

Extracting Violence from the English Language Arts Classroom

by

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Education of The College of Brockport, State University of New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science of Education

October 9, 2021

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Abstract:

Informed by research and discourse from the contemporary movement for police/prison abolition, scholar Erin Geary makes the case for nonviolent schools, an ask that seems obvious, but, in many ways, is foreign and controversial amongst educators and administrators in America. Geary situates her study within the lived context of her own English Language Arts classroom and asks herself how she can provide a physical/emotional space conducive to learning that refuses to banish and exclude for the sake of “order.” In Geary’s nonviolent classroom, the flow of power is examined and disturbed, students’ needs are met, and conflict is mended rather than punished. Geary provides concrete techniques, resources, and ready-made lesson plans which cut-at-the-root of subtle, stubborn school violence and trouble the assumption that some students will always be “the bad kids.”

Keywords: English Language Arts, nonviolence, classroom behavior, mutual aid, curriculum violence, punishment, accountability, exclusion, harm, transformative justice

Chapter One

Andrew and I: A Story about Punishment

I waited over the shoulder of a math teacher down the hall as she helped me print my class roster. Paper ticked from the machine, tattooed with names of my new students. I practiced saying them in my head, a rehearsal for my first foray at taking attendance. *Neil. Amia. Frank. Wesley. Samantha. Julie. Hasan. Josselyn. Andrew.* The math teacher gawked, her long fingernail tapping at Andrew's name. "Good luck with *that one*." She huffed out a laugh as I nervously played along, rolling my eyes and pushing a palm to my forehead. I was twenty-one years old and a novice at navigating teacher-teacher conversations. This was all so new.

When I first saw him—Andrew—he had his feet kicked up on the desk behind him, two sneakers in the face of a girl named Callie who still tried, exasperated, to flip the pages of her composition book. Upon looking at me, he began taunting me about my clothes, age, and voice. He balled up pieces of paper and rocketed them across the room, belly laughing as they ricocheted off the necks of peers. After the class shuffled out with the bell, I cried behind the door, my body roasting from the inside out. The math teacher down the hall was right. Andrew was one of those "bad kids."

By Day Two, I was yelling at him. My voice scared me, shrill and ragged.

I didn't tell anybody about Andrew at first, especially my friends who were so proud of me for starting my adult career, or my peers from undergrad, who were posting shiny Highlight Reels of adventures in their own classrooms on social media. It was embarrassing. I kept noticing ugliness at the corners of my heart whenever Andrew sauntered into the classroom. Blood-red anger gutted me. It seemed like he did whatever he could to ruin the meticulous

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lessons I crafted each night from the desk by my childhood bed. At Parent-Teacher conferences, a mother looked at me somberly and went, “Ashley says class is a little out-of-control. Hang in there!” She meant well, her voice wilting with the weariness of a veteran parent, but all I could imagine was the dinner table conversation in her home, the stories her daughter brought home that framed me as unfit, unready, or—worse—cruel.

I eventually sought help, scheduled meetings with administrators to figure out how to address the problem. They all gave similar advice: when Andrew “acts up,” send him out of the room. Put him in the in-school suspension room, where the walls are icy, and each kid sits alone in a cubicle. I followed their advice. By Winter Break, he probably missed around forty class periods. When he was gone, the other students would sigh in relief, cheering once when I sent him out within the first five minutes of class. The administrators were right; sending him to ISS got me the results I wanted. Classes passed smoothly and without interruption. The rest of the students were “compliant” and happy. But something didn’t feel right. The problem felt unsolved.

Maybe I wasn’t sure what the problem was. Maybe I’m still not sure. My gut knows Andrew wasn’t the problem. In fact, he might have been the victim of it.

The Vision Begins

How could a classroom look if it was both productive/safe *and* nonviolent/anti-carceral? Is there a happy medium wherein educators do not rely on being pseudo-cops in order to achieve the environment they desire? “The courage to teach is the courage to keep one’s heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able,” (hooks, 2018, p. 19). I

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know I must find room in my practice to address the echo Andrew left in me, the small pain when I remember his face. Is there a world where he could've stayed in the classroom?

Major Pillars

Part of the work is for teachers to process and release our ego and pride. When I was teaching Andrew, I was already fumbling with nerves and wrestling with imposter syndrome. Andrew was derailing the “perfect classroom” I imagined prior to getting into the weeds of the work, and he was doing so right-out-the-gate. He was adding to the story I was telling myself: that I was secretly not competent enough to do this job. It's important for teachers to have robust support systems to navigate personal feelings that might contribute to a quick and harsh demeanor in the classroom. We must have bountiful, pillowy webs of connection to haven our most vulnerable educators; we must go beyond a single district-assigned mentor.

Feelings are data. We must open the lines of communication to talk about the way discipline and punishment feel. I eventually found myself numb to the experience of exiling Andrew. This is dangerous. I suggest we create venues to talk about the conflict in our bodies when “playing the teacher,” to really hone-in on it. My stomach would swirl. My face would burn. These are not sensations that contribute to an environment of learning. They are painful; we must acknowledge that. Of course, this is an acknowledgement of vulnerability. Kazu Haga (2020) says, “Speaking about our shame ... is an act of nonviolence. ... When one person is vulnerable, that could be healing for those who witness it. You don't know who is not capable of shedding their own tears. You don't know who else you're crying for” (p. 103). How about Andrew? How did *he* feel? Why didn't I ever ask? I think I was afraid to let him have more of a voice. However, a relationship without two-way dialogue is bound to be frayed, and “one side of

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conflict never has a monopoly on truth” (Haga, 2020, p. 83). How is Andrew supposed to understand that community is valuable if his community is constantly shunning him? We deserved repair.

