

# Statement

A MAGAZINE OF THE COLORADO LANGUAGE ARTS SOCIETY

FALL 2020

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## Are Grades Getting in the Way of Student Learning?

**PUBLIC SCHOOLS**  
SCHOOL REPORT CARD

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STUDENT HABITS NEED IMPROVING.  
OR CITIZENSHIP INTERFERES WITH CLASSWORK  
TEACHER RECOMMENDS PARENT CONFERENCE.

SEE REVERSE SIDE FOR EXP

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PARENTS SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_  
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# A Letter from the CLAS President

**JACKIE SMILACK**



Jackie Smilack is the High School Literacy Curriculum Specialist at Denver Public Schools. She is also a PhD student at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education. She is so happy to have found CLAS as a place to connect with, learn from, and get inspired and invigorated by other English educators!

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In our household, back-to-school time has always been a flurry of activity. When my husband and I were both in the classroom, it was a flurry of trips to all of the back-to-school sales, late-night sessions at the dining room table to create name tents and anchor charts, and bringing our then-toddler son into our buildings to help each other set up our classrooms while he kept busy in a desk that engulfed him. Each year, it got a little easier -- our classrooms established and furnished, a greater confidence that the room, while important, is secondary to our mindset, attitudes, and energy level. For the past few years, it's been more about easing back into "work mode," making sure our house is clean, our meals are planned, we have "school clothes" that we can wear, and our son's sleep schedule is supporting an earlier wakeup for school.

This year, however, there is a new landscape. "Unprecedented." "Rapidly changing." Filled with words like "pivot," and "asynchronous," and "hybrid," and "fluidity." We're back at the dining room table, creating Bitmoji classrooms, virtual meeting links, and Schoology courses. We're setting up remote learning / teaching spaces for everyone in the family. We're also using this time of the continued oppression of and violence toward the BIPOC community to have the conversations we should have been having for years -- how do our classroom procedures and structures reflect the privilege and power we hold as white educators? How do our

grading practices conflict with our values of equity and access? How do our actions create safe and brave spaces to empower our students or how do they silence and limit our students? How can we take stands as antiracist educators to dismantle the systems that have historically underserved our BIPOC students and educators?

As we move into an “unprecedented” school year, my hope is that we can use this opportunity to redefine the aspects of school that are so problematic. In this issue of Statement, Asao B. Inoue, Sarah Zerwin, and Katie Miles, tackle long-held beliefs around grading practices and propose new ways of thinking about grading and meaningful feedback. You’ll also see some of the amazing work teachers wrote this summer as engaged (virtually) with the Colorado Writing Project and the Denver Writing Project.

Finally, with this “unprecedented” landscape where meeting in person isn’t a viable option, we’re evaluating how CLAS can best provide purposeful and meaningful support and connection for you and your students. We’ll be sharing how we’re “pivoting” this year to offer opportunities for learning together, building community, and sharing resources.

**Jackie Smilack**  
CLAS President

# Call for Manuscripts

**SPRING 2021**

We are hoping by the next issue of *Statement* we will have a vaccine for COVID 19 and school will return to normal. Since last March school as we've known it has been disrupted, and we know teachers have been remarkable in rising to meet the challenge of a new way to "do school." What have you learned during the pandemic that you will carry forward when you are back in your classroom with your students? Are there new programs or apps that you will use? Have you found ways of conferring, workshopping, and responding you will continue when you are face-to-face with students? What about literary discussions? Anything you will carry over while teaching literature? How did you build community while going virtual? What about finding resources? Any new gems? We know that teachers have been heroic in their efforts to reach kids, so let's mine those lessons and share with others.

Student writing and teacher writing is always welcome for consideration.

## Submission Guidelines

- Manuscripts should be double spaced (including quotations and works cited) and no more than 10-12 pages.
- Follow current MLA style
- Manuscripts should not have been published anywhere else.
- Number all pages.
- Please include a photo and short bio
- *Statement* is refereed. Manuscripts are read by at least two reviewers.

**DEADLINE: January 15, 2021**

Send manuscripts to : Karen Hartman (kj\_hartman@comcast.net) Include a statement that the work has not been published and is not being submitted elsewhere.

# Statement Information

SPRING 2021

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# Rethinking Grading

# Grading Writing is a Racist Practice

**ASAO B. INOUE**



Asao B. Inoue is Professor and Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, Equity, and Inclusion for the College of Integrative Sciences and Arts at Arizona State University. He is a past member of the Executive Board of CWPA and the CCCC Executive Committee, and the 2019 Chair of CCCC. He has published many articles and chapters on writing assessment and race and racism, as well as two edited collections and two books on writing assessment and race. He has won the CWPA's 2014 Outstanding Scholarship Award, their 2015 Outstanding Book Award, and the NCTE/CCCC Outstanding Book Award in 2014 and 2016.

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Does the title shock you? Do you grade your students' languaging by a single standard in your classrooms? Does your school or department have a single standard or rubric for writing that you have to use or grade by? Or maybe you grade student language by "development," or how far a student has come from their first efforts? If you do any of these things, chances are -- and they are very good chances -- you directly perpetuate the White language supremacist outcomes we see in every school and place that serves BIPOC students. Why and what can you do about it? Well, that's what I want to discuss in this article.

To understand why grading writing by a single standard is racist -- no matter how that standard is articulated -- you have to understand how racism, language, and judgement work together, how they have worked together in schools, academic disciplines, and in Western settler colonial enterprises. You have to accept that schools and teaching English, no matter your good teacherly intentions and kind words to students, are colonizing projects by their nature. There may be some good things about that colonizing -- excuse me, about that learning -- but there are also bad things, and those bad things are not evenly distributed among your students.

Unfortunately, to really get what I'm saying, you have to understand a lot more than I can offer here. For instance, Suhanthie Motha has offered an engaging account that explains the way language teaching in public schools is racist and points toward antiracist teacher practices, while I've offered other accounts in higher education (Antiracist; Labor-Based Grading). In this article, I'm gonna focus on two arguments that I hope lead you to other places to learn more. The first argument is about language standards and where they come from, and the second is about grades and what they do not do for students. Put together they make an educational cocktail for White language supremacy that harms BIPOC and other minoritized students in your classrooms. Understanding these two dynamics can help a teacher begin the lifelong process of doing antiracism.

### An Ending at the Beginning

To frame my argument, I want to offer an allegory in the tradition of Critical Race Theory, a tradition in legal studies that uses allegory and fantasy to reveal "invisible forms of racism" (Marinez 60). If my allegory sounds crazy or misplaced, that may be because it reveals the unfairness in our own grading systems. It may also require different habits of language than what you have. My hope is that by the end of this article, this short allegory will make more sense, be better placed.

Imagine that you go into your classroom tomorrow and explain to your students that their final grades this semester will be determined by what state their maternal grandparents grew up in. Everyone whose grandpa and grandma grew up in California will get As, and the farther away from that state your grandparents lived, the lower your grade. Nevada, Oregon, and Arizona are Bs. Washington, Utah, and Colorado are Cs, etc. Those from the East coast, well, they get the Fs. And if your grandparents were from different states, then you take one grade lower than the grandparent who gives you the highest grade. And if your grandparents come from another country? Well, we don't really know how to grade that strange student.

As a student from Colorado whose grandparents are from Nebraska and Maine, you may think that this all seems really unfair. It's foolish to grade this way, right? Your teacher's standard for grading is based on something that you have no control over -- where your material grandparents were raised. You didn't choose those things. On top of that, the lessons, the pedagogical push in the classroom tells you one thing: Stop being a Nebraska-Maine Coloradan, be Californian or fail. It's all ludicrous! But is it though? What would be a more

ludicrous system, one even less fair? Oh, I know . . .

### Your Norm Ain't My Standard

No matter the details, if you're gonna grade writing, you have to have a standard of some kind. One way to inquire about your own language standards is to ask a simple question. Where did you get your standards for writing that you use to grade? I mean, where do they come from? Who do they come from exactly? The examples you use, the textbooks, models, and other resources you draw on, might be one way to inquire. Who wrote those words? Where do those words circulate in the world? Whose English do you ask your students to reproduce through your standards and the judgement practices you use to administer those standards? For most students, especially BIPOC students, it's likely someone else's English. Maybe it wasn't always yours at one time, and investigating that part of your own literacy journey might be helpful in understanding your stake and implication in racist systems and standards of language.

Another way to understand standards is to consider them next to norms. They ain't the same things. And the distinction is vital in how we use them in our classrooms. In Washington, where I previously lived, typical speed limits for urban interstates and similar roads was 60 mph, while in Arizona, where I live now, it's 65 mph. In Georgia, Mississippi, and Michigan, it's 70 mph. In South Dakota, it's 80 mph. Different states have different standards, but are safe driving standards on highways that dramatically different a few miles away in another state? These different standards for safety should call into question the standard itself as inherently correct and universal. How was that standard determined? Who determined it? What does this standard produce in the environments it operates? Does going 80 mph become safer once you cross the border from Iowa to South Dakota where there is a 15 mph difference?

All standards are decisions made by people for particular reasons, but they are not universal, nor are they infallible. This goes for language standards as well. They may very well be capricious and cause some people undue harm. Thus it's reasonable to think that language standards are not infallible rules for clear or effective language practices. They are just the rules we have inherited today, made by people who had the power to do so yesterday.

Thus, we might say that language norms bubble up organically from a community of language users and tend to be descriptive. Norms show us what we have done or do with language already. Language standards, however, are

decisions imposed onto a community of users and so are prescriptive in nature. They describe what we should do according to some group of people who made the standard.

This means that language norms are how people communicate in communities, while language standards are formal agreements by a group of people for how to communicate. But of course, we might wonder: Did everyone affected by a particular standard get a chance to make that standard? When we say standards of language help us communicate effectively and accurately, it's not completely true, but not entirely false either. When we say this, we are choosing to see only one side of what standards are and do.

In schools and other places, language standards are created to make judgements, rank, and punish, not teach people something. Teaching is assumed in a standard. Teaching and learning are supposed to happen before one tests for adherence to a standard. So if we are holding on to standards because we think they teach students things, or they help us do it, we are fooling ourselves. They are just a measure of a particular kind of learning that is predetermined by a particular group of people or, worse, a single person. And I'm gonna ignore the fact that just because you have a clear standard doesn't mean that it can be used accurately, consistently, or similarly by a single teacher-grader or by a group of them. The research on this is clear. It's difficult to agree on how to judge language, no matter who you are (Diederich 6; Belanoff 55).

Schools usually impose external standards of English out of necessity. They cannot use the local norms unless the local people write the rules, but usually that is not what happens. Schools use externally created textbooks, guides, and curricula, often created by language experts who come from some other place or were educated in some other place with some other English language. And because the assumption must be that the local students will not share these same English language norms with the experts, they impose standards and test for them.

The bottom line is one group's norms for language use ain't another group's standard if that second group hasn't agreed already to try to mimic that standard. We can try to convince ourselves that our language standards are there to help our students in their futures in college or careers, but there is little evidence that proficiency in any form of English correlates to better jobs or higher pay in jobs. Samuel Bowles and Herbet Gintis offered a deep study of this phenomenon in U.S. schools and colleges in 1974 (republished in 2011), focusing on cognitive test results. They found that schools and colleges actually increase

inequality in the U.S., not decrease it (Schooling, 131), and that family background -- where ya family is from and how much money they got -- matters more to a student's success in and after school (Schooling, 141). And they revisited this research in 2002, confirming their previous findings.

The point is, standards are set by those in power. It's a power move. It's how one group colonizes the minds of another for Capitalist and other reasons, like making obedient and subservient workers. And sitting in a classroom or sending your kids to a school, ain't agreement to this arrangement. It might easily be coercion or consent to one's oppression, if there are no other real choices. If we are talking about high school English, it's compulsory. What choices do most parents really have?

Language standards don't help students succeed or get good jobs or go to nice colleges. Mostly, they reaffirm racial and other socioeconomic hierarchies in our society.

### It's All About Where Ya Live and What Ya Do

So language standards are just the language norms of the group in power. Where and when you live, as well as who came before you in the places you live, will determine a lot of your material conditions for acquiring language. This is why we have so many different versions of English in the U.S. It's a big place with lots of different living conditions and people. Black English is perhaps the most obvious example of a fully functioning and widely used English that has different words, rules, and pronunciations from standardized Englishes. Most, however, judge this difference as deficit or substandard, but not being of a standard doesn't make something substandard, even if the politics of language make it subordinate to that standard.

