A Letter to White Women Teachers: an urgent plea for change

Laura Baker [i]
Westfield State University

Abstract
The new Progressive Education Network mission says that Progressive Education "promotes diversity, equity, and justice." These goals cannot be met unless there are substantial changes in the way the majority of teachers in the United States, white women teachers, think and operate. This open letter to that audience from a white woman teacher lays out five important changes that must be made if public schools are to meet and teach all students in our schools. Through stories of experience and research, the letter addresses current issues and suggested practices in teacher thinking, language and action related to the safety of targeted populations and choices made in discipline and curriculum.

Key words: Progressive Education, White women teachers, think, operate

[i] **Laura Baker,** pronouns she/her, began her journey in education in 1972. She has taught and lead schools, worked in both general education and special education and most often in inclusive schools. Currently, she is an Associate Professor of Education at Westfield State University. Laura is active in North Dakota Study Group and is on the Board of Lives in the Balance. She lives in Western Massachusetts with her partner.

Correspondence: lbaker@westfield.ma.edu

Dear Colleagues,

It is out of love, connection and the gnawing realization that we are complicit in the miseducation and dehumanization of students that I write this call to action. Rather than taking time describing all the ills of our system, the crisis in which we find ourselves, I am going to focus on what it is we can and must do if we are to "promote diversity, equity, and justice in our schools and society" (PEN, 2016, p. 1). When I say "we" it means the white women who are the majority of educators in our country. Many of us have gone into education to change the world, to make it more fair. Certainly, I did. And yet as I did my work I have often squarely faced the conflict between what I have been required to do, trained to do, and what my gut feels is wrong. I have learned to raise questions and to search for ways of working that honor my students *and* feel right to me. I have also had to "unlearn" and continue to struggle with ways that I have been taught to understand the world. What follows is a set of five changes I believe we must make, not of and for others, but of and for ourselves. We have to do better so that we can meet our students (not needs, but them!). Since I believe we hurt our black and brown children the most, I will begin each section with issues of race and then extend the thinking and practices into the education of other targeted groups. I offer what follows knowing it is not exhaustive and that, while a work in progress, it is an earnest and urgent plea for change.

We must:

1. Know ourselves and therefore know how we are limiting others.
2. Be very intentional with our language.
3. Hear and accept what students communicate through words or actions.
4. Examine school safety.
5. Bring student experience into the classroom.

Know ourselves and therefore know how we are limiting others

That I am white causes me to notice people who are not. We see the "other." When a brown or black person is "noticed" then there are responses. We know there are police responses; there are teacher responses as well. If it stopped at noticing and responding more often, then it would not be so bad. However, we are socialized to see danger, taught to cross the street, lock our doors and be fearful. A new report from Yale University's Child Study Center found "racial preconceptions" in the way preschool teachers see black boys in particular. This was evidenced as a computer program tracked eye movements and found that teachers watched black boys more often and for longer durations when "looking for signs of trouble" (Editors, 10/9/16). In the classroom, unconscious acts of watching coupled with the socialized perception of threat results in racist disciplinary action (Skiba, 2011). This noticing is pervasive in our thinking, as well. For example, two years ago at an awards ceremony for college seniors who ranked the highest in their class, I heard a young woman just completing her student teaching announce in her speech, "I am working in a diverse classroom and I have learned that those students need more structure and discipline." The number of problems in this short sentence is stunning.

A "diverse classroom" means a white person saying there are mostly brown and black students in the class. In fact, the school she referenced is a segregated school, the result of segregated neighborhoods, accepted racist social structures in which most of us live in our country. Saying "those students," however, is perhaps the most telling and the most problematic, and has to be struck from our thinking, not just our language. "Those" is opposed to "our." All students are our students; black and brown students are our students; transgender students are our students; students in special education are our students, our children, our babies. We have to stop, catch ourselves, and change our thinking. ALL children need and deserve a nurturing environment, a connection with adults, and an atmosphere of acceptance even as we are teaching and practicing skills. This is what the Black Lives Matter movement brings to white attention. We must recognize that black students are part of all students. And yes, all students matter.