Another part of the work is to imagine. Esteban Lance Kelly and Jenna Peters-Golden suggest thinking like “an artist” (2020, p. 95). Couldn’t there be another mode of keeping order? Or—why is order the pinnacle of success anyway? Order is so militaristic. It’s not gentle. I want to veer off the course of what I’d seen growing up. My schooling experiences feel near and easy to replicate, but I am not required to be on a path or follow a pattern. Everything about my teaching can *be* pathmaking. Instead of carceral punishment, I could call upon strategies like accountability, harm reduction, and healing to serve my students. Instead of obsessing over order, I could honor my students’ natural diversity by having a more varied, nuanced idea of how learning looks. “Let us (too,) eliminate the idea that young people are “doing nothing” in our spaces. No young person is doing nothing when they are surviving 24/7” (Brooks & Kaba, 2020, p. 163).

Maybe I want my classroom to feel bright green, soft blue, and joyous pink. Maybe it doesn’t need to be black-and-white.

My ELA class might benefit from reading stories about protagonists that are “troublemakers:” disrespectful and rowdy. Students already get enough messaging about “good vs. evil” from fairytales, childrens’ movies, and comic books. When we start discussing characters in our classrooms, we don’t need to further push this concept of “protagonist vs. antagonist,” especially in terms of likening it to those false “good vs. evil” binaries and dichotomies. “Protagonist vs. antagonist” can be a valuable construction in terms of identifying

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who the author wants us to follow and what that character is up against, but we should widen and deepen the scope of conflict for students. A lot of times, a “person vs. person” conflict is underscored by a “person vs. society conflict.” We need to encourage our students to notice the web of conflict that we all exist in. There are always factors that cause us to choose the behaviors we do. It’s crucial that Andrew can imagine a world where he is not demonized for how the world has made him behave, and, instead, knows how to channel his frustrated energy toward self-advocating and organizing. “We are accountable, ... not for fixing (young people), but for providing them with opportunities to understand, engage with, and potentially transform what limits and harms them” (Mikel Brown, 2016, p. 41). Mariame Kaba (2020) describes the school-to-prison pipeline as “less a pipeline than a nexus or a swamp” (p. 76). How easy it might be for Andrew to get stuck in the muck without receiving help awakening the inherent tools useful to get out.

Finding Community

There is a lot of research we can use to inform the ways we begin to build an anti-carceral and nonviolent classroom. We can borrow from abolitionists who have been doing this work for decades as a way of eroding the Prison Industrial Complex; we can borrow from mental health professionals specializing in trauma, who have studied how to better support adolescents for years as a way of reducing the risk of suicide, anxiety, etc. We are not alone in our quest to support all students and—further—all people, but it is a messy ride that requires us to take the risk of relationship. We must be firm about our mission because there will be pushback and confusion, as there always is in the field of education, since “in our society, caring professions are devalued” (hooks, 2018, p. 86). It might not always go right. However, like anything else, it is a discipline. I know that removing violence from my classroom will be worthwhile because it

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will teach students that a more humane world is possible and that we don't have to discard people when they don't "comply." I "don't have to know all the answers in order to press for a vision" (Kaba, 2020, 167). The curiosity that I move through my classroom with can splinter out and cause a massive impact on the world around me. We, as educators, are so lucky! In what other career do you have the ability to influence over 100 young minds every single year?

We must see students as being in progress. They are not finished. Our words and practices can be the catalyst that allows them to see themselves as something more than "bad," the notorious name teachers don't want on their roster. This is, legitimately, lifesaving work. And through a ripple effect, it might help us see ourselves with more compassion as well.

* Pseudonyms were used in place of student names to protect dignity and privacy.

Chapter Two

Not Everything is Harm

The most important distinction to make, right off the top, is between harm and disorder in the classroom. Instances of harm include: "sexual violence (touching, groping, comments of a sexual nature, etc.), physical violence (pushing, punching, etc.), harassment (slurs, insults, threats, etc.), and intimidation (isolation, hostile jokes, etc.)" (Safe OUTside the System Collective & The Audre Lorde Project, 2020, p. 175). These actions can physically and emotionally hurt students. They must be stopped immediately in order to maintain a safe classroom. However, many of the actions we deem as "bad" in a school setting are not

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necessarily harmful; they are merely instances of disorder, of chaos. Therefore, they do not require the same process when being dealt with.

A productive classroom sometimes requires quiet and order, but the rigidity with which we enforce these norms is flexible. Historically, teachers have exerted control over childrens' bodies and voices simply because it makes their jobs easier. However, would we like this control if we were on the receiving end of it? Few would appreciate the strict, tight leash we put students on, almost as if they aren't people. "Why are we obsessed with proper and good and coloring-between-the-lines when clearly what the world needs are places where imagination, dissent, and passionate engagement rule?" (Mikel Brown, 2016, p. 177). Students "want to speak, not just listen. They want to play, not just work. They want to perform, not just sit in the audience. They want to stand out, not fit in. They want to be teachers, not just learners" (Shalaby, 2017, p. 167). If we design our classes to allow for young people's natural behaviors, they will be less likely to do something out of line, since the line will have been moved. It's noteworthy, too, that many school norms are difficult for some students to read, remember, and understand. If a student is neurodivergent, for example, their way of inhabiting a space might *always* go against the grain of what we consider "orderly." It can look like a student is being disruptive when they are merely being themselves, completely unaware. "The fact that these demands are considered normal makes them ... part of a neutral and unproblematic school culture. This invisibility draws us to the conclusion that classroom life is regular and children who don't comply with it are irregular" (Shalaby, 2017, p. 68).

The stereotypical "orderly" classroom is also lacking in personality. A lot of educators have a false misconception that if they teach a secondary grade level, or in a "serious" content area, they must drain their classroom of passion, fun, and energy. Students, up through their

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senior year, are children. They deserve play within their learning. “We must not lose the importance of co-constructing spaces with young people to lean into creative expression and joy” (Communities for Just Schools Fund). If a class is rowdy, it might be more productive to orient them toward a hands-on project, something collaborative or silly, but still meeting standards, rather than hound them to quiet down and comply with arbitrary rules.

