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...And a Child Shall Lead Them...

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Abstract: In this reflective essay, the author addresses fellow educators and their responsibility to students on issues surrounding the ongoing struggle for civil rights. She links the integration of Little Rock, Arkansas schools in 1957 with the 2018 student protest against gun violence following the Parkland, FL mass shooting. As a facilitator of diversity education and anti-bullying initiatives, her essay is grounded in her experiences with fighting for civil rights. She asserts the need for teachers and students to speak their minds in response to acts of oppression, with special attention to the school integration of Little Rock by pioneers like Elizabeth Eckford and the Little Rock Nine. The author addresses (1) their courage and resilience in persisting through violent opposition to their rights as U.S. citizens, and (2) the role of courageous allies in supporting their advocacy for their own rights and humanity. Speaking directly to teachers and school administrators, she makes points in both heartfelt and empirical ways to urge social activism against bias and bigotry and toward an equitable society. These remarks are based on her experiences at the 2018 JoLLE Winter Conference, being a diversity educator, and her role in helping Elizabeth Eckford reach a new generation of citizens with her autobiographical narrative *The Worst First Day*. This reflection takes into account the legacies of (1) discrimination that continue to affect the U.S., and (2) resistance to oppression that desegregated the Little Rock (and other) school systems. This latter tradition continues today with demonstrations such as those initiated by today's youth to fight back against school violence, particularly that incurred on students through easily-available guns and weapons.

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As a diversity facilitator of more than 30 years, I was so impressed by the 2018 Journal of Language and Literacy Education conference and Dr. Peter Smagorinsky's introspective essay that I jumped at the opportunity to communicate with the next generation of educators and administrators, whom I'll address as you in this essay. As the mother of two, I can't thank the educators who participated in this priceless forum enough for continually seeking new strategies to reach students in divergent populations.

What you are doing matters because it shows that you care. As we shared in our presentation, Reframing Anti-Bullying Education: Leveraging History and Prose to Increase Student Awareness and Resilience kindness and empathy literally saved Elizabeth Eckford's life while she[1] endured the trauma of desegregating Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Our presentation of Elizabeth's experiences was part of an ongoing effort to convey the difference educators can make in a student's world by creating inclusive learning environments and intervening instead of turning a blind eye when bullying behavior is observed.

I can honestly say that I began mentally drafting a message to JoLLE educators while still at the conference, addressing a myriad of training concepts that have proven most effective over the years, such as understanding one's personal socialization process and identifying microaggressions. I felt compelled to write, because I was awe-struck by the intriguing training topics and high level of participant interaction observed in the JoLLE sessions. The energy was contagious. Honestly, there is simply is no better way to inadvertently honor a civil rights icon like Elizabeth, who suffered great personal loss to implement the Supreme Court's 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision to desegregate schools, than to continue your inclusive conversations for the betterment of all students. Elizabeth was truly touched by your efforts.

These are historic times. September 25, 2017 marked the 60th anniversary of the desegregation of Central High. The city of Little Rock held week-long events to honor the sacrifices of nine courageous students who endured a year of torture at the hand of segregationists. On March 26, 2018, we lost Linda Brown, the child who became known as the lead plaintiff in the Brown vs. Board case; and April 4th marks the 50th anniversary of the senseless assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. Today, we focus on his dream, but his message broadened at the end of his life as he vehemently opposed the Vietnam War and spoke out for the poor and disenfranchised. Elizabeth is very cognizant of the passage of time and often notes her own mortality. It is never a conversation that I want to have, none of us do, but it emphasizes her point none of us have time to waste. We must determine how to coexist on this planet. As Dr. King said, "We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools."

The initial focus of my article sought to address the issues that led to our current level of racial division. However, the horrific school shooting that took the lives of 17 students and faculty on February 14th at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida changed my emphasis. Watching Parkland families convey their sorrow due to the pointless slaying of their loved ones was heartbreaking. It was a textbook example of a *victim versus system* focus. In the days following the shooting, it was invigorating to watch the students unabashedly leverage their privilege and platform to

[1] I acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that I can use when referring to individuals in my writing. Throughout this article I use pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

Figure 1. Eurydice Stanley and Elizabeth Eckford speaking at Central HS, Little Rock Arkansas

address the issue of gun violence with notable success, much to the chagrin of gun advocates. The subsequent treatment both parents and students received as they disavowed the use of assault weapons, including the fabrication that they were crisis actors rather than students traumatized by the Parkland shooting was infuriating.

