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CORE CONNECTIONS:

EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY IN THE CLASSROOM



A QUARTERLY MAGAZINE FOR EDUCATORS

CORE CONNECTIONS

EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY IN THE CLASSROOM

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Welcome

TINA R. STARKS

 [@TINAR_STARKS](https://twitter.com/TINAR_STARKS)

INSTRUCTIONAL COACH FOR FONTANA
UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
2020-21 TEACH PLUS POLICY FELLOW

Welcome to the December issue of Core Connections Magazine!

The year 2020 will likely stake its claim as one of the more tumultuous times in our nation's history. COVID-19 called to question the safety of our health as over 200,000 Americans lost their lives to the coronavirus. Meanwhile, the ongoing killings of Black citizens under the guise of law enforcement sparked collective outrage and social unrest across our country. With so many of us staying home, we're unable to experience sharing physical space with extended family, friends, and colleagues which heightens uncertainty of the impact on our social-emotional and mental health. In essence, we are living through multiple pandemics at once.

However, the paradoxical way that life unfolds reveals the possibilities that may arise from the dark tragedies of 2020. Particularly in education, we have the opportunity to address the gross inequities, systemic racism, and sweeping disparities magnified by our current realities. The call for the urgency of change is upon us.

There is no doubt the work for equity and social change will be difficult and perhaps even painful at times. For all that, educators are equipped to lead the charge. According to James Baldwin (1963) in *A Talk To Teachers*, "The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions..." He goes on to say, "To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity.

"The very nature of our profession insists upon developing productive citizens who will not preserve the transgressions of our past but rather transform the future for our collective betterment. In fact, many of us were beckoned to teaching precisely to make a difference, to see students discover, and to watch them become. We stand now in an extraordinary moment of possibility to influence what we will make of 2020. We can normalize how we interact with the difficult topic of racism through vulnerability and meaningful Coffee and Conversations with fellow difference makers. We can conceptualize instructional practices to foster culturally affirming and anti-racist learning environments by Disrupting the Canon with collaborative support. Together we can humanize education with conviction and purpose.

Much Respect,
Tina Starks

Welcome

ANTONIO RICHARDSON
DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES
STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT PARTNERS



Welcome Core Advocates,

My name is Antonio "Tonii" Richardson, and I am the Director of Human Resources at Student Achievement Partners. At SAP, I have the opportunity to apply my passion for building equitable systems that center people as active agents in their learning, advancement, and identity to push our work forward.

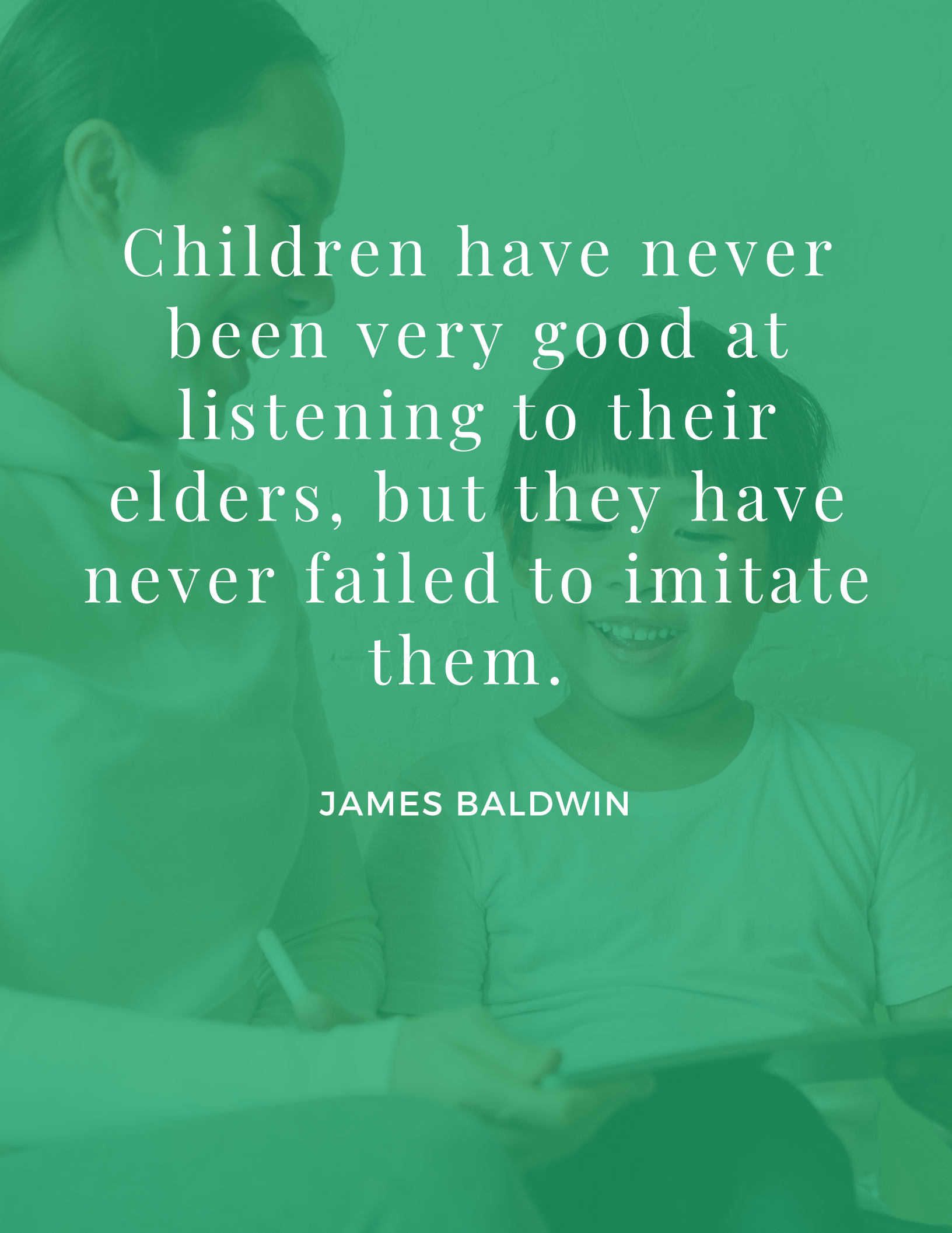
In my work, I use a human-centered approach to integrate equity measures with policies, procedures, and systems across the organization that create conditions ultimately aimed at improving outcomes for students across the nation. These critically designed methods put SAP staff at the center and build systems around them, leading to greater adoption of new internal practices. When employees have the space to show up at work authentically and without barriers, they bring another set of ideas and new approaches to work.

