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Professing Education

Part I: Protecting the Promise of Public Education

Part II: Creative Insubordination

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Professing Education is a journal of the **Society of Professors of Education**. The Society was founded in 1902 when the National Society of College Teachers of Education was first formed in cooperation with the National Education Association. Among its early presidents were Charles DeGarmo and John Dewey. The Society is an interdisciplinary, professional and academic association open to all persons, both theoreticians and practitioners, engaged in teacher preparation or related activities. Its purpose is to serve the diverse needs and interests of the education professoriate. The Society's primary goal is to provide a forum for consideration of major issues, tasks, problems, and challenges confronting professional educators. We invite you to join us. Visit www.societyofprofessorsofeducation.com for more information.

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From the Editors

The collection of essays and panel discussion in this issue of *Professing Education* challenge us to live fully in this moment in history. The issue includes three sections:

- DeGarmo Lecture 2019 by Brian Schultz, current President of the Society of Professors of Education (SPE);
- Part I: Protecting the Promise of Public Education—A Panel Discussion.
- Part II: Creative Insubordination

In his DeGarmo Lecture, “Spectacular Things, Teaching in the Cracks, and. Need to Push Back,” Schultz writes:

I am concerned that at this moment there is a strong need, an urgency if you will, to push back. There is a need to push back on the stories told about city kids and their capacities. There is a need to push back on the ways in which curriculum is defined. And there is a need to push back on ourselves.

In his lecture, Schultz describes some of the “spectacular things” that can and should happen in classrooms. He explains that supporting students toward their full selves requires that teacher teach “in the cracks” identifying “what is worthwhile” and organizing curriculum around the worthwhile. Most teacher stories end at this point but Schultz takes us on a journey of his self-reflection, and in so doing, he identifies the complexities of power, privilege, class, race, and gender. He points to the structural, systemic obstacles his former students face—and the need to push back. In many ways, the themes from Schultz’s lecture echo implicitly or directly throughout this issue.

In Part I, “Protecting the Promise of Public Education,” Eleanor Duckworth, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Deborah Meier, Domingo Morel, and Diane Ravitch engage in a conversation that connects social policy, the conditions of schooling, daily interactions with

students, and curriculum that matters. The conversation took place via webinar on May 7, 2022, and was sponsored by Critical Explorer. The transcript (lightly edited for readability) is included here. Hughes-McDonnell and Schneier, both teacher educators who invite their students into curriculum through materials and “the worthwhile”, introduce the conversation. In the introduction and in the conversation, the writers/speakers connect public schooling and its current challenges to the future of democracy. They remind us to “push back”—vote, organize, teach curriculum that draws students into thinking, weighing evidence and claims, make decisions, and more.

Part II, “Creative Insubordination,” includes a set of essays that emerged as a result of a panel discussion by the same title at the 2022 American Educational Studies Association (AESA) conference. The panel, which included Brian Schultz, Ming Fang He, Denise Taliaferro Baszile, William Schubert, and Paula Groves Price, engaged the membership of AESA and SPE in critical dialogue about the ways that senior scholars have engaged in “creative insubordination” throughout their careers to instigate change and create spaces where criticality could thrive despite oppressive structures, institutions, and systems. The discussion, grounded in rich life stories, highlighted the subversive and nuanced ways that educators have always had to engage in creative ways to push back against power structures for greater equity. While we find ourselves in a current political context that includes attacks on the teaching of race, practices that affirm LGBTQ identity, and curriculum that challenges single narratives in K-12 and higher education--the stories shared in this issue provide instructive ways for how we must continue to push back to protect and enact the promise of education.

--Mary Kay Delaney, Paula Groves Price,
and Gretchen Givens Generett

Charles DeGarmo Lecture 2019 Spectacular Things, Teaching in the Cracks, and a Need to Push Back¹

Brian D. Schultz

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I really contemplated titling this talk grounded in the language of Charles DeGarmo, particularly from his book *Aesthetic Education*. I decided against the idea to avoid confusion, particularly because there are many parts for which I am critical. Instead, I will weave some of his ideas and thoughts into how I am concerned that at this moment there is a strong need, an urgency if you will, to push back. There is a need to push back on the stories told about city kids and their capacities. There is a need to push back on the ways in which curriculum is defined. And there is a need to push back on ourselves. In my case, my storytelling and writing from over 10 years ago needs to be challenged, disrupted, and re-considered so that both the current (troubling) times are part of the narrative and my romantic views of the experience can be nuanced and complicated.

For those of you who are familiar with DeGarmo's 1913 work, *Aesthetic Education*, you will be reminded of his argument here. I find his demands refreshing as well as troubling, his ideas a reason for celebration as well as a reason for caution, and his absolutism both keen and concerning. Add to this that much of his argument is from a dominant, hetero, and maybe misogynistic perspectives. The contradictions inherent in his work, or at least my analysis of his work, is well situated for how I have been theorizing about education and curriculum and

the ways in which schools and schooling often miss opportunities to engage young people.

In the very first lines of the book, DeGarmo purports that "every child should acquire in school a first-hand aesthetic view of the world, as he now acquires an intellectual or moral view of it" (p. v). DeGarmo goes on to lament how current aesthetic education of the day as second-hand and deficient, missing much of the beauty of the world. By only looking at pictures of things rather than the things themselves, DeGarmo argues that schooling falls short. In this treatise, he names a requisite for combating this: The teacher, he says, needs to be able to find or acquire the seeing of beauty for herself before she is able to help students to see such beauty in nature and in various aspects of daily life.

While this argument is powerful, even profound, DeGarmo's book goes on to name a second requisite that is equally powerful and profound but instead of a reason for joy, it begs us to ask questions. Questions about his meaning. Questions about what assumptions are built into his ideas. And questions about what the implications are of his premise. Because, in this other requisite, DeGarmo states that the "teacher should be able to impart the canons of good taste to the pupil" (p. vi). He goes on further that it is the teacher's role to lead the students to find and discover beauty in everyday life through his version of aesthetic education. Canons? Who gets

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to define such canons? Good taste? Whose good taste? And what is good taste, anyway? Who decides? Who does not? Why not? Whose voices are heard and whose are silenced?

It is in this space that I situate this lecture titled: *Spectacular Things, Teaching in the Cracks, and a Need to Push Back*.

Touchstones and Pushing Back

I know for a fact, if people want to make change, they have to stand up.

Demetrius, 2013, in *In These Times*

A decade after I taught fifth-grade in Room 405 at Carr Community Academy, I received a voicemail from my former student, Demetrius. That Demetrius would reach out to me was not a surprise; our relationship had transcended the classroom and I had maintained regular contact with him and several of his classmates from that school year. But the fact that Demetrius had left a voicemail was unusual. Voicemails, especially for millennials like Demetrius, were reserved for more urgent matters.

Upon calling back, I was relieved to hear good news. Demetrius explained that a story had appeared in the progressive news magazine *In These Times*. The article detailed his involvement with the Fight for \$15 and the Workers Organizing Committee of Chicago, a group pushing for a minimum wage increase in a larger effort to curtail gun violence (Schuhrke, 2013). Demetrius not only needed a raise, the article reported, but he was also demanding a safer work environment. As a Walgreens stock clerk at the time, Demetrius was struggling to make ends meet. In addition to the low pay at this job, the Walgreens location also lacked security guards. This expense was apparently eliminated due to costs, even though a worker had recently been shot and killed while on the clock. Although Demetrius was grateful for a job, he wanted and needed more. Rightfully so.

As his former teacher, I would have been uplifted if the story simply conveyed Demetrius's involvement in fighting for what he believed in to help himself or his community. What caught my

attention in the article, though, was how Demetrius cites his experiences in fifth grade when he saw the potential of grassroots organizing as a reason to get involved in these causes related to workers' rights. Demetrius had carried these skills with him for all those years. He knew from firsthand experience the power of identifying a problem, coming up with a solution, and taking action accordingly. A competency learned in fifth grade when as an eleven-year-old Demetrius helped fight for a new community school building had a profound and lasting effect. Retaining the skill into adulthood, Demetrius was more woke to issues around him: He was willing to stand up to make change for himself and the community of other workers like him.

In a frame offered by DeGarmo, Demetrius could have been looking to increase beauty and pleasure and perhaps safety and security and better opportunities in his everyday life—while diminishing what DeGarmo argued as “ugly” (p. 5, 6).

Fifteen years have passed since I spent time in the classroom—Room 405—that I shared with the inquisitive and courageous fifth-grade students at Carr Community Academy in Chicago. I fondly recall our time together as we challenged not only a city and school board to make good on their promise for a better school building for the neighborhood, but also pushed back on the all-too-common deficit-oriented stories about schooling and urban kids growing up in housing project communities. Such narratives are built into how many people think about historically marginalized neighborhoods, the schools in such communities, and in turn, the students who are expected to learn within them.

The assumptions—often stated as facts—about city kids is that they don't care about their education. Or, that kids raised in housing projects are not capable of doing sophisticated work. Youth from urban areas need a back-to-the-basics, rote approach to their education because they lack necessary foundational skills. Such young people require remediation before they could take on inquiry-based projects. Urban

children don't have what it takes to succeed in an increasingly global society. And, on and on. The assumptions proliferate.

Such perspectives do not happen by chance. Popular media perpetuate them. Newspaper headlines about urban areas regularly focus on pathology and despair. Hollywood productions frame children and families from urban communities of color within a deficit narrative. Federal education guidelines narrow curricula. Publishing companies commodify student learning. For-profit companies seek to privatize public education. School districts and their principals regulate teachers with expectations gleaned from state and national standards. Teachers wrestle with tensions of either connecting with their students or meeting outside mandates.

But my time teaching and learning from, with, and alongside the fifth graders in Room 405 a decade and a half ago and through subsequent engagement with my former students over the years since resists these assumptions. My experience was exceedingly different from such usual rhetoric about urban kids. The students from my classroom contradicted most of these very ideas. These particular young people demonstrated resilience and hopefulness. They brought community assets and funds of knowledge to our classroom and beyond it. They developed a sophisticated curriculum centered on broad notions of what they believed was worthwhile (beautiful?). They were resourceful and successful with limited and often substandard resources.

The students wanted not only to improve their educational opportunities and the place in which they were to learn—seeking that aesthetic—but they also pushed for something better for their community and for the family members who would follow them. Room 405 collectively satisfied standards and expectations for student performance not for their own sake but because doing “good work” helped them to solve problems in which they identified—perhaps, reflective of the notions of good taste in

which DeGarmo demanded. As teacher and students collaborating, we created a culturally relevant and responsive curriculum. The students not only had a lot to say about their learning and their ideas, but also had the persistence, presence, and the ability to reframe debates that forced others to reconsider their assumptions about urban education. But importantly, it was the students who engaged in the counter-narrative, not me as their teacher imparting such ideas on to them.

Our experiment in teaching and learning, where we co-created curriculum based on the curiosities, needs, and questions the students raised, continues to counter-narrate about city kids and education. Instead of succumbing to the common trope that focuses on deficit thinking and low expectations for schools in city centers, Room 405 showed the intelligence and capabilities, the creativity and imaginations these particular young people possessed—clearly they were able to vision something different, something better from within. *Their good taste* was inclusive of other people's canon and they knew to demand it.

These times became a touchstone for my ongoing thinking about what it means to be a teacher, the power of students, and the role of school in society. Since chronicling our school year together as we journeyed to fight for a new community school building, I have considered a lot about teaching, learning, and curriculum. Arguing that we must listen to and learn from students (2011), I contend that we need to rethink relationships in the classroom and how we determine the value of knowledge. Just as DeGarmo pushes me to ask questions about his meaning of aesthetics and insists that as a teacher I must “diligently practise the arts” (p. 15), my former students and my reflections from that time likewise challenge me: Who gets to decide what is taught in schools? Who does not? We must find ways to go beyond the walls of the schoolhouse and into the public sphere in order to allow for authenticity in curriculum. Engaging in public pedagogy, students and teachers jointly

can negotiate obstacles and be pushed to the brink of their collective comfort zones (Schultz, Baricovich, & McSurley, 2010). Emphasizing the role of social justice in curriculum making, teachers and whole schools can find openings and opportunities within rigid educational systems in order to become student-centered and action-focused in their classrooms (2017). Collectively, these ideas guide my thinking about how we can look to kids to create better schooling experiences. It should be no wonder that every kid wants to make, build, create, and do for themselves and their communities if they were afforded the chance. In this way, kids can be teacher educators if we center curriculum itself around them rather than having it be driven by specific content knowledge or outside prescription. The perspectives and intuition that young people and community insiders alike bring to a classroom has tremendous power in how teachers can approach their classrooms and the curriculum within it.

Throughout this scholarship, I continuously reflect on my time with the young people from Room 405. What the ten to twelve-year-olds taught me has reinforced my belief in the potential of and necessity for focusing on what students deem worthwhile. In this way, *Spectacular Things* can happen for sure.

My subsequent engagement with other children and their teachers in kindergarten through high school classrooms as well as in my own courses at the university level with undergraduate and graduate students demands that we continue to look to ways we can rethink how we approach teaching and learning. One thing that I understand more fully now than I did when I was teaching in the fifth-grade classroom is that we must continuously strive to find ways to connect with the young people in the classroom in order to inhibit bad educational policies that create barriers at every turn.

Curriculum Definitions and Pushing Back

After *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* was published in 2008, I went on a scattershot speaking tour sharing the hopeful story of our classroom with teachers and teacher educators. Inevitably during Q&A sessions after a book talk or lecture, there would be a question from the audience asking how I was able to “get away with” not doing the prescriptive, mandated curriculum with my students?

My intention then, as it is today, was to challenge the audience to rethink what curriculum is and what curriculum ought to be. Responding in these ways reinforced my idea that the questions that young people raise can be the essence of curriculum. This idea challenges so many of those familiar definitions of curriculum that are perpetuated in teacher preparation programs, in classrooms, schools, school districts, and even how policy makers at the state and national level think about what needs to be covered in classrooms. Just as the students in Room 405 pushed back on the assumptions regarding education and urban youth of color, the way we think about curriculum can be a form of resistance in times when curriculum is continuously being reduced, weakened, limited, or commodified.

Leaning heavily on the celebrated work of William Schubert (1986/1997), I propose to my students that a definition of curriculum may be best suited as an act of trying to answer the “what’s worthwhile” questions: what is worth knowing, doing, being, thinking about, wondering, and pondering. It is not totally at odds with what they suggest, but it is certainly different from how they typically think about curriculum. What would happen if teachers brought this kind of alternative definition—albeit a philosophical stance—of curriculum to their students in their classrooms? Acknowledging that this could be an abstract argument, I go beyond simply telling them about this alternative idea suggesting ways that they may begin to contemplate such an approach in their own classrooms.

Can this be part of the aesthetic that DeGarmo desired?

By asking young people to name issues in the community or problems central to their lives that they want to solve, my challenge is to push educators to shift their thinking. For many of them this can feel uncomfortable at first. The practice is neither what they are used to nor is it what most experienced in school themselves. Nor can this approach be practically located in many teacher preparation programs' methods courses or in the basal reader. Rather, this way of engaging in curriculum encourages a rethinking of common practices.

Because, the common practices echo a critique offered by DeGarmo and many curriculum scholars today: they tend to focus on efficiency, rote learning, decontextualized curriculum, etc. "Factory methods" DeGarmo argues "have tended to develop efficiency, but also uniformity and sometimes plainness, if not ugliness, in their products" (p. 16). In this way, he is literally writing about products coming from a factory, but for me, this can transfer to his educational argument as well: Students are not taught in schools to critically think, contemplate, develop their own artfulness and this is highly problematic. Problematic for keeping kids in school. Problematic for having teachers stay in classrooms. Problematic because schooling is falling short.

While the alternative curriculum definition Schubert, and now me, and many others argue for pushes back against conventional approaches to schooling, it also has the very deep potential of reshaping how students are viewed. The method values their sensibilities and by its form alone it shows that they have ideas worth studying. It demonstrates a caring approach. It creates in them a sense of worth. It honors their humanity.

But it would not be fair for me to merely challenge future teachers in the abstract. Providing soon-to-be educators with multiple avenues to see, explore, and even experience for themselves what the practice looks like is

important. Some of the examples are culled from my own classroom teaching experiences. Others are from educators whose books inspired me to try an alternative approach for myself. And still others are from former students or teachers whose classrooms I have spent time observing problem-posing, student-centered, and action-focused curriculum in practice—in many ways these are the teachers who are teaching in the cracks—finding ways to honor the full humanity of the students in their classrooms. Beyond seeing how others made sense of this approach to curriculum, I have endeavored to create a college classroom environment where my students can have direct, firsthand experience engaging in this form of curricular practice. Leveraging *social action curriculum projects*, my university students name a problem in their community that they want to solve and then work to solve it. The problem identification and subsequent action planning provides university students a chance to engage in the practice for themselves. They see how they may find openings in their classrooms. They can align the work to standards or other mandates. They negotiate obstacles and overcome barriers. They feel motivated by something about which they are passionate. They infer how the engagement could transfer to their own classrooms.

What is magical about this approach is that the motivation—the hook—is built in. Not because of some kind of extrinsic reward, or fear, or classroom token economy, but as a result of the topics and issues having merit and value for those involved. After all, it is the students who have identified these very ideas in the first place. This problem-posing approach as Paulo Freire theorized fifty years ago, honors students and their perspectives. From there, curriculum becomes culturally and contextually responsive, not as an add on, but as a part of the teachers and student endeavoring together.

So take this as my prompt—albeit my version of good taste and beauty in and for classrooms. Imagine how you can create curriculum with students that is more culturally

relevant, more contextually responsive, and inevitably more focused on the concerns of the young people in your classroom. Like Demetrius, they may very well grow up to remember it.

Storytelling and Pushing Back

In 2004 NPR's *This American Life* visited Room 405. Host Ira Glass shared what he had seen in our classroom with a national audience: students working against all odds to get the city to deliver on a new school building. In the episode Glass describes me as idealistic. I admit I was disappointed at least initially; as a teacher in my second year, the characterization struck me as condescending and dismissive of my fervor for the students' project, and my strong belief that change was within grasp through their agency. But in the years since the story aired, I have come to celebrate the episode's insights and advocacy for our classroom. The episode titled, "Desperate Measures," opens with the Room 405 students to frame the hour-long show as "Stories of people stuck in unfixable situations who try desperate measures. Sometimes these are inventive, sometimes they're ingenious, sometimes they even work." The episode captures the students' fight in this vein, but it also calls me out as a bit of a romantic. I wanted my students to push to get a new school. I was willing to share my authority with young people. I thought we could challenge the dominant narrative and the sorting machine (Spring, 1989) that schools, particularly ones serving urban housing project communities, have become. Perhaps at the time I chafed under a fear that "idealism" would mark our project as impossible. Perhaps I interpreted the characterization as unhelpful criticism that would stand in the way of change. But given all of the damning educational policies that truncate the potential of schools, I have since come to understand that idealism in teachers is a good thing, maybe even necessary. And to that end, Ira Glass's perceptions were prescient.

Less than enthusiastic about the episode when it aired, now re-reading my book (ten years after its publication and fifteen years after its

events took place) I see that romanticism and idealism crop up in my storytelling. While many of the stories and their attendant ideas have only strengthened my stances on curriculum, teaching, and learning, some elements do strike me as *too* romantic. For instance, when Ira Glass asks me repeatedly while recording for the episode what will happen if the students fail, I was steadfast in my responses that the endeavor itself was worthwhile. While this may be true, my naïveté of Chicago's machine politics likely clouded my judgement related to potential fallout of such pursuits. Other times, complicated matters were not complicated. At some points my writing conveys sentiments that "I just figured it out," when in fact I often found and continue to find myself pondering and reflecting on our interactions in Room 405. At other moments my storytelling is too neatly packaged. For example, when one Room 405 student, Crown, refers to the idea of aligning the efforts of the class with that of a particular U.S. Senate candidate as analogous to signing a record deal, the swiftness of storytelling and precision of my memories of the classroom talk loses the essence of the classroom interactions. My narrative fails to capture some of the inherent messiness of how classroom discussions, like this one and others, unfold. As the old adage goes, with age comes wisdom. As a time capsule of my thinking, pondering, and wondering at a time of tremendous growth, the first version of book is expressive of the ambition of a new teacher. Now of course these moments and many others would be written very differently. My aim would be to present more complication in order to provide other teachers a glimpse into the messiness of teaching.

While stressing that what we took on together was transformative for all of us, I want to more overtly push back and problematize how it all came together. My social location is part of the story. Although I was actively trying to teach against the teacher-hero, White savior ideas that are unfortunately a common genre for first-person teacher narratives, my storytelling of the

experience nevertheless deserves more critique. Troubling my experiences and storytelling about teaching an entirely African-American group of fifth-graders is part of the story. My access to resources and the benefits of a system that privileges White heterosexual men represents a large part of the reason there was much traction to the story that emerges from our endeavor in creating curriculum together. It fit that Hollywood storyline. It supposedly helps explain how “those” kids were able to “do that.”

If, however, I believed then as I do now that by looking to the students and letting them lead me and our forays into city politics, then my idealism was a driving force for something profound. Having been involved with teacher preparation programs at multiple universities, I can see how teacher educators can quickly destroy the idealism of so many future teachers. The sense of what is possible, of what is imaginable, of what is not yet is often squelched, squashed, and smashed by myopic ways many professors (who themselves often feel hand-tied) interpret standards, expectations, mandates, and the possibilities of curriculum. In this way, don't we need more idealistic teachers who can imagine something that is not yet? To envision pedagogy that will inherently connect with and intrinsically motivate young people? This is not a utopian perspective riddled with inexperience or naiveté of novice teachers, but rather one that could come from not having been stuck within the system. Along with that idealism, though, needs to come critical introspection, contemplation, problematizing, and troubling one's positionality.

In the preface and acknowledgements of the book's first edition, I wrote about how the book emerged from my experiences in the classroom with students. While this is an accurate assessment, my journey needs more complication. Whereas I attempt to make prominent my students' voices and their stories, there are rough edges particularly given my positionality as a White, male teacher of considerable privilege. It is critical to acknowledge that my recollections from that time

are clouded by an immersion in powerful experiences that created increased exposure for Room 405. Further, writing a book about one's own experience as well as other people's children is inherently complicated. In this case in particular, the stories that made up the book make for good reading about a group of students who pushed back on the system as they asked for a fair chance at a more equal educational opportunity. That elementary-aged students ever need to point the finger at this issue is a shameful fact about our society. That children have to ask for an education equivalent to their more affluent counterparts is a baffling reality in the United States.