It is not hard to see how any standard for English will be closely connected to the group of people who came up with that standard. It comes from their unique material conditions. Those conditions are a product of the places in which that group lived, the people they talked to, the things they needed to use the language for, etc. In other words, your languaging -- the way you know, use, and embody language -- has relations to (is a function of) where and how you live (and have lived), who you know (and have known), and how you responded uniquely to all those material conditions.

A simple way to say this is: *We are what we do in the places we are at with the people there.*

Language is something we do all the time, and the places we do that languaging affect us, define us, and make us, just as we affect, define, and make language in particular places. It's a kind of chicken-and-egg dialectic, in that language creates people as people create language. And we operate from this understanding intuitively. For instance, places in the U.S., like "urban areas" and "suburban areas," have been racialized in the course of U.S. history (Mills 41-53; Wilkins 3-61). That is, particular bodies are associated with particular places. When I say "urban youth," what image comes to mind? How is that image, those bodies, racialized? Who do you expect to see when someone says, "We're going to the doctor to get a diagnosis?" How are the bodies in a clinic or hospital racialized in your mind? Just because you haven't noticed the racialized ways you think, don't mean you ain't being racial in your thinking. Remember, we are not the only ones who make our language. We are what we do in the places we are at with the people there.

Some might call this our implicit biases, but it's also our languaging. And because our country is so deeply and historically racially segregated, our languaging is raced and gendered, among other things. Who did you language with on the daily as you grew up? Who do you commune with now mostly? If you're like most Americans, your closest friends match your racial and socioeconomic standing. They are like you. Those are the people who make up your language tribe. And how they language is likely similar to how you language. Now, what about your students? Are all of them part of your language tribe? What does that say about your standard when you apply it universally to all tribes "equally"?

We are the product of racist systems of housing, living, working, and schooling. We are a product of racist everything, even our languaging. Who is most likely to be an English or writing teacher in the U.S. today? A white person. In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics reports that in 2017-18, 80%-85% of all teachers in schools were White (NCES). What kind of English and standards for language do you think these teachers bring to their classrooms, to their grading practices? What language tribes get represented in all those teachers?

This is why I can say with confidence that singular standards for writing in any classroom are not simply racist but uphold White language supremacy, the supremacy of White racial habits of language. These standards come from White groups of people making rules for everyone in schools, colleges, and professions. White groups of people have made the rules and standards for language in all

places in the U.S. And we are used to calling these language standards neutral and objective, and not racial. But they clearly are because we are what we language in the racialized places we are at with the racialized people there.

Calling our rules and standards objective and neutral, calling them just effective ways of communicating, hides the reality of White language supremacy and the ways all teachers are implicated in it. Most of the time, our standards for English are just White ways of seeing or *hearing* what is effective in writing.

### Where Grades Come From

Now, our singular standards are closely associated with grades. They are used together. But why and where did we get the practice of grading in schools? Isn't grading just measuring learning? No. These kinds of assessments never have been. In fact, you may be surprised at what they have done.

Grades were invented around the turn of the twentieth century, around the same time that White supremacists like Lothrop Stoddard were promoting eugenic ideas. It was the end of the 19th century, and the problem colleges in the U.S. were having was how to handle the increasing number of students entering. These were previously ungraded places where small groups of homogenous young, White, privileged men circulated. People in these places, like Harvard, were not given grades before this time, even though they took examinations and classes.

The assumption was not to measure them but to educate them, until the groups got bigger and relatively more diverse. At that time, the diversity came in the form of social class diversity. So assessment and grading were ways to control who could enter, and exclude those who were, in the parlance of the time, uneducable because of the places that made them. The logic of grades and assessment was simple: Keep people from that place out of this place.

This period of history happens to also be a period where there was a growing interest in what later would be called psychological measurement, the measuring of cognitive abilities in people. This is the same period that produced the IQ test; the Army Alpha and Beta tests; the psychological classifications of idiot, imbecile, and moron; the SAT; and college entrance exams. All of these assessments work from fundamental assumptions that dictate that all people have uniform cognitive dimensions and those dimensions fall along inherent hierarchies, bell curves (or normal distributions), that can be measured with some precision, then used to engineer society. Not only do these kinds of assessments require a single standard, not only do they invent and reify the very cognitive

dimensions they are trying to measure, it turns out, they have produced in various ways racist and White supremacist outcomes -- all of them.

In fact, the contemporary term “eugenics,” which today is closely associated with White supremacist groups, was founded around this time (in the 1880s) by Francis Galton, a British mathematician and statistician who promoted the idea after misreading his half-cousin, Charles Darwin’s, famous work, *The Origin of Species*. This idea led to forced eugenic sterilization laws in the U.S. that began in the first decade of the century and continued into the 1970s. The vast majority of women sterilized, usually involuntarily, were Black women (Stern; Severson). However, Latinas were also involuntarily sterilized during much of the twentieth century in large numbers. One third of the female population of Puerto Rico were sterilized, while in California, over 20,000 Latinas were involuntarily sterilized (Andrews; Stern). Eugenics was closely associated with measurement and the assessment of people and their worth to society. And that is what grades are supposed to show: students’ worth.

Galton, the creator of the statistical concepts of correlation and regression toward the mean, the inventor of meteorology and the first weather map for Europe, was influential in creating what we know today as the institutional practice of grades, and much of his thinking and work was motivated by -- premised on -- White supremacy through his promotion of eugenics. Galton, like those statisticians after him, such as Karl Pearson, another White supremacist, were part of a larger scientific movement that attempted to measure people on a single scale, often around reifications, made up concepts, that then were measured hierarchically through tests, like IQ, SAT, and Advanced Placement scores, all of which found that White people -- the judges and measurers -- were on top, were superior. Stephen Jay Gould, Norbert Elliot, Mary Lowell Smallwood, and Angela Saini offer various accounts of this historical scientific movement that fed or led to the grading practices we know today.

Our fast thinking about the usefulness of standards and grading for learning, because of its history, is structured by White supremacist and eugenic thinking, which has, over the decades, become naturalized, so much so that it don’t even feel like race thinking anymore. It’s just thinking, just an objective standard, just a practice that keeps us all in our places. But what exactly is grading helping us do? Who is it helping us become? Who is it excluding? What injustices do your grading and language standards maintain in your classrooms?

## Stop Grading So-Called Quality By a Single Standard

Because of where all language standards come from, if you're a teacher who grades writing in your classroom by a single standard, you are engaging in racism. Grading literacy performances is a White supremacist practice. And beyond this, grades do not help students learn. They only help institutions and schools label, control, and manage students. The research is clear about grading. And many teachers have known and acted upon this knowledge already.

You may have heard of the wide-spread grading phenomenon called "ungrading," which has been around for some time (Supiano). In short, practices of ungrading take grades out of the classroom while still producing a final course grade (see also, Bloom). Supiano cites several folks who have done research on grading and all come to similar conclusions: Grades do not do what many think they do. They don't help students learn. More likely, they keep learning from them. They don't motivate students very well. In fact, they tend to de-motivate students. They discourage creativity and encourage students to be risk-averse, meaning grades make students avoid taking risks and see failure as only bad, not as a learning opportunity, not as something to inquire about or be interested in. Failure engenders shame, not engagement and interest, as it should.

Don't believe Supiano or me? How about Alfie Kohn? His classic book *Punished by Rewards* is comprehensive in its discussion of how rewards and punishments like grades work to do all the wrong things in schools, workplaces, and even homes. Kohn has a more succinct argument against grades too ("The Case"). There are others who have researched or reported on the negative effects of grades in schools (Thomsen). Bottom line: Grades don't help us teach. They don't help students learn well. And they do more harm to the very students most of us say we want to help: BIPOC, multilingual students, and students from underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds.

Furthermore, grades help us reproduce a racist society by reaffirming the social inequality that already exists, as Bowles and Gintis' research shows. Grades of language performance work from harmful assumptions about universal cognitive abilities and justify withholding opportunity and resources by blaming people for being from a different language tribe than the one who made your standard.

So your first step in being antiracist and anti-White supremacist likely should be to stop grading by a single standard. But, of course, it's not the only thing a teacher and students need to do. I'm talking about the brave, hard, and lifelong

work of decolonizing our minds and bodies and interrogating the ways we are already made racist in racist systems and cultures. But we gotta start somewhere, right?

I wish I had time to discuss in detail grading alternatives. There are several out there. Ungrading is one. Another is grading contracts. There are hybrid contracts and labor-based contracts. The latter is what I find most antiracist and meaningful in literacy classrooms (Inoue, *Labor-Based Grading*). In short, labor-based grading contracts use only labor to determine final course grades, allowing feedback and all other activities in the class to still use whatever expectations readers have. The language norms of all students and teachers get to be circulated in a classroom. Students are only obligated to meet minimum labor requirements, usually determined by the amount of words read or written, and time on task. My research on labor-based grading contracts shows that it helps students in a number of ways, and classrooms are just as rigorous as or more so than those using conventional grading.

### Closing

Now, remember that allegory about grading by states? Does it make more sense now? If you use a standard to grade your students writing, how are you not grading by where your students are from, who they are, what language tribes they have membership in? If you teach English, likely your tribe, or the one you joined, made the standard.

In Thoreau's famous essay, "Resistance to Civil Government," he ponders bad laws and rules made by his government. Should he pay his tax to a government that he doesn't find worth supporting, a government that does bad things in his name? He explains, "Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?" The last clause is his answer. He explains, "Let your life be the counter friction to stop the machine" (233). Now, there's lots of ideas around this one that I don't care for, but this piece of advice from Thoreau I do think makes sense, especially given how difficult systemic change is if done slowly. Systems tend to co-opt the changes to them. Stopping your grading is a transgression in racist systems, one that must be done at once, one that may be very uncomfortable, even painful.

One hundred and fourteen years after Thoreau's essay, Martin Luther King, Jr. asks a similar question in his "Letter From A Birmingham Jail." In that letter, King responds to a local group of clergy that asks for patience, to wait longer for

change. Sitting in jail, King writes, “We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter.”

But his real argument comes a few paragraphs later. He criticizes the “white moderate,” like the clergy. His argument is damning, and I think is a good way to understand the so-called White, progressive -- but moderate in my view -- literacy teacher today who still grades by a single standard but realizes it’s a problem, because, well, “my students will be graded tomorrow by someone else, so I must prepare them today,” or because the teacher feels they should paternalistically prepare their BIPOC students for the harsh tomorrow by being harsh today. Why whip them once when you can do it twice? King’s words apply equally to these moderate teachers, and I offer them as a way to urge you to transgress your grading systems:

the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

The presence of justice. The inconvenience of today’s season. Whose inconvenience? Whose timetable for freedom and justice do you set with your grading and standards? But if you need a more contemporary and direct formulation of this principle of antiracism in systems already made racist, then consider Ibram X. Kendi. He explains that “The opposite of ‘racist’ isn’t not racist.’ it is antiracist . . . One either allows racial inequalities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequalities, as an antiracist. There is no in-between safe space of ‘not racist’” (9).

The same goes for your grading and singular literacy standards in classrooms. There is no safe in-between way to grade students’ writing. You either contribute to the White supremacist and racist educational systems of language and judgement or you don’t.

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# Why Now is the Perfect Time to Grade Pointlessly (and how to get started)

SARAH ZERWIN



Sarah M. Zerwin teaches language arts at Fairview High School in Boulder, where she works to convince her students of the importance of reading and writing for their lives as human beings. She is a teacher consultant for the Colorado Writing Project and is enjoying interacting with readers of her first book, *Point-Less: An English Teacher's Guide to More Meaningful Grading* (Heinemann).

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We would all agree that readers and writers need feedback to grow.

In a points-based, grade-based, in-person classroom, our students get feedback from us in many ways that have nothing to do with grading. Every conversation with a student, even every short and informal one, is an opportunity for the student to get some feedback to inform their work as readers and writers in our classrooms. Our responses to their ideas about what they read, what we say about a piece of writing they may have in progress—these and myriad other ways are sources of rich, on-going feedback that we provide to nurture the readers and writers who people our in-person classrooms. And the opportunities for these sorts of conversations are many when we share physical space with our students—as they come into the room at the start of the class, as we move around the room during class, and as they leave the room at the end of class, there are many places in our day to talk with students.

