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John Pascarella III
University of Southern California

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Join Me in the Eagle's Nest: An Essay on Cultivating Connection, Belonging, and Joy in Turbulent Times

JOHN PASCARELLA

University of Southern California

English teachers and school librarians are growing increasingly wary of news reports about educators around the country getting suspended, fired, or subjected to other forms of retaliation against their efforts to diversify curriculum, books, and teaching practices that better serve their students. These reports rarely offer much insight into the everyday lives of educators navigating this political terrain, nor do these stories typically convey the ways they cultivate joyful, powerful learning experiences in their classrooms. Highly publicized school board disputes over what content should be taught in classrooms or which books students should access in libraries have repeatedly fallen short of addressing indisputable facts about the increasingly diverse K-12 schools students attend and the empirical research on the benefits of culturally responsive and inclusive curricula. In 2020, students of color made up 54% of all youth enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools throughout the U.S. (NCES). In contrast, only one out of five teachers are educators of color and only 22% of principals are leaders of color (Carver-Thomas; NCES). Students of color are far more likely to be taught by newer, less experienced teachers than their white counterparts and more likely to attend schools with higher turnover in faculty, staff, and principals (Kavanagh 66). As these longstanding inequities continue to prevail, English teachers and librarians are under greater scrutiny as they weigh the uncertainties of teaching age-appropriate

and culturally responsive books that might be construed as too controversial.

As a former high school English teacher, I began my career as a white student-teacher who taught in a predominately Black school community in the South Ward of Newark. During my year-long practicum, I designed and taught a unit on the Black Arts Movement for students who would not have otherwise read or discussed this literature at school. Nearly 20 years have passed since teaching that unit, but the challenges I encountered then were strikingly similar to the arguments lodged against diversifying curriculum today. In this essay, I share my personal story of being a young white teacher galvanized to teach in race-conscious, culturally responsive ways, while confronting the assumptions I made about my students, my colleagues, and myself. I begin with the recent passing of my grandmother to share her eulogy and, in it, the story of her kitchen that became a metaphor for the kind of classroom I had hoped to offer my students. I share some lines of poetry I wrote during this time and some excerpts from a poem by Nikki Giovanni that I introduced in that first unit for my students. I shed light on the lessons I learned at the time, and I offer key insights these experiences yielded to answer the pressing questions of this issue of *New Jersey English Journal*: How can we help our students find joy in learning language and literature? How can we cultivate (or reclaim) it for ourselves as teachers? How can we push back against practices or

policies that disrupt joyful teaching and learning?

Join Me in the Eagle's Nest

When you walk in the back door of my grandparents' home, you'll cross a little bridge with a powder room on your left and a stained-glass window on your right. Then you'll reach an old door you've never seen shut before, shrouded with Grandpa's coats and a plastic bag for recyclables hanging on the doorknob. And the next small step you'll take *is a step up* into my grandmother's kitchen. If you made it that far without her greeting you with a firm hug and kiss on the cheek, then there must have been some kind of action happening out in the living room or down in the basement. Whatever she had to get done out there or down below, you can be sure Nana would be back soon to greet you. It was in that kitchen you quickly learned that nothing could be more important to her than reconnecting with you. No subject was off limits. No detail not worth telling. No sin that couldn't be confessed. Kathleen was listening, making you a dish, pouring you some hot tea, and taking some notes—in case she needed them for future reference!

Join me for a moment, if you can, and sit down at her table. What might you see? I see my grandmother sitting across from me, ready for company, wearing a fashionable outfit, hair and makeup fit for network television, and her bright blue eyes staring back at me, giving me her undivided attention. I see a steady stream of steam rising off the kettle and a polished brass clover hanging above the doorway behind her. I hear the dishwasher running to my left and CNN playing on the small TV behind me. "Johnny...what can I make you?" Before I can answer, I hear Grandpa in the living room, shouting, "Kathleen!? KATHLEEN!?! KAAATHLEEEEN!!!?" Nana shakes her head and shouts past me,

"What?!" "What do you want?!" Muffling some expletives under her breath, she gets up and opens the door to the living room. He'd answer, "Will you get me some water?" or "What's all the racket in there?" or "Where are my pills?" And in his last few years, I would hear him say, "Oh, nothing...I just wanted to make sure you were there." If you didn't know it by now, you were somewhere special. Even though they were sitting in two separate rooms, you were sitting between them: a place where you could be heard, he could watch his programs, and she could keep her peace.