This also presents a serious contradiction. I feel gratified to have shared in the experiences where my students fought for something beyond themselves and for their families while also functioning as part of a system that celebrates stories about my students within academia. By telling *their* story, I advance *my* career. Therefore, I must ask what the students get out of it?

Demetrius is a good example. While writing this, I met with my former student over dinner one night. We discussed the powerful experiences we shared together in his fifth-grade year and the time since. Just as Demetrius was excited about the article written about his organizing efforts several years earlier in a way that highlighted for me that he had gotten something out of our endeavor, his current reflections point to this as well. But it's also clear that he struggles with the reality of circumstance and factors associated with growing up in a historically marginalized community and going to a school serving a housing project in Chicago. Demetrius has since earned a trade school degree in electrical maintenance. He speaks proudly about his persistence in getting the degree, but his frustrations about the debt and his not working in this field because of barriers with transportation complicate his accomplishments. He works multiple jobs in restaurant and

hospitality in order to pay the bills in a system that is set up to keep him running in place.

It's important meanwhile to juxtapose my work. As much as I am committed to social justice, and raising the consciousness of my students in both K-12 and university classrooms, it remains a reality that teaching and writing about teaching in this manner positions me within the academy in ways that allow me to perpetuate a career while my students continue to wrestle with contextual factors that precipitated such an experience in the first place. As an educational professional contributing to its literature, I am cognizant of such systemic problems. Yet, I am hopeful for change, aware of contradictions as I am ambitious to overcome them, and committed to finding where these ideas intersect and oppose one another.

A New School for Other People's Kids

I think it's nice but, why couldn't they keep Carr right here? New windows. They built another section to the school. I wish they had done this when we were fighting for our school. That's crazy. They could have done this for us when we were here. I think they were trying to get us—they had a plan. They knew they were going to close the buildings down just to wipe us out of the way.... They are going to keep this for those kids—different race kids but not African-American kids...and keep us on the other side.

Interesting. When we wanted a new school, why couldn't they build us a new school? Why couldn't they do this for us? I just hope they let the kids that want to make it from Cabrini come here to this school. They can be a part of this school, too.

Malik, 2011

It was about seven years after the Chicago Board of Education (CBE) shut down Carr Community Academy. The school building was in the midst of a transformation, a full scale rebuild of the structure that would reopen as a new school—a school for *other* people's kids, that is. Not kids from Room 405. Not kids from the area once known as Cabrini Green.

The CBE initially sought millions of dollars for the Carr property in the booming real estate market of the mid-2000's. But once the bubble burst, the CBE entered a 99-year ground lease agreement, initially with the City of Chicago. Subsequently, the city subleased the property to the Catholic Bishop of Chicago/Archdiocese of Chicago (Chicago Public Schools, 2018). That one of Chicago's highly-coveted selective enrollment public high schools was already leasing a vacant Archdiocese parish school building a block away from Carr as its annex, this arrangement seemed mutually beneficial. As part of the deal, the Chicago Archdiocese was permitted to make additions as well as extensive interior and exterior renovations to the Carr building. This updated school would be necessary to create a draw for a parochial school for the children of new area residents.

While this makeover was taking place at what was once Carr school, I visited the construction site with one of my former students, Malik. As Malik and I walked around the fenced-in construction zone to get a glimpse of the changes being made to the building's facade, we shared stories and reflected on past pursuits. Like Demetrius, Malik was in my fifth-grade classroom when he and his classmates fought for a better space in which to learn. Our class challenged the city and school board to make good on its promises of a new school for the community. Malik and I also talked about how dramatic changes to the neighborhood affected his family, who first relocated to the city's Southside, and eventually to Indiana.

But Malik's sentiments above—the ones that open this section—speak for themselves. Malik keenly felt that a building renovated to fix the very shortcomings he and his Room 405 peers had named years earlier, from the lack of gym, cafeteria, and an auditorium to frosted-over windows with bullet holes was a slap in the face. Despite their ardent and courageous campaign for a new building, Room 405 students were not granted their ideal solution. Instead of a brand-

new building, the Room 405 fifth-graders saw only piecemeal remedies to the shameful problems within their school building. The new renovations to the building itself were troubling enough; Malik was at no loss for words in calling the situation as he saw it. As we spoke, I reflected on how his lived experiences from his initial time in Cabrini to the years since lend themselves to his understanding of the blatant racial implications of the city's gentrification effort and their subsequent fallout. Chicago's actions toward displacement more than imply to people living in housing project communities that the land itself is more important to the city than its residents.

I would revisit the new Catholic school again, this time with Demetrius, whose visceral response to what could have been a building completed for Carr Community Academy echo Malik's thoughts:

I don't know. It's just like (I) feel like cursing. I just want to, feel like saying a bad word because all that work we put in, to have another sign on it at the same spot—St. Benedict. I'm not saying I don't like St. Benedict or nothing like that, it's just Carr could've been that light....

It's a nice building, very nice. It could've been Carr. You see how they still got the sides like we had. They really just made over it, which they could've done with us. That could've been the Carr building right here.... I probably wanted my kids to go there or something.

Responses of Malik and Demetrius to what they interpret as both beauty and the marginalization of their community are unsurprising and should give us pause. The questions and frustrations that comprise their perspectives should challenge us to think about the implications of school reform policies, resources allocated, and initiatives—particularly ones meant to improve educational outcomes in large urban school districts—that have lasting detrimental effects on not just the individual students but society as a whole.

The Context of School Reform in Chicago and Beyond

Carr Community Academy was shut down amidst school reform efforts that were occurring across the country. In Chicago, a branding for this reform was called Renaissance 2010 and it was launched the same year Carr was closed. Partnerships formed between business and philanthropic community leaders. The effort was led by the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago, and it resulted in the CBE utilizing Renaissance 2010 as justification to close scores of what the district deemed “failing” or “underperforming” schools. The intention was to reopen 100 new schools within ten years in their place in the form of charter, performance, contract, or (eventually) turnaround schools. The new schools would operate outside of the union contract. Although state law limited the number of charter schools, the mayor's office and district leadership found ways to let charters proliferate, namely by allowing multiple school campuses to open using a single charter (Orfield & Tuce, 2016). Despite mixed, uneven, inconsistent, or sometimes less than promising track records of charter schools in Chicago (Hall, 2017; Institute for Metropolitan Opportunity, 2014; Lipman, 2011; Saltman, 2012/2016) and the significant disruptions caused by school closures (Farmer et al, 2013), the city went forward with their plan. Renaissance 2010 served multiple purposes and functioned as something of a poster child for trends in school reform. It gave more power to a mayorally-appointed school board, weakened the teachers' union, allowed for-profit entities and corporate interests to begin profiting off the public schools, and created an avenue to militarize the school system through public charter military academies. As Pauline Lipman (2011) contends, these neoliberal educational policies conceived as wholesale reform effort mostly affected schools in already historically marginalized communities of color, while also further segregating students based on race (Hall, 2017).

At the height of the Great Recession, the federal government created a bailout of big banks and insurance companies that were “too big to fail.” In October 2008, right before the elections, President George W. Bush signed into law the Troubled Asset Relief Act (TARP). Likewise, in February 2009 just after taking office, President Barack Obama signed a stimulus bill into law, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). The TARP coupled with ARRA were a deliberate, federal attempt to get the economy on stable footing. Although there were many facets to both TARP and ARRA, one initiative under ARRA was the unprecedented federal funding for education. With so many resources at hand, then U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan would continue to support top-down educational policies as had become the norm during his tenure as the CEO of Chicago Public Schools. This time it was through Race to the Top (RTTT), a means to distribute billions of federal dollars in education to the states. This distribution, however, would come at a steep price. Not only would states vie against one another for federal dollars, they would do so by changing their state laws to support efforts that further privatized public education. In this way, a monetarily-charged federal government established a system that pitted states against one another. Instead of working to uplift educational opportunities for all children in all states, states willing to yield to neoliberal interests would be the biggest winners of the federal funds. For instance, states that had a finite number of charter schools in state law were incentivized through a scoring rubric to change such laws in favor of more charters (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Following this same plan, and according to the Common Core’s own website: “the federal gave competitive advantage to Race to the Top applicants that demonstrated that they had or planned to adopt college- and career-ready standards for all students” (Common Core, 2018). Whereas the Common Core State Standards were not explicitly required, many states met the requirement of adopting common

standards through them in order to be able to compete. The more states succumbed to the interests that would inevitably privatize public education resources, the more attractive they became to the gatekeeping raters for the federal funds. States were put in a difficult position. Still reeling from unfunded mandates associated with No Child Left Behind, many states jumped at the opportunity to change policy in order to capture more money. In order to be eligible to receive funds, states in financial hardship, like Illinois, were willing to adopt educational policies that may not have had students’ best interests in mind.

This process of corporatizing and commodifying public education was front and center in Chicago. Whereas Renaissance 2010 was well underway and had already further marginalized already marginalized communities by closing down schools and destabilizing neighborhoods, ARRA continued the effort with a national level influence. The ARRA funding was hard to turn down, a kind of “indecent proposal” to the Illinois State Board of Education. By succumbing to Race to the Top provisions and policy changes, the stage was set for a showdown between a mayor-controlled and appointed school board and the historically powerful Chicago Teachers Union. In their insightful book, *Worth Striking For* (2012), Isabel Nunez, Gregory Michie, and Pamela Konkol detail the teachers’ demands including smaller class size, job security, fair compensation, and a holistic curriculum. In so doing, the book highlights the pressures that led to the standoff that set a philosophical argument about the purpose of schools and school’s role in society against a bit of corporate-driven educational policy. Allies of the Chicago Teachers Union were those who believed in community uplift, the power of grassroots organizing, and the potential of teachers making a difference in the lives and communities of students. Sick and tired of the continual assault on schools by corporate interests, the teachers and their union challenged educational policies that lessened autonomy, introduced high stakes

evaluations, proliferated charters, and worked to weaken the union. They pushed back. On the other hand, the neoliberal Mayor Rahm Emanuel and his associates believed in allowing for private interests to pervade all parts of government. For instance, in consenting to for-profit interests like banks and investment firm involvement in the schools, Emanuel's administration has let city and school board debt increase, while financial institutions continued to get rich(er) off the backs of or at the expense of children in its public schools (Gillers & Grotto, 2014; Wirz & Gillers, 2016).

As the title of their book suggests, in 2012 the teachers took the hard stand on principle. With more than 90% of the vote authorizing the strike, the Chicago Teachers Union pushed back not only on the market-driven approaches that were becoming more and more common in Chicago but also overcame a recently changed state law—as part of the ARRA/RTTT changes—that demanded a more than 75% union vote to authorize a strike. The law had been previously thought to be strike-proof by corporate profiteers and legislators. In underestimating the rank and file teachers, the state bureaucrats paid the price with a seven-day strike. Whereas the union seemingly won this battle, the fight continued onward and the following year, the school board closed 49 schools exclusively in Black and Brown communities. Again, no surprise as the school board touted cost savings for underutilized schools. In fact, cost savings did not materialize. The vacant buildings did not sell. The massive school closings created more problems with gang violence, student safety, destabilizing neighborhoods, disinvestment in communities, and overall disgust with how the young people were being treated. Taking the fall was the CPS CEO, Jean-Claude Brizard, a school “reform” champion and union adversary handpicked by the Chicago mayor. In his place was the fifth Chicago school CEO in four years, Barbara Byrd-Bennett. A career high-level school executive with experience in Detroit and Cleveland, Byrd-

Bennett was touted as the person who could fix an ailing school system. Unfortunately for the young people in Chicago, Byrd-Bennett brought not only her resume but also the vast cronyism she had had the reputation for in the other cities in which she worked. It was not but three years before her wheeling and dealing caught up with her. After pleading guilty to a 20-million-dollar bribery and kickback scheme from a long-time business partner who had a lucrative no-bid contract with Chicago Public Schools, Byrd-Bennett was sentenced in 2017 to federal prison and is currently serving time (Meisner & Perez, 2017). Unfortunately, the churn of top district leadership has not stopped. Byrd-Bennett's successor, Forrest Claypool, an attorney, politician, and favorite unelected top administrator appointed by Chicago mayors resigned amidst questions regarding ethics violations after only two years. In 2018, Janice Jackson, a former CPS student, teacher, and principal was appointed to lead the district.

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For a long time, I resisted writing the second edition of *Spectacular Things* for this very reason: the contextual factors of students who attended Carr, people who came up living in housing project communities, is complicated. On one hand, I feel a responsibility to share the ups and downs, and on the other I am wary of telling other people's stories in a manner that may come across as authoritative or exploitative.

The profound disinvestment our society has made in historically marginalized communities like Cabrini Green exacerbates these issues. The barriers to “making it” are big hills to climb and seeking to get out of the community is just as complicated and problematic. “Getting out” carries ramifications of assimilation and disregard for the students' home culture. That people have wanted to hear updates from the students in Room 405 has been a challenge for me. I have commented over the years that the students were not performers and their fight for a better school was not for someone else's entertainment. But, if you pick up

the book's new edition, you will see how I do update some of the students. In so doing, I complicate those updates and my position to be an updater.

Who am I do provide such updates? I cannot perpetuate the pathology, despair, and problems that are so often associated with urban areas and the chronicling of them. While, it is important to be honest about how updates on their lives are related to, and symptoms of the larger inequities our society has created, even while sharing some uplifting, hopeful anecdotes. Wholesale disinvestment in certain communities, lack of affordable housing, access to healthcare, and adequate schooling all comes together to paint complex contexts in which the students from Room 405 grew up.

The reality of my former students' experiences, though, includes many common symptoms associated with high poverty in historically marginalized communities. Although I know that one particular school year would not break systemic oppression familiar to such areas, I have always hoped for the students to push back in any and by all means that they could. But those systemic barriers and contextual factors are part of this story. Teenage pregnancy. Pushed out of high schools. Incarceration. Neighborhood destabilization. Gun violence. Even one former student was shot and killed a stone's throw away from Carr. Some students who started college, struggled to finish because of various setbacks. For example, an injury on the football field or a car accident, created new barriers. Scholarships were pulled. Car repairs were cost prohibitive. There is hopefulness, too. From what I understand, most Room 405 students finished high school. Some did go on to college or technical school. From professional basketball to getting involved in workers' rights, Room 405 students pursued personal goals. And, those who have become parents, brag about their kids, work to create opportunities for them, and show them great affection.

### *Pushing Back as Activist Students, Activist Teachers*

A lot can be learned from the young people of Carr Community Academy's Room 405, then and now. Not only did these particular fifth graders push back on the city and school board in their pursuit for a better learning environment for themselves and their community, but they also learned about the power of using their voices in purposeful ways for something they believed in. Emboldened by an understanding of the stark reality of the school conditions in which they were expected to learn, they were provided space and opportunity to work towards something better, something more beautiful, some that has "good taste". They stood on principle. That they took a stand on the inequitable conditions and demanded something better should give us hope that young people do rise up when challenged with the responsibilities to engage in student-centered, action-focused curriculum making.

What we learned together as we pursued our shared goal for a new school was a testament to the capacity, fervor, and determination of young people. Indeed, this experience—powerful for all of us—was profoundly educative. We learned more than could ever be prescribed through outside mandates. We also learned that even such powerful lessons do not in and of themselves eradicate societal inequities and systemic barriers that the students have had to negotiate as they became young adults.

Also standing on principle were the rank and file members of the Chicago Teachers Union in 2012. These educators sacrificed for the sake of students in their classrooms. They named what they needed for support, so in turn they could reach their students. Whereas many of these teachers would not have self-identified as activists for a myriad of reasons, their purposeful stances on important educational issues and backward school reform policies make them just that. The willingness for the critical mass of Chicago Public School teachers to push back against the neoliberal policies that were curbing their



abilities to support students in their classrooms is a powerful example for others to emulate. The teachers among us know that *collectively* teachers have our students' best interest in mind. With educational policies and reform efforts weakening teachers' abilities to connect with their students, CPS teachers made a concerted, strategic effort to take action in 2012. This effort is parallel to the contingent action planning the fifth-grade students in Room 405 took to pressure the city to do right by them. Taken together, the willingness of both teachers and students to take direct action to shift policy and curriculum has the potential to be pervasive.

Direct actions need not be limited to large urban districts like Chicago. When people organize through grassroots means, as West Virginia teachers did statewide in 2018, they are a force to reckon with. Walking out for nine days and shutting down every public school in the state, the rank and file educators in West Virginia pushed back on their state legislators and on their own union leadership in order to not only take care of themselves, but also take care of the students in their classrooms (Bidgood & Robertson, 2018). They inspired other educators to take action. Teachers in Oklahoma, Arizona, and Kentucky have walked out in mass demanding better pay and working conditions. These mobilizations are similar to the powerful stories where students are taking on the controversial issue of gun control with lawmakers

and lobbyists in the wake of the Parkland, Florida school shooting tragedy. Teachers, too, are pushing back in this instance using the social media campaign #ArmMeWith in response to politicians, including President Donald Trump, and the National Rifle Association calling for arming teachers in a shamefully reactive approach to make schools safer. Rather than being armed with guns, the educators' hashtag campaign expresses an imperative to focus on root causes, and instead be armed with books, resources, smaller class sizes, and increases to mental health services for students.

Whereas in each of these instances these fights have garnered national attention, action planning and organizing need not capture a media frenzy in order to be successful. Informed citizens will support teachers who take a stand on corporate interests that corrupt public schools, on policies that narrow curriculum, on the high stakes of standardized testing, on class sizes that are too big to reach children, on teachers willing to co-construct learning with their students, and more. Likewise, when students name issues important to their communities and devise campaigns as curriculum in order to solve problems, citizens are compelled to pay them attention. That young people have the capacity, the time, and the interest in fighting for what they believe in schools and beyond should give us hope.

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## Introduction to Protecting the Promise of Public Education: A Panel Discussion

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*Editors' Note: On May 7, 2022, a panel of distinguished scholars with a keen interest in public schooling, democracy, learning, and students' lives in school and community gathered via web conference to consider the topic of "Protecting the Promise of Public Education." The panelists included Eleanor Duckworth, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Deborah Meier, Domingo Morel, and Diane Ravitch. In this Introduction, Fiona McDonnell and Lisa Schneier, teacher educators who are also Board members of the sponsoring organization, Critical Explorers, articulate the rationale for the panel and introduce us to the panelists' ideas. The full transcript of the panel discussion follows the introduction.*

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The nation's public schools enroll more than fifty million students annually.<sup>2</sup> At its best, public education reflects the nation's collective promise to provide each and every student an education that develops them to their fullest possibilities. Yet, as panelist **Gloria Ladson-Billings** observes and questions,

When the number of White middle class students decreases, so does public support. Since *Brown* and the various funding cases there have been a series of other cases designed to roll back both school desegregation and equal funding plans. . . . Why don't we keep those promises?

How we do school matters. The questions and problems that curricula open up,

the materials and perspectives that students examine and explore, and ways of interacting supported in the classroom, have consequences for the value and respect that students develop in themselves and others as knowledge-makers and change agents. **Eleanor Duckworth** has elaborated how teaching that encourages "the having of wonderful ideas" supports learners in their own sense-making and ongoing development, writing it is "the essence of good pedagogy" to give students "occasion to have . . . wonderful ideas."<sup>3</sup> Through experiencing, exploring, and experimenting with materials and phenomena of the world, and students' growing respect for their own and each other's ideas, classrooms become places where, together, teachers and students enter into new relationships as they make sustained inquiries into the promise and possibility of what a democratic society can be. Thus, democracy begins in and is sustained through classroom life.

As John Dewey expressed, a democracy can be seen as a form of government (a technical structure), but at its deepest level, it is

a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking

<sup>2</sup> National Education Statistics.  
<https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372#PK12-enrollment>. In fall 2021, a total enrollment of 48.7 million students included 22.4 million White students, 14.1 million Hispanic students, 7.4 million Black students, 2.7

million Asian students, 2.3 million students of Two or more races, 0.5 million American Indian/Alaska Native students, and 0.2 million Pacific Islander students.

<sup>3</sup> Duckworth, E. (2006). "The having of wonderful ideas" and other essays on teaching and learning, p.1.

down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept [human beings] from perceiving the full import of their activity.<sup>4</sup>

Public education has always been contested terrain, access has never been equal, the promise unrealized for too many. Yet, barriers to whose histories and cultures are let in and what constitutes good teaching have risen to a level of intensity not seen in decades. Legislative bills being introduced and adopted in states across the country are restricting the areas of history that schools can teach, the books that can be found on library shelves, and the topics and perspectives that teachers can discuss.<sup>5</sup> The very promise of public education is threatened. As panelist **Diane Ravitch** puts it, “Our fight for democracy and education is a fight to keep public education public.” Panelist **Deborah Meier** asks,

Where do we imagine citizens of a democracy might go to explore, play with and become experts at the art and crafts of democratic citizenship? Clearly not in the public schools we have designed and protected-which are exemplars of authoritarianism.

Public education is an unfinished project. While imperfect, it is our best hope for us as a nation to realize our best selves. In the words of panelist **Domingo Morel**,

The moment is right for reimagining the possibilities of a more equal and just society, where education, wages, healthcare, and housing are sources of human flourishing, not misery. . . .

The promise that our public schools hold up for us as a nation must be advanced and protected. It is amid

this context, that we invited panelists who could put the current moment into historical context and illuminate the different dimensions that must be protected to provide a path of hope and possibility.

The panel discussion transcribed here was sponsored and hosted by **Critical Explorers**, a non-profit organization founded to provide public schools full access to the teaching/learning approach of Critical Exploration. Developed by **Eleanor Duckworth**, Critical Exploration has as its foundation the creation of learning encounters that put students into direct contact with the actual materials of the world - including both the natural world and the human-made world - rather than explanations of these. Students develop and build ideas from their own current knowledge as it is called forth by new experiences with primary source materials. The teacher is the developer and guide in such experiences. The students together build a web of ideas and critique their own and each other’s thinking as they see how it holds up in relation to the materials that they are experiencing. This creates a vitality of intellectual experience and develops students’ confidence in their own minds and judgments. No idea is taken as holding authority based solely on who offered it. All ideas are considered seriously. This is what **Duckworth** has termed “a democracy of ideas.”<sup>6</sup> This participatory experience invites students into full participation in democratic life. It also supports the development of the necessary skills that will allow them to take part in public discourse.