Students don't only get feedback from us constantly while in-person in our classrooms. Conversations with their classmates are also opportunities for feedback on how they're doing with coursework. Their responses to each other help students to think about how they are doing themselves with the work. They'll get responses that suggest how their reading and writing work is going—all rich opportunities to assess how their progress toward the goals they have for themselves.

In an online classroom, it's really hard to replicate that kind of constant, informal feedback. So one thing we can do is be very intentional about providing as much feedback as possible and even swap out the time and effort we put toward grading to focus it on feedback instead.

Because points, numbers, scores, and evaluation rank and sort and measure, they do not work well for breeding the kind of connection our students need to feel toward their classrooms and their teachers to be successful as readers and writers. When students feel judged by their teacher and their classmates, and when the teacher's judgments are high stakes because they affect the ever-calculating grade, students are not free to take the risks involved in growth. In fact, that atmosphere of judgement and evaluation focuses on competition and individualism. It's the exact opposite of the atmosphere necessary for students to relax and dig into the tough thinking required to read challenging texts and the complexities of writing to express what they want to say from the depths of who they are. If you use traditional grading strategies in your in-person classroom, maybe you can mitigate the negative effects of constant, high-stakes grading through a really strong classroom community where students are constantly getting the informal feedback I described earlier in this piece. But a distanced classroom requires a much stronger emphasis on feedback to cultivate the space students need to do truly authentic work.

Here are three things to think about:

**ONE: What our students need in our distanced, remote, online classrooms is connection.** They need to feel like they belong. They need to see themselves as a person in a community of readers and writers who can read challenging texts, have original thoughts about them, discuss those ideas with others, and write to effectively communicate what they want to say.

If we grade with points, put grades on everything, and keep students focused on that ever-changing overall percentage in our gradebooks, they'll be even more distanced from each other and from us. The emphasis will be evaluation and point collecting, comparison and competition, all people working just for themselves rather than as one member of a vibrant reading and writing community that works to lift up the success of everyone.

We want to craft communities of readers and writers who can't wait to log on to Zoom or Google Meet to build thinking with each other, who itch to share their writing with a group of their peers, who tear through a book because they want to be able to figure out how to make sense of it together with their classmates. None of this is possible in a distanced classroom if students are focused only on

their own grade and collecting the points they need.

Research shows that when students feel like they belong in a classroom, they are more motivated, there are fewer behavior struggles, trust grows, student well-being increases, engagement soars, academic performance improves, and students respond more adaptively to critical feedback (MindsetKit.org, “Belonging for Educators”). Those are the things we want for our online classrooms. A focus on points, scores, grades, evaluation, and judgment get in the way.

**TWO: Invite engagement rather than forcing compliance and emphasizing accountability.** We are still in the middle of the trauma of a pandemic that has pretty much disrupted everything we’re used to. And that trauma includes job losses for students’ parents, possible food scarcity and/or housing instability, debilitating illness, lasting health issues and disabilities, and death. The last thing our students need from us is any kind of do-this-thing-or-else pressure from their teachers.

I’ve heard teachers say things like, “how do I keep students from looking up the answers online?” That is exactly the wrong question we should be asking right now. We want students to show up in those little boxes on our computer screens and talk to us. We want them to do some writing that truly matters to them and helps them make sense of what they’re experiencing right now. We want them to read some texts that will push their thinking. We want them to turn to each other for conversation to figure things out, together. We can’t force any of this by threatening them with points lost or low grades.

It is so easy right now to go there, to assume that students won’t show up or do any work unless we hold grades over their heads. Sure, that is one way to get them to show up and do work, but they won’t be happy about it, and they’ll only be doing it to comply, not because they are humans whose ability to really read and write determines how well they’ll navigate our so complex world.

But don’t go there.

Don’t make it all about points and grades. Make it about the most meaningful reading and writing experiences you can imagine that focus on what your students are already thinking about. Make it about inviting them to engage with their whole selves. Make it about learning to know your students, to really know them as individuals, so you can serve up intriguing invitations they cannot resist. Make it so that in the middle of whatever disrupted world the pandemic has meant for each of them, your class is a bright spot where they really want to be—and NOT because they’ll suffer a lower grade if they choose not to do the work.

**THREE: Differentiate assessment.** We talk a lot in education about differentiating instruction, which is critically important right now of course. But crafting your approach to assessment so that it serves the unique needs of each student might be more important.

What if you took all of the curriculum standards and expectations for your classroom and boiled them down into a short list of concise, powerful learning goals. Like, “read books to explore the human condition,” and “write to express who you are.” Then, what if you invited each student to choose a few goals off your list (I recommend no more than three) to be theirs. You could ask them to state the goals in their own words to reflect the reading and writing work they each want to do, imagine what success would look like for each goal, and chart a plan to work toward that success. Now your students are focused on learning rather than points, and it’s learning they have chosen for themselves.

With this approach to assessment, I think of my students as the primary users of my classroom assessment data. If I think about their needs first—to see clearly how they are progressing toward the goals they have crafted for themselves—I’ll collect information that reveals the trajectory of their learning. This means lots of descriptive comments that simply reflect back to students the work they are doing. Students don’t need me to evaluate them based on some external standard when they have decided for themselves what their learning targets are. I’ve hacked my online, electronic gradebook to house this qualitative data (hint, it involves heavy use of the “comment” fields for each assignment). And I show my students how to use that descriptive information to see their own learning journeys unfold.

Making the learning and assessment serve the needs of each student individually could powerfully connect them to the work of your distanced classroom.

Maybe something here has convinced you to emphasize feedback and learning over grades while you’re teaching online, and you’re willing to give it a go this fall. If so, here are some places to get started (you can find these suggestions and more in my recent book, *Point-Less: An English Teacher’s Guide to More Meaningful Grading*):

- Talk about grades and points as little as possible.
- Teach students to set their own learning goals and reflect on their growth.
- Do more grading based simply on whether or not students completed the task. You really don’t have to evaluate everything.
- Take the numbers off of the rubric.

- Have students write narratives about their work based on the rubric instead of using them to determine scores.
- Turn a points-based rubric into a checklist of the characteristics of high quality work and use that as feedback instead of evaluation.
- Choose one category in your grade book and think about how you could manage it without points.
- Hold off on assigning grades to a task until as late as possible.
- Type something besides a number in the score box in your grade book just to see if you can.
- Ask your administration if you can have more flexibility with your grade book.
- Have more conferences with students.
- If you have to do grades as usual, add in places for students to respond to grades and write to explain if they think the grade is accurate or not. Be willing to change it.
- Have an open, honest conversation with your students about grades.
- Just try something and see what happens. (all from page 169 in *Point-Less*)

One of the administrators at my school reminds my colleagues and me that the grade book is only a tool. It does not have to be the ultimate, final say on grades. We don't have to fill all the grade book boxes with numbers and math our way to grades. We can design a different path that will invite our students to do the hard work of reading and writing. We can center our grading on what serves students best first before any other considerations. We can and must do this now, during distanced teaching and learning, to make up for all the ways we've lost to offer our students constant, informal feedback that helps them grow and makes them feel like they belong in our classrooms.

And if you know me at all, this last bit won't surprise you. Everything I've argued here about our grading in our current remote teaching situation goes for your future in-person classroom too. Use the pandemic as a reason to stop grading as it seems we're expected to.

And then don't ever go back.

# Humanizing Our Cultures of Assessment

**KATIE MILES**



Katie teaches 8th grade at Centennial Middle School in Boulder. Her answer to the question about grading in the language arts classroom is simple: value the young people in the room less like students and more like humans.

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When I watched the video of George Floyd's slow murder under the knee of police officer Derek Chauvin, questions urgently pulsed in my mind. *What is Chauvin's purpose here? Does he not know that he's killing a man? Does he not hear the pleas from Floyd and other onlookers? Eight long minutes and he's not responding to those pleas or his own moral compass?*

Amidst the media storm that followed Floyd's death, the public got to relive the stories of Eric Garner and Michael Brown and Tamir Rice, and dozens more Black lives taken by officers of the law. Although outraged by each of those stories over the years, my reaction this time was different. By witnessing the act itself, by watching in disgust for eight helpless minutes, it became clear: to Chauvin, Floyd was not human. (My great grandfather used to pin down calves to be branded in much the same way, knee to neck.) Before this, I could conceptually understand that systemic racism was the foundation of inequity upon which institutions like our justice system or our education system were built. Not until I watched George Floyd take his last breath did I have a visceral notion of what it looks like when individuals with power in these systems dehumanize other individuals to maintain that power.

I started thinking more about the systems that allow for police brutality to be such an epidemic. Surely something is broken at the

systems level if, for centuries and from sea to shining sea, individuals in uniform have been committing such dehumanizing acts without repercussion. Seems like the Slave Codes of 1705<sup>1</sup> must be required reading for all recruits in police academy.

And, like many other white Americans, Floyd's death and the social unrest that followed had me taking a long hard look at my personal relationship with racism. As a public school teacher, I am also faced with acknowledging my professional role in an institution that certainly participates in systems of oppression. What is my responsibility as an individual within that system?

Coincidentally, at the time of Floyd's death, I also happened to be thinking a lot about how damaging a traditional system of grading is to students. I teach in a traditional middle school where students operate in a culture of grading and high-stakes testing. In this culture, they are sorted and ranked (by teachers and by peers) based on assessments large and small. The criteria for success on those assessments were established by external bodies whose worldview leans white and Western. So, when a student's life experience limits their ability to access and acquire the learning being assessed, they also cannot access the grade being offered. In this model, there is no value placed on the human's unique experience.

Moreover, this system of grading rewards a student's ability to conform their behaviors. The students who receive high scores and grades remain passive because they've figured out how to win the game, while the students who do not receive those scores and grades remain passive because their low performance means their voices are not valued. It's a culture that values compliance. In this culture, we help young people think like a herd.

It did not take me long to make the connection: perhaps individuals who are rewarded for being compliant for thirteen years in public school then enter a workforce without the skill set to disrupt systems that perpetuate compliance. This system of schooling may have worked when the goal was to produce assembly line workers, but, if Derek Chauvin's actions are any example, it's certainly not producing the kind of humans we need now.

So, what do we do?

The state and federal policies I'm asked to uphold are made by legislators in capitols far away. I don't have much control there. I teach in a school where most of my colleagues are happy complying with the traditional grading system.

<sup>1</sup>The [Act Concerning Servants and Slaves](#) was passed by the General Assembly in Virginia. Article 34 states that if any slave resist his master, or owner, or other person, by his or her order, correcting such slave, and shall happen to be killed in such correction, it shall not be accounted felony; but the master, owner, and every such other person so giving correction, shall be free and acquit of all punishment and accusation for the same, as if such incident had never happened.

I don't have much control over that either. But I do have control over my own classroom. I can enact practices that disrupt the status quo by placing value on the humans I teach instead of the scores they receive.

With the long overdue nationwide call for more antiracist practices and policies, teachers cannot remain idle. It's time to shift the culture of assessment in our classrooms.

In the world of traditional grading, summative assessments carry weight. The value placed on these final exams, or oral presentations, or written essays outweighs any learning done along the way. In this culture, points and letter grades are currency, and the system benefits the wealthy. In this culture, students cram all night for a test the next morning only to forget the information they memorized by lunchtime. Students are incentivized to cheat, they ration out their motivation based on points possible, and jump however high we ask them without knowing why. In short, students are rewarded for their compliance then evaluate themselves and their peers based on scores received.

When I overhear anxious students in the hallways asking each other frantically, "What did you get on the science test?" I'm always amazed at the power of the letter grade in this competitive and comparative system. Just like our students' behavior is the product of a system, so too is the behavior of police officers. The system that shapes the actions of our law enforcement officers values control of situations and power over the people they are meant to be serving and protecting. In the words of Breonna Taylor's mother, police behave "with a total disregard for the value of human life."

In a culture where process is the focus, the power suddenly shifts to ensure that each student is engaging in the authentic practice of whatever discipline is at hand. In a science class, they are no longer students but biologists, physicists, and chemists participating in the processes and habits of mind relevant to these areas in the real-world. In social studies class, students no longer have to memorize dates and names to regurgitate on a multiple choice quiz if the focus is on engaging in the authentic processes a sociologist, archivist, or economist might.

In my language arts classroom this means there are no tests or quizzes. We engage in the authentic practices that readers and writers do in the real world. We reflect on that practice and decide where to grow next. Is this not the daily experience of a human in the working world? For most members of the workforce, crafting a well-organized five paragraph essay or completing a weekly

fill-in-the-blank quiz is not a job requirement. But, for members of society in any career path, having the skills to improve is essential. More than just a utilitarian function, placing value on the journey and not the final product allows us to be human and evolve. We can help students take ownership of their learning and grow from the outcome of their choices. In our classrooms, we can place value on the human experience.