"More structure and discipline" means that we have to be tough, not nurturing; impose more rules and punishments; impose more behavioral and objective responses. There is nothing objective in our disciplinary actions. "More structure and discipline" is about power and control, power and control over children. Underlying our need to control is the belief that the children are damaged, or worse, dangerous. Recently, I overheard a white woman who has an adopted black son ask a black mother, "At what age did your son learn that he was dangerous?" If, in our minds, students are dangerous or damaged, we limit our responses. We must fix "them" or protect ourselves. Lisa Delpit heart-wrenchingly states in the introduction to *Multiplication is for White People: raising expectations for other people's children*:

> …This perspective is so ingrained and so normalized that we all stumble through our days with eyes closed to avoid seeing it. We miss the painin our children's eyes when they have internalized the societal belief that they are dumb, unmotivated, and dispensable.
>
> Nor can we see what happens to the psyches of young people, often well-meaning white people who have been told that they are the best and brightest and that they are the saviors of black children (Delpit, 2012, p. xviii).

From our deficit thinking, our perceptions of students as needing either to be controlled or fixed, we alternate between using our systemic structural power as white teachers *over* or *for* students, when our goal should be to work *with* students, families, communities. We have options in the way we think about our power (structural and unearned). We can use our power over students and assert our dominance. The absolute belief that we deserve and must get respect (compliance) no matter our actions is one way we do this. Or we can feel sorry for our students, want them to have better (more like our) lives, and we can do things *for* our students. The prepositions used are very important indicators of thinking. *Over*, *to* and *for* are related and imply the inherent good in "our" view and the problem in the "other." The goal is to get to *with* and care about each student as they are.

When we perceive students with fear, we become threatened. We act defensively, even aggressively. We interpret actions as defiant or disrespectful. The US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights "Data Snapshot: School Discipline rates of suspension and expulsion by race and ethnicity" supports this reactive misperception (US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, March 21,2014). We must notice when we are becoming afraid; we have to stop, pause, and remind ourselves that this is a child to whom we have committed care and guidance. And this is how we change our thinking, intentionally.

Deficit thinking and limited responses are quite evident throughout our educational thinking. We believe economic poverty is the fault of the person even as we know that many work longer hours than those with economic wealth. We have "special education" bringing an entirely separate and parallel set of placements and goals. We have ELLs, as if students who speak another language are entirely "other" and don't bring great strength. Since seeing the "other" and having fear is unconscious and feels "normal" and we know we have learned this, then we have the absolute responsibility to unlearn these attitudes. We must become aware when fear occurs and replace it with statements that are true. If we do not change our thinking, then we continue the pain.

"Do no harm" must be our super-mantra; the Hippocratic Oath has meaning for teachers. While medical doctors are sworn to keep people physically safe, additionally, we have the responsibility for intellectual, social and emotional health. We can, we must re-educate ourselves. We must catch our thinking before it comes out in language.

Mantra: Do no harm = stop, check your thinking

Be very intentional with language

There are many books about teacher language, but like most educational pedagogy, the recommendations avoid issues of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. *Responsive Classroom* ™ (RC) teaches reinforcing, reminding and redirecting language. Never once in *The Power of Our Words*, the RC book on language, does author Paula Dentin talk about race, class or gender (Dentin, 2007). Peter Johnson, in *Choice Words*, another academically accepted and respected resource on language openly acknowledges the omission:

> The bottom line is that in this small book, I do not really deal with the cultural and linguistic variation we encounter in classrooms (Johnston, 2004, p. 89).

Language is the expression of our thinking (or subconscious learning) and is value laden. Oslem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo explain:

> Language is a form of knowledge construction: the language we use to name a social group shapes the way we think about that group (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 42).

For instance, labeling "people of color" infers there are people without color. White is the norm, color is the "other." White goes unsaid, unnecessary to be named because of its privileged and invisible status.

Herbert Kohl, in his essay "I Won't Learn From You," writes about learning from his student, Akmir, to examine his language for bias, exclusion and oppression:

> I had to learn to choose my own language and learn to make the avoidance of racist reference habit. I had to think very carefully about talking about "dark intents" and "black deeds"; to avoid using comparisons like "civilized/primitive," and "sophisticated/unsophisticated"; and to eliminate characterizations like "disadvantaged" and "deprived" (Kohl, 1994, pp. 20-21).

We must pay attention to the way we use language and understand that words, used or omitted, can devalue people, render whole groups of people invisible.

