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Introduction

I believe we need to create a pedagogy of joy and justice. When Michael writes a stunning essay about language policy in Native American boarding schools, there is joy because he finally nails this form of academic writing, but there is also justice in talking back to years of essays filled with red marks and scarred with low grades. There is joy because he’s learned a craft that he felt beyond his reach; there’s justice because Michael and his classmates learned to question policies that award or deny status based on race and class. When Bree writes a poem so sassy that we all laugh and applaud in admiration, we rejoice in her verbal dexterity, but we recognize the justice of affirming the beauty of black/brown women whose loveliness has too often gone unpraised in our society. When Jacoa speaks to a class of graduate students at a local college, she exudes joy in taking what she learned about Ebonics out of our high school classroom and into the university, but she speaks about justice when she tells the linguistic history of a language deemed inferior in the halls of power—including schools.

I begin my teaching with the understanding that anyone who has lived has stories to tell, but in order for these stories to emerge, I must construct a classroom where students feel safe enough to be wild and risky in their work. My curriculum uses students’ lives as critical texts we mine for stories, celebrate with poetry, and analyze through essays that affirm their right to a place in our society. I attempt to craft a curriculum that focuses on key moral and ethical issues of our time because I have discovered that students care more about learning when the content matters. Writing and talking about these issues—like race, class, gender, and solidarity—takes them out of the shadow world and into the light of day, so students can understand why things are fair or unfair and how to change them. When I “correct” student writing, I embed the instruction about conventions, nitty-gritty skills, in the context of

students' writing about their lives and the broader world. I make their growth transparent, and we celebrate it inch-by-inch. Teaching for joy and justice makes students the subject of their own education.

Uncovering Brilliance

Teaching for joy and justice also begins with the non-negotiable belief that all students are capable of brilliance. Some students arrive in my classroom trailing years of failure behind them. Students in low-income communities are often tossed like loose change into overcrowded and underfunded classrooms where elementary teachers didn't have enough hands, materials, or time to build every student's literacy skills. Then we blame those students for arriving in our secondary classrooms without the tools they need to succeed. It's not

uncommon for my high school students to read at a 2nd- or 3rd-grade level, according to unreliable reading tests,

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and to write without a punctuation mark on the page. But just because students lack skills doesn't mean they lack intelligence. My duty as a teacher is to attempt to coax the brilliance out of them.

After teaching for 24 years at Jefferson High School, located in an African American working-class neighborhood in Portland, Ore., and for a few years at Grant High School, where rich and poor, white, black, and Asian rub elbows in the hallways, I came to know that kids' lives are deep and delightful—even when they have low test scores. Their language is a history inherited from their parents, their grandparents, and their great-grandparents—a treasure of words and memories and the sounds of home, not a social fungus to be scraped from their mouths and papers.

When we begin from the premise that students need to be “fixed,” invariably we design curriculum that erases students' home language and culture; we fail to find the strength and beauty in the experience and heritage that students bring with them to school. When our curriculum attempts to “correct” their supposed faults, ultimately, students will resist.

When I think of my students whose voices have been strangled and made small by overcorrection, I think of the poet Jimmy Santiago Baca, who captures this experience in his powerful essay, “Coming into Language,” from the anthology *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing*:

Ashamed of not understanding and fearful of asking questions, I dropped out of school in the ninth grade. . . . Most of my life I felt like a target in the crosshairs of a hunter's rifle. When strangers and outsiders questioned me I felt the hang-rope tighten around my neck and the trapdoor creak beneath my feet. There was nothing so humiliating as being unable to express myself, and my inarticulateness increased my sense of jeopardy. Behind a mask of humility, I seethed with mute rebellion . . .

My student Jerald taught me the importance of searching for a student's talents instead of lining up his writing in the crosshairs of my weapon—a red pen. Jerald entered my classroom years behind his grade level. One day he sat at the computer behind my desk working on a piece of writing—a narrative, an imaginative story, I can't remember. Jerald knew how to write stories and essays in the big ways that matter. He knew how to catch the reader-listener by creating characters and dialogue so real and funny or tragic that we leaned in when he read his pieces

out loud. And the boy could out-argue anyone, so essays were a matter of lassoing and reining

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in a thesis and lining up his arguments. Jerald had been kicked out of most of his classes, so he came to my class about four times a day. He was placed in special education, and clearly, Jerald lacked the conventional skills that mark literacy—sentences, spelling, paragraphs—but he didn't lack intelligence.