Critical Explorers (<https://criticalexplorers.org>) furthers this approach by providing help to teachers in engaging students in investigations of this kind that call forth “real intellectual work...that engage[s] their minds and imaginations” (Critical Explorers Mission Statement).

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<sup>4</sup> Dewey, J. (1966). *Democracy and education*. The Free Press (Original work published 1916), p. 87

<sup>5</sup> PEN America, <https://pen.org/banned-in-the-usa/>

<sup>6</sup> Duckworth, E.; Hooper, P.K.; McKinney, A; Schneier. (2022). Constructing Understandings. *Human Development*, 66, 4-5, 263

## Transcript Protecting the Promise of Public Education: A Panel Discussion

[Eleanor Duckworth](#)

[Gloria Ladson-Billings](#)

[Deborah Meier](#)

[Domingo Morel](#)

[Diane Ravitch](#)

including words from [Sonia Nieto](#)  
[Gopal Krishnamurthy](#), facilitator

Organized by the Board and Director of [Critical Explorers](#)  
Held May 7, 2022 via web conference

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Hello and welcome to everyone. My name is Gopal Krishnamurthy. I'll be moderating this panel. I serve as chair on the board of critical explorers the organization that's hosting this panel today.

Before we start, I'd like to thank *Domingo Morel* for joining us at very short notice. Bios are [hyperlinked in the above list of panelists]

I'd also like to say that *Sonia Nieto* regrets very much not being on the zoom panel. . . I'd like to share and read out a quote from **Sonia Nieto** as her contribution to this panel as well. And this is the quote:

*Sometimes the hardest work we can do as human beings is precisely this-- to confront ourselves unflinchingly and honestly in order to improve. In the case of teachers, it is about improving not only one's knowledge of subject matter and pedagogy, but also one's own knowledge about and interaction with students. Although learning about one's strengths and talents shortcomings and flaws, vices and virtues may be hard work, it can also be enormously empowering. It means asking hard questions in good conscience about one's privilege and power. And about how one uses these in the context of teaching and learning.*

*It might mean reassessing who one is in the context of teaching and about how one's experiences might have a negative impact on one's choices of curriculum pedagogy and philosophy of education. Although difficult and exhausting, throwing oneself*

*into this kind of introspection can nevertheless be the key to becoming a better teacher and in the process even a better person.*

[From] *Sonia Nieto* in *Finding Joy In Teaching Students Of Diverse Backgrounds* 2013.

So, thank you very much, Sonia.

Um, I'd like to extend a very warm welcome to the panelists who I regard as educational luminaries, in the sense that as learners, teachers, researchers, and change makers, they're deeply committed to liberatory and democratic pedagogies. To the panelists—*Eleanor Duckworth, and Diane Ravitch, Deborah Meier, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Domingo Morel*, [welcome]. I'd also like to extend a very warm welcome to everyone joining us here.

It is indeed significant and timely that we are all here today for this panel on *Protecting the Promise of Public Education--* in the midst of a global pandemic, climate change, the assault on freedoms and democracies, the corporatization of education, etc. So there's much to be considered and done. The panel is [was] conducted as a fundraiser for Critical Explorers to support the groundbreaking work of Eleanor Duckworth and colleagues in critical exploration. [Editors' note: The fees to attend the panel benefited Critical Explorers.] So, I invite Eleanor Duckworth to introduce the work of Critical Exploration and the [non-profit]

organization, Critical Explorers, that is hosting this panel too.

To start us off, Eleanor, could you please say a bit about Critical Explorers and Critical Exploration and welcome everyone?

### *Critical Explorers and Curriculum*

**Eleanor Duckworth:** Yes, I already greeted Sonia letting her know that we miss her. As a member of the board of Critical Explorers, I'm happy to welcome you and to introduce to you the organization that is producing the event. We are based in the Boston area. We have one employee and a hard working board. We are basically teacher educators and we have come to this work from many directions--degrees in various school subject matters, a lot of experience in teaching K-12 and higher education, the arts, school administration, the psychology of understanding children's thinking, active participation in issues of justice, philosophy of knowledge and more. We run workshops and short courses to help teachers expand their thoughts about what it means to teach and what it means to learn and what it means to know something. And we developed curriculum which responds to all of this.

*About curriculum.* I'd like to say that we think a subject matter is its own best authority. That is, for a learner to learn some math, we think they need to be figuring out how to solve some math problems rather than being shown the method of solving them; to learn history of a given place or period, students need to be deeply into materials from that period and place rather than being told how to think about these materials.

*Curriculum can be simple.* Sometimes such curriculum's quite simple. Anne Collins was a teacher of math, grade seven math. She wanted to teach her students about mixed numbers. In case you don't remember what that is from elementary school, it's a number that has a whole number and a fraction, like  $7\frac{1}{2}$ . Two class

periods had been spent trying to teach her students, about mixed numbers--how to add them how to subtract them how to multiply them, etc. She had told the students about mixed numbers for two whole periods and she had gotten nowhere. So in the third period, she decided to do this: She put equations all over her blackboard. I guess it's not a blackboard these days but all over where the kids looked.

Like for example, seven and a half plus five and two thirds equals thirteen and a sixth. [ $7\frac{1}{2} + 5\frac{2}{3} = 13\frac{1}{6}$ .] She put many such equations on the board-- plus, minus and so on. By the end of that lesson, her students had figured out everything she had tried and failed to teach them in the first two lessons, when she was telling them what they should know... It worked--so well that that's the way she did most of her math teaching thereafter.

*Or curriculum can be very involved.* Sometimes, on the other hand, making a curriculum that brings the subject matter right to the students is very involved. Alythea McKinney, the director of Critical Explorers, as a student of history, brings her training to the slavery and reconstruction curriculum on our website. I recommend it to you. She knows how to look for and find letters, orders, tax records, advertisements, photos, maps, objects and more. She makes careful choices about what materials to start with-- something that will catch the students' interest and raise questions and conflicting thoughts.

She -- and the teachers she has worked with -- listen to what the students have to say as they examine the material, as they point out what they notice, and as they express their thoughts and their questions. As the lessons continue, they add materials that enable the students to pursue their ideas further. They often ask the children to express their understanding by drawing the situation being described in the materials. And sometimes to act it out an event. They do not make judgments about the students'

comments. They keep listening, and encouraging the students to express their thoughts.

*Materials and Critical Exploration.* Much of material evidence on which the study of history is based can be brought into the classroom. And that's the case for every subject matter. We have found that the basic materials, making judgments about the materials--and not about what people say about [the subject matter] works in just about every subject matter. So the way we teach we've called Critical Exploration. It comes from Piaget's work and Inhelder's work and I may get back to that. Their method of researching kids' thinking is called Critical Exploration. So we're joining them in that. Thank you.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thank you very much, Eleanor. I wanted to share with panelists and everyone here that a group from Critical Explorers has been developing some of the questions [for the panel that] we are going to use today and this, not so much to stick to them as a kind of script, but really to facilitate a conversation. So just to start us off, I'd like to invite the panelists to start off by please share what perspective and orientation you bring to this topic and because it's just an initial kind of introduction, we'll just keep to about one minute each--a very brief introduction. What perspective do you bring to this topic? And let's just go around on the screen. I'll request, Diane, could you start us off please?

### *Network for Public Education and Democracy*

**Diane Ravitch:** Sure. I'm a historian of education. I retired from New York University and I have for the past decade led a group called the Network for Public Education.

*Network for Public Education.* It has 350,000 members mostly teachers and parents all over the country and we fight privatization. We fight against laws that allow public money to support

private and religious schools. And what I've discovered over the years is that there is a very well-funded campaign funded largely by right-wing billionaires to destroy public education and to allow public money to go to homeschooling, religious schooling, and all sorts of non-public schools. So we fight for democracy. Our fight for democracy and education is a fight to keep public education public.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thank you very much. Deborah, can I invite you to say a few words, please? Thanks.

### *Democracy and Schooling*

**Deborah Meier:** Okay. It's Mother's Day. And my son is here to help me do this. Fifty years ago, I started subbing, in Chicago. And one of the striking things I realized was how undemocratic our schools are and what the impact must be of twelve years of living, for children, living in a thoroughly authoritarian environment, and the degree to which we have all accepted that as necessary --- And on the other hand, ...society insists that democracy is the best form of government.

*Expanding access to education.* And the story of public education as Diane mentioned is in one sense a glorious story of the continuing expansion of who was considered educable--from the time that we first invented public schools, to today. More than half of the population was once not part of our public education system.

*Class and other discrimination in access to education for democracy.* But while we have increased the number of years students spend in school what we have not done much about is making that kind of education equally democratic for all children regardless of their background, race, income. The children who belong to what we think of as the ruling class get a good ruling class education and learn to think better and understand more and expect to be heard, and the other kids don't



get that. And democracy is too damn complicated for us *not* to see that we need to spend 12 years in, not only teaching about it, but observing, thinking, and trying out, and understanding the impact of democratic governments and the impact of its absence.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thank you very much, Deborah. Can I invite Gloria to say a few words, please, about your perspective? Thanks.

### *Public Education and Democracy*

**Gloria Ladson-Billings:** Thank you, Gopal. And thank you to my fellow panelists. Delighted to be here. I come to you as a former eighth grade US history teacher in the school district of Philadelphia. And so here I am literally in the midst of the birthplace of democracy trying to help youngsters understand that they have a right to participate and yet nothing about the preparation of teachers nor the way that school districts, who organized as Deborah alluded to, really spoke to the way democracy really relies on an educated citizenry. And, the place that that educated citizenry should get started often is in public schools. So I see public schools as key to maintaining democracy.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thank you very much. Domingo, can I request you to say a few words, please?

### *Higher Education and Community Organizing*

**Domingo Morel:** Thank you for having me and thanks to all the panelists for engaging in this very important conversation. I'm a political scientist at Rutgers University Newark and I focus on American politics broadly but education politics is a major part of my research interest and what I teach. So, I come from that perspective. In addition, I worked in higher education for over a decade...and I also have a community organizing background. I led multiple organizations, many of which had education as a central part of their mission and objectives. That's the perspectives that I bring to this conversation.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thank you very much. Eleanor, would you like to say a few words as well, please?

### *Classrooms and Teacher Education*

**Eleanor Duckworth:** Yes, my perspective is from the classrooms, the children, and the teachers in classrooms, and it is as a teacher educator. It's a heartbreaking really to see how enthusiastic teachers can be when they learn how they can really affect people's lives and then to be shut down when they get into school [as teachers] and unable to do what they know would be the best way to teach.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thank you. To start with a bit of context, I'm requesting, I'd like to request Diane to help us with some context setting here. What do you see as the historical promise of public education and historically how have people understood the promise of public education, and if you could say a few things then we'll open it up for the other panelists also to contribute and then respond. if you [Diane Ravitch] can start us off, that would be helpful. Thanks, Diane.

### *Historical Context*

**Diane Ravitch:** Sure. The context which I'm speaking is the recognition that there's always been a huge gap between our ideals and our practices.

*Gap between ideals and practices.* While we have always had our founding fathers and other leaders from the beginning to today speaking grandly and gloriously about education, there were many children, as Deborah pointed out, who were excluded from education. Black children in particular were not allowed to be educated. It was against the law in the southern states before the Civil War and so just begin with the understanding that I'm speaking about the history while recognizing that the context was far from our the ideal and it's very important to

recognize that public education was something that has been part of the plans of this country from the very beginning.

*Vouchers and separation of church and state.* And there has been an effort by, particularly by, voucher supporters to say the vouchers are very legitimate because we always had Church schools and that there should be no distinction between church and state and we can anticipate that this supreme court that we currently have is about to strike down the wall between church and state and require states to pay for religious education. And if you think that current our current public schools are not democratic enough, take a look at some of our religious schools which exists specifically to indoctrinate children, so I would recommend to you a book by a lawyer from the University of South Carolina named Eric Black. *From the Constitution on—public schools.* His book is called *Schoolhouse Burning* and he points out that in the Northwest ordinances of 1785 and 1787 the founding fathers, before they wrote the Constitution, laid out what states had to do in order to be admitted to the union and showed how their towns should be laid out and they always set aside one plot for public schools. And it says though we've completely, because the word education doesn't appear in the Constitution, ignore[d] the fact that the people who wrote the Constitution said that public schools were so important that every state that joined the union would be required to have at least one plot set aside for public education. Families and communities in different parts of this country created public schools before there was any legislation for public schools and they did so so that their children would be literate.

*Common schools and Horace Mann.* Then we come to the era of Horace Mann who's generally considered the father of the public school and Mann where I stated quite specifically, said that public education would be a balancing wheel between those-who-had, were haves, and those who were have-nots and would provide opportunity for have-nots. He was very

concerned about education for community building and he said it was very important that we not allow politics to get into the schools because it would destroy them. And he also is very opposed to having religion enter into the schools.

*Religion and public schools.* The religious issue has always been a problem in American education because there were always religious groups who said if you're providing money for public education, you must provide money for churches for church schools here. We're on the brink of this happening.

*Reconstruction and public schools.* After the Civil War every state adopted a clause in their state constitution guaranteeing a free public education and requiring that there would be no money specifically for religious education in the Reconstruction Era where we had probably the most progressive legislation ever passed for education. All of the southern states, which did not have Confederates voting, adopted very Progressive legislation requiring public schools and specifically in some states requiring that schools be open to both Black and white children and after reconstruction ended many of these requirements were rolled back specifically to keep, to protect Jim Crow schools.

*Education for citizenship in a democracy.* The purpose of free public schools in my view looking over our history of a long period of time has been education for citizenship, education for citizenship specifically in a democracy. And as you all know there's a huge gap between rhetoric and reality. But as I see, for example, there was a speech by the new Commissioner of Education in the state of Virginia pointed by Governor Glenn Younkin whose whole campaign was based on attacking Critical Race Theory and so he appointed a woman who came to Virginia and said the purpose of education is to prepare for a job. And so every, she wants all schools to be focused specifically on job training. This is not

the purpose of the public education in a democracy. The purpose of public education is to prepare people to vote intelligently, to be thoughtful about issues, to serve on juries, and to be prepared to defend democracy. It is not preparing for a specific job in the area of Virginia where Amazon is located. Presumably they'll be preparing people for the Amazon jobs. And so and so on. I read frequently debates about well, maybe it should be about preparing children for technical careers. No, it should be about preparing young people to be citizens in a democracy.

*New McCarthyism.* What's happening right now in public education across the country is what I consider the new McCarthyism and this is something that I've been very engaged in. blog everyday [about] the attacks on Critical Race Theory or, [it's] outrageous, their attempt to silence and intimidate teachers. And many teachers are afraid to teach about racism at all because almost anything can be considered Critical Race Theory if you're teaching about the history of racism in America suddenly. Book banning... we see the censorship that's being passed in many states and something that I've actually never seen before which is laws banning a particular book, in this case, *The 1619 Project*. I've never seen anything quite like this. So we're in a very dangerous time. [This] is the new McCarthyism and if we want to protect democracy in our schools, we're going to have to fight for it. Thank you.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thank you, Diane. Um, I think we will return to some of the themes and what are the significant threats to democracy and public education. We will revisit them. I'd just like to invite other participants also to contribute at this time to the conversation, your own thoughts, as well, and then we can respond and then I'd also like to open up this question of citizenship in a sense of national citizenship or global citizenship that sort of thinking about citizenship, as well, is of interest to me. So I just

bring that into the conversation and request other participants to just raise their hands and I will invite you into the conversation. So I see Gloria's hand. Please.

### *'Role of Formerly Enslaved Black Folk in Pushing for Public Schools'*

**Gloria Ladson-Billings:** Yeah. I just want to make one brief point here. I think it's one of those points that often gets omitted when we talk about the development of public education in the United States. In James Anderson's seminal book, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, he talks about the role of formerly enslaved Black folk in pushing for public education because literally in the South people were thinking the rich people continue to send their kids to private schools. They sent them to Europe and they thought, 'Well, the poor people their kids will just do whatever their parents do. If your father's a Blacksmith you're gonna be a Blacksmith; your father's a tenant farmer, you'll be a tenant farmer. Yet, here with the people—who had spent all of this time in chattel slavery--were saying the most important thing we must have...not houses, not even money, it's not even a job. The most important thing—we must have this education for our children.

And so I have almost a visceral reaction when I hear people talk about Black people not being committed to education when I know we have given our life for this very thing. Thank you.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy** Thank you, Gloria. Anyone else? And also any questions to Diane or Gloria? I think Deborah is wanting to speak. You'll have to unmute Deborah.

### *Life of School, as Teacher*

**Deborah Meier:** It's intriguing that if we want to teach someone to play baseball, we would make sure that they were surrounded by people that they spent at least part of their time playing baseball or watching baseball played well, and ...

we're brought into the culture of baseball players and they [students] saw them [baseball players] as powerful and interesting people. They wanted to join it. So why is it—and that's true in almost every field--sports or artists or anything--but in school...we don't see that the life of the school is itself a teacher.

*Daily relationships.* 'What're the daily relationships between people?' My friend Ted Sizer said once, said when they did the study of high schools, he could tell almost instantly who the school was serving when he walked into the front door. And when I asked him what he meant by that he said, how people talk to each other, the tone of voice, the respect or disrespect, and what's on the walls of the school. He said it's permeated by what we think of children and what our purpose is with them...

*Responsibility for public education.* We had what was important so when people somehow say, 'well we need students to be academically--sometimes I'm criticized for putting down academia. It's only because the way we use that word at schools is to trivialize it and the disrespect it. And I just think there's so many contradictions that I agree with Diane on, but we also need to remember that we've--there were a lot of fights for public education . And a lot of people, you know, spent a lot of their lives fighting for it. And we, when we give it up, we have betrayed so many of our fellow citizens and the history of this country. We haven't lived up to their ideal but we have a responsibility not to trash it.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thanks, Deborah. I see Diane, Diane's hand up to make a contribution. So I'd like to invite you, Diane, and also after Diane speaks maybe we can move on to the next phase. It's still connected. The next phase is really to look at what are some of the current threats, but I'll just pause for a minute and invite Diane to say something and then we can go into the next phase of the conversation.

### *'No excuses' Schools—Students, Parents, Teachers*

**Diane Ravitch:** Thank you. In response to what Deborah said about the tone of the school and how people interact with one another, I couldn't help but thank of the very popular charter model called No Excuses, which to me is a horrendous abuse of human rights, of charter teachers telling children that they will be punished if they speak to one another, if they speak out of turn, if they're not tracking the teacher with their eyes at every moment. This is such an incredible assault on the human rights of children. I cannot believe this has not been challenged in court and yet they're right. Now there are two people--a principal and another and one of her teachers--in Washington, DC were fired because they refused to adopt this method and they are in court now trying to sue to get their jobs back and they said that they felt that imposing a no excuses regime on their children--and this this is a Black principal and a Black teacher and the children are Black. They say this no excuses regime is racist, that it's a school to prison pipeline and they refuse to do it and they were fired.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** So I'd like to connect this with, where do you see the promise of education has been broken? Where have you encountered evidence? We've already begun the conversation but to continue on that. Can you please share some examples of this fracture? What is at stake? What are the dimensions of it? It actually is something that we started talking about and I'd like to invite Domingo to start us off in terms of for example--what do you see specifically with regards to policy? And it doesn't have to be restricted to that, Domingo, but just to start us off in thinking about it. So please help us. Yeah. Thank you.

### *Ideal vs. Reality in Public Education*

**Domingo Morel:** I think in answering that question I want to go back to some of the things

that Diane was saying, and that Gloria was saying in terms of the history. There's really been this *ideal* of public education and then the reality, right, what's really happened with public education. In so many ways I think the history of education in the United States--and I would perhaps argue that the history of the United States period--is a *struggle* over public education--that we've never achieved public education for all.

*History of struggle.* To this original question that you're asking, Gopal, about where do we see a fracture, where has the promise of education been broken now, I would argue that we've never achieved it, right, that it's a story of struggle and the African-American struggle, as Gloria was mentioning, is key to understanding the fight for public education, right? And so if we go through the historical trajectory, as Diane was discussing, where African Americans can't be educated and poor white kids can't be educated either, in the pre-Civil War period. Then we get these political fights to increase education for all people and then we have obviously segregation, "separate but equal", and then it takes this landmark decision by Supreme Court *Brown v Board*, which says that segregation, that separate but equal, is not constitutional. And, of course, that was about education, but it's really about American politics and about democracy broadly speaking, right? And then when we think that we're achieving, that we're winning in the struggle to expand public education for all, there's these elements—there are these policies that emerge that were hidden for so many years, right?

*Disenfranchisement and state recovery of local school districts.* And so I studied state takeovers of local school districts, and for many years the idea of a state takeover of a local school district was within the domain of outside-of-conversation-about-politics-and-democracy. What I try to do in my work is show how these state takeovers of the local school districts, which emerged in the 1980s and expanded over the last 30 years, are really an

effort to disenfranchise communities, particularly communities of color. And there's a slew of these types of policies that have affected communities, particular communities of color, since the 1970s, at a time where we thought we were winning, in this struggle for public education, right?

*Tell the story of the struggle for public education and efforts to deny education.* So I think our struggle, our aim as scholars, as practitioners, as teachers is to tell the story about that struggle for public education and try to discover the many ways that the efforts to deny education continue to surface in so many ways --sometimes hidden sometimes not so hidden-- right, and so in speaking of what are the current policies, as I mentioned, state takeovers as one of those. It has already been mentioned, the expansion of charter schools, expansion of privatization, the idea of vouchers, right? These are all policies that are intended to separate communities from their public schools to make education a private endeavor rather than a public endeavor.

*Not K-12 only, also higher education.* And along those lines, I want to also talk a little bit about, just mention, that this is not just a K through 12 education issue, right, that these kinds of things are also unfolding at the higher education level. And so perhaps we can talk a little bit about this some more throughout this conversation about it being education broadly speaking, not just K through 12.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Gloria [who has raised her hand to speak]

### *School desegregation and equality in funding*

**Gloria Ladson-Billings:** So I guess I want to take a bit of a long view and I want to suggest that, actually it is part of the quote we were scrolling through before we began. There are two promises that we have made to the American people.