English is my first language, and the only one in which I am fluent. Therefore, it feels right to me that school is conducted in English. However, the language we choose to use has implicit norms. The fact that we recognize "standard" English only in our schools and in the ways in which we judge achievement devalues the "other" once again and limits me and my students. Because I am fluent in English alone, I am confronted often with the reality that I cannot communicate with many people in my own community. I am deeply saddened that in our schools we rarely recognize the strength of speaking any other language. Since we know that reading is anchored in language, in context and comprehension, we must have resources for students to read in their first language. Our job is to provide education. Our students should know what a strength it is to think, speak and connect in multiple languages, and understand this as an important window into culture, a culture that should provide pride. We must advocate for children to be taught to read in their first and most proficient language and advocate for bi-lingual education. For those of us who do not speak Spanish we have to learn. This has strong implications for teacher preparation and for professional development. In the meantime, we must work with people who are native speakers.

My language has changed as I have become aware of its ability to make invisible or diminish entire groups of people. Becoming aware of and critical of my language is a constant learning struggle and opportunity. It was easy for me to add the female gendered language during what is considered the woman's movement of the 1960s. It now has become almost standard to use "she or he" or "s/he" or to alternate pronouns. As a cis gender woman, I had no idea how many people that dichotomy hurt or made invisible until I recently went to a forum on transgender youth. We need to understand it does not matter if we believe transitioning is right or not, transgender students are *our* students, and it is our job to protect the dignity of every single one of our students.

Therefore, we cannot force students, from a very young age, into making a dichotomous choice about gender or worse, tell students they are wrong in their identification or dress. "Boys and girls" cannot be used for sorting as if they are the only two options. This means rethinking lining up, assigning groups, placements in circle, choosing people for games. We must change our pronouns from he/she to they, even as a singular pronoun when we are speaking generically. Asking students to choose the pronouns they would like to use needs to become a habit. When reading books, we can notice for and with children the ways in which genders are assigned and stereotyped. And we have to really think about how people who have identities with lenses different than ours might hear what is being said.

Language that excludes or diminishes people swirls all around us. It is so commonplace we don't even notice. The song "This Land is Your Land" makes invisible Native Americans and the colonization of land. This land was Native land. We often say we are "Americans" without even thinking about people from other countries in the Americas. The lyrics of "De America Yo Soy" by Los Tigres de Norte asserts this powerfully (Norte, 1987). We must say we are from the US or of the US. There are many Americans. Language can exclude or include.

Perhaps most common in the discussion of inclusion is the way we label and treat students with disabilities. The language of disabilities focuses only on deficits and is conscious language, purposeful in our intention of telling people and families that a student is different. We use divisive language as we provide a "special education" to this person and determine to what extent that young person can be in the company of "typical" students. The language is explicit. Learning disability means not able to learn. We know this is not true. Labels reduce our students to their deficits and limit our work to fixing them. An excerpt from a poem written by Janice Fialka in her book, *What Matters: Reflections on Disability, Community and Love*, affords some insight into the hurt that we cause:

> After the case conference
> I looked at my almost five-year-old son.
> He seemed to have lost his golden hair.
> I saw only words plastered on his face.
> Words that drowned us in fear.
> Words like:
> Primary expressive speech and language disorder
> severe visual motor delay
> sensory integration dysfunction
> fine and gross motor delay
> developmental dyspraxia and RITALIN now.
>
> I want my son back. That's all.
> I want him back now. Then I'll get on with my life (Fialka, 2016, p. 37).

Earlier in the poem she tells of her son's passions and strengths. How can we see and center education around these strengths?

Words have power. They can destroy or empower. We have to do better. We must begin to notice these affronts and change our own language proactively. Changing how we think and the language that we use changes our actions.

Mantra: Do no harm = stop, check thinking and change language

Hear and acknowledge what students communicate through words or actions

I have a working class perspective and my experience within that informs the way that I think. I learned that my education was important and offered my way "up"; doing my homework was my responsibility and my first job; the teacher was my boss. I never questioned whether or not the

assumptions about education were true, or true for everyone, I just assumed it. I never questioned whether "up" was good or what I wanted. It was simply part of my unconscious thinking. Therefore, it was natural, absolutely my right, and for the good of my student when, very early on in my teaching, I asked an eighth grade student to stay after class. I was worried that he was falling behind, doing no homework. It was the last class of the day; I had asked him quietly by his side, so I wouldn't embarrass him. To my surprise, he got up, knocked into me hard, and yelled, "You don't know anything about me!" This happened in 1975 and I remember it vividly. He was right. I knew it as soon as he said it. The next day I found him in the auditorium, where all students waited until the bell rang to go to homeroom. I acknowledged his statement as truth, and we began to talk. I learned that at 16 (yes, 16 in eighth grade) he was a father and lived with his son and his grandmother and needed to go home directly after school because his grandma had to get to her shift. I also learned that students should not have to scream at me and knock me over to get me to learn about them.