One morning during my prep period, I decided that I would teach Jerald how to punctuate. I printed out his piece where verbs not only didn't agree, they argued. And Jerald, depending on his mood, either loved the comma or left it out completely. So on this day, I was determined that I would teach him where the periods and capitals went once and for all. "Come here, Jerald," I said. "Let's go over your paper. I want to show you how to correct your punctuation." I bent over his dot-matrix print-out and covered it with cross-outs, marks, and arrows.

When I looked up, Jerald, instead of hovering, pulled away from me, from his paper. He looked at me as if I had betrayed him. I had become every teacher he'd had over the years, the ones who told him what he couldn't do instead of showing him what he knew and understood about writing. Instead of telling him how beautiful his writing was, instead of finding what worked in his piece, I found every single thing that was wrong.

Ultimately, students like Jerald taught me to teach the writer, not the paper. Locating his brilliance doesn't mean that I ignore what needs to be fixed in his writing, but I start the conversation in a different place, and I measure my critique. I show him one or two things he needs to develop in order to become a more competent essay or narrative writer. With each piece, I teach him a bit more about punctuation or grammar. He doesn't have to learn everything in one draft. If we write frequently enough, he can practice and improve his writing, one essay, one narrative, one poem at a time.

When I begin my work with the belief that all students can write and that they have something important to say, I build writers by illuminating their gifts instead of burying them.

To create dazzling, adept writers, I must rethink how I spend class time. Honing our craft takes time and multiple drafts. I can't assign writing; I have to teach it. Students need to know how to use writers' tools—from snappy

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openings to anecdotal evidence to flashbacks to semicolons. I can't expect that students know how to write when they enter my classroom, especially when so many children these days have been pressed like tarnished pennies through mechanical curriculum that promises increased test scores and delivers thin imitation writing without a hint of originality anywhere on the page.

Students' Lives at the Center

Teaching for joy and justice also means locating the curriculum in students' lives. Many of my students experience injustice. Sometimes this mistreatment arrives in the form of an unkind comment about a person's weight, facial features, hair, or clothes. But often my students and their families are targeted because of their race or language or immigration status. Their families are denied housing, jobs, fair wages, health care, or access to decent education. Connecting these issues to the literature that we read, as well as writing and talking about their concerns makes them visible, not just the stuff of nightmares that haunt us throughout the day. I want students to examine why things are unfair, to analyze the systemic roots of that injustice, and to use their writing to talk back.

Putting students' lives at the center of the curriculum also tells them they matter—their lives, their ancestors' lives are important. When we create writing assignments that call students' memories into the classroom, we honor



their heritage and their stories as worthy of study. Throughout the year, my students write poetry and narratives about people and events that link to the curriculum. I create opportunities to celebrate the joy of my students' daily lives. This writing is a transformative act where they build their literacy skills at the same time as they build a place for themselves in the world. Jimmy Santiago Baca's description of the island rising beneath his feet is the image I carry into my classroom:

But when at last I wrote my first words on the page, I felt an island rising beneath my feet like the back of a whale. As more and more words emerged, I could finally rest: I had a place to stand for the first time in my life. The island grew, with each page, into a continent inhabited by people I knew and mapped with the life I lived.

My unit on "reading without words" illustrates this point. I had been struck over the years by how much school devalues the lives of blue-collar workers, divorcing manual work from "intellectual" work. In fact, I did this myself on occasion. I recall once saying to a class, "Study or you'll end up sweeping someone's floors or pumping gas." One of my students, Byron, raised his hand and said, "Ms. Christensen, my father cleans offices every night. That's how he's supported our family. There's no shame in that." Byron was right. I had insulted his family and reinforced the class lines built into the structure of our educational system.

To prepare for this "reading without words" assignment, I interviewed my Uncle Einar, who fished the Pacific for salmon and tuna his entire life, about how he "read" the ocean when he fished. My uncle flexed his intellectual muscles every time he climbed aboard the *Arctic* and left Astoria's harbor. He said he fished at the point where the water changed color, because fish school at the edge of the color change. He also told me that blue water meant albacore; brown water indicated bait was present and so were salmon. Birds diving overhead signaled schools of fish, and he put his boat on full throttle to get there.

I shared my interview with my students and asked them to interview members of their families about ways they read the world without words. Students shared delightful pieces. This assignment marked the first time Troy shared in class. He wrote about how his father, a long-haul truck driver, read his engine and the highway. Mario wrote about how his mother, a hairdresser, read hair and heads. Carl wrote about how his grandfather read rivers when he took him fishing. When students write about their lives, they have more incentive to revise the paper, and they care more about learning about mechanics.