On the rare occasion that I somehow made it past the kitchen before briefing Nana on all my updates, Grandpa and I would get to talking in the living room. He would pause or mute his program to ask me to give him the rundown, save him the long stories, and—for God's sake—get to the point about whatever happened, whichever decision had to be made, and whoever was wrong about what! Then, upon being satisfied that he had heard what was useful to him and had offered me his unequivocal advice, he would direct me to go back *inside* and talk to my grandmother. When I first learned as a child that Nana's kitchen was *the inside*, and the living room was *the outside*, I questioned Grandpa about why this was the case. He couldn't tell me, which made me wonder if it had all started with him being banned from the kitchen, given his reputation for being a royal pain. I later realized Nana's kitchen was, in fact, a space she protected – a seat at her table was a seat *in the eagle's nest*. She was willing to do what was necessary to protect it from intruders, feed her family and friends, warm us up with her unconditional love, and shower us with questions to quench her insatiable curiosity about our lives and the people to whom we were most connected.

Without her kitchen, I wonder how many of us—her children and grandchildren,

her friends and neighbors, her coworkers and bosses – might have lived different lives, might have not made better choices, might have laughed less and suffered more, and might have had less confidence and not taken as many leaps of faith had it not been for the love and attention she gave us in that room. By the time I was 18, I had lived in 18 homes. All those places had perfectly fine kitchens. What I realized after passing through those many kitchens is that Nana’s kitchen was mission control: the place where all things were told, most problems were figured out, some plans were made, and, whether you realized it or not, *you belonged there*. She wanted you to stay as long as you could and come back afterwards to tell her what happened.

Building an Eagle’s Nest for My First Students

When I was 22, I moved in with my grandparents to attend Montclair State and earn a master’s degree in teaching. Each morning, I got up at an ungodly hour and drove from their home in the suburbs to the city school in Newark. I wanted to be an urban teacher because I had been an urban kid. The students I related to most were those who didn’t grow up with stability at home, didn’t have access to the best schools, and didn’t experience the many advantages associated with being raised by two college educated, gainfully employed, and financially secure parents. I wondered then what it would have taken to give my students what my grandmother had provided me. Might my students ever be able to think of my classroom as their eagle’s nest?

Most days, my assumptions got the better of me. Some students had a stabler home environment than I had growing up, and some had advantages I didn’t, but I never had to pass through metal detectors or deal with school resource officers screening my bags as they did each morning. At least

once a week, I’d pull into the school parking lot as my car doors rattled and my speakers crackled to the percolating beats of *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* album. I’d walk past students getting screened and wonder who wasn’t showing up that day; if, in the words of Ms. Hill, we had “just lost one,” not to crime or poverty or to a tough home life, but to the lack of connection, safety, warmth, or sense of belonging I assumed they encountered in this city school with their mostly white teachers, with me. In truth, I was the one who felt disconnected. I was an outsider, had not grown up in their community, had not been interviewed by them or their families to be a student-teacher in their school, and had very little knowledge of the neighborhood or section of Newark in which they lived and thrived. Who was I to build an eagle’s nest for them? After all, I was not their eagle.