Students tell us a lot with their actions and their words, and we often see their gifts of communication as threats (because we are fearful) or as defiant (because we are controlling). How can we accept what students say as clumsy means of telling us thoughts and feelings? For example, where I live in New England, local school gardens are becoming a typical part of school curriculum. I have a friend who takes great pride in working with her students to become organic gardeners, raising food for the school lunch program. However, my colleague said that she wished she could get her students to engage with their school garden. Her students, mostly African American, were oppositional, in fact. When she brought students to the garden to work, they often said, "I'm not your slave." To her, the students were defiant. It often became a power struggle and ended with disciplinary consequences.

It is important to enter a situation with a calm and open stance to be able to hear what is being said. Staying calm is work that must be visualized and practiced. We need strategies like deep breathing and muscle release that can be used on the spot. When a student says something triggering to us like "I'm not your slave," then first we need to catch ourselves and stop. Then we need to calm down and think (Bailey, 2011). Once calm, the "defiant" thought or interpretation of student words or actions can be reframed in our thinking. We say, "this action or these words are telling me something important." We must listen and hear the truth and perspective of our student. Our response must be to acknowledge or affirm the student's perspective by saying, "You are right. You are not my slave." This takes us elsewhere, to our actions; we have options here. The immediate response to students must at least be acknowledgement of what it is the student communicated, albeit clumsily (Bailey, 2011, p. 68). I believe that this response often should include an apology.

Choosing what follows requires us to continue to be calm and to keep the students' best interests as the focus of our work. Ross Greene in his work on Collaborative and Proactive Solutions (CPS) says we have three choices. Plan A asserts your authority, taking us back to the desire for control. Plan B advocates collaboratively solving the problem either in that moment or at a later time. Plan C withdraws the request. In each, the goal is to teach lagging skills to the student (Greene, 2014). I argue for a different set of outcomes and a different frame of reference. It is we who need the skills and understandings to change the power structures that silence and oppress our students. Therefore, after the tension of the situation, we must explore the situation with the student and make changes in our thinking, our language and our actions.

Both examples, mine from 1975 and the garden assignment, gained attention by the teachers as issues of discipline, yet upon examination are better understood as issues of race, class and power. Our perceptions, our language, our interpretations direct our actions. Whether we want it to be or not, race is an underlying power issue in an unbalanced relationship of white teacher and black or brown student or community member. Class is another power issue. We must understand, acknowledge and, yes, even talk about this with our students. Power relationships are another dimension of differentiation. And yet, because of our desires for equality (treat people the same way) and our discomforts with hard, yet important conversations, we often can't see or understand what is being played out before us.

Struggling to understand the different reactions white and black middle school boys had to her directives, a white woman who has spent her career working in urban schools offered an example. She had witnessed both white and black boys litter paper in the halls. There was a rule that was processed with all students about taking care of the environment. Yet, when she asked the male students to pick up littered paper, the white male students complied while the African American males either refused or denied that they had littered. "What is it culturally that makes that happen?" she inquired.

Culturally, white people, generally men, in the US make the laws, and hold black and brown people accountable, usually more accountable than white people. "Take care of our environment" is the rule; no littering the implication. The rule was made by the invisible white power structure, and enforced, in this case, by the white principal. We know that teachers watch black boys more often (Editors, 10/9/16) and that black boys more often receive disciplinary responses (Skiba, 2011). We know this is unfair. So do the boys through lived experience. Even if this principal does not have a bias in her responses, it does not matter. She is part of this power structure and perceived as such by our students. And how are we perceived? Now here is where I will offer some imagination, some prediction. It is likely we do not look like the students' loving and caring mothers or grandmothers. Instead we might look like the person at the store who follows without cause. It is also likely the school experience of our black and brown students is not very nurturing (remember that young teacher- to- be who thinks "they" need more structure and discipline?). We are the face of oppression, especially when we "catch" our students. We must recognize that the outward reaction of being caught masks a fear that has been learned in order to survive (Coates, 2015). This is the context in which our children live (remember that we teach black boys they are dangerous). We confuse our children, help them develop hurtful and erroneous self-perceptions. Actions have intended and unintended consequences; they are important means of communication. What is seen is often of less consequence than what is heard or understood.