*Desegregation.* One comes through, as Domingo mentioned, through the *Brown versus Board of Education*. That promise was a promise of school desegregation. Of course, we've seen all these cases that come on the heels of it that roll it back from *Milliken* to *San Antonio v Rodriguez*, *McDowell*. You know, on and on, to just eat away at it. So one promise is school desegregation.

*Equality in funding.* The second promise comes through the California decision *Serrano v Preiss* about funding.

*Never 'made good' on.* So two things--school desegregation and equality in funding--make such a huge difference. Diane gave you the example of this Black principal and Black teacher in DC in a desegregated school. Trust me, white middle-class parents are not gonna let you make their kids track eye tracking. So there's certain things that we often, and I'm as much a part of that as anyone else, we often are trying to do stuff at the classroom level, um at the school level but there are overarching ideas around school--who gets to go to school and where, as well as the funding of those schools that we have never made good on. And I think until we really do that, we're just going to keep having this debate and watching our schools deteriorate.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Yeah, I see Deborah. Deborah, I just would like to bring in the other question as well because we've been speaking about this—where has the promise been broken? I'd like to just bring in this question and then Deborah can come in on this. So grounding your responses in instances you've seen-- what is the effect of this breakage on any of these—and you've already several of you, you've already mentioned some of these, but I'll just add to that list on the promise of public education:

- the health and well-being of students teachers and
- teacher education
- the fight for equity and justice

- freedom of speech and expression
- critical thinking and reasoning in a democratic society

Some of these things have already been mentioned in the conversation. I'm just adding to that list and expanding the list and then, Deborah, if you can come in and contribute to the discussion now. Thanks.

### *Notion of 'Common'*

**Deborah Meier:** This discussion reminded me that when the...decision on desegregation came down, I was telling the kids in my kindergarten class a little about it and one of the little girls raised her hand and she said, 'I don't understand that'. What were they going to do in our school because it's an all-Black school in Harlem? And I realized that a lot of my friends in New York City thought this was only about the south. Then, about nine-tenths of the Black children in New York City were going to segregated schools. Of the two things I wanted to talk about, one is the notion of common, our common interests.

*Common schools.* And I think it may have been Mann who used the word, common schools. It's a word we've forgotten about. That notion that we have something that we all hold dear and that we want for each other, not just for ourselves. And I think that's part of what I mean by a democratic community school—that that's the ethos in the school, [which] is that we all deserve the respect we want for ourselves. And that I think we've lost that. We think of school as the place we send our child so they will be better than other people's children. They will get the better jobs. Not the other—that we want, for all, what is best - - what I want for my child.

*Money does matter.* And the other is when people told me that money wasn't the issue. I think there's a famous Harvard professor who insisted and it's been said over and over again that money is not the issue and yet I was thinking these

schools in New York City that the wealthy said their children to charge \$50,000 and, some more, some maybe, a little less per year for each child. And maybe New York City spent \$15,000 for each child now. They're not even the same ball game. That's what's so shocking, quite aside from all the other educational things that wealthy parents do for their children. We may take a two-day trip with our kids and insist everybody chip in to help it. And they take their kids to Paris for a month.

*Treating communities differently depending on the school.* We treat some kids so differently from how we treat others that it's just hard. It's hard. It was the hard thing going into public education for me to realize how true that was. I was shocked by Chicago's Public Schools. I hadn't known how disrespectful those schools were - - not just to children, but to parents and to teachers, too. I was a parent in the school. I was a teacher in the school, and my children were in the school and we were all treated in a way that does not inspire democratic aspirations. So I don't, you know, some part of me remains puzzled--at how we can so blatantly disregard what we claim to be our great heritage.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Anybody, any responses and thoughts, or contributions? Anyone else?

### *Two Conversations: Democracy in Schools AND Who Controls the Schools*

**Diane Ravitch:** You know, it seems to me there are two conversations here that overlap.

*Democracy in schools.* One is, and this is something which I think Eleanor and Deborah and maybe Gloria understand--because you're teachers. I only taught in higher education--and that is you're talking about democracy within the school, within the classroom, and democracy being as you define it, you know respect for children and allowing them to make decisions and to be part of a democratic classroom.

*Democracy and control of schools.* There's a whole other conversation that I think Domingo and I are involved in which is--who controls the schools; who decides how much money they get; and will there be equity in funding? And will these schools be controlled by a narrow-minded legislature that bans speech and bans books and fires teachers and the same thing is moving now, as we discussed earlier, it's moving increasingly into higher education where professors who teach, who do teach Critical Race Theory being threatened with their jobs and their tenure. This was a threat made explicitly in Texas. So there's two discussions about democracy and education-- one being the issue of control by politicians and the extent of which they are making a distinction between the schools in their community, their affluent community, and others. And you're discussing democracy when the classroom. I'm not sure maybe they're the same conversation. But I think that's an important discussion to have I'm concerned about the censorship and the book banning and the teachers who are afraid to teach about race with all these laws being passed saying that any discussion of racism is Critical Race Theory and the encouragement of people to turn teachers in. You get a bounty if you report that your teacher taught about racism and there's a reward for that. It's kind of like what's going on in Texas with abortion where people can collect \$10,000 if they find that a woman's had an abortion--turning everyone into vigilantes

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thanks for that framing. It is, um, it is rather grim.

Um, I'd like to invite--I saw two hands there-- maybe in response and then I'd like to get into some of the details of what's being done, what can be done, and so on but I think we need to just give a little bit more time for this to come out-- What is actually happening and how these things-- there's an assault on various things that we might have assumed would be held, would be respected. So, let me just bring in Deborah. Did you? Did I see your hand up?

*Participation in politics and school life are connected*

**Deborah Meier:** I was just thinking with Diane's remarks--What is the connection? And in some ways, well, the effect of politics on our schools is negative--in some ways because the citizens don't play a role in our politics. They may occasionally vote, but they don't see themselves as active participants in our politics.

*Disrespect in school life.* And I'm saying that I think that experience they had for 12 years in school and the experience they had watching the adults in their lives--the teachers and their parents--how they got treated in this public world has had an enormous impact on how that they see their connection to the society. They don't see themselves belonging to a common good. They see themselves as disrespected. And they see their families and their community and the adults in their lives as disrespected. And that doesn't make them active citizens who make policy that responds to that reality. So, there's, I wouldn't expect that you could, you know, end up being a great ball player if you had spent 12 years [during] which the only sport you saw was something that you didn't respect, nobody in your environment respected, and was played badly and was full of flaws. You wouldn't expect that out of that would come great athletes, and we need great citizens.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thank you, Deborah, for making that connection and framing it in that way. Gloria, could you, Gloria, and Eleanor...I'd like to invite you to say something and I'd also like to sort of request that in the interest of time that we also start orienting the conversation to what is being done. What can be done and examples that will throw some light on this but that doesn't have to happen right now because I think it's an important conversation to connect these two aspects that Diane spoke about Gloria, so yeah, please.

*Larger conversation: Concentration of accumulation of power and wealth*

**Gloria Ladson-Billings:** Oh, yes, I think that the two conversations do connect in that much of what we see happening at the classroom and school level is kind of reaction to things like book banning or teachers can't say this or you have to do that. But the bigger conversation and the long game, if you will, is about the accumulation of both power and wealth. And in some ways as long as we keep, you know, if we can be kept chasing our tails around individual things like, and I'm not saying they're not important, but if we can be just so focused on a book banning, we can just be so focused on critical race theory in some ways. We are distracted from the longer political game of rhetoric that speaks to certain fears that people have that then either don't get them to a voting booth or don't get them engaged in active citizenship so that the same group of people really control everything.

*Five pandemics.* So, you know often I've been giving talks about what I've called four pandemics. I've talked about Covid-19. I've talked about the pandemic of racism. I've talked about the pandemic economic disparity and the pandemic of environmental collapse, catastrophe but I think a fifth pandemic is the raging authoritarianism.

*Raging authoritarianism.* And I know we're talking about schools in the US but authoritarianism is everywhere. I mean, we, you know. [President] Macron kind of just makes it past Marie Le Pen in an election the other week. We see what is happening in the UK. We see what has happened in Brazil. You know, we tend to be somewhat ethnocentric because we're a big country. We've got stuff we want to do but the truth of the matter is these things are not unrelated and so seeing this growing authoritarianism and people being quite okay with it. I mean that the former occupant of the White House was an authoritarian. And you know, I think there's a there's new book coming out from a former



Defense secretary. This guy [former President Trump] wanted to send bombs to Mexico and quote, 'Nobody will know. We'll just bomb them.' I mean think about how precarious democracy is. So yeah, if you can just keep focused on that, you know, classroom over here-- In some ways we don't get into the larger conversation and I think we have to be a part of this larger conversation.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Eleanor, did you have something to say at this time?

**Eleanor Duckworth:** I don't think so. I'd like to talk about some hopeful work in classrooms...

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Alright. Okay. Yeah, [it's] not quite [time] but I'd like to give time for that. I think also I'm seeing from some of the posts, people are interested in that conversation as well. And, [in] what is to be done. So I'll maybe—Diane, can you just respond now? And then we can move to that.

#### *Point well-taken*

**Diane Ravitch:** Okay, I want to respond to what Gloria said because I think it's very important, and I want to use Florida as an example. We have heard quite a lot in the last few weeks about Governor DeSantis and his 'don't say gay' legislation. And we've heard about Governor DeSantis and his 'stop woke' and I want to say I am woke. I consider woke to be I am wide open to knowledge and enlightenment. I am woke. If you're woke, you're against inequity and injustice and I'm woke. But while he was talking 'don't say gay' and Critical Race Theory, he was redistricting the state. He was gerrymandering the state so that a state that is almost 50/50 Republican and Democrat will have of its 28 Congressman 20 will be safe Republican seats. And the number of seats that are currently held by Black Congressmen will decline from four to one. That was going on behind the scenes while he had everybody

focused on CRT and 'don't say gay'. So, Gloria, your point is well taken.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** So, I'd like to orient this, and bring in this aspect: What is one way-- you or a colleague who is working to advance democracy and or protect democratic education-- What do we need to do? What is being done? And we'll have a few participate in that but I'd also like to return to this question of what happens at schools—teaching and learning, curriculum, and what are things that are being done and that you see that could be done? So let me just invite, Diane has also got her hand up and so Diane, please, go ahead.

**Diane Ravitch:** Unmute, yeah. Oh, sorry. I had my hand raised for my last question and I made my statement. Thank you.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thanks. So then can I just ask if Domingo? ... Is there something you want to say at this point or?

**Domingo Morel:** Yes, I guess in answering this question--I'm not sure if you wanted somebody else to go first--but in trying to pivot to what is being, what is being done. It's okay if I if I go on?

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** It's okay, will be helpful to have a specific kind of example that could illustrate this. So that [example] I think would also... we've been actually using specific and concrete examples. But yes, please please go ahead and ground, ground the conversation with examples as well, if possible.

#### *What is being done*

**Domingo Morel:** Thanks. Yeah. So I think in order to answer that I want to go back a little bit to the comments, our conversation that was taking place primarily between Diane and Gloria in the last question. What is the importance of, what's the connection between, public education and these crises that we are experiencing at the international and, what I know most are familiar

with, within the American political context? So there's all these anti-democratic practices, policies, politics that we're experiencing here in the United States, as Diane had mentioned in Florida and other places, and as Gloria was mentioning as well. Not just in the United States, but it's happening across the globe.

*Our challenge and the purpose of education.* And so I think our challenge to think about as scholars, as practitioners in public education, what is public education's connection to all this right? And so we have to think about and really ask ourselves, the way that Deborah has been pushing us to think about-- what is public education? What is this idea of the common? Right? And so public education of course is a byproduct of democracy but also a foundation to democracy. So we have mostly [been] think[ing] about that and [we need to] push ourselves and examine what we mean by that. What is a connection to public education, to these crises? There's so much analysis that goes into that.

*Emergence of Black political power in cities and then backlash.* One aspect of this, that I want to talk about it and kind of ground what is happening now is--as I mentioned before, this policy of state takeovers of local school districts. And this is entirely connected to these other themes that we're talking about. Part of the reason why we have state takeovers of local school districts is the emergence of Black political power in cities. And Republican and conservative state legislatures fighting against that. And they occur at precisely at a time, connected to what Gloria was saying earlier: Once communities fought for more local resources for their schools and filed lawsuits--so *Serrano* in California, *Abbott* in New Jersey, and a slew of other states are passing...courts are making these decisions to secure more resources for their schools. It is at that time when the attack against local communities and their local control starts to surface, right. And so it's not disconnected. It's all connected and this is also happening--I saw a comment from somebody talking about organizations like ALEC, right, how

they promote these policies at the state level. Well, ALEC really got a strong footing in education policy. So ALEC is of course is this organization at the state level--the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), right? And they begin to implement education policies in the 1970s and 1980s. Today ALEC is known to be part of this mechanism to disenfranchise voters and all these other conservative policies, but they really get started in education policy. They create a path for expanding the policies through education, right? So this is all connected.

*Communities push back, see the connections.* But I do want to bring, you know, a level of positivity to the discussion as, you know, we've been asked to consider here. Again, from a perspective of somebody who studies state takeovers of local schools, I get invited by communities across the country to come and talk, talk about these, what's happening not only in their in their communities but elsewhere and there is a pushback against this. And more, most importantly, communities understand that the attack on their public schools is not isolated to public schools. It's an attack on public housing, it is an attack on public health. It's an attack on the environment, right, that these battles are all connected. And so I think that this is promising and most promising of all is that young people who understand this in ways that perhaps we older folks don't understand, they get it. And they're fighting for their schools just like they're fighting for the environment, for these other kind of issues. So I think that that's something promising and maybe we could talk a little bit more about that.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thank you Domingo, Deborah, yes.

### *Tracking in schools*

**Deborah Meier:** I was thinking about the...sometimes when I listen to some of my neighbors who are Trump supporters. I [am] thinking about how another way of thinking about what impact schools have and thinking of

my own children's education and what it meant to be in a school in which we've separated what we call the 'smart kids'. We've tracked kids sometimes into just two tracks sometimes three, four, on the basis of test scores or other such measures which generally put white and wealthier children to the top track, which means they're social world is the top track. They're not in a common school. They almost, they have very little contact with each other and the language in which the school gets accustomed to talking about these different groups of children is insulting to the children in the 'lower tracks'.

*Underestimated the degree to which 12 years of schooling disturb our politics.* And I was thinking-- What is it like to spend 12 years in a school in which you're continuously compared to somebody who's considered your 'better' by the adults and who you know, will have a different life than you have and have from the beginning, from the start. With the exception of maybe sports, we have those tracks carry over into every area—the school newspaper and the clubs--and it produces a kind of class and social resentment which has sometimes more influence than one's class interest, if you will, it makes you want to revenge against those people who made your 12 years so miserable in school or who in a sense pushed you out of school? So I think we underestimate the degree to which the climate of a school has distorted the politics of our country.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thanks ,Deborah. I think that helps me sort of lead into, lean into this question also. Then looking at the climate of the school and the teaching-learning process and the curriculum, and to make that connection again, maybe Gloria and Eleanor can say something about how the climate of school could be different. So yeah, Gloria you had your hand up. So please

### *Extraordinary Young People*

**Gloria Ladson-Billings:** I may indeed make that connection, but I do want to kind of piggyback off of Domingo's point about what our

young people know, what they're able to do, and what they are doing. There is an incredible youth culture out here that most schools totally ignore.

You know everybody celebrated Amanda Gorman standing on the inaugural stage reciting her poem, 'The Hill We Climb.' Amanda was our first US Youth Poet Laureate. I had the privilege of working with Urban Word in New York and helping to select this young lady to be the Poet Laureate. And one of the things that I've been saying to teachers all the country is students like Amanda are not extraordinary. Stop saying Amanda is extraordinary. She is very, very good. She's an outstanding student but there are thousands of these young people who do this work. I have the privilege of working with the group of students in Sacramento as a part of Sacramento area Youth Speaks. I just got finished a panel for the next Poet Laureate Getting ready to announce this weekend. So here are, I mean, there's this reservoir of young people who are deeply concerned.

*Young people--catalyst for change.* If you paid any attention to what happened after the murder of George Floyd, you know, it was young people. who were the catalyst for the social change and that's the way it's always been. You know, I'm someone from the 1960s who, it was me as a young person in the streets as a part of the Civil Rights Movement. So I think one of the things that we give short shrift to.. I don't care what side of political spectrum we are, we are ignoring these young people and we're ignoring them to our peril. They have something to say and I think what they have to say can help change many of the things that we are concerned about.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Eleanor

### *Critical Exploration—Democratic moves in the classroom*

**Eleanor Duckworth:** I'd just like to talk about, this isn't any new contribution, but I'd like to describe a little bit of what our approach is

in the Critical Exploration. because it certainly leads to a lot of democratic moves in the classroom. I described two kinds of curriculum, but what they share is that the teacher is not the judge of what a child thinks. It's the evidence of that very being in the middle of . like Debbie says in the middle of the baseball game that enables you to make your judgments about how it works and where to pay attention and what the value is.

*Materials are the authority.* So in every class we seek the kids to be active, adults, too, active with the materials of that subject matter. And that's where my idea of democracy of ideas comes in also. In the classrooms that we recommend, there are not-- it's not the textbooks that are the authority; it's not the teacher who's the authority. It is the materials that are the authority. Every child's idea, every idea of a learner that comes from paying attention to these materials is valuable and considered. And the teacher is not the judge. The kids can judge other kids, can say "yes, but" or "oh, yeah, that was fantastic," but it's not the teacher that does that.

*Teachers write of Critical Explorations and their teaching.* And I'd like to read a couple of responses from teachers who are gone back into the classroom having studied ethics of critical exploration. Here are a couple of quotes from a survey made after a dozen years later than people took the course.[Eleanor Duckworth reading] "I remember being amazed at how many different ways people could see the world, solve problems, etc. This is a new idea for me. I think until that time. I really thought everyone thought or should think just like me." And another person says, "the amazing range of human abilities and learning styles and the amazing limits of my own abilities and learning style". One person wrote, "Through powerful experiences. I was able to re-experience my own process of making meaning and subsequently have been very inclined to help children have this experience." Another one: "I question more and I think that I empower students more as I was empowered. It was only in

this class that I finally felt comfortable saying, 'I don't understand.' I knew that these words were not a closure. I would not be excluded from the discussion. As a teacher and teacher of teachers of troubled and troubling children the emphasis on empowerment is also the key to helping children who feel powerless, angry and don't see hope and strength in classroom experiences. It helps them to see hope and strength."

"If I assign a problem ask a question or do a demonstration that I expect will cause them to make a certain connection. I realize that it is not their fault if they don't. I just missed the match in guessing what would be useful and we need to try again. I try to listen as carefully as I can to every answer a student gives and especially try to listen if the answer is different from the one I had in mind."

I have so many I hate to not read them all, but there's also sadness in there, of course: "In many ways I've also gotten much sadder about education as a result of this course. I experienced what it is to engage my own and others' minds fully and what people's minds are capable of. I came to have a much different view of the nature of knowledge-- how much more interesting teaching then became. But what also became more visible to me was how the structure of traditional curriculum as well as predominant assumptions about what it is to learn make us devalue everything but rote learning and how we therefore convince students to kill their own intelligence and vitality."

And another one, similar: "What I tried to find in T440, in this course, was just a way of beginning an outlook again in hope. Since at the time I started school for this course, I felt quite deprived of hope in the context of teaching. So it did take a whole semester for me to begin to be more willing to allow hope again. I had no idea how to make that hope practical or prevent it from being crushed Again by the end of the

course a semester later, I am still unsure. I spent a day this week visiting the school where I had taught the futility all came back to me. I did not know how to pass on my hope and happiness to them in the midst of problems we all know to be so deeply wrong.” [Pause]

And I just want to read this one: “Sometimes I worry if I'm teaching enough to my students. But stories of how some students are changing their approaches to the world are getting back to me and many students say I used to not like science.”

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thank you. Deborah, you have something, you've got your hand up.

### *‘Rediscovery on My Part’*

**Deborah Meier:** Yeah, I just, listening to Eleanor’s story reminds me of the story that I told many times before. So Diane and Eleanor may have heard it. When I started teaching kindergarten, it actually gave me great hope for the future. In part because of just what you said. It was a rediscovery on my part that these so-called ‘hard to educate’ children ‘who have no language’--all the things I had been told about low income, particularly Black children--they had no language--that was the most amazing [implying “amazingly wrong”]. So I was amazed to find out how many important ideas they were exploring. It just gave me hope that this could happen. The human being is capable of a democracy.

*Re-discovering ‘Living or non-living?’.* And one of it was a time when I asked the kids to bring in some object from home so we could discuss what's living and non-living. That was in fact sort of a standard kindergarten project. And the kids all brought in things and I called on Derek first who had a rock in his hand. And I said, ‘So which box could you put that in, the living or the non-living? And he said, ‘It's living,’ and we got into an argument. And it wasn't an equal argument—he completely persuaded the class that he was right, that it was living. In any case, the next child had a leaf in her hand that she had torn off a tree on her

way to school and I thought, ‘Is that living or not living?’ I said, ‘Listen, let's come back to this tomorrow.’ [We got] busy with our morning activities. And that night, I called a friend of mine who's a scientist at Rockefeller Center, and I asked him about the rock. And he said, ‘Well, I hate to tell you this, but your friend Derek is on the cutting edge of modern science.’ I told him the next day. And, but there were people who criticized me. They said, ‘You know, a lot of those kids will think that maybe he was right,’ and I said, ‘So what, what are you afraid of, what do you suppose could happen?’

*Deeply embedded in school cultures.* It was the notion that I missed a chance to tell them the truth was what was disturbing. And I happened to..be in the midst of an argument about the school that I once started in Boston. And one of the criticisms of the school is that they don't do enough academic teaching. It turns out what academic teaching is being *told* the truth, and we had too much time exploring things and not enough time learning the proper end. And I thought that's so, it's a deeply embedded in our school culture.