This approach can be just as practical when designing for students. By placing students at the center, we can view their value as the experiences they create and the perspectives they bring to the table.

For the past ten years, I have worked in education non-profits, where I have seen the dedication and versatility of many educators across the country. I firmly believe that quality, K-12 education has the power to be transformative for students in pursuit of college and career readiness and I see SAP and Core Advocates as a catalyst for change.

I am grateful for the opportunity to introduce myself to an amazing group of educators and look forward to seeing the good work you all do every day.

Best,
Antonio Richardson
Director of Human Resources
Student Achievement Partners

A woman and a young girl are sitting at a table, looking at a book together. The woman is on the left, and the girl is on the right. They are both smiling and appear to be engaged in a learning activity. The background is a solid green color.

Children have never
been very good at
listening to their
elders, but they have
never failed to imitate
them.

JAMES BALDWIN

Resources on Achieve the Core



Critical Content Collections

There are four carefully curated resource collections focused on high-priority instructional topics: [Fractions](#) and K–2 Early Reading Accelerators (which includes the [Early Reading Accelerators](#) overview, [Foundational Skills](#), and [Knowledge & Vocabulary](#)). All of the collections offer multi-media materials for classroom use, role-based support, and addressing instructional issues specific to the 2020–21 school year. The collections will continue to evolve and grow in response to needs identified through [feedback](#). The [Fractions Critical Content Collection](#) and [Early Reading Accelerators Critical Content Collections](#) webinars from October highlight some of the newly-added resources and feature the amazing Core Advocates who developed them.



Quarter Turns: Supports to Access Complex Text Across Disciplines

“Quarter turns,” or small pivots teachers can make in the classroom, can be used across the content areas when a complex, grade-level text must be read and understood by all students. The quarter turns identified in this resource, authored by Sarah Brown, have been designed to engage more students--particularly middle and high school students--more frequently with more text.



The Coherence Map

The Coherence Map shows the connections between Common Core State Standards for Mathematics for grade K–12. It’s designed to help educators build student understanding by linking together concepts within and across grades, as well as identify gaps in a student’s knowledge by tracing a standard back through its logical prerequisites. New NWEA assessment items have been added to over 100 K–8 standards in the map. In addition, 45 middle and high school standards now offer recommendations to help teachers ground themselves in the skills and knowledge that students are bringing to the current unit of study and gather valuable information to use when teaching a particular standard.



Knowledge-Building Resources for Middle and High School

A high-leverage, evidence-based strategy to support students in accessing a complex text is to anchor that text in a conceptually coherent set of resources that build needed knowledge and vocabulary. This work is particularly critical for students not yet reading at grade level. These knowledge-building resources, based on the quad text set model developed by Comprehensive Reading Solutions, are designed to support educators to use [existing knowledge-building text sets](#) or develop their own.

2020–21 Priority Instructional Content

Over the summer, we shared [2020–21 Priority Instructional Content in English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics](#) authored by Student Achievement Partners and [Addressing Unfinished Learning After COVID-19 School Closures](#) by the Council of the Great City Schools. These complementary resources support instructional planning and decision making for the 2020–21 school year by naming grade-specific instructional priorities in math and ELA/literacy and key considerations for addressing unfinished learning while attending to social, emotional, and academic development.

While it is critical that all students—including those with specialized learning needs—pursue grade-level academic content, the past few months have revealed many challenges and learnings in addressing unfinished learning while ensuring equitable access to grade-level material. To further support this work, [Seek Common Ground](#) and Student Achievement Partners created [Family Guides](#) (available K–HS in English and K–8 in Spanish; high school coming soon) to help anyone supporting a child's learning in the 2020–21 school year learn more about what children should know and be able to do, grade by grade, in math and literacy. The guides provide information on the most important things students should be learning, and how to reinforce learning with everyday activities, tips for talking to teachers, and online resources.



In addition, the Council of the Great City Schools and Student Achievement Partners collaborated on a three-part Webinar Series on Addressing Unfinished Learning and Essential Content in which experts and practitioners discuss (1) how prioritized ELA/literacy and math content and addressing unfinished learning work together hand in hand, (2) successes and challenges in addressing unfinished learning while focusing on essential content, and (3) moving this work to scale.

PART 1 (Recorded 11/18):

[Addressing Unfinished Learning: Addressing Equitable Access to Grade-level Learning](#)

PART 2 (Recorded 12/2):

[Educator Perspectives: Guidance on Addressing Unfinished Learning and Essential Content](#)

PART 3 (Register now for 12/16):

[Leadership Perspectives: Best Practices and a Path Forward](#)



CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

ANet

Director, Organizational Sustainability & Operations
Director of School Support – Georgia
Vice President, Partner Management

Instruction Partners

Director of Instructional Support
Math Lead

Leading Educators

Chief External Relations Officer
Instructional Leadership Coach - Math, Charleston

EdReports

Content Specialist, Secondary Mathematics
Senior Specialist, Assessment

New Resources from Partners



Seek Common Ground (SCG) released [Family Guides for grades K-12 in English and K-8 in Spanish](#) (HS coming soon). The Family Guides were created with Student Achievement Partners (SAP). The Guides are designed to help parents, grandparents, caregivers, friends – anyone helping a child learn during the Covid-19 pandemic.



ELSF provides [free resources](#) designed to illustrate activities and scaffolds that can be strategically built into lessons and units to deepen and accelerate English learners' content area learning over time.



High-Quality Professional Learning Vision & Theory Workbook for System Leaders

System-level leadership is about pulling the right levers to make shifts at the instructional core, or the relationships between teachers, students, and content. This workbook will guide you and your team through a process to develop your vision for the instructional core, the theory for how you will impact the instructional core, and action plans for professional learning to execute this vision and theory.