There is also a difference between being angry/frustrated and causing harm. We don’t need to make students feel ashamed of what they’re feeling, and certainly don’t need to silence them when they try to express it just because it’s a bit charged. Emotions are wonderful tools. They run hot and can tell students what parts of their life need a little extra attention. Students, in order to be successful, need access to counseling, movement, downtime, and nature. If a student is dysregulated and lacking in tools to cope, they may turn to harm. “We know conflict is inevitable and we know the more space we have (inside us), the more space we have to absorb new conflicts without ... overflowing” (Haga, 2020, p. 76). These tools free space in our systems; they cleanse us out. It is possible to prevent harm before it occurs, rather than scurrying around cleaning it up. We must direct our money and resources here. However, even if a school district does not have a robust mental health taskforce, individual teachers can do a lot of work in this area. “Adults who can stay present in the midst of (students’) anger and confusion and sustain open conversation ... are lifelines” (Mikel Brown, 2016, p. 36). “Often, people feel alone and uncared for in crisis, and making an effort to offer them a sanctuary can mean a lot” (The Fireweed Collective, 2020, p. 129). Just showing up for our students, being gentle with them and listening intently, can go a long way. Some students may not have the emotional vocabulary they need. So, when they are up against something—rightfully—difficult, like instances of oppression, mental illness, or the everyday stress of being a teenager, they may not even

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understand what they're feeling. "Young people are both very aware of changes around them and not always completely certain about what they mean" (Mayo, 2014, p. 65). We must be patient and thorough when talking with them. When we "de-dramatize and destress the situation as much as possible," we are lowering the temperature of the room before a student has the thought to turn to harm (The Fireweed Collective, 2020, p. 129).

Teachers should be wary of what words they use to describe this cooling-down process. "The terms 'manage' and 'regulate' are words commonly associated with transactional business tactics. ... We are not fulfilling the true promise of SEL (social-emotional learning) if we continue to use it as another form of policing under the empty promises of words that feel and sound good" (Communities for Just Schools Fund). Our investment in these students must be deep-rooted and holistic. We should "look into the eyes" of students "to recognize their humanity and to give them an opportunity to reciprocate" (Haga, 2020 p. 45).

Activating Students

Some of the anger and frustration our students voice is interpersonal. However, power dynamics that are at-play outside of school leak into the walls of the building. Marginalization that lives elsewhere also lives in the classroom. Students may be getting triggered (Holland) about problems that legitimately need to be solved. Their "acting out" is the raising of a red flag. Sometimes, "students of color, and other marginalized students, are consumed by feelings of rage. Their anger blinds them, preventing them from taking needed steps to restore their integrity of being. ... They recover themselves only when there are progressive educators who give them space to ... do the work of healing" (hooks, 2003, p. 101-102). Most young people "don't know how to initiate an action that addresses the daily indignities they witness and experience. Most

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don't have who and what they need" (Mikel Brown, 2016, p. 20). We can align with these students. A crucial part of this work is educating ourselves, so that we are preemptively aware of what they may be experiencing and how it may be manifesting. This prevents students from having to explain lofty topics and "-ism"s to their teachers as if they are merely hypothetical and not of current presence in their life.

The "toppling of authority is considered "oppositional" because it opposes the norm of what is expected--that children automatically be subordinate to adults in school. This kind of subordination takes on particular meaning when it intersects with race, gender, and class. A white middle-class girl as subordinate to a white middle-class woman has a different symbolic and historic tenor to it—a less loaded and fraught one—than the dynamic of the subordination of black working-class males to white middle-class women" (Shalaby, 2017, p. 148). White teachers should be explicitly aware of their own privilege and power in the classroom and take it into consideration when a student of color reacts with anger that is unexpected or feels "too big." Often, that is the anger of generations, and we play a role in producing it. It is not our place to police the scope and size of an emotional expression. "How we receive their anger will impact how available that anger is to them as a source of information, a barometer of injustice, and whether they can access it as motivation for creating something better" (Mikel Brown, 2016, p. 81).

"Knowing when and how to challenge authority is a skill worth teaching and learning, ... (so is) understanding the power of organized, collective dispute—as an alternative to vulnerable, individual dispute." (Shalaby, 2017, p. 111). What are the steps students can take when they feel as if they are being slighted? What's the best way to be heard? Unfortunately, "grassroots students activism directed at school policies ... are unlikely to make it into the local paper unless

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discipline is involved,” so young people may feel as though they are up against all-knowing powers (Mikel Brown, 2016, p. 16). It might not feel worth it. Our encouragement can show students that dissent is not only possible but can be successful. It is something to be celebrated, rather than condemned. Also, it is very possible to cause an important ruckus without causing harm. “Knowing that ... power flows in a predictable fashion through most institutions, enables (students) to communicate effectively in these systems and get what they need” (Mikel Brown, 2016, p. 52). They don’t have to be caught at a dead-end, pumping more violence into the school system. It doesn’t have to be a cycle. “What would it mean if we mobilized young people to address these human harms, practicing first in the relative safety of our classrooms, so they could then graduate to thoughtfully, fiercely, intelligently, bravely addressing human harms in the world beyond school?” (Shalaby, 2017, p. 179). It could be revolutionary, not just in terms of “classroom management,” which is a tired goal, but in terms of living in a healthy democracy twenty years in the future (Graham).

