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## **Sowing Seeds of Justice: Feminists' Reflections on Teaching for Social Justice in the Southwest**

Tonya Evette Walls

*Touro University Nevada, [tonya.walls@tun.touro.edu](mailto:tonya.walls@tun.touro.edu)*

Malayka Neith Cornejo

Tara J. Plachowski

Erica Kristina Reid

Soo Park

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Marquis C. Grant  
*Grand Canyon University, USA*

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## Chapter 9

# Sowing Seeds of Justice: Feminists' Reflections on Teaching for Social Justice in the Southwest

**Tonya Evette Walls**

*Touro University Nevada, USA*

**Malayka Neith Cornejo**

*University of Nevada – Las Vegas, USA*

**Tara J. Plachowski**

*University of Nevada – Las Vegas, USA*

**Erica Kristina Reid**

*University of Nevada – Las Vegas, USA*

**Soo Park**

*University of Southern California, USA*

### ABSTRACT

*Forming the basis for a provocative dialogue and written to illuminate teaching stories often pushed to the margins, this chapter provides a counter-narrative to the discourse surrounding leaky teacher-of-color pipelines and the national teacher crisis. Employing a critical race analytical lens, critical auto-ethnographic approach, and narrated through prose, five female educators committed to social justice share how they rely on unique and intersecting identities to sustain themselves in contested school spaces, while simultaneously exploring the cultural wealth they and their students bring into those spaces. Their collective stories reveal important lessons essential to our understanding of how to develop teachers for social justice. They also provide insight for those who teach in schools and classrooms meant to educate our most vulnerable and under-served students, and may answer the question, Why doesn't anyone want to teach anymore?*

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## INTRODUCTION

For critical scholars, teaching is an act of love: a radical love untapped when situated within school environments operationalizing policies like high stakes testing and no tolerance discipline<sup>1</sup>. In these contexts, schools become contested spaces (Stovall, 2004), amplifying the challenge of teaching and rendering classrooms hostile environments antithetical to a critical scholar's anti-racist subjectivities. For those committed to justice, this means leveraging the best of their pedagogical stance becomes extremely difficult and teaching becomes a complex balancing act in which undesirable choices have to be made.

At a leadership retreat for teachers committed to social justice—the kind of social justice rooted in feminists' epistemologies viewing teaching as an act of love, education the practice of freedom, and learning an act of transgression against the boundaries of white privilege and oppression (hooks, 1994)—five female educators participated in discussions on what it means to teach and lead within schools and universities in the southwest. During reflections, one statement gave reason for pause, "...I didn't know what to do with what this school was calling teaching, but I knew I couldn't be a part of it any longer." Silence ensued. In that silence, it was as if the universe spoke: respite had finally come, and in each other, there was brave space to courageously examine, and boldly critique, the contested spaces they had all experienced. In that silence, the seeds of their collective journey towards teaching for social justice took root.

Employing a critical race analytical lens (Ladson-Billings, 1989), critical auto-ethnographic approach, and narrated through prose, five critical scholars share how they rely on unique and intersecting identities to sustain themselves in contested school spaces (Stovall, 2004), while simultaneously exploring the cultural wealth they and their students bring into those spaces.

Specifically, each woman's story foregrounds race, as intersected with gender and class, to reflectively examine the cultural, social, and political nature of teaching and learning (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Quicke, 2010). Narratives reveal how toxic classrooms and schools (Au, 2010) are cultivated. They also include detailed depictions of how culturally-centered knowledge and ways of being, gained and learned through lived experiences (Yosso, 2005), became a source of formative knowledge used to advocate for equity and justice for our nation's most vulnerable and underserved students (Santamaria, 2014). Finally, the unique strategies diverse teachers employ while teaching for social justice are highlighted, providing qualitative support for an emergent body of research provoking dialogue on the critical question: "Why do so few people want to teach anymore?" and offering a counter-narrative to deficit-laden answers blaming leaky teacher of color pipelines and the teacher shortage crisis on low teacher pay, cultural deficits, and claims of not enough people (of color) with a desire to enter the profession (Jackson and Kohli, 2016; Ingersoll and May, 2011). These stories suggest neo-liberal school reform policies and the marginalization of a discourse centered on equity, culturally relevant pedagogies, and the knowledges and lived experiences of diverse teachers committed to teaching for social justice may be the culprit (Kohli and Pizarro, 2016). Their critical narratives follow.

## Malayka

*We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes. —Ella Baker, “Ella’s Song,” Sweet Honey on the Rock*

Ella Baker’s words ring loudly in my heart and mind every time I reflect on why I became a teacher. My point of entry into a classroom was an act of divine timing. I began my journey in higher education as a biochemistry major. Determined to help others from a young age, I planned to be a medical doctor. I loved the sciences, inquiry based learning, and yearned to follow in my parents’ footsteps. They were chemists. Interestingly, my parents were also educators, yet choosing to major in education was never a topic of discussion in my home. Everyone wanted me to become a doctor; it was a collective dream. In fact, when the valedictorian of my high school shared plans to become an elementary school teacher, she was met by disappointment from peers and staff alike. The hidden message was twofold: given her GPA, she was meant for a field of higher prestige while simultaneously suggesting that teaching was not a “prestigious” career. I sat with these thoughts for years, unaware such seeds had been planted in my mind.

After my second year in a large Midwestern university, coupled with unmet financial and emotional needs, I withdrew, and to everyone’s surprise, I found myself joining the world of education. Teaching came to me as a middle school English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching assistant and program coordinator for a bilingual afterschool program. I leaned on my experiences to inform this new journey. I grew up watching my parents teach. Now retired, my father was a university professor, and my mother, a kindergarten and English teacher to immigrant parents. Their teaching was art: an abstract painting of Spanish and English words on a canvas of unconditional love and care for students and families.

