is all forgotten, and it's all peace and rainbows and happiness. I do feel like it is uncomfortable for me to not connect history to the present because that just seems wrong, you know, like I'm lying." Marla was right that the law limited her ability to talk about systems of oppression in current events (see box on p. 23), but the policy's chilling effect is evident in her caution about talking about race at all. Though she still has those conversations, she worries it may be in conflict with the law.

Changes to Curriculum

Other teachers, especially those teaching history and government, identified how their curriculum had been changed by administrators in response to the law. One high school social studies teacher, Isaac, gave a stark example of this. Following the protests for racial justice in

media narratives about the so-called "riots" occurring there. When the law went into effect, school-level administrators shelved those lessons in favor of a less overtly political curriculum focusing on historical civil rights struggles rather than contemporary ones. "It's good for us to talk about that," Isaac said, "but it's not the same level" of the discarded anti-racism lessons. Instead, Isaac made space for those conversations with students after class.

Other teachers, however, raised concerns about those spaces beyond the formal curriculum. Brea, a student teacher in an elementary classroom, described a moment when a white student referred to a Black student as a slave, apparently referring to the child's classroom responsibility to sweep the room. By engaging students in guided conversation about this racism, Brea's mentor teacher responded in the way that many anti-racist scholars would recommend. Yet, Brea, who wanted to become a teacher precisely because of the opportunity for conversations like this one, worried about the law in that moment, wondering, "Is this actively illegal? Can I not be doing this?" Brea expressed concern that the

law would prevent teachers in similar situations from having frank conversations about race and racism with students.

Prospective Teachers Reconsider Career Choice

Although many of the teachers we spoke with focused their attention on how to resist or evade the law, it made some prospective teachers reconsider whether they still wanted to pursue the profession. Many saw teaching as an opportunity to build students' critical consciousness, and it appeared to them that the law would prevent them from doing this work.

Trish, a new college student considering teaching as a career, saw the policy as erasing history. “[Students might] learn about Martin Luther King and how he had a dream. But they probably won't learn about how he was against capitalism. They won't learn about more current events that have to do with Black Lives Matter,” she explained. Trish believed

“They’ll have to write a better law for it to affect anything that I do.”

that this type of watered-down curriculum, which she imagined would be the outcome of this policy, wouldn't prepare marginalized students to navigate and resist systems of oppression that they would face in their lives. Trish evidenced a high degree of critical consciousness and could not imagine teaching anything neutrally.

Her experiences teaching at a youth social services organization illustrated

this orientation. Relating to her work with outdoor education, she explained race and racism are relevant to agriculture, citing, for example, USDA discrimination against Black farmers and the role of enslaved people in establishing agriculture in the United States. When she talked about how her students had an interest in basketball, she saw the opportunity to teach about how Black athletes are treated as commodities. For Trish, it was easy to see how race related to everything in the curriculum, and it alarmed her that making those connections might be legally constrained.

Consequently, she struggled to imagine committing to teaching in Tennessee: “It's like me lying to students, and I don't even feel comfortable doing that as a teacher. I would be fired.” Later, she expanded, “I just can't. I can't do this. I really value being honest with students. I really don't think I can navigate teaching in such a watered-down type of way.”

Another future teacher, Ivy, shared Trish's concerns. Although she entered college intending to teach in a Memphis public school, this law led her to wonder if she should just “find some little hippy-dippy private school, so I can teach in peace.” She explained, “I think this law puts a lot of pressure on teachers that genuinely care. That's very dangerous, trying to disempower people who will be good, culturally responsive teachers.” While Trish ended the focus group wondering if she should teach at all, Ivy decided that she could resist the policy: “They'll have to write a better law for it to affect anything that I do,” she said, and suggested that she'd lend her name to the hypothetical future case, *Ivy vs. Bill Lee* [Tennessee's governor], that might one day challenge the law in court.

Ivy was not alone in her intentions to resist this law. Another future teacher, Sarah, described her refusal to follow the law as a high school history teacher. “I'm ready to get fired for that. To be honest, I think for me, that's just a part of activism.” While Sarah believed she might get fired for her insistence on historically accurate

teaching, other teachers resisting the law were less concerned about this potential consequence. Noting the substantial need for teachers at her school campus, first-year elementary teacher Caroline explained, “I try to find moments where I can insert [topics of race and racism], whether or not my principal is OK with it. I learned very quickly that they're not going to fire me over things like this.” Like Caroline, many teachers brought up teacher shortages as a source of potential power, concluding that administrators would be reluctant to fire them over their teaching.

Aligning with Standardized Curriculum

Our conversations with teachers also reminded us that these anti-critical race theory laws are not the only force constraining curriculum for teachers and students. Many teachers noted that the standardized curricula they were mandated to follow had already erased many of their opportunities to engage students in critical conversations. These mandates were enforced via pacing guides, classroom visits by school- and district-level administrators, and minute-by-minute curriculum content scheduling.

Xandra, a high school English teacher, described her required curriculum this way. She noted that although the curriculum includes some general engagement with the Civil Rights Movement, such as a story featuring Claudette Colvin, “it was very surface-level. It was just like, ‘she was the first Rosa Parks.’” Although some of the law's supporters might oppose even the inclusion of a figure like Claudette Colvin, Xandra drew on her own exploration of critical race theory in graduate school to soundly refute that point: “When I think critical race theory, I am talking about how Black women were left out of the entire Civil Rights Movement. . . . or about how Claudette Colvin was not given her props, if you will, because she was a teenage mother.” Here, we understood Xandra to be criticizing how textbooks

and other mainstream tellings of history often omitted Colvin's significant role in the movement. Xandra's more critical readings of the Civil Rights Movement, as well as of contemporary racism, were absent from her prescribed curriculum.

Xandra's experiences serve as a reminder that struggles to provide students with opportunities to more critically engage with the world go beyond this most recent legislation. Standardized and whitewashed curriculum, high-stakes testing, and related reforms have constrained such explorations and perpetuated white supremacy for decades. Although many teachers have both the desire and ability to engage in more critical teaching, Xandra noted, "There's really no time. We have 50-minute class periods, and we have to do this and this and this because we're tested." She regretfully added, "I would love to, and the students would too."

The Intention, Not a Byproduct

Across our conversations, we discovered a plethora of ways that the Tennessee policy affected classrooms. These included teachers' hesitancy to discuss racial justice with students, programmatic changes to anti-racist curriculum, and teachers with justice commitments struggling to remain in (or enter) the profession. Rather than unintended consequences or misinterpretations of the law, however, these effects are in fact the goal for conservative lawmakers who have promoted color-blind approaches and made clear their belief that talk about race is racist. (For instance, see Citizens for Renewing America's online guide, *Combatting Critical Race Theory in Your Community*, that takes this stance.)

It doesn't matter that the laws don't actually make it illegal to tell an accurate story of "the first Thanksgiving"; it matters that teachers worry that it might, so they censor themselves. The laws give cover to groups wanting to object to any form of anti-racist teaching, so schools change their curriculum to avoid these confrontations. Gag orders work because

The prohibited concepts in Tennessee's SB0623 are:

1. One race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex;
2. An individual, by virtue of the individual's race or sex, is inherently privileged, racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or subconsciously;
3. An individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment because of the individual's race or sex;
4. An individual's moral character is determined by the individual's race or sex;
5. An individual, by virtue of the individual's race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex;
6. An individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or another form of psychological distress solely because of the individual's race or sex;
7. A meritocracy is inherently racist or sexist, or designed by a particular race or sex to oppress members of another race or sex;
8. This state or the United States is fundamentally or irredeemably racist or sexist;
9. Promoting or advocating the violent overthrow of the United States government;
10. Promoting division between, or resentment of, a race, sex, religion, creed, nonviolent political affiliation, social class, or class of people; or
11. Ascribing character traits, values, moral or ethical codes, privileges, or beliefs to a race or sex, or to an individual because of the individual's race or sex.

The law goes on to say that instructional materials that include the following *are* allowed:

- The history of an ethnic group, as described in textbooks and instructional materials adopted in accordance with present law concerning textbooks and instructional materials;
- The impartial discussion of controversial aspects of history;
- The impartial instruction on the historical oppression of a particular group of people based on race, ethnicity, class, nationality, religion, or geographic region; or
- Historical documents that are permitted under present law, such as the national motto, the national anthem, the state and federal constitutions, state and federal laws, and Supreme Court decisions.

of their vagueness and the nebulous legal climate they create.

A review of how these laws have been enacted nationally illuminates why the teachers we spoke with were concerned with how to teach under the new policy. In Georgia, a new DEI administrator was harassed into resigning. Teachers in New Hampshire felt the need to obtain parental permission before viewing Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech in class. A parent in one Iowa district demanded that the high school elective course "Social Justice in Literature" be discontinued. And teachers and administrators in multiple states have been fired for their discussions about race and racism.

Teachers Fight Back

Ultimately, when censorship prevails, educators lose ground as professionals with authority and judgment to design curriculum. And students lose the opportunity to make sense of racial injustice through connecting the past to the present with an educator's guidance.

This type of policy climate for teachers demands organized resistance. Teachers in our study often talked about resistance as an isolated endeavor. But when educators work alone, we lose. It is through coordinated efforts — like the [Pledge to Teach the Truth](#), local union organizing, participation in national professional organizations, and involvement with local school boards — that teachers most effectively fight back.

As of January 2023, more than 8,500 educators had pledged to teach history honestly via the [Zinn Education Project](#), which compiles teaching materials, news, and campaigns. In June 2022, Neighbors for Education sponsored a rally at a local museum for teachers, parents, and other stakeholders in response to curriculum bans. More recently, in Faulkner County, Arkansas, parents, concerned community members, and students protested at a local school board meeting against a proposed curriculum policy that would ban divisive

concepts like critical race theory, gender identity, and sexual orientation. This school board meeting protest followed a walkout at the local high school led by students against the proposed policy. Nationally, the College Board piloted an AP course in African American history in 60 U.S. high schools, which could include content banned by current laws and policies. One teacher in our focus groups told us her administration had told teachers: "We stand against this [policy]. We're an anti-racist organization."

Resistance can also be incubated through study groups or learning communities where teachers come together to critically analyze the specifics of a law and reflect on their position within that context. In our focus group conversations, teachers read and discussed the Tennessee bill, and many found that the written policy was not quite as restrictive as they had feared. Some teachers pointed to the exceptions in the bill for discussing racism in the context of history as a "loophole" (see box on p. 23) to continue teaching about racism. Teachers might consider holding similar study groups to examine their state policy, and teacher education programs could host spaces where future teachers have collaborative conversations to identify opportunities for resistance.

Based on what we learned from our focus group conversations, we held a campus-wide panel to provide information on the law and identify opportunities to resist the law both within and beyond the classroom. We continue to bring these conversations into our teacher education classrooms, and have adapted our courses to teach teachers how they can affect educational policy through working in unions, participating in school board meetings, and pressuring elected officials. We are also inspired, for instance, by the decision of teacher educators at Cal State Fullerton to halt placement of student teachers in the Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified School District, where trustees voted to ban critical race

theory. What are other institutional-level actions we can take to resist?

Educators can and must collaborate to resist and push for the repeal of these policies. As the teachers we spoke with affirmed over and over, "Kids can talk about hard things," and their right to do so in school is worth fighting for. ●

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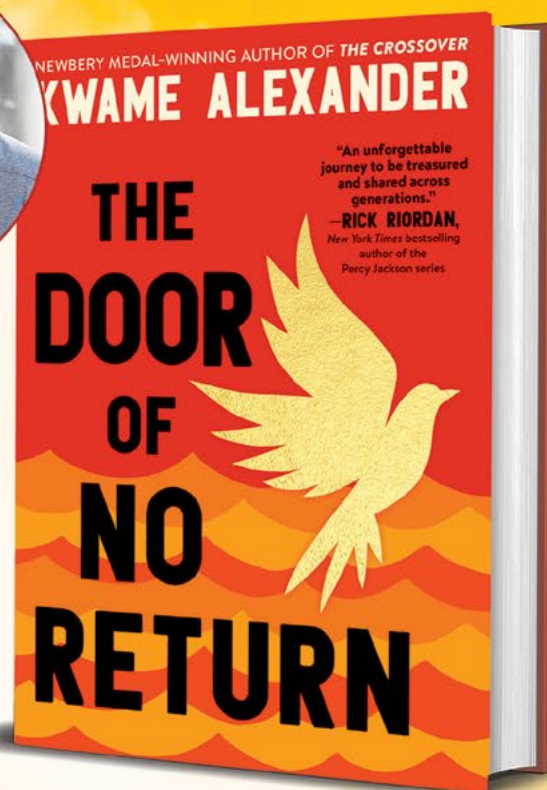
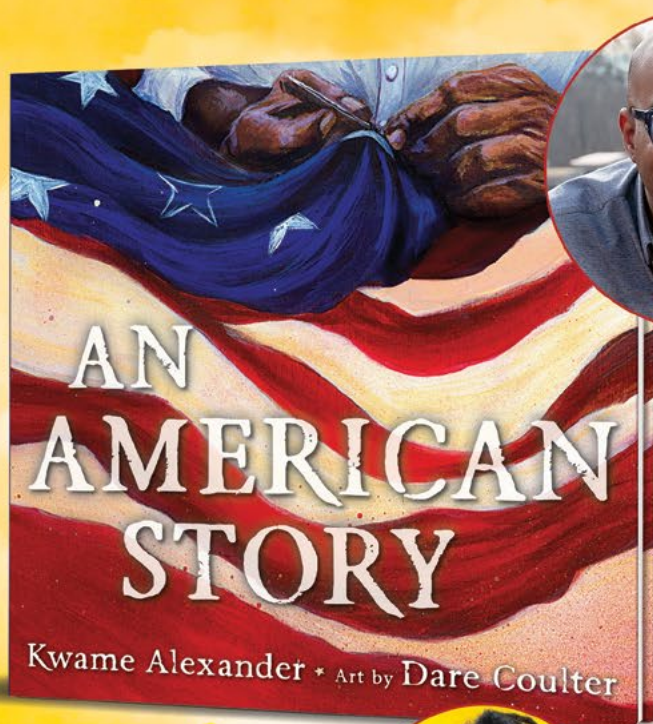
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Peacekeepers and Peacemakers

Fifth graders explore what

I looked across the school cafeteria, coffee in hand, and watched as my 5th-grade students gathered alongside the rest of the elementary school and repeated our daily litany of pledges. At just 7:50 a.m., students were already in the middle of their

third pledge of the morning.