*Tendency to go back rather than listen.* And when Seymour Sarason told me years ago that he did a study—he went to look at all these schools that had once been famous for their [programs]...and that most of them had stopped being famous. Something happened after that. He said the main thing was when the founder left and the school went back to being like every other school. And he wrote a book then called *The Inevitable Failure of School Reform*. Seymour Sarason, it's worth rereading that. And I, you know, the tendency to go back to the telling rather than the listening that's so critical in education is very powerful. And so human beings are capable...of listening well but we seem to also be programmed to mostly want to tell.

And that is true of me in this discussion.--all the stories.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thank you, Deborah, for sharing that. Domingo, you had your hand [up].

### *Reason for hope*

**Domingo Morel:** Yeah, so I think along the lines of what just Debbie and Eleanor mentioned in terms of hope, and I see that there was a question from one of the particular attendees, although they're anonymous—they don't have the name up there—saying, 'Given the dismal state of democracy in this country, is there any reason for hope?' As I guess, you know, I ended last my last answer to the previous question talking about young people.

*Young people, resistance.* I think that when we work with young people, when we see what young people are doing, I think you see a great sense of hope there. I do want to add though--I think that from the historical perspective, as I was mentioning earlier, we should frame public education or democracy, broadly speaking, as a struggle, rather than something that is broken or something that we've achieved. Because I think, going over our history, we can never say, particularly for people of color, for women, and other marginalized people, I don't think we can say that there was a heyday of American democracy or heyday of public education, right? It's always been a struggle. And so I think that if we put that in perspective, we'll see that the struggle continues and people continue to resist the idea that we don't belong or education is not for all of us. That resistance is still part of us. And we continue to do that and with gains comes backlash. And so that is part of the American history as well—backlash, and we are in the midst of significant backlash, but I am hopeful that we will continue to resist and we'll continue to struggle because that's part of our story as well because that's part of our story as well.

*We'll get through this but not without struggle*

**Deborah Meier:** I just want to remind people that when I was born--which is quite a long time

ago but it was not ancient history, the majority of American children did not enter high school much less graduate. Just keep that in mind when we're told about the glorious past and why don't we go back. So in a way we have challenged ourselves with a really tough challenge and that that we haven't achieved it yet.

*Not the first generation.* I think you're right. Domingo, that shouldn't discourage us. There are moments when it's hard, hard on us to see some things that we thought were wonderful being destroyed, but this is not the first time. And, after all, when I was eight years old in 1939 my parents must have felt pretty discouraged about the world. And being eight years old, I didn't really... I took their reassurance—that it would all work out well--you know, as the truth. And I wouldn't worry, wasn't worrying about who would win the war. But I realized that we're not the first generation also to face really tough times both in our own country and worldwide. And somehow we got through that, we'll get through this, but not without a struggle. Thank you, Domingo, not without a struggle.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thanks, Domingo and Deborah. Diane, I see your hand up. Could you say something? Then I think we'll move to the Q&A. You've been, several of you have actually addressed some of the questions that are coming up, but we'll turn to some of them and just hear them and continue to respond and engage with them. But Diane, yes, please.

### *Standardized Testing*

**Diane Ravitch:** I think we would be remiss if we did not include the rise and installation of standardized testing as the measure of all things. And it's really, it's been with us for many years, but it's been official federal policy since 2001 with the passage of No, Child Left Behind and I've written a lot about standardized testing and the harm that it does to Children. It certainly crushes the kind of democratic classrooms that Eleanor and Deborah have been talking about and

I know that Debbie has written a lot on the subject.

*What standardized testing does.* But I can't help but think of the preface to the 1958 edition of *The Rise of the Meritocracy* by Michael [Young] and he in this preface talks about the danger of standardized testing and this was 1958. And he said that what [standardized testing] does is to say to the children of privilege that they deserve their privilege because they have high scores and it says the children who get low scores-- you don't you deserve nothing because you have low scores. And it certifies, it makes official, a class structure that gets replicated and replicated by these test scores.

*What do we do?* I think that when people ask, as several have in the chat, what do we do? Part of what we do is to continue the fight against standardized testing. It should not be an important part of school. And another part of it is to resist this label, failing school. A failing school is usually a school in a very impoverished community that has many children with special needs and that has low test scores because of all of the multiple problems and the underfunding and the large class sizes. And so instead of addressing any of the real needs of the school for more resources, for higher paid teachers, for smaller classes, the officials say, 'Well the test scores are low, this is a failing school and the school has to be closed.'

*Back to school closings.* So this brings school closing into it, too. It's a way of a really crushing the community and distributing the kids across multiple communities and I think in a place like Chicago where so many schools were closed, there has been a tremendous drop in the Black population in Chicago, as communities were destroyed by the closure of their schools.

And so it all comes back to standardized testing. So that has to be part of the discussion because that also makes a democratic classroom

impossible because the children are labeled by their test scores.

### *Testing connects to pedagogy*

**Deborah Meier:** Which are the result of right and wrong answers precisely what Eleanor was originally trying to get us away from.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Eleanor

### *Discard the phrase 'achievement gap'*

**Eleanor Duckworth:** I'd also like to say just about that -- that I move to discard the phrase, 'achievement gap,' because it has nothing to do with achievement. It has only to do with test scores. In my view, aiming to get higher test scores is a guarantee of doing worse education. So I believe we have to get rid of that phrase.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thank you Eleanor. I think that... that connects with Gloria. I saw Gloria's hand being raised and I know Gloria has thought deeply also about reframing that phrase, 'achievement gap.' So, I think that's a perfect connection. Gloria, could you say a few words connecting this? And then we'll go into the Q&A further on what can be done.

**Gloria Ladson-Billings:** Thank you. Yeah. I actually, Eleanor, I've made that proposal in 2006.

**Eleanor Duckworth:** Ah, good.

**Gloria Ladson-Billings** I talk about education debt.

**Eleanor Duckworth:** Yes, I know that.

### *Education Debt*

**Gloria Ladson-Billings:** Yes, [education debt] and *not* an achievement gap. It [education debt] is what is owed to these communities because of what we have historically done to them.

*Harriet Tubman*—in this for the struggle. But I really wanted to connect with Domingo's point that he made about the nature of the struggle, that really comes from Harriet Tubman who said, 'You know, it's not about winning. You're not in this to win. You're in this to struggle. That's what we are called to.' And so it is this whole issue of: How do we remove things further down the road? Not just merely say, 'Hey, hey we won.'

*Not just public education, whole public sphere.* And I think I did see a question pop up somewhere that connects what we're talking about to some things that I think we talked about offline regarding--it's not just public education. It is the evacuation of the public sphere. So, what does that mean? Well, public housing. You know Deborah mentioned, Chicago. Much of the public housing was on some of the best property in Chicago, but that public housing is gone now and what came in its place? Luxury condominiums that the very people that got displaced could never afford. Public health. We're in the midst of a pandemic. We had a pandemic in 1918. We saw what happened in the major study looking at Philadelphia, Saint Louis, and San Francisco when people paid attention to the public health authorities, we won't listen to Dr. Fauci who has devoted his entire life to infectious disease, but we're listening to a judge out of Florida to tell you take your mask off. I mean this is...all of this stuff is related. And public transportation--the fact that we've talked about what the degradation of our environment because we all are in our own individual cars and we don't provide an infrastructure that allows people to safely and inexpensively traverse their cities and communities. So public education in my mind is one of just multiple public facilities that we have decided we're not going to fund. We're not going to participate in; that the way to go is privatization. And anybody who thinks that just the aggregation of individual rights leads to the public good doesn't understand what the public good means.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Public good. Thank you. So I think these questions, some of the questions that I'm seeing, have been engaged but I will read some out just to really refocus our attention on the question of: What are the things that can be done? So I'm going to just read the question. Some of them have been responded to seeing one question asked for specific strategies to combat the attacks on public education. Please share your ideas including strategies communities have engaged in in the past that have been successful. And then:

- Given the evolution and perpetual war against public education, what do we do?
- Do we dismantle the entire thing and start anew? If not, how do we as a country protect what's good and dissolve what is bad?
- What is the metaphorical chemotherapy for the institution of public education?
- How do we counter attacks from the far right on aspects of public education today, such as teaching history truthfully teaching multiculturalism, advocating for social justice, and building social emotional competence and moral character?

I've read them rather fast, but just to give a flavor of the kinds of questions that are coming in. The tenor of the kinds of questions that are coming in--really are trying to engage with the question of:

- What are the strategies?
- What can we do?

I'll turn that back. We've already been addressing some of that and just to refocus our attention. So what, what can we do? So to the panelists again. Please.

*'Run for the local school board...go to school board meetings'*

**Diane Ravitch:** We mustn't give up because there is...in some states the people who are going to school board meetings are the Proud Boys, the Moms for Liberty, the Parents Defending Education, all of these right-wing



funded groups should try to destroy everything we talked about today and it's very important. If you have any inclination, please run for the local school board. And if not run for it, go to school board meetings, follow the work of the school board.

### *Teachers speak out*

**Deborah Meier:** You know, I had lately decided that the solution was to require every school to define what it meant by democracy. That's so important. And then to try to figure out how they should operationalize that definition in their school. That should be required. . . um, I still love the idea, but I must say I'm no longer sure that 1) we could ever get such a requirement and 2) that it would produce what I have in mind. So it's hard. I mean I have been part of several solutions and I don't like to tell you all, that I none of them have quite worked out the way I hoped but I do think that part of it is getting the story told well. And getting teachers to speak out. You know, I can say that's the dilemma. Is it impossible given what teachers are going through? I mean, they're all going through 14-16 years of formal schooling and then formal schooling has taught them to be afraid of making trouble and fear of, fear of making trouble or fear of being hurt by those who have power I think underlies the impulses that make democracy so hard to live up to and it's a vicious circle as long as some people have much more power. It's reasonable to be afraid of them.

And it was a one of the things I was amazed at when I started teaching was how many teachers would come to me and say would you bring this up at the staff meeting? And I'd say why don't you bring it up? Well, because you seemed to not be afraid of the principal and I don't know what she would do to me. She might change my classroom and all kinds of things which she may give me different kids. That teachers are in a habit of trying to please principals in the same way that children are in the habit of trying to think how they can avoid trouble. Teachers feel the same

way and I think principals. That's why the school board comes in--I think teachers don't respect the school board. They're afraid of the school board.

I think the notion of a respectful relationship between leaders and followers rests on that democratic idea that 'I chose them,' and 'they're mine', you know. We chose the leaders so if we respect ourselves, then we need to respect them until we have reason to change our mind. That's not what's happening. Thank you.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thanks, Deborah. Domingo, you were going to say something. And then I also see a question that's come up. And I'd like to raise that question just after you speak Domingo, but I'll just raise it now just so people have it on their minds and it's a specific question as someone who's studying to be a kindergarten teacher within this pandemic and insane time to be a teacher and the person has been feeling overwhelmed. What advice would you give? Is it all worth it? So there's a question but we'll keep that in mind. I'd like to go back to Domingo because I saw your hand up earlier to respond to some of the earlier questions. So after Domingo, we will go back to that question. So Domingo, please.

### *Opposing standardized testing—a critical part of the fight for democracy*

**Domingo Morel:** I just want to respond to some of the things that are being asked, particularly the suggestion that Diane had about running for school boards. I think that's critically important. I just want to remind folks that for many of the cities where we work or, have done research, they don't have locally elected school boards. Boston doesn't have a locally elected school board. New York City doesn't have a locally elected school board. And Newark, where I teach, just recently got a locally elected school board. This is a critical part of this idea of democracy and building democracy. And part of the reason, again--connecting it to something Gloria was saying earlier and Diane was saying

earlier as well, as the reason why standardized testing is critically important here. Standardized testing has been used to destroy the public sphere. Standardized testing has been used to close schools and to take local control away from communities. And in another way too, which we haven't really talked about as much in this conversation, standardized testing has been used to displace Black teachers after *Brown v. Board*, and it has been used to prevent Black teachers from entering the profession. The Praxis test which many states have in order for students to get into departments of education and then become certified teachers, that's a standardized test and it has worked to discriminate against students of color, particularly Black teachers, right? And so the standardized testing is something-- I think Diane raised and I just want to echo-- is critically important to the challenge to fight for democracy. That has to be a critical part of it. So I'll just end it with saying in answering your question-- What is to be done? We have to always go back to this idea of organizing--students organizing, teachers organizing, community organizations organizing, other folks organizing, to fight for this idea of what public education should be. So that needs to be always at the center of this work.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** I just like to say one thing--somebody has posted on the chat that they're having difficulties in seeing everyone's contributions. So I just want to say if there is any tech issue, that, please also have a look on the queue and also that people are collating the various contributions made. Colleagues of mine are collating the various contributions made and really having some questions highlighted or framed to summarize the different kinds of questions because there are so many coming in. So thank you for all those contributions and to the extent possible, we're trying to make sure that all those questions get a hearing and also that all those questions, in terms of technology and so on, that we're trying to make sure that all those questions are visible, so they'll be up after this

program is over. So those who asked, will we have a chance to look to see what people said? Yes, you will. We'll thank you for that reminder. Yes. So I'm going to focus again on that particular question: As someone who's studying to be a kindergarten teacher within this pandemic and insane time to be a teacher and somebody who's been feeling overwhelmed, what advice would you give? Is it all worth it? So. Anybody... who wishes to respond?

### *Are teaching and preparing for teaching worth it?*

**Deborah Meier:** Yes. Yes. It's definitely worth it but only if you enjoy it. You know, it may take a while for some people to enjoy it or may happen instantly. I have a granddaughter who's just, somewhat against my advice, become a high school teacher -- just recently-- and she's had five years... I think she's in her fifth year now. She was teaching in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Now, she's teaching somewhere in Pennsylvania. And the fact of the matter is sometimes she calls me several times a week just to tell me wonderful stories. They're not always stories about how she did something right but they're sort of wonderful insights into -- and she is having a good time. So even under fairly grim circumstances, if you find kids interesting, it's an interesting way to spend your time. And if you if you're in a situation where you can't find the kids interesting, I don't think it's worth staying in the field. And the other thing is to find a few friends who feel like you do so you have people. Not all your friends are going to want to hear all your stories about school, your grandmother might, but not all of your friends. And I think it's important for us to build a little circle when we start teaching, of people who you feel you can talk frankly and honestly to and explore your experience.

*Once with 'the kids', you will invest, 'commit in ways you never thought possible'*

**Gloria Ladson-Billings:** Deborah, I actually have a granddaughter who will be graduating in a couple weeks and she intends to become a

teacher. And her younger sister is a college sophomore and she intends to become a teacher. And when I asked them, you know, what's spurring their interests. Well, I talk about having always really loved interacting with kids. But the latest thing is, 'Grandma, people talk about you all the time.' So I think this is there they think that's going to lead them to celebrity. Trust me, it's going to be a rude awakening for them, but it's worth it in the same way as someone who asks the question, 'Oh, I don't think I want to have tell kids the world is in such a terrible place.' Trust me. Once you have these kids, it'll be worth it because you will invest. You will double down. You will commit in ways that you never thought possible.

**Deborah Meier:** So when you get to be old like me, you have someone who will come visit and help you out.

### *Do the impossible*

**Gloria Ladson-Billings:** Right but it's probably a crude analogy, but I do think you know, I love Derek Bell's statement that just because something is impossible doesn't mean it's not worth doing and that's been a kind of motivation for me all these years. You know slavery, ending slave was impossible but fighting against it was worth doing. Sharecropping which both my grandparents on both sides were sharecroppers—it was impossible but they fought against it. My own parents were subject to legal apartheid, state-sponsored segregation--it was impossible, but they fought against it. So I actually think teaching some kids to read or learn history or science is a lot a hell of a site easier than what my ancestors have been doing. So, yeah, it's worth doing.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thank you so much Eleanor?

### *Students' Ideas-Make it Worth It*

**Eleanor Duckworth:** Well, I just want to read another quote from a person, a teacher, 'Teaching has become more open-ended, more lively, more fun. Because ideas are constantly changing, I want to see and read about the students' ideas, it's more fun.'

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thank you. Um, so I also see as Deborah mentioned, I think some of these posts will be recorded and I also see suggestions coming up from people in the audience. And before we take up some of that. I would also like to ask the panelists. Do you have something you're grappling with and haven't figured out that you can share with the rest of us. Is there something in your own work, in your own experience that you're grappling with and haven't figured out, that you'd like to share with us? So sort of to flip the Q&A a little bit. Would you have questions for us? Thanks.

### *Teacher in audience*

**Deborah Meier:** I think I noticed that Ron Berger is in my audience and actually, Ron Berger, I have a lot of questions to ask you. Ron was a wonderful teacher who we learned a lot from at Mission Hill in Boston, by visiting his class and it was an extraordinary classroom. And he's written some extraordinary books and I think he and Scott Hartl now run...what's it called? [discussion of the name] it's a sort of Outward Bound translation into regular public urban schooling and it's everywhere.

**Eleanor Duckworth:** Expeditionary Learning.

### *Collaborate, go to conferences*

**Deborah Meier:** Okay, and because I think we, you know, there used to be some regular conferences. I used to go to where mostly there were teachers there who shared enough of my viewpoints so that I could use the conferences as a time to brainstorm and both because I don't travel as well and also because some of those have gone out of existence, there are things I'd love to talk about but they would take...they wouldn't

fit in here. And that is that the troubles of many of the schools that I have been particularly found and had strong feelings for are in trouble. And I'm not you know, since I'm not intimate in those environments anymore, I'm not very good at giving them advice.

### *Reclaim justice*

**Gloria Ladson-Billings:** Gopal. I would say the thing that I'm sort of wrestling with these days and I'm trying to finish this book, reading a lot to try to finish it, is the whole concept of justice. You know, one of the things that I think is we get bogged down in sort of rhetoric sometimes and then certain words you don't say or certain phrases, but I think justice has been a kind of enduring idea in many ways. The same way the notion of equality has and so I'm just looking at ways that we can reclaim, if you will, the concept of justice in our teaching and in our school settings.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thank you, Gloria. I just wanted to add to that that's been something that I have also been wondering about--in terms of grounding justice and where does it stand in the constellation of several things that I care about. I'd gone to a rally and I'd heard Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez say and quote basically say about justice that justice is what love looks like<sup>7</sup>. Justice is what love looks like and that I think was a quote of Cornel West and it touched me deeply. But thanks for sharing that as well. Um, yeah others, please, any questions?

### *Four Freedoms*

**Deborah Meier:** You know, I also think about one of the Four Freedoms that was part of my youth. FDR announced the Four Freedoms and one of them, the fourth one, I think, was Freedom from Fear and it's not often celebrated as an important idea the way, you know, the way justice is. Yet I think it's worth, it's worth our

reminding ourselves how important it is--to not live in fear, and our right to be in a setting that's not dominated by fear. Of what? What others have can do to you. And there's a, you know, if I climb a local mountain and I take a dangerous pathway. I'm choosing fear. But the kind of fear that almost everybody in many of our schools feel, it's not healthy for anything. Except actually, there are people who probably benefit and we're thinking about who those people are who benefit from our fear, but on the whole it's at the root of everything that's also wrong with our schools-- that they are operated on the basis of the only thing that motivates us is fear.

### *'How do we free ourselves from... to give education a chance?'*

**Domingo Morel:** I'll share some of the things that I'm really thinking about. I just think about how, how we can create a politics where our material conditions allow us to really experience education, right. How we can arrange ourselves, organize ourselves as communities and as a society in ways that really give education a chance. Because right now, as has been said throughout this conversation, education is used to justify exclusion, to justify marginalization, and not to let young people flourish. Because at the end of the day, there's a job or there's some sort of economic benefit, some sort of hierarchy, that education is used to feed, right? And so how do we free ourselves from that to give education a chance? To give young people an opportunity to really enjoy what education is supposed to mean? So that's what I think about a lot. Thank you.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thank you, Domingo. Thank you. Diane and Eleanor, I would just like to invite you to say something if you wish to, and the next phase will be to... I have something to say to the audience as well. But if you wish to, Diane and Eleanor, please.

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<sup>7</sup> Cornel West, sermon at Howard University, April 2011. [Source](#) Full quote: *Justice is what love looks*

*like in public. Just like tenderness is what love feels like in private.*

*'Behind it all...dramatic inequality'*

**Diane Ravitch:** Well, I guess that my reflection at this point is that for the first half of my career, I advocated things that were wrong. So I have spent the last dozen years of my career trying to make it right and it's been a lot of work. But what Deborah once asked me in a conversation--we used to write a blog together at *Education Week* called Bridging Differences. We bridged them: I crossed the bridge and joined Deborah.

But she once asked me what motivates you because I was doing, you know, writing books, speaking, doing whatever I could. And I said, I'm just angry. I'm angry. I'm angry at myself, but I'm also angry at people who are doing really harmful things to children and who are hurting our democracy hurting our society hurting the chances of people to have a good life, a decent life. And it's become so clear to me that what is behind so much of what we call our failing schools is the dramatic inequality in our society. The poverty in which so many children and families live and that if we're not willing to address the need to have fairness for everybody and a decent living wage for everyone and a decent life for everyone, we will never solve our education problems. Poverty has to be our foe and what makes me angry is to see so many people denying this, blaming teachers blaming children, instead of addressing the real issues that confront our society. So I would like to say that I'm motivated by love and justice, but I think I'm really motivated right now by anger and it's been anger this last...long while because I'm angry at the unfairness. I'm angry at the injustice and I want to be motivated by love so you can all help me. Thank you.

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Thank you. Eleanor?

**Eleanor Duckworth:** No, I'm fine.thanks.

*All students can 'fit into scientific space'*

**Gopal Krishnamurthy:** Okay. Gloria, did you want to say something again? You're okay. Okay,

I would just like to thank you all so much. I'd like to invite the rest of everybody else who's with us today--the audience--please write in the chat one thing you can do, one thing you can do. Please post that on the chat. Now, you can take a while and please post that on the chat--one thing that you can do.