After observing classes in the morning, I would write lines of poetry about this disconnection I felt. “SittN up here in this ivory tower / TrippN up on all this made up white power / Too afraid to be Their friend / Too green to be Their teacher.” I’d stay up late most nights relearning British literature for the 12th grade curriculum we taught, questioning why we did so little to supplement the readings with Black poetry, plays, and novels. I regularly challenged the overt racial bias in these choices with my mentor teacher, which generated some tension between us. We were both white teachers serving nearly all Black students; she, far more experienced than I, made cogent arguments about the curriculum’s alignment with college preparation and access, the high scores her students achieved year after year, and the strong connections she had with them. Seeing these connections unfold firsthand, I followed her lead. I quickly learned students’ names, made efforts to get to know them, and, tall as I was, I sat down or knelt next to them instead

of towering over them during small group discussions. I deliberately made consistent positive eye contact and did my best to demonstrate my belief that their ideas were interesting and that they were as smart as or smarter than me. All efforts led to the same goal: to convey to them that they mattered to me. I openly discussed my racial and ethnic identity with them, which was met with some acceptance and some confusion. Their reactions seem to convey: “Yeah, we get it, Mr. P. You’re white and you don’t think you’re better than us; now what?”

Much later in my career, I realized that I had spent too much effort trying to prove I respected and cared about them, rather than build genuine connections that supported their learning. I thought of myself as different from all the other white teachers because I felt like an outcast among them. I think I wanted the students to know it. I openly challenged racial biases expressed by other teachers, and by professors and peers in my teacher education program. The possibility my students ever overheard these conversations is low and speaking up when deficit or colorblind mindsets were voiced was risky, but necessary. After all, I needed to prove to myself I could be my students’ eagle. They might not have needed my protection from colorblind teachers, but I needed them to know that my classroom would be a space they could trust wouldn’t tolerate such foolishness. In my notebook, I riffed on the paternalistic feelings this stirred up:

they say i’m a man on a mission
 a mission of cultural transmission
 a mission of superstition
 about what it means to be American
 & in the submission
 about what it takes to give an
 education
 a mission of inner city
 vindication

a mission to survive the
 tribulation
 of beN a teacher of those
 America believes don’t need teachN

When I wrote these lines, it had not occurred to me that this missionary zeal I felt might inflict more harm than it could ever cultivate any genuine trust with my students. I naïvely pressed on, determined to disrupt the Eurocentric curriculum they consumed. After some convincing, my mentor teacher agreed to let me design and teach a literary unit on the Black Arts Movement. Many of the most notable Black Arts poets, playwrights, and writers were from Newark, Paterson, and nearby Harlem, Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn. Surely, exploring these literary works together would be more relevant to them than the predominately dead white male authors we had read most of the year.

Early in the unit, we explored Nikki Giovanni’s 1968 poem, “For Sandra.” The week before the lesson, I remember repeating the lines of her first stanza over and over, out loud and in my head: “i wanted to write / a poem / that rhymes / but revolution doesn’t lend / itself to be-bopping.” The contradiction in the speaker’s desire to write a poem while a revolution is happening was deeply evocative to me—to begin the poem by confronting this contradiction and to do so by composing the very rhythm in those lines that could, in fact, lend itself to be-bopping, if only the speaker could ignore the revolution happening around her. That same week, I had an appointment at the district’s central office downtown. I left school, and before I reached downtown, I pulled over in the middle of a field of empty city blocks in the Central Ward. Cement slabs and overgrown grass were scattered among a handful of apartment buildings left standing. I got out and walked around, struck by the eerily

quiet streets in front of me. I thought of the first time my father took my brother and me to visit the rural battlegrounds of Gettysburg, PA, and I wondered: What happened here? It seemed like the remains of an urban battleground. When I got home that evening, I searched online and discovered that 36 years earlier the predominately Black neighborhoods of the Central Ward had erupted in protests after a Black cabdriver had been badly beaten by white police officers. The protests quickly escalated into riots as Newark police inflicted more violence on the community. Entire city blocks had been burned down. Revolution had not lent itself to be-bopping.

The next morning, I told my mentor about the experience, and she shared her memories of teaching in Newark during the 70s, of the student protests that followed to diversify the curriculum. I looked out our classroom window and asked her about the back lot of the school, as if seeing this space for the first time. The crumbling concrete, the rusted chain-linked fencing, and the absence of painted lines for parking spaces made me wonder how this lot came to be. I thought about Giovanni's next stanza:

then my neighbor
 who thinks i hate
 asked—do you ever write
 tree poems —i like trees
 so i thought
 i'll write a beautiful green tree

poem

peeked from my window
 to check the image
 noticed that the school yard was
 covered
 with asphalt
 no green – no trees grow
 in manhattan.