After the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance, students recited the Pledge to the Texas Flag, and then moved on to our school pledge, which the school had proudly named (or rather, adults far removed from the classroom had named) the Peacekeeper's Pledge. On this morning, it was the Peacekeeper's Pledge that really caught the attention of my still-awaking brain. What were our students promising to do? Who were they promising to be? And why did we expect them to mindlessly recite words that they had played no role in creating?

BY ERIN GREEN

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Illustrator Sophia Foster-Dimino's art can be found at hellophia.com.



we do when peace doesn't already exist

The students wrapped up their pledges, essentially promising to be obedient students for the day, and then we walked down the outdoor hallway to our portable. As students chattered about video games and their activities from the night before, I kept thinking about the Peacekeeper's Pledge.

Students hung up their backpacks outside the classroom and came inside to sit in a circle on the carpet for our morning meeting. We went around the circle for our sharing time, and then once each student had the opportunity to share, I broached the subject with the class.

"I've been thinking a lot about the morning pledges. What are pledges? Why do we say them?" I asked.

Jeremiah raised his hand and suggested, "Like a promise? I think the pledges are like promises." Others nodded in agreement.

"Yeah," Joaquin added. "It's like we promise to do those things."

"OK," I said. "Promise is a good word. So I'm wondering then, what exactly are you promising to do? Specifically, when you say the Peacekeeper's Pledge, what's the promise that you're making?"

Aliyah raised her hand. "I think the Peacekeeper's Pledge is kinda like the school rules. We promise to follow the rules."

I affirmed Aliyah's contribution and suggested that we



take a closer look at the school pledge. I took down our copy of the Peacekeeper's Pledge from the wall, and we read it together. This time, though, I encouraged students to read it slowly and thoughtfully, and to really think about the words, instead of just repeating them. The pledge read:

I am a Carver Elementary Peacekeeper.
I promise to be helpful, truthful, and kind.
I promise to respect my teachers, parents, and friends.
I promise to solve problems with my words.
I promise to always do my best.
You can put me to the test.
I am a Carver Elementary Peacekeeper.

After reading, my students shared some of their thoughts. Their comments were mostly positive, that these were good rules to follow and it's good to work hard and be kind to people. Some students were annoyed that they had to say so many pledges every morning, but no one had an issue with the content of the pledge.

I, on the other hand, was puzzling over how this school pledge, and others like it, prepare our students to engage with issues of injustice. How does promising to “respect our teachers, parents, and friends” prepare students to engage in local and global activism? And while being “helpful, truthful, and kind” are typically great character traits, what about situations in which kindness isn't enough? In the midst of police violence, white supremacy, and a violent presidency, the refrain “no justice, no peace” repeated in my head. How could

How could we ask students to promise to “keep the peace” in the midst of injustice?

we ask students to promise to “keep the peace” in the midst of injustice? This pledge did not push my students toward the justice orientation I hoped they would take up, nor did it provide them with tools for engaging in collective action.

So I pushed them further.

“I agree with you, I think these rules are helpful in a lot of ways,” I said. “I think it's good to be helpful and kind and to

do your best. But here's what I'm struggling with. I think the Peacekeeper's Pledge is great if we live in a 100 percent fair and just society. If peace already exists, we should definitely work to maintain it. But what do we do when the peace does not already exist? I'm not sure this pledge is very helpful in *making peace*.”

Internally, I had a vision of peace that was not congruent with the state of our country, and was especially incongruent with the realities of my Black and Brown students and their communities. When I think of “peace,” I think of contentment, tranquility, and a space void of conflict in which every person is free to be their authentic selves and to live in harmony with others. This vision of peace is what every community wants and deserves, but it is a utopia that is not a reality for marginalized and underserved communities. There is an underlying assumption of equal rights that is foundational to a peaceful society, and without justice, peace can only be a reality for those benefiting from the current system.

Our morning meeting time was limited, and on this first morning we didn't dive much deeper into the issue of the pledges and my wrestling with peace and justice. I had wanted to share my interest with my students, and to get them thinking critically about the words they were saying. But I knew that this would not be the end of our conversation around pledges, and I started making a plan to return to the topic. I wanted us to start thinking about what it might mean to get into trouble, “good trouble” as the late John Lewis so eloquently described it, for the sake of justice. A guiding question was coming into focus for me: What do we do when the peace does not already exist?

How did leaders like Nelson Mandela, Frederick Douglass, and Malcolm X fight for their communities' rights to live in a peaceful society in the midst of violence and oppression? For each of these individuals, and many more like them, fighting for their communities meant disrupting the “peace” that those in power already enjoyed. These individuals did not “keep the peace,” but rather, they actively disrupted the status quo, sometimes through engaging in violence. They did not fit the bill for “peacemakers,” and yet, their fights for justice pushed for marginalized communities to experience the peace and the privileges that those in power already enjoyed.

I went home that evening and began designing an exploration into peacekeepers and peacemakers. I searched through picture books and online resources, looking for historical and contemporary figures who worked to make peace when the peace “did not already exist.” I looked for women, people of color, and people historically pushed to the margins — people who had just reasons to break unfair rules.

Only in my second year of teaching, I didn't have a wealth of information and resources at my fingertips. I was dedicated to teaching toward social justice, and to help my

students learn counternarratives surrounding U.S. history, but as a product of the same school systems as my students, I had gaps in my own knowledge. With little variation, the pledges my students recited and the figures they learned about were the same pledges and the same historical figures I had learned about during my own schooling experiences. Seeking out figures who exemplified different kinds of citizenship, figures like the Freedom Riders or Claudette Colvin, who defied Montgomery's bus segregation before Rosa Parks' famous action, was not only a way to teach my students a more nuanced vision of history and current events, but I was also teaching myself.

After sorting through a selection of books, I created a text set highlighting figures I identified as peacemakers, people who got into "good trouble" for justice. The picture books from the text set illustrated the stories of historical and contemporary figures whose behavior did not exactly follow the rules laid forth by the Peacekeeper's Pledge. These were people who broke the rules when they were unjust, and who boldly stood up to power structures and authority figures. They were *peacemakers*.

I chose to begin our exploration by starting with a story I felt exemplified a fight for justice that required being more than a peacekeeper: *For the Right to Learn: Malala Yousafzai's Story* by Rebecca Ann Langston-George.

The next day, I gathered my 5th graders on the carpet. I reminded the class of the conversation we had begun the previous day, and I shared the new books that I had found. Showing my students the covers, I said, "These people might challenge the idea that following the rules is the same thing as being peaceful. As we read about Malala's story, I want you to keep the Peacekeeper's Pledge in your mind, and I want you to think about whether she is following the pledge or not."

I then read aloud *For the Right to Learn: Malala Yousafzai's Story*, pausing to think aloud or to invite students to turn and talk to a partner at specific parts.

Through our reading of this picture book, we learned about Malala's childhood in the Swat Valley of Pakistan, her love for her homeland, and her passion for learning. When the Taliban took over her city Mingora, women's rights were restricted, and young girls lost their right to an education. Malala bravely defied this ban on education. She continued to go to school and began publishing about life under Taliban rule using the pen name "Gul Makai." Malala defied unfair rules for the sake of justice and faced incredible violence from the Taliban as a result. Despite the violence she faced, including being shot, Malala has continued her activism and remains outspoken in the fight for women's education today.

After closing the book, I turned to the class: "So I wonder, if we agree that Malala wasn't being a peacekeeper in this book, what was she being? Was she being a troublemaker?"

"She wasn't a troublemaker! She did the right thing!" Jeremiah called out, steadfast in his conviction that Malala should not be branded with a negative label like troublemaker.

"She did get in trouble though," I argued. "She was even shot! That wouldn't have happened if she just followed the rules and obeyed the people in power."

Anahi chimed in: "I mean, yeah, she got in trouble, but she got in trouble for doing the right thing! She wasn't the troublemaker. She was brave."

"These people might challenge the idea that following the rules is the same thing as being peaceful."

"I agree that she did the right thing," I responded, "but she also kind of caused trouble, didn't she? She didn't really follow the Peacekeeper's Pledge. She didn't respect the adults who told her not to go to school. She was told not to and she did it anyway. That was disrespectful to the men who told her to stay home."

My students pondered the questions. I was complicating their understanding of what it meant to be "good," what it meant to be a peacekeeper. For years, they had been taught that being good was synonymous with following rules and obeying authority. Proposing that good people sometimes choose to get into trouble brought a new lens into our learning.

"So I wonder," I continued, "if she wasn't really being a peacekeeper, but if we don't think that troublemaker is the right word either, then maybe there's another category we haven't talked about. What do you think it might mean to be a peacemaker?" Rather than allowing students to come up with their own term for this category, I provided them with the label *peacemaker*. I wanted us to wrestle with what it meant to keep or maintain something, versus the difficult work required to *make* something.

I then drew a big T-chart on the whiteboard, and labeled the left side "peacekeepers" and the right side "peacemakers." Under peacekeepers, I wrote "keep the peace that already exists." "What else does the peacekeeper's pledge ask us to do?" I asked.

“Follow the rules!” Anahi responded, along with a chorus of agreement from her classmates. I wrote “follow the rules” under the criteria for peacekeepers.

“If a peacekeeper follows the rules, then what would a peacemaker do?” I wrote “create peace where it does not already exist” on the right-hand column and asked students to turn and talk to a partner before sharing their responses. Among the chatter, I overheard a disagreement between JJ and Sabrina, and asked them to share their dialogue with the class.

JJ shared, “If a peacekeeper follows the rules, then a peacemaker breaks them.”

“Not every time! You shouldn’t just go around breaking rules,” Sabrina responded.

“You both make really good points,” I chimed in. “I’m wondering if there’s a piece to this that we’re missing. Do you guys think that a peacemaker breaks the rules all the time, or?”

“I think a peacemaker breaks the rules if they’re not fair,” Joaquin jumped in.

I agreed with Joaquin that “if the rules are unfair” may be the important point we were missing, and the class agreed. I added “willing to break the rules when they are unjust” to our T-chart, and we continued our discussion. We eventually landed on three criteria for each.

PeaceKEEPERS

- keep the peace that already exists
- follow the rules
- respect authority

PeaceMAKERS

- create peace where it does not already exist
- willing to break rules when they are unjust
- willing to courageously stand up to authority for the sake of justice

Continuing the Work

After this initial read-aloud, we continued our exploration throughout the next few weeks. We read a picture book about John Lewis and analyzed his quote that inspired so much of this unit: “Get in trouble. Good trouble. Necessary trouble,” and students became familiar with the idea of “good trouble.”

Students read books on different figures, such as Claudette Colvin, the Freedom Riders, John Lewis, and Fred Korematsu, and created biographical posters of the figures, in which they described whether the figure they researched was a peacekeeper or a peacemaker, and why. We began to ask, “What kind of ‘good trouble’ did that person get into and why?”

While the curriculum began to transform as we centered peacemakers, we didn’t stop learning about peacekeepers, either. We learned about both side by side, and discussed the hard choices that people make in the face of oppression and discrimination.

In one instance, we read *Goin’ Someplace Special* by Patricia McKissack, a picture book included in our standardized curriculum. This book tells the story of a young Black girl who experiences multiple episodes of racism while on her way to the town library. In each instance, the young girl does not speak up or act out in response, and instead waits patiently to arrive at her favorite place, the library. Instead of just answering the comprehension questions provided by the curriculum, (which did not address the character’s responses to racism), we also talked about why this character chose *not* to make trouble in this moment, asking questions like “What was she risking? Who would be impacted by her actions? What did she have to gain or lose by her different responses?” We discussed her choices, the potential reasons behind her choices, and how the story would be different if she were acting as a peacemaker in the story instead.

At each point of our learning, I hoped to include the nuance that people can choose to be peacemakers in some situations, and peacekeepers in others. My intentions in teaching about peacemakers were not to teach students to disregard authority and to break all the rules. To the contrary, my intention was to teach students to think critically about when it is most fair and peaceful to obey and follow the rules, and when it is most fair and peaceful to break the rules or stand up to authority. I wanted my students to be able to think about a multitude of settings and conflicts, such as their own families and communities, the playground, our classroom, and the wider context of national and global conflict and injustice. I wanted them to think about the times when it is most appropriate to keep the peace, and when it was necessary to cause a little disruption. I wanted my students to be able to look at a photograph of Martin Luther King Jr. being hauled off to jail, and I wanted them to be able to have words to describe the kind of trouble he was getting into, and why it was worth it.

Bringing a New Lens into the Rest of the School Year

Our lesson on peacekeepers and peacemakers, which began with my own questioning of the pledges we ask students to recite each morning, became a lens that we used for the rest of the school year. In language arts, while we described characters as static or dynamic, flat or round, we also now described them as peacekeepers and peacemakers. During times of conflict, whether on the playground or in the news, we discussed the appropriateness and the cost of being a peacekeeper or a peacemaker in each situation.

Too often, we teach students that being good citizens means personal responsibility: follow the rules, help others when you can, obey your teachers and parents. It would then follow that bad citizens break the rules and disobey. This kind of binary thinking does not provide students with the tools necessary to think about activism and good trouble. My hope

is that by providing a framework of peacekeepers and peacemakers, my students can see that there are a wide variety of ways to be a good citizen, and sometimes being a good citizen means breaking a rule and disrupting the status quo.