A new era of youth leading the charge for justice is being introduced across the country as massive marches and movements take place demanding student safety and gun reform. You can learn more about their platform at marchforourlives.com. I believe Dr. King would be proud; Elizabeth certainly is. While it is beautiful to watch, it was also frustrating on many accounts to see students be demeaned and maligned for views that differ from many in power. History seems to continually repeat itself as Parkland students receive hateful smears and even death threats. Like the Little Rock Nine, Elizabeth's classmates who desegregated Central High in 1957, the Parkland students' tenacity will benefit the greater good. It is in the country's best interest to march with them *now*, rather than honor their efforts years later, as experienced by the Little Rock Nine.

Outrage due to the Parkland shooting has been significant on both ends of the political spectrum. Unlike the Little Rock Nine, who were threatened with expulsion if they responded in kind to the physical and mental abuse they experienced daily, Parkland survivors have used every form of media available to convey their disdain for the slow response to their requests for increased safety in American schools. As evidenced by the March 24th march, citizens worldwide stand united with the students as they seek gun reform. Those supporters include Central High students, who walked out in honor of the stand taken by the Little Rock Nine 60 years ago with the blessing of their Principal, Nancy Rousseau. Rousseau told NPR, "The Little Rock Nine stood up for what they thought was the right thing for their education and their futures, and that is what the children did today."

As the principal of one of the most famous high schools at the country—a landmark of civil rights education—Rousseau understands the value of civil unrest. She suspended classes for 17 minutes to ensure student participation. Conversely, schools and counties more interested in control than compassion penalized students who walked out of class with everything from detention to suspension. Educators, as you become influencers in your respective institutions of education, choose to be one who inspires rather than intimidates. Regardless of whether or not the proposal for arming teachers comes to fruition, know that educators serve on the frontline of defense for students in numerous ways. Personally, I prefer leaving the issue of physical safety to school resource officers. Instead, we should arm teachers with the knowledge necessary to understand the impact of the invisible wounds left by school bullies.

In our presentation, Elizabeth noted, "None of us have permanent physical scars, but all of us have been deeply hurt. Life goes on." Elizabeth is truly a

survivor. She is reaching back to encourage those who have been deeply pained by life's scars. For them, life does not go on if they choose the option of suicide, a rising phenomenon that we want to see end. In our book, written completely in verse, we wrote:

> Know that bullies are influenced by what they were taught and their own personal insecurities.
>
> When they lash out against your uniqueness, they expose their own self-doubts in a distorted way.
>
> I know what it is to endure the endless taunts of tormenters and persons filled with hate,
>
> But hurting myself or suicide due to someone else's shortcomings was never an option – give tomorrow one more day! (p.113)

The Worst First Day addresses a myriad of issues that reflect the collective pain of our day. For example, in Little Rock, there were two attempts to remove Elizabeth from being hounded by the crowd, but they were from men, one a fellow Little Rock Nine teen, Terrence Roberts. These acts were something Elizabeth knew her mother, whom she refers to as "The Queen of No," would never approve.

In an essay included in *The Worst First Day*, my 15-year-old daughter Grace addresses the issue of human trafficking and the dehumanizing way African American women have been raped, kidnapped, and abused since enslavement by tormentors seeking what they perceived would be an "exotic" sexual encounter. That truth has been overlooked for years in the news. Shaun King addressed the issue in an exposé about girls stolen from Washington DC, and 11-year-old Naomi Wadler gave a moving account during the March for Our Lives by speaking for black girls who have been victimized and whose stories are not told. Now, their stories are being told, and after 60 years, Elizabeth is telling her own story as well.

In *The Worst First Day*, we attempt to bring history to life and make the story applicable to today's reader, particularly young people who like graphic novels. The focus throughout the book is not solely race. It is difference. Elizabeth and the Little Rock Nine were abused due to her difference. That same difference continues to hold students captive in schools across the country.

In the collective experience of the writing team, acts of kindness received during times of trial have had monumental impact. So much so, in fact, that Elizabeth credits two students, Ann (Williams) Wedaman and Ken Reinhardt, with literally saving her life.

Figure 2. Elizabeth Eckford with statue commemorating her role in the Little Rock school desegregation

Figure 3. Eurydice, Christian, and Grace Stanley joing the March For Our Lives movement protesting gun violence

I recently had the opportunity to speak with and thank Ann for her courage. When I shared Elizabeth's comments, Ann was touched that Elizabeth continued to speak so highly of her. I asked Ann what prompted her to speak to Elizabeth every day during their last period of school when her other white classmates ignored, shunned, attacked, or berated the members of the Little Rock Nine. Ann simply and humbly responded, "That is the way I was raised." Ken shared the same sentiment. They saw Elizabeth's humanity, which clearly was not the case for the segregationists who threatened her life.