Distance and Hybrid Learning Principles

Teaching Lab innovated these principles after interviewing dozens of educators early on in the pandemic. The guidance is designed as a starting place for educators who are adapting to teach in fully remote or hybrid (combination of in-person and remote) instructional contexts. But we know we don't have all the answers so we'd love to hear from you about how useful you find these principles and what you might change. Fill out our one-minute feedback survey [here](#).





BERNICE WISNIESKI

State: Michigan

Role: Grade 2 ESL Teacher, Grand Rapids

Core Advocate Network Advisory Board Member

What is a recent professional, work related success you've had?

I recently co-authored and published a children's storybook, *It Only Takes One Caring Heart: A Classroom Journey Into Inclusive Education*. This story was designed to be used along with my teacher guide to support elementary teachers in using peer-to-peer mediation and restorative practices in the classroom. My future plan is to collaborate with a local university to research the fidelity of my professional work in creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment for all students. Due to COVID-19, our research project has been placed on hold until school resumes with normal classroom instruction.

What is a great professional book, article, website, resource, tool, etc. you would recommend, and why?

Lost at School: Why Our Kids with Behavioral Challenges Are Falling Through the Cracks and How We Can Help Them, by Ross W. Greene, Ph.D. This book is a practical guide that thoughtfully illustrates why old-fashioned school discipline and zero-tolerance policies have failed our students. It offers a positive and practical approach for teachers who believe in the resilience of kids and restorative practices.

Describe the work you're doing in school(s) to advance equity in education.

Currently, I am working with a school-level team in collaboration with Education Trust Midwest Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) and High Impact Leadership (HIL), partners who are fierce advocates for equity and high academic achievement for all students. We focus on how to present “teach smart” opportunities as a way for students to develop key literacy skills that are aligned with grade-level standards and are critical for reading improvement. The path to improvement is clear: we must first understand reading

expectations at each grade level while carefully scaffolding skills and concepts that are requisite to meeting grade-level expectations. Furthermore, we must provide students with multiple learning opportunities to interact with reading content and tasks. The goal of our team is to systematize a process so all teachers can incorporate our design into their practice so ALL students have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Describe a teacher/educator leadership opportunity you've been a part of, or a teacher/educator group/organization you are a part of, and how it has impacted you and your work.

Leading Educators has afforded me many professional development opportunities to explore equity as the foundation of my teaching practice. Speaking for Leading Educators, G.T. Reyes stated, "Inclusion is not enough. Disrupt, dismantle, and heal from the structures, practices, behaviors, and beliefs that exclude us in the first place." These words revolutionized my teaching practice. Instructional equity means giving the code to all students since institutional inequality has kept the code from our most vulnerable students and has contributed to the learning gap. Recent assessment data confirms G.T. Reyes's beliefs since low-income white students consistently achieve at a higher achievement rate in core classes compared to middle-/high-income students of color. Regardless of my personal experiences of growing up in an impoverished home environment, white privilege gave me the code and advantages to navigate the educational system, employment, and other aspects of life. My participation with Leading Educators has given me an equity lens when viewing data or developing lessons for my students. My priority is to build a culturally and linguistically responsive environment with a classroom foundation built on restorative practices and social-emotional learning. As an educator, I have become vulnerable and willing to disrupt practices that are harmful to students. Through my professional development and work, I often stumble. However, I refuse to stop fighting for those who have fallen through the cracks of our unfair broken systems.

What do you enjoy doing outside of work?

I enjoy reading, writing, exercising, and spending time with friends and family.

"My priority is to build a culturally and linguistically responsive environment with a classroom foundation built on restorative practices and social-emotional learning."



What We're Reading

01

We can't populate our way to inclusion: Relationships are the building blocks of inclusive culture

-- Cornelius Lee & Andrew Greenia, *Promise54*

02

Influential literacy expert Lucy Calkins is changing her views

-- Emily Hanford, *APM Reports*

03

Letting Young People Lead With Their Identity

-- Karen Pittman, *Edutopia*

04

Want to Learn More Effectively? Take More Breaks, Research Suggests

-- Jeffrey R. Young, *EdSurge*

Let us know what you're currently reading [here!](#)



**A round-up of resources from
a powerful first season**

Each of our guests brought their expertise to conversations that seek to highlight the ways that each of us is able to create a more inclusive classroom through our teaching. Click on any of the organization logos on the next page to find the recorded sessions along with the relevant resource guides.

We hope you will join us in January as the conversations continue!

BRINGING RADICAL INCLUSION INTO THE CURRICULUM CONVERSATION

#DISRUPTTEXTS

"Going Beyond Representation"

Guest: Lorena Germán



ImmSchools

**"Supporting Immigrant and
Undocumented Students and Families"**

Guest: Vanessa Luna

#DiversifyOurNarrative

**"Bringing Student Voices to the Anti-Racist
Teaching Conversation"**

Guests: Ana de Almeida Amaral & Ariana Kretz

GLSEN®

"Queering Your Curriculum"

Guest: Becca Mui

www.classroomandcommunity.com

"Trauma-Informed Practices for STEM Classrooms"

Guest: Idil Abdulkadir





GLENNA CARLTON SIGMON

State: Florida

Role: 9–12 Instructional Coach, St. Lucie County
Core Advocate Network Advisory Board Member

What is a recent professional, work-related success you've had?

I successfully transitioned 9th-grade ELA to virtual instruction using digital tools to engage students.

What is a great professional book, article, website, resource, tool, etc. you would recommend, and why?

Nearpod and Flipgrid are instructional tools I am using.

Describe the work you're doing in school(s) to advance equity in education.