Does that mean we stop having expectations for students who are black and brown? No. It means the way we address behaviors has to be much more thoughtful and proactive and much less confrontational. This will not hurt anyone. In fact, it is the right way to operate. This takes us back to CPS as a collaborative process rejecting the deficit lens of students it proposes. Engaging Schools and RC provide strategies for morning meeting and advisories for developing relationships even as they must be examined for issues related to ethnicity, race, and gender. We cannot, however, accept punitive recommendations like time-out that are part of RC (Brady K, 2010) or continue to use detention and suspension. We can think carefully about how our power is perceived, acknowledge it, and have dialogue instead of punishment.

Acknowledging, understanding and accepting issues of race that permeate our classrooms builds relationships. How do we proactively acknowledge issues of power and race and class and begin a conversation before there is a problem? How do we get comfortable raising questions, having dialogue, having hard and necessary conversations? *This* is important professional development and we must demand it. We must see and acknowledge the ways our thinking, language and actions have been affected by the power structures which have perpetuated the dichotomy of "them and us." We have to be willing to confront and change these structures in our classrooms and schools. Most importantly, the way we behave with our students must take into consideration and name issues of power, societal issues related to targeted groups of people. The line between teaching and punishing, listening and lecturing, planning carefully and acting habitually is often the safety of our students. We will do no harm.

Mantra: Do no harm = stop, get calm, check thinking, change language, acknowledge/affirm, engage with.

Critically examine student safety

Perhaps there is no issue as emotional and problematic as safety in our schools. I have learned when safety is really an issue, I must maintain my calm, problem solve, and work collaboratively with families. I learned this most significantly in my first year as principal/special education director of an inclusive elementary school.

Leroy was a first grader new to our school. When asked to introduce himself, he scratched his face drawing blood. His intense discomfort with attention was a safety issue for him. One time, when classmates were looking at him, he left the school. I was notified. Usually, when students leave, I can stay still on a bench or bounce a ball, and they will come to me as they become calm. Leroy kept walking, fast. He was in the street. I knew that if I chased, he would run. I observed the direction he was headed and determined he was going home. I knew this because I used to run to find where my students lived, wave at family members, and sometimes have little conversations. This was well before cell phones, and often the families did not have telephones. Running and the grocery store were my main methods of communication. I got my car, drove to his house, got his father (who I knew would be sleeping because he worked nights) and we intercepted Leroy. Leroy's father and I needed to be a united caring partnership with Leroy. At our short meeting I acknowledged Leroy's strong discomfort and we also acknowledged our fear for his safety. Together we established a place he could go when he needed to get away. He was not in trouble, did not need an additional consequence. The consequence to the action was that we needed a plan for his safety. This would not have been as successful if I did not have Leroy's father with me. We all bonded through this situation, a modified application of CPS. Leroy never left school grounds again.

There are a few times in my career in which I have considered calling the police. Leroy's leaving was one of them. I never have. The desire to call for police comes when I am afraid. When I remember that I am the adult, and must be calm and in charge of myself, I can see that the student is also afraid in this moment, and that the police will make that fear even worse. It is then that I remember that students are at the center of our work and that my job is to keep them feeling safe and cared for. We are back to our role once again. We educate in a context of care and nurturing. These are our babies. When we become calm and clear, we can think about who our students are and what will keep them safe. We can begin to notice the inconsistencies in our rhetoric, our policies.

If we are dismantling the school to prison pipeline, and we must, then we cannot empower the police officers in our schools. Police in schools do not make our black students feel more safe. When we get stuck, we must reach to the families and communities of our students. Our job, as educators is to protect our students, keep them safe and teach. We are teachers, not enforcers. And it is our job to work *with* children and families.

The complex and convoluted relationship of schools and criminal justice was exemplified at a recent presentation/conversation about policing with the local chief of police. The police chief stated that school resource officers should function as the assistant principals of schools. He has seen this work well in some high schools. As a person who has dedicated my life to education, as a teacher and principal for more than forty years, I want to note the absolute misunderstanding of the role of an educator that is communicated in that statement. Education is not about rules and punishments. It is not about limits. As teachers we are opportunity providers not limit setters. In the article "Federal Officials Urge Clear Limited Roles For Police in Schools," Evie Blad reported:

> With the goal of protecting students' civil rights and limiting unnecessarily harsh school discipline, the Obama administration is calling on schools to ensure that the role of on-site police is limited and clearly defined (Blad, 2016).