The school's back lot had, in fact, been a grassy field, paved over to provide more secure parking for faculty and staff who

would have otherwise had to park on the street. My car was somewhere in the middle of that crumbling asphalt. I was consumed by the significance of this scene, this school, and this city through which I now saw the revelatory images of Giovanni's poetry. I had stumbled onto historical and institutional evidence of structural racism: the decision to pave over a grassy school yard, the deteriorating schoolgrounds, the lack of academic resources, the underfunded extracurriculars, and the vacant city blocks that had never been rebuilt nearly four decades after their destruction. I was galvanized to teach what I had discovered. After all, wasn't it possible that these students were descendants of Civil Rights and Black Power Activists, of Black artists, musicians, and poets of the Black Arts Movement?

Young, determined, and fired up as I was to teach this unit, I was still waking up to my own journey of growth and transformation. Without examining my motives, the fire that compelled me to reveal forms of structural racism I saw in my students' school and on the streets of their neighborhoods blinded me from considering what they might have already known. While I might have felt the genius, wit, rhythm, and power vibrating from the Black novels, short stories, poetry, plays, music, and films I chose to teach, I taught these literary works with a heavy conscience and somber heart. Even though I was thrilled by the insights and connections students made during our discussions, I was not joyful. They were inquisitive, confident, and compelled to offer interpretations of the literature we discussed. They shared ideas that tested each other's assumptions and mine. But my efforts to inspire them fell short. I had not critically examined or questioned the underlying motives that seemed to be driving my exuberance for teaching this literature. I was focused on the injustices

exposed, the pursuits of liberation, and the truths being told in these poems, plays, and short stories. I was angered by the deprivation I saw in the conditions of their school and some of the neighborhoods in their community—the mounting evidence of historic and systemic racism all around us. Distracted by my anger, I hadn't considered how I could have helped myself or my students realize the full potential of joy in learning literature I believed would otherwise not be taught in their educational upbringings.

In *Unearthing Joy: A Guide to Culturally and Historically Responsive Teaching and Learning*, Gholdy Muhammad writes about the history of Black-centered schooling:

Joy mattered historically, with and without oppressive conditions. Yet, joy and formal education have never been paired in many spaces. There have been no learning standards for joy, teacher evaluations for joy, curricular objectives for joy, or a college course on joy in education. [...] We educators always talk about the importance of joy in teaching and learning, but, still, we rarely see signs of it in our preparation and profession. (69)

I had the uncommon experience of learning to teach under the mentorship of a joyful white teacher in a school for Black students. She was highly knowledgeable of her subject matter, exceptionally talented at meaningfully connecting with her students, held very high standards for them, and spent what was left of her free time pursuing a Ph.D. in Women's Literature of the Renaissance. She had earned a reputation throughout the district as one of the most accomplished AP teachers, dedicated to her students, with impressive academic outcomes. She was beloved by her students, and she loved them. She also loved the literature she taught, the art, music, and

films she incorporated, and the literary connections students cultivated in their discussions with her. She moved quickly and I did my best to keep up with her. Still, I struggled to accept that the AP and 12th grade honors curriculum was culturally or historically relevant to our students' lives beyond building knowledge and skills necessary to gain entry to predominately white colleges and universities. She and I continued to deliberate this matter throughout my practicum and the years that followed.

What I Wish I Had Known Then

As a new English teacher committed to racial equity, I sought out colleagues who were willing to critically self-reflect alongside me, as in question the instructional decisions and assumptions we made as white teachers serving Black students and families. Being welcomed into a coalition of talented, race-conscious teachers was *what I needed*, not just what I had hoped would have been available along the way. I was unsuccessful trying to access or build such a coalition in my early 20s with more experienced teachers who didn't know me or take me seriously when I challenged their biases. Going this route alone was an isolating, disheartening experience. In *Unearthing Joy*, Muhammad asks teachers to consider, "Who cultivates my joy?" This question never crossed my mind as a new teacher. Instead, I asked, who gets me, who's in my corner, and who was as upset as I was that we were reproducing the status quo? I asked myself who gets why I'm fired up to challenge the way we do things? Who else is willing to take personal responsibility for their part in perpetuating problems that harm the students we serve? During this early phase of my teaching career, I found the necessary ingredients for centering culturally and historically responsive literature in myself, and

cultivating joyful learning experiences in my mentor teacher, but I fell short of pulling off the recipe that included *both necessary ingredients*.