Against Exclusion

Sometimes, students are sent out of the classroom for being disruptive, though they have not caused harm. “When a child is excluded, it teaches ... other children that belonging to the classroom community is conditional, not absolute, contingent upon their willingness and ability to be a certain kind of person. In this paradigm, belonging is a privilege to be earned by docility, not a basic human right that is ensured for every child” (Shalaby, 2017, p. 162). This is why discipline is a community matter, not an interpersonal one. A classroom cannot function in a healthy way if one of its members is missing, banished. Punishment is familiar. It’s what many teachers have been raised on. “Oftentimes when (we) encounter something for the first time, it

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raises so much within (us). It makes (us) grasp for familiar things” (Kaba, 2020, p. 190). We can go against our instincts. It may cause discomfort and require practice, but it’s worth it.

Zero Tolerance policies have been enacted in many schools, where any type of “harm” (This term is used loosely, here) results in punishment, without much consideration or investigation at all. The intention is to crack-down on “harm,” but these policies instead drain nuance from that word. They also “shut down education in favor of stopping an incident” (Mayo, 2014, p. 70). A teacher, out of exasperation, may mistakenly view an action as “harm” when it is not. It’s just an annoyance, a disruption, or even self-defense. A truly safe classroom has no place for a Zero Tolerance policy.

No “Bad” Students

Of course, sometimes real harm does occur. Perhaps our attempt at prevention was not sufficient, or it did not happen quickly enough. So, we must be equipped with ways to deal with harm that put students’ best interests at heart. It’s important to remember that “no one enters violence for the first time by committing it” (Kaba, 2020, p. 145-146). “All conflict has history” (Haga, 2020, p. 70). “As we follow the thread back through time, it splits and splits again, tangling and weaving into other stories and histories, until we find ourselves asking still deeper questions about love, fear, scarcity, and the origins of harm” (Shara, 2020, p. 230-231). No student is inherently *bad*. Sure, it may be easy to look at our classroom population, and, more largely, the world, through the simplistic binary of good/evil, but this doesn’t account for the wholeness of human beings. We must get over our impulse to assign these qualifiers to children. Even if a student commits an act of physical or sexual violence, that is not the core of who they are. Violence “can cause PTSD, anxiety, depression, and trauma. ... If violence is part of our

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human nature, why does it break our brains?” (Haga, 2020, p. 229). A student who is violent can unlearn that behavior. In fact, it is better they do so while they are young and in school than when they are out in the world. The earlier we can unravel violent behaviors, the better.

It may seem insurmountable to be empathetic toward a student who has caused physical harm in one’s presence. To do this, teachers can draw upon ethics from the Nonviolence Movement, practiced by Martin Luther King Jr. and his comrades. King Jr. believed we could all live together in “Beloved Community,” caring for each other, living *for* one another. However, “Beloved Community is a big place. ... We can have love for people, and they can live *all the way over there* in Beloved Community” (Haga, 2020, p. 111). The extent to which we must show intimate compassion for violent students will be different depending upon the circumstances and it’s important for teachers to honor their own boundaries while doing this work. But sometimes “the work of nonviolence is as simple as telling someone they are worthy” (Haga, 2020, p. 146). It might mean telling a student that you still *see* them and believe they are good, even when it feels like everyone has demonized them, even when it feels like “good” is too far away.

The Accountability Process

Educators should get students in the practice of self-reflecting as much as possible. Many young people are used to running from punishment like a mouse would run from a cat, but students, especially teens, are often capable of holding themselves accountable without any help at all. Teachers can build this practice into all their lessons, so “troublemaking” students do not feel particularly called out by being encouraged to do it. A good question that students can ask themselves is: “Are there things I did today that are outside of my values?” or “Are there things I need to do to clean ... up (what I did)?” (Long, 2020, p. 213). If questions like this are not

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immediately followed with punishment or carceral-like discipline, they are much more liberating than traditional means of behavior management. “Education as the practice of freedom affirms healthy self-esteem in students as it promotes their capacity to be aware and live consciously” (hooks, 2003, p. 72). On their own, students may be able to identify the problem and the solution, taking ownership of the situation in a way that’s empowering. We all mess up and this would be a rather mature way of dealing with a harmful mistake.

Sometimes, harm is too large for a student to handle on their own, or a student may not yet be willing to acknowledge the harm they’ve caused. This is the point when a teacher must step in. Teachers can equip themselves with training about Restorative Justice circles. This is a type of accountability process that has been around since indigenous people in the United States used it to make peace in their communities. It involves sitting the person who has caused harm, the person affected by the harm, and a mediator in a circle, and its purpose is to repair the harm so that the victim can move on with their day/life. “Restorative Justice asks three questions: Who was harmed? What do they need? Whose obligations are these? These questions are a paradigm shift from our current ... justice system that privileges crime and punishment by asking: What is the crime? Who did it? What do they deserve? The former questions position the victim ... as agentive” (Winn, Graham, & Alfred, 2019a, p. ix). Every Restorative Justice circle looks different. Many of them focus on dialogue between the different parties involved. However, there are many tools that can be used, like storytelling, writing, and role-playing. “Alternative methods of expression such as (these, and) drawing, freestyle poetry, journaling, movement, ... etc.” are good, because they make the circle accessible for students (Oakland Unified School District Restorative Justice Team, p. 29). It’s important to get creative about what happens in the circle, especially when working with teenagers who may feel apathetic toward being there. We

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must “feel for the edge of our imaginations” (Kaba, 2020, p. 56). A circle should be tailored to the situation. One thing that all circles have in common is that “participation is voluntary” (Oakland Unified School District Restorative Justice Team, p. 3). If a student wants to back out and address the problem differently, they have free rein to do that. If a student wants to postpone a circle until they are in a better headspace, that’s what would be best.