We can no longer have high rates of preschool expulsion (Brasher, 2016), and allow 5 year olds to be handcuffed and escorted out of schools (Querry, 2015). We cannot have high school students restrained and arrested for yelling in the hallways (ACLU, 2016). We have to be very clear that teachers and leaders can and must have skills in de-escalation, skills offered in the mantras

already. Be calm, acknowledge, affirm. Breathe with the person. Change our thinking and reactions so that we do not continue to trigger students. Police are triggers. Police can do only what we tell them to do in a school, therefore we must limit or eliminate their presence thereby creating a safer environment for minoritized/targeted students.

As we continue to think about ways in which we change the environment to keep our students safe, we have to remember what we have already begun. We no longer see our students as threats. We see strengths, skills, desire to learn. We have changed our language and we have invited students into educational dialogue. And still we must ask how we can keep our students safe. Our actions must "do no harm." Retribution, shaming, humiliation do not belong in schools. We are educators, opportunity makers. The "boards of shame", whether about tests or behaviors must go. We must support practices that teach: CPS, restorative justice and conflict resolution. Students must be safe emotionally and physically. How do we create a school environment that is safe for people who are not safe in our communities? It is not by practicing drills. It is by thinking deeply about what our students need from us. Here I turn to a story about protecting a targeted group of people who have been bullied without much intervention and have a high rate of suicide: transgender youth.

About six years ago, a local school had a speaker (pronouns they/them) who was transitioning. After the speech, when asked what was most difficult, they talked about the discomfort of having to choose to go to either a boys' bathroom or a girls' bathroom. The students took this comment to heart and seriously studied the issue. After much consideration, the middle school students took a proposal to the principal who empowered them to make a presentation to the Board. What resulted was the utilization of a student created sign marking the bathrooms and making them gender free and a long term plan to remodel the bathrooms into single person bathrooms throughout the school. Six years later all the construction is completed. The original gender free signs remain.
What is important here is the acknowledgement (without defensiveness) of the issue and the involvement of the students to develop a response. They read, wrote, presented in the service of something that was important to them and also would make a difference. There are many additional environments that have to become safe including locker rooms, hallways, lunchrooms. The environment deserves and requires dedicated study as do many traditions. This means involving students in problem-solving, exposing unfounded fears, providing avenues of dialogue, and empowering students to make real change.

It is hard to undo hurts, even unintended ones. Hurts destroy relationships, the very foundation of our educational process (Scherer, 2016). We cannot ask students to dissociate from themselves in our classrooms, whether by structure, environment, or content. We cannot deny existence or limit it to one of victimization.

Mantra: Do no harm = stop, get calm, check thinking and language, acknowledge/affirm, engage with, keep safe

Bring student experience into the classroom

As a Jew, I know what it means to be excluded, to be invisible in the calendar, the celebrations, the decorations, the vocabulary, the stories. I know I am represented as the victim in the Holocaust whose people did not fight back. Such narrow representations are also assigned to African Americans and other minoritized groups. We must begin to notice who and how our content makes invisible or limits. We can acknowledge the omissions and act; change the voices, perspectives, values and words. We have this power. It is our work, our craft.

We must learn to be proactive, unpacking the messages in the content and the way it is delivered. In the garden project, the teacher was excited. She made the plans and the students were required to do the work. This "power over" project meant something different to the African American students. How do we begin to predict that the use of power in a situation of "overseer" and unpaid worker, "slave" will emerge, and that we must be much more thoughtful and inclusive. How can we really engage our students, validate and honor lived experience?

In *Making Space for Active Learning*, the authors offer examples of how we can find the time and space in our classrooms even while we are using texts. Patricia Carini, in the introduction, states:

> As contribution to the ongoing struggle for humane education, this book offers story: as bulwark against oppression, as act of resistance, as guardians of vision, as harbinger of hope (Martin, 2014, p. 6).