Although there are many approaches to disrupting the age-old system of grading, I focus on shifting two practices in my classroom toward valuing process over product: self-reflection and feedback.

In a culture that values self-reflection, students set their own learning goals, then they plan the actions they'll take to reach that goal. Students monitor their own progress on these goals and make choices to adjust course. They continue in an informal cycle of feedback and reflection throughout a project. Finally, students complete a formal self-reflection upon the project's completion. When students identify areas of celebration and challenge in order to craft goals for the next learning experience or project, they always know where they are and where they are going. In this way, we can help young people become more self-aware.

In my classroom, students document this process over the course of a project or semester and use their findings to propose a final letter grade at the end of the term. There are no points or letter grades along the way; the only thing that goes into my gradebook is qualitative data regarding student reflection, choices they make, and progress that results from those choices. Students are empowered to hold themselves (and each other!) accountable to outcomes authentic to their own practice. This culture fosters self-awareness and responsibility. Because students are in feedback loops with teachers and peers, this culture also expects students to enact relationship skills in order to grow.

Imagine: what if Derek Chauvin, at minute three, looked to his partner and said, "Hey, it feels like I could be going a little too far here. My responsibility is to safely put this citizen under arrest. I need to adjust course."

Useful self-reflection hinges on getting a wide range of feedback. In a writer's workshop we spend time learning how to give that feedback effectively. It takes practice for students to listen closely and with empathy. In writing groups, students have to really hear what the writer needs, then be able to clearly communicate specific responses that address those needs. To do this, students must understand the experience of both the reader and the writer, which makes this cycle of feedback an experiment in the very human practice of empathy.

In addition to receiving feedback from peers, writers are in a cycle of feedback with themselves, teachers, mentor texts, and other references and resources in the room. In this culture, students can become more self-directed. It shifts the power structure away from a traditional system, where the teacher has all the power, toward a more democratic culture where the voice and choice of every individual member is empowered.

On a very basic level, students are simply helping each other and helping themselves. More deeply, students are listening to the perspectives and needs of others then recommending a course of action even though the outcome does not personally impact them. Students are investing in each other's success. When these skills are applied in the real world, we might call it advocacy.

Imagine if officer Daniel Pantaleo, while slowly choking the life out of Eric Garner, took pause to listen with empathy when Garner gave the repeated piece of feedback, "I can't breathe."

To be clear, my personal and professional experience certainly do not qualify me to critique police practices. Instead, as a teacher, I am simply making connections between what I see in my own classroom and what I see in the streets.

Like many of my colleagues who teach secondary language arts, my college degree is in the humanities. We are teachers because we want students to read and write in order to understand the human experience. Does this end with instruction? Why don't our assessment practices value the very human experience of the students in our classrooms?

In response to the call for antiracist action, overhauling systems of oppression is the answer. Because our actions are guided by policies made by state and federal legislators, it's easy for teachers to feel powerless in this pursuit. Revising the systems at work in our classrooms is a clear first step. We have to ask ourselves: who has the power in this classroom? Who has access in this classroom? In a learning community where young people are self-reflective, using relationship skills to help each other grow, and have ownership over their authentic learning process, every student has power and access.

We can make changes in our systems in order to humanize our cultures of assessment. Will it be enough? No. We have more work to do. But, it is a step in the right direction.

# Teacher Writing

# It's Time to Be Uncomfortable

**KAREN HALVERSON**



Karen Halverson has taught for 26 years in international schools around the world and in Boulder, Colorado. Karen currently teaches middle school language arts at Centennial Middle School in Boulder. She is a Lover of Language; written, read and spoken. Curator of texts; new and beloved. Cultivator of literary lives. Believer that if we teach students to employ language with intention, discernment and agency, they can become the authors of their own lives. Teacher, aware of the diversity from which we all emerge. Human being, fiercely passionate about the power and the possibility of well-educated youth. Educator, committed to engaging students in their learning, inviting compelling conversations, bending perspectives and raising student voice within our classrooms and the greater communities of our planet

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White People. You are going to be uncomfortable. And this...is a good thing.

In our classrooms, we need to talk about racism. Some of you will welcome these conversations. Some of you will oppose them. Some of you will claim that young people are not ready to engage in such issues and will also oppose such talk. No matter where you fall on this spectrum, most of you are likely uncomfortable. Because looking at history and looking at now, we must acknowledge the truth. And the truth is uncomfortable. But we cannot afford to remain silent. Power and privilege must be examined in our schools.

We like to be comfortable, even strive to be comfortable: in our homes and conversations, in our work and aspirations. When we feel discomfort, we try to fix it, change something, to restore comfort once again. We cannot imagine what it would be like to live a life where uncomfortable is the way of things, all day, every day. For our black, brown and indigenous fellow humans, this perpetual discomfort is real.

Try to imagine walking down streets or store aisles and being viewed as a criminal in the absence of any wrongdoing. Try to imagine being denied a job, apartment rental or car purchase, all because of the color of your skin. Try to imagine jogging around your neighborhood, strolling through the park, or sleeping in your bed, never relaxing, always anticipating a police bullet in your back. Try to imagine.

Here's a vivid one for you. Maybe, you've already seen it: George Floyd. A man, an ordinary man, a gentle giant of a man, a black man pinned onto pavement with a knee on his neck. The knee of a white man, a policeman, a hateful man. This video, gone viral, in real time and past time, is played out again and again. We watch this black body struggle to breathe, to grasp for life, as another man wields his power of whiteness over this body and squeezes, then squelches, the life out of him. How, for even the briefest of moments, is this okay? How, for another day, can we remain silent? How, for another year, can we shut these conversations out of our classrooms?

Silence only perpetuates the violence.

Courageous conversations. This is where it begins. In our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces, and yes, in our classrooms. We must prioritize black justice and justice for all indigenous and people of color. As we study their stories, we humanize their history. As we ask the hard questions about oppression and marginalization, we begin to view a bigger picture of society and our role in it. As we engage in current event conversations, we come together to strategize and to improve the world. And in doing so, Matthew Kay, educator and author, explains that we "*help students develop healthy habits of both mind and discourse that will serve them for the rest of their lives.*" Yes, there will be discomfort. But, feelings of discomfort do not mean anyone is unsafe. Young people hunger for these conversations because they matter, because these issues are real and relevant, because they want to be a part of making a better world. And they aren't too young.

In fact, these conversations must start at birth. Consider this: What if our children are raised to value diversity at birth? What if our children are raised to see the humanity of all people from the moment they can smile? What if we cultivate empathy and appreciation of difference before they ever step into a school? This may seem like hard work, because, for most of us, it is new work. And, this is constant and continual work. It is a lifelong commitment with no finish line.

‘If we fail to talk, we fail the children,” as young adult novelist Jason Reynolds says, “If you can't put yourself in a situation where you are uncomfortable, then you will never grow. You will never change. You'll never learn.” Coming together around courageous conversations is the way forward. Students must understand that the work to change the world begins now and that it begins with them. Together, we can create a world for justice and love.

No more hiding out in comfort zones. It's time to get uncomfortable.

Special thanks to all those amazing educators, thinkers, and writers who have inspired and informed me to up-level my work in the classroom and as a human being with their town halls and presentations this summer: Kwame Alexander and all those presenting at the KidLit4BlackLives Rallies, Dr. Bettina Love and all those presenting with the Abolitionist Teaching Network, Julia Torres hosting Summer Book Love conversations and always, Jason Reynolds. Thank you for providing the words and the fire.

# That Seventh Grade Classroom Vibe

**SUE SPENGLER**



Sue Spengler teaches 7th Grade Language Arts at Manitou Springs Middle School. She has been a teacher for 28 years, but only in the past six years or so has she learned the importance of being a writer-teacher, leading to better instruction and relationships with her young poets and authors. This piece was written in June during the Advanced Institute of the Denver Writing Project, and she would like to thank the organizers and presenters of the DWP for the inspiration and motivation to write.

## *VERSE 1:*

Sunday afternoon  
my 19-year-old White son  
went downtown  
to City Hall  
where he stood  
next to his Black girl friend  
and held up a small piece of cardboard  
cut from a box  
on which he had printed in black Sharpie:  
VIBE CHECK THE POLICE

## *CHORUS 1:*

Monday morning I was asked: “What is your vibe right now? What is your teaching vibe?” The fact that this word—vibe—had entered my world two days in a row struck me as somehow important. Synchronous. Serendipitous. Vibey.

My vibe right now is worry. And doing projects to keep from worrying. Grief and mourning for classroom and country I pour into scrubbing the tub, chipping the paint, baking the muffins, and above all else: re-arranging the furniture. I wonder if this is a distraction, or a healthy outlet for emotion. Or maybe it's an attempt to change the vibe in my home, the way I change it in my classroom.

*VERSE 2:*

I've heard people say  
to check in on your Black colleagues  
I haven't done this  
I don't know how to  
Yet

*CHORUS 2:*

Student writer Nick Speranza, Arts Section Editor for his high school's online news site The Radonorite, declared vibe to be the 2019 word-of-the-year. He wrote perhaps the best definition of vibe check that I could find: "A vibe check is a genuine expression of empathy, a joking threat that encourages your friends to be happy, and a bizarre internet joke all at once."

On the surface, a vibe check means, "Hey...what's up? What's going on?"

At a deeper level, however, it seems to be asking, "What are your struggles? Are you ok? How can I help?"

You can always vibe check a mother by asking about her children.  
Maybe that's a place I can start.

*BRIDGE:*

White socks  
Black shoes  
I bet her mama shined those shoes  
the night before, scrubbed  
her white socks and white blouse and white sweater

so clean  
the White children would have no reason to laugh  
Ruby was brave  
Her mama was braver  
Would I have done it?  
Allowed my child to be the bridge  
between past and future?

What words did she say to prepare her daughter  
before she watched her be marshaled  
away with four White men in suits and hats?

*When you walk into that school,  
you hold your head high,  
Ruby Girl, but remember  
to glance down when you come to those steps —  
'cause everyone will be waiting for you to stumble.  
And remember to breathe, ok?  
As long as you just keep breathin', you gon be alright.*

And she was.  
Ruby Bridges vibe checked them all.\*

### **VERSE 3:**

The classroom vibe is everything.

I create the vibe  
starting from the outside

Good Vibes  
don't happen by accident —  
You have to orchestrate  
them, which requires  
a magic wand  
three comfy chairs

some fairy lights  
a dozen mismatched yardsale bookshelves  
along all four walls  
(where you somehow know where every book  
is even though they are not in alphabetical order)

You even have to re-arrange the furniture  
to metaphorically reflect your unit genre:  
Poetry — a seated circle around a round rug  
Memoir — small groups for sharing  
Fiction — Ideal Reader pairs directly across from each other  
Informational — rows facing forward  
Literary Analysis — a return to the circle, teenagers now, ready for Socratic Seminar  
Argument — two opposing sides facing each other

My classroom isn't where I work,  
it's an extension of my Self,

This is what I am afraid of losing —  
*If my students cannot feel that classroom vibe,  
how will I be able to teach them?*

Because you see,  
the outer vibe creates the inner vibe.

More than one student has told me  
that the 90 minutes they spend in my class  
every other day  
is the only time they feel calm.

*How can I re-create that safe haven in a virtual world?*

Have we been liberated from fluorescent oppression,  
only to find ourselves in a blue light sleepless state?  
What have we lost?

What have we gained?

*CHORUS 3:*

We have been given an opportunity to re-think, re-question, and re-purpose ourselves as educators. We didn't give CMAS, and the world didn't end! We changed grading and teacher evaluation policies overnight in ways we never would have considered before! Inequities were made visible and impossible to ignore! Police have been voted out of our schools, curriculum is being re-imagined, and teachers are learning that we have a role to play in dismantling our very own system.

Now is the time to examine the questions that underlie the questions. The time to ask all the whys. The time to spout crazy ideas that maybe don't sound so crazy anymore.

Teachers need to bring up questions, yet again, about school funding structures and all the vestiges of history that leave our school system still, in so many places, separate but unequal. We need to ask why our teaching force is still predominantly White, and how can we support young people of color who want to become teachers? What is the real cost of our individual-achievement-at-all-costs system?