I'd like to read out something--we're coming to the end of this and I'd like to read out something. It's written by Matthew Pyster, one of my students, colleagues, and friends in the Master of Science Environmental Studies/ Science Teacher Education Program at Antioch University, and he writes of his teaching, learning, and curriculum design that draws from Critical Exploration. And this is what he writes:

*When we were visiting public schools and guest teaching lessons as part of the science teacher education program, I designed the lesson using the principles I had learned with my cohort. I brought in my bug collection to middle schoolers and had them spend the whole class exploring different bugs following their own questions engaging in discussion and generally Messing About. Students were sharing what they noticed about their bugs--the similarities they saw and making educated guesses about questions they had. They became comfortable with being around insects and touched on topics like metamorphosis without me ever saying the words or 'teaching them' anything. At the end of the day the teacher for those classes came up to me. She shared that she was overjoyed because several students who didn't normally participate had been actively engaged in their own learning the whole time. She was especially excited about two students who normally very rarely participate in our class. One of whom was a young Black student who had 'diverse learning needs' and the other a young girl. On this day, they had both "fit" into a scientific space breaking down learning barriers, societal barriers, social barriers, and personal barriers to become in that moment, scientists.*

*I believe my own learning played a large role in what happened by making the focus of education the students' own ideas and noticing*

*and interests and questions, rather than the teacher's ideas. It gives power to the students regardless of gender, race, or IEP status in a society and school system where power is often being taken away.*

And we've been also having an ongoing discussion, about the construction of misfits in a classroom and society-at-large. So Matt's post deeply touched me and I wanted to share that with everyone in the context of this conversation.

I regard today's discussion as not just relevant to some limited notion or field of education but education in all its dimensions--This is me speaking—individual, social, political, economic, environmental, etc. It addresses the core of who we are, what we are to each other, and how we learn and live together in this troubled world.

Thank you very much for supporting this event. If you wish to continue your support financially for

the work of Critical Explorers, you can go to the nonprofit critical explorers.org to contribute. I also want to draw your attention to our annual workshop on Critical Exploration, which is planned for the first week of August [[2022 and 2023]]. Please mark this on your calendars. It will either be in person or virtual depending on the pandemic status. We will announce this soon as well. So, please, please stay tuned.

I'd like to express my sincere appreciation to the panelists for this occasion.

Thank you so much to the panelists and to everyone for joining us. There is much to be undone and done and many challenges and opportunities.

I wish you all a very good evening. Thank you so much.

## **Creative Insubordination: Divisive Concepts, Critical Race Theory, and Navigating Current Curricular Controversies**

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### *An Introduction*

At the November 2022 annual meeting of the American Educational Studies Association in Pittsburgh, the Society of Professors of Education hosted its biannual business meeting. During a special session concurrent to the AESA conference, several members of the society's past and present leadership were invited to speak about their ideas under the umbrella of the topic: *creative insubordination*. The panel included professors Ming Fang He, Denise Taliaferro Baszile, William Schubert, Paula Groves Price, and Brian Schultz.

Drawing from their experiences, the panelists discussed their takes on creative insubordination as it relates to divisive concepts, critical race theory, and current curricular controversies, topics of particular interest to the Society's membership. Creative insubordination is an approach to navigating classrooms that honors both the content expertise and pedagogical acumen of teachers. It is a form of noncompliance, and educators who practice these pedagogies are finding innovative, ingenious, and resourceful ways to do what is right by the students within their classrooms amidst the restrictive, punitive, or absurd rules and regulations made by politicians and, too often, their corporate puppeteers, who have not studied education. By enacting such imaginative pedagogies, these teachers are acting on their convictions and expertise, and in turn, expanding the possibilities for inquiry, agency, and capacity-building.

Given the advent and reemergence of fervent book banning, the damning yet inaccurate

thinking that critical race theory is pervasive in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade classrooms, and an all-too-commonplace describing controversial concepts as divisive, there is an explicit need for professors of education to think about ways to artistically teach their future educators how to navigate the current moment. At the same time, because of the polarized political landscape, professors of education must induct both practicing and future teachers into finding ways to enact curriculum that is worthwhile (Schubert, 1986), emergent and interest-based (Schultz, 2017), relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2008) and responsive (Gay, 2018), anti-oppressive (Kumashiro, 2000) and anti-racist (Kendi, 2019), and culturally sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017). This panel, with its cadre of experts, sought to invoke such a conversation.

What follows is a collage of thoughts and ideas from the panel participants, including those thoughts shared during the session and/or those considered beyond the session remarks. The pieces stand alone as written, but taken as a medley, offer insights that should prompt others to contemplate their own practices and promote change.

I begin the collage by describing the context of the current state of affairs and the ways it warrants different forms of creative insubordination. Following this contextualization, I share some of my ideas for teachers and teacher educators to "teach in the cracks" of the often-inflexible school environments. I then offer two ways to approach the moment by furthering a mission-driven

approach to teacher education and to supporting teachers in their endeavors: Engaging future educators, students in our programs, in social action curriculum projects and leveraging threshold concepts (Meyer & Land, 2003).

Following my thoughts are the three panelists' critical essays that make up this collage. Ming Fang He theorizes about her life experiences as manifestations of creative insubordination that take on cultural, linguistic, educational, and political forms. Ming Fang's contemplations of "living in-between" and "in exile" contribute in powerful ways to understandings of creative insubordination that have not only transformed her own life, but also hold deep potential for the significant work she is doing in the academy with doctoral students—educators who are caught in the current moment of navigating racist educational policy and surveillance practices that pick and choose what is deemed out of bounds, divisive, or simply not allowed. Ming Fang's guidance lays out a path for her students, and is exemplary of what others can do in the face of the ubiquitous punitive and limiting practices that perpetuate curricular controversies.

Denise Taliaferro Baszile's storying of her former third-grader Cee Cee's experiences with anti-blackness is a testament to ways of theorizing creative insubordination: by loving blackness and pushing back against the persistence of anti-blackness. Denise's challenge to our current moment's inherent racism and her proposal of an oath will undoubtedly prompt others to consider how they choose to engage with curriculum and the young people in their charge.

The collage ends with reflections from Bill Schubert on myriad curriculum studies literature that can guide teachers and teacher educators in and through the predicaments in which we find ourselves. Bill invokes his own ways of engaging in imaginative projection and role playing in his teaching and consulting as a means for creative insubordination. Taken independently or collectively, our hope is that

the ideas within these essays will challenge readers to contemplate, reflect, and transform their own experiences and situations to offer a more just, humane, and praxis-oriented approach to meeting the needs of all students in all classrooms.

### *Legislation and Curricular Controversy*

With so many states across the country either passing legislation or currently debating bills that are set to determine what can or ought to be taught in the public schools, teachers must find ways to engage in creative insubordination. Although curricular content has been long controlled by the states, recent interruptions—or disruptions—by state legislators and politicians competing to be the most conservative, right-wing, or fanatical—are prompting provocative debates and controlling much of the public pedagogy and rhetoric in the public sphere (Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010; Sandlin, O'Malley, & Burdick, 2011) about what should be allowed, permissible, or appropriate for students to learn and teachers to teach. These debates, and yes, the divisiveness, that is swirling about in the current moment has significant political implications for teachers. Educators are forced not only to recognize potentially problematic topics, but also to reconcile navigating a new and dangerous context with meeting the continuing needs of students in classrooms and communities—students whose needs are not met by new curriculum controls.

As gender identity, sexual orientation, race, racism and anti-racism are deemed appropriate—or inappropriate—by some parents and communities and debated at local school board meetings, state legislators have been rapidly enacting laws that once again put teachers into the crosshairs of political and culture wars. This politicization of P12 classrooms is presenting immense challenges for teachers.

Unfortunately, there are examples across the country where teachers, and in turn their students, are being impacted. For instance, the controversial Florida Parental Rights in Education



Law, better known by the catchy name proffered by its critics—Don't Say Gay Law—restricts teachers from teaching about sexual orientation or gender identity in certain grade levels (c.f. Diaz, 2022) and is part of the “anti-woke” agenda of Governor Ron DeSantis. Other states have passed legislation that restricts what can be taught in classrooms particularly related to racial justice. As of April 2022, an alarming 11 states had enacted 14 laws that in some way restrict “teaching of racial history” in the curriculum, while another 97 bills in 35 states that would curtail what may be taught were being considered by state legislatures (LePage, 2022; McIntyre, 2022). The ubiquity of these attempts to control curriculum are cause for grave concern for not only teachers but all citizens concerned with equity and justice.

In a recent textual analysis as part of his master's degree final project, attorney-turned-social-studies teacher George McIntyre (2022) considered the text of several states' laws. McIntyre's exploration points to the tough and complicated terrain teachers are forced to navigate. For instance, in 2021 Texas Governor Greg Abbott signed HB3979 regulating how educators teach about matters related to race, sex, and oppression, noting in a two-sentence filing statement that the law “is a strong move to abolish critical race theory in Texas, but more must be done” (Abbott, 2021). Ironically, the law also mandates that social studies teachers teach certain topics and teach using specific, named documents. Some of the topics and documents that teachers must include: the Fugitive Slave Acts, the Indian Removal Act, writings of Frederick Douglas, writings from the Chicano movement, women's suffrage and equal rights, the history of white supremacy, and the civil rights movement, among many others. In Ohio, where I reside, there are bills currently in committee that will impose, if enacted, even more restrictions on race-related topics and on learning outcomes related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Not only do these bills focus on K-12 classrooms, at least one includes restrictions

on divisive concepts in higher education curriculum as well (c.f. Spicer-Sitzes, 2022). One might think it fortunate for students, teachers, and the citizens of Ohio that these bills (HB322, HB327, HB616) remain in committee. Whether or not these bills get signed into law, the momentum to silence matters of inclusion, diversity, and equity in classrooms has already arrived, and to great consequence. In January 2023, the superintendent of a large suburban Cincinnati school district resigned from his post citing the relentless attacks from a board member about, in part, his support of diverse representations and inclusive resources to be taught within the district's curriculum. In his resignation letter, the superintendent cited the board member's “crusade to force me to resign” was a “direct retaliation for my efforts to protect Lakota [school district] students of all genders and races from her destructive efforts” (Weiter, 2023). When a superintendent sees no other option than to resign because of hostilities, relentless attacks from non-experts, and caustic debates related to “allowable” curriculum, there should be no shock that these same pressures flow to classroom teachers and others working in schools.

### *The Teacher Shortage and Blaming Teachers*

This full-throated assault on what's considered appropriate is undoubtedly one of the reasons for the pervasive teacher shortage seen throughout the country. In a recent interview with the local National Public Radio affiliate in Dayton Ohio, I was asked about the reasons for the lack of teachers (Frazier, 2022). I reminded the audience that this is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, the shortage of teachers, particularly in neighborhoods and communities that have been historically marginalized, has been ongoing and consistent for decades. There has long been a revolving door of teachers in the hardest to staff schools within neighborhoods that have the least resources. What we're seeing now is a more pronounced shortage that's come to more

affluent areas that were never at a loss for graduates from educator preparation programs. But importantly among the litany of reasons for the shortage, contested classroom curriculum was not one of them. We now see contested curriculum as a commonly given reason by those leaving early, or not even entering the profession at all (Edsall, 2022; Neuman, 2022; Woo, et al, 2022). Teachers are often targeted for the broader ills of society. Children's school-based performance, typically measured by standardized achievement tests, attendance, and external assessments are laid on the doorstep of the classroom teachers. Questions are rarely raised about society's lack of support for young people and their families-- access to healthcare, housing, food security, or other factors that affect a young person's life. But now, with a new and increased pressure points for teachers--in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the controversies associated with what, how, and why teachers teach what they teach, it should be of no surprise that licensed teachers are considering other options. The most social justice-minded teachers find themselves at the intersection of what they know is right by their students, their ethos of what it means to be a teacher, and this highly politicized landscape. And given the long-overdue racial justice awakening that has gripped our country following the unconscionable murder of George Floyd, everything associated with racial justice has been put under a microscope. Perhaps Zoom lessons in family kitchens and living rooms during the pandemic, or the lists of controversial books—that often, of course, have not been read—have entered the public's consciousness, debates about what can or ought to be taught in classrooms has become a hot button issue today.

### *Social Action Curriculum, Finding the Cracks, and Practicing Aspirational Threshold Concepts*

In that NPR interview the journalist asked me about teachers being criticized for teaching critical race theory in elementary and high school

classrooms. I responded with some skepticism that critical race theory had been actually taught in those spaces. What I argued was that critical race theory was being used as a code, a way of dog whistling the idea inherent to racial and social justice that didn't fit neatly or nicely into some conservative perspectives about what should be taught in schools. In working to challenge this assumption, I shared this anecdote: The notion that teachers would be indoctrinating young people in their classrooms is not something I've witnessed in the time I've spent in my students' and graduates' classrooms. That teachers are working to indoctrinate young people is a ridiculous argument. Instead, what I do believe is that the best teachers work to create spaces for students. They challenge the young people under their charge in inquiry-rich environments. They induct their students into critical thinking, critical analysis, and problem posing. They want their students not only to learn content and acquire knowledge but also to become knowledge producers and to ask questions... lots of them. Whether it's to rally a base for elections or simply to silence and oppress marginalized groups, those great teachers are under attack.

Considering creative insubordination and teachers wrestling with how to include the "divisive concepts" in their teaching as they navigate the current curricular controversies, I think a lot about what I have called *teaching in the cracks* (Schultz, 2017) coupled with students engaging in social action curriculum projects (Schultz, 2017, 2018). These frames encourage teachers to find the openings and opportunities.

With such opportunities, teachers make space for their students to engage in emergent forms of curriculum based on students' priority concerns. Leveraging issues students identify, a teaching-in-the-cracks approach allows teachers and students ways to co-create action-oriented, problem-solving curricular endeavors within the classroom. Given the chance to name issues important to them, students often choose justice laden topics that directly impact their communities. This way of *doing* curriculum

acknowledges that there may be mandates, expectations, or an already prescribed scope and sequence. But, importantly, it allows the opportunity for those who have the most at stake in the classroom—students along with their teachers—to find ways to engage justice-oriented inclinations that can meet those outside expectations, align to standards, not be running afoul of newly signed legislation while diving into controversial and hot-button topics meaningful to the students. In classrooms where such social action curriculum projects are present, teachers look to students to name community problems and come up with solutions. The entirety of a school curriculum can be leveraged to help solve the very issues that students identify. With fervor and interest, students dedicate time, energy, and insight while accomplishing math, reading, writing, social studies, and science in addition to all sorts of practical and transferable life skills.

Through this inverted approach to curriculum—starting with real-life issues first and then integrating the subject areas and particular content into problem solving—students come excited and ready to learn, and to create knowledge, too. These sorts of approaches to teaching and learning do not happen by chance. I have been working to induct my students into such approaches since I began teaching teachers. This was often done in my own courses, without having a cohesive set of ideas guiding collective work with colleagues.

Teaching future teachers to navigate complexities and find opportunities within the system(s) is more easily accomplished when there are intentional scaffolds and agreed upon beliefs shared amongst the faculty and put into place within a teacher preparation program. At Miami University, where I teach and chair the Department of Teaching, Curriculum, and Educational Inquiry, my colleagues and I have leveraged a theoretical frame called *threshold concepts*. As a department, we draw heavily on the pathbreaking work of Erik Meyer and Ray Land (2003, 2005), along with tremendous wisdom and guidance from Elizabeth Wardle and her

team at the Howe Center for Writing Excellence, which Wardle directs at Miami.

According to Meyer and Land (2003), “A threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress” (p. 1). Over the past five years, half a dozen cohorts of faculty within our department have engaged in the Howe Center’s Fellows program to learn about and then develop threshold concepts. Over the years, we have used our threshold concepts to build ideas for faculty, students, and a multitude of other endeavors across the department such as program re-design, faculty recruitment, developing a new program, and curricular mapping.

In a recent recap and to act as a launchpad for our next steps, Wardle presented what she calls “aspirational threshold concepts” (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2019, p. 31) at our faculty retreat to both revisit and introduce to new faculty how we have been engaging this transformative work. Wardle discusses aspirational threshold concepts more fully in the co-authored chapter, “Recognizing the Limits of Threshold Concept Theory” in her edited volume with Linda Adler-Kassner (2019). Sharing with the department’s faculty, Wardle (2022) revisited with us how “threshold concepts are ideas, ways of thinking and practicing, that enable learners to do things differently and see things differently than they did before...[and that they] have the potential to promote deep change” (n.p.). This notion of deep change is something in which Wardle has significant expertise and has recently written about with one of her former doctoral students (Martin & Wardle, 2022).

Indeed, the threshold concepts have been a means for the department to work toward our justice-oriented vision and work to make good on our unapologetically critical strategic plan. But, this work is not easy and is definitely a work in progress. In the retreat presentation, Wardle

spoke from her experience guiding faculty to develop threshold concepts across disciplines. Acting as both a refresher for longtime faculty and an induction for the cadre of new department faculty, Wardle (2022) succinctly presented characteristics of threshold concepts drawn from her work with colleagues (Glotfelter, Updike, & Wardle, 2020):

Erik Meyer and Ray Land (2003) noted that faculty in various disciplines identified what Meyer and Land began to call “threshold concepts”—concepts critical for epistemological participation in a discipline.

They identified several characteristics of such concepts: they are troublesome, transformational, and integrative; they illustrate the boundaries of disciplinary territory and enact both ways of knowing and ways of practicing in a particular field.

Learning them also requires recursive time in a liminal space—time that can’t be rushed. (p. 170)

In addition, and importantly, Wardle (2022) emphasized that “learners can’t meaningfully progress without them [threshold concepts]” and that they are “irreversible—cannot unsee or know them” once they have been identified.

This revisiting and illustrating with faculty was just as energizing as it was challenging. Five years prior, we had named, and then unanimously affirmed the following threshold concepts:

- Education is not neutral/Teaching is political
- Curriculum is more than standards, textbooks, or courses of study
- Curriculum is co-constructed
- Both teachers and students have empowerment/agency
- Teaching is/as intellectual engagement
- Teachers and students engage in critical-consciousness

- Teaching and learning honors people’s full humanity

No doubt a provocative and exciting list. We have come to know that drafting the concepts was the easy part. Living up to them in practice takes labor and ongoing deliberation.

Undoubtedly these are powerful ideas, but as “conceptual gateways” there is a constancy of contemplation because of the ongoing engagement with “troublesome knowledge” (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 373) associated with them and working to challenge and change a broken educational system. This engagement is not only for ourselves, but also for the future and practicing teachers with whom we work. We must be critically introspective of ourselves while also work to induct colleagues and students into the threshold concepts as we have come to name, know, and practice them.

Living up to these concepts as the cornerstone ideas for our work means building them into everything we do. This includes focus that spans from how we think about allocating departmental resources to reflecting on promotion and tenure. Most importantly in the context of creative insubordination, we need to anchor and thread the threshold concepts throughout our curriculum so our students have the philosophical ideas and ideals to guide them in their future endeavors. This is easier said than done. We know that these concepts cannot be merely a rhetorical exercise but we must practice them and continuously revisit our courses, our programs, and departmental practices to bring the next teachers into the profession with the abilities to reach all children, honor their diversity, and teach in critical, culturally sustaining ways. With this foundation in place, our hope is that we provide the scaffolding, guideposts, and convictions for our graduates to make curricular decisions that are influenced by shared convictions despite the noise and narrowing of the curriculum that is happening in this dangerous, disappointing moment.

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## To Live in Creative Insubordination is to Resist Domination and Thrive in Liberation

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My understanding of creative insubordination builds upon my work on *teaching, learning, and living in-between* (2003, 2006); *exile pedagogy--teaching in-between* (2010); *East–West epistemological convergence* (2016); and *diaspora curriculum* (2018, 2021, 2022). This understanding also draws upon the works of Edward Saïd (1994, 1999, 2000, 2003) on *interstitial spaces* and *exile*; James Clifford (1994, 1997) on *diaspora consciousness* and *diasporic space*; Homi Bhabha on *location of culture* (1994), *culture’s in-between* (1996); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1972, 1980, 1991) on *rhizome, interbeing, intermezzo, multiplicity, and line of flight*; M. M. Bakhtin (1981) on *double-voiced, double-accented, and double-langaged hybrid*; Ted Aoki (2005a, 2005b) on *teaching as indwelling between curriculum worlds*; Brian Schultz on *Listening to and learning from students* (2011) and *teaching in the cracks* (2017); William Schubert on *love, justice, and education* (2009). As I think about writing this article, I have realized that creative insubordination and its implications are deeply embedded in my experience as a Chinese woman and a faculty member moving back and forth between constantly changing Eastern and Western theoretical traditions, languages, and cultures. My experience of creative insubordination is not a simple one to articulate, but rather, something more complex, historically, culturally, linguistically and politically contested. In the following, I briefly discuss the dilemmas, tensions, and advantages associated with my life of creative insubordination in China, in the North American academy, and during the pandemics.

### *Creative Insubordination: My Life in China*

My experience of creative insubordination can be traced back to my life in China, particularly during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). I was born during the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s; grew up during the Grand Cultural Revolution (1966-1976); and began to be exposed to foreign cultures at the beginning of the open door policy (1978-present). These two movements had a strong impact on my preschool years. I remember that the children in my generation swallowed those political slogans as we learned to speak. At the beginning of the Anti-Rightist Movement in 1957, Mao Zedong [then the chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)] proclaimed: “Let one hundred schools of thought contend; let one hundred flowers bloom.” The “one hundred schools” of philosophy included the Confucianist, Daoist, and legalist schools which clashed with one another in their attempts to reform the CCP and China. We heard that our “aunts and uncles” (intellectuals of our parents’ generation) were encouraged to do self-criticism, to confess their anti-proletarian sentiments, and to express their critical views about the CCP to ameliorate socialist China. Soon in front of us, a disturbing picture appeared: The intensity of dissent about the CCP threatened Mao’s regime. The hundred flowers campaign ended abruptly in a suppression of intellectuals. One hundred thousand “counter-revolutionaries” were “unmasked and dealt with,” more than one million of our “aunts and uncles” (teachers in my parents’ generation) were “subjected to police investigation,” and several millions were sent to the countryside for “re-education.”

My memory was flooded with people's pain, silence, and agony. In 1958 Mao urged the simultaneous development of agriculture and industry with a focus on heavy industry. This campaign initiated a gigantic social mobilization, which was intended to have a labor investment in industry. A new form of social organization, the people's commune, was established to enable the rural productive apparatus to function without excessive dependence on the central government. I heard people shouting slogans: "Let's leap from socialism to communism!" "Let's surpass the United States and follow Great Britain in ten years!" Deep in my memory, I can still vaguely remember hundreds upon hundreds of people working and eating together, with loudspeakers blaring all day long. People were searching for pots, pans, and any other kind of metal to melt into iron and steel. Soon fewer and fewer people went to work together. My brothers, my sister, I, and many other children only went to school for half a day since the little food we had could not last for a whole school day. We were led into massive starvation. I began to receive primary school education amidst such turbulence.