As the school year came to a close, we gathered on our classroom carpet the way we had every morning since August. As we wrapped up our morning meeting, Joaquin looked at me, and said, “You know, Ms. Green, we’ve learned how to be peacemakers this year, but we still say the Peacekeeper’s Pledge in the cafeteria every morning. Can we rewrite it? Can we have a Peacemaker’s Pledge just for us?”

“I think that’s a brilliant idea, Joaquin,” I responded, along with a chorus of affirmation from his classmates.

I turned to my computer, hooked up to the document camera, and I shared an editable copy of the Peacekeeper’s Pledge. Keeping the spirit and cadence of the original pledge, line by line, we rewrote it together.

I am a Carver Elementary PeaceMAKER.

I promise to be bold, brave, just, and compassionate.

I promise to seek truth, justice, and liberation for all people.

I promise to create peace where it does not already exist.

I promise to always stand up for what is right,

I am a Carver Elementary PeaceMAKER.

The Peacemaker’s Pledge lived only in our classroom, as our larger school community continued to support the recitation of the Peacekeeper’s Pledge, despite my critiques. We didn’t enact a schoolwide change, but we challenged our own ways of thinking, and brought the spirit of peacemaking into our classroom and our approach to living in community with each other.

Rewriting the pledge had not been my original intention, and in hindsight, I wonder about the usefulness of pledges altogether. Although I do believe the Peacemaker’s Pledge held much more meaning to my students as the creators of the pledge, I wonder what we, both adults and children alike, accomplish by reciting any kind of a pledge.

As is typical with any lesson or any school year, I didn’t end with all the answers. I still question pledges, and I still feel conflicted about reciting them. Despite the internal conflict, I do hold tight to two things, both of which we strived for during this unit: the value of opening up space for students to question what is asked of them, and the value of providing students with the tools to advocate for change. ●



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The Day of Silence: Queer Kids, Conservative Kids, and the Silences Within and Between Them

BY ANNA MCMAKEN-MARSH

Anna McMaken-Marsh (amarshblog.wordpress.com) has taught in both private and public middle schools for 25 years. She lives with her wife and children in Arlington, Massachusetts.

Illustrator Ebin Lee's work can be seen at ebinlee.xyz.

My heart is heavy after this year's Day of Silence. It's a complicated sadness; I don't feel my familiar righteousness or sense of direction in the face of homophobia. My mind is a puzzle and a knot. When students who are marginalized because of language and culture become silenced by classroom talk to support students who are marginalized because of their gender and sexual identities, what can I do? How can I bridge that silence?

My school district, in a medium-sized university town, holds a diverse mix of families. About 40 percent of our families are white; they are often liberal and wealthy; 60 percent are families of color. My school serves many East African and South Asian immigrant families from Somalia, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh, who often live in subsidized housing. My work as a white, anti-racist teacher centers around creating



EBIN LEE



welcoming and safe spaces for students with different cultural perspectives. I structure my 6th-grade English classes around sharing stories and examining racism. I want my classroom to be a place where all my students are seen and feel heard — not just by me, but by one another.

In the early 2000s, even in our liberal community, it was not an easy decision to be open as a lesbian in the classroom, although the district was supportive. I wondered about students whose fam-

a Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) group as well. Sometimes it was just rainbow cookies and unicorn bonding. Sometimes it was anger and frustration about gym teachers who divided class into boys and girls. Sometimes it was shy questions and new vocabulary.

The GSA planned and organized our yearly participation in the [National Day of Silence](#). This day, organized in more than 3,000 schools around the country, invites students to be silent for a day in order to raise awareness about homopho-

students heard the phrase “that’s so gay” today, this week, this month, fewer and fewer students raised their hands. It was as if it had become uncool to use homophobic slurs. Over the years, more students began to share their queer identities. More students explored their gender identity and pronoun use.

Despite these cultural and school-based shifts, there were places that continued to feel like a knot of intersecting issues. Although my school is more than 50 percent students of color, the GSA has often been unbalanced in terms of race and religion. Students from white upper-middle class families seemed to feel more free to explore their identities than students from strict Muslim or Christian families. White kids from liberal families still described feeling marginalized and frightened about their sexual and gender identities, but it was not comparable to the challenges described by queer students whose identities were affected by multiple forms of oppression — not just homophobia within their religious communities, but racism within the school and GSA community.

For example, a Black trans student from Somalia struggled with his family, but he also struggled with a mainly white GSA that didn’t mirror his experience. “The GSA needs to work on its racism,” he shared in a meeting one day. A boy whose favorite activity was designing and sewing dresses with his grandmother looked at me with hesitation when I asked him if he wanted to

“I like my teacher. I like my religion. My teacher is gay. My religion says gay is bad.”

ilies and cultures were less accepting of gay and lesbian issues — I had both Christian and Muslim families, mainly immigrants, who grounded their family values in religious communities that held cultural, language, and gender role expectations that were deeply important to them. Although many of our values overlapped, acceptance of LGBTQ+ people was often explicitly disallowed.

I shared about my family with students, often through modeling writing tasks, or work about identity, and I led

bia and transphobia in schools. Year after year, students were surprised to find two-thirds of their classmates choosing to participate. The GSA visited homerooms, worked sign-up tables, and participated in the assembly to launch the day. The conversations, mostly between students, opened new understandings. They created a sense that many people believed in LGBTQ+ rights. Many people wanted to be supportive. Students often commented that they felt the tone shift after the Day of Silence. When I asked how many

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participate in the Day of Silence. “I . . . don’t think my dad would like that very much.” I pictured his loving father, who sacrificed so much to immigrate and raise Davide in the United States, and remembered the comments of colleagues at my school who shared his background and expectations around gender, saying that he needed to be more masculine, suggesting that within his family and cultural context, he would need to live a straight and cisgendered life.

“Davide, you don’t have to participate. This is a totally optional activity,” I said gently. Thinking for a moment, I added, “One thing I do know about your dad, though, is that he is an incredibly kind and loving person. Your religion teaches a lot about love and respect.” Davide nodded. “To me, this day is about respecting all kinds of people.” I don’t know if Davide’s dad would have agreed with me, but Davide decided to participate as an ally — he wore a sticker to support the day, although he didn’t try to be silent.

Are 6th graders ready for this kind of tension? They are beginning to see that more than one thing can be true at the same time even when those things seem to be in conflict. “I like my teacher. I like my religion. My teacher is gay. My religion says gay is bad.” Wheels within wheels. *The big wheel runs by faith, and the little wheel runs by the grace of God.* I love that line from the African American spiritual, partly because I don’t understand it entirely. I don’t think it is wrong to expose students to ideas they can’t square up yet. Kofi, an Ethiopian student, shared in class one day, “I support LGBTQ rights. My religion — well, my family isn’t very religious, my dad is Muslim and my mom is Christian, but it’s complicated — says it’s not for me, like we’re not supposed to be gay. But I want to support my friends who are LGBTQ. I think that’s important.” His ability to hold several complicated stories at one time is a sign of his social flexibility. He, like many of my students, is good at living in multiple worlds.

My Muslim colleague speaks with empathy for both LGBTQ+ people and her child, who is still stuck on the idea of gayness as haram. She says, “He doesn’t understand yet. He sees only one truth. As an adult, I know, I can see how complicated it is. If a group of people are praying in congregation and the one leading the prayer happens to be gay then their prayer is still accepted, even if they aren’t open about it. The whole concept is that it is not our job to search behind people’s private lives. Also, we should not

then backs off of their decision. One student active in his Ethiopian Christian church asks me if I want him to pray for me. “Sure! Can I pray for you, too?” I ask. “Anna, you can’t! You know lesbians can’t be Christian.” “Well, they can in my church,” I respond, but he is off on another tangent.

The wider political context weighs on queer students and immigrant students in ways both similar and different. Things feel less safe. Saturated in online chat rooms throughout the pandem-

Slurs come easily to students during recess and hallway conversations, and sometimes my voice lands like a Charlie Brown adult.

question their choices. I know there are many ways to be Muslim. But he can’t see that yet.” Another colleague speaks about “Lakum deenukum waliya deen,” a verse from the Quran she interprets as “Everyone has their own choices.”

This year, post-remote school and a year online, things feel a lot harder.

This year, I have heard homophobic slurs every day. The divisions between my queer students and my conservative students have become open and hurtful. A recent Haitian immigrant is first shocked, then disgusted, then verbally violent toward a nonbinary teacher. A white trans girl carries a giant rainbow flag through the halls, and a physical fight breaks out as an 8th grader tries to take it from her, shouting f-slurs. My own homeroom group is challenging. I hear six Muslim students quietly talk about how it is “haram.” One of them asks us to use they/them pronouns, and

ic, slurs come easily to students during recess and hallway conversations, and sometimes my voice lands like a Charlie Brown adult. “That hurts!” “Please don’t say that.” “Do you know where the f-slur comes from?” “Stop.” “Stop!” “Stop!” None of my words seem to work.

As in other years, I share about my wife and our children as we discuss identity. I share more in the fiction writing unit, where I ask students to write about social issues that touch their lives. I write a story based on my daughter’s experience, about a girl who doesn’t know how to tell her new classmates about her two moms. When we discuss credible resolutions, the students shrug and shake their heads. They glumly come to consensus: There is no realistic way for a kid to get other kids to stop saying “That’s so gay.” The only credible situation is one in which everyone feels really awkward.

I listen to them and I want to tell

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2. In-county by mail, per PS Form 3541	0	0
3. Mailed at other classes through the USPS	344	359
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them a different story. But they are writing the story with their lives. The changes of the early 2000s are not the changes they are feeling.

When we organized the Day of Silence in the GSA this year, students had worries. "What if you are being silent, but other kids try to make fun of you?" "What if it causes kids to be *more* homophobic?" "What if it doesn't make a difference at all?" But, calmed by the activity of making rainbow-laden posters, they moved forward. They designed a slideshow to explain the day and rehearsed their presentations. They worked the sign-up table, where some students created signs they held up for a photo: "I am silent because I want to support my friends." "I am silent because I believe in LGBTQ rights." "I am silent because I am nonbinary and it's awesome!"

On the Day of Silence, like in past years, two-thirds of the students participated as allies or silent participants. At the end of the day, we met in homerooms to talk. Students in my homeroom were quiet.

"What did the Day of Silence make you think about? What did you notice today?" I asked, like I do every year.

"I don't know," they answered, one by one. "Nothing."

"Pass," said a Muslim student. Earlier in the week, as students from the GSA had presented, he had carefully covered his ears to block their story. "I can't listen," he said. "I'm not allowed."

I felt this disconnect deep in my body. Probably because it touches my life so closely. But also because I feel the conflict on both sides. The messages from families telling their children not to listen to LGBTQ+ stories hurts. But the separation between me and these particular students of color hurts as well. I think about a popular advice columnist who is quick to tell people to cut off their family if they don't support their sexual or gender identities. And I think of a colleague who interrupts me with a blanket "There is *no* place for homophobia" when I describe the struggles of a

religious student to support queer issues. I understand her desire to fully affirm LGBTQ+ people, but I think of my own experiences, the time it took for my family and my friends' families to come to new awareness and support. I remember my step-grandfather who started out telling my wife and me that he would come to our 'Celebration' (what we called our 'Wedding') but that we couldn't be a family, and who, three years later, was claiming great-grandfather status of our newly born daughter. Homophobia lives in all of us and permeates the society we live in. Like racism, it is not something you can bar at the door, not something that can be outlawed. It is something we have to allow into the conversation *in order to transform it*. It takes time, and stories, and love. It takes strategic and thoughtful action.

Watching my students, the queer ones and the religiously conservative ones, the ones who are both queer *and* religious, I felt the silence heavily. The silence of disconnection. The silence of students stuck between worlds. The silence of being different.

What does it mean to be silenced? Who is being silenced in these conversations — queer students? Conservative religious students? Immigrant students? White students? This moment of silence, at the end of the Day of Silence, reminds me that the fight for justice is not always — not ever — a clear and uncomplicated story.

Intersectionality is no buzzword. It means that being queer and white carries a different set of consequences for me, in this cultural moment, than being queer and Black, or queer and Asian. It means that I need to think about my assumptions about LGBTQ+ rights with a continuous awareness of how my connection to power, safety, and cultural capital affect my claiming of those rights. When my in-laws decided to leave the Catholic Church, after years of working within the church to expand acceptance for LGBTQ+ people, they were still in the cultural majority — able to shift

communities without loss of language, history, and home.

I was careful to reach out to my conservative religious students in the week following the Day of Silence. I'm still here. I'm still your teacher. I still want to connect with you. Your story matters, and your voice can be heard. But I also mentioned my wife. I also shared about some great books with trans characters. We can listen to one another's stories. We do not need to be silent.

In the GSA, after the Day of Silence, I asked the students to celebrate something from the day.

"I want to celebrate all the kids who participated. There were a lot!"

"I want to shout out my homeroom. In the fall, when I shared my pronouns, they were like 'huh?' but now, six months later, I feel like they really are engaged. They ask questions and have opinions. Like, they needed more information to get comfortable."

"I guess I want to celebrate that even though it isn't consistent with the theme of silence, I decided to honor the day by talking to my dad about being nonbinary for the first time. It went well!" We cheered.

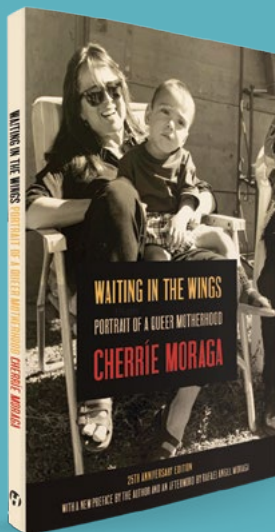
"I want to celebrate a kid in my advisory. After the Day of Silence he asked if he could ask about my identity. I never thought he'd want to talk about these ideas, like, really *talk*. We all know the kinds of things he says in the hallways. But he was actually really cool about it. He listened to my stories about my cousin, and we just connected about it all."