Familiar with smaller learning environments, I saw myself in my students’ eyes. Moving to Chile in middle school and having to quickly learn to read, write, and experience the world around me in another language while enduring culture shock and profound confusion about my identity gave me the ability to relate to my students. Understanding what it was like to feel lost in large college lecture halls helped me to build a learning community where everyone felt valued. I engaged families, provided after school tutoring and weekend mentoring and offered the support I wished I had been given during my own transitions. At that time, caring for immigrant students and their families in a school that placed them in a small, self-contained basement classroom was an act of social justice (Hambacher & Bondy, 2016). I realized what had been modeled for me as a child—the good, the bad, the culturally responsive, and the indifferent—now inform how I facilitate learning. Caring for others felt natural, like a third language; yet, it was not until my intersection with the Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools the following summer, that I knew I was meant to be a teacher.

The week-long training, rooted in Freedom Summer 1964, provided college aged interns with tools to engage K-12 students in the CDF Freedom School model, and inspired many of us to pursue a career in education. We listened to Ella’s words on a daily basis as we learned the principles of servant leadership, social action, critical multicultural literacy, and African indigenous pedagogy (Hilliard, 1997).

The first summer was the hardest yet most rewarding. My bilingual Latinx and Black students pushed me to critically explore my positionality. The Freedom School way strengthened character, reconnected students to ancestral practices, and empowered children of color, permeating students' year-round school experience. On Wednesdays we engaged in social action and reflection. The idea that we could *make a difference in self, family, community, country, and world, with hope, education and action*, became a way of life for us all. Because of these experiences, I completed an associate's degree in secondary education, a bachelor's in sociology with a concentration in Black and Latinx studies, and interviewed for a teaching position half way across the country. After five Freedom School summers, I moved to the East coast to teach Spanish and technology to PK through third grade students at multiple schools. I learned that great teaching involves culturally responsive caring (Gay, 2010; Roberts, 2010) that engages community cultural wealth and students' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

My first high school position was at a small, student-centered, social justice driven school of second chances. I was the third ninth grade *herstory* teacher during a year of leadership transition. I reflected on how to develop meaningful relationships and create a space where students had access to tools that could transform their lives. What I did not know is this group of students would transform my life and strengthen my praxis and critical pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Arriving mid-year required that we learn about each other quickly. My students could see right through me. They knew when I was bringing personal issues to the classroom, and could sense when I was feeling less than my best. Beyond teaching me about themselves, my students taught me valuable life lessons, often about myself. I learned that wounded children tell the most truth. We lived in a city that normalized death. I was moved the first time I saw a student wearing a rest in peace shirt with a child's face. Ready to address a side conversation, I paused: my students were sharing a funeral program. I had no words. There was an unspoken conversation taking place: a foreign exchange, which I did not understand. I was privileged. I did not know death, loss, or this type of sadness. I knew pain, however, and fully empathized with the need to explore emotions and help my students navigate the messages behind these feelings. My students may not have been fans of world history; yet, they could recite their world story, the story of lost souls traversing mean streets, and the legacy that would live on in their memories.

We lived in one of the largest wards of the city, vibrant with murals depicting community cultural wealth: neighborhoods thriving against unforeseen odds and a community of brilliant and resilient children, where folks offer elders their seat on the bus, neighbors greet each other by name, and young people walk fearlessly. In this ward, one in every three adults is in need of employment, community recreational centers navigate neighborhood issues, and the largest mental health facility is now closed. Blue and red lights are always present, jump outs in unmarked vans criminalize Black and Brown youth, while sirens and caution tape foster a socially toxic environment (Garbarino, 1995), with traumatic implications for teaching and learning (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

I rode the bus to school with students. Viewing the city through their perspective strengthened my street sense. I learned the dangerous and painful things that young people are exposed to on public buses. I understood morning frustration: waiting on a delayed bus, tardy arrivals, and breakfast bags full of sugar. The only store in route was full of processed foods. Students had to walk a mile across the state line to access the closest grocery store.

My classroom was a space where students felt safe to vent, strategize, make plans to exercise their voice, and contemplate social-emotional learning (Duncan-Andrade, 2007). I frequently bought lunch for students who provided me informal professional development sessions. Students expressed what was working and what wasn't in other classes, with particular attention to how they felt teachers viewed them. Their insight pushed me to accept a position as grade-level academy lead to share what I had learned.

The following year we lost our first ninth grade student. I learned about death, loss, and a need for healing spaces. Several teachers expected students to be able to go on with their lessons. We needed to seek to understand post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the continued trauma that was taking place in our community. Teachers need the language and tools to de-escalate, hold space, and read student behavior differently (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). Trained as a wraparound educator I believe *misbehavior is the product of an unmet need*. Learning the power of language and labels from Dr. Maya Angelou and Dr. Asa Hilliard, III, I describe students others might call "misbehaved, bad, or disobedient" as "festive" children, with a genius within waiting to be nurtured (Hilliard, 1997).

Kasey and Sierra (pseudonyms), two of the most festive ninth graders, received daily calls home. Leaning on an assets-based framework (Hambacher & Bondy, 2016), I invited their families to meet. The girls set self-management goals, developed a behavior tracker, negotiated incentives, and gained a caring teacher-femtor<sup>2</sup>. The outcome of wraparound plans for youth experiencing chronic "toxic stress" was transformative; it prevented the school pushout of two brilliant Black girls (Morris, 2016). Trained as a servant-leader, I strived to meet students' highest needs, gaining their respect in the process. Tension slowly increased with the school administration. I received my first negative evaluation, and was told that I would no longer serve in my leadership roles. I was deemed a "problematic" teacher: too radical, caring, and loving.

I found respite at social justice conferences, collaborating with transformative educators and foreign ministries of education, and completing a master's in educational policy and administration. If one in three urban youth experience trauma and are twice as likely than those returning from war to have PTSD (Duncan-Andrade, 2009), than what exactly were my students experiencing? I knew the only way to learn was by *allowing students to teach me*. All schools need more student-led professional development sessions, and teachers must be willing to learn.