While much has been written about the racial biases of pre-service and in-service white teachers, few studies have followed the efforts of new teachers committed to disrupting those biases, committed to doing what equity scholar Bettina Love says we must do: “White People, Save Yourself” (236). Where in our own educational upbringings do we learn to openly challenge our racial biases and deficit mindsets about students of color that inform the ways we, consciously or not, reproduce those biases in our everyday teaching decisions? Who is in our corner to partner with us through that process? To what extent have the people in our corner made their own progress in disrupting their biases? How do they go about cultivating joy in their classrooms, while remaining committed to reflecting on mistakes that undermine equitable learning experiences for their students? What do these colleagues do when we turn to them with a mistake and require honest, critical guidance to make things right with our students who might have been harmed by our actions? To save ourselves, to unearth joy in teaching literature and language arts, and to navigate the increasingly difficult terrain of teaching culturally responsive literature, *we need each other* to challenge one another and not abandon or punish the colleague who is willing to give us the gift of difficult feedback. The more we pull away from race-conscious educators, the greater risk of harm and isolation we subject to ourselves and to our students.

Despite fervent differences in our perspectives, my mentor teacher and I continued to work closely for the twenty years that followed my student-teaching experience in her classroom. The tensions we navigated were rooted in preconceived

notions we each held about what would most benefit our students and *the value we each believed our perspectives held* in achieving that aim. I would not accept that she knew better solely due to her decades of teaching experience in Newark. She would not accept that I knew better solely due to my experience in an African American Studies program before pursuing a teaching degree. I would not buy into her widely held preoccupation with the value of Eurocentric literature. She did not buy into my preoccupation with culturally relevant literature mattering as much to their academic preparation for college entry and success. We both grew and we continuously found common ground. Essential to the longevity of this relationship was ensuring: 1) we both valued and respected each other, despite our differences in age and experience, 2) we were both committed to professional growth, as a novice and veteran teacher, 3) we could both call each other in on choices we did not believe best served the needs of our students, and 4) we both were willing to make some concessions when those choices undermined our relationships with students and their learning.

I taught many more literary units by authors and with characters that mirrored the diversity of my students, their families, their communities, and their futures. I included white authors and texts, but I did not center them or suggest that these works held more value, beauty, or significance. I sought out critical friends among my colleagues, invited their insights, and learned from their best practices. Over time, I learned to nurture genuine rapport and reciprocal respect with my students and their families. I lived in their communities, spent time getting to know them better in after-school activities, and learned from the feedback they and their families were more and more willing to give me. I kept a journal going

and I wrote more poetry about those teaching experiences. And it was through journaling and poeticizing those experiences that I uncovered abundant joy for teaching literature and language arts I believed and witnessed mattering to them, their lives, and the academic journeys they would encounter after they left my classroom. Many of these discoveries were made in the solitude of my empty apartment, after hours of grading essays or preparing for their next literary unit. When I look back on this early phase of my teaching career, I often wish this period had been less isolating to me and more rewarding to my students.

In a rare speech titled, "Towards the Splendid City," Pablo Neruda reflected on his harrowing journey through the Andes to escape persecution by Chilean authorities. Given at the 1971 ceremony in Oslo awarding him the Nobel Peace Prize, he told his audience:

There is no insurmountable solitude. All paths lead to the same goal: to convey to others what we are. And we must pass through solitude and difficulty, isolation and silence in order to reach forth to the enchanted place where we can dance and sing our sorrowful song – but in this dance or in this song there are fulfilled the most ancient rites of our conscience in the awareness of being human and of believing in a common destiny.