Ruby Bridges had to take a test to get into William Frantz Public School (a test designed, by the way, to keep her out) — and so we must ask: how and why is testing still being used to determine who gets to go where?

And maybe someday soon, Zoom will create a “seating chart” function that, when enabled, will allow me to continue re-arranging the “furniture” in my “classroom”. What if I could make circles, rows, and groups, out of those little square windows, in an attempt to re-create that seventh grade classroom vibe?

It's not a distraction, my need to re-arrange — it's an acknowledgement that my physical space creates my classroom vibe. When there is thoughtful structure and beauty on the outside, only then can I maintain my inner vibe, the one that allows me to show up, speak truth, be present every day with my kids.

# Ownership

**KATIE DIDONATO**



Katie DiDonato has been a middle school teacher in Colorado for 15 years. She completed her Principal's License with the University of Denver Ritchie Program and did one year as dean of students before returning to her true love -- the classroom. She lives in Broomfield, Colorado with her husband, two kids and two cats.

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It was a nice, new mechanical pencil. Mint green with an eraser top. A prized possession. A simple item. Lost and found on the floor.

I was knee-deep in other nonsense of the day, when the boys arrived in my dean's office -- both panting loudly, red-in-the-face, visibly shaken, battered and bruised.

One Black.

One white.

One privileged.

One not.

One honors.

One special education.

I came to find out it all started when the white boy found a cool pencil on the floor of his science class and scooped it up on his way out the door. The other boy ran him down in the hallway to ask for it back.

Later, the white boy's parents got an attorney who requested the next part on the hallway video in hopes of vindicating him and erasing the incident from his record. Unfortunately, the video shows him taunting the pencil owner -- arms

thrown wide in a gesture that even without sounds seems to say “what the fuck are you going to do about it?”

A sense of white bravado?

The attorney ended up not wanting the video evidence.

The pencil carrier never saw the pencil owner. He proceeded down the hall, past teachers on hall duty into an empty classroom and was promptly pummeled to the floor. Students reported fists flying, tables crashing, and teachers sprinting toward the noise.

I ended up getting a confession from the white boy that he fought back. I ended up in the inevitable conversation with his family that our district doesn't support fighting in any way -- even in self defense. Definitely at the top of my list of least favorite talks of the day.

Both boys were inches into sixth grade, barely eleven-years-old, and so they were ticketed by the police officer down the hall and assigned a day in court and Saturday classes with their guardians.

The white parents were in my office before I even had time to breathe. There were tears and threats and my calm voice trying to override it all just with facts. Two boys. One pencil. An issue of ownership.

The other mom, a single mom working two jobs, a Black mom, couldn't make it to school to pick up her son to start his suspension. He rode in the police cruiser to a police youth detention center where she could pick him up when she finally finished work. She came into my office the next day furious. “You're racist,” she said.

*Thinking back on the incident many years later, I reflect on all of it. I kept that pencil in my eyeline on my desk the rest of the year.*

Both boys received the same punishment. But subtleties were different.

The time I spent with the white family was exponentially longer. I remember kneeling by their son's side as he sat in the police officer's office. I spoke calmly to him as large tears streamed down his cheeks. I tried to tell him that he was a good kid who got wrapped up in a bad situation and this too would pass.

I don't remember any words of comfort to the other child or his mother. I do hope I said some. He continued to visit my office frequently -- even once throwing a chair at me.

I remember helping the white family's attorney. Looking up video. Listening.

I never asked the Black child's mother what she needed. How I could help.

This is really tough and embarrassing to admit. But necessary. Dredging out our own inner demons we find our own space for growth.

From the outside, this simple pencil snatching could look like an aggressive, bad kid beating up an innocent kid.

But I do remember a conversation with the pencil owner's mother where she explained the pencils were new, an added expense, and deemed special to the child.

From another lense you see a kid, just trying to get by, just get through the day, just appreciate the little of what he did have -- all while insurmountable problems piled up in his own life.

A kid who just wanted to keep his own damn pencil.

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### Ways to Tackle Your Own Implicit Bias

According to the [American Psychological Association](#), "research shows that compared with white students, black students are more likely to be suspended or expelled, less likely to be placed in gifted programs and subject to lower expectations from their teachers." Black K-12 students are 3.8 times as likely as

their white peers to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions, according to the APA. This has led to the so-called “pipeline-to-prison” because black students are then more likely to drop out of school, have run-ins with the law and end up in the juvenile detention system.

Implicit bias in our unconscious stereotyping of students. Our unintentional discrimination. Jill Suttit, of Greater Good Magazine, offers these tips:

Teachers can first become aware of their biases.

We can work to create empathy in our classrooms.

We can practice mindfulness and loving kindness.

What would happen if we notice when we sit four Black students at the back of the class? What would happen if we spent five minutes just settling our minds and sending good will to others? What would happen if our students spoke and shared more? What would happen if our students started to understand where each and every other child in the classroom was coming from - the invisible baggage they were carting with them that particular day?

The first step is analyzing ourselves and making a plan to do better.

# Say Its Name: Five Points

COURTNEY NICHOLSON-PAINE



Courtney Nicholson-Paine grew up in Colorado. She is currently a high school English teacher and photographer based in Boulder. More of her photos of Five Points and other parts of Colorado are available at <http://www.thewildernessgems.com/personalshots>

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As I read the stories of the vibrant Five Points community that was once a hub of Black culture in Denver, I can't help but think about an interview I once watched with Malcom X. His panel of "interviewers" interrogate him rudely about the X in his name. I'm sure he's angry, but he takes a deep breath and leans in towards the microphone. Calmly, coolly, he replies, "During slavery, the same slave master who owned us put his last name on us to denote that we were his property. So when you see a negro today who's named Johnson, if you go back in his history you will find that his grandfather, or one of his forefathers, was owned by a white man who was named Johnson. If his name was Bunch, his grandfather was owned by a white man that was named Bunch." He goes on to explain that he took "X" for a last name because the name he was given at birth was nothing more than a slave name that had been passed down in his family to carry the history of a white oppressor.

We did this same thing to countless neighborhoods. Hell, we did it to countries, to continents even. When we say that Columbus "discovered" America, we pretend that it didn't exist until he arrived, when in reality, people, communities, traditions, and cultures were thriving there long before Columbus ever showed up.

In 2017, urged by real estate developers to put a pretty new spin on an "up and coming" neighborhood, the City of Denver renamed part of the Five Points

neighborhood the “River North Arts District”, better known to hipsters and recent Denver transplants as “RiNo”. The problem is, this isn’t a new neighborhood. And it isn’t “up and coming”; it has been a cultural hub and “arts district” long before cities and urban planners ever even used that kind of language.

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Named for the star-shaped intersection where 26th Avenue, 27th Street, Washington Street, and Welton Street meet, Five Points was the original name for the streetcar stop at this intersection.

In 2002 Five Points was designated as a cultural historic district in recognition of its important role in African- American history. Between 1916 and 1970 over 6 million African Americans left the rural southern states in search of better lives for themselves and their families, often settling in urban communities in the West. Many people of color came to Denver during this time and as a result of Redlining (a discriminatory housing law which excluded people of color from getting loans for houses in specific neighborhoods) Five Points became a home for communities of color.

From the 1920s to the 1950s the community of Five Points thrived. During this time Five Points was known as the “Harlem of the West” because of its spirited community and arts culture. Denver’s jazz scene was booming. Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Count Basie, Nat King Cole, and Billie Holiday were frequent performers in Denver clubs and swanky hotel bars. During this time, however, Black performers were forbidden from staying in the very hotels and venues that profited from their fame. The Rossonian Hotel was built in 1912 and served as a homebase for traveling artists and the people of color who helped build Denver’s jazz scene. The Denver Architecture Foundation writes, “Between the 1920s to the 1950s, the Rossonian Hotel was an integral institution in Five Points. The first-floor Rossonian Lounge became the most important jazz club between Kansas City and Los Angeles. Top performers who passed through Denver often played there on off nights between concerts at larger venues downtown or late at night, after they had finished performing at other clubs and returned to the hotel.” The Rossonian, situated right at the Five Points intersection for which the neighborhood is named, played a vital role in supporting and protecting the arts and culture of this community.



*The Rossonian Hotel located on the streetcar line of the five-pointed corner that gives the neighborhood its name. The building has been empty for years but there are new high-rise condos being built next door. Currently, the Five Points Development Corporation is in a partnership with Palisade Partners and Craine Architecture to restore the historic hotel to its original uses. Photos by Courtney Nicholson-Paine*



Another historically significant location in Five Points is Denver Fire Station #3. Station #3 opened on March 13, 1892 and was the first Denver firehouse staffed with all Black firefighters. Having an all Black crew was a first for Denver, and a source of great pride for the people of Five Points, but the crew was still under the command of a white fire captain. Denver Architecture Foundation notes that, “They were consistently given the oldest equipment D.F.D. had and when their engine collided with another during an emergency, killing two senior members of Station No. 3 and critically injuring 3 others, the old faulty equipment was quickly identified as the cause”. Despite many untimely deaths and setbacks due to failing equipment, they continued to serve their community and remained an all Black crew until the Denver Fire Department finally began racial integration and desegregated the station in 1957. The station has earned historic landmark status and still operates to this day, although it has the tightest fit for an engine of any firehouse in the city with only about 3 inches of clearance for each mirror.



*Historic Fire Station #3 next to a newly gentrified apartment building. Photo by Courtney Nicholson-Paine*

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In June of 2020, Shannon Martin started a [Change.org petition](#) to have the City of Denver legally change the name of the new “RiNo” neighborhood back to its original name of Five Points. The petition has accrued over 8,000 signatures. Martin writes: “In the rise of a tense political climate, we have seen nationwide news of protests, neighborhood renaming, and statue removal in an effort to advance the diversity and inclusion of the world as well as minimize the glorification of racist history.” She argues that we should do the same in our own community.

“It is enough that the neighborhood [of Five Points] has been gentrified beyond belief, but further, the name change to “RiNo District” is simply unacceptable in an effort to erase our history and culture,” she writes. Martin is mad. And we should be too.

I've heard the argument that "RiNo" is its own neighborhood separate from Five Points and that's simply not true. The neighborhood of Five Points is large and is denoted on city maps as being bordered by the South Platte River to the northwest, Thirty-Eighth Street to the north, Downing Street to the east, Park Avenue and East Twentieth Avenue to the south, and Twentieth Street to the southwest.

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In 2017 Denver native Gabrielle Bryant wrote a beautiful opinion piece for Denverite Magazine entitled, "RiNo?" "Five Points?" Why a new name hurts in a storied neighborhood. In her article she interviews several locals about their experiences growing up living and working in Five Points. Here is an excerpt from her article where Bryant asks Asia Dorsey about the significance of changing the name.

"What does RiNo signify to you?" Without hesitation, [Dorsey's] first response was "violence." She went on to liken the name change to the traditional European colonial process, citing that the "first thing you do when you move into a place is rename it." [Bryant] then asked, "Well, isn't it just a name?" Adamantly [Dorsey] replied, "It's not just a name, it's the erasure of what was there before."

Brian Mathenge was the owner of Cold Crush, a local nightclub in Five Points. Cold Crush's tagline was simply, "music, food, art" and Mathenge made sure his business fulfilled their promises, investing heavily in local artists and musicians. They were known for their creative murals on the side of the club's brick facade, almost always created by local artists and people of color. Cold Crush was permanently closed a few years back and the previous nightclub's building now houses a hipster "dive bar themed" cocktail lounge.

In the same 2017 interview with Gabrielle Bryant, Mathenge admits that he feels heartbroken that an area where Black people have lived for generations has now been gentrified to a point that they can no longer afford to live in the community that they helped to build. He points out that those that stay have been made to feel unwelcome, like this is no longer a place for them. Again, Bryant argues that replacing the historic Five Points name with RiNo is "a complete removal of the culture that is fighting to remain relevant."

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I think again about what Malcolm X said about the value of names. He was greatly concerned with, and vocal about, the importance of not carrying a name forced upon him by an oppressor. It's painful to admit that we ever did this to people and that we continue to do the very same thing to important places.

We gave this integral Denver neighborhood a slave name. We called it "RiNo". We disregarded its history previous to when we "discovered" it and bestowed on it a name that we chose. We treated this historically important place as if it would only truly begin to exist, would only really begin to matter, after we showed up to witness it and to mold it into what we wanted it to be.