Restorative Justice rarely ends in punishment, but many students encounter an accountability process and feel threatened. It triggers them, as they might have a history of carceral punishment that has dehumanized them. In a Restorative Justice circle, “when (we) talk about ‘holding someone accountable,’ the keyword should not be *accountable*, but *holding*. ... Does that person feel held, or do they feel attacked and judged?” (Haga, 2020, p. 134). “Students ... will need to test whether there is trust in the Circle before they share, and while they are assessing, they may experience embarrassment and even want to project that embarrassment onto someone else. They may not be compassionate and may say something mean to someone in the Circle” (Winn, Graham, & Alfred, 2019a, p. 35). Our job, as teachers and facilitators, is to redirect students toward the purpose of the circle and to adjust norms until all parties feel comfortable. If a student is not ready, we cannot force them.

There is likely to be bitterness in the circle. Perhaps a student will be angry that their behavior has been “called out.” Perhaps a student will want to avoid the one that caused them harm. Therefore, it’s important to navigate our role with utmost importance. “Speak slowly, gently, and clearly. Use a firm voice” (Safe OUTside the System Collective & The Audre Lorde Project, 2020, p. 177). We must be a bridge between the parties. Of course, a large circle “may not be appropriate in bullying situations. ... (We must be careful about) re-traumatizing the target. ... Individualized circles of support for the aggressor and target may be more effective”

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(Oakland Unified School District Restorative Justice Team, p. 32). In this case, our role is to get students to remember their values, ask for forgiveness, request/give reparations for damage done, and transform their behavior going forward without having to directly speak to one another.

There also may be things “unspoken in the circle that ... block progress,” so some processes may take a rather long time and it’s important not to rush them (Oakland Unified School District Restorative Justice Team, p. 38). A circle may need to meet for several sessions.

“Demands are actions the (victim of harm) needs from the community or the person who caused harm in order to be safe and to heal” (Kelly & Peters-Golden, 2020, p. 94). A student may ask for an apology, space away from the perpetrator (new seating arrangement, etc.), or they may request that the perpetrator have a learning experience, like reading a book about the danger of racial stereotypes or attending a course about the history of homophobic language. It is natural that some students who have been harmed may demand carceral-like punishments for the perpetrator. We should encourage them to be a bit more imaginative. Sky is the limit when it comes to demands. Their gut feeling may be to dole out more violence, but is that what they truly want deep down? We can ask them: “Does this goal fit your values? ... Is it actually possible to achieve (what you want out of it)?” (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020, p. 102-103). The ultimate success of a Restorative Justice circle is to get the perpetrator of harm to experience genuine remorse. This will cause them to move to the side of the victim, address the damage they did, then make it their life’s purpose to sway that behavior in others. Most perpetrators will not get here right away. “Dodging accountability can look (like) ... denying, avoiding, minimizing, shifting blame, manipulating, disconnecting, waiting it out without taking genuine action,” so it’s possible that a facilitator will have to work through each of these stages with the perpetrator while reminding them that “no one is wholly accountable or unaccountable” (Long, 2020, p.

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212). Perspective effects everything. Just because one sees themselves as innocent doesn't mean they haven't caused harm. Without the threat of carceral-like punishment, students will open up more easily to admit the violent actions they took.

The term Restorative Justice is problematic because many people interested in this field “are not seeking to go back to a previous state of being but forward to new and better conditions” (Winn, Graham, & Alfred, 2019a, p. 91). Some people even like to use the phrase Transformative Justice instead. The final part of the accountability process is crucial; it's when this transformative shift either occurs or does not. Instead of patching up a wound, the relationship between student, teacher, and community should have developed a stronger skin that won't break as easily next time. “As the adult, and the teacher, in this case, you share the responsibility of reintegration with the student” (Winn, Graham, & Alfred, 2019a, p. 39). It's important to welcome them even further into the classroom community despite what they might have done. Then, it's important to move on quickly, so as not to place too much emphasis on their wrongdoing. “While getting back to instruction may sound like ‘business as usual,’ it's more of an acknowledgment to students and families that it's imperative that students continue to engage and be engaged in their learning” (Winn, Graham, & Alfred, 2019a, p. 89). This is, ultimately, why the student is in your care, and if the accountability process was successful, the two of you should be able to return to this dynamic smoothly. “After an accountability process, the people with whom we have worked know that we are here for them whenever they need us” (Kelly & Peters-Golden, 2020, p. 99). Students must know a teacher's interest in them has not been tainted due to their behavior.

Maintaining a Transformed Relationship

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In order to maintain the type of classroom where such a low-intensity accountability process can occur, teachers must be doing what they can to minimize curriculum violence and other forms of unsafety that they create for children. Curriculum violence is when what is (or isn't) taught in a classroom or school is discriminatory or harmful in some way. Some teachers may not even realize that they contribute to curriculum violence. "Curriculum violence ... does not have to be deliberate or purposeful. ... Intentionality is not a prerequisite for harmful teaching. Intentionality is also not a prerequisite for racism" (Jones). Unfortunately, many ELA teachers center cisgender, heterosexual, white students when choosing texts to read, both fiction and nonfiction. Though they are *technically* inclusive, in that there is diversity amongst the characters or writers, they present a very narrow view of what living as a marginalized person is like. "This laser-like focus on the "right" books sends a clear message to ... (marginalized people): your stories aren't worth much if you don't bleed on the page for us" (McKinney). "It can feel like all (marginalized students) know about (themselves) are the ways in which (they) are oppressed" (Haga, 2020, p. 149). This can have a negative impact on the behavior of these students. To reiterate: harm tends to cause harm. By sending this message to students, teachers are communicating that they've already pigeonholed their marginalized students and the classroom is not a safe space for these young people to explore their potential. Rather, they have been placed under a low ceiling. Curriculum violence can also be seen in the ELA classroom through the way that formal, white, European English is centered and militantly enforced. There are "various dialects and languages that many, if not all, students bring to the classroom. Dialects ... (are the) variety of English language(s) used by ... group(s) whose linguistic habit patterns ... are determined by shared regional, social, or cultural perspectives" (Melo). To privilege one way of speaking or writing over others is unnecessarily exclusive. It signals to students that their