Unafraid like the city's youth, and no longer willing to compromise my health, I retired my teacher hat. It was imperative that I heal and overcome the toxic stress in order to show others the way. A year later I accepted an administrative role within a juvenile detention facility, where I learned the policies, practices, and process of youth criminalization. I also learned the power of restorative practices and the need for healing in schools. Determined to dismantle the school to prison pipeline, I moved to the southwest to pursue a Ph.D. and elevate the expert voices of the young people I dared to love fiercely (Darder, 2002). The students of Washington, D.C. challenged me to grow professionally, personally, and spiritually: to be my greatest self. I now teach future teachers, passing on everything I learned throughout my journey. I am a radical feminist healer and social justice educator, with audacious hope, and I am committed to sowing seeds of justice in the southwest.



## **Soo**

My entry into the field of education was fortuitous, provoked by a car accident experienced well into a career in the tourism industry. I never imagined a career in education before I resigned from my job as a catering manager and wedding coordinator, but volunteering in schools while undergoing physical therapy from the car changed my path.

My educational background—which included the hurdles experienced in a schooling system that often made me feel disconnected from my emotional, social, and educational needs—prohibited imaginings of teaching from occurring. The rigorous South Korean schooling system, Department of Defense Dependent Schools, and U.S. public schools left an unsavory impression on this Generation 1.5<sup>3</sup> (G 1.5) (Roberge, 2003) Asian American female trying to acculturate into U.S. schools, so when it was time to select a career, teaching was not it. The car accident and my volunteer time changed all that. Despite facing complex challenges as a G 1.5 high school student: developing new languages and cultural identities, facing family tensions and high parental expectations, and learning to navigate hurdles without traditional academic support from home, I quit my job to become a teacher of English Language Arts (ELA). I did so because I witnessed G 1.5 students in public schools experiencing some of these same challenges today. These challenges are complicated and often further exacerbated by stereotypes the public and society-at-large hold about G 1.5 students. I am certain the combination of witnessing these things, combined with my past educational experiences, and the passion I developed for helping students like me work through the barriers that being G 1.5 brings, sowed the seeds of becoming an educator and social justice advocate in public schools that I now hold dear.

My parents emigrated from South Korea, and my father joined the U.S. Army, so I grew up in a military family. As a daughter of immigrant parents who spoke very little English, I became an overachiever in school because I wanted to feel a sense of belonging with my peers. Yearning to belong is a trite but real socialization issue many adolescents encounter, but immigrant students' experiences in acclimating to a new environment further complicate this issue and sometimes create challenges to academic success.

My first language was Korean, but it is no longer my primary language. I attended kindergarten and first grade in a Korean school, so I did not learn English until the second grade when we moved to Iowa. When I started learning English, I had mixed feelings about my heritage and eventually I began to dislike the facial features and skin color I saw in the mirror. My Korean voice was silenced in the classroom for fear of being made fun of for not knowing English. I remember being asked by the other students why I “got” to leave class every day (for pull-out language instruction). When I finally spoke up in my second grade class at the end of the school year, my teacher paraded the entire class down to my English Language Learning (ELL) teacher to thank her for teaching me English. At the time, I felt proud, but when I think back to this incident, I am no longer sure I feel this way. Instead, I question this teacher's choice: I wanted to belong and not be recognized as someone different. She also further silenced my Korean voice and sense of self.

Today, as a high school English teacher, I see many G 1.5 students who are perfecting English, but also want to belong. Like me, these students are silenced and their sense of self crushed. For example, a student in my honors English class who once won a speech contest was also required to take the World-class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) exam. Federal and state testing mandates require all ELL students to take the WIDA exam until they receive a passing score. Her confidence was crushed; she

felt as if she was told her English was not good enough. She was born in the U.S. but like me, she did not learn English until she entered kindergarten. Yet despite winning a speech contest, because her English came with Korean flavor, it was not good enough. She complained that her bilingual ability seemed to be a punishment in the public school system instead of a source of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005).

No matter how often I had been told about the advantages being bilingual would bring to my career and life, I never really saw that. In secondary and higher education, I often felt like my bilingualism and foreign-sounding name were obstacles I had to overcome. When I was in Hawaii, the diversity of its population was an asset to my career as an educator and gave some respite; but in the Southwest, I have found that people often overlook my talents until I tell them I have a Ph.D. in Education. I find it disconcerting that a terminal degree is what impresses people about my career as a teacher, rather than the cultural wealth (Moll et al., 1992; Yosso, 2005) and knowledge I bring. I have often been a “trophy” faculty member for administration because of my degree and leadership positions, yet, never have my language and culture served the same purpose.

My tenure in education initially began with aspirations to become a teacher leader, but when I moved to the Southwest, that dream was subdued. I saw the politics and injustices practiced in public schools. In a socially just education, all students are supposed to be taught to become more aware of who they are and value themselves. They should learn to become active in creating a more just and equitable society, one that honors multiple perspectives and ensures everyone’s emotional and well-being is met: so too should their teachers, yet, in my first schools, these things were not encouraged. Instead, the curriculum failed to reflect my students’ and my own experiences and grading and teaching practices were inequitable.

For example, grades were inflated using minimum F scoring procedures disallowing zeroes even if it was earned and enabling failing students to pass classes for graduation and school leaders to gain professional praise for raising graduation rates in underperforming schools. I was once encouraged to give easy work to a senior who was in my 11<sup>th</sup> grade ELA class after only showing up for the first week of the semester. The rationale from administration was that she had to pass her English class in order to graduate. When I refused to pass the student, she was removed from my class, and placed into a different class. Unfortunately, teaching practices such as these, initially seeming to benefit students, really deprive them of equitable learning opportunities, including denying them access to authentic learning and limiting life opportunities. I truly feel the job of educators is to help students have positive learning experiences that lead to a more positive life (Dewey, 1998). Unfortunately, in today’s age of standardized testing and high stakes accountability this is not encouraged. Match that with policies that encourage the use of canonical texts and lessons catering to the privileged (Hersch, 1998), and many students feel disconnected and lose motivation (Powell and Kusuma-Powell, 2011). An educational system that requires learning from a hegemonic viewpoint fails to reach students where they are (Asher, 2008). If students, especially G 1.5ers, cannot relate to the curriculum and are not met where they are, they disengage. As a teacher and social justice advocate, I feel that it is my responsibility to help all of my students be more motivated to use academic discourse to make connections and succeed. I am also committed to helping them do so.