Five Points had a history, and it had a name, long before we arrived to colonize this place. As white people we have a long history of arriving and giving names to things and people that do not belong to us. We should stop stepping in and naming things, when what we really need to do is step back and listen.

# The Girl

**DR. MEREDITH COLLINS**



Meredith Collins is an 8th grade teacher and coach who has a passion for the written word. She has written articles for Statement, Women Forbes, Yahoo Voices, and Glass Heel. She's a regular at several local Starbucks locations, adores her dogs, and finds no greater joy than being with her family.

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*There was this girl--small in stature, yet outgoing and a bit on the wild side. She entered the classroom being the new kid once again. The teacher made her stand up in front of the class, as she butchered the girl's name on the chalkboard. The spelling wasn't even close. Blue eyes stared back at her brown ones, and she glared at anyone who dared to make eye contact. She always made friends quickly, knowing it was necessary to get through her time at this place--the Hell Hole she called it, but in private and away from her mother's ears. She was studious, talkative, and never missed the free meals that were given to her. Always embarrassed that her tickets were green and not blue, always ready for battle with anyone who provoked. She was an athlete, a problem child, a smart ass, and the class clown. And one day, in one of the nine schools she attended, a teacher saw through it.*

As I entered the classroom for my 18th year, the silence around me was quite deafening. The excitement of teachers, veteran and newbies, was nowhere to be heard. The halls were darkened. My face covered. The usual "Welcome Back" and designed to be inspirational speech to be delivered by our administration was put off to the side, instead I'd be logging into MS Teams—a place where islands could go unseen. Unheard, if one wasn't careful.

Teaching would look different this year. The tightness in my chest was already beginning to form. I learned how to code on an Apple II—in 1985, for goodness

sake. I was not a tech wizard. My yearly professional goal always centered around technology—the one place I never quite felt at home. And yet, here I was. On the brink of newness, unsteady and unsure.

\* \* \* \* \*

*There was this girl, who always felt like the black sheep of her family. She was never pretty enough or ladylike enough or clean enough. She was too much of a tomboy and a slob and unable to see the value of make-up. Her stomach always stuck out a little too far and her room was always a mess and her face was always filled with pimples (so gross). When she went to school, she could reinvent herself. She didn't have to be the victim. She didn't have to be the outcast. She could be whomever she wanted. And if things didn't work out in her favor, no worries! The odds were she'd be moving onto another school anyway and she could start again.*

The first week back was long and arduous. What happened to the feelings of being connected, of being a part of something great? Isolation for teachers is a real problem, and suddenly it began to consume me. My classroom became a place of solitude, of loneliness. I was instructed to make it “COVID” safe. For the first time the tables were in neat perfect rows, lined up like soldiers ready for battle. All the frames filled with pictures of my family were put away. The bookcases that housed a mini-library, so my students never went without, were covered. It felt sterile. It felt barren. It felt like anything but what it should.

I took every course the district offered on Schoology (our online platform students use). Suddenly I was thrust into being a first year teacher again. I became invigorated—it was renewing! The anxiety was kept at bay and the learner in me took flight. My days spent with Big Bertha (the nickname of our copier) became infrequent. I wrote my password down, lest I forget. My new goal was to have a paperless classroom—something a few weeks prior I would've never dreamt of having, nonetheless creating on my own.

\* \* \* \* \*

*There was this girl, who wasn't afraid to talk back or talk out or talk up. She thrived on those teachers who wanted her to like them. The power it gave her was almost overwhelming. Easy target for her, for sure. She kept track of every grade, from every class, doing the math herself at the end of every semester--*

*ready to confront any teacher whose math wasn't as precise as her. And she had to do this on more than one occasion. Being meticulous was important, at least it was to her. She expected teachers to know their stuff, to challenge her learning and her thinking, but found very few did. This was a bit disappointing, made her bored, which in turn gave her lots of time to focus her energy on ways to annoy her classmates, her teachers, and herself. She completed every assignment. She was in advanced classes. She was a part of the National Honors Society--they came looking for her, as she didn't even know they existed.*

Our district would start in-person, with the goal of staying that way as long as we could. There would be no grand entrance for the 6th graders—no 8th grade WEB leaders to show them around. All sports were cancelled this year. I hung up my coaching whistle for the first time. While everything around me seemed to be changing and not for the better, I knew my teaching game would have to be at its all-time best. Teaching is so much more than the content knowledge one has, or the experience, or the degrees hung up on the wall. For the first time in 18 long years of teaching, I had to figure out how I was going to create an atmosphere of camaraderie in this unfruitful, non-collaborative room.

And that's when I dug deep, remembering that little girl who went to nine different schools in 13 years. How did I connect? Who made me want to come to school every day and what were the things that made me want to crawl back into bed and feign sickness? Teaching is remembering who you were as a kid. It's empathizing with situations other than just your own. It's seeing beyond the books, beyond the grades, beyond some test that decides the haves from the have-nots.

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*There was this girl, who had four standout teachers in nine different schools in thirteen years of education. Six schools from K-8 and three different high schools. The first one was in 7th grade. He cared about the girl. When he saw the class struggling, he would put the lesson on hold. He would talk to the kids about what they were going through—and tackle those taboo topics like suicide. He would call the girl on her silliness and lack of focus. He was strict and kind at the same time. She respected him.*

*The second and third ones were both in her Junior year of high school. Her English teacher saw the girl had mad potential and decided to do an independent study with her. She fed the girl books and the girl hungrily ate*

*them up. She read Maya Angelou, Sandra Cisneros, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Kate Chopin, Shakespeare, and more. She was able to see her life in others, and realized circumstance did not have to dictate whom she was to become. She won the Holy Cross Book Award that year, something ordinarily won by Seniors. The third was her history teacher and also her basketball coach. He drove her and her teammates home after practice every night because their neighborhood was wicked bad. He bought her letter jacket so she wouldn't stand out as the poor girl. He cared about her--beyond what her ability in the classroom and on the court was. He never made her feel less than and she appreciated that.*

*The fourth was her Spanish teacher, who noticed her struggling during her Senior year. He spent hours after school tutoring her, making sure she'd pass the only class that was on the line. Each of these standout educators gave the girl something that went beyond a job description, beyond their paycheck, beyond an expectation.*

As I write this piece, I'm in quarantine after being exposed to COVID. While I've tested negative, I still have to follow the district's protocol and stay away. I wish I could say I figured everything out and this school year is going amazingly well. I wish I could say how students are loving the online environment, making masks the new fashion trend, and are enjoying the social distancing measures that are in place. I wish I could tell you how much I love cleaning all the desks in-between classes, how I'm miraculously able to teach my curriculum in two days, how my little 8th graders are becoming these responsible, independent learners who get everything accomplished on their remote days. Oh, but I digress.

What I can tell you is that I'm different. I appreciate every second I'm with my students, in a way that is difficult to put into words. I miss them tremendously when I'm not there and miss them when they're on their remote days. I simply miss them. Teaching is more than an action, it's a feeling. It's putting your passion for your content, whatever your area of expertise may be, and setting it on fire. It's something you can't leave in the workplace. It's frustrating. It's ever changing. It's the kids who grab your heart and stay there. It's worrying. It's emotional. It's remembering that little kid that you once were. *It's the best job in the world.*

2020

DEB BASS O'BRIEN



Deb Bass O'Brien teaches middle school English and Social Studies in Central Colorado at a project-based school. She values getting books in students' hands and making writing a less scary endeavor. She wakes up early to read and do yoga most mornings.

Healthy Teacher

Healthy, White Teacher

White Teacher

*Prologue*

My head spins. There is so much information new to me about

COVID.

Black Lives Matter.

It swirls together with

Black Lives Matter.

COVID.

Connected or separate. Are they different or the same issues we are facing?

Twisted together like a vanilla and chocolate ice cream cone.

*Conversation I*

How should we

reopen schools so everyone feels comfortable?

work through discomfort of our racial thoughts?

Teachers and Staff.  
Students and Parents.

Black. Indigenous. People of Color. White.

Is there a right way?

I can't get this right,  
and I won't.  
I hope my students can.

***Conversation II***

How will I approach

my curriculum?

educating my students?

What will my curriculum be?

Write a lesson plan.

Write a blog post.

Do we have enough money for books?

Do I have the right books?

How do I teach

in-person and online simultaneously?

to students whose families don't agree?  
How do I start the conversation?

I build trust.

***Conversation III***

Protecting myself and others.

Do I have

my mask?

A big enough shield?

What about my students' emotional well-  
being?

Do they have

adequate support?

the right support?

I can only bear so much.

Tired.

It's worth it.

If not me, then whom?

How can I expect others to continue to do the  
work with me?

I am all in.

Sick

or

tired.

# It's Personal

**ALICE L. SMITH**



Alice L. Smith has been teaching English at Northglenn High School for 17 years. Some of her professional affiliations include the Adams 12 STEM Advisory team, Denver Writing Project, Colorado Language Arts Society, and the National Council of Teachers of English. In a variety of capacities Alice has designed and facilitated professional development for teachers in the areas of reading and writing instruction as well as STEM education. Prior to becoming an educator, she worked in the marketing field for a civil engineering firm and a healthcare company, and she still draws upon that experience when designing educational opportunities for her students.

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It's March 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic sends us out of our classrooms and into isolation. At first, we thought it would be an extended Spring Break. Before we left, I adjusted my reading schedule for the sophomores and made copies. I picked up my purse and locked my classroom and thought, In two weeks I'll be well-rested and ready to roll with the punches. I closed my classroom door and left 17 years' worth of teaching memories tucked safely within.

*One of my students blows a kiss to her friend from across the room. A boy named Zach intercepts the invisible kiss, pretends to catch it, and spikes it in the "endzone" that is between my desk and filing cabinet.*

But we never came back. At least, not that semester. The whole world was in a state of panic - each of us trying to function in our own respective spaces. Those of us in education were trying to figure out how to teach through a computer. Our school administrators deployed laptops to thousands of students. Our cafeteria crew set up a drive-through food service for families in need.

*I'm standing at the whiteboards reviewing the agenda when a girl in the front row slides a note across her desk that reads "I need to talk to you." Once everyone starts working, I open the note and see the words, "I'm pregnant and I don't know what to do."*

I hastily tried to check in with every student. Most of them replied to my emails. Some of them I reached via phone. And a few of them just disappeared. It didn't take long to realize this wasn't teaching. It was triage. We were handing out curriculum in the same way we were handing out food.

*At some point during a conversation with a group of students I reveal my age. "Really?" one of them remarks, "I thought you were more like 25." I tell her I'm flattered. Another student pipes up, "I thought she was 20!" I touch my hand to my chest and tell him he's too sweet. Then another student - exasperated - yells out, "OK, if that's what we're playing, then I think she looks like a three-month-old baby!"*

I had already been working with these students for more than a semester, so I could hear their voices in my head when I read their emails, but it was kind of impersonal. I posted work on Google Classroom and scored whatever came in. Per the instructions I received from my principal, I did not penalize them for missing or incomplete work. All I had to do was take their virtual pulse.

*We're writing memoirs and Joaquin is struggling. He's trying to retrieve a memory about a teacher who humiliated him by making him stand up in front of his third-grade class. After a lot of digging, we discover that Joaquin can't remember why he was standing in front of the class because he didn't understand any English at the time.*

When students asked for help during remote learning, I answered them as best I could, and they seemed to move forward. Some students refused to read or write and their parents took their phones away until they at least read the Sparknotes. Many went to work full time - Walmart, McDonalds, construction. After a while it seemed that many of my juniors and seniors didn't have time for school anymore.

*Students are chatting while they collect evidence for their literary analysis essays. Out of the blue one of them says, "Did you know that every time you masturbate God kills a kitten?" Without missing a beat her classmate replies, "Good thing I'm a dog person."*

I was never a teacher who lectured in person, but during remote learning I recorded daily lessons using Loom. I projected the text on the screen and I pretended that we were going through it together. My face appeared in a small bubble on the bottom left while I spoke into a void.

*I'm arguing with Alejandro because he won't do his assignment. I'm trying my early career "tough love" approach and it's not working. He blows up at me and shouts, "You think anyone without a high school diploma is worthless!" and he storms out of the room.*

The school asked us to set up office hours - times when we would be available to answer students' questions immediately over email. I got the occasional question after midnight, but never during office hours. After a while, I just placed the laptop next to me while I watched TV or napped in my "office" on the couch.