In the scale of prejudice developed by psychologist Gordon Allport (1958), racial prejudice begins with antilocution (hate speech) and continues through four additional levels: *avoidance*, *discrimination*, *physical attack*, and *extermination*. The Little Rock Nine experienced each of those levels except actual extermination, but it wasn't without trying. Countless weapons were routinely confiscated from the segregationist mobs who tried to prevent Elizabeth and the rest of the Little Rock Nine from attending Central High. Those who could not prevent Elizabeth's attendance at Central High sought to kill her spirit. For years, they succeeded. But now, every time Elizabeth speaks and shares her story, she releases more of the pain that held her captive in past years.

Our greatest hope is that readers will learn from Elizabeth's story and understand the impact of their own socialization. By becoming a student of the socialization process, you can better understand the experiential learning that shaped your own development and craft methodologies that will be impactful in the classroom. By remaining cognizant of the ways students learn and are influenced as you develop your lesson plans, you can better connect with, uplift, and encourage them. I know it is a tall order, but I have had the privilege of conducting this type of training for the Department of Defense. There is nothing like seeing that "lightbulb" turn on in the mind of a student who couldn't grasp concepts they had not previously experienced. Once you have that experience, positively changing lives can become addictive.

Becoming aware of one's socialization can also reduce stereotypes. It will allow you to better see each student for themselves, not the stereotype they represent. If left unchecked, said stereotypes can become validation for personal prejudices. For example, if a teacher believes that African Americans are violent, they could perceive danger in interactions they would normally consider benign with other groups. This misperception has caused a significant pattern to emerge in-school arrests. Children engaging in childish misbehavior are being perceived as aggressive, arrested and fall victim to the school-to-prison pipeline, which creates felons before students can reach graduation. In my hometown of Pensacola, Florida, during the 2014-2015 Escambia County, Florida school year, black students comprised only 35% of the population, yet they represented 77% of student arrests according a report from the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). The report was reflected data from the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice.

I have witnessed reactions change toward my own son Christian, now 12. I have watched him transition from "cute kid" to potential "trouble" as he navigates his way through his first year of middle school, and it is horrifying. It has been quite a wake-up call, one that may prove grounds for a family move in the near future to a school environment where he will be perceived as what he is, a child of *promise*, rather than a potential *problem*. Perception can become reality.

Although Escambia County is a national leader in the school-to-prison pipeline, its national standing seems to be a best-kept community secret. When I shared my concerns with one of my son's teachers, he remarked, "That doesn't happen here." He was partially correct. More than likely, it wouldn't happen…to him or his children. Our discussion represents yet another frustrating barrier between parents and educators, particularly teachers who do not, as Covey (2013) says, "seek first to understand." As with most things, one is aware of issues that affect them. Seek to understand issues outside of your normal purview or comfort zone. You'll be amazed at the world outside the walls of your daily experience.

Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris killed 13 and injured 21 in the first high-profile school massacre in Columbine, Colorado, April 20, 1990. This year, on the 19th year of their horrific assault, there will be another student protest at 10 AM. You can learn more at #NationalSchoolWalkout. Klebold and Harris were bullied in school and committed suicide at the scene. It is interesting to note that our current school "zero-tolerance" rules which disproportionately affect students of color were enacted after their case. In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander describes such occurrences as part of a racial caste system where "a stigmatized racial group is locked into an inferior position by law and custom" (p. 12).

Invariably, whenever I conduct training regarding the school-to-prison pipeline with adults, the discussion almost always turns to the inevitability of African Americans going to jail due to the programming they receive from their music and their culture. However, when I speak with students, the discussion focuses on how to break perceptual barriers and stereotypes. I prefer interacting with students. They give me hope for the future.

Unfortunately, students trapped within the prison pipeline are essentially the victims of overt efforts to reinstitute segregation, resulting in students of color serving as filler for privatized prisons before they even have had an opportunity to live their lives and contribute to society. Until we recognize such occurrences and the discriminatory motivations behind them, the cycle will continue. Efforts to segregate through prison are not new. In *Slavery by Another Name*, Douglas Blackmon (2008) exposes the practice of involuntary servitude that continued after the Civil War through World War II. We must be cognizant of the legacy of racism if we are to have any hope of ending its inheritance.