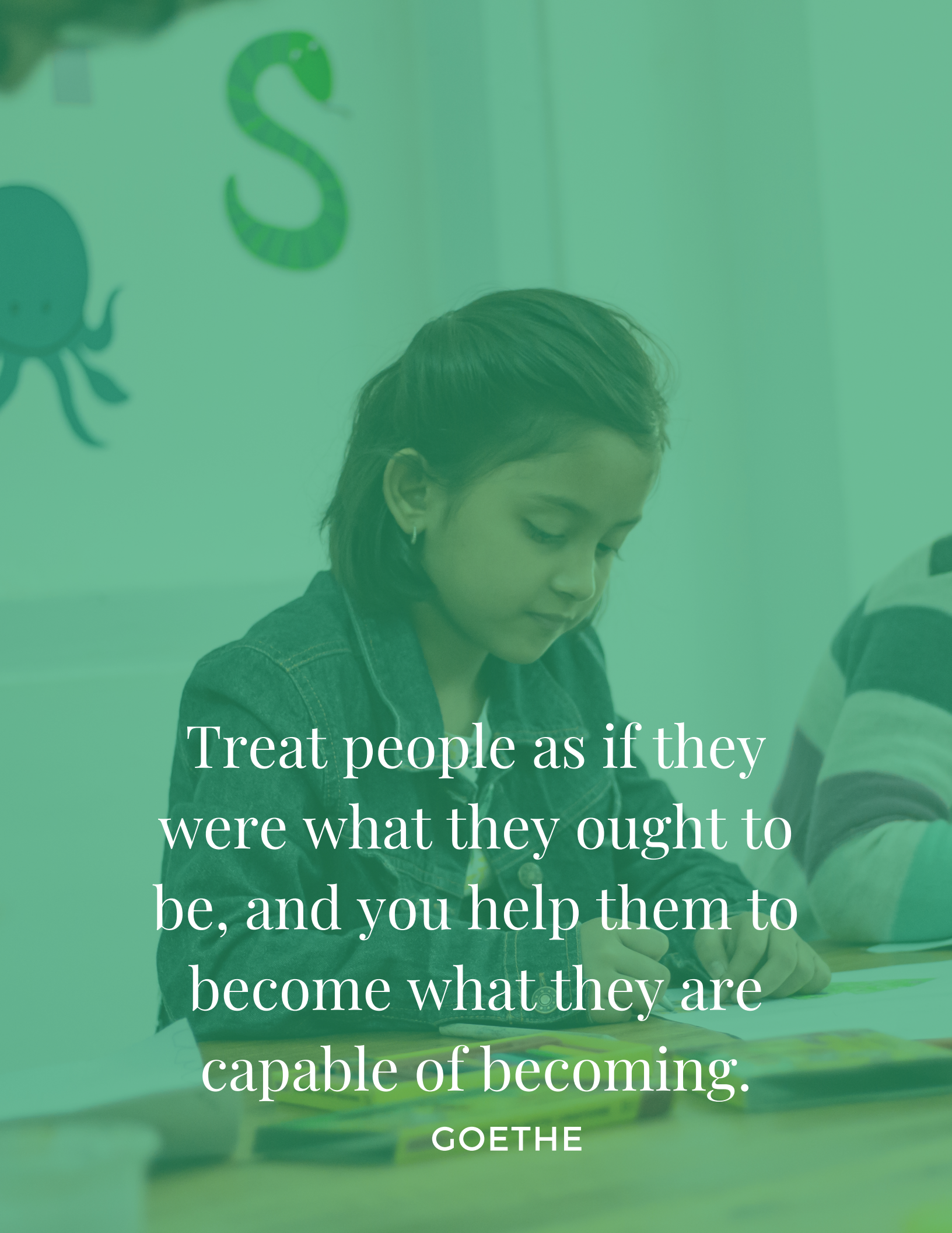
This year I am providing equal access to high-quality instruction and materials for all online students.

Describe a teacher/educator leadership opportunity you've been a part of, or a teacher/educator group/organization you are a part of, and how it has impacted you and your work.

I recently graduated from Leadership Florida Education Class 5, where I became part of a network of education professionals who collaborate to positively impact teaching and learning across the state.

What do you enjoy doing outside of work?

I enjoy shopping for antiques aka “junken.”



Treat people as if they
were what they ought to
be, and you help them to
become what they are
capable of becoming.

GOETHE

CORE ADVOCATE WEBINARS

December 16

Leadership Perspectives: Best Practices & A Path Forward

Districts have had to make quick adjustments during these last few months of implementing the guidance on unfinished learning and essential content. Despite moving pieces and moving targets, districts had to figure out how to move this work to scale. Join us in this webinar to learn about how district leaders have approached implementation, what went well, lessons learned, and changes they are considering for the future.

January 13

*Register
here!*

Using Assessments to Foster Agency, Identity, and Learning

Assessment can be harmful and dehumanizing. However, assessments can also be tools that positively support student learning, agency, identity, and belonging. Join us in this webinar to learn how one district is moving to rehumanize assessment as part of a broader effort to rehumanize teaching and learning. During the session you'll hear educators from Newport-Mesa Unified School District and Orange County Department of Education examine the shift that's taking place from classroom and district perspectives as they consider student and teacher identity, data literacy, and systems.

Join us for this special 90 minute webinar from 4-5:30 PT/7-8:30 ET!



Want to learn more about our webinars?

Each month, the Core Advocate network hosts webinars on a variety of topics related to college- and career-ready standards. All webinars are available on achievethecore.org, where you can watch videos of presentations, [access presentation materials](#), and [learn more about the topics at hand](#). We're always on the lookout for new webinar topics, so if you have any ideas to share, please let us know [here](#).



Centering Student Voice & Choice in a Remote Classroom

How student feedback changed classroom dynamics

By Whitney Aragaki

I co-taught for the Hawai'i Department of Education (HIDOE) Learning Lab, a summer venture that put teacher teams together to offer virtual enrichment classes for cohorts of students. My co-teacher and I were an unlikely pair. He is a high school computer science teacher from O'ahu, and I am a biology teacher from Hawai'i Island. While we had attended training sessions together before, we had never worked together professionally, let alone taught a class in tandem with only a few days of preparation.

Our class aimed to teach Google Suite skills, working to get high school students proficient in Docs, Sheets, Slides, and introductory video recording. As a twist, we themed our lessons with our hobbies—cooking and baking—and what resulted

was The Sweet Suite. We offered two sessions, each one hour in length for eight days, for up to 50 students. Advertised as a “laboratory” setting, students and families signed up knowing that the curriculum and many teaching strategies would be piloted in this format, and honest feedback was expected. However, we were not prepared for the blatantly honest feedback we received during the first week! That feedback led me to realize what is imperative to productive/positive/successful classroom dynamics: centering student voice and choice.” Students feel more comfortable in environments where their perspectives are integral to protocols and experiences. They can invest their current and future selves in opportunities that acknowledge how their emotions and environments vary by the day. A few students lingered in

the virtual meeting after we wrapped up class on our second day, looking like they were waiting to engage in conversation. I took the bait: “So, how was it?”