The choices we make for our reading, must be expansive, instructive, and offer a view of strength. Listen to the thinking of Jenerra Williams in her choice of reading the Langston Hughes poem, "Refugee in America," to her 2nd and 3rd graders:

> …his words have the ability to speak truth and reveal the honest shortcomings of humankind while simultaneously leaving behind an intentional pathway to hope. When I think about teaching our "Struggle for Justice" theme through the lens of the African American experience, this too is my intention: Speak truth, birth hope (Meier, 2015, p. 61).

We may not all have the freedom to develop units based on theme, but we can and must be intentional in the choices we do have and be clear about our goals, the ideas and questions we expect our students to explore. Ideas like "speak truth, birth hope" offer us pathways into honest conversations.

Critically looking at the materials we are given is not only pertinent to literature and history. We can ask the same questions in math and science. Whose perspectives are present? Whose are missing? What values are being promoted? What language is used? In the powerful article "The Problem with Story Problems," Anita Bright writes:

> Many teachers I queried noted that the textbooks are filled with examples that are alien to their students' lives. The class bias is particularly troubling. For example, here's a problem from Brooks/Cole's *Precalculus: Mathematics for Calculus, 5th edition*: Craig is saving to buy a vacation home… (Bright, 2016, p. 16)

In this article, Bright offers multiple examples of underlying classism, racism and sexism found in math texts, elementary through high school. She also describes processes of involving the students to notice and address the issues. Certainly class and consumerism are issues in the problem to be solved for Craig. (We could ask students to describe how they see Craig and unpack this as well.) Bright makes a case for having students re-write questions using the same mathematical thinking so that the new questions reflect real experiences in the community. Students are brought into the classroom and at the same time we are acknowledging the limitations of the texts and prompting deeper conversations.

Even in the most prescribed of curricula, we can supplement. We can question. We can provide opportunities for student voice and exploration. We can take news events that students hear only bits and pieces of and decide to teach about them. Often our work means we must educate ourselves.

In "Responding to Tragedy: 2nd graders reach out to the Sikh community," Dale Weiss, the second grade teacher, describes the need to address a killing at a Sikh temple within the community of her school and the method she uses for her planning (Weiss, 2013). The work began with a realization that she knew very little about Sikhs herself and she devised a plan of action for learning that included visiting the temple, meeting people and doing research:

> As I made my usual preparations for the school year, I continued to read about Sikhism and to gather resources. I learned that nonviolence is at the core of Sikhism. I learned that many traditional Sikhs do not cut their hair of those, boys wear a *patka*, men and women wear a

> turban…. Like any religion or culture, there are core beliefs and a breadth of practices (Weiss, 2013, p. 30).

Weiss guides us through the journey she took with her students. She notes that "Through learning about the Sikh community, our class became a community" (Weiss, 2013, p.36). Building a community comes from being engaged in real work together, work that is important to us all. We do not need to engage students with tricks, fun activities and technology; we must engage students by bringing them into their own education addressing important issues.

Bright and Weiss affirm the experience of the students and involve the people and issues of the community. We must work *with* our students, our families, our communities. We are not technicians for programs, teacher guides, or texts. We are teachers. We must adjust, critique, and, if we dare, create curriculum that expands the thinking of our students even as it is anchored in their experiences. As Delpit writes,

> We have to cease attempting to build "teacher-proof" schools with scripted low-level instruction and instead seek to develop (and retain) perceptive, thinking teachers who challenge their students with high quality, interactive, and thoughtful instruction (Delpit, 2012, p. 34).

We can do this. When we stop and assess our books and materials for values, language, and voice, when we make changes to include the students, we are teachers. When we talk to each other, share our thinking, hold each other accountable and support each other in this work, we are teachers. There are many of us. We have power in our work and our numbers. We cannot be afraid, there is too much at stake, too many of our students are disconnected. We are not technicians nor are we enforcers. We are teachers.

Mantra: Do no harm = stop, get calm, check thinking and language, acknowledge/affirm, engage with, create safety, include = teach

A wise (white woman) superintendent I worked *with* started her meetings by saying, "We are part of the problem; we are part of the solution." So, my colleagues, we have a lot to do, change for ourselves and our systems. We must know ourselves and therefore understand how we are limiting others. The system has endowed us with immense power as teachers. We must use it to include, not control; to work *with* and *in* community. We must be very intentional with our language; language can hurt and restrict or be empathic and inclusive. We must see, hear, and affirm what students say by words or actions. We must keep our students safe emotionally as well as physically. We must change the curriculum so that it first meets our students and validates lived experience as it extends and expands perspectives and ideas.