Creating Social Justice Curriculum

Teaching for joy and justice means creating a curriculum peopled with authors and characters who not only represent our students' roots, but who also provide a window to the world. The books we choose to bring into our classroom say a lot about what we think is important, whose stories get told, whose voices are heard, whose are marginalized. When I was a young woman, I remember thinking that nobody like me had ever done anything worthwhile. Important people were men or they were rich. As a social justice educator in a language

arts classroom, I look for stories where the protagonists refuse to accept "their place" in society; I try to find fiction and nonfiction

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about people who disrupt the script society set for them. I want students to see that history is not inevitable, that there are spaces where it can bend, change, become more just.

All students need to see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Nelson Mandela, in his memoir, *Long Walk to Freedom*, describes the affirming moment that occurred "like a comet streaking across the night sky" when Krune Mqhayi comes on stage dressed in traditional Xhosa clothing and speaks his language. Poet, playwright, and actor Daniel Beaty told students at Jefferson High School that his life changed when he saw a videotape of Dr. Martin Luther King speaking. King's speech gave him a vision of a black man in the world that he was missing in his own life. When a student asked if he liked performing for a majority African American audience, he said, "Most of my life I read literature written by white people and watched plays written and performed by white people. I saw pieces of myself in their words. I love that people from other backgrounds can watch my plays and see themselves reflected in my work."

His words reminded me of a beautiful moment after Beaty performed his play, “Emergency,” at Grant High School. A few students from the African American Literature class came to the faculty meeting the following Monday to share poems they had written during a workshop with Beaty. One of the students said, “We always read literature by white people, like Shakespeare. This is the first time everyone in the school had to read a play by a black man.”

I write this 30 years after Portland’s Black United Front demanded a multicultural curriculum that honors and celebrates the accomplishments, literature, and history of our diverse and unequal nation and community. I am appalled that 30 years

later, we still struggle to break open the canon. Teaching and discussing and writing about the plays of

Luis Valdez and August Wilson, the stories or novels of Louise Erdrich and Raymond Carver, the poetry of Lucille Clifton and Li-Young Lee, or any other writer of color or working-class writer, allows students to understand a wider human experience, to know that no matter their gender, skin color, or social class, they can write.

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Building a Curriculum That Matters

Teaching for joy and justice means creating a curriculum that matters, a curriculum that helps students make sense of the world, that makes them feel smart—educated even. Historian Howard Zinn talks about how too often the teaching of history gets lost in a narrow, fact-finding game about the past. The same is true of language arts. We can get lost in the minutiae of memorizing literary terms instead of analyzing, questioning, and creating. When I center my curriculum on key moral and ethical issues, students care more because the content matters. The study of literature and composition, which should be a study of society and ideas, can get reduced to a search for technical details—chasing motifs and symbols at the expense of the big ideas. How do we live our lives as moral citizens of the world, how do we make the world a better place? What can we learn from literature and history that helps us understand the complex problems confronting us today: Gender violence, the corruption and inequality exposed by Hurricane Katrina, the rise of gangs and youth violence, the skyrocketing incarceration of men of color?

We need a curriculum that matters in order to address the roots of inequality that allows some students to arrive in our classrooms without literacy skills. Students, no matter what their reading and writing ability, are capable of amazing intellectual work. They act up and get surly when the curriculum feels insulting. Teaching students to write with power and passion means immersing them in challenging concepts, getting them fired up about the content so that

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they care about their writing, and then letting them argue with their classmates as they imagine solutions. Great writing

doesn't take place in isolation from the world. Global warming? Getting pulled over by the police because you're black and young and running down the street? Plant closures? Domestic abuse? Forest, river, and salmon loss? Toxic dump in your back yard? Students will rise to the "challenge" of a rigorous curriculum about important issues if that rigor reflects the real challenges in their lives. Too often the rigor offered students is a "rigor" of memorization and piling up of facts in order to earn high scores on end-of-course tests.

And students need to act on their new knowledge. If we intend to create citizens of the world, as most school districts claim in their mission statements, then we need to teach students how to use their knowledge to create change. By this I don't mean taking students out to demonstrations and picket lines, although they might end up there of their own accord. I mean we must construct academic ways for students to use the curriculum, to authentically tie student learning to the world. Over the years my students have traveled to local colleges to teach graduate education students about the history of the SATs, the politics of language, and the power of praise poetry in the Harlem Renaissance. They have also walked to elementary and middle schools to read books they've written about abolitionists, Native American treaties, and Ebonics. They've created poetry posters for local store windows, distributed report cards on cartoon videos to video stores and local newspapers. They've created table-tents for elementary schools about women we should honor, and they've testified about changes that need to happen in their schools.

Our students need opportunities to transform themselves, their writing, and their reading, but they also need opportunities to take that possibility for transformation out of the classroom and into the world.