Their words lift my sadness, even as I read the news from Florida and Texas about banning queerness from classrooms. I have seen transformation, again and again. Fighting all kinds of injustice takes time and work and endless patience. I know that being a strong and open lesbian teacher makes a difference to students struggling with their own

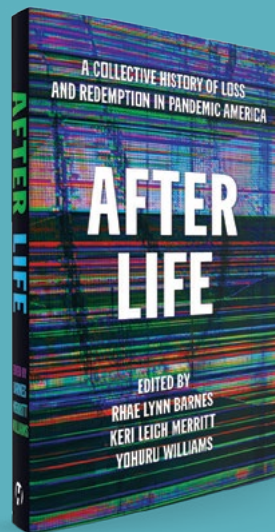
identity. I know that having all teachers, no matter their identity, address LGBTQ+ history, literature, and activism throughout the curriculum makes a difference. I know having time to think and process helps all students understand the commonalities as well as the spaces between us.

One student reflected in class, "I like that we can all believe different things, and we can still have conversations about it. We can still respect one another."

All I can do is commit to having the conversations. All I can do is bring it up, listen, and use connection to bridge the silence. ●



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UNMASKING PATRIARCHY

Analyzing texts to identify oppression with high school students

BY FAYETTE H. COLÓN AND FRANKEE GROVE

Aridia, a 9th grader, sat in the front of the class as she led an analysis of the poem “Unhide-able” from *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo. She asked, “Do you have any evidence that connects to the cycle of oppression?”

Guilia responded, “When the other girls call her a ‘ho,’ that is internalized oppression. . . . The girls have been oppressed and then they internalized that and projected it onto other women.”

“So you think that when she hears that she starts to believe it?” Aridia asked.

Guilia replied, “Yes, the other girls probably got called that too.”

Michael added, “Her being ‘thick’ builds the stereotype that she’s a ‘ho’ and people make assumptions about who she is. This leads to discrimination or oppression because they say bad things to her that make her want to use her fists, and it’s all a cycle.”

Our 9th- and 10th-grade students in this co-taught introductory gender studies course at Harvest Collegiate High School in New York City were not strangers to patriarchy and oppression. In fact, the course came about after a group of young women distraught by their experiences with sexual harassment at school sought counsel from Fayette Colón and Jessica Jean-Marie, two teacher confidants. After discussions and listening to students’ stories, the students requested a course be added to the curriculum on the importance of feminism. Fayette and Jessica took this request to the principal, Kate Burch, and Engendering Gender was born. Several years later, we, Frankee Grove, a special education teacher, and Fayette, a social studies teacher, worked together to grow this course.

Our students came from all five boroughs and a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds with 67 percent of students categorized as “economically disadvantaged” and 29 percent students with disabilities.

Students could take an advanced course on feminism in the 11th and 12th grade so we focused our Engendering Gender curriculum on topics we thought were foundational to understanding feminism. We wanted students to understand how patriarchy functions and how it connects to the feminist movement as well as homophobia and

transphobia through these overarching questions:

- How do individual attitudes, institutions, and social norms/cultural traditions allow patriarchy to function within our society?
- To what extent do gender stereotypes allow or prevent us from being our true selves?
- How does patriarchy contribute to homophobia and transphobia?

Our goal was to provide students the tools to unmask oppression in their own lives, within popular culture, and within texts.

Developing Working Definitions

As Faye often told students, to dismantle oppressive systems we need to name the oppression. Historically oppressors limit knowledge so the people they oppress cannot identify let alone discuss their oppression.

Throughout the course we engaged in activities to allow students to develop working definitions of core vocabulary. We called them “working definitions” because we wanted students to know that these terms could be edited and re-defined as we continued to learn more.

Given that patriarchy is a form of oppression, we thought it was important for students to understand the cyclical nature of oppression. Oppression is complex and manifests itself differently in different societies and at different points in history. The oppression of enslavement is not the oppression of the U.S. invasion of Vietnam, which is not the oppression of South African apartheid.

To understand gender oppression, we first had students think about their own connections and create definitions for key terms: oppression, stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, and internalized oppression. We divided students into pairs and gave them one of the five words and chart paper. Students wrote their assigned word in the center. Then they responded to questions: What do these words mean to you? How are you connected to these words? What is your experience with these words? What are examples that can help us understand these words? What questions do you have?

After completing their own, students rotated to a new chart paper to engage with each word. Most students could describe their experiences with stereotypes. Although not the case with every Latinx student, several young Latinx women described the prevalence of machismo — the stereotype that men should be more dominant than women — in their household. As we expected, many students had a harder time vocalizing their connection with oppression and internalized oppression. Even though we knew this was possible, it was helpful to see what students already thought they knew about these words without the pressure of deconstructing text.

The next day, each pair returned to their original assigned vocabulary word.

We gave students a definition using a variety of scholarly sources and then asked them to create their own definition. We encouraged students to provide an example for each word using comments from the previous class discussion. Then we came together as a class to develop definitions. In one class, students defined oppression as:

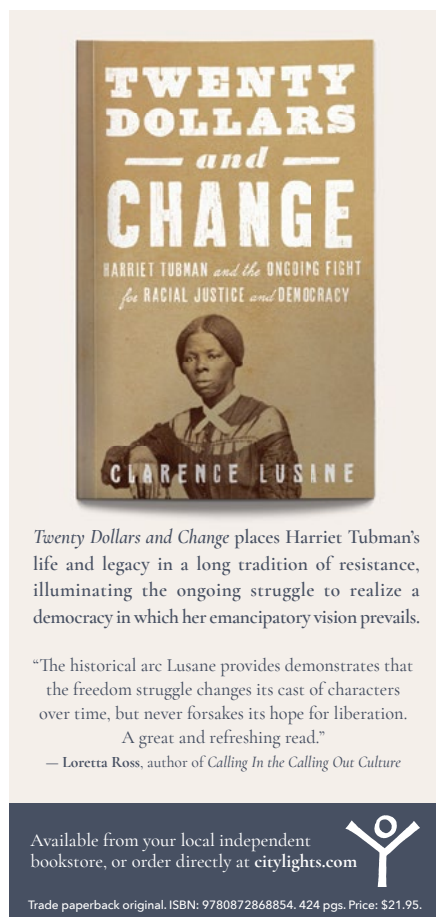
Harm being done to one group by another group. One group is privileged while the other doesn't receive the same beneficial opportunities. Oppression reduces the potential for oppressed groups to be fully human. Within oppression a certain group benefits from social power and disadvantaged groups are seen as less human. In addition, oppression has to do with the institutions (laws/government, schools) that are put in place that allow oppression to exist.

We compiled the definitions that students received the following day. Then, with students in mixed groups, we gave them a circle with a space for each of the five words and asked them to think about how the words were connected in a cycle — how these ideas help oppression persist.

“Where do you see oppression beginning? How does it flow?” we asked.

Some students argued the cycle began with stereotypes because these inform the prejudices people have about particular social groups. Then discrimination, oppression, and internalized oppression occur. Students acknowledged that internalized oppression is connected to stereotypes and cements the cycle because people then perpetuate stereotypes about their groups. One student said, “Internalized oppression happens when women blame themselves or blame the victim for sexual harassment.”

Faye made her own iteration of a cycle of oppression and shared it with the class.



“I am reading a book, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* by Dr. Ibram Kendi. His writing reinforced the notion that oppression is not just ideas, but begins with people having a stake in exploiting others and needing an ideology to justify the exploitation. For this reason, I would place oppression at the beginning of the cycle.”

We also asked students to think about how the cycle of oppression connects to patriarchy. We believe these lessons defining terms were integral to students’ ability to have complex literary analysis discussions.

Analyzing Texts

Another key activity was weekly text analysis discussions. We wanted students to see how they could use a feminist lens to analyze the world. Each week we selected a current popular song, TV commercial, or young adult reading. Texts we analyzed include “If I Were a Boy” by Beyoncé, “The Best Men Can Be” 2019 Gillette commercial, “*Mom, I’m Not a Girl*”: *Raising a Transgender Child* Cosmopolitan YouTube, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED Talk “We Should All Be Feminists,” and excerpts from *Milk and Honey* by Rupi Kaur. Students often recommended texts.

Toward the beginning of the course, we read the poem “After” from [The Poet X](#) by [Elizabeth Acevedo](#), which had been recommended by a student (see Resource). Acevedo grew up in Harlem and attended a nearby high school in Manhattan. Many students were drawn to Acevedo’s work because they saw their lives in her poems.

Frankee began: “The reason we do these poems is to practice two habits, Habits of Evidence, selecting evidence and close reading, and Habit of Perspective, which is claims and reasons. You practice these habits when you annotate these poems, when you share in your turn-and-talk, and when you share with the class.”

To help students make connections

to the course’s essential questions and build literary analysis skills, we photocopied prompts onto each text. The prompts included: “Circle three stand-out words and explain why you chose them. Why does each word stand out to you?” “Underline two feeling words and explain why you chose them. How does each word make you feel?” “Box one summary word and explain why you chose it. How does this word capture the essence of the poem for you?” “Make a connection to the parts of patriarchy, privilege, or gender stereotypes.”

After students received a copy of the poem, Frankee said, “Remember, the purpose of the first read is to listen and then on the second, make at least one annotation on every stanza and use the suggested prompts.” A student volunteered to read the poem aloud. Here is an excerpt:

It happens when I’m at the bodegas.
It happens when I’m at school.

It happens when I’m on the train.
It happens when I’m standing
on the platform.
It happens when I’m sitting on the
stoop.

...

I should be used to it.
I shouldn’t get so angry
when boys — and sometimes
grown-ass men —
talk to me however they want

...

Frankee pointed to the question written on the whiteboard. “How does this text uphold or challenge gender stereotypes?” Students filled the poem’s margins with annotations as Frankee read the poem a second time.

After several minutes Frankee said, “Turn and talk to your table partner for two minutes about one thing you noticed in this poem.” We assigned seats in our class strategically so that table partners

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were composed of mixed-ability pairs. As students shared their thoughts, we each visited two or three pairs of students, and listened or prompted them to think more deeply: “Can you explain why you circled those words?”

Then Frankee brought the class back together: “As you read this poem, what did you notice?” Faye circulated the room and whispered to a student, “I loved your analysis of the repetition of ‘It happens when.’ Please share in the discussion.”

Simply talking about patriarchal ideas seemed to shift students’ thinking.

Students began sharing cautiously; their thoughts gradually deepened as they built upon each other’s ideas.

For example, Zuri said: “I would like to add on to what Kenya said about the line ‘It happens when I forget to be on guard.’ I thought maybe that has to do with self-blame.”

“Great,” Frankee said. “Can you say more about that?”

“Like bad things can’t happen if she is more aware of herself,” responded Zuri.

“Can someone make a connection between that and the posters you made on the cycle of oppression?” Frankee asked, as she recorded students’ ideas on the poem projected with the document camera. “How does it connect to stereotypes, oppression, prejudice, discrimination, or internalized oppression?”

“This is like internalized oppression,” Elizabeth responded.

“Can you say more about how?” Frankee asked. “Because internalized is like she is oppressing herself.”

“She is going against herself by saying it’s all her fault and that idea is reinforced with the repetition of ‘I’m’ and ‘I.’ It is like she is taking responsibility for the action and not the men,” Amaya said.

“And not just there but also in the last paragraph.”

“Elizabeth pointed out internalized oppression and Amaya pointed out the repetition. So great! That’s the first literary device I’ve heard so far, repetition,” said Frankee. “Amaya, I like that you added the function of the repetition. She didn’t just say that ‘I’m’ repeats but also explained why repetition is significant.”

“When she says ‘I should be used to it’ she is making it sound like it is OK

for men to harass her yet she is still surprised,” added Janet. “It is almost like it is a social norm for guys to be able to harass girls.”

To help students see the connection between their ideas and those of the class, Frankee said, “So we see social norms as one of the parts of patriarchy playing out here.”

The weekly text analysis allowed us to pre-teach annotation, literary analysis, and discussion skills required to have meaningful seminar discussions.

Seminar Discussions

Throughout this course we talked about how patriarchy impacts everyone, and about how it specifically impacts the LGBTQIA+ community. The course ended with a student-led seminar focusing on how patriarchy connects to homophobia. As a scaffold, Frankee and Faye led an in-class reading and analysis of “Every Shade of Red,” a short story by Elliot Wake from the anthology *All Out: The No-Longer Secret Stories of Queer Teens Throughout the Ages* edited by Sandra Mitchell. “Every Shade of Red” is written by a transgender author and is a version of the fairytale Robin Hood

with all queer characters where Robin is transgender.

To prepare, students completed a four-page graphic organizer. First, they chose one of two possible seminar questions: How does patriarchy connect to homophobia? To what extent do gender stereotypes allow or prevent us from being our true selves? Then students summarized the story, answered their question, found evidence to support their response, and analyzed how the author’s use of literary devices helped answer their question. Lastly, students made connections to the overarching concepts — gender roles, gender stereotypes, patriarchy, intersectionality, the cycle of oppression — and chose a quote to discuss.

Surprisingly, in both sections we taught, students focused on the same two sentences. Two characters, Will and Tuck, talked about the benefits and disadvantages of lesbian and gay couples within society. Tuck says to Will: “Women who are lovers aren’t looked at with revulsion. . . . Women are seen as less than men. That’s why they’re permitted indulgences — they’re pretty pets.”

Faye asked students, “What words stand out to you?”

Kenneth responded, “What does ‘permitted indulgences’ denote?” Faye threw it back to the class.

“It denotes a guilty pleasure,” Liana responded.

“So what does the narrator mean when they say women are ‘permitted indulgences’?” asked Faye.

Jessica responded, “Well, the word permitted denotes to be allowed, so I think this is saying that women are allowed to be lesbians. It is subliminally saying that women are not viewed as negatively as gay men.”

“It’s like Will wishes he was a lesbian because they are not as oppressed as gay men,” Ben added.

“How does this connect with patriarchy?” Faye asked.