To move forward together as a people, we must demand a level playing field *for all*. On April 26, 2018, the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), founded by Bryan Stevenson, a crusader for justice. Stevenson is expanding his courtroom battles by showing the *conditions* that led to false arrests and senseless lynchings to the world. The EJI will open the Legacy Museum & National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. Counts' iconic photograph of Elizabeth will be featured in the museum as yet another reflection of racism in America and the necessity of justice for all. In *Just Mercy,* Stevenson (2014) shares his experiences representing "…the poor, the incarcerated and the condemned" (p. 17). He shares powerful lessons observed in our judicial system, particularly the

unfair prosecutions and convictions of abused and neglected children trapped in the school-to-prison pipeline, who were "...prosecuted as adults and suffered more abuse and mistreatment after being placed in adult facilities" (p.17).

We need to end the mindset that would so easily condone the criminalization of our future. Hopefully, Stevenson's effort will start much-needed conversations that have not taken place in the United States. It did in South Africa through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I had the opportunity to conduct human relations training for the South African National Defense Force in 2000 after Transformation. I was incredulous when training participants shared the admissions heard through the commission in the hope of achieving racial reconciliation. In exchange for full admissions, assailants were not held accountable for their offenses. Mr. Dullar Omar, former South African Minister of Justice, noted, "...a commission is a necessary exercise to enable South Africans to come to terms with their past on a morally acceptable basis and to advance the cause of reconciliation." The admissions gave family members the opportunity to know what happened to their loved ones.

The Equal Justice Initiative museum features numerous images of American lynchings and documents the names of 4,400 lynchings America has as of yet to admit to the sin and the legacy of once socially accepted practices condoned a very short time ago. Those who do not understand the significance of the Charlottesville white nationalist weekend rally may gain a deeper understanding by visiting the national memorial. The ultimate goal is peace, redemption and reconciliation, which does not come without truth. In *The Worst First Day*, Elizabeth notes, "If we have honestly acknowledged our painful but shared past, then we can have reconciliation" (p. 102).

As I have attempted to share with recent examples, prejudice did not end in 1957 after the 101st Airborne secured the safe passage of the Little Rock Nine into Central High. Now, overt policies have become covert, and even seemingly benign issues such as zero-tolerance school policies are inadvertently affecting students who were not the policy's intended target. *The Worst First Day* seeks to help readers see the impact that bias, racism, and discrimination can have through Elizabeth's teen eyes. The autobiography was written by a diverse team that focused on illuminating different perspectives of Elizabeth's first-person experiences. Grace ensured that the writing retained the interest of youth. For this reason, the book is written completely in verse. As a retired Army officer, I focused on the military operation side of Elizabeth's days at Central High by including executive and military documentation from what was known as "Operation Arkansas." Combined, *The Worst First Day* provides a historical backdrop and civics lesson that most readers aren't privy to in an autobiography. Beyond the writing, the book is complemented by essays to include Principal Rousseau, Robin White, the Superintendent of the Little Rock Central High National Park Site, and the compelling photography of Kirk Jordan and Pulitzer Prize-nominated photographer Will Counts.

The photo that Counts captured of Elizabeth being surrounded by hostile segregationists became one of the most iconic images of the 20th century. Since photographs weren't available to depict incidents in school, we recreated Elizabeth's memories through the compelling graphic artwork of Harding University senior Rachel Gibson. We wanted readers to understand the utter pandemonium and bitter violence Elizabeth and the Little Rock Nine experienced every single day while simply attempting to obtain an education.

Through the book, we hope to inspire expectations of excellence and denounce stereotypes that can become self-fulfilling prophecies. The Brown v. Board of Education case was won with compelling testimony elicited by Thurgood Marshall and his legal team from Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark. The researchers placed two dolls, black and white, in front of African American children and asked them to point out the "good" doll. By and large, the white doll was chosen without hesitation, because that was all the students saw in a world dominated by segregation. Their internalization of such a self-pathologizing perception was among the most compelling testimony against segregated schools.

The Brown decision was supposed to end segregation and prevent the pervasiveness of policies that led to such widespread, self-depreciative beliefs among African Americans, but it took years to actually implement. Students continue to be impacted today. One of the most effective ways to break the stronghold of influences such as the media and peers begins at home and is greatly influenced by perceptive, caring educators. Please remain aware and question policies and procedures that disproportionately have a negative effect on one particular group, whether the group is discriminated against by race, sex, sexual orientation, or another demographic feature. Remain vigilant and serve as an advocate for students who are not empowered to speak for themselves, as Anne and Ken did on behalf of Elizabeth. Look at the impact, not only the intent of school discipline. Do not allow your students to fall victim to the graveyard of broken spirit through socially accepted injustice approved by school leadership. Be vocal about practices that marginalize. Their influence can last a lifetime.