After a brief pause, a student spoke up. “It wasn’t great.”

“Yeah,” another student chimed in, “I didn’t like it. Will we have to do that tomorrow?”

My co-teacher and I exchanged quick glances. Swallowing our pride a bit, we inquired: “So, what would you want?”

“We want to choose our own groups,” the first student offered. Others nodded. After thanking the students for their candid responses, we bid aloha to our students and offered them a change for the next day’s lesson.

Breakout rooms are a top priority of many teachers’ lists of instructional strategies. Since breakout rooms are often a tool to use when teachers want to increase personalization, have more directed conversations, and allow students opportunities for novel engagement, my co-teacher and I initially hoped that randomized breakout groups would support students in the new virtual space.

They were coming in from a variety of public and private schools across the state and ranged from rising freshmen to seniors. However, this was far from reality. The newest technology tools do not replace thoughtful pedagogy and classroom culture.

Students craved the comfort and choice that we did not initially create for them and in preparation for the next day of

class, we brainstormed ideas. How about assigning groups by age? Maybe by island? Hogwarts House? Nothing sat right. A fleeting wonder stuck. What if we gave characteristics of the group, and offered students the opportunity to choose based on their self-perception? They would choose a breakout room, not by what their peers or society decided for them, but by what they felt they could meet that day. It could not hurt to try after the earlier feedback.

At the start of the small-group session we deployed the group links and characteristics:

- **Group 1** - We like our camera ON, we like to UNMUTE our mics, and we are ready to ENGAGE!
- **Group 2** - We rather not video, but we UNMUTE, and we are ready to ENGAGE!
- **Group 3** - We rather not video or talk, but we CHAT, and we are ready to ENGAGE!
- **Group 4** - We rather not video or talk, but we TRY TO CHAT! We are getting comfortable soon.
- **Group 5** - I need more assistance from a teacher, or my tech is not working.

We opened the breakout rooms, and no one lingered in the main session as students moved quickly into the individual groups. Quick checks in Groups 1-3 showed the students engaging in the activity. My co-teacher remained in Group 4 to help students build confidence, and I hosted Group 5 to help those students get acquainted with the platform and the activity.

As we checked in on the breakout groups near the end of the sessions, the volume of



of voices in Groups 1 and 2 were heartwarming. The lengthiness of Group 3's chat was staggering. Students in Groups 4 and 5 let us know that they might be ready to move into different groups soon. At the check-out stage of our whole-group meeting, students offered positive and robust feedback on how much they enjoyed the session and were looking forward to seeing their peers in the next meeting.

The following sessions continued smoothly. For the next few days, we kept the same group characteristics and noticed how students moved into different groups by the day. Some noted that background noise prohibited their mic one day, and others developed greater confidence to turn on their cameras. Offering students choice and voice, with daily variation, was a success!

Although some group characteristics transformed into more traditional cues, such as the amount of work completed, need for teacher support, and willingness to exceed course expectations, the common thread of student voice and choice remained. Students came to class prepared to engage and challenge themselves, with the expectation that we as teachers honored their choice. They continued to linger after classes to offer feedback and were eager to see how we changed the class and valued their voice.

This is an instructional strategy that will persist in our own virtual classrooms this year. The theme of student voice and choice was always there, but it will be supported by the technology and the belief that students' self-perceptions change by the day. We will be there to elevate them on their best days and hold space for their needs on other days. We will meet students where they are so they can feel supported in their true selves every day.



Written by
Whitney Aragaki

ALIGNED BLOG

Do you read Achieve the Core's blog, [Aligned](#)? Many of the articles are authored by Core Advocates and are filled with practical advice, new resources, and honest reflections. Here are just a few! Feel free to reach out to these Core Advocate authors if you have questions or want to learn more about their work.



DESIGNING EQUITABLE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Intentional instructional practice decisions, with a specific focus on mathematics

By Amber Cook

ENHANCING REMOTE LEARNING AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITH ONLINE TOOLS

Five tools to make virtual learning more social for students

By Aaron Grossman



KNOWLEDGE-BUILDING MODEL LESSONS FOR MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL

Rethinking how we define "text" to engage older students and accelerate learning

By Jenni Aberli & Lauren Trahan

ALIGNED BLOG (CONTINUED)



BUILDING A CULTURE OF ADVOCACY

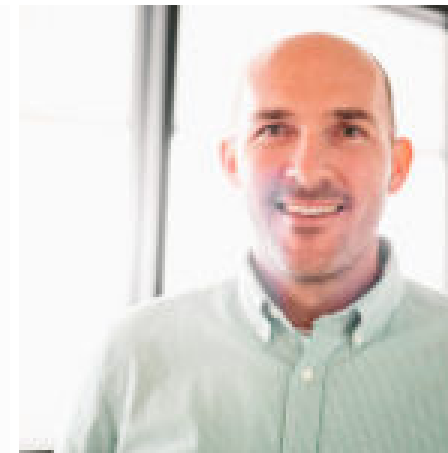
Building a culture of advocacy is a continuous effort

By Dr. Janice K. Wyatt-Ross

TWO FACTS: WE ARE BETTER TOGETHER, AND WE CAN DO HARD THINGS

Exploring what it means to be “good at math”

By Brian Dean



HOW TO KEEP VIRTUAL LIVE LESSONS RUNNING SMOOTHLY? IT TAKES TWO

A two-person model can improve the flow and engagement in virtual lessons

By Matt Kerrigan

Ready to Disrupt the Canon?