“This connects to ideas about patriarchy,” said Elizabeth, “because women are seen as inferior to men so they are

allowed to be desired, or to satisfy a more superior human being. Because women are over-objectified as sexual objects, and are always seen as a sexual symbol it is accepted for them to be together, or to want to be together.”

Later, during the seminar, a fishbowl discussion, we asked students on the outside of the circle to record at least three student comments and their own response on a graphic organizer.

We assigned students inside the fishbowl other roles: discussion-pusher, evidence-checker, question-poser, and connection-maker. We gave each role corresponding scaffolds. For example, scaffolds for the connection-maker included: How does what (student name) said connect with patriarchy? Who can add onto (student’s name) point?

At the start of the seminar, Storm, in the center of the fishbowl circle, asked, “How does patriarchy connect to homophobia? I’m not really getting that.”

“I think patriarchy contributes to homophobia because when society follows what powerful men say, when you come out as gay, you are going to be punished for it in some way,” Aisha responded. “In the story, when Will’s father punished his lover, it shows how men are just so powerful that they brain-wash people into thinking that if you’re gay, you’re bad.”

“I think that some gay men have feminine traits and they think, well, this man has feminine traits and therefore he is less than a man because he acts like a woman,” Gina said.

Malik responded, “I agree with Gina that in this version of society women are treated as less than men. It’s also connected to how Robin was seen as less than everybody else, men and women, because he was gay and transgender. When you have two things going against you, it makes it a lot harder to be who you are, even though you are trying to be who you are.”

Eventually students used their text analyses and seminar discussions to write literary analysis essays.

In one discussion, Malik talked about how his father’s expectations of how a man should act impacted his mental health. Malik felt pressured to fit into this gender box. He shared that suppressing his emotions made him angry and depressed during middle school. But through conversations with his mother, a therapist, and our class, he was beginning to heal from the harm these expectations created.

Simply talking about patriarchal ideas seemed to shift students’ thinking. One unplanned discussion was a heated student-driven debate on whether it has the same implications when a man or a woman uses the word “bitch” toward a woman. Students used examples from their own lives and course readings, made comparisons between other denigrating words, and wove power, privilege, race, and the cycle of oppression into the conversation. They changed each other’s minds on this word so casually tossed around in the hallways and on social media. On the last day of class, Brian, who entered class skeptical of the content, reflected in a fishbowl discussion that he decided he would no longer use “bitch” and explained his thinking.

In the final unit we asked students to create a product bringing awareness to a topic we discussed in class. Some students chose to write children’s books, others created poems, while others made Instagram accounts. In the future, we will ask students to consider ways we can — and may already — resist and abolish patriarchal oppression and envision a post-patriarchal future.

Not every teacher is comfortable with nor has the privilege to talk in class about feminism, gender, homophobia, and transgender experiences. But to not have these conversations denies the experiences of the people we teach. Having conversations about patriarchy and its impact on individuals is one step toward dismantling it. ●

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Rethinking the Inclusive Classroom

BY MELISSA WINCHELL, KAREN ALVES, AND EMILY MESSINA

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Part 1: **Making My Child's District More Inclusive for Neurodiverse Students** **by Melissa Winchell**

Twelve years ago, my family's small, suburban school district claimed to be fully inclusive for students with disabilities, a hopeful promise for us as new residents there. Finding an inclusive district was important to us; our teenage son had an intellectual disability and our baby daughter had been diagnosed with Down syndrome. But we soon discovered that the district had a strange idea about what "inclusive" meant; for them, inclusion meant that their schools had no substantially separate classrooms.

In truth, the district was not inclusive; it generated an excess of out of district placements for autism spectrum disorder and intellectually disabled/developmentally disabled students. Many of its neurodiverse students were being educated in nearby, larger districts or in collaborative programs. Although some of these out of district placements were justified, many of the placements would not have occurred, or could have been delayed, had there been districtwide inclusive programs and pedagogies.

As a former urban public school teacher, a professor of education at a state university, and co-founder of a nonprofit

advocating with families with children with disabilities, I knew our district was not alone in its lack of awareness about inclusion. Too often, out of district placement becomes a perpetual cycle; because students are educated outside their district's public schools, there isn't a catalyst for a district's mindsets and pedagogies to change.

I had dreams of inclusion for my daughter and for our district. But as my daughter progressed through the school district, I was confronted again and again by the medical model of disability — an incomplete belief that disability is a diagnosis of impairment. Some well-intentioned teachers hoped to use strategies to modify or correct what they understood to be her deficiencies. But approaching my daughter's multiple disabilities as problems needing to be fixed or remediated proved ineffective and harmful.

Instead, my child thrived with teachers who understood her disabilities, which include Down syndrome, autism, anxiety, and ADHD, as opportunities to make their classrooms and schools more inclusive. For these teachers, my daughter was disabled not by her diagnoses, but by the many ways in which their schools, curriculum, and classrooms restricted her development. This social model of disability — in which disability is caused by the barriers that deny



disabled students access to learning and a meaningful life — generates new ways of thinking about inclusion.

As special education directors came and went, I cheered along districtwide changes — like professional development for teachers on co-teaching, which holds promise for inclusive classrooms — and supported teachers as they piloted new pedagogies and practices. I offered advice as the district created a learning center program for classroom-based therapies and interventions. I served on search committees as our district hired its own therapists, like an occupational therapist and an adapted physical educator, and I connected the district with a professional developer who could offer inclusion training for secondary teachers.

My daughter is now 12. She is the first student with Down syndrome the district has educated, remaining in her hometown's schools longer than we anticipated. Thanks to the progress the district has made since my family

arrived, she is included in our district's 6th grade and loves school. The best of her teachers have designed curricula centered on her interests — like baking — and collaborated with our family to presume her competence, remove barriers to her inclusion in after-school programs and school sports, and adapt their school schedules to her needs for rest and play. Together these teachers and I have found what we all know to be true about disability justice: When we make our schools accessible for one student, everyone benefits.

In the next sections, two teachers in my daughter's school district share their practices with including students with disabilities. With an understanding that the true disability is inaccessibility in schools, they seek to change their classrooms and not their students with disabilities. Their efforts are messy, incomplete, and ongoing; in other words, the slow and fraught efforts of social justice education.

Part 2:

Flexible Seating by Karen Alves

During my first 10 years of teaching in an inclusive classroom I encountered one issue year after year after year — students who could not sit still. I started to wonder what would happen if they didn't have to. Would they be more productive overall throughout the school day? Would they listen more? I was determined to find out.

So, I went to my then principal and explained my concerns to her. Lucky for me she was open to my new ideas and anything she could call a "pilot." She asked me to come up with my exact plan. I set to work in early November designing my new classroom on paper — a high table that kids could stand at, a lower table where kids could kneel on pillows, bean bag chairs to provide some sensory movement, pillows and blankets tucked into a corner under a canopy for

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kids who felt more comfortable in a tight spot, couches for kids who needed to spread out. When I brought my design to my principal she approved it under one condition — the school would not help pay for any of the furniture. I agreed and we planned a start day for the day we came back from winter break.

My second step was to find the items I needed and to let the students and parents know what my plan was. I turned to Facebook to find suitable items. Within 24 hours of posting, parents in our predominantly white suburban town, as well as family and friends of mine, donated rugs, pillows, chairs, yoga balls, and more. Some bought brand-new items while others donated things in their homes they were willing to part with. I began to talk to my students and their parents about flexible seating and what it meant for our class. I even showed them a video of a class already using it. They seemed excited and I could not wait for winter break, when I could rid my room of desks.

As our holiday break approached, my excitement, although still alive and well, turned to concern. My concern was for Tommy. Tommy was autistic and suffered from anxiety. He had been doing really well in my class but seemed concerned about flexible seating. He asked lots of questions: “Where will I sit each day?” “Will other people be using my crayons?” “How will I know which books are mine?” I tried to answer these questions the best I could, but his worry did not seem to subside and his daily questions continued.

As a teacher of an inclusive classroom I am more than familiar with the old phrase “The best laid plans . . .” — lessons that end up being loud and scary for some students, moments when students just won’t do what’s planned, or days when we clearly didn’t see just how wrong an activity could go. But flexible seating had become my baby; I couldn’t give up on it just yet. So I went back to my drawings — back to the sofas and chairs and pillows and rugs — and right in the

middle I added three desks, one with a nametag. And for the next three days I made sure to let Tommy know that the classroom was going to be changing, but his desk in the middle of the room would remain his spot. By the time break came I had (almost) convinced him that his spot would be there when he returned.

And it was. Our new room was full of all types of new items. Students used clipboards and could sit where they worked best. At first, of course, kids raced to the places that looked most fun. Eventually though, kids realized they didn’t work great on the couch because it was too squishy, or they liked to be on their stomach on the cold floor for testing. Students who had trouble sitting chose to stand at a table or kneel on pillows. My students were getting to know themselves as learners, at the ripe old age of 8.

Tommy came in every day and went to the desk with his name on it. Other students knew and understood that his desk was off-limits. But he was watching kids on sofas, on yoga balls, on pillows, or standing at a table, holding clipboards and sharing materials from the class bins. And after two weeks of watching, he joined. One morning I came into the room to find Tommy on a green yoga ball with a clipboard. My heart was overjoyed that he felt safe enough to try it. I smiled at him and he smiled back. Still grinning, he pointed to his desk in the middle of the room and said, “But that’s still my spot!” And it was.

Part 3: **Healing Circles** **by Emily Messina**

When I entered my second year of teaching, I was fearful of being a regular education teacher with many students with IEPs in my 1st-grade classroom. Although the year was full of many successful moments, it was also overwhelming. I was not used to spending so much of my planning time meeting with team

members, reviewing behavioral and academic data, and attending IEP meetings. I felt like I was only scratching the surface of what I thought it would feel like to teach in an inclusive classroom.

In my mind I was spending too much time talking about students and not talking with my students. I allowed this frustration to help me rethink the way I used class time, and began spending more time building trusting relationships and incorporating social-emotional learning practices into my work with my students. I allocated time every week to activities centered around getting to know my students. My planning time was re-centered around creating materials based on individual interests, finding diverse stories to read, and participating in music, art, and other specialists’ classes alongside my students.

My students may be little, but that does not mean their emotions are. We spent many days and lessons practicing identifying our emotions, naming them, and determining what caused them. Eventually I implemented healing circles to create a safe place for students to express their feelings to peers, and for me to express my feelings to them.

A healing circle is where members of our classroom community sit together and share thoughts as a way to repair relationships. We use healing circles in my classroom whenever there is a behavior that causes harm to our relationships. This is something I first learned about through a classroom management program created by the Active Educator. When children have an outlet, they are more likely to understand their own feelings and have empathy toward others.

One afternoon Tyler was sharing a special moment with a friend. Tyler has autism and often had difficulty relating to peers and managing his big emotions. On this day, Tyler and Jake had a disagreement over which game to play at recess. Tyler became upset with Jake but was struggling to find a way to address it with him. He began to lash out, saying hurtful phrases and destroying Jake’s

work. Tyler became so overwhelmed by the “fight with [his] best friend” that he began to engage in other disruptive behaviors that the team felt it necessary for him to take a break in our sensory room.

As things in the classroom settled back down, Jake asked if he could talk to me about what happened; he told me he didn’t understand why Tyler was being so mean to him. He recognized that Tyler had acted similarly in the past and knew that he often had difficulty with his big emotions, but Jake had never been involved with Tyler in this way. We discussed the situation and Jake had a better understanding of Tyler’s perspective.

invited Jake up to continue the discussion. Jake began, “Tyler, yesterday we got upset because we didn’t want to play the same game. I am sorry that I hurt your feelings. Can we play together today?” It wasn’t often that Tyler wanted to be an active participant in a healing circle but when prompted by Jake, Tyler moved to the front of the room to stand near his friend Jake. I was surprised when Tyler offered his own apology and agreed to play at recess.

This was not only a great moment for Jake and Tyler, but also the other students to see how a healing circle helped facilitate a discussion to rebuild a friend-

family noted that they found comfort in discussing Tyler’s disability openly with others (including school peers) because they felt it would improve his ability to interact with classmates in a more open and honest way. As the year went on students became more eager to help and understand Tyler; they were more accepting of his differences and more willing to spot the similarities.

I want students to feel like they have my support; at the same time, I want to gradually release responsibility for their emotional management back to them, over time. Another practice that has helped me do that has been calm bags. Every student in my room receives a personalized, soft pencil case — their calm bag — that they keep in their desk. Throughout the year we add calming tools to their bags that they can use at any moment in time. When I walk through my room of students, I find a calm jar sitting out on a desk, a puzzle being put together quietly, a breathing card being finger traced, a worry stone being rubbed, or a positive affirmation being read over and over.

I try to remember that every year is an opportunity to learn and grow. Not every healing circle is a perfect example of student encouragement and understanding. There are times that students are blunt or share details that have absolutely no relevance to the circle. And sometimes my students are too overwhelmed to use their calm bag. Helping students navigate their relationships with one another — big emotions and all — helps make my classroom a more inclusive place for students of all abilities.

Part 4: **The Hallmark of Inclusive Teaching** **by Melissa Winchell**

Despite the progress our district has made, this will be our child’s last year in our district. The truth is, inclusion as a paradigm shift and a practice has not yet reached every classroom and every

Understanding that the true disability is inaccessibility in schools, they seek to change their classrooms and not their students with disabilities.

After our conversation Jake asked if he could lead a healing circle about what had occurred. Because this was still a very active situation for Tyler we held off on the circle until the following morning.

The next morning on the rug, I raised my hands to my heart (my favorite motion of a healing circle) and asked my class to follow along with me. I said, “Yesterday, a couple of classmates had a disagreement and it caused a break in a friendship. As you know, sometimes friends have a different way of handling their emotions. I saw many classmates showing courage when they saw these big emotions happening. When I looked around I saw friends working hard and respecting the privacy of our friends who were having a difficult moment.” I

ship. Healing circles provide a space to develop empathy and compassion for others. They give students a chance to see that they are not alone in their feelings, and that our classroom is a safe place for them to learn and grow.