Easier Said Than Done

Teaching for joy and justice isn't an individual endeavor. We can't do this work alone. It takes time to find the just-right reading material, to build a role play or tea party, to invent a curriculum from scratch that encompasses literature, history, and students' lives—while we're teaching. As my mother used to say, "Many hands make light work." And it is true, whether we're cleaning up after a family dinner or creating a unit for a literature circle on the politics of food.

From the first moment I entered Jefferson High School in 1974, I learned the importance of working with my colleagues. From our spontaneous discussions in the hallways to our department meetings to our arguments during faculty meetings, I found teachers whose curriculum and pedagogy helped me evolve as a teacher.

Twenty-five years ago, my husband and teaching partner, Bill Bigelow, and I became members of a critical pedagogy group with like-minded teachers from the Portland area. We got together every other Sunday night to discuss books on critical pedagogy. While we loved the

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theory, we also wanted to know what this kind of pedagogy looked like in the classroom. In teaching, as in writing, we need models. In our group we used each other as a sounding board as we developed curriculum to engage our students in literacy and history by critically examining their lives and the world. The group became my curricular conscience. Instead of leaping from book to book, my years of working in a critical collaborative community taught me to construct curriculum around ideas that matter and that connect students to their community and world. I learned to pull books, stories, poems, and essays that helped students critically examine the world.

During my years in the Portland Public Schools curriculum department and in my work with the Oregon Writing Project, I have experienced the joy of collaboratively developing units with other teachers. Whether it's learning how Sandra Childs sets up response groups, or how Mark Hansen gets his 3rd-grade students to move from a community walk to passionate persuasive essays about the need for change in their neighborhood, or how Katharine Johnson uses color-coding to teach students how to write cumulative sentences, my students have benefited from the new skills and ideas I've collected.

I attempt to keep my vision—and hope—alive by continuing to participate in critical teaching groups—including my local Portland Area Rethinking Schools group, the Rethinking Schools editorial board, my Oregon Writing Project community, and language arts teachers in the Portland area. To use Toni Morrison’s words, these “friends of my mind” help me think more

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carefully about social justice issues inside as well as outside of the classroom, from literacy practices to top-down curricular

policies. Our sometimes-heated discussions about articles, books, and curriculum hone my ability to evaluate my work. I carry these voices—and the solidarity of these teachers—like a Greek chorus in my mind. They remind me to question and sometimes to defy those in authority when I’m told to participate in practices that harm children. They nettle me when I fall into easy patterns and point out when I deliver glib answers to difficult problems. They help me choose the more courageous path because I know I’m not alone.

And We’re Never Done

After my home school, Jefferson, was reconstituted in 1998, I spent several years in the district curriculum office. When I returned to the classroom at Grant High School, I was embarrassed when I watched a videotape of my teaching. I had romanticized the classroom when I worked in the central office, so when I returned to teach tracked sophomore and junior English, I had to regain my teaching moves, remember the importance of building community, and the hard work of engaging the disengaged. Some days, to use Bill Bigelow’s description from the years when we taught together, it seemed like the students had thrown a party and I was the uninvited guest. It was a cold reminder of how demanding and complex good teaching is.

Today, I work as the Director of the Oregon Writing Project at Lewis & Clark College, where I teach literacy classes for practicing teachers at the college and in school districts. I also returned home to my beloved Jefferson High School where I co-teach classes and work with teachers as part of a university-school collaboration. Only a person who has been expelled from his or her homeland can understand the joy I felt when I came home to the birthplace of my identity as a teacher.

Teaching is like life, filled with daily routines—laundry, cooking, cleaning the bathtub—and then moments of brilliance. We get up intending to create the classroom of our imagination and ideals. Sometimes we reach that place, but often we’re doing the spade work that makes those moments possible: mining student lives for stories, building a community where risk-taking can happen, teaching historical background in preparation for insights and connections, or revising drafts—again and again. Those moments of empowerment and illumination are built on the foundation of hard work that often doesn’t look either shining or glorious.

Teaching, really teaching, in a classroom with too many students—both the engaged and the unengaged—is both difficult and rewarding. Teachers don’t make enough money; we’re treated as intellectually inferior, in need of external “accountability” programs and “training.” We don’t have adequate time or authority to plan our

curriculum, engage in conversations with our colleagues, go to the bathroom, or digest our lunch. But the joy

of watching a student write a moving essay that sends chills up and down my spine or a narrative that brings the class to tears or a poem that makes us laugh out loud or the pride as a student teaches a class about the abolition movement at the elementary school across the street—that’s the life I choose—again and again.

Teaching for joy and justice. It’s what our students need. But it’s also what we need.

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