*It's the start of our U.S. Seminal Documents unit and I'm standing in front of the class wearing an Abraham Lincoln top hat and beard. A student raises her hand and asks, "Miss, why do you have to be so extra?"*

It was business as usual when it came to staff meetings and committee meetings and IEP meetings. Our principal talked while a bunch of teachers stared at each other on Zoom or Google Meet, and we hid our images while we ate bagels and scrambled eggs.

*While I'm helping him with his college application essay, Oliver starts crying. He has never talked to his mother about his father's suicide, and he wants answers. We agree he's old enough to ask. Later that night she tells him, "I don't know why he did it. But I know that he loved you very much."*

May 11, 2020 was my 44th birthday. I stood in the school parking lot in the rain for our socially distanced graduation ceremony. All the teachers were wearing masks. Spaced out with umbrellas over our heads, we held signs that read "Honk for Seniors." Students drove through the parking lot with their families and waved from their cars while we cheered and cried and cheered and cried.

I'm at my desk writing this during summer break, and teachers everywhere are stuck in a holding pattern while the higher ups weigh big decisions and consequences. Do we continue teaching online in the fall? Will we go back to in-person instruction? If so, what will it look like?

I know there are people who regularly teach online and their work has merit. But for me, whenever I have a choice (and when it's safe), teaching will always be an in-person job. Despite my best efforts, I wasn't teaching during the pandemic. I was just playing school. Teaching is nurturing. Teaching is connecting. Teaching is love, and patience, and rage, and despondency and triumph. It's simultaneously clawing at the rocks and reaching the summit.

Teaching is personal.

# You Don't Remember

SIERRA GILBERTSON



Sierra Gilbertson teaches English at Fosston High School, a rural school in northwestern Minnesota. In addition to teaching, she currently serves as Past President and Assistant Executive Secretary of the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English. Sierra holds a master's degree in Literacy Education from Hamline University, where she studied the impact of critical literacy methods on the moral reasoning of adolescents for her capstone project. Arts integration and thinking routines are two other areas of interest that have made a significant impact on Sierra and her students.

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You don't remember the way you gripped the bar of a motorcycle's sidehack the day of a big race, bouncing and shifting your weight as your brother drove you around the rugged track, the California sun beating down on you, liquid courage running through your veins, a moment captured on the cover of *American Motorcyclist*.

You don't remember the way your cats, Fat Albert and Fishface, watched you work on your Harley, or the way you comforted them in their last moments. They lived a good life.

You don't remember the way Santana enraptured you with his smooth, faultless strumming. When he came on the radio, time stopped for you. Now it does for me, Uncle.

You don't remember the way you made us laugh on camping trips when your brilliant idea of drying socks over the fire resulted in a pile of ash, or the way you scared us with ghost stories about Old Man Johnson who drowned in the lake we camped by.

You don't remember the way you taught me to savor tranquility. Those lessons brought about in the unmatched peace of fishing trips on Lake Bemidji on a cloudy, but not too cloudy, summer day. I'd toss you a sandwich, Uncle, and you'd toss me chips. The fish wouldn't bite much. But who cares? That's not what fishing is really about, anyway.

You don't remember your service in Korea. How a judge made you choose to enlist in the Marines or go to jail. How your father chose for you. How your sergeant made you all look at the soldier who hung himself in boot camp. How you couldn't attend your mother's funeral. How despite all the bad, you thought military service should be a requirement because it taught you how to be a man.

You don't remember the way you would travel across Minnesota to train your fellow police officers about gangs. Growing up in L.A., you were pressured to join one, but you resisted with the strength of will of your abuela, who left her home to pursue a better life in America. She would be proud. Your experiences made communities safer.

You don't remember your struggle with faith. You were certain that your sins would be too much for God to forgive and you hadn't been to confession since your mother made you. On the day of my brother's funeral, going into the church, you muttered that it was going to set fire when you stepped in it. But God forgives. God is gracious. You are saved.

You don't remember Betty Jean, the love of your life, your wife of 34 years and counting, the one who took you to the doctor to hear the news that you dreaded: Your memories were disappearing and not coming back.

You don't remember, and it hurts. I've seen it: your hands balled into fists, bases of palms pressing into your furrowed brow, eyes scrunched tight, mind trying to grasp something that you know should be there but isn't.

Maybe deep down there is something that remembers still. As my children play Christmas carols for you at the nursing home, some of your fellow residents sing along. But my attention is on you. We stare into each other's eyes. There's a flicker of recognition, my name at the tip of your tongue. As I leave, I say, "Merry Christmas, Normie." It happens so quick, I almost second guess it: You wink at me in return. A wink that I'll cherish forever. You don't remember, but we will.

# Young Adult Literature

# How Do We Get Our Students Reading While Learning from Home?

**SHEILA KAEHNY & KAREN HARTMAN**



Sheila Kaehny is the literacy coach at Westlake Middle School, a teacher/consultant for the Colorado Writing Project and a lover of YAL.

Karen Hartman is the director of the Colorado Writing Project and shares Sheila's love for YAL.

It seems to us that book clubs or choice books are the way to get kids reading in the time of COVID. We have gone through our old lists and picked out books for middle and high school kids that we think are engaging and will motivate them to read. We've chosen books that can be bought in paperback. How to make sure your students have books available to them is another issue, and one we will address at the end of our book list. If you want further titles, go to [coloradowritingproject.org](http://coloradowritingproject.org) under resources, and you will find our past lists.

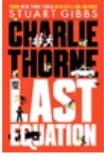
## Books for High School or Middle School Students



**De La Pena, Matt. *Superman: Dawnbreaker*. New York: Random House, 2019.**

This is one of four novels written about superhero icons by four well-known authors. De La Pena takes on the story of a high school aged Clark Kent who is just discovering how to control and use his powers. Clark and his best friend, Lana Lang, realize something evil has infiltrated their town. While investigating the incidents in town, Clark's superpowers begin to strengthen. As he works at controlling his powers, he and Lana take great risks to find the evil lurking in their small town.

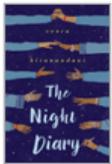
**Notes:** I think boys and girls from grades 7-12 who are into superheroes will love this book. Of course, there are Clark's superpowers, but there are also topics of immigration, the use of science for criminal activity, friendship, first love, and family.



**Gibbs, Stuart. *Charlie Thorne and the Last Equation*. New York: Simon & Shuster, 2019.**

Charlie is a 12-year-old girl with an IQ off the charts. The CIA is on the hunt for an equation Albert Einstein developed decades ago and then hid it because it could destroy the world if it gets into the wrong hands. The CIA thinks she can help them find the equation before a group of terrorists discovers it and uses it for evil. There is murder, mayhem, and a wild chase to discover the equation. This is an exciting adventure and so well-written.

**Notes:** A book for grades 7-12. I had to read it from cover to cover in one sitting. I love the character—a bright, smart mouthed young girl who discovers herself as she sets out on a very dangerous mission against her will. The author looks at family relationships, immigration, terrorism, science used for good and evil, and self-awareness.



**Hiranandani, Veera. *The Night Diary*. March 2018, 272 pages.**

Nisha is a painfully shy twelve year old girl whose life is torn apart by the 1947 Partition of India. Nisha's mom, who died in childbirth, was Muslim, while her father is Hindu. This mixed ethnicity means Nisha and her twin brother are no longer safe, and they must travel across the border to the new India. Nisha processes and chronicles the journey through letters she writes to her mother, expressing thoughts she feels unable to share out loud. Nisha's journal becomes the companion she needs to survive this incredible upheaval in her life and to find her voice.

**Notes:** This is a book for upper ES/MS girls, fans of historical fiction and survival stories, told in letters and inspired by the author's father's experiences during the Partition. Topics of refugees, transformation, includes a glossary of historical references; a great model of finding one's voice. An important book - informative, good flow, strong characters, letters compelling - good for book groups



**Levy, Dana Alison. *It Wasn't Me*. November 2018, 336 pages.**

This is the story of Theo, an introverted seventh grader whose photography project is vandalized after a school art show. There are five suspects and none will confess, so the principal wants to just suspend them all in order to close the case. But Theo's favorite teacher, Ms. Lewiston, has another idea: bring all of the students in over spring break for a Justice Circle, a restorative practice designed to right the wrong...and the kicker is that she wants Theo to be a part of it.

**Notes:** This is a book for MS girls and guys, who are fans of teen drama and realistic fiction. Topics of restorative practices, vandalism, stereotypes, sports, victim, mental health, sarcasm, masks, gay slurs. The novel is intense, good character development, model of the idea of a justice circle - good for discussion groups.



**Lu, Marie. *Warcross*. G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers, 2017. 368 pages.**

Emika Chen is broke and about to be evicted, barely making money as a bounty hunter for the fantasy game Warcross. Thinking she can earn some cash as a hacker, Emika exploits a glitch in the internationally hyped opening ceremonies of this year's Warcross Games and ends up exposing her identity to the world. The billionaire creator of the Games inserts her as a Wild Card into the Games. Emika is forced to learn how to work with the other competitors while also on the hunt for Zero, a mysterious figure from the dark world. As things heat up, Emika begins to question who the bad guy really is in this game.

**Notes:** This is a book for middle school and high school guys and girls who are fans of tech fantasy worlds, video games, adventure, suspense. It is a compelling, fast paced, a techy *Hunger Games* and a contemporary *Ready Player One* put together. Subjects of hacking, virtual reality, world building, bounty hunting, survival, poverty, sabotage, fame and fortune.



**Schmidt, Gary D. *Orbiting Jupiter*. New York: Clarion Books, 2015.**

Joseph, 14, comes to live with twelve-year-old Jack's family as a foster child. Jack, 12, tells Joseph's story—a story of abuse and heartbreak. When Joseph comes to Jack's home, he doesn't trust anyone and he is crushed that he is kept away from his girlfriend and their baby, but Joseph soon learns Jack has his back. And he soon realizes Jack's parents also care for him and support him. But he can't seem to escape his abusive father.

**Notes:** This is a middle school book but will certainly be enjoyed by older students. Themes of family, friendship, trust, child abuse, teenage fathers, foster care, death, and grieving.

## Books for High School School Students



**Cohn, Rachel. *BETA*. New York: Hyperion, 2012.**

Elysia is a clone, created in a lab, and made in the image of a teenage girl who died. She is an experiment—one of the first teenage clones born at 16 years of age with no feelings or memories—she is soulless. She is made to serve the people of Demesne, an island programmed for perfection where only the very rich live. The governor's wife buys her for a companion to replace the daughter who has left for college. It is here that she begins to discover she is not what her makers expected. She does have vague memories, and she does have feelings—feelings that confuse her and that will cause her great danger. She also begins to realize some of the worker clones are unhappy with their plight; they too have feelings. Elysia realizes she must hide her feelings or she will be eliminated, but, when she falls in love, hiding what she feels becomes more difficult. When her “defect” is discovered, she must run for her life.

**Notes:** Choice book for girls who like Sci-Fi. Themes of family, cloning, betrayal, love. You can buy this on Amazon, used.



**Chao, Gloria. *American Panda*. February 2018, 311 pages.**

Mei is a sweet, clumsy, naive, and funny seventeen year old Asian American prodigy starting her freshman year at MIT, and now she is living in a dorm with an outrageous roommate who hates her. According to the plan her parents have for her, Mei is going to go from college to medical school and then she will marry a Taiwanese boy and have babies (especially a boy), thus validating all of the sacrifices her parents have made for her. But Mei is grossed out by germs, and she also has a crush on Darren, a boy who definitely is not Taiwanese. Afraid to tell her mom, Mei sneaks around and as her guilt grows, so does her independence.

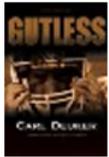
**Notes:** This is a book for upper MS/HS girls and teens facing pressure from parents plus for fans of romance. Subjects of coming of age, overbearing parents, mother/daughter stories, culture, self-discovery, dreams, identity



**Currinder, Michael.** *Running Full Tilt.* Waterton, MA: Charlesbridge, 2017.

Leo Coughlin's older brother is autistic and has cognitive delays. When Caleb starts getting more and more agitated, he begins to attack Leo, going for his eyes and pounding his head and body. To escape the beatings, Leo begins running, taking off and running until he and Caleb both settle down. His running becomes a necessity and a passion; he joins his school's track and cross-country teams and becomes better and better. Caleb asks to run with him, and he too becomes a runner, doing well in the Special Olympics. He still attacks Leo every day; Leo struggles to protect himself and to understand his brother. An unexpected ending will surprise readers.