It is hard work to change. We have to talk to each other, remind each other of our work and support each other. We must practice having hard and honest conversations. We must learn to work with our students, families and communities. We can use the mantras; initiate dialogue about the components with our students, our families. We can use the process and we can teach it.

Stop: In order to break habits, first we stop. We need this pause to so that we can think before we act.

Get calm: In stressful situations, we must use calming strategies to regulate ourselves before we can even begin to check our thinking.

Check: We must check the thinking behind our feelings, the thinking behind our initial thoughts, the thinking behind the curriculum, posters and the environment, and make corrections to our thinking.

Change language: We must be intentional with our language, make it inclusive.

Acknowledge/Affirm: We must acknowledge when we cause pain through omission, denial, deficit thinking, control.

Engage with: In order to change relationships, understandings and practices we must engage in dialogue with students and community.

Create safety: We must examine the environment and context of our schools, understand what it means and make changes so that our students are *and* feel safe.

Include: Changes in thinking, language, interpretation, classroom content must bring our students into the center of our work. We must begin by knowing our students and having our students' experiences visible and validated by classroom experience.

We have our work cut out for us. We must be teachers, informed, caring and courageous.

With love, care and respect,

Laura

References

ACLU. (2016, November 1). Impairing Education: Corporal Punishment of Students with Disabilities in US Public Schools. NY, NY.

Bailey, B. (2011). *Managing Emotional Mayhem: the five steps for self-regulation.* Olviedo, FL: Loving Guidance.

Blad, E. (2016, September 14). Federal Officials Urge Clear, Limited Roles For Police in Schools. *Education Week, 36*(4), p. 1.

Brady K, Fortin, M. & Porter, D. (2010). *Rules in School: Teaching Discipline in the Classroom.* Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children, Inc.

Brasher, J. (2016, September 26). *Pyramid Model could reduce preschool expulsion rate.* Retrieved from news.vanderebilt.edu: https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2016/09/26pyramid-model-could-reduce-high-expulsion-rate

Bright, A. (2016, Summer). The Problem with Story Problems. *Rethinking Schools*, 14-19.

Coates, T-N. (2015). *Between the World and Me.* NY: Spiegel & Grau.

Delpit, L. (2012). *"Multiplication is for White People" Raising Expectations for Other People's Children.* NY: The New Press.

Dentin, P. (2007). *The Power of Our Words.* Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children, Inc.

Editors, NYTimes. (10/9/16). *Racial Profiling in Preschool.* NY: New York Times.

Fialka, J. (2016). *What Matters: Reflections on Disability, Community and Love.* Toronto, Canada: Inclusion Press.

Greene, R. (2014). *Lost at School.* NY: Scribner.

Johnston, P. (2004). *Choice Words.* Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Kohl, R. (1994). *"I won't learn from you" and Other Thoughts on Creative Malajustment.* NY: The New Press.

Martin, A., Schwartz, E. (2014). *Making Space for Active Learning: the Art and Practice of Teaching.* NY, NY: Teachers College Press.

Meier, D., Knoester, M. & D'Andrea (2015). *Teaching in Themes*. NY, NY: Teachers College Press.

Norte, L. T. (1987). De America Yo Soy [Recorded by L. T. Norte]. On *America Sin Fronteras*. San Jose, CA, USA.

Progressive Education Network (PEN). (2016). *A Message to Colleagues.* PEN Newsletter.

Querry, K.-T. (2015, May 5). Mother furious after 5-year-old was handcuffed following school outburst. Watertown, NY, USA.

Scherer, M. E. (2016, September). Relationships First. (Scherer, Ed.) *Educational Leadership, 74*(1).

Sensoy, O., DiAngelo, R. (2012). *Is everyone really equal?* NY, NY: Teachers College Press.

Skiba, R., Horner, R., Chung, C-G., Rausch, M., May, S. & Tobin, T. (2011). Race is Not Neutral: A National Investigation of African American and Latino Disproportionality in School Discipline. *School Psychology Review, 40*(No. 1), 85-107.

US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (March 21,2014). *Civil Rights Data Collection Data Snapshot: School Discipline.* Washington DC: OCR.

Weiss, D. (2013, Spring). Responding to Tragedy: 2nd graders reach out to the Sikh community. *Rethinking Schools, 27*(3), 30-35.