As a social justice educator teaching at the secondary and college levels, I try my best to incorporate multiple perspectives on issues and make sure I teach my students to check their biases and privileges. Even though entering a teaching career was the result of a car accident, it is no accident that I have found my calling in educating for equity and justice. In the current political and economic times, students need

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schools to be a space where they can pursue their academic goals without being judged. Politics and finances must not prevent them from reaching their full potential. I want my students to feel welcomed and accepted for their backgrounds. I want G 1.5ers to want to read and write about the various experiences and perspectives they bring to the classroom, including to the text choices I make.

Although I have often been disheartened, my career choice is no accident. There were moments when I wanted to give up and move on to a less stressful and more monetarily rewarding job, but my students keep me rooted in my desire to fight for equity in education. Whenever I feel down, a student reminds of how valuable the space I provide for them helps them grow intellectually. That is what keeps me fighting for a more just education for my students. It is what helps me to continue to sow seeds of justice in my classroom.

### **Tara**

The seeds of my love for teaching were planted first by a passion for the arts and then nurtured through a commitment to social justice. Born into a white, working-class home with a Vietnam-vet father and a mother who was a survivor of incest, a self-proclaimed teenage troublemaker, and childhood run-away, I emerged into this world within a family shaped by conflict and contrast, but bound with love.

Growing up on the plains of North Dakota then in a rural area in Missouri, I am the first in my family to attend and graduate from college (aside from a cousin who attended seminary). Despite being raised in a white normative culture in a community with minimal diversity, having parents who were labor union activists and devout Jesuit Catholics instilled in me a deep commitment to equity, justice, and service.

My urge to push beyond the bounds of what I knew was a provincial start in life, motivated me to attend college, graduate school, and teach in both New York City and in Los Angeles, before landing in my current urban southwest community. Though many in my life nudged me to teach, I didn't feel the call until graduate school, while volunteering as an artist-in-residence in New York City (NYC) public school classrooms. It was then, as a young woman of 22, that the universe insisted I confront both my privilege and our racialized system of education.

Educated in the rural Midwest, I was unprepared for the vast inequity I witnessed in NYC public schools. Classes were only 45 minutes long, and some had more than 50 students in them. Lecturing was the norm, with too few textbooks in many classes. At one middle school where I volunteered, the teacher-of-record I was assigned to was young, white, in her second year of teaching, and daily angry with her students and the school. About three weeks into my residency, during one of my poetry writing lessons, a seventh grader pulled out a machete and laughed in a comic-book-bad-guy voice as he jumped on a desk and whipped it back and forth. The teacher stood behind her desk shouting at him to sit down. When he held the knife in front of another student's throat, the teacher ran from the room for help. By the time campus aids arrived, I had talked the student into letting go of the girl he grabbed, but he was still laughing and waving the knife. One of the two aids easily grabbed the knife from the boy. The boy shouted, "I was just jokin'!" They led him out, each holding one of his arms. The teacher, red-faced with embarrassment? anger? fear? asked me to continue my lesson, and she went back to grading.

On the subway ride home, I saw the boy laughing and joking with some of his friends; I had a flash of fear and thought *I hope he doesn't see me*, and then a responding hot backlash of shame. This boy was 11-years-old. I was his *teacher*. It was ridiculous that I should fear him, and so maddeningly *unfair*:

unfair and *unacceptable* that a teacher might look at him as an object to fear, rather than as a child to nurture. This was the moment I chose a career in education. I was raised to dig-into problems, not complain about them. I felt compelled to become an agent for change committed to improving educational opportunities for marginalized students. Yes, this white, straight, cisgendered girl decided to come into the fray, fist raised, ready to stamp out injustice.

I wince thinking back to that angry, belligerent, naive version of myself. I know now, of course, that the very feelings that drove me into teaching were deeply entrenched in deficit assumptions and white privilege. I know now that making change happen in any school is complex and burdened with socio-political, economic, and personal agendas. Even in failing schools, there are many educators struggling to make the lives of students better every day. My journey—first as a teacher, then administrator, then education consultant and coach, and now as a teacher-educator and emerging scholar working to narrow the teacher racial diversity gap—has been rich in opportunities to learn from a diverse array of femtors (Brown, 2006).

When my career began, the behemoth bureaucracy and wealth of diversity in one of the largest districts in the nation was a catalyst that strengthened my tenacity to improve schools and classroom experiences for all students, particularly those traditionally underserved. I entered the profession of education because I felt a call to advocate for marginalized students forced into racist and classist school systems of cultural reproduction. When I read Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* (1991) alongside daily witnessing monumental inequities for Brown and Black students, the call to advocate for social-justice deepened. My first year teaching was in a high school that was ~60% African American and ~40% Latinx. I gained students' trust through honest conversations about race, culture, and our families. I never tried to be anything but who I was. Although I was flawed, admitting this to my students, committing to work as hard as I could to get them what they needed to do well in college, and demanding that they spend every second in my class improving their reading and writing skills so they could have the future they wanted and hopefully, reshape the world in the process, this effort built trust (Hammond, 2015). I adored my students, and I struggled to connect with the majority of the administrators. The school was enmeshed in chaos due to a variety of factors (destructive and abusive discipline policies, lack of communication with staff and families, lack of willingness to engage in the social and political problems affecting the daily lives of students). By the end of the year, I felt like I was part of the problem, complicit in the denial of exceptional education to students. I was prepared to do anything besides teach at that point.

My former high school theatre teacher, then my femtor, talked me into transferring schools rather than leaving the profession (Brown, 2006). She was hopeful that a change in administration and school culture would make a difference. I switched to the second largest high school in the U.S. also located within an infamous police district. I taught English and theatre classes in a school-within-a-school model that tried to provide more personalized learning experiences for students. I stayed within that small group of teachers (four of whom had grown up in the local community and came back after college to teach) for the next eight years. We fought institutional structures to maintain autonomy for instructional and organizational choices that supported students. We transitioned from that small "academy" structure into one of the first Pilot<sup>4</sup> schools within the district. Our goal was to provide college readiness curriculum to local neighborhood students through an inquiry, arts, and project-based model. In order to do so, we had to navigate a sociopolitical war happening around the neoliberal push for "school choice." Despite understanding that "choice" was deeply problematic, we leveraged this upheaval to develop a community school (Oakes, Maier, & Daniel, 2017).