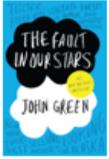
**Notes:** Athletes, both boys and girls, will love this book. The author was a competitive runner and the running scenes are well written. But there is so much more than the running that makes this book well worth the read. Subjects: autism, siblings, loss, relationships, friendship, track and cross-country, and training



**Deuker, Carl.** *Gutless.* New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2016.

Brock plays goalie for his high school soccer team; he's good but is afraid of getting hurt—not a good quality in a goalie and even worse for a football player. When Brock goes out for football, he's still afraid of mixing it up—of getting hit or tackling someone else. His fear spills over into much more than sports. He doesn't stand up to the football players who bully his best friend until they go too far, and Brock finally finds his courage. A mixture of sports and the difficulties of navigating high school will engage young male readers.

**Notes:** High school boys will want to read this new Deuker novel. His mixture of sports and the difficulties of high school will engage young male readers. Themes of bullying, friendship, sports culture, family, illness.



**Green, John.** *The Fault in Our Stars.* New York: Dutton Books, 2012.

Hazel, begins her story with—“Late in the winter of my seventeenth year my mother decided I was depressed, presumably because I rarely left the house, spent quite a lot of time in bed, read the same book over and over, ate infrequently, and devoted quite a bit of my abundant free time t thinking about death.” Hazel’s mom and her doctor insist she attend a therapy group with other teens with cancer. Here she meets Augustus Waters, a young man who has lost a leg to osterosarcoma. The two connect immediately, but Hazel is hesitant to get too involved. Gus has already lost one girlfriend to cancer; she doesn’t want to put him through the loss of another. The two of them find joy in their friendship and fall in love, something neither of them thought they would find at this point in their lives.

**Notes:** Grades 9-12. Wonderful characters and important themes of death and life.



**Hiaasen, Carl.** *Skink No Surrender.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014.

Richard is worried about his cousin, Malley. When she sends him a text saying she’s off to an early orientation at the boarding school she doesn’t want to attend, he knows she’s lying. When he discovers she’s left with an older guy she met online, he knows his 14-year-old cousin is in trouble. Richard takes off with Skink who offers to help find Malley. Skink is a raggedy, older man with one eye, who says he’s a former governor of Florida. Richard googles him to discover Skink is telling the truth. Not only was he governor at one time, but he’s supposedly dead. The two take off in search of Malley and to bring her captor to justice. Their journey is filled with danger and Richard soon learns he’s in over his head.

**Notes:** A choice book for students grades 8-12. Topics of kidnapping, friendship, and the environment.



**McCormick, Patricia. *Never Fall Down*. New York: HarperCollins, 2012.**

McCormick's novel is based on the true story of Arn Chorn-Pond who survived the Khmer Rouge to become a man who works for humanitarian causes around the world. This is a tough but important read. Arn's family is separated when soldiers force the villagers to leave. The soldiers march the villagers long distances with little to eat, killing those who fall to the wayside. Arn is eventually assigned to a labor camp and works in the fields long hours, watching other children die from malaria and starvation or led away to be murdered. He learns he must make himself useful to the regime and make himself as invisible as possible. He is eventually pulled into battle and The Killing Fields—given a gun and forced to fight. Arn eventually escapes and meets an American in a refuge camp. He is given the opportunity to go to America and study. His American guardian tells him he is the chosen one, and he says, "You are the one who will tell everyone what happened in Cambodia."

**Notes:** Grades 8-12. It's a tough read and should be read by the instructor before making the decision to teach it. Themes: the horrors of war, survival, courage, man's inhumanity to man



**McManus, Karen M. *One of Us is Lying*. New York: Delacorte Press, 2017.**

Five students report to detention after school and only four leave alive. Simon is an outcast, always on the outside looking in. He developed an app that dishes up ugly rumors about other students. He dies during detention and the police believe one of the other four students murdered Simon. The reader eventually discovers the secrets Simon knew about each of the others and why they might consider murder to keep their secrets from the student body. Who killed Simon?

**Notes:** High school boys and girls will enjoy this book. Subjects of murder, coming out, secrets, cheating, abuse, rumors, criminal behavior, outsiders



**Moore, Wes and Goodman, Shawn. *This Way Home*. New York: Delacorte Press, 2015.**

Elijah Thomas lives with his mother in a tough neighborhood in Baltimore, a neighborhood known for its gangs. Elijah hopes basketball is his way out. He's good and he and his two best friends, Michael and Dylan, play year-round, entering and hoping to win a summer tournament. But Michael changes all of their lives when he accepts new shoes and jerseys with the logo of a vicious street gang.

**Notes:** For high school boys who love basketball mixed with the influences of gangs in a neighborhood. Themes of honor, violence, gang influence, choices, trust.



**Sitcomer, Alan. *Caged Warrior*. Los Angeles: Hyperion, 2014.**

McCutcheon Daniels' is an up and coming star in the underground Mixed Martial Arts world in Detroit. His father, an abusive and violent man, is his manager. McCutcheon fights to keep his father happy and to protect and care for his younger sister. The fight scenes are graphic and violent—the fighters are out to win no matter what the cost to their opponents. When McCutcheon begins to realize there is another world out there, his father hides his sister from him. His science teacher helps him find his sister and the reader hopes for a better life for the two of them.

**Notes:** This is a choice novel that will be popular with high school boys and maybe some of the girls. The fight scenes are extremely violent. Themes of family, abuse, cage fighting, violence, courage, love



**Zentner, Jeff. *The Serpent King*. Tundra Books, 2016. 384 pages**

Dill and his mom are broke, living in rural Tennessee while his father, a Pentecostal minister known for snake handling, is in prison for sex abuse. Dill knows that staying in Tennessee is toxic for him, but he just can't allow himself to dream of escaping, not when he has his mom to care for and no money to get him anywhere, anyway. His two best friends, Lydia and Travis, are loyal despite rumors about Travis and his father. The three navigate life in the Southern sticks together, cheering each other on through poverty, abuse, bullying, as well as shopping trips and long conversations. But sometimes friendship isn't enough to conquer personal demons. Then something terrible happens that forces Dill to reset his priorities and recognize he just might have the power to shed his past.

**Notes:** This is a book for MS/HS girls and guys and fans of realistic fiction, stories about family drama, small town life, friendships, overcoming obstacles, bonds of friendship, faith. There is magnetic character development with deep and real pain and an intense turning point scene. Topics of religion, small town life, sex abuse, reputation, friendship, shame, hope, hero's journey, secrets, father-son, family loyalty, faith. (Not sure it is in paperback.)



**Zoboi, Ibi. *American Street*. Balzer + Bray, 2017. 336 pages.**

At sixteen, Fabiola Toussaint moves from Haiti to America to live with family in Detroit. With her mother detained by immigration during the move, Fabiola starts a new life with her mom's sister, Matant Jo, and her three larger-than-life cousins, Chantal, Princess, and Primadonna. She prays for her mom's safety, setting up a small Haitian altar in her room to find strength. She also begins attending an American high school, making friends, getting a weave, and dating the sweet but flashy Kasim. Over time, as she grows more street smart, it becomes clear to Fab that her aunt's job isn't necessarily legal and Donna's boyfriend Dray is shady and Pri's hiding something. Then an FBI agent makes secret contact with Fab, offering a deal to get her mom out of detention in exchange for information that will take down her cousin's gangster boyfriend. Fab is in deep before she even knows what she's into, blindly driven by her conviction to reunite with her mom. She also realizes just how crazy some of "the s\*\*\* you do for family" really can be.

**Notes:** This book is for high school girls and guys and fans of realistic fiction, gritty city life, HS and gang drama, cultural assimilation. Topics of mystical fiction, Haiti, vodou, family, pride, loyalty, poverty, crime, immigration.

## How to Get Books in Your Students' Hands

Having trouble figuring out how to get books into your students' hands during COVID? We know that some parents will get on Amazon and order books for their children, but we also know that might not be an option for parents who are out of work and struggling to make ends meet. So here are some ideas to help you think about how to help students get the reading material they need.

### Ideas for Families

- Look at the map for Little Libraries in your community and give your children their locations.
- Parents can organize a book swap where they trade books with neighbors.
- Parents can start a book club in their neighborhood - read the book, do an outdoor movie.
- Parents can check out a used book store or Goodwill or ARC and see out what they have.
- Some public libraries are open a few hours a day.
- Learn the online library process so your child can check out books for free.

### Ideas for Teachers

- Ask teachers and your PTO and families to donate gently used books and then have a free book fair.
- Create a traveling book mobile and take donated books around the neighborhoods.
- Host a pop up book store/library on your front lawn.

# The Last Word

# Let the Books Go

JENNIFER DUNBAR



Jennifer Dunbar grew up in the bay area and studied literature at University of San Francisco and New York University. After teaching ESL in Spain and college English in Washington and Florida, she moved all over the country with her pilot husband and three children. In 2017, she returned to the classroom, and completed an M.A. in English Education at CU Denver in 2019. She has participated in the Denver Writing Project for the past two years.

Jennifer teaches English, Freshman Seminar, and Yearbook at Skyline High School in Longmont, CO. She loves books, movies, podcasts, and writes award-winning screenplays in her spare time. Her short film, *Secretly Left Handed*, was featured at the Denver Emerging Filmmakers Project & Colorado Independent Women's Film Festival

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The best moment of my teaching career so far happened when a student did something decidedly against the rules. I was sitting at my desk in my cramped, dark, and stinky classroom. Grading essays over lunch, hoping to achieve that elusive work-life balance touted in professional development sessions, I saw someone had opened my door. It was Antonio.\* His dark hair was suspended in a hair gel wave, and he wore pale jeans, a long sleeved t-shirt, and weathered Vans.

He looked sheepish and ashamed as he walked in with the graphic novel we had just read three hours before, *YUMMY: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty* by Gregory Neri and Randy DuBurke.

“I’m sorry I took it, miss. It’s just that it was the first book I ever read all the way through and I knew my friend would like it. I know you said you didn’t want us to take the books.” He had just about gotten to my desk and was handing the book to me.

I couldn't believe my ears. It had been a difficult year in sophomore English, particularly in Antonio's section. Several of his friends were reading at the third grade level, with only a few credits on their transcripts. Antonio was clearly trying to decide if school was worth his time or not.

"Are you saying you stole the book to share it with your friend?" I asked.

"Yeah," he answered.

"What made you like it so much?" I asked.

"I don't know. I just really wanted to know what happened to Yummy."

I handed the book back.

"Keep it. You just made my decade."

In a world where students get visibly riled if I give them something longer than a single sheet of paper, persuading students to read anything on their own has become the most important standard for how effective my teaching is. Getting students to want to know what happens to the character in the story or hooking them on nonfiction if they think they don't like to read is job number one. Nothing we do will matter if reading feels like taking medicine. They can't improve their reading abilities, they can't learn other disciplines, they can't continue on as students--or think for themselves!--if we don't get them to engage in texts at some point in high school.

Allowing students to choose what they read is the most reliable way to hook them. An OECD study of PISA test scores found that engaged readers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds outperformed their counterparts from the highest income brackets on reading achievement tests, simply by reading thirty minutes or more per day.

I read Penny Kittle and Nancie Atwell's work on reading workshops when I went back to get my master's degree in education and it felt like a religious epiphany. I decided that caring about my students meant letting them choose what they read as well as allowing them reading time and access to irresistible books.

Indeed, a recent Social Science Research study shows that access to books in one's home is more important in determining a young person's literacy, numeracy, and digital competence than the income or education level of their parents. A ninth grader with access to books she can write in, re-read, and refer back to was found to have the same literacy level as a college graduate who only borrowed books from the library.

As an eleven year old, I rode my bike to the Five and Dime store to buy Nancy Drew mysteries for \$2.95 each. I remember scraping the money together, annoying the clerk by taking forever to choose the one I wanted, and racing home to start the next book, enjoying the pulpy smell of the clean paper and binding. I devoured those stories, re-reading them, gazing up proudly at the growing shelf of yellow volumes, which sit in my daughter's room today.

While I wouldn't necessarily recommend those titles to my students now, I know they formed me, motivated me to read better books, and allowed me to feel like a proficient reader. Owning those books propelled me as a student. Teachers need to do everything they can to fill their classroom libraries with compelling books from every genre. School districts need to invest in these smaller libraries and allow students to take these books home for keeps to support the lifelong literacy of their students.

It might sound strange, but I'm really hoping that I have a few books stolen this coming year.

\*The student's name has been changed for privacy.

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