The social-emotional learning strategies I use benefit all students, but these practices have extra importance for students with disabilities. In my experience, when a student’s behavior goes unnoted, students often feel like it is bad or wrong. Part of ending the stigma is encouraging children to talk about what they see or notice. This was a big reason for a discussion I had with Tyler’s family at the start of the school year. His family was concerned about how others would respond to some of his reactions. The

teacher; our child has moved through her grade levels at a faster pace than progress. For example, our district persists in designating particular classrooms of each grade as “inclusion classrooms,” rather than insisting that every classroom include them. As such, these classrooms are an ironic misnomer for parents like me — they segregate our disabled children. I know our district is not the only one that does this; grouping students who need additional educators and support is a cost-saving measure. Too many classrooms persist in ableist paradigms and pedagogies and special education remains a siloed program that segregates a district’s most vulnerable students.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is nearly 50 years old. And although it guarantees a public education to our disabled students, so many of its promises remain unrealized. Worse, the inclusive vision of IDEA is increasingly under attack, as

right-wing politicians criticize the kinds of social-emotional learning — including Emily’s healing circles and Karen’s flexible seating — that allow students with disabilities to thrive. But neurobiology and neuroscience are now confirming what inclusive teachers like Karen and Emily have long known: If we want academic success in our schools, we have to first design our classrooms for emotional resilience and health. I see real hope for inclusive, neurodiverse schools in these kinds of flexible, social-emotional pedagogies.

Without teachers like these, my child would not be the reader, writer, and mathematician she is today. Thanks to their efforts, she loves the solar system, uses a microscope, follows a recipe, plays inclusive basketball for her school team, tells her teachers what she needs, and names her emotions.

Karen and Emily, and inclusive teachers like them, demonstrate the

hallmark of the most inclusive teachers my child has had in our district: pedagogical risk-taking. As a parent I can attest that not all of the strategies or ideas my daughter’s teachers tried were successful. But the most inclusive of these teachers persisted. If a strategy they tried didn’t work, they did some rethinking, collaborated with their colleagues, reached out to our family for input, and tried again. They know what a messy worthwhile struggle inclusive education can be.

They believe kids like mine are worth every effort. ●

Learning is rooted in purpose-finding and community relevance.

- map a path to purpose
- create cross-disciplinary, multiage classrooms
- learn experientially
- promote literacy
- connect to the community

Social justice is the cornerstone to educational success.

- authenticate students' voice
- demand anti-racist, inclusive spaces
- reimagine spaces & promote free play
- utilize responsive justice
- adopt critical pedagogy & build democratic schools

Dehumanizing practices do not belong in school.

- eliminate grading
- radically reduce homework
- reform food systems
- redefine assessment & end testing
- build strong relationships

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- self-directed learning
- support & elevate teachers
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- ensure a thriving public education
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Watson and Giovanni Write and Teach



Maya's Song

Written by Renée Watson
Illustrated by Bryan Collier
(HarperCollins, 2022)
48 pp.

A Library

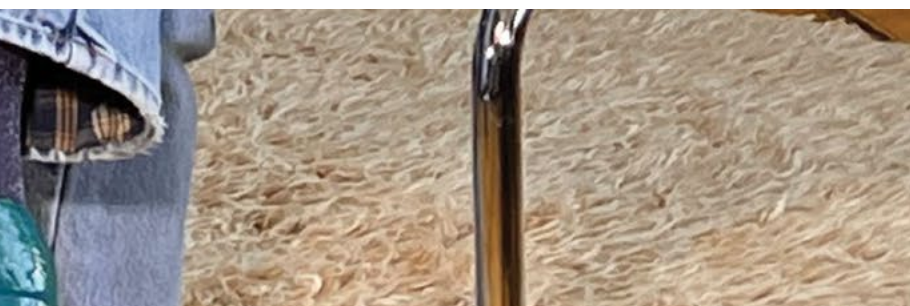
Written by Nikki Giovanni
Illustrated by Erin K. Robinson
(Versify/HarperCollins, 2022)
32 pp.

BY LINDA CHRISTENSEN

In a dialogue in New York City for HarperCollins, [Renée Watson](#) and [Nikki Giovanni](#) talked about their new picture books, the joy of a writing life, growing up Black, activist librarians and teachers, and they remembered Maya Angelou. Near the end of their conversation, the writers shared a laugh imagining their mothers and grandmothers sitting together on a porch in the afterlife celebrating their daughters' achievements. Giovanni said, "Heaven must be a mess. All those Black women up there bragging about their children."

As the writers talked, Watson recalled being a student and encountering "a very white curriculum" in which Black history and experience was presented "usually through the lens of pain and struggle." She said she needed a fuller story about her people, which she discovered when she read Giovanni's poetry as a child. "I remember reading your poems like 'Knoxville, Tennessee' and 'The Reason I Like Chocolate.' Those kinds of poems. Oh, [I thought] these are everyday Black folks. They

About the "Humanity of Black Folks"



talk like me. They sound like me. Simple poems that anchor the reader in the humanity of Black folks. And I needed that as a kid.”

Watson’s comments about Giovanni’s work are also true for her writing. An ongoing theme central to both writers’ work is that Black lives are not one-dimensional. Yes, they have been visited by violence and tragedy and inequality, but that is not the whole story. Both Watson and Giovanni continually celebrate the daily joys of being Black, of growing up in a community where family includes neighbors, church folks, librarians, teachers, and books. This sensibility ought to inform our teaching. Both Watson’s *Maya’s Song* and Giovanni’s *A Library* are gifts to teachers of all ages — resources we can use with students to teach for Black lives, to help us imagine the kind of world we want to live in, and to prompt students to write their own stories.

Maya’s Song

Watson’s *Maya’s Song*, illustrated by the award-winning artist Bryan Collier, is the chronicle of Maya Angelou’s life written in verse. Watson tells key stories from Angelou’s history, including accounts of her family members and her years of silence following abuse, as well as her coming into language and storytelling as an artist and activist.

In the opening poem, “Too Grand for His Own Skin,” Watson introduces the reader to Angelou’s father, who returned to Arkansas after fighting in World War I, speaking French, demanding equality, and unwilling to bow his head and “shrink himself till his confidence/ was as tiny as dust.” Instead, he moved the family to California. “No way in the world they could make this grand man small.” His advice to Maya is something all children need to hear: “*We are a people of dignity. Don’t ever hold your head down.*”

The poem about Maya’s grandmother, “Miss Anne’s Store,” is a praise poem to the family matriarch, who saved money to buy land and a store. In this verse chapter, Watson teaches young

readers about the importance of Black ownership. Beyond the creation of a business to earn a living, places like Miss Anne’s store became gathering spots for the Black people in town. Watson’s poetic description brings her audience to Stamps, Arkansas, to the Whites Only signs, but also to the beauty of a community that helped raise and educate Angelou. “On Saturdays, barbers set up in the shade of the porch./ The men told tall tales, trying to outdo each other./ Who was the bravest? Who was the strongest?/ Troubadours moaned their songs/ and played cigar-box guitars./ . . . Maya saw what love looked like up close.”

Watson doesn’t shy away from the violence against Blacks during the Jim Crow era. In the poem “When Night Came,” she tells the story of the night the Ku Klux Klan came for Maya’s Uncle Willie, but she also shows the bravery and ingenuity that Black people demonstrated. Maya and her brother hid their uncle in a crate, piling vegetables on top of him, “but surely whatever meal they’d cook/ with those potatoes and onions would taste like sadness, like fear,/ after being soaked in Uncle Willie’s tears.”

Over a series of several poems, Watson explores the sexual abuse that pushed Angelou into silence. The violence against Maya’s body is age-appropriate, but clear:

When Maya was 7 years old,
her mother’s boyfriend
hurt her body, hurt her soul.
*Don’t tell nobody, he said. Don’t
say a word.*

What is also clear is that “some secrets shouldn’t be kept inside.” Maya’s silence lasted five years. “Maya kept all the words she knew to herself./ No more feeling the buzz of the B vibrate her lips,/ no tongue against her teeth/ to say thank you or I love you.”

As a poetic interlude, Watson’s poem “What Words Do” makes a great stopping point for students to write their own poetry about what words do. By

turns playful and sad, Watson helps the young reader feel Maya’s silence, but also imagine it:

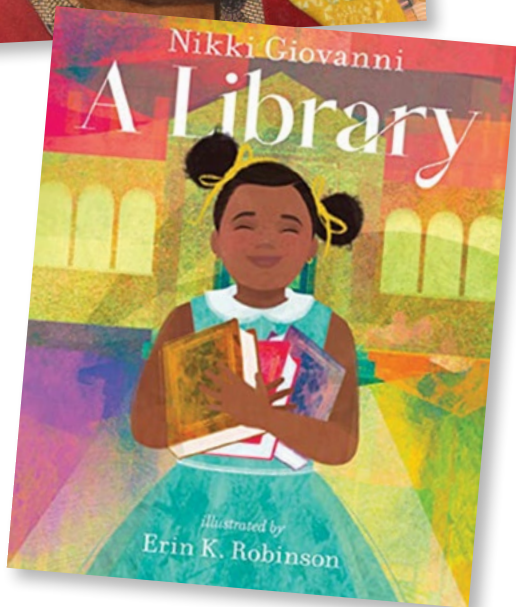
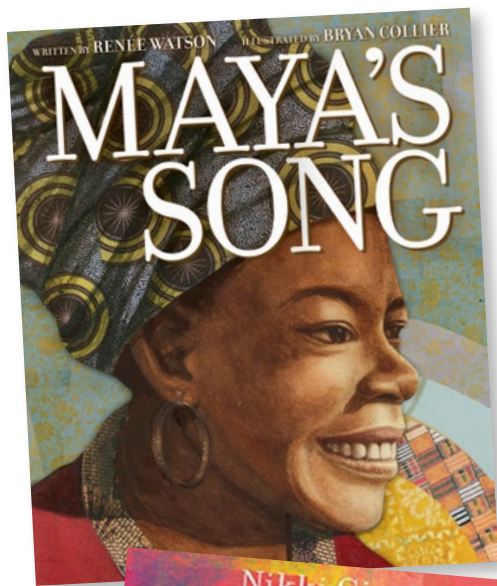
Sometimes words itch the tongue,
beg to come out,
rise but then get swallowed

by fear,
by shame . . .

Sometimes words are patient.
Like tiny seeds they wait underneath
the soil.
They are in no hurry, no rush.
When it’s time, they will bloom.

The images of words itching, begging, rising, nesting, tapping, knowing, becoming seeds lend themselves to an imaginative writing journey as students explore other verbs illustrating their own vision about the work of words. After reading this piece, students can write their own poems about words. What verbs would they use? What metaphors? Over the years, my students have described the ways poetry/words hop on the porch to chat with their grandmother, smuggle under the bed covers at night with a flashlight, light up freeway signs.

The final chapters tell of the rebirth of Maya’s voice through poetry, which helped her build a new world, but also of her work as an artist to support the son she gave birth to at 16, her travels to Africa, and her friendships with James Baldwin, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X as well as her activism: “Their friendship was an anchor. Kept them steady./ Kept them trusting that a change was going to come./ Freedom was coming, coming soon.” After the assassinations of King and Malcolm X, James Baldwin “refused to let her keep her words inside.” In the poetic chapter “Rising,” friends encouraged Angelou to write the childhood stories she told at dinner parties with friends. Those stories became her celebrated autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. And once again, Watson gives teachers an



church in Giovanni's poetry, students can hear the stories of their families and their neighborhoods in this story. What friendships anchor them? What can they write about joy and loss? Watson's text can help students chronicle their own lives.

A Library

Nikki Giovanni's *A Library*, beautifully illustrated by Erin K. Robinson, is an ode to libraries. As Giovanni and Watson unwrap their newly published books during their dialogue, they talk libraries and librarians. Giovanni says, "You go to library because you're safe, because you got the books and the books themselves open up another whole world to you."

Giovanni's bold dreams and humor appear throughout the book as she catalogs the wonders of a library and the ways a child can imagine themselves in the world. "A library is:/ a place to be free/ to be in space/ to be a cook/ to be a crook/ to be in love/ . . . to be quick and smart/ . . . to surf the rainbow/ to sail the dreams/ to be blue/ to be jazz . . ."

Like *Maya's Song*, *A Library* provides a wonderful read-aloud for students, but it also provides a poetic framework for children to write their own place poems. Teachers can help notice how Giovanni shows her love of the library and the kind of joy she found there. Students could list their favorite places, then choose one of those places and list what can happen there. For example, I might write "A river is: a place to take a roller coaster ride on an inner tube, to be a fish or an eel, to be blanketed by water, to snuggle on warm rocks . . ." Following in Giovanni's path, I might throw in a few surprises like the crook or jazz. I would use both books with elementary through high school students as poetic models, perhaps even encouraging them to illustrate their poems with collages or photos.

Giovanni's poem is joyful, full of light colors and warm details. However,

Giovanni, like Watson, doesn't hide the painful backstory of the library. In her conversation with Watson, Giovanni goes into greater detail about the humiliation and derision her first librarian, Mrs. Long, faced across town. At the end of her book, Giovanni writes about what Mrs. Long went through to get her readers books from the white library across town. "I grew up during the age of segregation and would want to read books that were not in the Carnegie Branch Library of the Lawson McGhee Library, which was the colored library. Books by Walt Whitman or Alfred North Whitehead. Mrs. Long would go up to the main library to get them for me. I was almost grown before I understood what she must have gone through to get me the books I was interested in. Mrs. Long always knew what I needed."