After nearly a decade in the same community and group of educators, I decided to push myself into the role of administrator. I became an Assistant Principal/Data Instructional Coach at an arts-focused independent community charter school that was directly authorized by the state. I was hired specifically to help the school meet assessment and accountability measures while still following the mandates of their charter to deliver inquiry-focused and arts-based education to local students, the majority of whom were students of color (~70% Latinx, ~10% Black, ~10% White, ~10% two or more races/other). I was shocked to find that most teachers frequently vented about why “difficult” students weren’t being “kicked out” and several were openly advocating for tracking students based on language development, academic achievement, and disability status. Additionally, I discovered the school had virtually no effective system to regularly and consistently communicate with the large population of parents who spoke Spanish.

The time I spent coaching teacher in this role, most of whom had fewer than three years of experience, I quickly became aware of the gaps in their preparation to teach in this context. Many came from what are thought of as “progressive” teacher education programs and yet only had minimal awareness of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014) and virtually no understanding of how their complaints about students and school policy were deeply connected to issues of white privilege, marginalization, and social justice. In this role, I was also gaining a deep and complex understanding of school “accountability” and state mandates, even as I tried to help navigate these policies and structures. I began to feel more and more complicit in supporting systems that refused to acknowledge complex and cultured ways of knowing and solving problems. I could not continue my work in this administrative context, even as I loved developing new teachers using an equity-based approach.

The culmination of my varied experiences in schools—and an out-of-state move to my current southwest context—motivated me to pursue a doctoral degree in teacher education as another step in my education as a social justice educator and advocate for liberatory public schooling. I understand that large-scale change seems unlikely, but am unwilling to fall victim to despair. I will continue to teach, mentor, and write my truth, as I also continue to sow the seeds of social justice *with* students and teachers. I do this simply because I cannot accept inaction. I eagerly adopt Welch’s (1990) feminist ethic of risk in order to embrace the critical hope and care needed for justice (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Hambacher & Bondy, 2016). For me—a white female teacher and emerging teacher education scholar dedicated to allyship, social justice, and the eradication of racism—*critical hope* is the only choice forward, and we must begin now.

## **Erica**

### **The Danger of Accepting the Lie**

*Do you see their eyes?*

*Bright bold and beautiful*

*Do you see their minds?*

*Open, ready, skilled for more learning*

*Do you hear their thoughts?*

*Empowered, resilient... they chant “I can face anything”*

***DO YOU SEE THEIR FACES***

*Eager, determined, self-motivated*

*Never have they said failure was an option*

*Never have they said I don't want nothing*

*Never have they said I never had a dream*

***DON'T YOU SEE***

***DON'T YOU SEE***

*They day dream of possibilities*

***DON'T YOU SEE***

***DON'T YOU SEE***

*They wait for space to show how much they really know*

***DON'T YOU SEE***

***DON'T YOU SEE***

*The only distraction are the misconceptions that blinds your vision*

—Erica Reid, “Do You See Them Dreamin’?”

***Do You See Them Dreamin’?***

Every student I have ever met had a desire to learn. If students didn't want to learn, *why would they keep coming to school?* If parents didn't care about their child's education, *why would they keep bringing their babies to school?* For years, we have internalized pervasive and systemic lies created for us—in some instances, developed by us—to (re)sell the lie that students don't want to learn. “Those kids just don't want to learn” we say, “Their parents don't care.” These false “truths” situated in deficit mindsets, trap students in systems bound by realities voiced in Langston Hughes's “Dream Deferred.”

The beginning of systemic failure leading to unfulfilled dreams starts in the classroom, roots of school and community cultures (Heitzeg, 2016) no longer providing healthy environments for students and teachers to thrive and dream (Jaydon, 2014). Healthy school environments ensure *all* students are able to develop: schools where teachers are mentored and supported by administrators and staff are vested in the possibilities of the students' dreams.

I, like so many educators, represent what happens as a result of systemic failures in education and policy that create school climates maintaining marginalizing cultures that lead to “dreams deferred” (Jaydon, 2014). When schools become places of bondage, building bridges to prison instead of places of self-discovery, dynamic evolution, and creativity, we lose our teachers and our children. My dream to contribute to the manifestation of greatness in our future leaders led me into the classroom. Schools that bore roots of dreams deferred led me out.

In disempowered schools, my dream became a heavy load: a burden wrapped up in the rotting dreams of each child I encountered, many of them suffering from structural changes strangling what little dreams



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they could hold on to. I saw the rotting everywhere, felt the heavy burden students bore, and witnessed the trauma within districts due to the decreased presence of diverse cultures of teachers and the rapid increase of systems that imbedded school-to-prison pipeline narratives through zero tolerance policies (Heitzeg, 2016). Detention centers and jails instead of colleges, confinement for the same group of people: Black and Brown beauties. You would think they would stop coming since their fate was clear. You would think one family would say to other families “let’s stop taking our kids to school, they gon’ end up in prison that way!” Yet, they keep coming, which leaves me asking, *why do they keep coming*; and if parents do not care, *why do they keep bringing their babies to school?*

### ***If They Didn’t Want to Learn Why Do They Keep Coming?***

The idea of changing the world through teaching never dawned on me; however, when I entered my very first Sunday school classroom as a Sunday school teacher, subconsciously I knew I was and would always be a part of the process of creating anew. The idea of contributing to the essence of a young child’s future, will always, and forever entice me. Thus, this is where my teaching journey began. Teaching was, and will forever be, my first love. It is a major part of my identity. It is where I learned to dream.