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natural way of speaking and communicating is not enough. It's "dumb" and lacking. Once again, many teachers may not even consider this, since our historic English curriculum, along with the ways we conceptualize of "proper English" and "articulacy" have been framed by white people. It's crucial to consider, though. "Violence doesn't abide temporally. Although a learning experience may be void of violence during one moment, it can still possess the potential to cause suffering in the future. Pedagogical violence is enigmatic at best, yet continues to move persons away from familiar bonds, knowledges, know-how, and into, perhaps, states of alienation" (Melo). These subtle ways of showing students they are not valuable are memorable and hurtful. Students may not feel comfortable exploring their emotions, conflicts, and mistakes with teachers who see them like this, or who unintentionally give the message that they do. "The very systems that we're working to dismantle live inside us" (Kaba, 2020, p. 140). If we want to extinguish violence, the first place we should check for it is in our daily habits. This is what students encounter the most.

"Authoritarian (educators) often invest in the notion that they are the only 'serious' teachers whereas democratic educators are often stereotyped by their more conservative counterparts as not as rigorous or without standards" (hooks, 2003, p. 43-44). It's interesting that this misconception exists, because it seems that the opposite is true. "Fear-based students doubt that they can accomplish what they need to accomplish,"—they are constantly worried about falling short, getting in trouble, and not being enough, —but "when students are encouraged to trust in their capacity to learn, they can meet difficult challenges with a spirit of resilience and competence" (hooks, 2003, p. 132). Regardless, "nonviolence is about action, not inaction" (Haga, 2020, p. 56). A nonviolent, non-carceral teacher is not passive. They don't let misbehavior slide. Rather, they find solutions to prevent it, repair it, and transform it. These

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solutions just look different. They are less restrictive, punitive, and—frankly—cruel. “Catching ourselves, choosing to be quiet, listening more—these are small acts of loyalty. This is the heart of the matter. Relationships can weather all kinds of bubble-bursting moments if we have a solid relational foundation and cause to trust one another” (Mikel Brown, 2016, p. 122-123). Students feel safe exploring their behaviors with teachers who love them. Love is “not a science. It’s a practice. Skills are cultivated by being in relationship, showing up and participating, failing, adjusting, and showing up again” (Mikel Brown, 2016, p. 75). “Educating students is really the primary agenda, not self-aggrandizement or assertion of personal power. ... This is the tradition of abuse the caring teacher seeks to challenge and change” (hooks, 2003, p. 91). We cannot educate students unless they are free of harm.

Chapter Three**Blog Post - “Creating Care in the High School Classroom”**

I’ve always heard that school prepares students for *the real world*. What this means, allegedly, is the ability to meet strict deadlines, arrive on time, and keep organized. Lately, I’ve been wondering what school would look like if every choice we made as educators—every gesture, decision, and assignment— moved students, like a needle, closer to a *future* world, rather than the punitive one we currently live in. The *real world* that lies in Americans’ collective imagination has an ethic of every-man-for-himself. It’s cut-throat, rigid, and carceral. Why must we uphold it if we know it causes harm?

Students learn and “behave” best when they have their needs met. This is why I created, for example, a “Take What You Need” cart in my high school classroom this year. On it, there is a series of bins and drawers with free materials and resources in them. The cart is parked off to

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the side, out of the way of instruction, but not hidden. Of course, there are school supplies on the cart. I have pens, pencils, highlighters, markers, notebooks, and post-its. However, there are also other items, not directly related to school, like bandages, Chapstick, hair ties, menstrual products, and snacks. Students can discreetly help themselves to anything on the cart before or after class, or grab something quickly while working to keep them moving and learning. They know they don't have to ask me for permission. The cart is theirs. It's not mine.

I've noticed that the cart helps keep students in the room. So much learning interruption occurs when students run to grab something from their locker, the nurse's office, or the vending machine each day, and more class time is always preferable. However, what's most important to me is that students aren't sitting in class with an empty stomach or worrying that I'm going to dock five points off their assignment because they didn't highlight what I asked them to. I create equity through the cart. I ease anxiety through the cart. High school can be a tough time for young people without access to hygiene products, so being able to grab a tampon, a stick of deodorant, or a few mints from my bins can help students feel more confident and ready to engage with others in the classroom.

I purchased all the products on the cart with my own money. Of course, sometimes students take things that they don't need. Sometimes, students take advantage of the materials and misuse them. It happens. Providing for these students isn't technically my responsibility. It's not in my job description. However, this is an action I take because I believe in the value of it.

I don't mean to virtue-signal. Honestly, I'd rather *not* purchase these materials on my own. I believe they should be purchased systemically, through government funds going to schools. We see hints of this type of mutual aid through free/reduced lunch programs and 1-to-1

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technology (heavily introduced during the pandemic), but it's not nearly enough. Students need little things. Students need immediate things. If free resources are only available for certain kids, we are stigmatizing those near/below the poverty line. We are drawing attention to them and singling them out. Further, neglect can exist without poverty, and many students struggling with executive dysfunction, or who are simply juggling a lot, can be forgetful. We should not be reserving help and generosity for dire situations. Trauma should not be a prerequisite for kindness.

I believe the opposite of violence is care. When we support the students in our room in a holistic way, we are helping remove barriers between them and learning. We are making them want to come to class, stay in class, and be invested in what we have to say. The cart is a small sign of love. It says—*I want you here*. It says—*you matter to me*.

I don't want a *real world* where we don't help each other out, where everyone's on their own. If that's the *world* we're in, why must we stay there? Can't we build a bridge out?