In countless training sessions I have conducted over the years, it has not been unusual to see audiences wide-eyed at the day's conclusion. When I served as an Instructor at the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute, we provided 16 weeks of intense training identifying personal biases and societal discrimination. Our students had the challenging responsibility of helping commanders address contentious issues such as racism and discrimination within their commands. After their training, many participants felt overwhelmed by the discriminatory behavior that they simply had not been able to see prior to their immersion. The greatest benefit that I see to JoLLE's educational work is the invaluable exposure to issues that may not have been part of one's awareness without this venue. Maximize the opportunity by not only reading the articles, but also interacting within the JoLLE community. Visionaries flourish with the support of like-minded spirits. Rise together.

Without fail, after training I am usually asked the $100,000 question, "What can I do?" It is easy to feel overwhelmed by institutional discrimination, especially when one considers its enormity. I am as taken aback by some of the images in *The Worst First Day*—to include citizens holding signs saying "Race Mixing is Communism" or the Little Rock Nine being escorted by the 101st Airborne—as I am

Figure 5. Illustration from *The Worst First Day* that depicts the results of the study conducted by Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark

by listening to the gun lobbyists make disparaging remarks about Parkland students. Although it can be overwhelming, we must begin where we can: with ourselves, by expanding our personal knowledge base and becoming aware of our personal biases. It is only when we challenge our own stereotypes that we can ascertain the source of our beliefs and change behaviors that do not coincide with professed values. Introspection can uncover hidden biases that originated from a grandparent, rather than reflecting your current beliefs. Invariably, we are creatures of habit. We do what is familiar until we recognize something different. If you want to expand your worldview, expand your circle of influence. If everyone you know looks and thinks the way you do, it can create tunnel vision. Expand your personal influences. It will expand your mind. Angela Davis said, "I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept." Educators, please follow the lead of the Little Rock Nine and the students who spoke out for the voiceless during the March For Our Lives. They were not willing to accept the bullying and bias that they have been subjected to since the school massacre. One of the most resonant voices, Parkland student David Hogg, noted that African American students who survived the Parkland massacre have been silenced. Similar comparisons have been made to students who spoke out against the shootings of unarmed African Americans, especially protestors associated with social justice groups such as #BlackLivesMatter. Hogg's comments give me great hope because he is not only cognizant of his privilege, but he makes every attempt possible to share it whenever possible until there is a level playing field for all. As more voices are heard and opinions understood, more walls come down.

Parkland students are leading the way by standing up and fighting organizational apathy with action and engagement. As you continue your careers as educators known for creating inclusive environments, don't limit your view by seeking out blatant acts of overt racism. Instead, adjust your personal lens to look below the surface to be able to identify the countless layers of institutional discrimination that would impact your students without your intervention. As Ann and Ken proved, your effort can be as simple as treating students with kindness and respect, but it can have a life-long impact.

Bullying excludes, awareness informs, and empathy unites. We salute you because we know that you have one of the most challenging jobs in America. Although you are most likely under-resourced and under-funded, please always remember why you sought to become an educator. Elizabeth Eckford and the Little Rock Nine endured unimaginable cruelty and unabashed hatred by maintaining their vision of desegregating Central High and securing the best education possible.

We thank JoLLE Conference co-chairs S. R. Tolliver and T. Hunter Strickland for the invitation to present in Athens and Principal Editor Heidi Hadley and the entire JoLLE editorial team for being such wonderful hosts. Most importantly, many thanks to each conference participant for your heartfelt response. This was our first conference since publishing our book, and JoLLE will always have a warm place in our hearts. We envision with delighted expectation the classrooms you will positively influence in the future and the educational culture you will transform, one student at a time. The example you set will make discrimination what it should be: taboo and obsolete.

Always remember that what you do makes a difference. Elizabeth often remarks that much progress has been made since her traumatic year at Central High, but she felt compelled to share her experiences in *The Worst First Day* because there is still much work yet to be done. This book is so timely, and will be a powerful means of teaching

students civics lessons by utilizing compelling stories from American history.

We hope readers will remember Central High and remain cognizant of their interactions with others as well as their own behaviors while dealing with those who are different. Educators, never forget the difference you can make by serving as an advocate for your students. Positively influence them and please, don't turn your head in apathy to their distress. A kind word from you can make all the difference in the world, and it could be one of the few they ever receive. Who knows? Years from now, you may have students walk up to you and thank you for saving their lives…just like Elizabeth.

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