These dreams led to my experiences as a secondary education teacher. When I think back on these days, I realize I have never met a student who on day one said, “I don’t want to learn. From coast to coast, all of my students— regardless of their academic abilities— always came with a desire or a dream. Disruptions along the process of learning are caused by the structures they encounter in school spaces, with some schools recognizing the humanity the kids bring and manifesting beliefs these same kids should all have a chance to live out their life’s dreams, while other schools sell the notion that some students, particularly those of color, are simply coming into the space of a school to transition into a juvenile center, then to a prison. A school’s climate and policies often shape the direction of students’ dreams (Jaydon, 2014). In my schools, the dreams got deferred.

### ***The Climate of Failure***

My journey in secondary education began with high schoolers who knew they were labeled as repeaters, in an English classroom in rural North Carolina, mid-year, six months after graduating from my teaching program. It also included spicy ninth graders who were brought in under a college-prep curriculum initiative. The only difference between the two groups of students was their age group, and curricular focus; every one of them wanted to learn so they could pass the ninth grade End-of-Course (EOC) exam. I noticed from day one my repeat ninth grade students had internalized learned failure—a norm in the district—but desperately wanted to learn and worked extra hard. Unfortunately, the conditions of the school created barriers (Jaydon, 2014). This particular school had been taken over by the state with multiple principals in a year, creating an environment full of distrust and rapid failure. Because of these conditions, many students who returned year after year were slipping through the cracks due to district and state laws that never took into account the reality of destructive school climates (Jaydon, 2014). My specific position had been made available by the removal of a teacher accused of falsifying documents. Many other teachers, for various reasons, came for a short period of time, then left without caring what happened to the children as a result of the empty space their departure created.

My favorite student in this school experience was an 11<sup>th</sup> grade student I will call Michael. He was an 18-year-old African American boy, labeled as “special needs” and who read on a first grade level. Placed in my class, he struggled, a result of systematic failures exacerbated by the frequent teacher departures. Yet, Michael wanted to graduate: he dreamed of working and starting a life for himself.

We worked hard: he tried every day, but somewhere along the lines someone passed him up without the skills necessary to be proficient. I often wondered after that first year: why keep giving the same students the same test to get the same results? Isn’t there another way? This story became a repeat across the states in which I taught, which led me to believe we have moved from being concerned about students’ well-being to deficit model assumptions about their futures. When I think about Michael, I think about district changes that should have occurred to enable him to show his brilliance and move on to the next level of his dreams. This did not happen and Michael’s dreams were deferred.

### *If Parents Didn’t Care, Why Do They Keep Bringing Their Babies to School*

School policies create environments in schools which are not conducive to learning. Through my experiences in secondary education I realized that policies mirror the disbelief administrators and teachers hold as truths about students’ future abilities. Policies have a way of deferring a dream before it even comes to fruition. My experience teaching in the southwest brought this point to surface. During my sixth year of teaching, I met a boy whom I will call Mario. He entered my eleventh grade class midway through, and had little to say. I realized after two days that he did not speak English. He lacked the skills to tell me his name and could not communicate with me either. Worse yet, Mario was not given any guidance to learn English. With little support and limited ability to communicate with Mario in his first language, I used Google translation and also relied on multilingual student helpers. Luckily, I found a Spanish version of *The Great Gatsby* (the text we were using) from the library. Mario did not seem to mind, except communicating with him was still an issue. Despite our communication challenges, I knew I had to prepare Mario for proficiency exams. I asked a lead in our department how he would be able to take a test without having any experience with English. She said, “He will have to learn.”

The day of proficiencies was the saddest day of my career. Mario sat down, I put the test in front of him, and he simply stared at his desk. After an hour, he said, “dis test.” I left school that day crying! District policies prevented our school from receiving resources to support students learning English. Thus, students who did not speak English, and their teachers who could not speak the student’s home languages were left to fail, until on their own they could comprehend each other and the respective languages in which they were trying to learn and communicate with each other. Mario’s mother didn’t send him to school to fail, but district policies of how we support students who are learning English condemned him to failure. After this experience, I left teaching. I loved it too much to stand by and be a part of a system that failed our children. How can we service children if we do not meet them where they are? Emdin (2016) encourages us to meet the needs of students by understanding the level at which they enter our classrooms. Meeting Mario’s needs meant providing support as he learned a new language.

As I consider the state of Mario and Michael, I wonder, *what do we do now?* If children did not want to learn, why would they keep coming to school; and if parents did not care, why would they keep bringing their babies to school? Through my teaching I learned parents whose pride and joy rest in the children they birth are advocates of education. They send their children to school to be developed and



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nurtured so their child can live out their dreams. Students keep coming to school because they have a desire to learn and dream, yet we fail them when we do not serve them and put our own perceptions of their future into our policies and procedures. I will not fail our children. No dreams deferred will I sow!

### **Tonya**

The roots of my teaching run deep. Born of radically fierce love (Darder, 2002) sprung from the germinated seeds of a family and village with the audacious hope to dream, my roots continue to grow. I once tried to bury my roots deep inside of myself, but they continue to emerge as radicles, severed from a tree once cut down, yet refusing to die. Springing forth from the stump left behind, my teaching roots stubbornly take hold and manifest as blossoms magnificently unfolding. They become the dream my family and village always envisioned they would be. They, these roots, the roots of my teaching, have morphed into gifts from the universe. Like my cisgender femaleness and my kissed by the sun, full of melanin, caramel colored brown skin, these gifts, deeply rooted, gift life back into the world. Without these gifts, I am nothing! One day in November of 2014, I almost believed I was nothing! Almost!