Fundamental to unearthing joy in our language arts and literature classrooms is our capacity to become more fully aware of what we impose on our students, the assumptions we have about them and their experiences, the choices we make about literature and teaching practices we believe will most benefit them, and the unexamined emotions and intentions we may need to overcome or might still be in the process of overcoming as we embrace our humanity and theirs. To build an eagle's nest in my classroom, I needed to slow down and hold

space with them as individuals, to give them my undivided attention, and to be insatiably curious about them and the lives they led. In that nest, I needed to cogenerate a learning environment with them that centered their joy in the literary discoveries we made together.

Epilogue

Just after Grandpa passed away, I showed up at my grandmother's back door and crossed the small bridge into her kitchen, holding my bright-eyed, curly headed daughter. Nana hugged us and led us out into the living room. She sat down, as my wife and aunts stood near my daughter in the middle of the room. Excited as ever to be surrounded by these incredible women, she took her first steps and we all cried out with joy and laughter. She tried a few more times and eventually achieved a few more steps. And, again, we cheered her accomplishment.

There was no more inside and outside Nana's kitchen. Nana's entire home had become her eagle's nest. I will never forget the intense connection I felt among us that evening and the immensity of sharing this moment in my grandmother's nest with her great granddaughter. Just a few months later, Nana passed away. I sat back down in her kitchen in the chair across the table from where she sat those many years and gave me her undivided attention. Behind me, and through a doorway into the living room, my grandfather's empty chair was still there. My father and his sisters looked through photos in the dining room. No televisions competing between rooms, filling the spaces between questions and opinions. No problems to solve or advice left to give. All we had left were the memories of how we were connected to one another and all we chose to unearth in that moment was the joy those memories offered us.

Though I wasn't raised in her home, I am from my grandmother's kitchen. Though I lived in 18 homes and attended 13 public schools, I am from the teachers who inspired, challenged, and provoked me to care deeply about learning and aspire to be an educator. Though I didn't belong to the communities in which I taught, my students and their families welcomed me. I am from those city schools, who let me in, where I built my classroom nests. I am from the rhythms in those halls. I am from the inspiration I felt from seeing the genius they displayed in their artwork and murals on the walls. I am from the stories never read I brought them to unfold, from the joy they discovered, the bellowing laughs, and the questions interrupting questions as they began to take the lead in learning literature they could claim as their own. In *The Peace Chronicles*, Dr. Sealey-Ruiz told us:

I am from
me
you
this moment
where hope reigns supreme
& belief of being the change you want
to see in the world is the drive unspoken
that moves us all. (75)

No matter how much pushback that must be overcome, we must persist with allies in our corner and fires in our bellies to choose literature that honors our students' lives, their ancestors, and their communities *and* to pursue the possibilities of joy we might unearth with them in our schools. In *Punished for Dreaming*, Dr. Love told us: "Abolition requires us to understand and confront 'oppressive systems that live out there—and within us.' Therefore, the work is deeply personal and rooted in how we care for each other" (256). And in *Unearthing Joy*, Dr. Muhammad told us: "When you are tired and overwhelmed as you cultivate (and water) the next

generations, please remember to claim and reclaim your joy over and over again and (re)member the very purpose of why you entered this beautiful field of education" (218). *Are we listening?* We must do our best to give each other and our students what those who offered us sanctuary gave to us—a front row seat with our undivided attention, recognition of the harms they encounter in our schools, and a protected place for "repair and transformation" (Love 288) where there is wide open space for every student to thrive and experience learning, laughter, critical thinking, academic success, and joy together.

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JOHN PASCARELLA is Chief Academic Officer of USC Race and Equity Center and Professor of Clinical Education in the USC Rossier School of Education. His research examines the intersections of racial equity, digital literacy, and transformative educator preparation. Prior to his appointments at USC, he taught English Language Arts and Literature in Paterson, Newark, and South Orange high schools, and served as an Adjunct Professor of Education at Montclair State University, a Course Lecturer at McGill University, and a Visiting Researcher at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He can be contacted at: pascarel@usc.edu.