From these two books and both authors' oeuvre, our students need to understand that we can both love and critique. That history and people's lives are complex, full of injustice, but also full of acts of courage and compassion. We need to trust that children can read books that do not diminish suffering, but instead let that suffering exist next to joy and laughter. ●

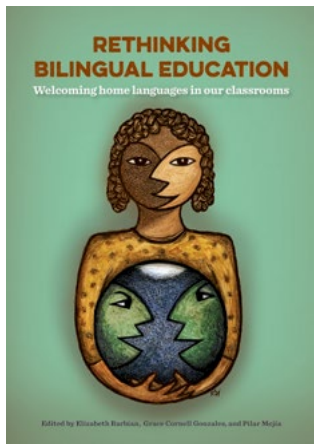
*Linda Christensen (lmc@lclark.edu) is the director of the Oregon Writing Project at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. She is an editor of *Rethinking Schools*, and author and editor of many *Rethinking Schools* books, including [Reading, Writing, and Rising Up](#), [Teaching for Joy and Justice](#), and [Rhythm and Resistance: Teaching Poetry for Social Justice](#) (edited with Dyan Watson).*

opportunity for students to tell their own stories by examining the list of stories that Angelou wrote about her life:

She wrote about all of the joy
and the sad times.
She wrote about all of the
cities she called home.
She wrote about her family
and friends
who were no longer alive to tell
their own stories.

She carried them with her every
time her pen touched paper.
She was writing her story and
their stories too.

Just as Watson heard the people
from her family and neighborhood and



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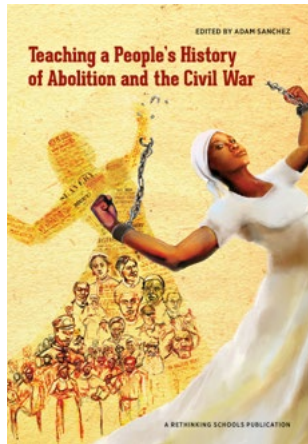
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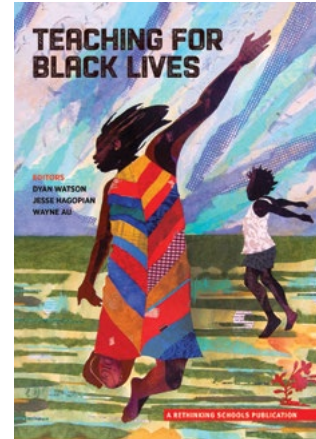
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Teaching a People's History of Abolition and the Civil War is a collection of 10 classroom-tested lessons on one of the most transformative periods in U.S. history. These lessons encourage students to take a critical look at the popular narrative that centers Abraham Lincoln as the Great Emancipator and ignores the resistance of abolitionists and enslaved people. The collection helps students understand how ordinary people can challenge unjust laws, take action together, pressure politicians to act, and fundamentally change society.

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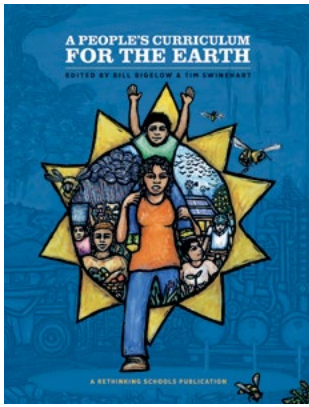
Teaching for Black Lives grows out of the movement for Black lives. We recognize that anti-Black racism constructs Black people, and Blackness, as not counting as human life. This book provides resources and demonstrates how teachers can connect curriculum to young people's lives and root their concerns and daily experiences in what is taught and how classrooms are set up. We also highlight the hope and beauty of student activism and collective action.

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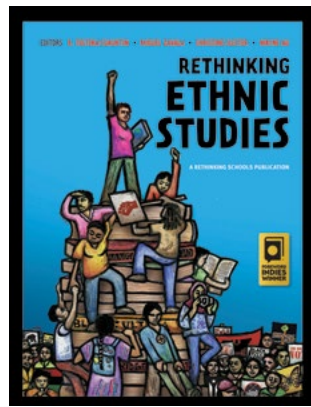
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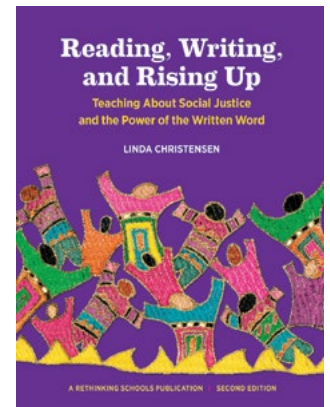
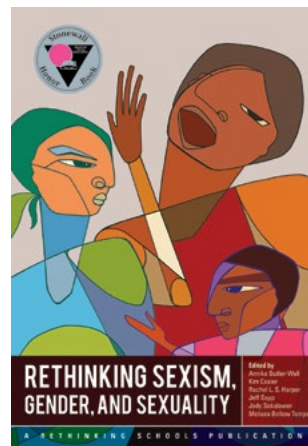
Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality

Edited by Annika Butler-Wall, Kim Cosier, Rachel L. S. Harper, Jeff Sapp, Jody Sokolower, and Melissa Bollow Tempel

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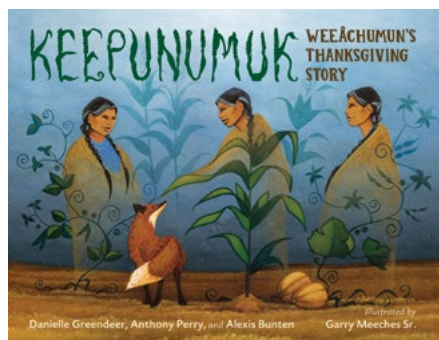
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Resources



Picture Books

Keepunumuk: Weeâchumun's Thanksgiving Story

Written by Danielle Greendeer, Anthony Perry, and Alexis Bunten
Illustrated by Garry Meeches Sr.
(Charlesbridge, 2022)
32 pp.

In this powerful picture book, N8hkumuhs (NOO-kuh-mus), Grandmother, shares the story “about the time Weeâchumun [corn] asked our Wampanoag ancestors to help the Pilgrims.” Beginning with Seagull announcing the newcomers’ arrival, this story centers plants and animals as N8hkumuhs tells how Weeâchumun, Beans and Squash, and animals Duck, Fox, Rabbit, and Turkey honor their responsibility to help all living things. Through messages sent in dreams, Weeâchumun tells the First Peoples to bring her and her sisters, Beans and Squash, to the newcomers. A wonderful read-aloud for elementary classrooms, this book is an invitation to discuss colonization, perspective, Thanksgiving also as a day of mourning, and the responsibility to help all living things.

See You Soon

Written by Mariame Kaba
Illustrated by Bianca Diaz
(Haymarket Books, 2022)
32 pp.

Pain, love, and hope fill the pages of Mariame Kaba’s most recent picture book about a child with an incarcerated loved one. Like young readers who might be system-impacted themselves, or perhaps children considering a humanized perspective of incarceration for the first time,



Reyna thinks, “I have so many questions. I’d ask, but I’m afraid.” In the pages that follow, Reyna asks those questions as she says goodbye to Mama at the prison, culminating with “When will I see you again, Mama?” Mama’s answer, “Soon, Queenie. Soon,” opens up Reyna’s tears and yelling and anger. But it becomes a comforting refrain of hope when Reyna returns to life at home. Early elementary teachers could use Reyna’s experiences to help students develop empathy for people whose loved ones are incarcerated — and as an anchor story to raise questions about incarceration.



Los coquíes aún cantan: Un cuento sobre hogar, esperanza y reconstrucción The Coquíes Still Sing: A Story of Home, Hope, and Rebuilding

Written by Karina Nicole González
Illustrated by Krystal Quiles
(Roaring Brook Press, 2022)
40 pp.

This is a beautifully written and illustrated story of resilience and community, seen through the eyes of a young girl in Puerto Rico in the aftermath of devastating Hurricane María. The silence and return

of the song of the native coquí threaded throughout shows a sacred connection to nature and place. As climate chaos makes hurricanes more destructive and far-reaching, this book will serve educators to deepen children’s understanding and empathy toward those who live through such horrific weather events. Special care should be taken by teachers if their students or students’ families have been harmed by hurricanes.

Build a House

By Rhiannon Giddens
Illustrated by Monica Mikai
(Candlewick Press, 2022)
40 pp.

Build a House is based on the moving song that Rhiannon Giddens wrote and performed with cellist Yo-Yo Ma on the 155th anniversary of Juneteenth in 2020. Giddens’ lovely, poignant new book illustrates the song, telling the story of enslavement and freedom: “You brought me here/ To build your house/ To build your house/ To build your house./ You brought me here/ To build your house/ And grow your garden/ Fine.” As Giddens writes in an afterword, people enslaving other people is “one of the worst things about being human,” but, she notes, “this story also shows one of the best things

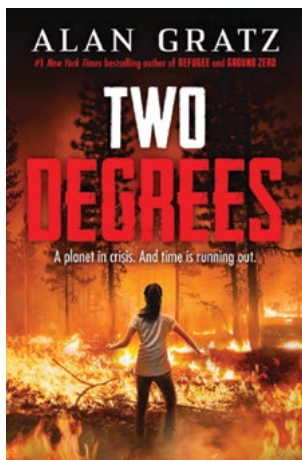


about being human: how we keep finding ways to make our family and our home, no matter where we are.” Giddens is a renowned singer, songwriter, banjo player — see her extraordinary, student-friendly *Songs of Our Native Daughters* — and offers teachers another gift with this beautiful book.

YA Novel

Two Degrees

By Alan Gratz
(Scholastic Press, 2022)
384 pp.



The main characters in this novel are middle school students, threatened and harmed by very different climate events, including the warming tundra, hurricanes, and forest fires. The book’s narrative rotates among the characters,

weaving in facts about climate change as the youngsters’ lives become more precarious. The fast-paced plot will hold most students’ attention through the 384-page book. *Two Degrees* would make an excellent literature circle book for 5th- through 8th-grade students. Gratz chose the title to highlight the Paris Agreement that committed nations to work toward capping global warming to no more than two degrees Celsius above



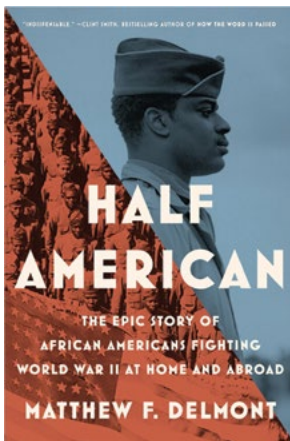
preindustrial levels — although countries from the Global South have demanded a 1.5 degree target.

History/Policy

Half American: The Epic Story of African Americans Fighting World War II at Home and Abroad

By Matthew F. Delmont
(Viking, 2022)
400 pp.

World War II looms large in U.S. popular culture. There are more World War II feature films and documentaries than one can count; the image of U.S. Marines hoisting the flag at Iwo Jima or of a sailor kissing a parade-goer at the V-J Day



celebration in Times Square are iconic. People of the era are valorized as “the greatest generation.” World War II is glorified because it is understood as

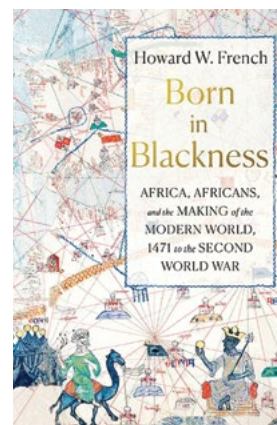
the “good” war: The United States fought for a just cause and defeated fascism. But Matthew Delmont’s new book asks readers to rethink what they know about the war by centering Black protagonists. He writes, “Nearly everything about the war — the start and end dates, geography, vital military roles, the home front, and international implications — looks different when viewed from the African American perspective.” One example: The dominant World War II narrative celebrates the unity of the nation — at home and abroad — in the face of fascism. But during the war, hundreds of industrial work stoppages led by white workers protested the hiring of Black workers; during only one three-month period, government officials estimated that these “hate strikes” cost war production plants more than 2.5 million worker hours. The *Baltimore Afro-American* called the

strikers “Hitler’s Helpers.” Delmont’s book, bursting with accounts of the war from the Black press, Black workers and veterans, and civil rights activists, will help teachers and students tell a fuller, truer, and more historically useful story of World War II.

Born in Blackness: Africa, Africans, and the Making of the Modern World, 1471 to the Second World War

By Howard W. French
(Liveright, 2021)
544 pp.

The story of the modern world that shows up in most U.S. and world history textbooks, in chapters like “Three Worlds Meet” or “The Age of Exploration,” starts in the wrong place. According to Howard French, “The first impetus for the Age of Discovery was not Europe’s yearning for ties with Asia, as so many of us were taught in grade school, but rather its centuries-old desire to forge trading ties with legendarily rich Black societies hidden away in the heart of ‘darkest’ West Africa.” In this retelling, it is Portugal not Spain that drives the action, and the events of 1492 would not have been possible without those of 1471 — when the Portuguese discovered gold in West Africa and began work on a fort at Elmina. European rulers became obsessed with the idea of gold in Africa in the decades following the Malian emperor



Mansa Musa’s pilgrimage to Mecca. On that trip, he stunned audiences with “a 60,000-person delegation, including 12,000 slaves, each of whom reputedly carried a wandlike fan

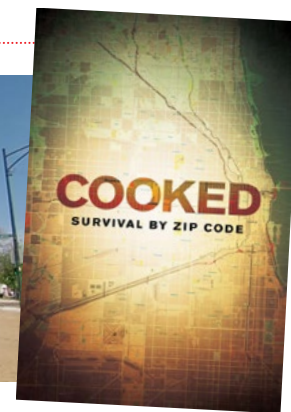
of gold weighing four pounds.” Mansa Musa’s ostentatious display of gold gave birth to an idea of Africa that drove the next 200 years of European exploration. French writes, “It would be unusual for a story that begins in the wrong place

to arrive at the right conclusions.” By starting the story in Africa, French hopes to combat a “centuries-long process of diminishment, trivialization, and erasure of Africans and people of African descent from the story of the modern world.”

Teaching White Supremacy: America’s Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of Our National Identity

By Donald Yacovone
(Pantheon, 2022)
464 pp.