A new on-demand learning
experience

WRITTEN BY
KATE CRIST, JOY DELIZO-OSBORNE, AND
TORI FILLER



The long-overdue reckoning with racism in the United States these past months has many educators thinking and rethinking their work and role in the school system. At Student Achievement Partners, we too are asking ourselves what needs to change about our work to contribute to an anti-racist and more just education system. Much of this work involves an ongoing and honest examination of our own role in perpetuating racist ideas and policies in the education system, the biases we as individuals hold, the work that has come before us, and the work we have left to do. As always, we are actively invested in evidence-based literacy work—namely, ensuring each and every student in this country can engage in literacy in ways that meet grade-level standards with depth and joy. Simultaneously, we wonder about the voices we have given privilege to, the stories we have uplifted, and the experiences we have ignored. How have we contributed to the continuation of a canon—the literature most commonly taught—that does not represent the cultural expansiveness of this country? How can we disrupt the canon and move towards anti-racist teaching, as we keep complex text at the center of instruction? In working to answer these questions, we are dedicated to working alongside you, the teachers and educators who work on behalf of students every single day.

October Learning Series

To help us move forward on this journey, we wanted to work with a community of educators to dig deeper into the ongoing work of the #DisruptTexts movement. Led by Tricia Ebarvia, Lorena Germán, Julia E. Torres, and Dr. Kimberly N. Parker, the goal of the #DisruptTexts movement is, in their own words, *“to challenge the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum that our students deserve.”* We spent the month of October in a series of live sessions with educators to learn more about the four pillars articulated by these #DisruptText leaders. Some comments from October’s participants include:

“
We need to stop normalizing white, male, hetero, ableist ideals and start interrogating them.
”

“
What are we willing to do with what we already have? What are we willing to ask about and acknowledge about this text?
”

“
If we’re only thinking about the content knowledge and skills gained, we may miss the humanity of texts.
”

“
Who is Steinbeck leaving out - whose stories are not mentioned?
”

A New Asynchronous Learning Experience

We heard from folks in October that an asynchronous version of this content would be helpful, so we created a learning series [available on Teachable](#) as a prototype to try out and get your feedback. To get a feel for the course’s content, check out our [Prezi](#):

Four Pillars of #DisruptTexts

SP By Student Achievement Partners
Nov. 16, 2020

▶ Present

If you're interested in diving into this kind of content, we'd love for you to join us! Here are some additional details about this learning experience:

- It's free, available on-demand, and takes approximately nine hours to complete.
- It's designed specifically for ELA/literacy K-12 teachers and those who support teachers.
- The module includes multimedia content and tasks, and lets you engage with the content from all four pillars (or you can select individual pillars if you'd like!).
- Professional learning credits are available for each completed pillar.
- The module will remain open for sign-ups from November 9th through December 31st. To sign up, head [here](#) and feel free to share it with a few colleagues, too.

We hope you join, learn, and share your journey with us as you strive to become a stronger, more knowledgeable ally for your students!



photo credit: @lupita.reads 



Core Content In Practice



Do you have an ELA or Math resource that is standards-aligned and has translated particularly well to the remote classroom setting?

We would love to highlight your work in our next issue!

SUBMIT YOUR RESOURCE [HERE!](#)

Congratulations to the following Core Advocates!



With all the challenges educators have faced this year, we want to focus on celebrations and successes you've had! This is an opportunity to share with the network any work-related achievements you've accomplished. Did you win teacher of the year? Tell us about it! Did you finish a new degree? Earn an add-on certificate? Tell us about it! Did you win a special grant for your classroom? Do you have a success story about virtual learning? We want to hear all about it, AND we want to share it with the Core Advocate Network in our Core Connections magazine! Submit your celebrations for an upcoming edition [here!](#)



Keenan Lee [@learningwithKL](#) - was able to obtain ESL certification while teaching full time!

Lyndsay Nottingham [@lyndsayteaches](#) - was selected to recruit the next generation of Kentucky teachers with the KDE's GoTeachKY as an ambassador!



Kristin Wilson [@HigbeeWilson](#) - recently completed coursework to gain licensure for Superintendent!

Carissa Marin [@RADteacherMarin](#) - provided a series of 8 professional development sessions regarding Culturally Responsive Processing Tools for teachers!



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WRITING AND IMPLEMENTING CULTURALLY RELEVANT AND RESPONSIVE MATH LESSONS

Teaching math with culturally relevant topics and themes of social justice.

BY NICHOLE CAMPBELL
& PEGGY NAYAR

We knew our students' test scores did not reflect their capabilities and potential. Since most students had spent their academic careers in our district, and we knew students, families, and teachers were working hard, we came to believe that the disconnect was due largely to not better knowing our students, their interests, and their concerns. We knew we needed a change, and cultural relevance and responsiveness could not have come at a better time. We steeped ourselves in literature, including Zaretta Hammond's book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, and Dr. Kristopher J. Childs' work in equity. To date, we have created 15 math units with culturally relevant topics and themes of social justice.

The first seventh-grade unit we created was on interpreting data in circle graphs, bar graphs, and histograms. As we were writing

in a newly renovated, air-conditioned building, we wondered why our nearly 70-year-old building in a predominantly Black neighborhood didn't look similar. After all, it was the same school district. And then someone in earshot was talking about crime and we had our idea: let's teach circle graphs and charts and histograms by looking at data on crime in our districts' neighborhoods!

Internet searches and research gave us a wealth of data. (Here is a [link](#) to one of our main resources.) We were both hooked! Slides were developed and strategies were implemented. Ideas for differentiation seemed to flow easier than ever before. [Here's an example](#) of one of our lessons from our first unit.

Our district supervisor, Ishmael Robinson, was enthusiastic and encouraging. The more he listened to us, the more our ideas came. We developed our unit and thought we were all set. But we soon found out that educators were reluctant to implement the lessons and had lots of questions. Would this information be a traumatic trigger? Would it be too upsetting? What would families think?

We talked with our principal who supported our work, and then sent letters home to families explaining what we were going to try to do: we wanted to use culturally relevant topics to engage our learners. These letters were customized to match our students' home languages — [English](#), [Hmong](#), and [Spanish](#). Families were encouraged to reach out, and many did. All the families we spoke with were enthusiastic about our endeavor.

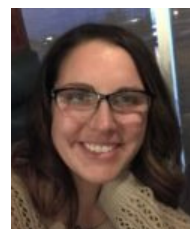
Anecdotally, we could tell you that we had better class participation than we had ever had before. On a typical day, even formerly reluctant learners were waiting at our classroom door. Data showed that we had better homework completion and more students wanting to redo assignments.