### **Remembering the Incident**

It was my rookie year as a school leader and I had just been appointed to serve as an assistant principal in a small suburban elementary school. I was the only administrator of color in the building and one of four people of color on staff. When advocating for the needs of students, a small percentage of which were students of color, my presence and voice became critical. On the day of the incident, I was asked to implement school regulations situated in “no tolerance policies.” Specifically, my principal asked me to suspend a fourth grade student named Shannah (pseudonym), accused of threatening the lives of two of her peers: two white male fourth graders. Considered a serious offense, suspension was mandatory; so too was a thorough investigation. Engaging an investigation, I learned that Shannah had been the victim of repeated harassment by her accusers. I also learned she had not been responsible for authoring the *Kill List* invoking her suspension. Instead, the list had been crafted by one of her friends, a fourth grade white girl. She, too, was being harassed by Shannah’s accusers, as were a small group of their female classmates. I shared what I learned with my principal, who insisted I continue with the suspension. I struggled. I struggled because deep in my heart I knew what I was being asked to employ would merely reconstruct inequities born of the same policies I spent my whole career fighting to dismantle. *How could I suspend Shannah when I knew she was the victim of racialized and gendered harassment – a harassment born of intersectional white racism and couched in the ratchet taunts of white boys repeatedly calling her nigger, cunt, and slut?* I couldn’t! So I refused to suspend Shannah. Unfortunately, my principal made a different decision and Shannah was still suspended. The suspension involved the police, I was forced to witness the interrogation, and together, Shannah and I, began an outsiders within (Hill-Collins, 1990) retreat. Silenced, I listened as erroneous accusations were made about Shannah’s actions. Marginalized, I experienced leadership strip Shannah of her dignity and watched in agony as tears streamed down her face. Dehumanized, I shuddered as Shannah’s body shrank into itself, and I cried as my body shrank alongside hers. Though I had not suspended Shannah that day, I failed to speak up on her behalf. Thus,

my dignity, like hers was stripped away. Rendered invisible, I could no longer see myself, so at the year's end, I did the one other thing I felt there was left to do. I walked away from the only true love I had ever known— teaching and leading in P-12 settings. Without this love, I was nothing: almost.

Years and hours of reflection later, I now realize how making the decision to walk away from what I most love—and my subsequent struggle to engage it—was deeply rooted in the seeds sown of my roots while growing up as a little Black girl in Oakland, California. I failed to remember those roots in November of 2014, but I remember them now.

## Coming of Age in My Oakland

My Oakland is east of the San Francisco Bay Bridge, where an eclectic collage of strong Black families live amongst a mosaic of equally strong Brown communities, each speaking truth to life through different tongues. Drawing on the wealth of their respective cultural communities, they learned to share space, and together, as one, became the Black and Brown village planting seeds that grew into my teaching roots. These seeds taught me the ways of my ancestors—to love radically, give willingly, walk and speak boldly, laugh often, be humble, care for the collective—especially the children—and to always, always, remember my roots. These seeds also taught me to value communal relationships, ethnic pride, personal strength, and spiritual faith. They taught me how to be resilient.

The love and lessons I received from my mother and father helped plant these first seeds. It was my mother who insisted I learn to love my homeless, alcohol addicted, often absent father. She taught me this love simply because he *was*. In her firm, but caring manner, she'd remind "It was your father who breathed life into you Tonya, and you must remember that he loves you." These words, shared by the first teacher in my life, taught me how to find the humanity in everyone. The times my father shared with me complimented these lessons because they helped me to understand what resilience and radical love *truly* look like. Despite experiencing life on the dank streets of an urban terrain, my father found ways to smile and laugh, seek joy, and love his baby girl fiercely. When I visited his streets, we enjoyed laughs sitting on park benches in Berkeley, where we shared slices of Blondie's Pizza, and he danced a special dance just for me. Oh how I loved seeing him do so. As I grew older, weekend visits saw us laughing underneath covered bus stops on Dwight and Telegraph, shielding ourselves from the cold, and telling stories through poetic verse, giving birth to a special kind of resiliency that I secretly prayed showed up in me, because even at a young age, I recognized that if a man who lived in the streets and struggled with alcohol and drug abuse could still find ways to breathe, wake up, and engage the world with hope, then certainly so too could we all. These were my mother and father's first gifts. Seeds that laid the foundation upon which the bricks of social justice teaching would be built, and yet buried down so deep, that I almost forgot they existed.

Fortunately, my mother and father did not plant their seeds alone. There was help from Big Daddy, my maternal grandfather and the male-identified center of our family. He demonstrated the pay-off of hard work and care for community. He dropped out of school to help with sharecropping and was uneducated in the traditional sense, but when he was provided with the opportunity to dream his best life, he took it. Drawing on the work ethic born of his experiences in someone else's fields, he married the love of his life, traveled west, and sowed seeds of his own success. By the time our lives merged he was

the proud owner of his very own dry cleaning business. It was there, in Airport City Cleaners, between racks of clothing, pressing irons, and steam machines that the downtrodden came to ask my grandfather for help, and he always gave. He greeted his visitors with a smile, shared kind words, then nonchalantly slipped a few bills from his pockets into theirs, always leaving them with their dignity. These seeds of giving back stayed with me, and when I finally made my way to teaching, it is no wonder that my first classrooms were in elementary schools in the same Oakland community that once gave so much to me.

Big Daddy wasn't the only one in my village. There was Big Mommy, my paternal grandmother. She taught me the value of servant leadership. Not out of pity or for a self-serving need to be validated, but simply because service is the ultimate and purest form of love. Combined with the love of the countless uncles, aunts, cousins, family friends, neighbors, teachers, community advocates and church parishioners, these roots from *my Oakland* formed my earliest conceptions of teaching for social justice. They were seeds planted deeply, and meant to empower, but they also became the lens through which I experienced the incident.

## Remembering Again and Coming Full Circle

I now understand why I struggled when asked to suspend Shannah. It was wrapped up in having to face the truth of how emboldened with the privilege and power to make a decision that could disrupt inequitable educational practices in my school, seeds sown in me growing up in Oakland, I did not. This made me the oppressor. As a Black, female, educator, operating under the panoptical glare (Foucault, 1977) of a system built on white privilege and committed to a single-story narrative (Adichie, 2009) of women of color in leadership, I became the oppressed. I forgot to remember the seeds planted as I grew up, and failed to tease out methods for enacting creative acts of resistance (Jean-Marie, Williams, & Sherman, 2009; Hill-Collins, 1990). Allowing myself to be silenced by an internalized racism (Huber, Johnson, and Kohli, 2006) that prioritized policies and people intent on securing the safety of the white teachers and leaders who occupied the school over my own, and engaging in stereotype threat behaviors that forced me into a submissive, rather than assertive stance, I also failed to speak up for myself. So, I could not use my gifts to speak up for Shannah, who couldn't speak up for herself.