Chapter Four

Set of lesson plans: “Jason Reynolds’ *Long Way Down*”

Overview: As explored in the previous section of my research, curriculum violence can be extremely detrimental to students in school. When the novels we teach in English Language Arts exclude them or marginalize them, they may feel as if they do not belong in the classroom community. In the same way that curriculum can cause harm to students, it can create freedom for them. Jason Reynolds’ *Long Way Down* is a young adult novel-in-verse written by a Black author, about a Black boy. This novel, though *literally* about violence, is ultimately about

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nonviolence. Teaching it through this lens can encourage conversations that lead to a classroom where care is prioritized over harm.

Unit Summary: While reading the text *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds, students will look critically at their own moral values and trace each one back to its root. The novel’s main character, a teenager stuck in a cycle of gun violence, is a complex hero, one who contemplates murder while reminding readers of his vulnerability, youth, and anger. Students will sit with his ambiguity while discussing the origin of choices and whether one can really assign “evil” to a person based on their actions. Though the unit has students engaging with an award-winning text, it is never Reynolds’ characters who are at its center. Rather, students see their own inner lives in the curriculum. The unit allows for creative expression of one’s most nuanced feelings and wrestles with the idea that we all have the capacity to be “good,” and that “evil”—perhaps—is the product of one’s conditions and environment.

Grade Level: 9 (This unit can be adapted for grades 7-12.)

Standards:

9-10R4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings. Analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning, tone, and mood. Examine technical or key terms and how language differs across genres.

9-10R3: In literary texts, analyze how complex and/or dynamic characters develop, interact with other characters, advance the plot, or develop a theme.

9-10W3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences

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9-10W3d: Use precise words and phrases, explicit details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

Essential Questions:

- What drives us to behave the way we do?
- Where do our values come from?
- How do we decide who is “bad” and who is “good?”
- Why do we read fiction?
- Why do authors use slang/dialect in their writing?
- Why are literary devices/poetic devices useful when writing about emotion?

Approximate Unit Length: 3-4 weeks

Prior to instruction: Students will complete the My Values Creative Project (Figure 1). This way, before students even meet Reynolds’ protagonist, they will already have something in common with him: an awareness of societal pressure to conform, embrace tradition, and follow role models. Whether or not students come from the same cultural background as Will, they will start noticing the weight of culture on their choices and behaviors. These projects can be displayed around the classroom, should students feel comfortable.

(Figure 1) My Values Creative Project

Overview: In *Long Way Down*, the new novel we’ll be reading, the main character Will is unable to clearly define his own values and, instead, makes choices based on what society tells him to do.

- Reflect on your personal values. What are they?

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- How did you come to hold them? Did someone teach you them? Did you see them modeled by someone else? Did you learn them through experience?
- How and when do your values go against larger cultural or societal values? How does this make you feel?

Directions: Explore the questions listed above in a creative way.

You may choose from one of the following project options.

poem(s)	short film / short film script	scrapbook or photo album of your life	music playlist
stand-up comedy performance (on video)	podcast episode	mock talk show interview (on video)	illustrated children's book
bag of objects symbolizing different things	short story	painting, drawing, sculpture, etc.	diary-style writing
TikToks or original memes (at least 5)	letter to your past self	trading card of yourself	board game that takes players through your life

Lesson 1: Students will watch Jason Reynolds' interview with the Kennedy Center, which gives background information about Reynolds' intentions for writing the novel and the format he uses (poetic verse, inspired by hip hop). Then, students will pair off and read the Washington Post article "Does Reading Fiction Make You a Better Person?" by Sarah Kaplan, completing the graphic organizer (Figure 2) together. This can be opened up to a larger class discussion about why we should read about "flawed" protagonists like Will and why everyone is deserving of a story.

(Figure 2) Graphic Organizer for “Does Reading Fiction Make You A Better Person?”**by Sarah Kaplan**

Quote from the text:	What are your personal feelings or connections to this quote?	What question does this quote raise?
<p>“In 2013, researchers at the New School made a splash when they published an article in Science arguing that literary fiction — as opposed to nonfiction or a popular genre, like sci-fi — temporarily enhanced a skill known as theory of mind, the ability to imagine what might be going on in someone else's head.”</p>	<p>I agree with this. When I read realistic fiction, I develop my ability to empathize with people who are different from me. Sci-fi books are more about action and entertainment, in my experience.</p>	<p>Is this why we read the type of books we do in school?</p>

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Read pages 1-61*.

Lesson 2: Students will watch Jason Reynolds' interview with Trevor Noah. In it, he and Noah bond over their childhoods as Black boys who did not believe reading was "cool." Students will do a gallery walk around the classroom to view different book jackets of *Long Way Down* (Figure 3). They'll put Post-Its on each one to give their first impressions of each cover. Which one caught their attention? Which would they be proud to hold as they walk around school/town? Why? What does this say about cultural values?