From grade one to grade three, children of my generation learned how to read, write, and count. Our teachers were quite strict with the syllabi, which focused on love for the Chinese Communist Party, Chairman Mao, and Socialist China. Our primary courses included language, math, politics, physical education, and music. In our language courses, our reading materials were mainly about Chinese fables, and revolutionary heroes and heroines such as: how Chairman Mao became the revolutionary hero and leader; how Chairman Mao's colleagues became national heroes or heroines; stories of the capitalists' and landlords' cruelty, etc. Even some of the math questions were built upon those political topics. In politics, we were requested to memorize important events in Chinese history, especially those of the Communist Party. We were frequently asked to report our thoughts to our instructors. In physical education, we went through very rigid training. We were asked to

walk like the wind, to sit like a clock, and to sleep like a bow. In music lessons, we learned to sing and dance to revolutionary songs such as "Love our Socialist China!" "Love Our Communist Party!" "Long Live Chairman Mao!" and "Long Live the Chinese Communist Party!"

We would do whatever Chairman Mao told us to do. We felt happy and never complained about any difficulties in our lives. We were asked to think about all the hardships the Red Army had gone through when they were doing the Twenty Five Thousand Li (twelve thousand and five hundred kilometers) March, a retreat which laid the foundation for the Chinese Communist Party's success in 1949. We dressed in uniform blue. Six days a week, we went to school, listened to the teachers, and thought along the same lines as the teachers. The teachers listened to the authorities and thought along the same lines as the authorities.

My parents were teachers, and as such, were relatively privileged, being considered "engineers of human beings' brains." But the forces in the Anti-Rightist Movement and in the Great Leap Forward led to dramatic changes in my family's status in China. These changes culminated during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when social values were turned upside down. We heard people shout, "Long Live the Unprecedented Proletarian Cultural Revolution!" "Long Live Our Chairman Mao Zedong!" We learned to shout along with the people to show our revolutionary spirit. To go with the wind was to protect ourselves since "the first bird flying out of the bush will get shot first" (a popular Chinese saying that we learned almost as soon as we were born). As eleven or twelve-year-old children, we were encountering torture, violence, and madness almost every day. We could see: wives reporting their husbands.... sons fighting ruthlessly against their fathers or mothers.... brothers spying on each other.... "revolutionary" students sending their teachers to "reforming farms," or "dark rooms" (i.e., solitary confinement), and repaying their teachers' kindness with enmity and cruelty.



At school, students burned their books, read Chairman Mao's famous sayings, drafted Da Zi Bao (criticism), posted them on the wall to criticize teachers' "inflammatory" teaching and to show their revolutionary action, and criticized themselves for any bourgeois thinking including dressing well and colorfully, and wanting to eat good food and live a good life. On some school days, peasants and workers were invited to schools to tell the students about their hard lives before the Liberation (1949). We sang and danced to revolutionary songs all through our secondary and middle school years during the Grand Cultural Revolution. Every day before our meals, we had to stand up to worship Chairman Mao and then we ate. Since we were not allowed to join the Red Guards due to our bourgeois backgrounds, which could provide some advantage for our education, joining the Chinese Communist Youth League became almost impossible. Thus, our education beyond high school was in jeopardy although we were doing very well at school.

Intellectuals were considered bourgeois and were to be "re-educated." My father, for example, was removed from his position as teacher, chastised in a street parade where he wore a high paper hat and placard on his chest with his name upside down and crossed with a red X, and eventually imprisoned on a reforming farm to "confess his anti-revolutionary bourgeois pollution of students' brains." As a child, my values and beliefs were in question. Once my parents were highly revered and suddenly, I witnessed my father being publicly chastised, which sharply put basic values and beliefs in conflict. As a child I held onto those values meanwhile adopting the values of the Cultural Revolution without questioning. As a child, of course, I neither thought of this as creative insubordination nor understood that there were fundamental intellectual threads at work, which, I now see, are tied to my current academic life. I have written about this as a key moment in my cross-cultural life and identity development (He,

2003), which, I now realize, is also a key moment in conceptualizing creative insubordination.

These cultural movements and the sense of creative insubordination were particularly poignant for me because this intellectual insubordination within political upheavals was essentially an intellectual revolution. What began as anguish over family and social values is now with me as an intellectual sense of not belonging here or there, but of living in subordination in-between.

What began in the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Great Leap Forward had at least one other major revolutionary expression important to the development of my sense of creative insubordination. It was the intellectuals that were primarily targeted in the Anti-Rightist Movement, the Cultural Revolution, and in another form, later in what the world has come to know as the Tiananmen Square Student Movement (1989).

I was somewhat emblematic of my generation in that following the Cultural Revolution, when the universities re-opened, it was, for the most part, the children of the intellectual group who went to university. Our sense of creative insubordination was brought to life during the Cultural Revolution when books with inflammatory ideas were burned, libraries were closed down, lessons and textbooks were filled with revolutionary slogans but not content knowledge, schools were open with only political events, and youngsters were sent to reforming farms, factories, and military bases to receive re-education from peasants, workers, and soldiers. I remember, during hot summer nights, the children in my neighborhoods would gather while constant struggling against outrageous mosquito bites to listen to stories of Chinese literature from an oral history storyteller in the community. Sometimes some of our "uncles and aunts" would risk their lives to tutor some of us mathematics, physics, chemistry, sciences, language, and literature. Some of us even *stole* books from the banned libraries and secretly swallowed forbidden sexually implicit or explicit

adult books and listened to foreign radio broadcasts. I also remember from time to time while others played cards, went to films, or involved in street fights, I and some other youngsters would study under oil lamps or in shabby huts after we had spent the whole day doing heavy labor or military training in reforming farms, factories, and military bases. We would memorize English words, expressions and writings during our break time on our reforming farms or in the factories while overhearing peasants and workers flirting with one another. This is how my education and the education of my generation continued, secretly in creative insubordination.

I was successful at university and became a teacher of English as a foreign language at the university level. Even then, during that comparatively stable time, the sense of creative insubordination born during the earlier cultural movements was strengthened. My students, most of whom were born during the Cultural Revolution and, therefore, had no direct experience of it, were out of sync with their teachers such as myself. The China they knew and the China I knew were different. This is a difference that continues to this day as people of different generations speak very differently of the China they know. This difference intensified my sense of creative insubordination within my own culture.

My years as a teacher created (1983-1989), I now realize, yet another thread in my sense of creative insubordination, this time the foreigner versus the Chinese, and the position I now find myself in as being neither the foreigner, that is, the American, nor the Chinese. How did this occur? The post Cultural Revolution was a time of opening up to the West. Like many other youngsters, we valued every minute of our university time. We knew that we had to accept a very heavy course load and a rigid discipline if we were to make up for the ten years' formal schooling we had lost during the Grand Cultural Revolution. We were trained to work diligently like a silkworm (making a silk cocoon with a lot

of patience) and selflessly like a candle (lighting others and sacrificing ourselves).

Meanwhile, some communication media such as TV programs, concerts, and dancing parties blew some western wind into our thinking. It was during those university years that we began to be exposed to some western influence. Some Western scholars or teachers began to come to Chinese university campuses to teach or talk with Chinese students. We met them in our classrooms, at English corners (English speaking activity centers), in the streets, and in the libraries. We felt curious about their looks and their ways of talking and teaching. I studied with four American teachers, two Canadian teachers, and one British teacher on my Chinese campus and learned ways of teaching and learning dramatically differently from those I had learned from my parents and other Chinese teachers. I tried to bring these ideas to my own teaching and, as always, struggled to find the balance. I was in, intellectual insubordination, in exile.

This thread of being in creative insubordination as the Chinese and the foreigner became intensified during the Tiananmen Square Student Movement in 1989. Even though China's open door policy (1978-present) was intended as an opening to the Western economic world, Western values and ideas, as I noted above, flooded into China, particularly Western ideas of democracy. Tiananmen Square, the largest square in the center of Beijing, has been a national symbol of central governance for centuries (China National Tourist Administration, 2003). Tiananmen Gate, "Gate of Heavenly Peace," is the gate to the imperial city--the Forbidden City. It has functioned "as a rostrum for proclamations to the assembled masses," with the Great Hall of the People on the western side, the Museum of the Chinese Revolution and the Museum of Chinese History to its east and west, the Monument to the People's Heroes at the center of the square, and the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall and the Qianmen Gate in the south (China National Tourist Administration, 2003).

Democracy oriented students used this symbolic location to make a stand on democracy and request that the government move toward a democratic modern China. The student movement ended with military crackdown, political persecution, arrest of student leaders, and the exodus of large numbers of students and intellectuals in exile.

As a university teacher, I was once again in creative insubordination in exile, pushed and pulled in several directions at the same time. My sympathies with my own students' desire for Western democratic ideas paralleled my sympathies with Chinese situations and its history. I was caught between advising my students to be cautious, to respect traditional values and the current government, and to reach out to the West and exercise democratic rights. The Tiananmen Square Student Movement catapulted my thinking on my China-foreign creative insubordination in exile and I left China to study in Canada.

### *Creative Insubordination: My Life in the North American Academy*

My journey to North America dramatically shifted my positioning on what was foreign. Suddenly I became a foreigner, but still, perhaps even more intensely so, a diaspora of creative insubordination in exile. I brought my Chineseness which was far more of a living presence in my new environment than was Western foreignness, a presence in my Chinese environment. I was living in insubordination, that I had mostly read about and had only experienced indirectly in China. I earlier noted that the cultural and political insubordination into which I was born was, ultimately, an intellectual insubordination. This became strengthened on my arrival in North America. First and foremost, as in the Cultural Revolution, the experience was one commonly referred to as "cultural shock." Values that held me together and guided me were, as in the Cultural Revolution, turned upside down as I landed on North American soil. But I soon found, or at least it now seems as I

reflect on my experience, that landing on North American soil meant an intellectual shift. What might have been seen as cultural insubordination became, and was, intellectual insubordination.

One of the special features of creative insubordination in exile as I experienced it in North America, and which made even more distinct my sense of creative insubordination in exile, was constant uncertainty, unavoidable diversity, irresolvable confusion, and intensified complexity. I moved to undertake my doctoral studies in Toronto recognized by the United Nations as the most multicultural city in the world. Diversity and multiculturalism were key words everywhere: on the radio, in the newspapers, on the streets, and of course, in the ideologies and reference lists of the courses I was taking. Whereas I may have thought of myself as coming to North America and into something that could be more or less thought of monoculturally, I found myself wondering in the midst of uncertainty, confusion, diversity, and complexity, even more so than before, where I fit within this diverse, contradictory, and contested multicultural, landscape. The intellectual work complicated, rather than simplified, this sense of creative insubordination in exile. In search of theoretical traditions, I found a diversity of positions--an intellectual world of multiplicity that one needed to sort through and choose ideas, theories, and ways of thinking suitable to oneself and to various topics of concern.

Some aspects of this intellectual insubordination in exile were surprising from another point of view by providing unexpected connections to the intellectual roots of my upbringing. I found myself studying John Dewey and reading about John Dewey's trips to China (Clopton & Ou, 1973). I recognized, as did Hall and Aims (1999), intellectual links between Confucian thought and Deweyan thought. Indeed, my sense that Dewey shortened, rather than lengthened, the in-between bridge in exile terrain may have, at least partially, been behind

my special interest in Deweyan theory as I pursued my doctoral studies.

Though I had encountered, and even tried, Western thinking and teaching methods, and had worked through master's degree programs in two different universities, I found the spirit of inquiry required in intellectual life to be quite different from the sense of authority, certainty, and conformity that tended to accompany my ways of Chinese teaching and learning. Again, I found myself very much in insubordination in exile because I sensed a different way of thinking and reached out to it meanwhile being held from it by the creative insubordination I was born into and the creative insubordination I lived in exile. I was in insubordination in exile with a becoming intellectually inquiry-oriented, activist self, a sustained and conformed self who thought of knowledge in formalistic ways. Subordinating to the authority and conforming to orthodoxy were part of my upbringing and formal schooling in China. During many cultural and political movements in China, inflammatory ideas were perceived as anti-revolutionary, dangerously threatening, frantically forbidden, and brutally punished. Finally, when I was able to internalize *inflammatory* ideas such as critical theory, critical race theory, ecofeminism, and further develop or practice them in my learning, teaching, inquiry, writing, and ways of living, I was asked to "take away divisive concepts and inflammatory languages" from my syllabi and my doctoral students' dissertation proposal writing for the purpose of obtaining the approval of my university's Institutional Review Board. When I was able to overcome the fear of challenging the orthodoxies and confronting the authorities, I was accused of being disrespectful and "divisive." Just as I now understand that I can never escape the insubordination to which I was born, I cannot escape the insubordination in exile as a quest for certainty or conformity. This insubordination in exile permeates my intellectual life in North America.

This insubordination in exile, in another form, continues to develop as I live in the North American academy as a faculty member. Being a woman of diaspora, as who I was, and will always be, I often find myself caught up in-between tensions and dilemmas. This insubordination is compounded with multiple insubordinations in exile: insubordinations within my own culture in China, in North America, and in-between. This complex insubordination in exile blurs the boundaries between "colonizer and colonized, dominant and subordinate, oppressor and oppressed" (Ang, 2001, p. 2). It creates ambiguities, complexities, and contradictions. I find myself constantly entangled in creative insubordination. As I encouraged my students in the United States to challenge their White privileges, I realized that as a Han, the dominant cultural group among fifty-six ethnic groups in China, I was privileged even though I was intellectually suppressed during cultural movements in China. I also realized that I was privileged as one of the very few Chinese women who could afford to step out of my own country to experience this complex insubordination in exile even though I kept losing my sense of belonging in North America. I became, in the Mainland Chinese vernacular, an Overseas Chinese woman with "longer knowledge and shorter hair" (more educated and independent, and less "feminine"), and a woman with a "sandwich mind" (partially Chinese and partially Western).

This insubordination in exile became more complicated as I moved back and forth in-between cultures in China and North America. In May 2001, I was invited back to China as a Chinese American professor to attend an educational convention on women and minority education and give public lectures. As I flew across the North American continent back to the Asian continent, the cross-cultural, intellectual, insubordination led to political insubordination in exile. On April 19, 2001, the U. S. Department of State issued a public announcement "cautioning Americans--especially Americans of Chinese

origin -- that they should carefully evaluate their risk of being detained by Chinese authorities before deciding whether to travel to China..." (U.S. Department of State, 2001). The announcement states "that individuals who have at any time engaged in activities or published writings critical of Chinese government policies... are particularly at risk of detention, even if they have previously visited China without incident" (U.S. Department of State, 2001). As a Chinese-born American, I was advised not to travel back to China. That incident led to tensions and dilemmas. My writing on my experience of the Cultural Revolution (He, 1998) might be perceived to carry implicit criticism against the Chinese government. I was, again, captured in insubordination in exile. This time, the insubordination in exile was political. I was proud of my writing but frightened by its political potential. This fearful feeling was intensified when the Chinese graduate students at the conference friendly warned me to be careful about what I said and what I did in public since there was a group of security officers housed just above my residence room. My sense of insubordination in exile became traumatized.

This political aspect of intellectual insubordination in exile became magnified as I translated my talk and my North American colleagues' talks in Chinese. I found myself stumbling through translation at the very beginning of the conference, being recognized by my Chinese colleagues as an American professor who "dressed like a Chinese and talked like a foreigner" while they themselves dressed in Western ties and suits and talked about the Western paradigms of research in eloquent Chinese English. To borrow a phrase from Hoffman (1989), I felt "lost in translation" since the academic language of multiculturalism and qualitative research was not mentioned in my Chinese education. The political insubordination in exile with which I approached the conference turned into linguistic insubordination in exile during the conference. I found myself gaining confidence in my translation throughout the

conference and, as such, while still insubordination in exile, I felt myself moving towards my Chinese self. Being "lost in translation" was, for me, as it was for Hoffman, a metaphor for creative insubordination in exile and the sense of not belonging here or there that comes with cultural movements and political upheavals.

### *Creative Insubordination: My Life During the Pandemics*

The cultural, political, and linguistic insubordination became further intensified as the COVID-19 sparked racism, hate, and xenophobia targeted at Chinese diasporas and broader Asian diasporic communities. Racist remarks, calling the coronavirus the "Wuhan virus," "Kung flu," "Chinese virus," gave license to the rise of hate crimes and racist violence against Asian diasporas who have repeatedly been the object of racist and nativist U.S. legislation and policies relating to immigration, naturalization, civil and linguistic rights, and full access to education, including the Chinese Exclusion Act, Executive Order 9066, and *Lau v. Nichols* (Goulah & Nuñez, 2022; Spring, 2016; Takaki, 1993). The anti-Asian hate crimes and racist violence are reminiscent with what happened to Asian diasporas in history when they were often orientalized (Saïd, 1979) as exotic and submissive others or monolithic model minorities in times of peace and economic security, and vilified in times of war, economic adversity, and, now, viral pandemics; and the cycle of perceived threat followed by xenophobic rhetoric and policy response continued with the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes and violence during pandemics (Ladson-Billings, 2021), which further excluded and marginalized Asian diasporic populations and dismissed their invaluable contributions to their hostlands and homelands. Such escalating hate crimes, hate marches, mass shootings, bigotry, historical and systemic violence against minorities, and immigration concentration camps in the midst of pandemics-- "health care, economic, climate, and educational disparities" (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 68) pushed

Asian diasporas to subordinate to cultural, linguistic, racial, ethnic supremacy, anti-diaspora racism, settler colonialism, and cultural capitalism perpetuated by hatred of differences.

While I was experiencing, with other Asian diasporas, such cultural, linguistic, racial, ethnic subordination, Georgia House Bill 1084 surged. HB 1084 defines nine concepts regarding race and racism as “divisive” then prohibits “teaching divisive concepts” in any curriculum, classroom instruction or mandatory training program. The new law vaguely defines “divisive concepts” as follows:

- ◇ One race is inherently superior to another race;
- ◇ The United States is fundamentally racist;
- ◇ An individual, by virtue of his or her race, is inherently or consciously racist or oppressive toward individuals of other races;
- ◇ An individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of his or her race;
- ◇ An individual's moral character is inherently determined by his or her race;
- ◇ An individual, solely by virtue of his or her race, bears individual responsibility for actions committed in the past by other individuals of the same race;
- ◇ An individual, solely by virtue of his or her race, should feel anguish, guilt or any other form of psychological distress;
- ◇ Performance-based advancement or the recognition and appreciation of character traits, such as a hard work ethic, are racist or have been advocated for by individuals of a particular race to oppress individuals of another race; and
- ◇ Any other form of race scapegoating or race stereotyping.

HB 1084 legitimizes interpretations of racism and bias as “divisive concepts” with the intent to ban teaching “divisive concepts” about race and the history of race in the U. S. I began to witness that this law created a climate of fear for students where teachers could be subject to legal reprisals or schools could suffer damaging penalties for teaching the accurate and true account of the history. I could see or hear: Daughters of American Revolution pulling books with “divisive concepts” out of school libraries... principals tearing pages out of history textbooks that tell the truth about the history... Institutional Review Boards putting more surveillance on any dissertation research using Critical Race Theory as the theoretical framework... laws dictating “how teachers can discuss current events and the United States” history of racism, when “conservative parents and advocacy groups threatened school board members over mask mandates, vaccination requirements, and on-line learning,” and banned books on race, social justice, equity, critical thinking, sexual orientations.

With deep concerns about oppressive situations in which my doctoral students live every day in schools, I began to work with them to invent creative insubordination strategies such as developing creative insubordination research to push methodological boundaries while engaging in research on the counternarratives of curriculum of schools, neighborhoods, and communities in the contested U.S. South. I encourage them to use Black Feminist Methodology/Black Feminist narrative (Evans-Winters, 2019); composite counterstories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2006; also, He & Ross, 2012; He, Ross, & Seay, 2015); speculative essays (Schubert, 1991); speculative/memoir (Barrington, 1997; Birkerts, 2008; Ledoux, 1993; Roorbach, 2008; Zinsser, 1995, 2004); oral histories (Brown, 1988; Leavy, 2011; Ritchie, 2003); Black speculative writing (e.g., science fiction, fantasy, magical realism, and Afrofuturism; Allen & Cherelle, 2019); and ethnography (Clifford, 1977, 1988, 1997;

Clifford & Marcus, 1986/2010; Madison, 2020; Marcus, 1998; Soto & Swadener, 2005; Spradley, 1979, 1980; Van Maanen, 1988, 1995; Wolcott, 1999/2008) with young children as forms of curriculum inquiry into a wide array of topics such as: freedom's song cultivating creativity and releasing imagination through music--speculative memoir; where honeysuckles and azaleas bloom: a Southern Black woman reclaiming voice: a memoir; shunned to death: the joys and fears of a Black mother sending her sons to school in the South: a memoir; developing the culturally responsive/relevant/sustaining third-grade social studies curriculum: an ethnographic inquiry; doing ethnographic research with young children through multicultural children literature; languages, cultures, identities, and power: inquiries into the experience of international doctoral students in the U. S. rural South; Black women educators: their paths and barriers to successful leadership roles: Black Feminist

methodology (e.g., auto/biography, counterstories/counternarrative, composite stories); and otherwise futures reimagined: Afrofuturism as liberation for Black women--a speculative fiction. Exploring creative ways to transgress methodological boundaries is creative insubordination, which empowers my students to perform dissertation research and liberate academic writing by diving into life, writing into contradictions, and living against oppressions in schools, families, and communities in the U. S. South. The nuanced cultural, linguistic, and political insubordinations in China, in the North American academy, and during pandemics characterize my existence as a woman of diaspora in the North American academy. For me, to live in creative insubordination in exile, is to resist domination. To resist domination in creative insubordination is to thrive in liberation. A recognition of creative insubordination in exile is, perhaps, a turning point of inquiry in my life.