Teaching White Supremacy reveals the battle over historical memory in public schools and how white elites have devoted extraordinary resources to perpetuating racist ideas in each generation through the K-12 curriculum. As Donald Yacovone notes, in 1932 the NAACP called public schools a “breeding ground for bigotry and prejudice” and warned that “textbooks are often germ carriers of the most vicious [anti-Black] propaganda.” Yacovone documents the timeworn playbook guiding contemporary legislators in their campaign to censor teaching truthfully about racism and other forms of oppression in U.S. history. Just as important, Yacovone’s book can be read for the scholarship and organizing by African Americans throughout the 19th and 20th centuries to teach against white supremacy and with a vision for a more just society. Those stories of resistance permeate the book and offer strategies and inspiration for those defending the right to teach outside the textbook today.



Film

Cooked: Survival by Zip Code

Directed by Judith Helfand
(Distributed by Bullfrog Films, 2020)
82 min./Classroom version: 54 min.

Cooked focuses on the deadliest heat wave in U.S. history, in 1995, when 739 people in Chicago — mostly Black and elderly — died in one week. That’s the headline. But Helfand does much more than tell this story — although she does tell it, and tells it powerfully. Helfand focuses on Chicago’s heat wave to look at how a weeklong tragedy is really a story about the “slow-motion disaster” caused by race and class inequality. Helfand shows us a map of Chicago, with “almost perfect overlaps” between race, poverty, and heat wave deaths. “So the question is,” a Chicago official asks, “did people die of the heat, or did they die of the social conditions in these neighborhoods, and the answer is both.” Helfand examines — and mocks — the futility of task force reports, emergency plans, disaster preparedness, rehearsals for tornadoes and other calamities, when these ignore the racism and poverty that cause people

to suffer so unequally. Helfand’s question, Why did people die in these particular Chicago neighborhoods?, suggests the outlines of a potential trial role play: Who or what is to blame? Possible “defendants” could include the fossil fuel industry causing inexorable global warming; Chicago officials, especially Mayor Richard Daley, who tried to blame the victims’ families themselves for not doing enough, and who fail to address the roots of poverty; the Federal Housing Administration, whose policies explicitly discriminated against Black communities; banks and corporations, which disinvested from Black communities and left people excessively vulnerable to “natural disasters”; and the entire system of racial capitalism, from enslavement forward, which created maps with “perfect overlaps” of race and death. *Cooked* is a film that gives names and faces to the concept of environmental racism. It can help students recognize that the climate crisis is also a racial justice crisis.

Reviewed by Bill Bigelow, Ursula Wolfe-Rocca, Elizabeth Barbian, Bob Peterson, Deborah Menkart, and Matt Reed

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Edited by Michael Charney, Jesse Hagopian, and Bob Peterson

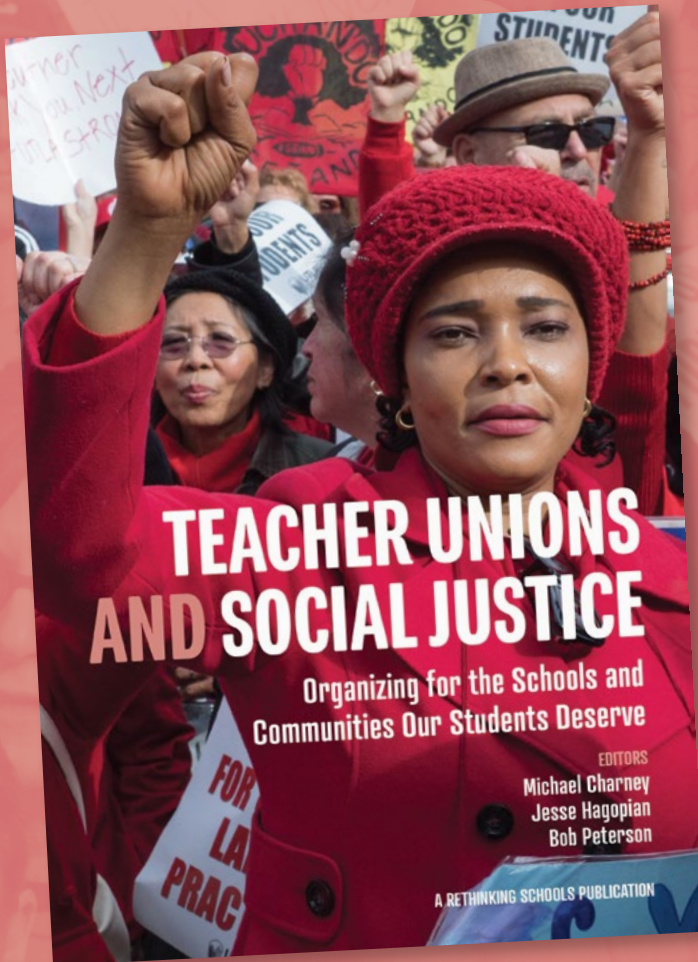
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CECILY MYART-CRUZ
UTLA President

The editors have effectively woven together dozens of articles, interviews, documents, contract language examples, and resource recommendations that serve to remind us of labor's historical ties to social justice while challenging us to do more by putting social justice and anti-racism at the center of our classrooms, schools, and our teacher unions.

BECKY PRINGLE
President of the National Education Association



Ecological Footprint Calculators Are Bad for the Environment

BY URSULA WOLFE-ROCCA

Ursula Wolfe-Rocca (ursulawolfe@gmail.com) is a Rethinking Schools editor and curriculum writer/organizer with the Zinn Education Project.

Illustrator Ewan White's work can be seen at ewanwhite.com.

For years, I would coax my 9th graders into the dreary, windowless computer lab for 10-15 minutes so they could complete an online ecological footprint calculator. I wanted students to see that first-world consumption patterns were unsustainable.

Students' reactions to the activity were formulaic. My mostly white, mostly affluent students expressed shock that if

everyone on the globe lived like them, we would need four (or five or six) Earths.

One student would say something like "Wait, Ms. Wolfe, so if we ended poverty, the Earth would collapse?"

Another student might say, "This is why we need fewer people; the Earth is overpopulated."

To which another student would (correctly) retort: "No. It means people in rich countries need to consume less."

I appreciated how the quick, engaging activity invited students to reflect on the idea of "development." I liked that it challenged students to redirect their focus from what needs to happen *there*, to what needs to happen *here*.

But after a few years, I abandoned the footprint calculator. I didn't stop to think too much about what made me uneasy about the activity; I just knew it felt wrong. Too simple. A bit like a trick.

Why We Should Skip the Calculator

The first and most essential flaw of the footprint calculator is its basic metric: a footprint. For those who have never taken one, I encourage you to head to the internet, search "[Global Footprint Network](#)," and take the quiz I used with my students. You will find catchy graphics, and questions like "How often do you eat animal-based products?" "Compared to your neighbors, how much trash do you

generate?" and "What is the size of your home?" At the end of perhaps a dozen questions, the algorithm spits out your results: "If everyone lived like you, we would need 3.6 Earths."

The activity's punchline: How my students and their families navigate choices related to their consumption is *the* critical determinant of whether the Earth remains habitable.

But that is wrong.

The real authors of environmental degradation were — and remain — entirely absent from the activity. Where was the system of private property that turned the Earth into a commodity to be mined, drilled, burned, and sold for profit? Where were ExxonMobil, Shell, BP, Chevron and the 96 other companies [that account for 71 percent of global greenhouse emissions](#)? Where were the governments of the world's richest countries who enable capitalists to prioritize profits over the Earth? The footprint calculator asks none of these people or systems to answer for *their* consumption; there is no authority figure marching *them* down to a musty computer lab to account for their behavior. The activity left my students feeling vaguely guilty — even ashamed; but that shame should not be theirs to carry. My students did not build this world. And the footprint calculator does nothing to help them ask who did, why it is shaped as it is, and how it might be redesigned and rebuilt more justly.

The footprint calculator foregrounds "choices" while obscuring their social determinants. The calculator asks how far we travel by car each week or by plane each year, but not about the conditions that shaped those transportation habits. Last year, as school buildings reopened during the pandemic, my phone would buzz with alerts from my child's school that bus service was once again canceled due to a "shortage of drivers." Policy choices created that "shortage": obscenely low wages and dangerous pandemic working conditions. I did not "choose" to drive my kid to school, burning fossil fuels and adding to the already-bad air pollution in our city.

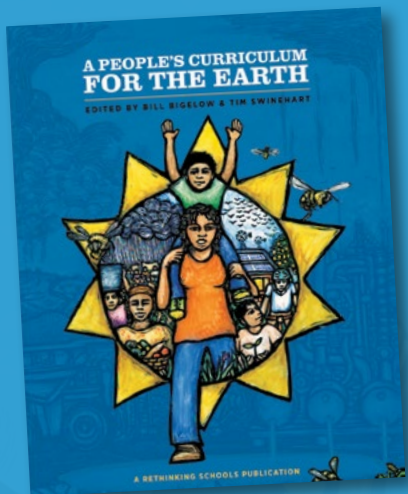
No. Choices were made to reopen schools during a deadly pandemic. Choices were made over decades to disinvest from public schools. And *those* choices narrowed the available options for me and other families, including those who had access to no transportation at all.

The calculator makes no attempt to account for questions of power — who makes the system-level choices that affect everyone else's choices? It ignores *why* people act as they do. In this regard, the ecological footprint calculator seems committed to the status quo. If its questions helped students recognize that our "choices" are not natural, but the outcome of political struggles, it would be an invitation to imagine what might be different, and how they might demand a different set of choices.

The "results" page of the Global Footprint Network's calculator invites you to click on a button called "solutions." In the category of food, it reads "Can you be a smarter shopper and reduce food waste? Can you try a new vegetarian recipe once a month? Once a week?" In the renewable energy category, it asks "Can you take transit, bicycle, or walk instead of driving solo at least once a month? Once a week?" These bogus suggestions are familiar; they are part of the dominant environmental discourse that permeates everything from advertising to children's books: If only we drove less, planted more trees, stopped using plastic shopping bags, went vegan, took shorter showers, and drank from reusable water bottles, we could save the planet. But we cannot "individual choice" our way out of a fossil economy. Saying that tweaking consumer behavior will not meaningfully impact the environmental crisis is not the same thing as saying that what we do doesn't matter. What we do matters a lot. But the "we" must be movements, not individuals working alone. And the actions we take must aim toward the transformation of systems, not an accommodation to them.

One exception to the calculator's tendency to ignore systems is under the "population" category. The site reads:





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Edited by Bill Bigelow and Tim Swinehart

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"Women's rights" is a nod to the existence of patriarchy — a system. And a generous reading of "family planning" might imply universal access to reproductive health care — a proposal that would require systemic transformation. Unfortunately, this is systemic change in the service of an insidious narrative about "overpopulation": The Earth's resources cannot sustain an increasing global population and the solution is to reduce the number of people.

Dakota Schee and Varsha Nair explain this narrative's dangerous logic at the Greenpeace website:

The Population Bomb, a book which first popularized this idea, was based on the author Paul Ehrlich's experience in a crowded city in India. It advocates for incentives and coercion to control the population — specifically targeted at non-white people. Even today when people talk about overpopulation, they are often talking about China, India, and other primarily non-white countries in the Global South. In the United States, "population control" has come in the form of forced sterilization of Black and Brown mothers. It has been used to justify ecofascist attacks, like the El Paso mass shooting, where the white supremacist shooter cited anti-immigration rhetoric based in the overpopulation myth to justify targeting and killing immigrants . . .

The Global South — with the highest levels of population growth are *not*

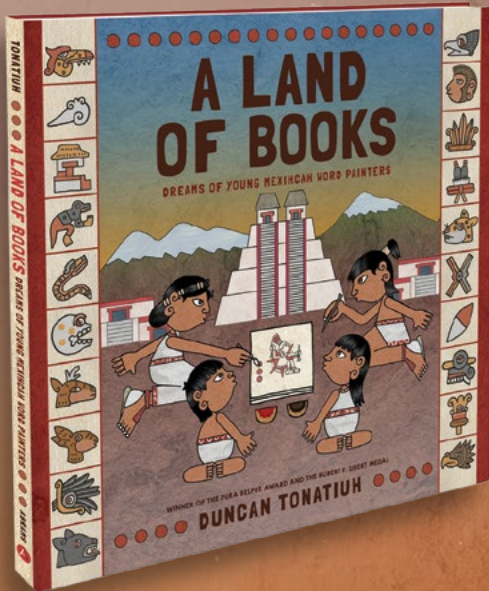
the ones overconsuming the Earth's resources; in fact, they have done the least to cause the Earth's destruction yet shoulder its worst impacts. The overpopulation argument obscures the real villains of the environmental crisis — billionaire CEOs and corporations — and scapegoats their victims.

And what of the questions *not* asked by the footprint calculator, questions critical to how radical transformation happens? The footprint calculator does *not* ask "How often do you meet with friends, family, colleagues, and acquaintances to share knowledge about the environmental crisis and plot ways to take action?" The footprint calculator does *not* ask "How many boycotts would you say you join every year?" or "How likely are you to divest your savings from banks that profit from the fossil fuel industry?" The footprint calculator does *not* ask "How often do you respond to calls to act in solidarity with Indigenous-led campaigns to protect the water and land?"

Our students do more than consume. They talk and laugh and sing and dance — albeit often on TikTok. They babysit their siblings. They write poetry and spend time listening to their grandparents' stories. They study butterflies and bake cookies and dream of kayak trips. And they have the capacity to join — or create — movements for justice. Educational tools that reduce meaningful human action to *consumption* — as the ecological footprint calculator does — do not belong in our classrooms. Students do not need more anemic "solutions" — meatless Mondays! — that, in Naomi Klein's words, "show people how they can change without changing anything at all"; and they certainly don't need white supremacist "solutions" predicated on population control.

These calculators command students to look at their own footprint and use less; our curriculum should invite students to look toward each other and demand more. ●

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