As the year progressed, we developed more units with these kinds of topics. Our work was shared with our district. Even still, many teachers were afraid to use these lessons, saying, "We like your work, but we worry it will be a traumatic trigger." There was that phrase again.

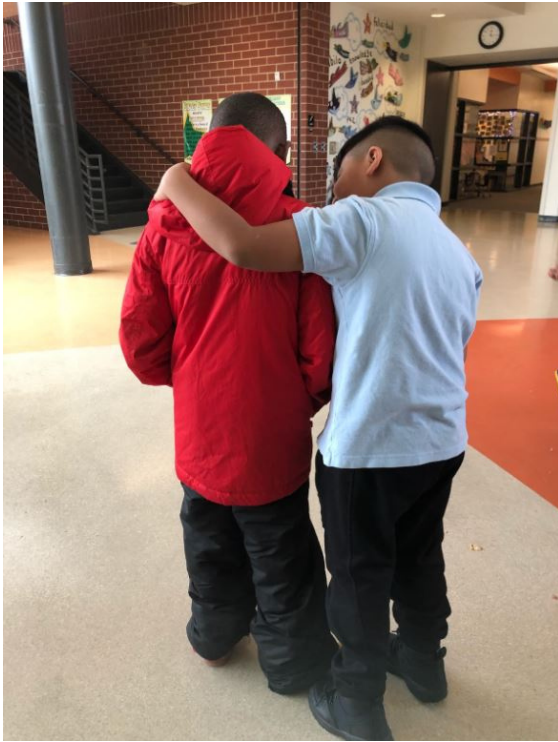
We have come to believe that the traumatic trigger is usually felt by the teacher (and typically that teacher is White). Students and their families are already having conversations like this at home. Cultural relevance leads to cultural responsiveness. This leads to better relationships which leads to better teaching and learning. It's really a win-win.

As the year progressed, we created units that leveraged topics like the [US/Mexico Border Wall to teach Proportional Geometry](#), [food deserts to teach radius and diameter](#) (this led to a food drive), [smoking and vaping to virtually teach proportional relationships](#) (students created videos which were sent to the Truth.com: [Ines' video](#); [Rajae's video](#)), and many more.

We had lots of moments we'd do differently. Like all good teaching, no lesson is ever really done. There are so many topics we still want to incorporate. Both of us would say that we cannot ever imagine not using culturally relevant topics and themes of social justice to teach math, however. We'd love to hear from any of you and further share our work and learn about what you're doing as well.



Written by
Nichole Campbell & Peggy Nayar



CIRCLING UP FOR EQUITY

A CLASSROOM JOURNEY
WORTH TAKING!

By Bernice Wisnieski

Prior to the 2018–2019 school year, my classroom was often showcased for many educators. I was perceived as a teacher leader who fought fiercely to close the disproportionate achievement gap between children of color living in poverty and other students, and my school data supported this claim. I did not become an advocate for children of color on my own, however. Organizations such as the Education Trust-Midwest, Leading Educators, and High Impact Leadership Team shared their vision and resources to support our school-improvement efforts. Leadership positions within my school district offered me a venue to share and collaborate with colleagues on issues of equity and learning. I am an active member on the

Instructional Leadership Team and serve as a Lead Mentor, representing the elementary division for the Grand Rapids Public School District. Additionally, I have the honor of working under the most dedicated, caring, and supportive principal, Rose Charles Maher, which has made all the difference in my career.

My understanding of culture and race in schools was shaped by the writings of researchers such as Tyrone C. Howard and Ibram X. Kendi. I challenged myself to understand the complexity of race and culture, and I learned how to present skills and concepts in a culturally responsive way (Howard, 2019). Examining some of the historical underpinnings that caused achievement

disparities for children of color and the poor was an essential undertaking for me to help all struggling students. In the book, *How to Be an Antiracist*, Kendi (2019) states that it is our duty to disable the racist institutional policies in education that still exist today. Kendi's call for action mirrors the NEA's Preamble to the Code of Ethics, which states that educators must deliver quality instruction to guarantee equal educational opportunities to each of our students (NEA, *ret.* 2020). Clearly, it was my duty to use high-impact strategies and focus on literacy with my 2nd-grade students.

To be honest, I felt very confident as a teacher. My delivery of instruction was highly effective, and I felt

like I was in a good place in my teaching career. However, just when I thought things were going pretty well, the perfect storm happened, and I was stopped completely in my tracks. Similar to most teachers, I've had challenging students in the past, but this particular class of students delivered me a knockout punch, and I didn't see it coming. Perhaps it was the composition of my students that school year who were placed full time in my general education classroom without any additional support (see Table 1).

On instructional day one, I attempted to implement the Shifts in ELA/literacy and mathematics, linked to the Common Core standards. However, my students had other plans in mind. They created behavioral "shifts" of their own. They refused to engage in lessons, snuck out of the classroom, threw books and other items, and insulted one another. After 30 years in education, I was at a loss for what to do. My management plan was rendered ineffective. Academic learning was sidelined, as I was spending the bulk of time disciplining students. I asked for help within my school district,

Table 1: Students represented in my general education classroom

1. General education
2. English learners
3. Special education (*IEPs*)-(*EI & LD*)
4. Medical Diagnoses (*Autism, ADHD, Anxiety Disorders, OCD*)
5. PBIS Tier 3 supports

but nothing worked. At night, I lay awake asking myself, "What plan could I implement to make the learning environment better for my students?"

One day, after hearing me vent about my difficulties, my sister posed a pivotal question. She asked me, "Why are you looking for outside support when you have 28 peer mediators in your class?" Her question was astute, considering that she works as a teacher consultant at our local intermediate school district and specializes in autism and peer-mediated interventions. This simple question paved the way for me to view my students through a new lens. Rather than solely relying on adults for support and guidance, students are capable of helping one another.

Reconceptualizing my role in the classroom transformed my beliefs and practices around teaching.