(Figure 3) Long Way Down book jackets

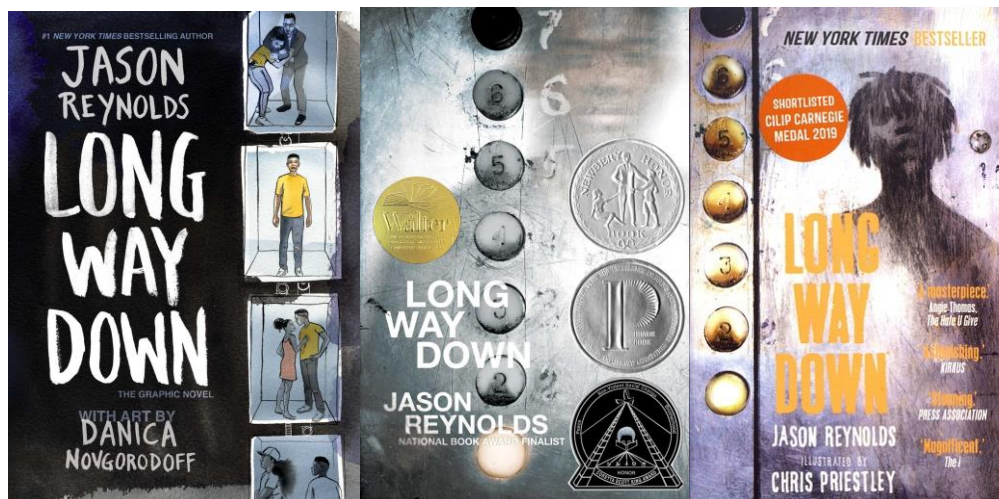


Image 1: *Long Way Down: The Graphic Novel* (<https://www.amazon.com/Long-Way-Down-Graphic-Novel/dp/1534444955>), **Image 2:** *Long Way Down*, American Hardcover edition (https://www.amazon.com/Long-Way-Down-Jason-Reynolds/dp/1481438263/ref=pd_lpo_1?pd_rd_i=1481438263&psc=1), **Image 3:** *Long Way Down*, UK Hardcover edition (<https://www.allenandunwin.com/browse/books/childrens/Long-Way-Down-Jason-Reynolds-9780571335121>).

Read pages 62-123.

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Lesson 3: Students will select a favorite poem from *Long Way Down* and annotate it. They will be asked to think specifically about Will’s use of language. How does it differ from the language in other things we’ve read together in school? Eventually, we will arrive at definitions of the following terms: “slang,” “dialect,” and “African American Vernacular English (AAVE).” Students will fill out their own Slang Dictionary (Figure 4). On one hand, this lesson serves to establish Reynolds as a “real,” sophisticated writer, despite the fact that he avoids white, European, “proper English.” On the other hand, this lesson serves to connect students more intimately with Will, as they realize they also exist in their own web of language, which informs how they see the world and the choices they make (Baldwin).

(Figure 4) Slang Dictionary

SLANG WORD	DEFINITION AND/OR SYNONYMS	USE IT IN A SENTENCE.
Extra	Dramatic or over-the-top.	Caitlin made such a big deal about the argument. She’s so extra!

--	--	--

Read pages 123-184.

Lesson 4: Students will review common literary devices (simile, metaphor, personification, etc.) by printing out the lyrics to their favorite song and marking them up with annotations whenever literary devices are used. Then, they will write an analysis paragraph, pondering the impact of Will's similes, metaphors, etc. (Figure 5). Depending upon time constraints and the rigor of the course, some teachers may also want to discuss poetic devices at this point, like alliteration, consonance, etc. Students should be coming away from this lesson understanding that literary/poetic language is a tool to communicate what's difficult to communicate (feelings, emotions, apprehension, pain, trauma, etc.).

(Figure 5) Analysis Paragraph prompt

Throughout the novel, Will uses figurative language to describe objects and feelings. For example, when he holds Shawn's gun for the first time, he notes that it is, "Heavier than/I expected, /like holding/a newborn." In this example, the juxtaposition of the image of a newborn baby with the weight of the gun highlights the deadliness of the gun and the loss of Will's innocence.

Find three examples of figurative language that you think are especially effective and explain their meaning/significance.

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Then, identify one theme of the novel. How do these lines of figurative language contribute to the theme you identified?

Your response should be between 250-500 words and show mastery of written English. It should directly reference the text. Quotes must be cited. This is a GRADED assignment.

Read pages 184-245.

Lesson 5: Students will watch excerpts of Jason Reynolds and Danica Novgorodoff (illustrator of *Long Way Down*'s graphic novel adaptation) in conversation at P&P Live! Then, students will create a comic strip (Figure 6) of a scene from the novel that's impacted them, so far. The teacher must make an abundance of craft supplies available, especially in terms of colored pencils/markers/etc. The goal of this lesson is to emphasize how evocative Reynolds' original language is. It explodes off the page. It is extremely sensuous. This helps Will's story make its way to our hearts faster.

(Figure 6) Comic Street assignment prompt

Prompt: Create a graphic novel adaptation of a compelling scene from *Long Way Down*.

Directions:

- You may make a physical *or* digital piece of art. (StoryboardThat.com is a good website to try out!)
- Please include panels, speech bubbles, color, etc.

* Remember what Danica Novgorodoff (*Long Way Down*'s illustrator) said about her process. Each color and font choice she made was intentional. Her choices deepened the story that Reynolds already told. Make sure your graphic novel adds another layer to the story, rather than “dumbing it down.”

Read pages 246-306.

Lesson 6: The ending scene of *Long Way Down* is intentionally ambiguous and may be frustrating for readers who are used to a neat-and-tidy finale in works of literature. Reynolds ends the novel before revealing whether Will decides to go home or go through with the murder. Have students split into two groups and argue why one or the other could be true. Students should find three pieces of evidence, each, from the last few poems to support their answer.

Final Project: Students will write their own story-in-verse (Figure 7). This will give them an opportunity to explore a moment they personally wrestled with societal pressure and tough decisions, while also displaying use of the technical skills they learned through the course of the unit. The teacher will guide students step-by-step through the drafting process. Students will also draw upon previous documents they used, like the Slang Dictionary, for instance. Students will have the option to “publish” their short story in a class e-book, which can be accessed by all students and parents. This ensures that students receive an audience for their work beyond the teacher-as-grader.

(Figure 7) Story-in-verse prompt

Prompt: Write between 15-20 short poems inspired by Jason Reynolds' *Long Way Down* to tell the story of a time you had to make a difficult choice.

Your poems *must* display use of:

- Figurative language (simile, metaphor, personification, etc.)
- Slang or dialect
- Poetic devices (line breaks, anaphora, enjambment, rhyme scheme, etc.)

Please put every poem on its own page. There is no word minimum or maximum.

* *Long Way Down* lends itself to being read aloud. Jason Reynolds himself narrates a great audiobook of the text which can be purchased through the audiobook service Audible.

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