I forgot to remember to draw on my roots. As a result, both Shannah and I were silenced and pushed to the margins. Marginalized by a steady flow of racial microaggressions (Delgado and Stefancic, 2013)—small acts of racism, administered in tiny insults and dismissals, projected onto our bodies, simply because they were Black female bodies, learning, teaching and leading—in the spirit of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), a racism without racists, and that refused to use the language of race to name what was happening. Acts that invalidated our expressions of self (Collins, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1998), effectively ignoring the cultural funds of knowledge and social capital (Moll et al., 1992) Shannah and I brought to the space in which the incident occurred. Without our cultural funds of knowledge, colorblind racism served to ignore its responsibility to create safe spaces for Shannah and I, and failed to identify my oppression in the same way that I as oppressor failed to identify and interrupt Shannah's. It also shook the very foundation upon which roots that ran deep shaped a fiery and resilient spirit that I was taught to engage, because I forgot to remember the seeds planted. I forgot to remember my roots; almost. But now, I remember!

## Remembering How to Sow Seeds of Justice Through My Teaching

Today I am (re)committed to eliminating educational practices that lead to inequities for little Brown girls like Shannah, and Black teachers like myself. I now remember the gifts life gave me and have reclaimed them, unapologetically. I use them daily to prepare in-service teachers with aspirations of becoming school leaders and am resolved to equip these emerging school administrators with the knowledges, dispositions, and strategies to employ social justice leadership. It is not by accident that I teach at a university with an expressed commitment to prepare educators for this work. As my family and village taught me, *the universe is perfect*. So I take the seeds of my family and village, sown through deep roots, into my teaching, and together with my students, I am learning how to navigate intersecting socio-cultural and historically contextualized identities. I am also remembering the audacious hope that I first carried with me into those first classrooms in Oakland. Drawing on this hope, and those seeds, I am spreading my roots deeper, farther, and wider than I ever have before, always keeping in mind Pine's (2009) words, "When we enter the classroom, we bring who we are as people - our gender, race, ethnicity, worldview, beliefs, ideologies, assumptions, values, perceptions, past experiences, personal history, biases, and attitudes. We cannot escape who we are, nor can we keep who we are out of the classroom." (p.201). Each day, when I enter the classroom, I enter it fully as myself, carrying all of my gifts, sown through deep roots, and always standing in my truth. I enter as an anti-racist, unapologetically Black feminist and critical scholar with a mandate to dismantle and disrupt systems, regulations, policies, and people who try to make us forget how to sow seeds of justice! Hopefully, we all will enter our classrooms this way, prepared to do so radically, lovingly, and fiercely!

## CONCLUSION

Counter-narrative storytelling bound five anti-racist educators together even more strongly as a collective than they had been before. Reflecting on shared experiences and sharing new knowledge enabled them to weave a web of courage and power acting as a tether to their collective goals towards liberatory education (Freire, 1968). Each time they came together, they were reminded of the power in relationships; that truly knowing each other and committing to collaborative scholarship, critical professional development (Kohli, Picower, and Martinez, 2015), and culturally responsive care (Roberts, 2010)—five women whose diverse backgrounds and cultures spanned the globe before they connected in time and place in the southwest—constitutes an act of resistance.

Their work of engaging in critical dialogue and reflecting on shared experiences as social justice educators is sometimes painful and often frustrating, but always bears fruit. The fruit born of this work—our students need educators to: recognize and affirm their worth; draw on their cultural wealth; care for them fiercely; teach them with radical love; engage them as they come, meet them in their worlds and where they are; listen and speak to them from the heart, open up brave spaces for them to teach and lead us, and follow them when they do; be willing to fight against systems of power and privilege on their behalf and empower them to do the same; speak up when they can't; engage in self and collective care, and continue to get to know ourselves, to better see and understand them. These are the lessons

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five women took away from their time with each other and the narratives that resulted, lessons they now share with the world, with hopes it provides new knowledge to answer critical questions, including how to sustain and retain teachers committed to teaching for social justice. Narratives also demonstrate the urgent need for critically minded teachers to continue to bind together as social justice educators both within and outside of school spaces, and through their binding force, to rely on each other to continue to sow seeds of social justice, including in the Southwest.

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## **KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

**Oppression:** Prolonged, cruel, and unjust treatment, delivered by those individuals and groups of people in power, and resulting in the stripping of an individual's or collective group of peoples' human right to dignity, freedom of expression, and liberty. This treatment is ratified and upheld through socially constructed ideology, governments, and politicized, social, and societal policies and practices. The goal of oppression is to limit those being oppressed access to the physical, material, and financial resources they need to live, survive, and thrive as a human being fully expressing the true essence of self (as individual and identity group) in any given society.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In many cases no tolerance policies (discipline policies that apply punitive measures regardless of context or reason for actions) lead to an inequitable application of disciplinary consequences, funneling students in Black bodies into the school-to-prison-pipeline – a figurative pipeline that serves to funnel the marginalized from schools into prisons (Alexander, 2012).
- <sup>2</sup> A term used to problematize the patriarchal nature of language and push back on the masculine presence in the term mentor (Brown, 2006). We apply the word femtor as a way to reclaim the guidance and support offered in mentored relationships, regardless of gender; in this case femtor is a female offering mentorship to another individual.
- <sup>3</sup> The G 1.5 is an immigrant group that has very unique and distinct characteristics. It is a group that has often been misidentified or overlooked (Forrest, 2006) with multiple explanations for the group. Mark Roberge's (2003) descriptions of the G 1.5 as foreign-born children of immigrants who are partially foreign-educated and partially US-educated, and their language abilities could be more dominant in either their native language or English, is one that explains most of my current students.
- <sup>4</sup> This model allows for district schools to be run by governing boards made up of parents, teachers, community members, and student representatives. This model was developed in Boston Public Schools with the support of the Center for Collaborative Education (see <http://cce.org/work/district-school-design>).