I ditched the notion of expecting outside help. Instead, I tapped into the amazing strengths of each of my 28 students. I learned that they felt like they were not being listened to and did not feel accepted by others. They also shared their personal struggles in learning and navigating friendships. Together, we created a community circle. In the circle, I taught my students how to effectively communicate injustices they noticed. These injustices ranged from laughing at a peer's mistake to acts of physical aggression. We also began to reward one another for modeling the type of behavior we most valued in one another. They began writing "noticings" to support and celebrate their peers for connecting and helping one another. In essence, the circle provided students an opportunity to ask for help and accept support from one another in times of difficulty.

By empowering students to act as peer mediators, the circle became a crucial pedagogical tool. It helped foster students' resilience, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. It also enabled my students to become social change agents. Here, we identified what social justice looked and sounded like in our classroom, playground, lunch room, and school assemblies. My students were taught to critically examine the social consequences of their actions. While doing so, they learned that acting or learning differently did not take away from the individual value of a person. Instead, it added to the cultural diversity of our class.

From a data analysis perspective, the implementation of our circle substantially reduced the number of office referrals for discipline. Data from the 2018–2019 school

year showed that during the first half of the school year (without our circle), my students received, on average, 16 office referrals per week. During the second half of the school year (with our circle), students received an average of 4 office referrals per week, which was a 75% office-referral reduction. Consequently, when teachers treat their students as peer mediators, students receive more classroom instructional time and experience fewer punitive disciplinary measures (i.e., office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions). In other words, peer mediation is a valuable tool for achieving equity in education.

The school year of 2018–2019 was when *true inclusion* and *social justice* happened in my classroom. We all have challenges and differences. Everyone needs to ask for help sometimes, myself included. What I have

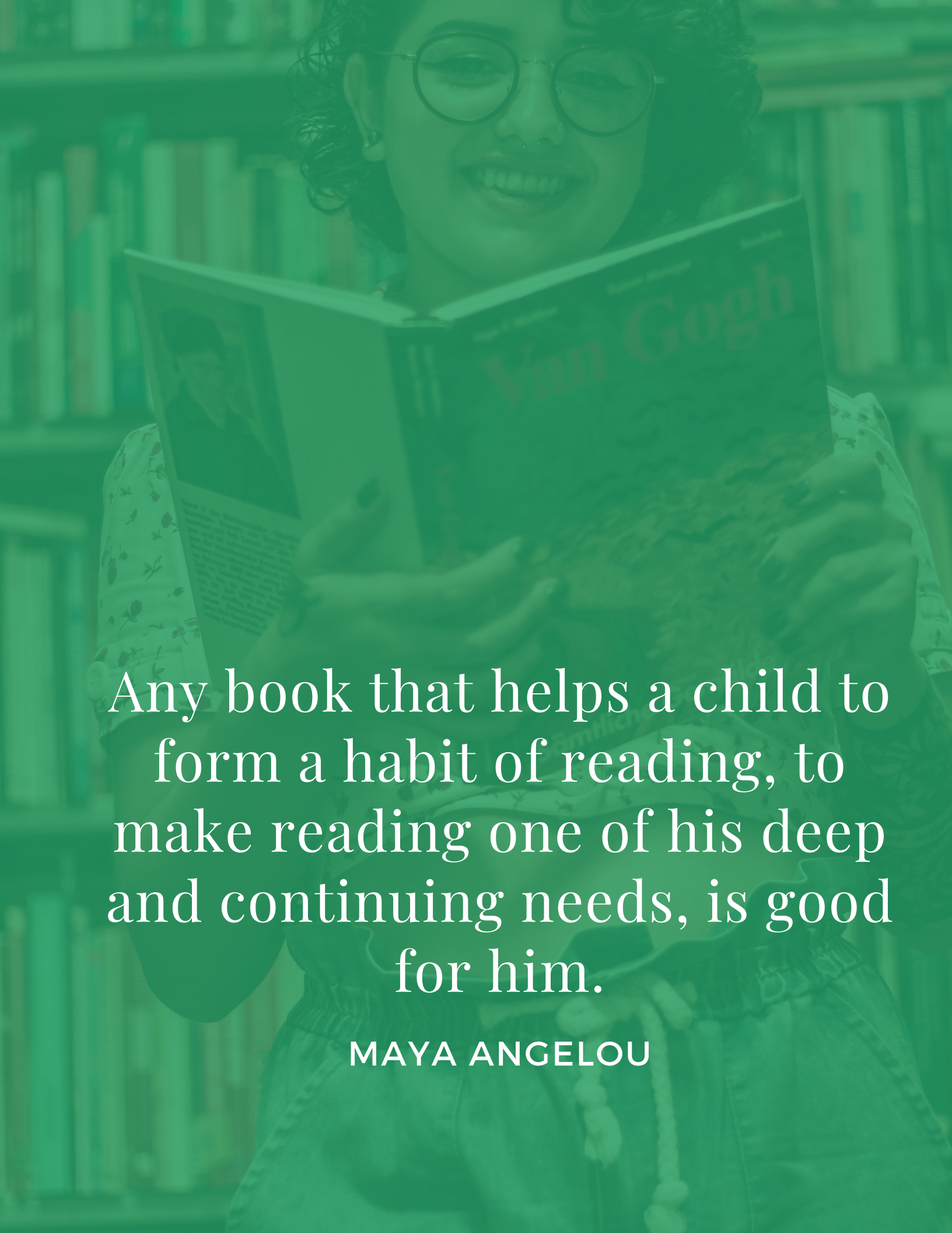
learned is that tapping into the greatness and resilience of my students is a journey worth taking.

I invite you to experience this journey of teaching by *circling up for equity*. This model was so effective that I developed an interactive read-aloud and lesson plans to accompany the storybook (available for free download) based on peers helping peers. It is a *journey* worth taking!



Written by
Core Advocate
Advisory Board Member
Bernice Wisnieski

"I challenged myself to understand the complexity of race and culture, and I learned how to present skills and concepts in a culturally responsive way."

A young girl with curly hair and glasses is smiling while reading a book. She is wearing a floral patterned shirt and a dark skirt. The background is a library with bookshelves filled with books. The entire image has a green overlay.

Any book that helps a child to
form a habit of reading, to
make reading one of his deep
and continuing needs, is good
for him.

MAYA ANGELOU



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