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## Cee Cee and the African Medallion: On Cultivating a Praxis of Creative Insubordination

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I believe I opened my comments on the panel by saying that creative insubordination was my middle name. My teaching is and has always been a constant and consistent flow of many acts of creative insubordination. While Brian calls it “teaching in the cracks,” I have been calling it a pedagogy of making do, because in my early teaching life, I was constantly challenged with scraping together what was available to support students in ways that the systems in place did not. Though it may come off to some as resistance for the sake of resistance, I would beg to differ. Creative insubordination is a praxis, a constant interplay between critical witnessing, critical reflection, and strategic and creative improvisation that not only challenge policies, processes, practices, and protocols that marginalize, disenfranchise, degrade, dismiss, and reproduce inequities in students’ educational experiences, but also prioritizes students’ educational wellbeing in the moment and at the site of trauma. As a Black woman teaching Black children in much less than ideal circumstances, creative insubordination is, was, and has always been not just good teaching practice, but a fundamental way of life. Let me share a teaching/learning memory that embodies what I mean.

### *A Moment of Critical Witnessing*

“Miss Denise, Miss Denise!” Someone was shouting my name across the playground. I could not quite see who, because the bright and intrusive Southern California sun was beaming rays into the blacktop playground which returned them in waves of vision blurring heat. As the shouting grew closer and louder, I could make out Cee Cee, who was furiously stomping her

way toward me, with Eugene, her nemesis, following just behind. I braced myself for a challenge, an adventure, because this was par for the course with these two. The first time they required my dispute settling services, Cee Cee was beside herself, because Eugene kept calling her a virgin, and she wanted me to tell him in no uncertain terms that she was most certainly not a virgin. “I am a Baptist!” she vehemently exclaimed. As Cee Cee rushed toward me with Eugene on her heels, I wondered what it would be this time? Cee Cee had deep brown skin and short kinky hair that simply refused to be held hostage by rubber bands. She was a precocious little girl with a certain sassiness that often got her into trouble with her teachers and her peers. Eugene, who also had deep brown skin and short kinky hair, was deeply dedicated to challenging Cee Cee at every turn. On this particular day, Cee Cee, who was wearing a leather medallion, was insisting that I tell Eugene, who was holding his side and pretending to laugh uncontrollably, that the shape painted on the medallion was “California, not Africa!” I smiled a big smile and then explained that the shape was indeed Africa, and went on a bit about the meaning of the red, black, and green colors. With a look of confusion, Cee Cee retorted, “So why is everybody wearing Africa if we live in California?” Again, I smiled and then thanked her for posing this important question and promised we’d take it up in class one day soon.

These impromptu mediations between Cee Cee and Eugene—mostly on the playground during recess—always had a way of pushing me to do more and to go further, beyond the confines of the school curriculum, as it was in so many ways woefully inadequate at best and utterly

incapable at worst of inspiring the children to reach their fullest potential. There were too many absences, misrepresentations, and unattended loose ends. I knew this not because my own schooling was much better, but because I was raised by a family who immersed me every day in a powerful counternarrative of loving blackness, one that was rich in Black historical and cultural knowledge that spoke specifically to how we might imagine, navigate, and intervene on what Wynter (1994) has called our “narratively condemned status” as Black people in an anti-Black world. In some small but impactful way the counternarratives fortified me against the inadequacy of the curriculum and other school practices of disregard.

So after the African medallion exchange, I decided to do what I had learned to do. I introduced the third graders to Countee Cullen’s poem “What is Africa to Me?” To my delight and distress, the discussion that followed brought a host of troubling questions about the absence of Black and Brown people in everything from shampoo commercials to weekly readers. In an effort to talk back to these circumstances, we researched and wrote a play about African origins (and later a project around the indigenous ancestors of Mexico) that the third graders would perform for the whole school.

Because Cee Cee delivered her audition lines with that certain sassiness, I chose her to be Cleopatra. Mrs. Robertson--the teacher I was working with--however was concerned about my choice, because she thought that the children would laugh at the idea of Cee Cee being the beautiful Cleopatra. I was willful and determined to give Cee Cee an opportunity to shine at something at which she was really quite good. On the day of the play, when the spotlight was on Cee Cee, and she delivered her line—“I am the beautiful and most powerful Cleopatra,” the children burst into laughter. Cee Cee ran off the stage in tears. And I spent the next hours holding her—against all school policy—in my arms and reminding her of all the beautiful things about her inside and out.

For a long time afterwards, I wondered about the children’s laughter and if it meant what Mrs. Robertson anticipated, what Cee Cee felt, and what I did not foresee. Were they simply laughing at the way Cee Cee delivered her lines? Or the idea that sassy Cee Cee could be beautiful? Or the juxtaposition of Black and kinky with beautiful? Or the notion that Cleopatra could be so black? All of these possibilities were considered in the conversation that followed in the teachers’ lounge. Is it helpful or harmful to teach children about their blackness? Many of the teachers thought it would limit the children, by focusing them too narrowly on their skin color and culture (which some believed to be part of the problem in the first place), and hampering their ability to assimilate to the idea of the American melting pot. I, of course, vehemently disagreed, arguing back then that one way or the other the world would surely teach them about the *problem* of their blackness and thus we should be compelled to offer a different more affirming narrative before they had to confront that life-altering realization. After the conversation in the lounge, I was shaken but also inspired to find a way to affirm the work of Cee Cee and the other children in our little cast. At the end of the year, the children performed the play for hundreds of people at UCLA’s Black graduation and received the shouts of joy and excitement and the standing ovation they deserved.

Although I was pleased for them, I was never relieved of the angst of wondering whether it was enough. Some thirty years later, I do not know if Cee Cee finds herself bumping into our memories, but I do wonder all the time whether she was able to move on or if that moment grew up in her soul like a tree with many tangled and crooked branches. I also wonder what the other children gathered along the way. Certainly I knew the affirming narrative would not, could not resolve the real issue, but could it fortify the soul, keep it from being utterly consumed by the relentless feelings of lack, invisibility, hypervisibility, and an overall sense of inferiority as an always haunting presence?

### *A Moment of Critical Reflection*

Undoubtedly, we continue to live in a horrifyingly and systematically anti-Black world. While the terror of senseless Black death unaccounted for is one of the most visceral signs of anti-blackness, it is the official and unofficial curriculums of Black death—the enshrining of anti-Black logic—that will continue to pervert the American imagination, refuse cries for Black mattering, and reemphasize the senseless and unjustified killing of Black people—literally and spiritually—as a matter of normality. Teaching in this context requires first and foremost understanding the curriculum as a discursive project; it is the place where statements are made, recorded and legitimated as knowledge worth knowing (Smalls, 2018), and through this process it not only represents identities but it produces identities byway of acknowledgement, overrepresentation, misrepresentation, absence, and/or denial. Teaching within, through, and against anti-blackness also requires understanding how anti-Black logic has structured the curriculum and thus often, for Black students and blackened students, manifests in many rituals of discursive violence, that work to script groups of students in ways that work to alienate students from themselves *and* from their possible selves.

I still feel that laughter as it reminds me of Cee Cee, Eugene, their third-grade peers, and the hundreds of other Black children and youth who experience life and school—in particular— as a compendium of racialized injuries—explicit and implicit. Reading through the haze of my own experiences, I can only understand it in the context of a curriculum absent any dynamic and meaningful engagement of Black lives and which has helped to create a playground culture, where the children both in light banter and serious vitriol pummeled each other often with the word black--you too black, you so black, you stupid black so and so. This, no doubt, is indicative of the consummate paradox of Black life/death in a systematically anti-Black world: we learn through the normal course of things to be aversive to ourselves. It is as much a learned feeling as it is a

thought, a reflection of the white supremacist/anti-Black world we inhabit and that also inhabits us. Black artist and activist Larry Neal once called it “the white thing within us,” which is also, paradoxically, akin to what Demitrus Eudell (2015) has referred to as the Thing of Being Black.

In an essay entitled, “Come on Kid, Let’s Go Get the Thing’: The Sociogenic Principle and the Being of Being Black/Human,” Eudell opens with the story of a young man, Roland Barton, who once wrote to the *Crisis* magazine to express his discontent with the magazine’s use of the word Negro. DuBois, the editor at the time, penned a thoughtful response to the young man intended to compel him to consider that the real problem was not the name but rather what it represented. He explained to Roland that “the feeling of inferiority is in you, not in any name. The name only evokes what is already there. Exorcize the hateful complex and no name can ever make you hang your head.” In closing the letter to Roland, Du Bois writes, “It’s not the name—it’s the Thing that counts. Come on Kid let’s go get the Thing.”

Eudell goes on to point out that getting after this Thing is the defining thematic of the Black intellectual tradition, from slave narratives, to the poetry and literature of the Harlem Renaissance, to the unapologetically Black verve of the 1960s and 70s call for Black power, to the work of contemporary Black scholars contemplating Black (non)being. Eudell draws on many examples from this tradition, but it is his discussion of Toni Morrison’s *Bluest Eye* that provides both a depiction of the Thing in process and a point from which to argue that Pecola Breedlove’s issue is not that she hates herself, but rather that her desire for blue eyes is a response to the system of ideas, interactions, habits, ways of knowing, feeling, and being in the world, a world structured by anti-Black logics, which in turn structures our desires and discontents. In contemplating Eudell’s argument, I surmise that the work of the Black teacher is the work of getting after the Thing while still captive to or

not really ever fully out of the reach of the thing. Because this requires a constant and relentless commitment to working against the status quo of anti-blackness, the only way forward, then, is through cultivating a praxis of creative insubordination.

### *Cultivating a Praxis of Creative Insubordination*

The struggle to incorporate Black historical and cultural knowledge (and many other marginalized knowledges) into the curriculum continues as many conservative politicians are busy restricting curriculum, banning books, denying truth, propagandizing history, promoting dis-remembering, shutting down DEI, and claiming to do all of this to keep white children, white people from feeling bad. They are clearly failing to see, or just refusing to see the racism inherent in such an argument, which shows a profound lack of concern for all the other children—Black, Brown, Indigenous, Asian, and more whose stories are in jeopardy of not being told and the impact of such absence on possibility. They are also failing their own children as they shroud them in a campaign of ignorance that will not only not prepare them for the increasingly complex and diverse society, but will also keep them from becoming their own best selves. And it will keep *all of us* from making progress in our healing.

What I have learned as a Black teacher teaching Black children in an anti-Black/anti-human world has prepared me well for teaching all students in this sometimes unforgiving and hostile world. Part of that teaching is about

opening up the possibility of loving blackness, loving Black people as part of our collective humanity. The other parts are about opening up to the multitude of subjugated stories that make up who we are collectively and who we might be if we knew who we have been. In my experience many of the ways knowledge gets produced, evaluated, and validated in school contexts is still beholden to a single story. Even if snippets of other stories are incorporated by or with the permission of the power brokers, the foundation is still reinforcing a single, or a dominating perspective. We can see the force of this in many states throughout the country as they desperately try to control the official curriculum and thus the official narrative of belonging or not belonging that guides us toward or keeps us from a more just way of living with each other.

As an educator in this moment of vitriol and backlash, how do we continue to put the educational wellbeing of all of our children at the forefront of our work? Teachers do not take an oath, but perhaps we should. An oath would remind us daily that our highest priority is the educational wellbeing of young people in an always-becoming-democracy or the evolution of something else that might lead to more justice, more peace, and more equity for more people. That oath, I imagine, would be the inspiration we need to get out of line for the greater and the common good. And this getting out of line sometimes needs to be a full on public protest, but more often than not it will be the praxis of creative insubordination that both attends to the students at the site of trauma and that chips away at the structure and the system of disregard.

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## Being Insubordinate Creatively, and Responding to/with Divisive Values

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I found it meaningful to exchange with Brian, Ming Fang, Denise, and Paula [Paula Groves Price] on dimensions of *creative insubordination* at our Society of Professors of Education presentation on November 3, 2022, in Pittsburgh. Over the past decade in teaching doctoral students with Ming Fang He, I have observed her encourage educators who are made distraught by the *cult of efficiency* (to use the insightful phrase by Raymond Callahan, 1962). Many of today's ultra conservative and reactionary cults support the neoliberal values of the corporate state under the guise of educational policy. Teachers and school leaders often enter doctoral study distressed by requirements and mandates that drive them berserk, because they are prevented from using their professional judgment to teach in ways they are convinced would benefit their students. The lesson plans they are forced to prepare and the tests they are required to administer have little if any relevance to cultivating a sense of wonder, imagination, critical thinking, value creation, and living a good life collaboratively with others. In view of this, Ming Fang (Professor He) and I have admonished graduate students (teachers, school leaders, and future scholars and teacher educators) to practice creative insubordination, to which they respond with considerable approbation.

Teaching with creative insubordination includes maintaining a sense of grace or a kind demeanor, that does not reveal desperate frustration we feel in dealing with enforcers of the mandates. Rather than fight directly against sources of imposition, practicing creative insubordination consists of showing administrators the value of getting to know students and building on their strengths, and sharing credit for successful teaching and learning

with those administrators who are expected to be enforcers of mandates by neoliberal policy pundits. As I have reflected, as a partner in teaching with Ming Fang, I have recalled many instances during my decade of elementary school teaching, followed by a half century of professorial and consultative work, including my years as Professor Emeritus. In such reflection, I would characterize much that I have done as creative insubordination. Just as Professor He's advice to students to influence power subtly with grace influences would-be oppressors to more fully build upon students' needs and interests and practice democratic ideas as their own, creative insubordination often works better than direct attacks on perpetrators of injustice. Surely, we do not want our graduate students, dedicated educators, to lose their jobs and thus their wherewithal to support themselves and their loved ones, by moving past creative insubordination to more direct confrontation.

At the same time, I see oppression spurred by plutocrats motivated by greed unphased by creative insubordination, and I feel sure that more pressure is needed. I also worry that, as Audrey Lorde (1984) warns, we cannot tear down or rebuild the master's house with the master's tools. Sometimes we need to exert more direct influence, for instance by forming movements organized in solidarity, especially if the impositions faced harm the students they strive to educate. Educators who respond positively to acting in creative insubordination often balk, as do I, at exerting more direct action. Understandably, we fear loss of jobs and thus wherewithal to support ourselves, our families, and lead lives that have a modicum of prosperity and autonomy. Many efforts of revision have come through teacher unions and



professional associations, such as AFT and NEA. However, I sometimes hear educators lament that laws in their states prohibit unionization, and I wonder if the first unions had legislative permission to challenge elite management. If not, they challenged anyway and endured sacrifice and the consequences of *civil disobedience*, derived from Henry David Thoreau.<sup>8</sup> What then should be done? Does our commitment enable us to move the fundamental curricular question (“What’s worthwhile?”), derived from Herbert Spencer (1861) and expanded through many prominent authors of synoptic curriculum texts throughout curriculum history (see Schubert and Lopez, 1980; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1996; Schubert, 2010; Morris, 2016ab), and expanded by Schubert (1986; 2009), Pinar (2004), Reynolds and Webber (2004/2016), Au, Brown, and Calderon (2015), and Schubert and He (2022) to become a fundamental question of political praxis (“What’s worth striking for for?”) raised by Nunez, Michie, and Konkol (2015).

When the what’s worthwhile question is infused in personal/political action (Izuegbu, 2011; Tillet, 2017) it becomes praxis as evidenced and exemplified by He and Phillion (2008), Schultz (2011 2017; 2018), and Vaughan and Nunez (forthcoming). Thus, considerations of worth come head-to-head with the other titular topics of our panel discussion at AESA: divisive concepts, Critical Race Theory, and other curricular controversies. The issue of how educators should navigate these controversies reminded me of the history of dealing with values schools. This, of course, is a topic too pervasive to treat in a short article; nonetheless, my own history begins with my experience as an

elementary school teacher. Early on, I rejected the widely accepted contention that educators, like newscasters, should present with neutrality. My rejection of neutrality (for both educators and newscasters) was based on the idea that everyone *is* an emerging theory that is heavily composed of values.

I had been taught by exposure to then (and still) popular *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (Bloom, et al., 1956) that the highest level of cognitive functioning is *evaluation* (based on memory, comprehension/interpretation, application, analysis, and synthesis) and the highest level of the affective domain (Krathwohl, Bloom, et al, 1964) is developing a *value complex* (based upon receiving, responding, valuing, organizing emotions that guide human lives). I was also influenced by Louis Rath and his colleagues who advocated the clarification of values (Rath, Harmin, & Simon, 1966) who assumed that if dimensions of one’s value complex were clarified and submitted to democratic deliberation, it would grow through exposure to many viewpoints. I also learned through study of social reconstructionist educational philosopher, Theodore Brameld, who called for teachers to admit what they believe on controversial issues and proceed to say that given this value posture, they would do their best to present other alternative views, within the caveat that students should remember the stance from which the teacher attempts to fairly convey alternative positions on issues studied. This departed considerably from the impossible role of teacher neutrality and the disdainful consequence of teaching students to be neutral beings. Brameld

economies, and much larger “local” populations (e.g., large cities vs medium or small towns). Teachers in non-collective bargaining states have and do put themselves on the line. They organize and advocate on behalf of students, teachers, and communities. They take risks. For one movement example, see the Red4EdNC story [here](#) and some of the national Red for Ed story [here](#)

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<sup>8</sup> Editor’s Note: The editors add this comment in consultation with the author. The editors recognize the challenge posed by Professor Schubert and also worry that this passage inadvertently appears to blame teachers for the socio-political contexts of the states in which they work, or that it conveys a sense that teachers in non-union states are not doing enough. Collective bargaining for teachers tends to exist in states with histories of strong unions, industrial

(1956, 200-208) called this approach *defensible partisanship* or *defensible partiality*.

As I proceeded through elementary teaching experience, I moved to another way to approach controversial issues. I realized the value of role-playing for and with students in many subjects and topics of teaching. One time I even dared to pretend I was a prehistoric person; as I performed certain actions, I challenged students to identify what social scientists (which we had studied) would be likely to study the kind of action performed. The first time I tried this approach I did not know what to do, so I just jumped out at the students and loudly growled some nonsense syllables. A student quickly responded by shouting “linguist.” I was astonished, since that was not on our list of social scientists studied. I performed a few more scenes, and student participation was vibrant. Soon a student, who was often highly active,, became focused and involved. Heran to the front and tried to push me into the audience, wanting to become the prehistoric man himself, and without missing a beat, students yelled, “political scientist!” noting as justification that it was a transfer of power. Today, I might relate this event to a violent insurrection! In any case, the success of this role-playing or acting influenced me to use it in value-oriented matters. We dared to learn about world religions, claiming that it was not overstepping separation of church and state rulings to *teach about* (not advocate) beliefs of different religions. So, students learned about basic beliefs, background, proponents of different religions, by watching a talented student teacher and myself role-play as believers, and then they joined the act.

In any event, I continued role-playing in my classes with children, and recall pretending that the students and I were from a planet from outside our solar system, exploring Earth, and commenting on selected behaviors of Earthlings we imagined observing. In historical studies, we tried to imagine how young persons of Ancient Greece experienced situations we read about

adult life in Athens and Sparta, and in language arts we pretended to be early humans trying to invent oral or written language. When I was awarded a sabbatical leave from my school district to pursue PhD studies and was hired to teach undergraduate teacher education students at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), I reinvented this role-playing to portray advocates of different orientations to curriculum and teaching. Throughout my career at the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC), I continued to invent these *speakers* as historical orientations that Ann Lopez and I found in our historical compilation, analysis, and interpretation of curriculum books from the late 1890s through 2000 (Schubert & Lopez Schubert, 1980; Schubert, Lopez Schubert, Thomas, & Carroll, 2002). For the past fifty-plus years this approach (variously interpreted as *Guest Speakers* or *Commentators*) has infused my teaching of undergraduates, graduate students, keynote lectures, workshops, and consultations with teachers, school leaders, and other professors throughout the United States and around the world. Sometimes the Commentators appear in published form as well, at the end of chapters in my synoptic curriculum text, *Curriculum: Perspective, Paradigm, and Possibility* (Schubert, 1986), or in articles or chapters reconstructed from improvised presentations (Schubert, 1996; 1997; 2008; 2014; 2018a; 2018b), that reveal ideas of Intellectual Traditionalists, Social Behaviorists, Experientialists, Critical Reconstructionists, Postmodernists, and Anti-Imperialists, among others. I have drawn upon these speakers to address today’s issues of core curriculum, censorship, Critical Race Theory, and related matters that are deemed divisive in today’s educational controversies.

When questioned about where I stand on a given issue or topic addressed by these *speakers* or how I dare be an advocate of so many positions, I simply reply that they are all within the larger theory that I am. When challenged about contradictory positions within me, I turn to Walt Whitman when criticized for expressing

contradictory stances in his *Song of Myself* (1855, p. 52); he simply responded “Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)” I, similarly, embody contradictions and am pleased to do so!

Reflection on my experience of role-playing prompts consideration on a larger implication of separation of church and state; namely, whether education itself should also be separated from the state, or more properly from the *corporate state* (to use Joel Spring’s term) to emphasize what the political sphere has become (Spring, 1972). I recall my own second grade experience when it was announced in current events discussion of *Weekly Readers* (newspapers for children) that the Eisenhower administration had added “In God We Trust” to coins and paper money, and also inserted “under God” to our daily “Pledge of Allegiance” to the U.S. flag and changed our daily repetition of this patriotic chant from that day onward. How did this get passed despite the principle of separation of church and state? I remember wondering how government officials could decide such changes and have them accepted. Moreover, in junior high, I remember the great frustration over who was winning the space race, the US (us) or the USSR. I remember our teachers (including my parents) being re-schooled in so-called modern math, science, and world languages, allegedly to compete with the USSR’s launching of Sputnik in

1957. The post-Sputnik curriculum reform projects stimulated by theories of Jerome Bruner (1960, 1966) and supported by the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) took education out of the hands of separate states and local school districts if educational change could be justified as based on a national defense issue.

Hence forward, this decision expanded from military to economic encroachments in justification of new iterations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, stimulated by *A Nation at Risk* (1983), and augmented by *America 2000*, *No Child Left Behind*, *Race to the Top*, and more reports and statements of mandates. If education has become institutionalized schooling for the benefit of the corporate state and its leadership class, how can we return to education? So, it seems clear that to prevent education from being a servant for the corporate state, perhaps education and state also should be separated. If there is separation of school and state, for similar reasons that we historically claim separation of church and state, who should fund it? Who should decide how to address the basic curriculum questions about what is worthwhile? Over 2000 years ago Socrates warned that when education becomes a commodity to be bought and sold, it is already lost. How can we find education again, not merely its facade in service of schools that serve the corporate state?

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